

Bozo and the Storyteller

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Chapter 1

The Storyteller

With the rising of the second crescent moon over the Kraggy Mountains, the Bloons realised that it was almost time for the Story to begin. Whether they were surfing the sand-dunes with their outrageously long feet, or simply engaged in a staring contest with a nearby star, they instantly forgot what they were doing and hurried over to the big rock where the Storyteller sat. The scarlet light of the three moons glistened on their blue skin as they skipped over the sandy ground, and their excited grins revealed beautiful, yellow teeth.

Before long they had formed a semicircle around the big rock. Latecomers jostled for a place. Those who ended up at the back lashed themselves with their long tails and swore that tomorrow they'd turn up three hours early to be sure of a good seat. Bloons could never remember anything for long, though, and they soon forgot their disappointment as they waited anxiously for the Story to begin.

The Storyteller sat above them on his stone perch, his eyes closed in deep meditation. He sat motionless, save for the twitching of his large, grey ears

that seemed to be searching for a distant signal. His skin was pale and thin and wrapped around his skull like the parchment of an old manuscript; his biography written in the sag of his cheeks and the lines around his eyes. Whether it was because of his drooping moustache or the melancholy look in his timeless eyes, the Storyteller seemed this evening to be far older and weaker than ever before. He was, of course, older than all of the Bloons put together but now, as his trailing white hair and goatee beard stirred in the breeze, it occurred to them that perhaps the Storyteller would not be with them for ever. The prospect didn't bear thinking about.

The Storyteller opened his eyes. They seemed to protrude so far from their sockets that each of his listeners felt he was looking directly at them. A hush fell as his eyes turned from red to amber and then finally to green, signaling that he was about to speak.

'My dear Bloons,' he began, in a voice that seemed as faint as the light from the distant galaxies. 'I passed my younger years travelling between the stars, unearthing the secrets that they yielded and sharing my wisdom wherever I went. I was bold, learned and profoundly unhappy. It was only when the invisible currents of the universe carried me to Bloonland that I found meaning to my life.

'In the three decades that I have passed here, I have found that simplest of treasures that every traveller longs to discover: a home. Among such foolish and touching company, I have felt welcome and loved in a way I never imagined possible. Together we have watched the Story unfold and, for a time, it was my salvation.'

He paused to breathe and it sounded as though his lungs were full of dust. Swallowing heavily, he raised his head and continued: 'For ten thousand nights I have told you the Story, and for ten thousand nights you have gathered to listen. Once, the looks on your faces inspired me to carry on living, as each night we travelled together through the latest chapter. I suppose that, for most of you, I remain a fearsome old man, irritable and aloof. Yet, with the Story, a piece of my mind became real, and you have come to know me better than any other.

'However, I can ignore no longer the fact to which I have closed my eyes and ears for so long: the telling of the Story has finally taken the very life out of me and soon I shall die. Ten thousand nights is far too short a time to have lived with such delightful folk, but now we approach the end. My soul shall float away on the breeze and the Story will be no more.'

A great gasp went up around the circle as they saw there was no glint of humour in the Storyteller's eyes: they had not changed colour. Some of the Bloons stuck their fingers deep inside their ears in the hope that they might be able to keep out the Storyteller's words. *Tell us that the moons will fall out of the sky, they moaned. Tell us that the light of the stars will go out like a candle. Tell us anything but that the Story will end.*

For as long as they could remember they had gathered each evening to hear about the strange green and blue planet that had only one sun and one moon. That alone would have evoked the sympathy of any Bloon, but the Storyteller said that hardly anyone bothered to look up at the skies these days. Instead, they had captured tiny creatures called Eleckytrons and forced them to make light.

The antics of the Hoomans who lived in the Story left the Bloons weeping with laughter, and they spent their days chatting about the previous night's chapter. In reality, of course, they had little else to do - life in Bloonland was a stress-free existence of eating, drinking and clowning around. When they were hungry they simply bent down and took a bite of the cheesy planet itself. Then they washed it down with a drink from the fermented streams that flowed down from the grape bushes in the hills. They made merry in the mornings and sometimes impersonated the Hoomans from the Story, strutting around the place with a self-importance that left the other Bloons on the ground clutching their sides in hysterics. A long nap through the heat of the day, and it was soon time to go and listen to the Storyteller.

In truth, they knew very little about the old man. None of the Bloons could quite remember when he had arrived on the planet, and none wasted time on such an abstract question. They loved him for the Story that he told, but otherwise he was something of a mystery to them.

The sight of him gazing up at the constellations and working away on his charts made them feel sleepy and gave them uneasy dreams. The Storyteller belonged to another world of languages and symbols, mathematics and

mystery: nothing for a Bloon to be worried about. While they loved the Story, they tended to avoid the Storyteller, and passed their days on the other side of the planet.

Only one of the Bloons, a tubby youngster by the name of Bozo, ever sought out the company of the Storyteller during the day. He would look over the old man's shoulder as he worked on his papers. The sight of the strange script filled him with wonder and fear. Occasionally, the Storyteller would deign to explain the meaning of the strange words or encourage the Bloon to learn the foreign alphabets. But then the letters would wriggle out of focus, and more often than not Bozo dozed off on the Storyteller's shoulder halfway through the lesson.

So now, as all of the other Bloons attempted to plug their eyes and ears, Bozo was the only one who tried to face up to what the Storyteller was saying. He began to think very hard and flipped upside-down to sit on his head so that the blood would flow to his brain. He screwed his eyes tight in concentration and attempted to create some space in his head so that an Idea would come along. Presently, he felt one come looking for a nest, and he trembled slightly as its invisible wings fluttered against his cheeks. He struggled to keep perfectly still and held his breath so as not to scare it away. Slowly and with a great deal of caution, the Idea floated around to his ears and made the unusual decision to make its home in the mind of a Bloon.

Bozo opened his eyes and looked up at the Storyteller. The old man sat on his rock cross-legged as always, but now with his head clasped deep in his hands.

'Master!' Bozo cried. The Storyteller wearily lifted his head to meet Bozo's gaze.

'Yes, Bozo?' he responded, in his long, rolling voice.

'Master, forgive me, but did you say that it is the Story that has made you ill?'

The Storyteller nodded grimly and replied, 'Since it has been the focus of my every waking moment - not to mention my dreams - for more than a century now, I can only conclude that the Story itself is the cause of my demise.'

Bozo's eyes glistened. 'Then might it not be that a Cure also lies within the Story?'

'It may well be,' the Storyteller agreed. 'But the Story is a projection of my own mind, and is too vast for me to explore. I cannot tell the Story and search within it at the same time.'

Bozo tumbled over from his upside-down position in excitement. 'Then send me into the Story to search for the Cure,' he said.

The Storyteller shook his head. 'Bozo, you must understand,' he replied. 'It would be suicidal. When I die, the Story will simply fade away, along with

everything and everyone inside it.'

'But, Master, what will become of us without the Story? You know what it means to us. Left alone, we will drink from the wine-streams until we fall off the planet in despair. I would rather die within the Story than outside it!'

The Storyteller fell silent for a long time. His eyes screwed tight in deep thought, he poised as still as the rock he sat upon. Only the odd arch of one of his bushy grey eyebrows gave any clue that he was awake. In the meantime, many of the Bloons dropped off themselves, dozing on each other's shoulders, their tales curled around their necks like scarves.

Then the eyes of the Storyteller flashed open and his gaze fell upon Bozo like the light of a torch. Bozo was sitting alone and out in the open. He longed for a rock that he could hide behind. He could feel the eyes of the Storyteller burning through his head but he dared not look up. It seemed to the Bloon that the old man was looking right into his mind as though it were an open book. He could feel the Storyteller probing his thoughts and feelings, perhaps testing him somehow, seeing if he really had the courage to go through with this.

Bozo cowered lower and lower where he sat, until he wished the ground would swallow him up. Just when he felt he could stand the interrogation no longer, it came to an end, and Bozo was released from the old man's terrible stare.

'I will accept your courageous offer, Bozo,' the Storyteller finally declared, 'though you are younger than a strand of my hair. But I must make myself clear: I still possess enough strength to write you into the Story, but I doubt I will be strong enough to bring you back again - unless, of course, your mission is successful and I am restored to health.'

'So you must ask yourself this: are you prepared to leave behind your friends and home, perhaps never to see them again? And should I die, what will become of you? Would you risk oblivion on a fool's quest to save an old man and a worn-out old Story?'

Bozo gulped and looked around at his beloved Bloons to find them all staring at him with a mixture of curiosity, fear and respect. They were the only friends he'd ever had and it was impossible to imagine life without them. He remembered the thousands of races they'd had surfing down the dunes, the long mornings of making up songs beside the wine-streams, and the nights of playing dot-to-dot with the stars. There was not one Bloon whom Bozo did not love as much as himself. He would have given his life for any of them.

And yet Bozo always knew he was a little different. Often, when his friends had fallen happily asleep, Bozo lay gazing at the distant galaxies and wondering what secrets they held. He had never mentioned to anyone his dream to travel, and had no idea how he might ever begin. He doubted anyone would understand, anyway. All the other Bloons were perfectly happy where they were.

'I'm ready,' he announced. 'When do I go?'

The Storyteller heaved a great sigh and called Bozo close to whisper some instructions in his ear. Then he withdrew a small, green pouch of golden sand. He blew a few grains into the air around his audience, and at once the Story enveloped them all. Every word conjured an image and they drank in the narrative like a collective dream.

'The Hoomans believe the weather to be a matter of chance, a science of equations and circumstance with the odds heavily stacked against those who live far to the North. They invent all kinds of long words to describe things they don't understand, and they hope to hide behind them. They say things like 'cold atmospheric front' but still don't know whether to take an umbrella with them when they go out.

The truth is that the weather is simply how the sky gods like to express themselves. Some of the sky gods are fierce and angry, often whipping up winds and hail. Others are always in a good mood, and bring blue skies and sunshine wherever they go. Other deities find it hard to get out of bed in the morning, and when they do they bring a good deal of mist and grey cloud with them.

In general, these sky gods are attracted to Hoomans of the same temperament. So the gods of sunshine and fair weather like to hang out where the Hoomans laugh and joke a lot. Where the Hoomans like to complain and whinge about things, the rain gods of drizzle and gloomy clouds gather together for months at a time.

Once in a while, the gods quarrel and they boom out thunderous arguments above the Earth. If no one backs down, then they fight with long, jagged spears of Eleckytrons across the sky. Occasionally, they miss, and one of these bolts comes crashing down on some poor tree or cricket umpire. Lightning, the Hoomans call it.

It was on one such night when the sky gods were fighting that something very strange happened. For a brief moment a window opened in the heavens, and out tumbled a small Bloon. The entire Story trembled. Hoomans stirred uneasily in their sleep. Compooper screens across the world wobbled. Animals bleated and barked in farms and homes across the land. Then the moment passed. It was remembered only by a poor Bloon, who found himself hurtling towards the ground at lethal speed and almost barbecued on the kebab spear of a sky god.

This rather terrified creature, known back home by the name of Bozo, looked down and screamed as he saw the ground approaching far too quickly. He'd been in this strange new world for only 30 seconds and already he was in trouble. He suddenly realised that he was holding a piece of green rubber with a label on the end that said, 'Blow here.' He put his lips to the opening and blew with all his might. He was happy to find that with each breath it

expanded into a rather large balloon. Even better: the larger the balloon got, the slower he fell, until he was floating earthwards at a pleasant rate.

He looked down and saw that the bright lights of the city below had gone out. It seemed that one of the spears of the sky gods had freed a colony of Eleckytrons, and the city was left in darkness. The buildings loomed beneath him like an ominous future and he hoped he wouldn't land on anything sharp. He floated closer to the ground and the wind blew him in the direction of a long, oblong building in the middle of the city. It was surrounded by a large garden with high walls and chestnut trees whose branches flailed in the wind. A flash from the battle far above revealed a sign: 'St Jude's Children's Hospital'.

Before he had time to think about that, however, a sudden gust of wind blew him in through an open window on the top floor and out of sight.

The Storyteller opened his eyes to reveal a mystic purple and took a deep breath. A light sweat covered his forehead and he appeared a shade older. Not that any of the Bloons had noticed: they were too busy looking for Bozo.

But he was no longer there.

Chapter 2

Theo

The first sunlight of the morning filtered in through the window and lit up the cheeks of a young boy lying in bed. A nurse entered the room and regarded the child with a mixture of tenderness and pity. Although there was no need to be quiet, she trod gently as she approached and laid a pile of letters on the bedside table. She lifted his head carefully and slid out the pillow so that she could give it a new case. The child's eyelids didn't even flutter. It was only the rosy hue of his cheeks and the frail rising and falling of his chest as he breathed that gave any indication he was alive.

The nurse was a young and pretty woman called Sandra, whose dark, curly hair made her a favourite with half of her patients. She forgot the task in hand for a moment and gazed sadly at the boy's innocent complexion, reaching out to stroke his forehead.

'Good morning, Theo,' she murmured, knowing that he probably couldn't hear her. 'It's a bit stormy today but you'll be nice and dry in here. Don't worry if the windows rattle a little - it's just the wind.' She wondered if he would sleep for ever, and a tear came to her eye at the thought. She quickly dried it with the corner of her sleeve and admonished herself with a pinch: as a nurse, she ought to be used to this kind of thing, but sometimes it still got to her. After all, here was a nine-year-old child who had spent the last three months in a coma, and who the doctors doubted would ever wake again. They had conducted every kind of test imaginable and found him in perfect health.

Except for the fact that he would not wake up.

They had found Theo one May morning, asleep beneath a tree in the garden of the children's hospital. No one could imagine how he'd got there and he didn't appear to be harmed in any way. There was no clue as to where he had come from and they knew only his name because it was sewn into the jacket he was wearing when they found him.

He had become the Mystery Child of St Jude's Hospital. His photo had made the front page of half the major newspapers in the land, and his story had touched the nation. Television celebrities and politicians had arrived to help publicise the search for Theo's family, and the telephone never stopped ringing with agents offering to represent the sleeping child. Donations sent in by well-wishers funded a poster campaign across the country in the hope of jogging someone's memory. Theo's photo could be seen at bus stops and train stations across the country, accompanied by the words '*Do you know this boy?*'

Streams of people came forward claiming to be Theo's father, mother, uncle or best friend, but a brief interrogation quickly showed them to be imposters. They just wanted to be on television: for, oddly enough, Theo had become a minor celebrity. Letters and flowers poured in every day from people who had

read about him or seen him on the latest chat show. Benefit concerts were held for him in the stadiums of the land and priests of every denomination urged the faithful to pray for Theo's release from the evil clutches of sleep. Theo was surely the first person in history to become famous by doing nothing other than snoring occasionally.

All of the medicines and therapies of the doctors had failed, and they succumbed to the pressure of the alternative practitioners, who were anxious to demonstrate their cures. Reflexologists, crystal healers, Tibetan chanters and voodoo shamans filled Theo's ward with incense, quartz crystals and the tongues of roosters (reputed for their rousing properties). They squeezed Theo's toes, hummed dead languages into his ears and blew particles of ground coffee up his nostrils.

It was only when the shaman's incense sticks set fire to the sheets that the doctors finally had the excuse to throw out the lot of them. *Bad vibes in here*, they declared, as they were hustled out of the entrance by some burly security guards. *No wonder the boy doesn't want to wake up*.

One of the doctors had suggested that it would not harm Theo to have his fan mail read to him each day. Maybe, she argued, he would respond to one of the letters. They didn't know if Theo could hear but there didn't seem to be any harm in giving it a try.

Sandra sat down next to Theo's bed and looked through his prodigious pile of mail. She stroked Theo's thin, sandy hair with her left hand.

'Well,' she said. 'You've got some postcards here from Barcelona - pity I don't speak Spanish. Anyway, it's lovely handwriting, so I'm sure it says nice things. Hmm. Here's one from the old folks' home down the road. I'll leave it for later, if you don't mind. I can't face reading another essay about someone's shaky knees right now. Hello, what's this one? I don't recognise the stamp.'

Sandra picked out a letter that had been posted in a circular, purple envelope. There was no return address and the stamp featured some kind of blue creatures sliding down a sandy hill. She supposed it must be from somewhere in South America. She opened the envelope and as she did so a lively aroma filled the room. It was the kind of scent that evoked a happy memory long forgotten, of something funny and touching that had happened in the past.

Sandra pressed the envelope to her face and inhaled deeply. She remembered how she had loved to play on the swings as a child, a steady hand on her back pushing her higher and higher until she thought she might be able to touch the sunshine itself. A smile spread across her face...and she failed to notice that Theo's eyelids were twitching.

Sandra came back to the present and slid out the letter from the envelope with a growing curiosity. She unfolded the golden sheet of paper and laughed as she saw what was written.

'Well, Theo,' she said. 'This one smells great but I think it was sent by another crazy. It says:

'Dear Theo, It's time to wake up. You have a visitor.

Love,

The Storyteller.'

'I'm awake,' Theo whispered.

'How crazy is that?' Sandra laughed, not hearing him. 'As if someone could just tell you to wake up and that would be it! I mean, as if all the doctors and the experts hadn't managed to-'

'I'm awake,' Theo repeated, a little stronger now.

'...cure you with their technology and - what did you say?' she gasped, losing her breath as she saw the piercing blue of Theo's eyes.

'I'm awake,' Theo said patiently for the third time.

Sandra stared at him speechless, tears streaming down her face in joy. Her first impulse was to smother him with kisses but then she remembered her responsibility as a nurse and ran to get a doctor.

The next three hours were the exact opposite of what someone who had been asleep for three months would want to face. A never-ending series of doctors and men in white coats marched in and out, armed with clipboards and briefcases full of stainless steel instruments. They took his pulse. They checked his blood pressure. They tested his reflexes and shone lights into his eyes and ears. Theo tried talking to the doctors but they were so busy running tests that they didn't seem to hear him. The best response he could elicit was an occasional 'Shhhhhh' and a pat on the head. Theo decided that if they were going to treat him like a dumb animal, he might as well play along. Sooner or later they would have to run out of things to test.

When the doctors were satisfied that he really was awake and apparently in good health, they seemed a little disappointed and sent for the psychologist. Presently, a middle-aged man with thinning hair walked in, a leather-bound notepad under his arm. He took up a seat a little too close to Theo's bed. His breath reeked of tobacco. He regarded Theo gravely and gave a smile that didn't seem in the least friendly.

'Good morning, Theo,' he said. 'My name is Dr Bunsen. Can you hear me?'

'Perfectly well, thank you,' the boy replied.

Dr Bunsen frowned and picked up his pen.

'Well, then, perhaps you could tell me a little about yourself. Would you like to tell me where you live and where can we find your family?'

Theo thought for a moment and realised that he had absolutely no idea. His mind seemed empty of any memories except of waking up and seeing Sandra crying by his bed. Only that and strange fragments of dreams that swirled around his head.

'I'm afraid I don't know. I don't remember,' he said.

Dr Bunsen's eyes rolled. 'Now, Theo, this is not the time to play games. I have never seen a case of amnesia in anyone younger than 21, and I highly doubt that-'

'No, really. I don't remember,' Theo insisted cheerfully.

'Very well,' growled the doctor. He wrote in his notepad:

The subject claims to have lost his memory. Most likely he is lying to avoid confronting his past.

Dr Bunsen had never liked children: screaming, dribbling, restless creatures of tantrums, snot and loud voices, always on the verge of breaking something or else erupting in tears. He hadn't even liked himself much as a child. As he grew older, he tried to be as big as possible by bullying anyone younger or weaker. His only friends were the nervous hangers-on who grinned anxiously every time they thought they were in danger of getting hit.

He had chosen psychology in the hope that he might learn how to trick people into liking him. However, his mother had pushed him to specialise in child psychology to overcome his hatred of children. Yet the more he came to learn about kids, the more clear and justified his reasons for hating them seemed to be. Children were steered by secret agendas buried deep within their unconscious minds. How could you reason with someone who was still traumatised by hidden memories of their potty training?

And to think he could have become a hotshot brain surgeon and made millions. Instead, here he was with some smart-alec kid who was already more famous than Dr Bunsen would ever be. And now this brat wanted to pretend he'd lost his memory?

'Listen, Theo,' he said in a sugared voice that Theo found to be vaguely threatening. 'We're here to *help* you. Running away from your problems won't make them disappear. Life is all about facing up to things. You're only hurting yourself if you're holding something back.'

'Well, there is one thing,' Theo admitted, hardly daring to look up.

'Yes?' Bunsen responded eagerly, grabbing his pen.

'While I was asleep I kept having this strange dream. I remember only bits and pieces. There was this yellow planet with two suns and three moons. There were hills and valleys made up of powdered cheese, and these blue creatures were surfing down them. And there was an old man sitting on a rock...'

'Theo, Theo, Theo. If you insist on wasting my time with this make-believe, we'll never get anywhere.' Bunsen shook his shiny head and scribbled on his pad:

The boy appears to be mildly delusional. It cannot be ruled out that three months in a coma may have damaged his mental health.

Dr Bunsen stood up and looked down his nose at Theo, making him feel very small. 'When you can think of something a little more, ah, *relevant*, to say, we'll talk some more. Now be a good boy and get some rest.' He gave a kind of a false wink that made Theo flinch, and left the room.

Theo found himself alone for the first time that day and at once felt ten times better. Since waking up, he'd been tested, inspected and diagnosed by an army of doctors. Then he'd been intimidated, accused of lying and vaguely threatened by a psychologist twice his size. He wondered if he hadn't been better off asleep.

The rest of the day passed fairly peacefully, though. Every hour or so, Sandra or one of the other nurses brought him drinks and comics to read, but otherwise he had the whole day to himself to think. He really had no idea who he was or where he came from. His memory drew a complete blank. Yet somehow this didn't really bother him as much as it did the adults. What was the point in having a past? Just another bagful of memories to cart around the place. No, Theo was quite happy to start from scratch.

He doubted Dr Bunsen would agree with him, so he kept these thoughts to himself. Since the nurses had told him to rest, he spent the afternoon reading and listening to the rain on the windows. Knowing that just a few inches away the wind was driving a chilly downpour against the glass made Theo feel all the more warm and secure, wrapped up in a pile of blankets.

Each time Sandra came by it seemed like her smile wanted to leap off her face. Theo had listened to her voice for the last three months and it was a sound he loved and trusted. In a way, he felt like she was already an old friend.

'Hey, Theo!' She grinned as she arrived to puff up his pillow in the evening. 'Are you warm enough? How was your day?'

'OK. Except for the doctors.'

Sandra laughed. 'I know what you mean. I think most of them have forgotten what it's like to be young.'

She placed the back of her hand against his forehead to check for fever and,

finding none, she placed a glass of milk on the bedside table. 'It looks like the thunderstorm they forecast has turned up. It might get a little loud but don't worry. If you get scared, give me a shout. I'll be just down the hall. Do you want me to close the window?'

'No thanks,' said Theo. 'I like the smell of a storm.'

The winds grew in strength throughout the evening and the howling gusts sounded like distant voices announcing some momentous event. The sky grew black with ominous clouds and there was a sense of impending war. On the stroke of midnight the storm arrived and all hell broke loose in the sky above. The echoes of the thunder made the windows rattle, and lightning left streaks on the back of Theo's eyelids.

He pulled the blankets close around him as he sat up to watch the show. He hoped Sandra wouldn't walk past and order him back to bed. It seemed like someone up above was really angry tonight and wanted to let everyone know about it. The rain pelted against the windows and they shook in the wind.

Theo could hear some of the children crying further down the ward. He was grateful that he wasn't easily scared, though he had to admit that he jumped when there was such a fierce bolt of lightning that it seemed like the air itself had split apart. The room was lit up and then plunged into a terrible darkness along with the rest of the neighbourhood. He guessed that the lightning must have struck a power line or something. He didn't mind. It meant that the thunderstorm was clearer.

He pulled back the curtains even further and sent his pile of correspondence tumbling to the floor. The letters fluttered across the room in the breeze that came through the window and revealed one card that was written in fluorescent ink. It was the card that had awakened him that morning. Theo bent down to pick it up and read:

Dear Theo,

It's time to wake up. You have a visitor.

Love

The Storyteller.

What visitor? Who was the Storyteller? And why had he woken up as Sandra had read him the card? Theo didn't have any answers yet but he had a strange feeling that he soon would. He stared at the stamp that glowed blue in the darkness and tried to think what it reminded him of. However, the memory eluded him and he looked back at the sky for inspiration.

The clouds swirled dangerously overhead but there seemed to be one patch of

sky that was darker than all the rest. Theo squinted to get a better view. Yes, it seemed as though there was something up there and it was getting bigger all the time. It must be something falling, he thought, or maybe floating towards the hospital grounds. It was too dark to make it out exactly, but one thing was for sure: it was headed right for him.

Theo gasped but couldn't bring himself to move out of the way. He stared ahead as if hypnotised, not willing to believe what his eyes saw. Through the falling rain he could make out a figure holding on to a balloon. While Theo gazed in wonder, it flew in through the open window and crashed right into him as he sat up in bed. He tumbled backwards in an avalanche of blankets and cushions, and found himself lying flat on his back with a heavy lump sat on his chest.

Some hidden instinct caused Theo to push his feet against the wall and he flipped his attacker on to the bed with a thrust of the knees. He jumped up and turned to face his opponent with a kung-fu posture that he copied from one of his comics. They stood motionless in the darkness, sizing each other up, neither daring to make the first move. Perhaps they would have stood like that until the morning had not a flash of lightning suddenly illuminated the room. Theo found himself staring into the eyes of a four-feet high Bloon.

'Who on earth are you?' Theo spluttered at last.

'Hmmph. Some welcome,' Bozo sniffed. 'Didn't the Storyteller let you know I was coming?'

Chapter 3

Bozo

Theo sank back on to his bed and wiped the dust from his eyes. I'm dreaming, he thought, I must be dreaming. Probably the aftereffect of being asleep for three months. Only stands to reason that I should start to confuse things. He rubbed his eyes until they saw sparks and then gave himself a long, hard pinch. But that just hurt and everything looked exactly the same afterwards. Nothing could change the fact that in front of him stood a blue creature with large, gleaming eyes and a long, curly tail. And it seemed to be busy drying itself on the curtains of his room.

'Who are you?' Theo asked again, regaining his confidence a little. A blue hand came out from behind the curtain in response.

'They call me Bozo.' Theo shook Bozo's hand and reflected that he was still no wiser for knowing his visitor's name. Moreover, Bozo made no sign that he had any plans to stop yanking Theo's hand up and down.

'What are you doing?' Theo asked. Bozo's head popped out from behind the curtain, his yellow eyes wide open in surprise.

'The Storyteller told us that you Hoomans shake each others' hands when you meet.'

'Well, yes,' Theo admitted. 'But only for a moment. Then we usually let go and ask questions.'

'Like what?' Bozo asked distractedly, as he sniffed the flowers. Liking the smell, he began to chew on the petals of the chrysanthemums.

'Hey! Why are you eating my flowers?' Theo cried, snatching the vase away from him.

'You ask people *that* when you first meet them?' Bozo laughed, his tail beating from side to side. 'Oh boy, the Storyteller told us you guys are crazy, but I guess you have to see it to believe it. Hee! Hee!'

Theo wasn't quite sure the conversation was getting anywhere, but before he could reply he heard footsteps coming down the hall.

'Quick! Hide!' he whispered. Bozo rolled under the bed and Theo scooped up the blankets from the floor and dived on to the mattress. At the same moment Sandra entered the room with a candle in her hand.

'Theo? I heard your voice from down the hall. Were you scared by the storm? It's taken out all of the electricity for three streets,' Sandra said, as she placed the candle on Theo's bedside table. Theo gave her a weak smile and then let

his eyelids droop as though he were overcome with drowsiness. He felt his nurse tuck him in and pick up the letters from the floor. 'Well, if you need anything, give me a shout. I'm only down the hall.'

Theo waited until her footsteps faded to a distant echo before he threw off the covers and peered under the bed. There was no one there. He lowered the candle to be sure and called, 'Bozo? Psssst, Bozo?' There was no answer and Theo sighed. 'I guess it was all just a weird dream,' he said.

'*Who* are you calling weird?' demanded an indignant voice from behind him. Theo whirled around to see Bozo polishing off the rest of his chrysanthemums and begin on the roses.

'Why didn't you answer when I called you?' Theo asked, unsure whether to be relieved or disappointed that the strange blue creature was still there.

'I had my mouth full,' Bozo explained. 'Ow! These roses have sharp bits.'

'They're thorns. Roses grow them so they don't get eaten by horses and cows.'

Bozo shook his head and laughed. 'No, no, no. You really don't know the first thing, do you? I mean, do you see daisies armed to the teeth on your garden lawn?'

'Well, no-'

'Exactly! The real reason,' Bozo continued smugly, 'is that beautiful flowers - like beautiful people - usually come with a bad attitude. That was one of the first things the Storyteller told us about you Hoomans.' Bozo extracted a thorn from between his bright yellow teeth and then drank the water from the vase to wash down his meal.

Thunder rolled moodily outside but the storm was already passing. The rain maintained a steady patter on the window, as if it was asking to be let in. The candle flame danced on its stage of wax, casting shadows that leapt about the room. Bozo watched them with interest.

'Exactly who is this Storyteller you keep going on about?' Theo demanded, pulling at Bozo's tail to get his attention.

Bozo swung around in shock. '*Who is the Storyteller?* You mean you didn't receive a message from him today? Man, he like *promised* me...'

'Oh yes. That one,' Theo said, as he fumbled around for the card. He found the envelope and discovered that the stamp was also luminous. He passed it over for inspection and only in that moment did he realise that the creatures on the stamp looked just like Bozo.

'I don't suppose you know any of these...people?' Theo asked nervously.

Bozo grabbed the envelope from him and cried, 'Ah, look! There's Dodo, Lobo, Gogo, Gaga and Raga! It's rather a good likeness, too. How like the Storyteller to send a picture to remind me of home.'

'But who *is* the Storyteller?' Theo pleaded.

'Why, he's the one who tells the Story.'

'What story?' Theo asked, completely confused.

Bozo gave him a big grin. 'This one, of course.'

By a candle flame that flickered to the rhythm set by the falling rain, Bozo explained the whole thing from the beginning. The storm raged outside and the windows shook in their frames as the Bloon spoke. Theo listened carefully to the full account and had to resist the temptation not to pinch himself again.

'You mean to say,' Theo stammered at last, 'that me, this hospital, this city and...everything in the whole wide world are all just chapters in a Story? And that this *Story* is told by an old man on a distant planet inhabited by blue monkeys like you?'

'Almost right. We actually prefer to be called Bloons.'

Theo ignored him and began to pace around the room, his forehead wrinkling so deeply that he suddenly seemed an old man. He shook his head in disbelief and waved his hands about like a conjurer attempting to pull a bunny out of a hat.

'You mean to say that all the animals, all the people and all the countries on Earth are just part of some *fairy tale*? That our history, our culture, our society are all made up by some old man sat on a rock somewhere? Boy, you're completely crazy, Bozo. Or, more likely, I am. Yes, that's what it is. The doctors thought that something might have gone wrong with me after so long asleep. When Dr Bunsen comes back I'll tell him I'm seeing things. Bozo, you're just a figment of my imagination.'

'You know, that's really quite ironic,' Bozo mused. 'Because speaking of figments of the imagination, you yourself didn't exist until about half an hour ago. The Storyteller just dreamed you up so that I would have a companion on my quest.'

'What on earth are you talking about?' Theo hissed. 'Haven't you seen the papers? I've been asleep for the last few months and all the doctors here can prove it!' He felt like screaming but didn't want to alert Sandra again.

'The Storyteller decided to backdate your entry into the story. That way I could find you here without any family getting in the way. OK, I know it's a bit sudden,' Bozo consoled him, wrapping his tail around the boy's shoulders, 'but just because you're only half-an-hour old doesn't mean you're worth less than

anyone else.'

'I am nine *years* old,' Theo insisted between gritted teeth. 'Do you think you can just create people in a few minutes? They have to be born and grow up. That takes time! Ah, what's the use? One of us is completely crazy, I'm sure of that much.'

Bozo thought for a moment and then said, 'OK, OK. Imagine it like this: say we write a story about a fish called Bert. So once upon a time Bert was swimming along in the deep, blue ocean, smoking seaweed and watching the waves pass overhead. Now, if someone asks us about Bert's past - his childhood, his family - we'll have to make it up. He has to have a history even if he was invented only 30 seconds ago. And Bert would believe in it more than anyone.'

'But Bert doesn't exist!' Theo cried, turning red in frustration.

Bozo leaned forwards with a wicked glint in his eye and whispered, 'Who knows? Maybe he does now.'

Theo sat with his back to the wall and played it all over in his head. He certainly didn't remember his past before today but he was sure that he had one. And though he'd been awake for only a day, he felt pretty confident that he knew what reality was all about. After all, how could a world as big and complex as the Earth fit inside the head of a single Storyteller?

But then Theo thought of the comics he'd been reading earlier. If he had been able to speak to the characters, they would have assured him that they were real. They would have been certain that their world existed. Though the truth was that their lives and exploits came from the head of some writer drinking too much coffee in a study somewhere. But these were stories with only 20 characters in them, not a planet with billions of people and trillions of animals. How could every conversation, every event fit inside one story?

'All right, let's say that I'm prepared to believe this,' he began warily. 'Are you saying that the Storyteller sits down every day and tells you about *everything* that's going on in the whole wide world?'

Bozo wagged his finger from side to side. 'Of course not. He just gives us the highlights each day. You know, the funniest bits about the crazy stuff you Hoomans do all the time.'

'Like what?' Theo demanded, his pride bruised.

'Like those Chains that you wear around your wrists. The ones with the big eye and the fingers that order you around.'

'You mean *watches*.'

'I mean *Chains*. They tell you when to come, when to go, when to eat, when to sleep. You can't even sit still in a park for a few minutes before you check them to make sure you're not late for something. And the funniest part is,' Bozo chuckled, 'you're only prisoners because you want to be. You could take them off at any time.'

'We're not *prisoners*...' Theo began, but Bozo was on a roll.

'Of course you are. If you were really free, then you'd get up when your eyes open in the morning, eat when you feel hungry and go to bed when you're tired.'

Theo had to admit there was some sense to what Bozo said. Still, he wasn't much nearer to understanding where this was leading.

'I don't know about that,' he said. 'But look, what about the Story - I mean, the *Earth* - in all of this? We orbit around the sun and that's part of a galaxy called the Milky Way, and that's just one very small galaxy in a very big universe. If what you say is true, then where do you suppose we are?' Theo threw his hands up to the ceiling, feeling like he'd made a very worthy point.

But Bozo didn't seem in the least bit fazed. 'Where are we? Why, we're just in a corner of the Storyteller's imagination.'

The pieces started to come together in Theo's mind and he wasn't sure he liked the conclusion. He struggled to put his thoughts in order and finally said,

'According to you, the Storyteller is sick - dying, even?' Bozo nodded sadly. 'If he dies, what will happen to the Story? I mean, to me and everything in my world?'

Bozo looked up, his eyes wide and tearful. 'I don't know. Maybe everything will just disappear.'

Chapter 4

Scoop

'Theo! What have you done to your flowers?'

The day was only 15 seconds old for Theo and already there was someone screaming at him. He squinted between dewy eyelids and saw Nurse Sandra standing over the vase of headless flowers with a horrified look on her face. She held a few chewed-up stems in one hand and stared at Theo in disbelief. There was little doubt that a fairly good explanation was expected.

'Um, I was hungry?' he offered.

'You *ate* them? Are you crazy?' she shrieked, slapping one hand over her eyes.

'I think I was dreaming that they were chocolate...or something.'

Lying wasn't a skill that came easily to Theo, but in the bleary morning light the truth didn't seem an option. Sandra looked him straight in the eye and he felt wide open under her gaze, as if she was hunting through the contents of his mind and already knew he was hiding something. Any minute now he would break down and tell her about Bozo. Then there would be a whole lot of explaining to do, which wouldn't be too easy as he wasn't sure that he understood all that much himself.

Sandra opened her mouth to speak but just then the bell down the hall began to ring. With a snort she hurried off, casting one more appalled look at the vase and Theo as she went. Theo peeked behind the curtains and under the bed but Bozo was nowhere in sight. He shrugged and replayed the events of the night in his head as he slid the breakfast tray on to his lap. He took a slurp of rice pudding and remembered how a strange blue creature had flown in through his window on a balloon. It had stood there and told him that he and everyone else in the world were all just part of some *story*. It didn't make any more sense at 8.30 in the morning.

What on earth was he thinking? Was he out of his mind? It must have been part of some strange dream - like thinking the flowers were chocolate. A dream that Theo was beginning to believe.

Come on, Theo, he said to himself. You may have amnesia but you're not crazy - no matter what the doctors think. He breathed a sigh of relief. It was good to know that the world wasn't going to end, after all.

He spooned some more rice pudding into his mouth and almost choked when he heard a familiar voice say:

'I see they don't trust you with solid food yet.' Theo jerked around and his jaw dropped as he saw Bozo appraising his breakfast tray with disappointment. 'I

don't suppose anyone thought to bring me any flowers?'

Theo's pleasure at seeing his new friend was tainted only by the uneasy thought that what he had heard the night before might be true. Bozo's oval, yellow eyes gazed at him with an expression of pure innocence - an impression that was offset by the mischievous curl of his dark purple lips. Theo started to laugh but then some cautious instinct warned him to be careful. It suddenly struck him that he had no idea who Bozo was. How had he come in floating through the window in the first place? How did he know that Bozo was telling the truth when he talked about the Storyteller and the Story?

Theo's mind began to race through all the paranoid possibilities: Bozo could be some strange creature that had run away from the zoo. He could be some out-of-control experiment that had escaped from a laboratory. Or maybe he was some kind of old-fashioned fairy or ghost.

He might even be an alien.

Before Theo could think about the implications of this, he heard Bozo whisper from the doorway: 'There's a whole crowd of people armed with Flash-boxes. I think they're coming to see you!' Bozo leapt across the room and promptly installed himself behind the curtains.

'Flash-boxes?' Theo asked in confusion, but in the same instant a squad of doctors and press swung into the room. The journalists had large cameras around their necks and hungry looks on their faces. Theo had a nasty feeling he knew who was on the menu.

'Good morning, Theo!' boomed Dr Bunsen, who led the pack. His smile was large and insincere. Theo guessed it was more for the benefit of the cameras than for him. 'Now give your visitors a big smile!'

The cameras had already begun to click and Theo reeled from the blinding flashes. Sandra approached the side of his bed and whispered:

'Don't worry, sweetheart. These people are journalists and they want to ask you a few questions. Don't answer anything you don't want to - believe me, they'll probably make up the answers anyway. I think the doctor invited them here so that he could have his shot at being famous.' She gave his arm an encouraging squeeze and moved to the side.

The winding and clicking didn't stop for a moment and the reporters jostled with one another for space. All eyes were on Theo and he felt quite uncomfortable. What if he sneezed?

'Theo, Theo! How does it feel to be awake?' asked a journalist with a squeaky voice and a face like a piglet.

'I don't know. How is waking up supposed to feel?'

'Theo!' came a gruff voice from the back. 'Do you know where you come from?'

'I don't remember,' Theo shrugged.

'You what? You don't remember?' came a chorus of excited voices, and the crowd jostled closer to stick large microphones in Theo's face.

Dr Bunsen decided things had gone far enough and he stepped in front of the bed with his arms outstretched.

'Ladies and gentlemen, as a doctor I may assure you that a temporary loss of memory is quite typical in these types of cases.' Having gained the attention of the *paparazzi*, his voice swelled and warmed to its own sound. 'However, under my careful psychological guidance, I am confident that Theo will soon be restored to his senses.'

'Doctor, how did Theo wake up?' The man with the piglet face asked.

Dr Bunsen smirked. 'That's Dr Bunsen, B-u-n-s-e-n. May I remind you that we are, after all, in the 21st century, and here at St Jude's we are at the cutting edge of technology and innovative treatment. Theo has been under my personal supervision for three months now and, modesty permitting, I must suppose it was in no small part due to my expertise and dedication that-

'I got a card,' interrupted Theo suddenly, growing tired of the whole show.

'You got a what?' the journalists cried, hungry for sensation.

Theo looked at their bright eyes and poised pens. He couldn't help thinking of ducks at feeding time in the park. 'I got a card. It told me to wake up,' he explained, trying not to see the dagger looks that Dr Bunsen was throwing him.

'Who was it from?' a woman with razor-sharp lips wanted to know.

'It was from someone called the Storyteller,' Sandra joined in, holding up the card for the cameras. There was another blinding flurry of flashes.

'From *who*?' they wanted to know.

But Dr Bunsen was missing the limelight already: 'Come along, now. I really think we must leave the child to rest, hmm? Doctor's orders! After all, he only woke yesterday. Perhaps you would all like to follow me to my study, where I shall be delighted to answer any further questions.'

'Just one more question, guv,' insisted the man with the gruff voice. 'Theo, what are you going to do now that you're awake?'

The answer sat at the back of Theo's throat and he couldn't swallow it, no

matter how hard he tried. His mouth ran dry and the room fell silent as they awaited his reply. Looking around at the crowd of swollen, agitated faces, he felt his voice float out into the room like a feather.

'I think...I think I have to save the world.'

The journalists left in good spirits, still over the moon about the last quote. They politely declined Dr Bunsen's offer of a tour of the hospital.

'Don't worry, guv, we've got all we need!' they assured him: a mystery cure from some fruit calling himself the 'Storyteller', a beautiful nurse with the healing touch and a child saviour of the world - more than enough for a cracking story!

Theo watched them leave and felt as though they were taking a small piece of his dignity with them. He turned to a rap at the window and saw that Bozo was out on the window ledge. He jumped up and let him in at once.

'It was getting too bright in here with all those Flash-boxes,' Bozo explained. He looked Theo up and down. 'They got you, all right. You look thinner already.'

'They're called *cameras*,' Theo corrected him. 'And they don't make you thin. They don't do anything to you.'

'That's what you think. Each time they flash, they steal a tiny piece of you. Look at all the fashion models on TV. They get flash-boxed hundreds of times each day and they're skinnier than anyone.'

Theo didn't want to argue right now. Something else was on his mind. He swung his feet over the side of the bed until they almost touched the floor and cleared his throat.

'Bozo, I was thinking - don't take this the wrong way - but how do I know that what you're telling me is true?' Bozo stared back at him with wide, indignant eyes. 'I mean, how do I know that everything you told me about the Story and the Storyteller is the truth...it's a bit much just to ask me to take your word for it and all...you seem like a nice guy but...' he trailed off, unable to take the hurt expression that covered his new friend's face.

'Well, I like that for gratitude!' Bozo cried. 'I leave my friends and planet behind and risk my life on a mission to save this crazy Story, and all you can do is call me a liar or a nut?'

'OK, take it easy,' Theo pleaded. 'I don't mean to be rude. I'm sure you are doing something really heroic - it's just that it's all a bit hard to grasp. I guess I need some kind of proof.'

Bozo nodded magnanimously and the two of them sat on the bed deep in thought. Finally the Bloon spoke up:

'If only I knew how to get in touch with the Storyteller. He could send you a sign or something. But I haven't got the first idea how to contact him.'

'Wait!' cried Theo. 'What about the card he sent me?' He grabbed the card from the bedside table and searched for a clue. He tried holding it up to the light and reading the message in the reverse image of a mirror. Nothing. He gave up and slumped back on his bed. 'I hoped he might have left a phone number or something,' he said.

'I don't know. It would never be like the Storyteller to make things too easy,' Bozo mused. 'He used to tell me that the answers always lay beneath the surface of things.'

They fell silent for moment and then Theo murmured, 'What about the stamp?'

While Bozo looked on with curiosity, Theo wetted the edge of the stamp with a few drops from his glass of water and peeled it back from the envelope to reveal:

ST 77335599221100448866789883434398988888343434343430000034348

'ST must be Storyteller,' Theo said. 'But that's the longest phone number I've ever seen.'

'I guess he doesn't want anyone calling him by mistake,' said Bozo. 'Leave it to me.' He opened the window and hopped out on to the ledge, using his tail to balance in the wind. He edged along to a drainpipe and slid down the wall to the garden below. Theo jumped up to the window and waited with suspended breath as he saw Bozo dart through the garden from tree to tree, taking great care that no one saw him. He scaled the wall in one leap and dashed across the street to an empty phone box. A minute later he was back across the road and over the wall like a shot. He landed on all fours in the garden, took a few good bites from the flowerbed and retraced his cautious route to Theo's room.

'Well?' Theo asked, dying of impatience. Bozo pointed at his mouth to indicate that it was still full. He didn't seem to be in any hurry to finish chewing though, and all the time his smile grew wider and more unbearable.

'Come on! Tell me, you scoundrel!' Theo insisted, barely able to sit still.

'If you're not going to be polite, I shan't tell you anything at all,' Bozo sniffed. 'I was almost run over by a bus and all you can say is "scoundrel".'

'I'm sorry. I'm just dying to know - please?'

Bozo's eyes lit up. 'I phoned the number and there was no one there.'

'Oh.' Theo's spirits drooped.

'But I got through to a machine that said, "Welcome to the Storyteller's emergency answering service. We are sorry but he cannot respond to your call just now. Please leave a message after the long bleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep, and somehow - who knows how? - he'll try to get back to you.'

'So now what?' asked Theo excitedly.

'Now I go back to the flowerbeds to finish my lunch and you sit tight until the Storyteller picks up his messages.' Bozo laughed and disappeared out of the window.

The rest of the day was like torture for Theo. At every moment he expected something amazing to happen. Maybe the clouds in the sky would take the shape of an old man and talk to him. Or maybe the Storyteller would appear suddenly on TV in a programme meant only for Theo. As much as his heart told him that Bozo was telling the truth, his head refused to believe it until he had some kind of proof. It was like walking the border between knowing and not-knowing, and it was a lonely place to be.

And still nothing happened. The minutes passed like hours and he could take no enjoyment in his comics or in chatting with Sandra, who seemed to have forgotten the incident with the flowers. Even worse was when Dr Bunsen came to take revenge for the morning's events by forcing Theo to complete entire papers of pointless psychological tests. He answered the multiple-choice questions in a kind of dejected apathy. He was powerless in a bed in a children's hospital where everyone seemed to think they knew what was best for him. Even Bozo was nowhere to be seen all day. Theo hoped he hadn't really hurt his feelings by doubting his word. Right now he was about the only friend that Theo had.

Sandra noticed that Theo seemed a bit down in the dumps, and she decided that he must have been worn out by the commotion of the morning. She gave him a light dinner of soup and bread, and ordered him to sleep as soon as it got dark outside. He protested feebly but her word was law and he found himself sinking into sleep early with a rather fed up expression on his face.

Had he known what was about to happen, he would have thanked her beforehand.

Chapter 5

The Dream

The gardener made his early morning rounds with an annoyed and bewildered expression on his face. Someone or something was tearing up the flowerbeds that he had worked so hard to plant, cultivate and tend throughout the summer. Granted, now that autumn was coming they wouldn't have lasted long anyway, but he hoped that the flowers cheered up the poorly children as they looked out of their windows or walked though the gardens.

What puzzled him more than anything was that it wasn't the usual type of vandalism that one expected anywhere in the city these days, what with the state of today's youth. No, it was more like some kind of madman or wild animal was tearing up the flowers with their teeth. He supposed he ought to alert the hospital authorities but he could see no other traces of breaking and entering, and no one had seen anything out of the ordinary. A few strange shadows about the place, of course, but then the light was changing with the shortening days, not to mention the stormy weather of late.

The leaves had begun to fall in golden brown cascades over the last few days and it was one of his favourite duties to sweep them up with an old rusty rake that leant against the wall. The leaves rustled like an echo of the wind, and he collected them into large heaps that would become the cinders of a bonfire later in the day. His rake dragged over the ground and the sounds floated up two storeys to the window of a room where a young boy was re-entering the chambers of the waking world.

Theo listened to the sounds outside without moving a muscle, vaguely conscious that, whatever happened, there was something he must not forget. Little by little, the fingertips of sleep loosened their clasp about his eyelids and he felt the warm blankets upon his body as though it belonged to someone else. His mind still whirled from the night's dream.

Theo knew that the dream had been very important and that he must remember it before the nurse arrived with breakfast and chased it away. Dreams were shy creatures: you couldn't simply grab them like you would a packet of biscuits from the cupboard.

Dreams loved the stage of your mind, but only as long as you weren't quite aware that they were there. If they felt at ease inside your head, then they would weave a collage of obscure stories and fables for you. They almost always had something to say but could never resist mixing all their stories together so that their message got rather muddled up. You'd find yourself having a birthday party in the desert before jumping on a flying camel that got you to school just in time to take an exam, but before you could start a sudden sandstorm would roll in and cover everything so that you wondered if there was any birthday cake left, or perhaps the camels had eaten it all....

This time Theo knew that he had had a remarkable dream, one that he simply had to remember. The dream was still close by - he could feel it breathing in the darkness behind his right ear. He pretended to pay it no attention, turned over on to his left side and faked a gentle snore. He felt tiny footsteps approach the corner of his eye and pause cautiously. Then cracks of light streamed into his head as the dream lifted up his eyelid to make its getaway. But Theo swung his attention around, and for a brief moment he and the dream stared at one another eye to eye. There was a sudden flash and Theo remembered what he had seen.

He had dreamt he'd been on Bozo's planet, in Bloonland. He had whirled in past one of the smoky red moons and seen below him the Storyteller sat on his rock. Theo recognised him at once from Bozo's description but could not help being blown away by the sight of someone far, far older than anyone he had seen before. It was like looking at a mountain.

Indeed, the Storyteller sat so still that he could have been mistaken for the rock he sat upon. His silver hair trailed over his shoulders and gleamed faintly in the evening air. His skin was wrinkled like old leather and his eyes gleamed white as though he had two stars in the sockets. He stroked his goatee beard with long, smooth fingers and he seemed to gaze off into infinity. With the rising of the second moon, an old Bloon picked up a conical white shell and blew a long, plaintive summons to the rest of his people. At once 50 Bloons came sprinting hell for leather from every corner of the hills. They dropped all they had in their hands and made a beeline for the Storyteller's rock, trampling over dunes, wine bushes and slower Bloons in their rush to get a good seat. They gathered around the Storyteller, who paid them no attention at all. Each late-comer was hushed into silence as he wrestled for a better view at the back.

It was apparent to Theo that the Storyteller was much beloved by the Bloons. They looked up to him with a mixture of reverence and adoration, none daring to speak or make a sound, all silently imploring him to begin the Story. It reminded Theo of an old man surrounded by his grandchildren, and he felt the urge to join the throng.

It was at that moment that Theo realised he couldn't see himself. While he could see and hear all that went on, he had no body of his own. It seemed as though he was floating in the air above them like an invisible cloud. He was there in spirit but not in body, and the sensation of emptiness made him unbearably dizzy.

The stars began to rotate around him and he felt himself being sucked slowly into the black vortex above. Theo was suddenly afraid that he might just drift away into the endless space overhead and never be seen again. He began to fall away from the planet faster and faster until he could hardly make out the Bloons and the Storyteller at all. He tumbled into an infinite blackness scattered with mere pinpoints of light. He tried to scream but nothing came out.

Then the Storyteller began to speak, and his voice was like an anchor to Theo. He concentrated on the distant rumble of the old man's words, and the stars slowed down around him. He shut out his fear, focusing even harder on the distant sound, and began to pull himself back towards the planet. Finally he once again hovered above the Bloons and recovered his calm as he heard the first words of the Story.

The Storyteller was telling the Bloons about the invention of mobile Fones and already he had his audience crying with laughter on the floor.

As Theo listened, he began to see the words and the picture they conjured until the scene entirely absorbed him.

The Hoomans took to stroking their Fones in their pockets as though they were pets. While they waited for calls, they played with the buttons and tried to count how many friends they had. But as much as they dressed up their Fones in suits of bright colours and ever-smaller, cuter shells, they always failed to see the teeth. For although the Fones were much loved and adored - especially when they rang - they had an insatiable hunger and ate up the lives of the owners little by little. When lovers were kissing, the Fones rang and took a bite out of their romance. When the sun was going down and the sky melted into a fluid blend of glowing colours, the Fones rang and nibbled away at the most beautiful moments of the day.

Everyone began to feel thinner. The more they talked into their Fones, the less they had to say of any value. They began to feel awkward talking to their friends in person and had the rising urge to hold their Fones in front of them like a shield. They converted their Fones into Flash-boxes and used them as a third eye through which they could see the world in only two dimensions. Bit by bit they invented new ways to feel more lonely, becoming more isolated from each other by the day.

The Story was violently interrupted as the Storyteller gave way to a terrible coughing fit. The images he had conjured dissolved at once and it was like a rude awakening from a dream. His body shook like an old bicycle and it seemed as though he might crack and break into a thousand fragments at any moment. The Bloons covered their eyes and ears with their tails, dreadfully afraid and powerless to help. Each cough and gasp from the Storyteller was felt in the lungs of all, and a sense of dread fell upon them.

For Theo the sight was just as unbearable. He could see exactly why the Bloons loved the old man so much and already he felt a deep affection for this mysterious spinner of tales. Forgetting that he had no hands, Theo reached out to comfort the Storyteller as he struggled for breath again. In that moment, the Storyteller looked up sharply to his right where Theo was floating and a strange look came over him. The Bloons looked up too but saw nothing. At first Theo could not bring himself to meet the Storyteller's eyes, but eventually it was as though there was nowhere else to look. He was awestruck by what he saw.

The eyes of the Storyteller were like doors unto a soul more ancient than anything Theo could have imagined. Here was a being that had been roaming the galaxies while the stars were still young. Here was someone who had forgotten more than Theo would ever come to know, and he felt like a small candle in front of a blazing sun. Yet despite this, there was something in the Storyteller's eyes that Theo would never have expected to see.

Fear.

Fear of dying and leaving the Universe behind for ever. Fear, too, for the Story itself and what would become of it. There was still plenty of light in the eyes of the Storyteller, but it seemed like the embers of a fire that was running out of fuel and would soon die out for good.

He was asking Theo for help.

It was only then that the boy understood in his heart that the Storyteller was dying. He needs me, Theo realised. Until now I didn't even know who he was, and now that I've met him he's about to disappear from my world for ever. And then what would happen to the Story he tells...

But Theo was no longer only worried about the fate of himself and his world. It's hard to care about someone you've never met before, but now he'd seen the Storyteller with his own eyes and witnessed his suffering, Theo was overcome by the urge to help him, to cure him if he could find a way.

'He needs me!' he cried.

'Everybody needs somebody!' rejoiced Bozo, swinging merrily from the overhead light. Theo blinked and realised that his eyes had been open for some time and the dream was long gone.

Chapter 6

Diagnosis

An hour later Dr Bunsen strolled down the corridor with a folder under his arm and a smirk on his face. The doctors had agreed that Theo should undergo a course of intensive hypnotherapy. Perhaps that way they might jog the boy's memory as to where he came from and who he was.

Dr Bunsen liked hypnotising his patients. He would soon have Theo at his mercy and that would be an end to those dirty lies about not remembering anything. The brat evidently thought he could waste everyone's time with his ludicrous fictions. As if the doctors didn't have anything better to do than put up with the make-believe of children.

Anyhow, I'll put a stop to that, Bunsen thought to himself. I'll poke through all of the corners of Theo's mind and shine a spotlight on all the little secrets he's got hidden away. While I'm there, I might install some valuable lessons about good behaviour and respect for authority, too.

Bunsen reached the end of the corridor and swung around the corner into Theo's room.

'Well, Theo,' he said. 'The time has come to find out just *who* you really are.' But his words faded as quickly as his smile. The room was empty and Theo was nowhere to be seen.

Theo was at that moment with Bozo on a lower floor of the hospital, surrounded by piles of books that were taller than him. The books in question were medical texts that had been left on the shelves for so long that they were each covered with an inch of dust. Every time they opened a new one, Bozo sneezed and they grew afraid that someone would hear them.

The books were not especially easy to understand, either. In fact, you got the impression that the people who wrote them didn't want you to read them at all. They used words that Theo had never heard before - indeed, he'd begun to suspect they'd made them up. Not only that, the sentences were so long that by the time you got to the end of one you'd already forgotten how it started.

Theo and Bozo had installed themselves at the back of the library. They had been hard at work for more than two hours now. The lighting was pale and metallic and the air so stuffy that their yawning had become utterly contagious. No sooner did one of them open his mouth wide to yawn than the other followed suit. In fact, they might have fallen asleep there and then if it had not been for the occasional doctor passing by to search for some text. At the sound of footsteps, Bozo threw himself under a bookcase and Theo looked so absorbed in his reading that no one thought it strange to see a nine-year-old boy studying medical diagnosis.

'This one might help us,' Theo announced, turning the pages of a heavy volume called Common Illnesses and How to Cure Them. Bozo opened half an eye. He was dozing on the second shelf of medical encyclopedias. He'd already found the best application of these leather-bound volumes - they made very comfortable pillows.

'Let's see,' Theo pondered. 'Does the Storyteller have trouble sleeping at night?'

'He never sleeps.' Bozo yawned.

'Insom-n-i-a.' Theo scribbled on a notepad. 'How about his appetite?'

'He never eats.'

'Come on!' Theo objected. 'You'll be telling me he doesn't breathe next.'

'Well...,' Bozo shrugged. Theo groaned and put the book down in protest.

'Look,' Bozo said, sitting up. 'Things back home are a little different to here. Life follows different rules.'

'But how can I cure the Storyteller if I don't know what's wrong with him?' Theo protested. He considered a moment. 'This book says the majority of health problems are caused by bad diet - if he doesn't eat, then how does he get the energy to do anything?'

'He drinks,' Bozo offered.

'Ah! What? Beer? Whiskey? Maybe he has liver problems....'

'No. He drinks starlight.'

'What do you mean?' Theo asked, bewildered.

'We know because once there was such a cheese storm that powdered cheese filled the skies and blocked out the stars for days. When it was over, the Storyteller was as thin as a shadow.'

'Does starlight have many vitamins?' Theo asked, thumbing through a leaflet on nutrition. He sighed and reminded himself how important it was to get this right. He picked up his notepad and pen: 'OK, let's start with some basic information. How old is the Storyteller?'

'Don't know.'

'Where does he come from?'

'No idea.'

'Oh, come on, Bozo. You're not helping me at all!' Theo cried.

Bozo slid down from the shelf and took up a seat on a dictionary of herbal remedies opposite his friend.

'This is all new to me too, Theo,' he said. 'The Storyteller is the first person I've ever seen get ill.' He looked down at his long, skateboard feet. 'Us Bloons never get sick. We didn't know what sickness was.'

'But everyone gets sick from time to time,' Theo insisted.

'Why?'

'There are viruses and bacteria and...things,' Theo concluded vaguely.

'Where?'

'You can't see them but they're all around us.'

'Oh.' Bozo laughed. 'Back in Bloonland we only believe in what we can see. It makes life simpler that way.' Suddenly his ears swiveled. 'Someone's coming.'

Bozo slid under a bookshelf and Theo buried his nose in a random large volume. The sound of approaching footsteps grew louder and louder until it seemed to fill the entire library. The click-clack stopped abruptly and Theo knew he'd been seen. He didn't dare look behind him and, though he knew it was hopeless, he buried his head deep in the book in an attempt to hide. A shadow fell over him. All at once a hand reached down and grabbed him by the shoulder.

Theo spun around in fright, expecting to see the snarl of an angry doctor. His fear abated a little when he saw Nurse Sandra staring down at him. She didn't seem angry but rather curious and amused.

'Theo? What on earth are you doing down here? We've been searching high and low for you for more than an hour,' she said. She picked up one of the books with a puzzled look on her face. 'Why do you want to read about this crazy stuff when you've got piles of comics upstairs?'

Theo accepted Sandra's hand and walked back along the corridor with her. 'I wanted to find out what made someone sick,' he said.

'Did you?' She laughed. 'Well, Dr Theo, there's no easy answer to that, but I'll let you in on a secret: most of it is in the mind.'

They strolled out of the library and into the elevator that would take them back to Theo's ward. Had anyone been watching, they might have seen a thin, blue shape dash from corner to corner in pursuit. It waited until the other elevator doors opened, rushed in and hid beneath the cover of a snack-trolley pushed by a kitchen porter.

They passed other wards and Theo's eyes met those of the other children sitting up in bed reading or watching television. Some of them looked away nervously but others tried a nervous smile. Theo felt inclined to say hello and take up the invitation to friendship, but then turned his head and remained aloof. Somehow he didn't want to share either his mission or Bozo's company with anyone else.

They arrived at his private room and Theo climbed back into bed. Sandra took a seat next to him and pulled out some comics in case he was still in the mood to read something.

'And here's Joe with the snack-trolley,' she said. 'You've got a glass of cold milk and some biscuits...though it looks like someone else got to them first. Joe, did a squirrel get into the kitchen cupboards again?' She turned to look at Theo who had gone quite pale. 'Theo, are you OK? You look as though you've seen a ghost.'

Theo was looking with dread at the plate of biscuits on which sat a grinning Bloon, chewing a hazelnut twirl. Sandra followed his gaze and raised her eyebrows. 'Don't worry. I'll ask Joe to bring some more biscuits if that's what's bothering you.' She patted him on the head and walked off down the hall to answer a bell rung by another child.

Theo watched her leave in amazement. Once he dared breathe again, he hissed, 'Bozo, did you see that?'

'Hmmm?' the Bloon replied, looking up and wiping his mouth.

'They couldn't see you! You were sitting there right in front of them and they didn't even see you.'

'Oh. I didn't notice. I'll tell you one thing, though.'

'What?'

'These biscuits taste even better than flowers.'

Theo had trouble getting to sleep that night. The discovery that Bozo was invisible to everyone else meant they could now do all kinds of things without getting caught. Theo had been worried that they might put Bozo in a zoo and charge entry to see him. Or maybe cut him into small pieces in a laboratory to see what he was made of. Now he knew his friend was safe, they could plan their next move without fear.

Bozo had already begun to exploit his invisibility by raiding the kitchen and demolishing the biscuit supplies. On the way back to Theo's room, the Bloon had got all the other kids into trouble by ringing their bells to drag the nurses away from their magazines. He even managed to lock Bunsen in his office for

two hours until someone heard his outraged cries. The doctor had marched up and down the ward to search for the culprit, but Theo had faked a peaceful sleep until the man left, fuming.

But none of that was what kept Theo awake.

He couldn't stop thinking about what Sandra had said about sickness. out of his brain, *It's all in the mind*. Theo felt in his belly that her words held a clue to the mystery of the Storyteller's illness, but he couldn't think what. The answer felt so close that he could smell it, yet it remained out of reach. Finally, he gave up and turned his attention to something else.

'Bozo?' he whispered.

'Hmmm?' came a murmur from beneath the bed.

'I can't sleep. Tell me more about Bloonland and the Storyteller.'

Chapter 7

Bloonland

'Bloonland is all I'd ever known before coming here,' Bozo began. 'I never knew I'd miss it so much. Well, where to begin? First of all, Bloonland is this huge lump of cheese floating in space. The entire planet is as blue as a Bloon, and it's full of craters, dunes and hills, which make it a great place to play hide-and-seek.

'It's got two suns and three moons, so the sky is full of amazing sunsets and moonrises and eclipses with multicoloured light. Though sometimes we get a bit scared that one day the suns and moons will crash into each other.

'But the best thing about Bloonland is that you can eat it! Actually, it's the only thing there *is* to eat. The Storyteller says that the blue cheese you have here tastes something like it. You can suck on big rocks or slurp up powdered sand or just start chewing the ground and see how big a hole you can make!'

'But how can you eat your own planet?' Theo laughed. 'What's left to stand on?'

Although slightly piqued by the interruption, Bozo nodded. 'We get a bit worried sometimes that we'll eat too much and then there'll be no Bloonland left,' he carried on. 'Luckily, one of the effects of eating the cheese is that it makes you forget to think about the future...it doesn't help much with remembering stuff either, come to think of it. Maybe that's the reason we don't really know where we, the Bloons, came from.

'Some think that we were space travellers roaming through the galaxies like nomads until we found somewhere to live. Then when we came across Bloonland we didn't see any reason to leave. Others think that maybe we're actually *part* of Bloonland itself. That when the Storyteller arrived and began to tell the Story, the planet wanted to listen. So we slowly formed out of the rocks and dust, with big ears to hear the Story.'

'Like listening is your strong point.' Theo muttered.

'What?'

'Nothing. Carry on.'

Bozo turned up his nose and continued: 'Either way, no one remembers life before the Storyteller. It seems like he's always been with us and no one can remember when the Story began. We don't think about time the way you Hoomans do. With two suns and three moons, it gets pretty confusing.

'Everyone loves the Storyteller, even though he's not an easy guy to get to know. He just sits around on his old rock and does calculations on ancient

parchments. Sometimes he sings under his breath in strange languages that none of us understands. Maybe he's talking to the stars, but no one dares ask. Even when I did feel brave enough to ask him something, he didn't always answer. I could see from the look in his eyes that he was really far away.'

'So where does the Storyteller come from?' Theo asked, burning with curiosity.

'None of us knows that much about him. Not where he comes from or why he came to Bloonland,' Bozo replied, thoughtfully. 'There was only this one time he had a visitor. We came down to listen to the Story one day and found that the Storyteller was talking to another old man with a beard even longer than his.

'We hid behind some rocks and watched them. The stranger looked similar to the Storyteller - they could even have been brothers. But he wore a long, black cape and carried a leather bag. He was much more serious and business-like, too.

'He pulled out a bit of paper from his bag and read it in a stern voice to the Storyteller, who barely blinked. His eyes just turned cold and blue. We couldn't understand a word of what they said and eventually we drifted off to sleep. All through the night we woke to bits of their conversation, especially when they started to argue. But it was always the visitor who lost his temper. It was like he wanted to convince the Storyteller of something.

'By the time the second sun was coming up the visitor was long gone. We didn't know how he came or went, and we didn't dare ask. We never did find out what was going on. We were just happy that the Storyteller continued with the Story again the next evening.'

'What's the Story like?' Theo asked. 'I mean, obviously I *know* because I'm in it, but what's it like to *hear* it?'

Bozo tilted back his head in dreamy recollection: 'Ah, the Story! Every day, when the second moon rises, he tells us a new installment. Of course, it's a million times too big to tell all of it, so he just takes out the funniest, strangest bits. Like how when Hoomans get nervous you start talking about the weather! Or how when you get lonely you worship the Hypnosis-box that every house has in the corner of the room. It's so weird to think I'm actually *inside* the Story!

'When the Storyteller begins each night, he first closes his eyes and it's like he sees it all before him. It feels as if instead of making it up he's telling you about something that's already happened. Like he's reading off the headlines for you and he couldn't change it if he wanted to.

'But sometimes when he finished speaking I saw a tear rolling down his cheek in the moonlight. I couldn't understand how the weird and funny things that happened in the Story could upset him. But each day he seemed a little more thin and tired. He started slumping on his rock and his beard was gold when he

arrived and now it's bright white!

'Every day before the second moon rose, the Storyteller closed his eyes for longer and longer before starting. It was like he didn't know which parts of the Story to tell us. And when he spoke his voice trembled like he had something stuck in his throat. He'd smile and make us laugh, but I think we all knew deep down that he was suffering. When his coughing started, he couldn't hide it any more.

'We knew he was in trouble but we never talked about it. That's not the Bloon way. Even when we were surfing down the dunes or getting drunk on the wine-streams, we knew something bad was going to happen. But we never had any idea he was dying. We've never seen anyone die in Bloonland.'

'What, no one ever dies?' Theo interrupted.

Bozo shrugged. 'There was this one time when a Bloon called HubHub ate so much that he got round like a ball. One day he was rolling down the south side of the planet and he fell off the edge and kept on going. All we could do was throw as many rocks as we could after him so he wouldn't get hungry. We never saw him again.'

Bozo sighed and looked up at Theo. 'We guessed that it was the Story that was making the Storyteller sick. So we asked him to stop and maybe tell a new one that would make him feel better. He didn't answer us - he almost never does - but we could see from the look in his eyes that he had no choice. It was too late - he just couldn't stop.

'Even now I wonder if that's what the other old man was trying to tell him....'

Chapter 8

A Visitor

A young woman with curly, auburn hair stood in front of the mirror one morning and tried to run a brush through her long tresses. It was no good. Her hair had always done whatever it wanted to do, and it saw no reason to change now. Still, wild and free was back in fashion. She'd fit in with all the other chic women walking the streets of Rome.

Wiping the sleep from her eyes, she poured herself a small cup of black espresso coffee and wandered through to the living-room in her nightie. The morning sunlight filtered through the balcony windows and she felt as good as she had in any morning of the past few hundred years.

She opened the balcony doors and, as she stepped out into the sunlight, leaves the same colour as her hair fluttered by on the wind. She breathed in deeply and let the smell of autumn filter through to every cell in her body. The air tasted of smoke, nostalgia and even...change.

She blinked and walked back through to the salon, placing her cup of coffee on a window ledge. She knelt down on a thick carpet beside a glass coffee table and reached for the deck of Tarot cards that lay beside a small crystal altar. She spread out the cards in a fan and selected seven. She turned them over one by one, and with each card her eyes gleamed more and more.

She stared in amazement at the cards and reached over to the altar to pick up seven wooden dice. She cast them across the table, made a quick calculation in her head and then walked over to a desk in the corner, where a laptop was waiting on standby. She fired up the internet and a few moments later a search page displayed:

The Sleeping Celebrity Awakes

The mysterious case of the nine-year-old boy lying in a coma for the last three months took an exciting turn last week when the patient abruptly woke up. Known only as 'Theo', the boy seemed to be in good health and amused his fans by declaring he 'wanted to save the world'.

A smile broke out from ear to ear across her face. She walked over to collect her cup of coffee on the balcony and looked up at the sky.

'It's about time,' she called merrily.

She drank the espresso in one gulp, dressed herself in a smart skirt and jersey, packed a day-bag and walked out of her apartment for the last time. She hailed a taxi and, as the cab pulled up, she tossed the apartment keys to

an old homeless woman begging on the pavement.

'Fifth floor. Apartment 521. It's yours,' she said in Italian, before jumping into the taxi. The old woman watched her speed away in disbelief, looked at the keys in her hand and began fervent prayers of thanks to the Mother Mary.

The taxi-driver could not bring himself to ask for any money from such a beautiful young woman, and all the way to the airport he told her about his family problems. She listened sympathetically and, by the time they arrived at the international terminal, the driver concluded that perhaps things weren't so bad after all. It was just good to talk to someone.

'You are feeling sleepy.'

'No, not really. I slept fine last night.'

Dr Bunsen snorted and put down the watch he'd been dangling in front of Theo's eyes. Never in all his years as a doctor had he met such a disagreeable brat - and he'd known plenty. Here he was, a distinguished psychologist with 15 years of expertise and experience, trying to *cure* the child - and what was his reward? Smart answers from a precocious nine-year-old.

The worst part was that the ungrateful wretch had the irritating smirk of someone who knew something he didn't.

'Theo, I want to *help* you. But how do you expect to get better if you don't want to help *yourself*?'

'There's nothing wrong with me.'

'Except that you refuse to tell us who you really are, hmm? Exactly what are you hiding?'

'Nothing.'

'There you go again. An answer to everything. You must trust in us to know what's best for you. You're only a child and haven't had the chance to learn very much yet.'

Dr Bunsen leant forward and softened his voice to the extent that it sounded menacing. 'Theo, if you continue to resist treatment, I may have to recommend a course of medication to overcome these emotional blockages of yours. Now you don't want that, do you?'

Of all the reactions to his barely veiled threat, Theo's response was the last one Bunsen could have expected. The boy burst out laughing, covering his mouth with his hand and almost crying with mirth. What the doctor didn't know was that Bozo was sitting at the end of the bed, mirroring every move he

made. The look on the Bloon's face as he leant forward on his fist to intimidate Theo was too funny for words.

'Bozo!' Theo cried, despite himself.

'What did you call me?' Bunsen's voice suddenly became sharp and dangerous. '*Bozo?* Now listen, you conceited little brat,' he snarled. 'Maybe all the cameras and celebrity status have gone to your ugly little head. This is *my* hospital and I have the power to make things very uncomfortable for you, my friend.'

It seemed as if Bunsen had ripped off his mask and Theo saw the doctor as he had always imagined him to be. His face screwed up in fury, his lips twisted cruelly and he stared at Theo with eyes burning with hatred.

'From now on, kid, there's going to be a little more co-operation around here and...' At that moment Nurse Sandra arrived with the food-trolley. '...and I'm glad we had the opportunity for this little chat, Theo.' Dr Bunsen smiled brightly, flashing him one last, dark look. 'Ah, here's Sandra with your lunch. Mmm, spaghetti - this hospital is like a hotel! We'll carry on tomorrow, Theo. Do think about what I said, won't you?' Bunsen left the room in a hurry and Theo's eyes followed him in terror.

'What was all that about?' Sandra asked with a puzzled look. Theo could feel his heart beat so fast it felt like it might punch a hole through his chest and bounce down the corridor like a rubber ball. Sandra put her hand to his forehead. 'You're sweating! What did Dr Bunsen say to you?'

Theo wanted to tell her, but somehow he didn't dare. As Bunsen said, he was just a kid - who would believe him?

'He scared me,' was all he managed to stutter.

'Doctors can be like that sometimes,' Sandra sighed. 'They spend so many years filling up their heads that they all go a little bit crazy. Don't pay him any mind.' She moved on with the food-trolley and Theo turned to see Bozo looking as shaken as him. The Bloon's oval eyes shone bright yellow and his tail trembled behind him.

'Man,' Bozo managed to say. 'I knew he was mean but not *that* mean.'

'Bozo, we have to get out of this place,' Theo said quickly. 'We've been sitting around here for too long doing nothing.'

'On the other hand,' Bozo replied with a slurp, as he struggled with a long piece of spaghetti, 'the food here isn't too bad. Where else are we going to get three meals a day brought to us in bed?'

'But Bunsen has got it in for me now,' Theo complained.

'Huh! Let him just try talking like that to you again,' Bozo puffed, throwing a

few punches in the air.

'A fat lot of good you were when I needed you,' Theo muttered. 'But really, Bozo, we need to get out of here. We need to find the Cure for the Storyteller, remember?'

'So?' Bozo shrugged, gargling with Theo's milk. 'This is a hospital, right? There must be rooms full of medicine here - some pill or other has got to work. And then I can get back to Bloonland. Man, I could murder some blue cheese...' he concluded wistfully.

'Bozo, I'm serious!' Theo insisted. 'I've been thinking about what Sandra told me last night. She said that most illnesses were in the mind.'

'So?'

'So if the world is the mind of the Storyteller, we need to get out there and discover what's wrong with it. *Then* maybe we can find a cure.'

'But you can see all of the world on the Hypnosis-box - as many channels as you want.'

'You mean the *television*,' Theo corrected him.

'I mean the *Hypnosis-box*,' Bozo laughed. 'It was funny to see Bunsen try to hypnotise you by dangling a watch in front of your eyes. All he really had to do was turn on that Box and you'd have been at his mercy.'

'I would not!' Theo snapped hotly.

'You would too. Here's how you look when you're watching something. You go like this.' Bozo slumped his shoulders and jutted his neck forwards. He allowed his jaw to drop like an ape and his eyes blurred stupidly.

'I do NOT look like that when I watch TV!' Theo yelled.

'Sure you do. And you know what? The more you watch, the dumber you get. You're all completely hooked: the longer you go without a remote control in your hands, the more nervous you get.' Bozo giggled. 'The Storyteller used to make us laugh by telling us how you Hoomans want to live for ever, yet you spend, like, ten years of your life as slaves to the Box.'

'I'm sick of you making fun of Hoomans - I mean, *humans* - all the time,' Theo shouted. 'We are not slaves!'

Before Bozo could retort, another voice spoke from the doorway and cut their argument dead.

'Am I interrupting something?'

They both turned in shock and beheld a smiling, young woman with auburn hair and gleaming green eyes.

Chapter 9

The Fool

'Er, no...' Theo stammered, feeling very exposed under the newcomer's gaze. 'I was just talking to...ah...'

'An invisible friend?' the woman suggested, with a glint of mischief in her eye.

'Something like that,' Theo murmured, looking down at his hands.

'Theo, my name is Michelle,' she said, taking a seat by the bed and offering her hand, which Theo shook uncertainly. Her fingers were long and slender, and she wore a small emerald ring on the pinky of her left hand.

'Are you another doctor, here to run more tests?' asked Theo.

'How did you put it? "Something like that"!' Michelle smiled, brushing back her hair. 'Let's just say I'm here to ask some questions, and maybe even help you.'

Nobody can help me, Theo thought. Because no one understands what I need to do.

'What was that?' Michelle asked.

Theo looked up in shock. He didn't think he had spoken but maybe his lips had moved. 'I was just thinking that no one can help me,' he admitted.

'Ah,' Michelle sighed. 'I know the feeling. And it must be especially daunting in your case, now that you've decided to save the world.' Theo blinked in wonder. 'I read it in the newspaper,' Michelle whispered confidentially. 'Tell me, Theo - whatever gave you that idea?'

For some unaccountable reason, Theo felt like telling her the truth. She didn't seem like any other doctor he had ever met. Against his better judgment he might have told her about the Storyteller - if only to share the burden of the enormous quest that lay upon his shoulders. But Bozo had taken an instant dislike to Michelle and he shook his head vehemently.

'Don't tell her a thing,' the Bloon hissed.

'I...I had a dream,' Theo limited himself to saying.

'Ah, a dream.' Michelle smiled, looking thoughtfully out of the window. 'Dreams are wonderful, mysterious creatures - no? You know, Theo, many people hear voices in their heads from time to time. The trick is to know which ones to listen to.' She looked up at Theo, who by now was in something of a daze.

'She's up to something,' Bozo declared loudly. 'I don't trust her an inch.'

Theo flinched but then remembered that no one could see or hear the Bloon. Just as well, he thought. Bozo wasn't exactly the diplomatic type.

Michelle looked around at the hospital ward with an unimpressed look on her face. Everything in sight - from the walls to the sheets - was a dreary beige. Even the few splashes of colour in the form of cheesy posters only accentuated the bleak sterility of the place. A few flowers here or there and the odd toy didn't change the fact that the ward seemed like a large waiting room.

'I've always thought that hospitals are excellent places to get sick,' she observed. 'Do you feel at home here, Theo?'

On this at least he could be honest.

'No, not at all,' Theo sighed. 'I mean, some of the nurses are nice but the doctors are mostly awful. They talk about me as if I wasn't there. Then, when they pass by, it's like they're disappointed to see that I still exist. And I'm not even sick!' Theo gave vent to the feelings of frustration that had built up over the past week. 'I just can't remember anything before waking up here,' he continued. 'And they act like it's some kind of a crime. Anyway, I shouldn't even be here because-'

'Because it's hard to save the world from a hospital bed?' Michelle suggested with the hint of a wink.

Theo couldn't help but nod. It seemed like the first time since he'd woken up that anyone had taken the time to find out how he felt. 'It's like I have something very, very important to do,' he explained. 'But I don't know how or where to begin. It just seems impossible.'

Bozo stared at him in disgust but Theo didn't pay him any mind. He just looked up at Michelle in a silent plea for help, and he suddenly seemed far older than his years. Michelle nodded and thought for a moment before she reached into her shoulder bag and drew out a pack of Tarot cards. They had a golden pattern on the back and she spread them in a fan across Theo's bedside table.

'Pick a card, any card,' she laughed.

'What are they?' Theo asked.

'No one simply believes in stuff any more,' she sighed. 'Everyone needs explanations and reasons to believe in anything. OK, if it helps, think of it this way: you already have all the answers inside you, Theo. You just need, let's say, a mirror, to help you see them.'

'Now,' she said, taking his hand and placing it on top of the cards. 'When you roll dice or you read the leftover cornflakes in the bowl or you pick a Tarot card, it's like you take a picture of everything that's going on around you. It's

like a photo of the situation you're in. And if you're ready to see it, then there may be some clues to show you what to do next. Do you want to take a card?'

Theo nodded. Under Bozo's disapproving eyes, his fingers began to run lightly over the cards until his hand felt like staying in one place. All the cards looked the same but one of them seemed to call for his attention more than the others. He placed his middle finger on the card and slid it out into the middle of the table.

'Before you turn it over,' Michelle said, 'think of everything that's happened until now, and all the questions you have in your mind.'

Theo clenched his eyes shut, recalled all the strange events since he'd woken up and, apprehensively, he turned over the card to reveal The Fool.

He could sense Michelle smile before he looked up to ask how to read it.

Bozo, too, seemed to be interested in the card. He was staring at the image with a mixture of fear and wonder.

'What does it mean?' Theo asked.

'What do you see?' Michelle responded.

He looked at the card again. 'Well, there's a man in funny clothes with all his possessions tied up in a little knapsack on a stick that he carries over his shoulder. He's walking off a cliff - but he doesn't seem in the least bit scared.' Theo scratched his head. 'In fact, he seems pretty happy about the idea of falling to his death. I don't get it.'

'Seems pretty foolish - no?' Michelle smiled. 'To leave solid ground behind and step out into thin air. And to be cheerful about imminent disaster. He's not called the Fool for nothing. At least, that's how it seems. Most people think it's crazy to leave behind what they have in exchange for the unknown. The thing is, Theo, even the ground beneath your feet can move. And sometimes, if you want to grow or learn or accomplish something, you have to leave your common sense behind and trust your intuition. Like the Fool.'

Like leaving the hospital, Theo thought. The only reason he'd stayed so long was that he had no idea how to survive in the outside world. What chance did a child and a Bloon have of making it on their own? Where would they sleep? What would they eat? Never mind looking for a cure for the Storyteller - they'd probably end up starving to death.

And even if they somehow found a way to survive, the authorities would look for him everywhere, as if he was a criminal. Once they caught him, it would be very hard ever to escape again, and then he'd never be able to find the Cure. Running from the hospital seemed like madness - but then what else could he do?

'Look again, Theo. What else do you see?'

Theo studied the card once more and suddenly understood why Bozo was staring at the image in shock. What Theo had first taken to be a small dog following at the heels of the Fool was nothing other than – a *Bloon!* It even looked a little like Bozo.

'I told you she was up to something,' Bozo moaned.

'Really, now, my dear Bloon. Can't you see he's trying to think?' Michelle wagged her finger.

This time both Theo and Bozo stared at her in astonishment. 'You can see him/me?' they asked at the same time.

'It's hard to miss someone who's blue with yellow eyes, yellow teeth and a tail that doesn't stop twitching. Especially when he keeps accusing me of trickery.'

'But why are you the only one who can see me?' Bozo asked, flabbergasted. 'I've been pulling faces in front of the nurses for days now.'

'Wasn't I just saying that no one believes what they see anymore? A Bloon doesn't make sense to them, so their brains reject what their eyes see.'

'What about you?' said Bozo.

'I guess you could say I'm not your average Hooman.' Michelle grinned, as though she didn't have the slightest intention of explaining any further. She glanced at her watch. 'Guys, it's been a pleasure, but I'm afraid we're out of time. The hospital must have realised by now that the pass I gave in at reception didn't check out with the computers.'

'What?' Theo gasped. 'You're not a doctor?'

'I never said I was. I just came to ask some questions, that's all. To make sure.'

'Of what?'

'To make sure that....Oops, here come security. Quick, Theo - take this! In case you need a smokescreen.' She tossed over a small leather pouch and in the same moment two beefy policemen marched in. They each took one of Michelle's arms and she smiled at them sweetly.

'Now, now, miss. No more funny business,' the younger policeman, who seemed to be trying to grow a moustache, said. He looked at Theo. 'Are you OK, son?'

'Leave her alone!' Theo cried. 'She hasn't done anything!'

'Don't worry, son. It will be all right,' the other copper said, with a kind smile. He turned to Michelle and grew very severe. 'Now, Miss, it's a very serious offence to impersonate a doctor, so you'll be coming with us.'

'Be delighted to.' Michelle smiled and shot a parting wink at Bozo and Theo as she was escorted from the room. Bozo gave a whoop.

'One thing you can say for this hospital,' he laughed, 'is that it never gets boring. Hey! What are you doing?' Theo had opened the leather pouch and found a box of matches. Without stopping to think, he heaped all of his correspondence against the wall beneath the smoke detector. He struck a match, threw it on the letters and the whole pile went up in roaring flames.

'Quick!' he said to Bozo, who looked on with an impressed gaze. 'Run down the hall and set off the alarms!' Bozo gave another whoop and was gone in a flash. Moments later the alarms were ringing throughout the hospital and black smoke was issuing from Theo's ward. He staggered out coughing and ran into the arms of Nurse Sandra.

'Come on, Theo. Let's get outside,' she said calmly, taking his hand.

The nurses led and carried the children down the hall to the fire exit and the gardens outside. More than a hundred kids stood in their dressing-gowns and shivered in the light rain that was falling. They exchanged uncertain looks, many of them seeing each other for the first time, despite their close living quarters. One or two of them tried to crack a joke, but it was hard to be light-hearted when you were that wet and cold.

As the last of the children was safely rolled out in a wheelchair, the sound of approaching sirens grew suddenly louder and a fire engine arrived outside. The hospital gates cranked open automatically and the vehicle rolled in. Tough-looking firemen jumped out and jogged towards the main hospital building.

'Quick, Bozo! Now - before the gates close!' Theo whispered, and sprinted for the main gates. Everybody was too focused on the fire to notice a runaway child. Everybody except for one.

'Theo! Get back here now!' Dr Bunsen yelled, dashing after him.

Theo's stomach turned and his blood ran cold as he saw Bunsen give chase. At twice Theo's size, Bunsen made up the ground rapidly and the gates seemed impossibly distant. Theo sprinted for the exit as fast as possible, until he could barely feel the ground beneath his feet and he could taste blood in his mouth. He wasn't fast enough, though, and, as the pounding of Bunsen's feet grew closer behind him, Theo panicked and slipped on the wet grass. He scrambled up again but he knew it was too late. He flinched as he waited for the inevitable hand to grab him by the shoulder.

But it never came. Instead, he heard a loud crack, a yell and a heavy thud. Theo glanced around to see Bozo standing innocently by a garden rake that

he'd used to trip up the doctor. While Bunsen howled in agony, Bozo dropped the rake and joined Theo in a dash for the exit. They slipped through the gap just before the gates clanged together. Theo looked over his shoulder and saw Bunsen try to give chase but immediately fall again. Bozo had tied his laces together as a parting thought.

The gates had already started to open again, however, and there was no time to be lost. Theo ran up to a black taxi that was parked outside. He jumped in the back with Bozo.

'Please - just drive!' Theo begged the driver. The Sikh at the wheel eyed the boy curiously for a moment, then gave a waggle of his head and pulled smoothly away.

Moments later a crowd of nurses and doctors burst out into the street, gesturing desperately for the taxi to stop. If the driver saw them, then he chose to pay no attention at all. He drove calmly into the heart of London. As they left the hospital behind, Bozo plastered his face against the back window and blew raspberries.

Chapter 10

Taxi to Hyde Park

'The young lady said that sir was to go to Hyde Park,' the driver announced in a clear, well-spoken voice. His skin was brown and smooth, and it seemed as though he had combed his black beard. His white turban was tied with immaculate precision and Theo wondered how much practice that took. He was a young man but his eyes were full of kindness and calm.

'We're going to Hyde Park?' Theo asked, puzzled. The driver looked at him in the rear-view mirror and wagged his head somewhere in between a yes and a no.

'Well, are we or aren't we?' Theo asked again, thinking perhaps he hadn't been heard. Again the driver's head wobbled on its axis. Theo was about to insist when the young Indian explained:

'See, in the country of my parents we do not really believe in certainty. How can I, a humble taxi-driver, know everything that is and will be? If I were to say "Yes", then I would be giving you a certainty that is not mine to give.' He adjusted his turban slightly. 'I only know my intentions, and those are to follow the directions given to me by that well-mannered young lady. God alone knows where we will go.'

'Who is this *God* and what does he have to do with us going to the park or not?' Bozo whispered, nudging Theo in the ribs. He was no longer so sure if he was quite as invisible as he'd thought.

'I haven't got the slightest idea,' Theo replied with a shrug. 'But I have the feeling he'll be happy to drive in circles for hours if we ask for an explanation.'

If the driver saw something strange in a young boy maintaining a conversation with the thin air, he was too well-educated to mention it. Instead, he confined himself to saying, 'The lady also left a bag for young sir. Just behind your head, if you would be so kind as to turn around.'

Theo turned and found a small day-rucksack. It contained a pair of jeans, two T-shirts, underwear, socks and a warm jacket. There were also a couple of apples, a cheese sandwich and a turquoise envelope. Theo hastily changed out of his dressing-gown and into his new clothes, while Bozo grabbed the cheese sandwich and opened the envelope with his long, yellow teeth.

'Seems like no one can say anything straight anymore,' sighed Bozo, in between mouthfuls of cheese.

'What does it say?' Theo mumbled from inside a T-shirt, as he tried to work out which way round it went.

'See for yourself,' Bozo said, and he flipped the letter over to Theo. But before Theo could grab it, it caught on the breeze and sailed out of the open window. Theo was about to cry out to the driver to stop but he saw the letter blow along the gutter and slip down a drain.

'Bozo!' he cried out in exasperation. 'That was our only clue! What are we supposed to do now?'

'Relax.' Bozo smiled as he finished the sandwich and reached for an apple. 'I already read the whole thing.'

'So what did it say?'

'Well,' Bozo raised his eyes to search his rather small memory. 'It said: "Dear Theo..." '

'Go on!'

'And it was definitely from that woman who could see me...Michelle! That was her name!' he concluded, very happy with himself.

'But-what-did-she-say?' Theo asked through gritted teeth.

Bozo took another bite of his apple and spat a seed out of the window. 'To tell you the truth, it kind of went on and on. I didn't pay all that much attention. But I'll tell you one thing.'

'What?'

'These apples are really tasty - but why the seeds? I mean, they're bitter and a Bloon could choke on one of those if he wasn't careful....'

'You mean to say you forgot all of the letter already?' Theo groaned, slapping himself on the forehead.

'Not *all* of it,' Bozo replied haughtily. 'I remember very clearly a good bit at the end that said, "If ever you're in a tight corner, don't be afraid to speak up." At least I *think* that's what it said.'

'Bozo! If you weren't going to remember, why did you bother reading it?' Theo fumed, beside himself with frustration.

'No, no. What you mean to say is: "If you weren't going to read it, why bother remembering?' Bozo waggled his head as he had seen the driver do.

'What?'

'In any case, a Bloon only ever remembers the good bits. Life is so much easier that way.'

'Bozo!' Theo cried. 'This is the most stupid thing you've ever done - and that's saying something. How are we supposed to go on now?'

'If you're so smart, how come you decided to leave the hospital in the first place? We could still be there eating biscuits, but no, you had to run away. Now what are we going to do?'

'It would have been easy enough if someone hadn't lost all our instructions! If-'

'Sir will be happy to know that we have arrived at Hyde Park,' the driver declared. He gave a contented sigh, as though the gods themselves had made such a miracle possible. Theo looked out of the window at the grey London afternoon and suddenly realised the consequences of making his own way in the cold, material world.

'But I don't have any money to pay you...' he realised with a gulp.

He hoped the driver wouldn't turn around and take him back to the hospital. But the Sikh smiled kindly and assured him:

'Do not worry, sir. The young lady was kind enough to read my fortune and I was predestined to bring you here. It is my pleasure to serve.'

Theo thanked him and took the plunge from the warm interior of the taxi out into the big, wide world. A moment later he and Bozo were standing at the entrance of Hyde Park, an island of green amid the choking streets of London's traffic. They stood on the pavement, uncertain what to do, as adults rushed to and fro, glancing at the Chains on their wrists as they went. Double-decker buses thundered past, their heavy wheels churning up the murky puddles from the rain. A light drizzle still fell and there wasn't much sunshine to be seen in people's faces, either.

Theo began to feel very small. It seemed as if Bozo wasn't the only one who was invisible. Every few moments a foot or knee jostled him as someone passed. They always mumbled an apology but never caught his eye. Theo looked up at the sky. He couldn't make out the clouds: it was just a shapeless mass of grey. Tiny raindrops sprayed across his face like a layer of despair. He wiped them off with his sleeve.

A discarded newspaper blew along the gutter, getting gradually more soaked. The front page splayed open to reveal '*Mystery Child to Save the World*' as the main headline. The claim seemed meanly ironic now. Were they even able to save themselves?

There was no way to stay still amid the incessant traffic of cars and people, all on their way somewhere in a hurry. Some strode along purposefully, with the air of someone important on their way to a meeting. Others grimaced at the weather and walked along all hunched up, wishing they had already arrived where they were going. Others slouched along despondently, with their eyes trained on the ground, their necks and shoulders weighed down by invisible

weights. There were even a few who seemed to have forgotten how to walk in a straight line: they zigzagged all over the place, empty beer cans in their hands and a lost expression on their faces.

Theo began to drift along too, away from the smell of the cars and their noisy engines. He took a path along the border of the park, where the trees gave a little shelter. Bozo kept up with him. They didn't exchange a word or a look, and each waited for the other to apologise. Their spirits grew as damp as their clothes.

The only sounds were the distant traffic and their feet as they scuffed through piles of fallen leaves. Bozo had barely a thought beyond the other apple in the rucksack, but Theo was deep in contemplation. Who was Michelle and why had she helped him escape? Maybe she was just some crazy woman on the loose, but then why had she been able to see Bozo? If only he had read that letter.

They ambled along in the shelter of the branches of the beech trees, and presently they came to the corner of the park. There they saw small groups of people listening to speakers standing on old wooden crates or plastic chairs. Some attracted larger crowds than others, but all appeared to have something very important to say. Theo paused to listen to an old man in a tweed suit who gestured furiously at a couple of Korean tourists with their Flash-boxes.

'Those were the days!' he cried. 'Time was that old folks were respected. There was none of the smart answers that go on today - oh no! And women knew exactly where they belonged - in the kitchen!' He wiped his brow. 'Nowadays, it's all gone to pot. Coloured people everywhere, girls dressing like belly-dancers. Even the beer doesn't taste like it used to.'

Theo wasn't surprised that hardly anyone was listening. He walked on. Most of the speakers were political or religious and some of them were clearly a little mad. He passed each one, lending only half an ear.

'I ask you - what's the good of a vote if you don't use it?'

'God has not forgotten you, my children. Repent now, while you have the chance...'

'Aliens came to see me last night...'

The audiences were made up of tourists, French schoolchildren on a day out, and people with nothing better to do. Some listened with a bored expression on their faces, some seemed to find the whole thing pretty amusing, while others appeared to have turned up simply to heckle and argue with the speaker.

Theo was about to walk on when he heard a sentence that made him freeze in his tracks.

'And what if life was just one big Story?'

Theo and Bozo wheeled around to see a balding man in a denim jacket standing on a soapbox. His skin was tanned and heavily wrinkled. He had attracted the attention of around 20 mildly interested listeners, and as he caught Theo's eye, he gave an unmistakable wink. Theo drew closer to hear what he had to say.

'For all we know, we could just be figments of someone's imagination. All that any of us can be sure of is that we woke up this morning in these bodies and with these faces. We have no real way of knowing what happened before that.'

'What about memories?' someone shouted.

'Ha! We make them up as we go along,' the speaker declared with a laugh. 'Look at it this way: each of our lives is like a tale that we write inside a much bigger Story of the world.'

'And I suppose you're going to tell us that this Story of yours is written by God?' jeered a young man at the front.

'Oh no,' came the shocked reply. 'I wouldn't call him *that*. He's just a Storyteller, is all. The one who tells the Story.' He waved his arms around in each direction to illustrate.

The young man at the front wasn't happy with that, however. 'So how come this Storyteller of yours didn't write the world with a happy ending? He must be a bit of a sadist to spin a plot with war, illness and hunger,' he sneered. As the crowd murmured in agreement, he continued: 'And I suppose that makes us just characters in this Story of yours? Well, I've got news for you, mate. *I've got free will,*' he said, and lit a cigarette.

Theo held his breath in excitement. It couldn't be just a coincidence! He listened intently and realised that the heckler's objections were the same doubts that had been growing inside his own heart.

The speaker seemed quite at ease, though, as if he had heard it all before. 'It seems that you've answered your own question.' He smiled. 'The Storyteller set the conditions for the Story in his own mind. After that it went along by itself, and now he simply relates the highlights each day. We were written into the Story with free will and he must be kicking himself about it.'

The crowd laughed, warming to the debate, and it might have gone on for some time but the heavens opened and a clap of thunder sent everyone scurrying for shelter. In the space of 20 seconds, the only people left standing in the clearing were Bozo, Theo and the speaker in the denim jacket.

The man turned to face them and Theo saw that he wasn't English, though he had no trace of an accent. His nose was slightly hooked and his eyes were dark gray and yet seemed to sparkle. His skin was smooth but etched with deep wrinkles like the lines of a map.

'It's a funny thing about rain,' he said. 'People have the idea that if they start running, they won't get wet.' He winked, and raindrops ran down his forehead and dripped off the end of his nose.

'Excuse me,' Theo said at last. 'I couldn't help hearing you mention a Storyteller...'

'Ah, yes. It's an old theme.' The man smiled. 'I hardly bother telling anyone about it these days. Usually, I have to choose another set of names so that it makes sense to them. But if you thought it was a tough crowd today, you should see them when I start talking about Bloonland.'

'Not another one,' Bozo groaned. 'Just how many Hoomans in this crazy Story know about us?'

The man grinned and patted Bozo on the head. 'Don't worry, mate. Any Hoomans *could* see you, but they're mostly too sensible even to allow the idea that you exist. Basically, you're invisible to all but seven of us, very small kids, mad people and some animals.'

'But how do you know about any of this?' Theo pleaded, shivering with the cold.

'Come on, boys. Let's get some hot chocolate and I'll explain.' The man led them over to a stall where a teenager who was playing with his Fone could be distracted for long enough to make some hot drinks. Three cups of cocoa were slid moodily on to the counter, but when the teenager was about to ask for the money, he received such an unnerving grin that he forgot what he was going to say. The speaker took the cups and handed Bozo and Theo their drinks.

'Simon's the name - or at least that's what I go by these days. How did your chat with Michelle go, by the way?'

Theo gasped. 'You know her?'

'We go way back. Time was we knew each other pretty well, too...' he mused with a faraway look in his eyes.

'But how did you know we'd met her?' Bozo asked suspiciously.

'Heard it on the news. Listen, here it is again.' Simon reached into the stall to turn up the radio. The teenager glared at him but was disarmed by a well-aimed wink.

'And here are the latest headlines,' the radio said with a faint crackle. 'The mysterious saga of Theo, the Sleeping Celebrity of St Jude's Hospital, took a dramatic turn today. An Italian woman posing as a doctor infiltrated the boy's ward before being apprehended by security. Shortly afterwards, a fire alarm was sounded and, in the commotion, Theo ran away.'

'The Italian woman is being detained under suspicion of impersonating a doctor and abducting the child, though she was armed with nothing more than a pack of Tarot cards. The public is asked to be on the lookout for Theo. He is nine years old, has short, brown hair, blue eyes and was last seen in a taxi heading to north London.'

The teenager surfaced from counting his friends on his Fone and looked curiously again at the customers. A thought appeared to be growing in his mind.

'So when I heard that, I knew Michelle must be in town,' Simon explained. 'And she wouldn't be here unless she was sure...'

'Sure of what?' Bozo asked.

'It's like this: we've known for some time now that the Storyteller was ill. And there's a Prophecy - if you believe in such things - that someone would come to save him. It's supposed to be someone pretty exceptional, with the kind of courage and vision needed to find the Cure.'

Upon hearing this, Bozo puffed out his chest. 'Well, I suppose you could say I'm not your average Bloon,' he acknowledged modestly.

'Sorry, mate. It's not you. Theo here is the one.'

'What?' Bozo cried. 'I come all the way from Bloonland just to play second fiddle to some snotty-nosed kid? Some thanks *I* get!' He turned his back and slurped his cocoa loudly while he whipped droplets of rain with his tail.

'But please,' Theo begged. 'How do you know any of this?'

'What?' Simon exclaimed. 'Didn't Michelle tell you?'

'She left a letter for me but Bozo lost it,' Theo explained meekly.

'Bloons!' Simon laughed. 'How I'd love to go to Bloonland and see how they live.'

'Is it possible?' Theo asked with great curiosity, the idea occurring to him for the first time.

Simon arched his eyebrows. 'Can a character exist outside his own Story? Well, there you're into some pretty heavy philosophy. To be honest, I usually leave that to the other AOs.'

'What's an AO?' Theo asked.

'The Awakened Ones. There are seven of us in total.' Simon pursed his lips. 'The Storyteller must have realised it would happen sooner or later - that eventually someone in the Story would wake up and realise what was going

on. And about 2,500 years ago, someone did.

'He sat under a tree all night, determined to understand the Great Mystery of Life and by the morning he'd worked it out. From then on, each time he closed his eyes, he could travel through the Storyteller's mind and see anything that was happening in the Story. He was even able to see Bloonland.'

'So how come there are seven of you now?' Theo asked.

'There are thousands upon thousands who suspect the truth,' Simon explained. 'There are even some who almost see it, but they get stuck putting it into words. Anyhow, the First AO believed that the secret needed to be kept alive, so, over the years, the message was passed on to awaken six others.'

'Why didn't he just tell everyone?'

'There were a few of us who tried to tell the world once or twice,' Simon admitted, 'but it usually ended up as a pretty messy affair. Thing is, no one wants to hear they're just characters in a Story. They want to believe that the world revolves around them. So there's no sense in rocking the boat too much.'

Theo's head span. Only yesterday he had felt utterly alone in his quest, and now there seemed to be an entire secret society that knew more about it than he did. Why hadn't the Storyteller told Bozo about the AOs? He was about to ask him, but then reflected that even if the Bloon had been told, he would probably have forgotten about it.

The rain had eased off and the hot chocolate was beginning to take the edge off the cold. He warmed his hands on the polystyrene cup and blew into the drink so that the vapour rose and heated his cheeks. 'Who are the other six AOs?' he said at last.

'Five. You've already met one before me.' Simon grinned as he waited for the boy to catch on.

'Michelle was an AO?' Theo gasped, the pieces of the jigsaw beginning to fit together.

'One of the youngest. And definitely the best-looking - though you'll be able to judge that for yourself.'

'Am I going to meet the others, too?' Theo asked.

'You have to.' Simon looked at him sternly. 'The Prophecy says that the one who finds the Cure must meet all seven of us before he learns enough to save the Storyteller.'

Theo suddenly remembered what was expected of him and his spirits drooped. It was nice to know that he wasn't alone in his quest, but he didn't understand

why such heroics were expected of him. 'Why me?' he groaned.

'Why anyone?' Simon countered. 'We all have our missions in life. Yours is just a bit bigger than most people's, is all.'

'What's *your* mission, then?'

'I stand on rocks and soapboxes to preach to people.'

'And do they listen to you?'

'Nah. But I wouldn't really want that anyway. I tried it centuries ago, but they always go and change what you've said to suit themselves.'

'Centuries ago?' Theo raised his eyebrows. 'Are you some kind of immortal, then?'

'I never said that,' Simon snapped. 'See? You're twisting my words already.'

'I'm sorry. But how old are you really?'

Simon looked Theo in the eye for a moment and then gave a classic toothy grin. 'Old enough. Maybe too old. Now listen, Theo, since we realised the Storyteller was dying, we've been trying to think of a way to help him. But it seems like it's going to need a fresh pair of eyes to put all the pieces together. None of us can tell you what to do, but perhaps we can help you work out a part of the answer.'

'So why can't I meet you all at once?' Theo demanded.

Simon leaned close and whispered, 'The Enemy would find us.' He looked left and right before continuing. 'The Enemy has been poisoning the Storyteller for thousands of years now. He knows when any of the AOs come together. He feels it. That's why we have to stay so far apart. Look what happened to Michelle when she came to see you.'

'Will she be all right?' Theo asked anxiously. He hadn't known her long but it perturbed him to think that he might have got her into trouble.

'Oh, Michelle could talk her way out of anything,' Simon laughed. 'Besides, if something happens to us, we always come back somehow.'

'But who is this Enemy person?' Theo persisted, confused under the rain of new information.

'It's not really my place to tell you,' Simon sighed. 'I'll leave that to Lou.'

He reached into his pocket and withdrew an old and battered business card. Italic black letters across the top read:

Louise Presquevu Boulevard de Seine 117 Paris

'Paris, France?' Theo cried. 'How am I supposed to get there?'

'Don't look to me for a loan,' laughed Simon. 'None of the AOs ever carries any money. We'd soon forget what we knew if we did.'

'But-' Theo began.

'Look, mate, there's more I would tell you but it seems like we're out of time,' Simon interrupted. He pointed to where the teenager from the stall was approaching fast with four police officers.

'That's the kid on the news, right?' the teenager squeaked. 'He's been talking to that weird old geezer there.'

The police officers knew all about strange old men bothering young kids. It was not the kind of thing they took lightly. They surrounded Simon and Theo, and pulled out their truncheons and handcuffs. They'd heard that the kid was a slippery customer, too. He'd set fire to his own hospital, by all accounts. Three of them moved forward to put the cuffs on Simon, while the female officer took a good hold on Theo's arm.

'Now then, young man, you've got some sharp explaining to do,' she said in a grim voice.

Thus far everything went to plan. What none of them was able to explain to their sergeant later was how their eyes came to be full of mustard and chilli sauce. They could only speculate that there must have been a hidden third party, an accomplice who had taken the plastic sauce bottles from the stall and attacked them. As no one else had been seen lurking around, their story seemed a bit unlikely, and they each received an official caution for incompetence.

Bozo put down the mustard and dashed after Theo, who had already begun to run in the direction of the speakers. The boy weaved his way through the crowd. All he could see were raincoats and belts. He could hear the shouts of the police behind him and knew they must be coming his way.

He squeezed his way through to near the soapbox where he had first met Simon, but the speaker was nowhere to be seen. Not far away Theo caught a glimpse of the first police officer pushing through the crowd. Theo looked around desperately but there was nowhere to hide. The iron railings were too high for him to climb, and if he made a break for it through the park they'd see him straight away. He half-hoped that if he stayed still and quiet, no one would see him, but in his heart he knew it was all over. They would soon be upon him

and he would be dragged back to face the wrath of Dr Bunsen.

'It's no good, Bozo,' Theo groaned. 'There's no way out.'

Bozo thought for a moment and then suddenly his eyes lit up. 'Remember what Michelle wrote in the letter!' he cried.

'How can I? You lost it!' Theo objected bitterly.

'If you find yourself in a tight corner, don't be afraid to speak up,' Bozo reminded him.

'So?'

'So there's your stage!' Bozo grinned, pointing at the soapbox where Simon had previously stood.

Theo looked at the box doubtfully. If he stood up, everyone would see him at once. And what could he possibly say? The idea seemed absurd. Foolish, even. Then he thought of the Fool stepping off the cliff, and before he knew it he had taken his place on the soapbox. A few heads turned towards him with interest. Theo gulped and said the first thing that came into his head.

'I really don't have anything to say,' he stammered.

'Makes a refreshing change around here,' someone cried, and there was laughter all round.

Theo grew in confidence a little at the unexpected warm response. He continued: 'No, I mean, I don't really know anything.' He kept one eye on the police who continued to scour Speaker's Corner.

'Someone honest at last,' an old man at the front remarked. Again, a ripple of mirth spread through the growing crowd.

'I just stood up here to speak because...because sometimes when you feel trapped you have to do something really foolish. If you want to stay free, then sometimes you have to stand up and speak out, I guess - even if you don't really know what to say.'

This impromptu speech met with thunderous applause. Cries of 'Hear! Hear!' filled the air, and everyone agreed it was the best lecture they'd heard all day.

The police searching for Theo joined up in a huddle about ten metres away. They shook their heads woefully. They didn't know how, but the kid had given them the slip again. He'd dissolved into thin air, it seemed. Behind them they could hear the crowd cheering a speaker who seemed to be more popular than most. But they had no time to listen to speeches. They had a child to find, so they spread out to search the rest of the park.

Chapter 11

A Trip To Paris

As the police dispersed, Theo stepped down from his soapbox with an overwhelming sense of relief. Various people in the crowd patted him on the back, and all agreed he had a great future ahead as a public speaker. Then a harsh autumn wind picked up and the sky grew dimmer, threatening to rain once again. The crowd fastened the buttons on their coats, pulled up their hoods and hurried off in search of a bus or underground train to take them home.

Theo had no home to go to, however. Simon had disappeared completely and Theo considered his situation desperately. The danger hadn't passed because the remaining police officers on patrol could be seen in the distance, their helmets bobbing along beneath the trees. In his hand, Theo clutched the business card of Lou Presquevu, the fortune-teller of Paris. It was his only hope, but how on earth was he expected to get there?

He looked up at the grim skies in a silent plea for help. He doubted there was any point in looking for the Storyteller there, but all the same he wished the old man could hear him, lend a hand somehow.

And what was it about the AOs that they didn't carry money, he wondered angrily. Couldn't Simon have broken the rules just this once to slip him enough cash for a train ticket to Paris? Was he supposed to sprout wings and fly there?

He would perhaps have continued this irate monologue in his head for some time had he not felt a persistent tugging at his elbow. He turned to see Bozo looking very excited. 'I found us a ride!' he exclaimed.

'To where?' Theo snapped morosely.

Bozo sighed in exasperation. 'I thought *I* was the forgetful one. To *Paris*, of course. There's a group of French schoolchildren over there and their bus leaves in five minutes.'

'How do you know that?' Theo asked, rather impressed. 'Do you speak French?'

'I don't know that I speak *English*,' Bozo replied thoughtfully. 'I speak *Bloon* - it just comes out this way when I talk to you. I understand all you crazy Hoomans, whatever noises you make.' He dragged Theo along by the hand. 'Come on, or we'll miss the bus.'

Theo glanced up at the gang of French kids being herded by a few stressed teachers. They were about the same age as him. He suddenly felt a bit shy. 'Bozo,' he stammered, 'what if they realise I'm not French?'

'Look,' Bozo snorted, 'either we go with the bus or we go with *them*.' He indicated to where the police could be seen circling back towards Speaker's Corner.

Theo didn't need any more prompting. He entered the crowd of schoolchildren with his eyes glued to the ground and felt the excited chatter sweep over him in words he couldn't understand. He drifted forward shyly. He could smell crisps and chocolate being munched around him. He got the impression that he had been noticed but didn't dare look up to check. Before anyone could ask him what he was doing, though, a teacher at the front called out something and the whole school party moved towards the bus. Theo shuffled along in their midst and he had the feeling the French children were talking about him.

'What are they saying?' he whispered to Bozo, who walked alongside him.

'They've guessed your plan.'

'And?'

'And they're going to help,' Bozo answered gleefully.

They reached the bus and Theo raised his hood so no one would see his face. They boarded in single file. As Theo drew closer to the door, his heart beat wildly. Would they notice?

His turn came to board the bus but, as he lurched forwards, a large hand came to rest on his shoulder. He glanced up to meet the quizzical look of a French schoolteacher. The man looked down with the intuitive sense of a teacher who knows when kids are up to something. Before he could think quite what, however, a piercing scream put an end to the sticky moment. A girl had fallen over and spilled the contents of her rucksack all over the pavement. The teacher sprang forwards to help and the children behind Theo pushed him on to the bus.

'Quick! English boy - to the back!' they hissed, suppressing their giggles.

Theo was bundled to the back of the bus, where he sat on the floor in the corner. A barrage of coats and bags were piled on top of him, along with several urgent commands of 'Shhhh!' - an order he didn't need to speak French to understand.

Moments later he heard a teacher at the front say something and another walk slowly down the aisle, presumably counting heads. The footsteps came to an abrupt halt near Theo but departed rapidly as a girl in the middle of the bus began to howl with tears.

The bus started up and began to shunt its way through London's traffic. Theo could hardly breathe under the stifling layers of winter coats, but each time he tried to sit up he was pushed violently back down again. He felt like he was suffocating and it was only when he thought he was about to die that the

French kids considered it safe for him to surface. He emerged from a pile of bags to a small crowd of grinning faces, their eyes burning with curiosity and mischief. Theo could tell from the happy buzz in the bus that everyone knew what was going on. Everyone except the adults - but what else was new?

'English boy! Why do you want to go to France?'

'I'm...I'm running away from the police,' he admitted, a little embarrassed.

The response was electric. Excited whispers passed up and down the bus as his answer was relayed. Suddenly, the boy sitting next to Theo gasped. 'It's true!' he said. 'He's the boy from the hospital. The one that was sleeping so long. He must have run away. Why you run, English boy?'

'They were mean to me,' he told them. A mass of heads nodded in understanding.

'Do not worry,' they said nobly. 'We will hide you.'

As it got dark, most of the children in the bus grew drowsy and the lights were turned out. This gave Theo the liberty to sit up, and also the space to think without answering a hundred eager questions. There was a slightly tense moment when the bus entered the tunnel to France, but the customs official merely checked the list of passengers and waved them through.

Bozo dozed soundly next to Theo, who gazed out of the window into the black night. It had been a day like none other. Admittedly, he'd woken from his coma only a week ago but, even so, he reckoned it quite an adventure.

He closed his eyes and tried to process all that he'd learnt that day: the AOs, the Prophecy, the Enemy...the images swam in his head and refused to form any clear picture. Why *did* he have to work it all out on his own anyway? The future of the Story at stake and Simon was just standing around in a park preaching to the passers-by! Theo wondered whether he *had* once been someone important. Maybe people had hung on his every word. He never did find out how old Simon was.

And all that stuff about the AOs. The Awakened Ones. Theo couldn't help but think it sounded a little self-important and vain. Why were only *seven* people able to swallow the fact that life was just one big Story? Forgetting how difficult it had been for *him* to accept the truth, he reached out to wake the boy sleeping in adjacent seat.

'Pierre? Pierre, wake up,' he whispered. 'I have something to tell you.'

'Mmmm?' he received by way of a response.

'Pierre, did you know that the whole world isn't like we think it is? Mobile

phones have teeth and Flash-boxes - I mean, cameras - make you thin? Because really, we're all just part of one big Story!'

'Good. I like stories,' Pierre murmured. His eyes opened a crack as he regarded Theo. 'You are very funny, English boy.' With that he fell back asleep.

Theo sighed and realised his conversion attempts wouldn't be quite as easy as he thought. If they couldn't even see Bozo, what chance was there of them believing in the Storyteller and Bloonland?

On the bright side, at least he was no longer alone. For thousands of years, seven AOs had been keeping the truth alive. Thousands of years? Did they never die? Simon was getting on a bit, but Michelle had seemed young enough.

There was so much more he had wanted to ask but he had met them both for only about 20 minutes. It didn't seem fair. He wished they had been able to come with him. He felt sure they would do a better job of finding the Cure than he would alone.

The Enemy would find us. Why didn't Simon want to tell him who the Enemy was? Theo imagined a dark sorcerer in a basement somewhere, brewing a foul-smelling potion to poison the Storyteller. He pictured him with cruel eyebrows and hateful eyes, pointed beard and pale, lifeless face. Then he remembered that he was thinking of a character from a comic he'd read the day before.

At the very least, now he knew where to go. Even if he didn't know what to do, he had a trail to follow. He had to meet all seven of the AOs...and then come up with the Cure. It seemed like some distant exam, and the prospect troubled him a little even now. He decided to worry about it only when the time came. After all, he thought, if I worry about it now as well as when the moment arrives, I will have worried about it twice. Worrying about something once is bad enough.

Out of the window, Theo could see they were already arriving in a big city. The lights came on at the front of the bus and a teacher said something that Theo supposed to mean that they were coming into Paris. Children up and down the bus began to yawn and stir, picking up their bags and beginning quiet conversations.

Fear returned to Theo like a cold breeze sweeping down his spine. The electronic clock at the front of the bus read 11 p.m. Rain pattered against the window and he guessed it was going to be as cold and wet as England. He didn't know much about Paris but didn't suppose it was a very small place. He had no money for a taxi and presumed that if Lou was an AO she wouldn't have any cash either.

'English boy, what you do now?' Pierre asked him as he rubbed the dust from his eyes.

'I don't know,' Theo admitted, trying to stay calm even as fear gripped his stomach.

Pierre thought for a moment and then said, '*D'accord*. You come to my house. My parents are away and my grandmother, she forget everything. I tell her that you are...how you say? Exchange student.'

Fortunately, Pierre's grandmother hadn't forgotten to meet the coach where it pulled up at the school. And she seemed to think it perfectly natural to be taking two boys home instead of one. They climbed into the back of her Citroen and splashed their way through the wet, night-time streets of Paris. Pierre's grandmother chatted away in French, half to herself, half to Pierre in the back. The only answer she received, however, was the occasional '*Oui, grandmère*'. He was too busy arm-wrestling with Theo to pay her much attention.

They arrived in a quiet, leafy neighbourhood and pulled up in a street that was protected by trees running down either side. As they got out of the car, Theo realised with a jolt that he hadn't seen Bozo for the entire journey. He looked desperately left and right, but there was no escaping the fact that Bozo had not been inside the car.

Panic swept through him at the prospect of having lost his best friend. His quest was lonely enough, but without Bozo at his side how would he stand a chance? He cursed himself for his carelessness and wondered what on earth had become of the Bloon.

'The next time you get into a car,' came a rather shaky voice from above, 'please do me the favour of holding the door open a little longer.' Bozo sat on the roof where he'd clung for the duration of the 20 minute ride, drenched from head to tail and his teeth chattering with cold.

Theo was ready to collapse on the bed that Pierre's grandmother had made for him but Pierre was excited about having a guest. He pressured Theo to tell him the story of the escape in intricate detail. The description of Dr Bunsen reminded Pierre of certain teachers he knew, and the account of the escape drew an impressed whistle.

It wasn't easy to tell Pierre everything without mentioning Bozo, but the tale was already hard to believe. Adding a four-foot high Bloon might have stretched even Pierre's fertile imagination. The French boy laughed uproariously at the mustard in the police officers' eyes. As Theo spoke, he felt the adrenaline running through him again. He described climbing on to the soapbox and couldn't help but give a full rendition of the speech that had won him such thunderous applause. By the time he finished, though, he noticed that Pierre, still nodding, had fallen asleep.

Moments later Theo joined him.

Chapter 12

Pigeons and Eleckytrons

Bozo listened impatiently while Theo related the day's events to Pierre. He couldn't understand why these Hoomans were so obsessed with talking about things that had already happened. They spent so much energy trying to remember all the tiny things in the past that they forgot about all the important stuff in the present. Like food.

Michelle's sandwich and apples were by now a distant memory. Bozo headed downstairs to investigate the local food supplies. He wandered into an old kitchen with a stone floor, where Pierre's grandmother was drying up a few last dishes, a cat curled at her feet. She sang to herself as she set down the last plate and almost dropped it as the cat sprang up with a hiss.

'Why, Cedric! What's wrong with you?' she cried. Cedric's fur stood on end and he stared rigidly at Bozo, who hovered uncertainly in the doorway. The old lady followed Cedric's eyes but could see nothing. Finally, the cat retreated backwards and exited with a snarl through the cat-flap in the back door.

Pierre's grandmother chuckled to herself as she dried her hands...and yet, she did have the creeping sensation that someone or something was watching her. She turned, expecting to see one of the boys in search of a midnight snack. The room was still empty. She poured herself a stiff brandy and shook her head.

The older she got, the less she understood the world. There had been a time, years ago, when she felt so sure of everything. Now she found herself asking questions all the time, like a child. The next thing she knew, she'd be believing in fairies again - like when she was a little girl and left them cake and wine before going to bed.

'There's no fool like an old fool,' she laughed to herself, and drank her brandy. She left the kitchen light on in case of burglars and walked to her bedroom at the end of the corridor. A moment later, she returned and placed a tray of biscuits, cheese and a glass of red wine on the table. It can't hurt, she told herself, as she ambled back to bed.

Having demolished the biscuits and cheese, Bozo raised his glass to French hospitality and drained it in a single gulp. The warmth spread through his head and made his ears tingle before stoking the biscuit crumbs in his belly. He refilled his glass and toasted the Storyteller. So far his mission had been a complete success, and far more entertaining that he could ever have imagined. Just wait till he told the Bloons about his adventures!

A lump suddenly rose in his throat as he wondered if he would ever see Bloonland again. It was all very well entering the Story and roaming around with Theo - who he had begun to love and respect - but the thought of never

seeing Bloonland again was too much to bear.

As good as the third glass of Burgundy he now swallowed was, it didn't compare to the wine-streams back home. Wine matured much better by starlight as it trickled down the cheese dunes. And the cheese! OK, this soft French stuff wasn't bad, but back home a Bloon would think nothing of eating his body weight in cheese powder before the first moon rose.

Ah well, I knew what I was getting into, he told himself. No point in complaining now. The Storyteller said there might not be a way back to Bloonland. Especially if a cure can't be found...Bozo shuddered. It was too awful to think about. No more gathering around the Storyteller on his old rock to hear the latest chapter...

Bozo suddenly wondered if the Bloons had been following his and Theo's adventures. The Storyteller surely wouldn't ignore such important characters. Maybe he was even telling the Bloons about Bozo sitting in this old French kitchen right now.

At once he puffed his chest and tilted back his head to strike a cool pose. Just in case they were watching, he had best put on a show. He tipped the bottle so that the rest of the wine arced through the air into his open lips. However, his mouth filled up faster than he could swallow, and in a moment he was coughing red wine all over his face and the table.

Bozo wobbled slightly under the effects of the drink. He felt quite embarrassed in front of the imaginary audience of Bloons. He had to do something heroic to compensate. His eyes settled on the light bulb on the wall and his heart pounded in sympathy. 'Poor things,' he murmured.

The Storyteller had explained how the Hoomans had learned to trap Eleckytrons, the tiny creatures of light. Normally, they lived by day, lighting up the world as they danced through the sky, a few of them coming out at night to honour the moon and stars. But the Hoomans trapped them inside glass cages and forced them to dance each time they threw a switch, when the sides of the cages became so hot that the Eleckytrons had no choice but to run from side to side in order not to get burnt.

Bozo knew he couldn't free all the Eleckytrons in the world, but was that any excuse not to save the ones he could? He picked up a heavy spoon and jumped on to the work surface just beneath the light bulb. With the heroic resolve of a champion of liberty, he swung the spoon in a dramatic strike upon the glass cage. There was a shattering sound, a flash of light and the Eleckytrons sped away to freedom.

Of course, the minor drawback of such heroics was that Bozo could no longer see anything. He knew that a hero shouldn't expect much in the way of gratitude, but he found it a bit off that the dancers of light hadn't even paused to thank him.

Worn out, Bozo felt entitled to take some more cheese and biscuits. He groped his way along the wall and had just reached the cupboard when he heard the cat-flap swing open and shut. A fierce hiss announced the return of Cedric. Bozo's tail twitched nervously. He couldn't make out the cat in the dark but he was quite sure that Cedric could see him.

As Bozo saw it, his only chance was to take a random swing at the contents of the cupboard and make a run for it before the cat pulled any fast moves. His hand fumbled carefully until he found a handle. He took a deep breath, swung open the door and grabbed with both hands the first substantial packet he could find. In the same moment, Cedric hissed and sprang at Bozo, who jumped backwards just in time, bringing the contents of the cupboard down behind him. A tin of cat food hit Cedric on the head and knocked him unconscious.

Bozo couldn't tell what had happened in the darkness, except that following the loud crash everything had gone quiet. Only the snoring of Pierre's grandmother from down the hall filled the air. The Bloon crept into the safety of a wardrobe in the hall and sniffed to see what he had plundered. How about that, he smiled to himself, cheese first time! So what if it was a little stale and chewy?

'English boy, wake up! There were thieves in my house last night!'

Theo opened his eyes to see Pierre grinning from cheek to cheek. His French friend couldn't believe how much excitement was coming his way these days.

'Did they take anything?' Theo mumbled, swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

'Only some candles from the cupboard,' Pierre laughed. 'But they made a fight with Cedric, our cat. The police come now to see what happened.'

Theo didn't answer. His eyes had already strayed to the Hypnosis-box in the corner of the bedroom. Pierre glanced at the TV screen, where a newsreader announced something next to a large photo of Theo. The sound was turned down but they could guess what was being said.

'*Ah non!*' Pierre gasped. 'And the police come here right now. What you will do, my friend?'

Theo didn't have the slightest idea. Fortunately, he didn't have to. At that moment a grey, speckled pigeon flew in the open window and landed on his shoulder. He froze in shock and Pierre exclaimed:

'Look! He has something on his foot.' He leant forwards and untied the piece of paper. 'Who is Lou?' he asked, handing the message to Theo. It read:

There is no time to lose. Take the bicycle that your friend is about to lend you and follow the pigeon through the streets.

As soon as it begins to rain, take off one shoe and throw it over your shoulder. Head through the cobbled lane and Bozo will do the rest.

Lou.

PS: Welcome to Paris.

PPS: Beware the Enemy.

PPPS: Pick me up a carton of milk.

Theo looked up at Pierre with apprehension. He searched for the words to say but his friend had already thought it all out:

'English boy, you must go before the police catch you. Come, we go by the back door.'

Theo dressed hurriedly and followed Pierre down the stairs and over to the garden. Already they could hear Pierre's grandmother talking to a couple of police officers at the front door. The boys slipped outside and Theo was relieved to see Bozo, who was munching on some conkers.

'They're a little hard to chew,' he announced by way of greeting, 'but have a great nutty flavour.'

Pierre (who, of course, had not heard a word) pulled Theo over to the alleyway that ran down the side of the house. 'You must take my bicycle,' he told his guest.

'But Pierre...' Theo stammered.

'No buts. You go now or they will catch you and take you back. Now come on!' He pushed Theo on to the saddle and Bozo jumped into the basket on the front.

Theo wheeled the bike into the alley and turned to take leave of his new friend. 'Pierre, I...'

'Us children must stick together, my friend.' He smiled. 'Now go!' he shouted, giving Theo a violent push.

Theo skidded past the side of the house and out into the lane where the police car was parked. He wondered which way to go but then saw the pigeon sweeping in front of him, heading north.

Theo pedaled along the pavement as fast as he could, anxious to put some distance between him and the police car. The pigeon took him through the shady streets of the suburb and then out into the main roads of Paris in rush hour. In the pavement cafés, men and women in suits and dresses nursed small cups of coffee, but Theo paid them no notice. The wind ruffled his hair as he coasted along.

He rounded a corner and almost collided with a news-stand. To his horror, he saw his own face smiling back at him from the front page of several newspapers. He guessed that some of the children on the bus must not have been able to keep the secret to themselves.

A shadow fell over him and he looked up to see a tall French policeman with a gun in his holster but a kind expression on his face.

'Qu'est-ce que tu fais ici?' He asked.

'He wants to know what you're doing here,' Bozo translated. The policeman glanced at the news-rack and a glimmer of understanding lit on his face.

Theo didn't wait for the penny to drop. He turned and pedaled after the pigeon, which led him down a busy shopping street. He had to swerve to avoid pedestrians. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the policeman in hot pursuit, shouting as he ran.

Theo picked up the pace and, as the policeman blew on his whistle, the crowds parted to let them through. Theo pedaled as fast as he could but the officer was gaining on him. All at once it began to rain hard, and the ground grew wet and slippery within moments.

Theo remembered the message and decided to trust the advice he'd been given. 'Bozo, untie my shoe and throw it over my shoulder!' he yelled.

The Bloon giggled but didn't seem to need an explanation to do something crazy. Theo swung his foot up on to the handlebar. Bozo untied the trainer and merrily tossed it over his friend's head. 'Now what?' he asked, thoroughly entertained.

The trainer bounced on the pavement a metre ahead of the policeman, who was almost upon them. Suddenly, an Alsatian lunged forward to grab the shoe, knocking the young officer off his feet. Neither was hurt, but it took the dog's owner and two passers-by to pull the animal off the poor policeman.

He had, however, already radioed ahead for support.

Theo kept his eyes fixed on the pigeon and banked a sharp right down a cobbled street. The wheels bumped over the rough stone surface and the bike shook like a drill as they picked up speed going downhill. Up ahead, a milk-float made the morning rounds.

'Don't look now, but it seems we're very popular today,' Bozo called.

Theo swung his head around and saw a police motorbike approaching rapidly. As it came up from behind, it put on its siren. The sound chilled Theo to the bone.

'What do we do now?' Bozo asked with interest.

'I don't know. The message said to leave it up to you,' Theo cried in desperation.

'I like *that*,' Bozo sniffed. 'You're supposed to be the Chosen One, but as soon as you get into problems it's up to *me* to sort it out.' The Bloon sat up, blocking Theo's view.

'Bozo! This is no time to be getting jealous...!' Theo shouted as he lost control of the bicycle. They skidded on the wet road and crashed into the back of the milk-float. They were both sent flying on to the crates of milk. Pierre's bicycle sprawled behind them. The police bike crushed the frame of the bicycle and then skidded on its side into a parked car.

The milk-float rounded the corner and the driver pulled up in the middle of the street to see what had happened.

'Look!' Theo cried. In front of them was a house whose front was covered in vines. A plaque above the open door read:

Lou Presquevu

'What?' Bozo grumbled, nursing a bruise.

'Never mind,' said Theo, lowering himself to the ground and glancing back nervously at the street corner. 'Just hurry up. And bring a carton of milk.'

Chapter 13

The Crystal Ball

Bozo swung the door closed just seconds before the police motorbike rounded the corner. The officer paused to interrogate the driver of the milk-float, who hadn't seen a thing but was complaining about a stolen carton of milk. The motorbike rolled on slowly as the policeman scanned the houses suspiciously.

The fugitives heaved a huge sigh of relief and wandered down the hallway to the kitchen, where they could hear a kettle whistling. Along the ceiling, suspended by thick ropes, hung flowerpots containing bundles of fragrant, dried herbs. Theo inhaled deeply and felt the fear and tension evaporate to be replaced by a sleepy contentment. He was walking through the unknown house of a stranger in a foreign country but he felt as though he was about to visit his grandmother.

They drifted into a large, tiled kitchen with long side windows that let in a leafy, chlorophyll light from the garden. Upon the kitchen table lay baskets of freshly baked bread, piles of cheese, pots of jam and marmalade, and three cups heaped with cocoa powder. The breakfast was accompanied by a note that read:

Theo,

You haven't eaten a thing in 24 hours. Make yourselves some sandwiches and pour the hot water on the cocoa. I take mine with a drop of milk. Put on the sandals by the door and you'll find me in the vegetable patch.

Lou

Theo walked over to the whistling kettle that had been trying to get his attention for some time now, jumping about on the stove. He filled the cups and joined Bozo in making a couple of enormous baguettes. The Bloon had already started but, as he ate half the fillings before they reached the bread, Theo soon caught up.

The usual flurry of questions that would be rattling through Theo's mind seemed curiously absent. He felt strangely relaxed, and the chase with the police seemed to have happened long ago. He slipped on a pair of child's leather sandals at the door and strolled out into the garden with the breakfast tray, Bozo at his side. As they emerged, the sun came out from behind the clouds to welcome them.

The grass in the centre of the garden grew high and wild, but the herb patches along the stone walls were in excellent condition. Green, leafy plants competed for space and offered enticing aromas as they passed. A sleek black cat emerged from the wild grass jungle and Bozo flinched. The feline showed no alarm at encountering a Bloon, however, and curled its body around Bozo's

ankles.

'Looks like you've found a friend,' Theo laughed, taking a bite out of an olive and balancing the cocoa on the tray. Bozo eyed the cat suspiciously and held his sandwich a little higher. The animal flirted with Theo's feet for a moment before prancing off towards a vegetable patch where there squatted a mass of skirts and blouses that could only be described as enormous. The hefty figure gave a grunt and flew backwards into a bed of wild grass.

'Help me up, then!' a cheery voice called.

Theo set down his tray and hurried over. He found a ruddy-cheeked woman flat on her back with a bunch of uprooted carrots grasped triumphantly in her fist. She was a woman who had perhaps never been thought of as beautiful, but her eyes were bright blue and twinkled as she spoke.

'You too, Bozo,' she called. 'You have to work for your breakfast around here!'

Even with Theo and Bozo pulling as hard as they could, it took Lou several minutes to get upright again, mainly because she refused to loosen her grip on the carrots that had landed her there in the first place. Sweating and out of breath, Theo passed her a cup of cocoa and asked, 'What would you have done if we hadn't been here?'

'But you *are* here,' Lou smiled. 'What kind of fortune-teller would I be if I hadn't predicted that?'

She adjusted her colourful skirts and blouses as they flared in the breeze, revealing the occasional roll of pink fat. They drank their cocoa in contented silence and Theo couldn't help but smile at the way Lou slurped her drink: she clearly couldn't care less what anyone thought of her, and Theo liked her all the more for it.

'How's your cocoa?' she asked suddenly.

'Nice. Very sweet,' Theo answered happily.

'And have you thought, Theo, where sweetness comes from?' Lou asked, looking down her nose at him like a schoolteacher.

He felt like he was sitting some kind of test and so chose his words very carefully. 'I suppose sweetness is part of the Story?' he offered hopefully.

'Good, good. And where does the Story come from?'

A light dawned in Theo's head. 'You mean that if the Storyteller wrote the Story, then sweetness must come from him?'

'You're a bright boy, Theo.' Lou smiled. 'In fact, *everything* here comes from the Storyteller. Just imagine - before the old man began to tell the Story, it

was all waiting inside his imagination. The source of everything in the world - the oceans and the continents, the skies and the forest, the animals and the Hoomans - it all comes from the Storyteller. Even pain,' she mused.

A moment later Bozo howled in agony. A bee had landed on his sandwich and he almost swallowed it before being stung three times on the tongue. He jumped up and ran down the garden to the pond, where he plunged his head into the cold water for relief.

Lou smiled and continued: 'It's like this. The Storyteller must have woven other Tales before, but this was his most ambitious yet. He opened his mind and poured himself into a luxurious green and blue planet with millions of kinds of plants, insects and animals. So when you see moonlight dancing on the water of a lake, you're seeing the magic of the Storyteller. When you take a spoonful of honey, you taste his sweetness. And when you see earthquakes and tornadoes tearing everything to pieces, you're witnessing his anger and confusion.'

Bozo slouched back to take his seat beside them, his head dripping with water. His face was set in a sulk against all of the tiny, stinging creatures that the Storyteller had created in a thoughtless moment. Theo, on the other hand, looked around the beautiful garden in wonder - the bright colours of the flowers, the scents of the plants, the songs of the birds in the trees - it was all a projection of the Storyteller's mind. He was speechless.

'Thing is, it seems the Storyteller didn't know where to stop,' Lou continued. 'He was so in love with the Story that he got carried away with himself and created the Hoomans.'

'Even I could have told him that was a mistake,' Bozo growled moodily, nursing his swollen tongue. Theo ignored him and listened intently as Lou continued.

'Perhaps it was indeed a mistake. At first, though, he was too proud to admit to himself that he had gone too far. He thought the Hoomans his finest creation. Just as the animals and the trees took their beauty from the Storyteller's imagination, so too the Hoomans were created to take their thoughts and feelings from his mind. Only it seems he didn't know his mind well enough.'

Lou broke off and glanced up at a cloud formation that seemed to trouble her. As if to confirm a growing suspicion, she downed her cocoa in one and then set it down to examine the residue. 'Hmm,' she frowned. 'I think we had best go inside before we're seen.'

'By who?' Theo asked between mouthfuls of his sandwich.

'By the Enemy,' she answered grimly.

At these words Theo's mellow state of contentment broke up into a fragmented

sense of unease. He imagined some evil sorcerer scanning the country for him, and he had the sudden feeling that he was being watched. As he and Bozo followed Lou's plump figure back to the house, he began to glance about him nervously. The sun ducked behind some ominous clouds and the whole garden took on a haunted aspect. A cool breeze stirred and the leaves on the bushes seemed to hiss. He hurried in through the kitchen door and heard the approaching whir of a helicopter's blades.

Lou closed the door and looked down at Theo with a frown. Her jolliness was gone, and Theo saw the age and wisdom in her face. He felt rather small in comparison. He was about to speak but the helicopter arrived overhead, drowning out his voice. The air seemed static with fear and, for a long, awful moment, he thought the machine was about to land on the roof of the house. He felt like he was going to scream, but then the drone of the blades passed on to another area of the neighbourhood.

'Yes, Theo. They were looking for you.' Lou looked down at him kindly and only when she put a hand on his cheek did he realise that he was trembling from head to foot. 'Too young,' she sighed. 'I wonder why the Storyteller chose someone so small to come and do all this...'

'Why are they looking so hard for me?' Theo asked with a shiver. After all, there were runaway children all over the world and helicopters didn't come after them.

'*That* is something you must learn for yourself,' Lou announced firmly. 'It's time for you to see what's going on. Follow me. You too, Bozo. This concerns the life and death of the Storyteller himself.'

Bozo nodded and followed close behind Theo as Lou led them along the corridor to a wooden trapdoor in the floor that led to a dark basement. Bozo often went quiet whenever Theo was upset or scared. Fear and sadness weren't very common in Bloonland, and he didn't know how to deal with them. He wasn't sure he even wanted to know.

The wooden steps leading to the basement creaked loudly and the air was thick so it was hard to breathe. When Theo and Bozo reached to the bottom, Lou closed and locked the trapdoor. Everything went dark. Theo heard a scurrying and he stood absolutely still, convinced that at any moment a rat would run over his feet. In the darkness he could hear the rustle of Lou's skirts as she passed him and moved around, looking for something.

'Aha!' she cried, and struck a match. A lantern began to glow dimly and Lou moved about lighting other candles around the room. Presently their eyes adjusted well enough to the gloom and they could make out a small wooden table with three low stools. In the centre of the table was something covered with a cloth. The room's walls were lined with mirrors which reflected the candlelight, and Theo had the sudden sensation of being inside a church. Lou lit some incense and motioned for the pair to come and sit. They took their

places at the table and, though it might have been a trick of the light, it seemed to Theo that whatever was beneath the cloth trembled slightly and gave off a faint illumination.

'There are some things, boys, which must be seen to be believed,' Lou began. 'But believing isn't enough on its own. You must *understand*. Bozo, do you remember the very first time the Storyteller sat down to tell you the Story?'

Bozo thought for a moment and then shook his head:

'No. It seemed like the Story was always there.' He paused, his brow furrowed deep in thought. 'I know I haven't heard it *all*,' he said, finally, 'because some of the older Bloons used to reminisce about when the Hoomans thought the world was flat, and how they were scared their ships might fall off the edge. And how angry they were when someone worked out that the planet was round.'

He chuckled for a moment and then grew wistful. 'We could only ever remember bits and pieces of the Story...I wish I could hear it now. I mean, it's great to be inside it and all, but I really miss the old Storyteller. He seems so far away.'

'Maybe he's not quite as far as you think,' Lou laughed, and, with a flourish, she whipped off the cloth. An explosion of blinding white light filled the room and they were forced to shield their eyes. Gradually, the intensity of the light faded and they were able to lower their arms to see a radiant crystal ball, pulsing with energy.

'Put your hands on the sides of the ball, Bozo, and think of Bloonland,' said Lou.

Slowly, Bozo reached out his skinny blue arms, his desire to see his home overcoming his fear. No sooner had his fingers neared the sides than they were sucked in like magnets. His hands were glued to the glass and his entire body began to shake as though conducting a fierce current. He calmed down a little only when the milky white interior of the crystal orb began to take form and colour. The clouds parted and he gasped as the familiar cheese slopes of Bloonland came into view.

The Bloons were gathered around the Storyteller and tears ran down Bozo's cheeks as he watched: 'There's Dizzy, Dazy and Dozy - half-asleep as usual,' he whispered ecstatically. 'And there's Nipi and Lipi in the front row - probably interrupting with too many questions. And the Storyteller is talking but the second moon is going down. He must be nearing the end of tonight's chapter...' He looked up at Lou. 'Does this thing have sound?'

But no sooner had he asked than each of them heard inside their heads the deep, rolling voice of the Storyteller.

And so, hunted by the authorities, Bozo and his Hooman friend, Theo, found themselves hiding in the house of an old fortune-teller in France. Hoomans have always paid handsomely to hear about the future, failing to realise that it comes soon enough by itself. All they have to do is wait.

Of course, there had always been Hoomans whose job it was to reveal the secrets of the future that are buried in the present. In a seed there is a tree; in a child a grown man; and so, too, encoded in the moment are a thousand possible futures. Most fortune-tellers soon learnt that it was more profitable to tell Hoomans what they wanted to hear, though. When they told their customers that everything would be fine, they were showered with gold. When they told them they could look forwards only to bad weather and toothache they were thrown out of town.

Yet even most of the talented fortune-tellers failed to see that our intentions and feelings are as much part of the moment as anything. By listening to the compass of our own hearts, the future can be steered in a number of directions....

The fortune-teller who sheltered Bozo and the Hooman boy understood these things better than most, and she gave them the chance to see things for themselves. She took them into the depths of her home, where she revealed a crystal ball.

Bozo took the ball in his hands and cried with happiness as he watched his fellow Bloons jump up and down with joy on learning that their absent companion was watching them even as they saw him in the Story...

The Storyteller stopped and his eyes faded back to a neutral amber. The last wisps of his words still floated in front of the Bloons, and they saw a Bloon gazing into a crystal ball that showed a crowd of Bloons gazing at the image of a Bloon gazing into a crystal ball...

When the Story faded in front of their eyes, the Bloons looked around, excited in the knowledge that they were being watched. A whisper passed through the crowd and a suppressed giggle was heard as they agreed on what to do: in one smooth wave, they all bent over and shook their behinds in the direction they supposed Bozo was watching.

Bozo fell back laughing and did a reverse somersault into a corner of the room, his stool tumbling to the ground. 'Those Bloons!' he cried. 'A laugh a minute!' He picked himself up and resumed his seat. 'And the Storyteller looked in good shape too, don't you think? Perhaps we're doing him some good already.'

Theo nodded uncertainly. It seemed to him that the old man had put on his best face for the sake of the Bloons. The moment he finished speaking, he seemed frail and broken like a dying tree. The image brought a lump to Theo's throat. He turned his attention to the crystal ball that now swirled milky white again.

'Can I try?' he asked timidly.

Lou nodded. Theo stretched out his thin, pale hands and they were sucked in hard against the orb that seemed hungry for his touch. At once the three of them saw the image of Pierre being interrogated by the police in the front-room of his house. He was being shown the pictures of Theo in the newspaper, and his face expressed an artful look of shock and disbelief. He shrugged as if to say he had no idea where Theo could be. It was clear from his eyes that he was thoroughly enjoying all the attention. Theo felt a stab of pain as he thought of his friend's mangled bicycle back in the street.

'Don't worry, Theo. Pierre's uncle is buying him a new one for his birthday next week.' Theo looked up at Lou in astonishment but, before he could ask how she had read his thought, the orb again demanded his attention. He now saw Simon preaching from his soapbox to a mildly interested mongrel - yet he delivered his speech with as much enthusiasm and drive as if he addressed a crowd of thousands.

The image faded and they saw Michelle step out of an expensive restaurant with a well-dressed man on each arm. Despite their protests, she kissed them both on the forehead and climbed into a taxi that had pulled up for her without being hailed. Theo had no idea how she could have talked her way out of trouble with the police, but he had the feeling that Michelle was practiced at looking after herself.

The scene shifted to St Jude's Hospital, where Nurse Sandra was reading the newspaper on her coffee break. The article was about Theo's escape and she had a worried look on her face. Theo wished he could comfort her somehow. Suddenly Dr Bunsen snatched the newspaper from her hands and the crystal ball filled with his face. Angry and spiteful, his eyes burnt red with hatred as he read the headlines.

Theo let go of the orb. 'Why does he hate me so much?' he yelled. 'What did I ever do to him?'

'You exist,' Lou said calmly. 'And every time he sees you he's reminded of all he has lost and all he will never be. He's a very sick man and he's not alone.' She sighed and gave Theo's hand a squeeze. 'I know you want the answers to many questions, and today you will learn much - more, perhaps, than you would like to know. The crystal ball will show you many things, and I will try to explain as best I can. But you must know that each of the AOs see things a little differently. I can only offer you the truth as I understand it.'

Theo nodded, quite sure that any explanation Lou gave him would be good enough. Until now he'd only had a head full of questions: Why was the Storyteller dying? Who was the Enemy? And what on earth could Theo do about it? First things first, he told himself.

'What is wrong with the Storyteller?' he asked.

Lou gestured towards the crystal ball. 'Touch the ball and ask the question in your mind,' she declared gravely.

Theo obediently set his hands on either side of the milky orb and again they were drawn in with a static hiss. The ball burnt bright red and yellow, and the flames burnt Theo's hands. He cried out in pain but held on as the vision panned back to show a bonfire licking around the feet of an old woman. She was tied to a wooden stake and her face was wracked with fear and pain. She begged for help but the crowd just jeered and spat.

'The burning of the witches,' Lou whispered softly. 'They threw her in a river and, because she didn't drown, they decided she must be guilty.'

Theo's eyes widened, appalled.

The orb now showed an old sailing ship rocking across the ocean. The view zoomed in on the deck and then down to the hold, where hundreds of African men and women were chained to cramped shelves. The air was thick with flies and the sound of people moaning in utter misery. One and all were sick, dirty and dying.

'The slave ships,' Lou said. 'More than half the Africans on board died before they reached America. Those that survived then had to work in the fields for their Hooman masters.'

Tears flowed in a steady stream down both Theo and Bozo's faces, but they could not tear their eyes from these awful revelations. The crystal ball took them through the gruesome scenes of a hundred bloody wars, and Lou named the worst of them. They saw concentration camps, where skinny, ashen-faced workers laboured until they dropped of exhaustion. Then they were murdered and fed to the chimneys.

They saw naked tribes in woods and deserts being hunted by other Hoomans with guns. They saw vast forests slashed and burnt, chemical waste poured into the rivers and seas, and the sky filling with poisonous smoke. They saw planes flying over jungles and dropping endless bombs on the valleys below.

Finally, they saw one plane drop a single bomb that landed on an island where hundreds of thousands of people died in one moment: the awful, collective scream of the dying rose to an unbearable crescendo, and Theo had to wrench his hands free of the ball and clap them around his ears. The orb filled with a great mushroom cloud, and then grew still and dark.

Theo and Bozo wept for several minutes, leaning upon one another in grief. The world had not seemed a perfect place, but they could never have imagined that such suffering and evil were possible. How could it be true? How could people do that kind of thing to one another? They sobbed without restraint, consoled only by having each other near.

Bozo was the first to speak: 'The Storyteller never...I mean, he never *told* us

about any of this.' He waved his hand towards the dark crystal ball.

Lou nodded sadly. 'It is as we feared,' she said. 'He could not bear to see it either, and closed his mind to it all. He chose to look elsewhere and told only the things that you would find beautiful or funny.'

'Why doesn't he *do* something about it?' Theo spluttered in rage and grief. 'Why doesn't he stop people doing these terrible things to each other?'

Lou leaned close. 'It is the work of the Enemy.'

'Simon said that too,' Theo sniffed. 'But who *is* the Enemy?'

'Do you still not know?' she inquired, flicking a glance at the crystal ball. Theo turned pale at the thought of consulting that awful orb again but his trembling hands already reached out for the answer. *Who is the Enemy?* he asked silently, and held his breath as a picture began to form. He half-expected it might be Dr Bunsen, or maybe the dark sorcerer of his fearful imaginings. Nothing could have prepared him for what he saw.

The crystal ball showed an old man sitting on a rock, his face sewn into a writhing, contorted mask of anger and hatred. His eyes boiled in their sockets and his teeth were bared like a slaving wolf. His skin was screwed up tight and his hair blew wildly in the wind.

It was the Storyteller.

Bozo screamed in dismay and stared at the orb in utter dread.

'What's going on?' Theo cried, pulling his hands away in panic. 'What's this supposed to mean?'

'The Storyteller is the Enemy,' Lou said gravely. She bit her nails as she looked for the words to make things clear to her young guest. 'Theo, you remember I told you in the garden that the Storyteller created the Hoomans to draw their thoughts and feelings from his own mind? Well, at first they inherited only his sense of humour and beauty, his feelings of friendship and romance. Alas, however, they went too deep and awoke something terrible. Inside some hidden corner of the Storyteller's imagination lay a dormant seed of evil. Just as the Hoomans drew their laughter and love from his mind, they also tapped into deep currents of fear, anger and cruelty.'

'As the Hoomans began to embody these dark forces, the seed of evil in the Storyteller's mind grew in strength until it waged war against his better nature. The Story became the battleground.'

'So why doesn't he just stop?' Theo asked, bewildered. 'If the Story brings out his evil nature, why doesn't he stop telling it?'

Lou shook her head. 'It's too late. Maybe if he had realised early enough, he

could have done something about it. But now he has invested too much of himself into the Story. It has become a part of him. His fate and the Story are now irrevocably intertwined.

'The Storyteller's mind is split. On one side, he's his old self, filling the Story with the love and laughter that has kept Hoomans going for thousands of years. On the other, he is the Enemy, urging us to lie, to cheat and to hate. And, if we listen, to hurt, destroy and kill.'

'But how come we never saw the Storyteller look like that in Bloonland?' Bozo protested, not quite trusting this strange, ruddy-faced woman.

'In Bloonland he is his normal self. He would never dream of hurting anyone and loves all of you Bloons more than you can imagine.' Lou rubbed her forehead with her fingers and sighed. 'The evil part of his mind that we call the Enemy lives only in the Story. It causes the pain and suffering you have seen today, and each time it does, the Storyteller dies a little more.'

'So how has he managed to survive all the terrible things we saw?' Bozo argued, torn up to think that there could be any evil in the old man that he had loved all his life.

'Until recently, the evils in the Story were distant and sporadic. Sometimes the Enemy grew strong for a while and unspeakable things were done. But then the better side of the Storyteller prevailed and Hoomans made peace again.

'The technology of the 20th century has changed everything. Fear, hatred and murder can encircle the world in a matter of minutes. A voice on a radio can incite millions to rise in violence. A push of a button can destroy an entire country. The Enemy is stronger than ever before. Greed and abuse fill the Story, causing Hoomans to harm and exploit one another. The Storyteller cannot stand much more,' Lou concluded, shaking her head sadly.

'What does the Enemy want? What will happen if he wins?' Theo asked.

Lou looked him straight in the eye and said, 'He wants only the end. He is the death wish of the Storyteller, a seed of self-destruction that threatens to kill its host. The Enemy desires to see the Story corrupted, plundered and poisoned from within. If you do not find a cure, Theo, then the Storyteller will die of a broken heart.'

There was a moment's silence. The room was so quiet that they could almost hear their own minds hard at work. The orb now swirled milky white again as though nothing had happened. The light it gave was reflected in the mirrors and then blended with the rising smoke of the candles.

Lou cleared her throat. 'The last thing you must understand, boys, is that the Enemy knows you are here. He is part of the Storyteller's mind and so knows all that he knows. You, Theo, are the one chance to save the Storyteller, and

the Enemy will do all he can to stop you.

'The Enemy can plant thoughts in the minds of people. He can influence the Story just as the Storyteller can, perhaps even more. He has certainly convinced the authorities that you are a runaway child who must be found at all costs.'

From up above they suddenly heard an enormous crash and the sound of many pairs of heavy boots.

'What was that?' Theo gasped, his heart trying to break out of his chest.

'I expect it was my front door being knocked down by the police. Someone must have seen you come in.'

'Didn't you foresee that?' Bozo grinned.

'No one knows the future, my Bloon. It hasn't happened yet.' Lou smiled. She gathered her skirts and rose to her feet, taking a lantern with her to the far end of the basement. 'Still, we can make some pretty good guesses and prepare as best we can.'

She picked up an old, dusty carpet that was rolled up in the corner, and pulled back a long curtain to reveal two large wooden shutters. She yanked them open and Theo saw to his amazement an earthy tunnel big enough to walk along at a crouch.

'My knees aren't what they were - would you help me, boys?' Lou asked. They pushed as hard as they could and finally she clambered up into the tunnel. They jumped up behind her. They heard the splintering of wood as an axe came through the trapdoor and daylight poured into the basement. They closed the shutters of the tunnel and found themselves in complete darkness. Lou struck a match and a dull glow emitted from a lantern that she held in her hand.

The tunnel was moist and stuffy. They followed her with their heads bent low. Presently, the tunnel began to rise and they could see cracks of daylight ahead. Lou pushed aside a covering of vines and they found themselves at the foot of her garden. The fortune-teller glanced back at the house that was now crawling with officers of the law, and unrolled the carpet she'd been carrying with a flourish.

'Come on, boys - hop on!'

Theo and Bozo stepped on to the carpet uncertainly. 'Now what?' Theo asked. 'Shouldn't we try to run or something?'

'Running won't get you where you need to go,' Lou laughed. 'You're going by air!'

This was too much for Theo. 'Oh, come on. You expect me to believe that this carpet is going to *fly*?' he said, his hands on his hips.

'Believe. Don't believe. Your future is yours to make. Either you go with this carpet or you go with them.' She jerked a thumb back at the police, who had just caught sight of the fugitives. A great cry went up and officers began to run towards them with their truncheons drawn.

'OK,' Theo muttered. 'Carpet - up!' Nothing happened and his head drooped. 'I knew it wouldn't work.'

'You forgot the magic word,' Lou remarked with a smile.

'What is it?' Theo cried, staring in terror at the approaching police.

'I know!' Bozo laughed. 'Carpet - up, *please*!'

The tassels of the carpet twitched as though waking from a deep sleep, and it sprang 12 feet up in the air. The police arrived below but, much to their fury, the carpet hovered just out of their reach.

'Tell the Sandman I'm sorry I kept his carpet so long!' Lou cried as she waved farewell. 'Good luck!'

'The who?' Theo called. But his words faded away on the breeze as the flying carpet did a loop around the garden, shook off a few years' worth of dust and soared away through the afternoon sky.

Chapter 14

The Sandman

All in all, travelling by flying carpet was rather an odd experience. At first, Theo and Bozo clung together in the centre of the carpet, terrified that they might slip off and go tumbling through the sky. Gradually, though, their courage returned and they began tentatively to crawl around, testing the rug's strength and firmness. They soon found out that even if they stood on the corners, the carpet held as flat and strong as a metal tray. When they discovered this, Bozo did a back flip in excitement and almost fell clean off in the process. He clutched on to the tassels for dear life and it took all of Theo's strength to haul the Bloon back up again.

Another thing about the flying carpet was that there was no windscreen of any kind. As a result, Theo's straggly hair swept tightly behind him, and Bozo had to wrap them both in his tail to stay warm. When they passed through a low-flying cloud, everything turned white and damp. They couldn't even see their bodies. They froze for fear of falling off, until at last the carpet burst through the layers of clouds and emerged into a blue heaven flooded with sunlight.

There was no need to try and steer the thing, either. The flying carpet knew exactly where it was taking them and held to a bearing of south-east. The sun dried off the moisture from the clouds and the harrowing events of the day seemed far behind them. The air was crisp and sharp, the sunlight fell like melted gold on puffed up beds of clouds, and there wasn't another living being in sight.

'You know, it's strange,' Theo mused. 'I don't feel in the least bit scared, even though there's only an inch or so between me and certain death.'

'How much is there usually?' Bozo grinned, and they both laughed. For the first time in days the pressure was off and, at 1,000 metres altitude, they felt safer than ever.

Presently, night fell and the air grew a little chilly. Exhausted, Theo and Bozo lay down to sleep. The moment they did so, the carpet rolled up its rear to cover them like a blanket. They were wrapped so tightly that there was no chance of falling off the edge, and moments later they were both snoring heavily.

Bozo spent the night dreaming of the blue-cheese dunes of Bloonland and the antics of his distant friends. In between breaths he giggled in his sleep, occasionally laughing so loudly that he woke himself up.

Theo didn't slumber so easily. The visions of the crystal ball tumbled through his head like clothes in a drier. The brutality and suffering he had witnessed haunted his dreams, and several times he shook awake, sweating with fear. Then he'd stare up at the moonlit sky and count the stars until he fell asleep

again.

He knew that the history of Hoomanity wasn't a pretty one, but to see it like that had made it much more real. He had *felt* the suffering of the men and women killed in war, of the slaves in those terrible ships and the fear of the old woman accused of being a witch....

Suddenly it occurred to Theo that the face of the woman burnt at the stake bore a strong resemblance to Lou: she had the same kind eyes, ruddy cheeks, and, though she was a good deal thinner, she even had the same wrinkles on her forehead. But how could that be? Lou had said that the witch hunts had taken place hundreds of years before. But then hadn't Simon hinted that he'd been alive for centuries? Theo couldn't put it all together in his head.

And then there was the Storyteller. All the hours Theo had spent reading diagnosis books in the hospital, and it turned out that the old man was simply cracking up. It reminded Theo of a comic he'd read recently: Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde - a doctor who drank a potion that brought out the evil half of his split personality. It would have been hard for Theo to imagine any evil in the Storyteller if he hadn't seen the vision of his alter ego, the Enemy. He wondered if the Storyteller and the Enemy were active at the same time or if one took over while the other slept.

Eventually these thoughts took too firm a hold on Theo's mind to let him sleep anymore. The stars were beginning to fade and the air was freezing. Bozo's eyes flickered open for a moment and Theo nudged him in the ribs and whispered, 'Bozo, are you awake?'

'I am *now*,' came the disgusted reply, and the Bloon wiped the dust from his eyes with a frown.

'Bozo, where do you suppose we're going?'

'Somewhere warmer, I hope. No one thought to give *me* a jacket.' The Bloon sniffed.

Theo swallowed a lump of guilt. 'I'm sorry,' he said, unfolding the jacket he'd used as a pillow. 'Do you want to wear it now? I slept on it last night and...hey! What were you resting *your* head on?' he cried, as he noticed for the first time a rolled up ball of cloth.

Bozo flinched guiltily. 'Oh, *that*. It's nothing. Just...a memento that I picked up....'

But Theo had already snatched away the cloth to reveal Lou's crystal ball shimmering pink in the dawning sky. Theo stared severely at his friend from beneath his eyebrows in reproach. Bozo shrugged.

'Well, you know, I figured we might need it more than her...I expect that she would have liked us to have it but, what with all the excitement, she forgot. At

least now we'll be able to stay in touch with the Storyteller...'

'How *could* you?' Theo cried. 'After all that Lou did for us - after all the risks she took, you repay her with theft.'

'If she couldn't see that coming, then what kind of fortune-teller is she?' Bozo snapped, bored of being apologetic. 'Everyone knows that a Bloon can resist anything except temptation.'

Theo huffed in disbelief and turned his back on his sticky-fingered friend. Bozo sniffed and did the same. The crystal ball lay on the carpet between them.

Although the eastern horizon was now daubed with streaks of pink and yellow, the sun had yet to arrive and it was hard to make out the land below. A carpet is a very small place to share with someone you're mad at, and so it was understandable that curiosity overcame their rift. Theo glanced edgily over his shoulder and met Bozo's eyes doing the same. They both looked away indignantly but the tension was unbearable.

Theo was the first to crack. 'I suppose now that it's here...' he began hesitantly. Bozo wrinkled his nose but also turned around to examine the orb.

'Where do you suppose crystal balls come from?' Theo asked, as he leant forwards to see if there were any markings on the ball. He didn't dare touch it yet, but the sides seemed flawlessly smooth.

'I know of a way to find out!' Bozo grinned.

'I don't think we need to know *that* badly,' Theo began, trying not to sound enthusiastic. 'And it would be playing with fire to ask....'

But Bozo had grabbed the crystal ball and already they could see the Storyteller on his knees on the far side of Bloonland, trembling and with his hands on his head in apparent pain. The vision then zoomed in to show scenes from the Story playing out in the old man's eyes: ships flying laden with gold setting off from tropical shores, while behind them in the jungle, thousands upon thousands of natives lay on the ground, coughing and dying. Then the image grew blurry as the Storyteller's eyes grew watery and a tear fell – but now down his face but from *inside*, falling from the sky and landing as a crystal sphere on a mountain, bouncing off rocks and on down the slopes until it careered into an encampment of gypsies in the forest down below.

Theo and Bozo then saw a collage of scenes: long journeys by horse and by boat, money changing hands and the crystal ball passing from clan to clan. In the last scene, they saw it reach the hands of the old woman who looked like Lou and who had met with such a terrible end.

The vision faded and Bozo removed his hands, highly impressed. 'I reckon this baby will tell us anything we want to know!' he whooped. 'Not such a bad idea to bring it along, eh?'

Theo nodded thoughtfully, though his conscience still troubled him. He went quiet for a moment as an Idea floated in through his ears. As he let it settle in, the sun climbed over the horizon and they were bathed in amber morning light.

'Bozo,' Theo began thoughtfully. 'Yesterday the crystal ball told us why the Storyteller is dying. Do you think it might tell us what the Cure could be?'

Bozo gazed back at him, awestruck. He nodded in wonder as Theo leaned forwards to take the ball in his hands. The boy felt the energy of the orb pulse through his fingers, and he held his breath in expectation as it swirled a rainbow of colours. Just as the vision seemed to begin, though, the ball turned silver and reflected only their hopeful faces.

'What's wrong with it?' Bozo demanded. 'Try tapping it on the side.'

Theo pulled his hands away and shook his head. 'Maybe it doesn't work in sunlight,' he said, a little discouraged. It was like opening a wrapped present only to find an empty box. However, his spirits returned a moment later when he looked over the edge of the carpet. 'Have you seen where we are?' he said.

They both crawled to the edge of the carpet and looked down. The clouds had vanished and they gazed through a perfectly blue sky to a landscape of sand. Undulating dunes swept to each horizon and the sand glowed scarlet in the dawn light. The dunes swelled up out of the desert and cast long shadows to the west like the paint strokes of an artist. Gazing down at the harmonious waves of sand, Theo had the impression of seeing an ocean frozen in time. In the driest place in the world, he could think only of water.

The flying carpet began its descent, and soon Bozo and Theo were coasting along just a few metres above the sand, soaring and dipping with each rise and fall of the slopes. The desert was enormous, but it was made of the tiniest granules of sand that washed up each ridge to form a perfectly straight line along the top.

The shadows were shrinking now and the view on all sides was of the endless desert stretching away to the horizon. The heat was already rising, and the air seemed to bend and distort close to the sand. The travellers hoped the carpet knew where it was going.

Then to the east they saw a tiny cluster of dots that stood out only because there was nothing else to see. The carpet made straight for this landmark and before long they could see that it was an oasis - an orchard of date palms with wild grass and bushes growing around it. As the pair grew closer, they could make out a tall, thin man in long, white robes attending to a camel in the shade of a palm tree.

The carpet gave a final dramatic arc through the air and then swooped down

gracefully to land in the middle of the oasis. The man in robes turned around to take in the new arrivals. He seemed to frown, and his eyes were dark and grim. A dark green cloth around his head cast his features into shadow, but it already seemed clear that he wasn't a man who smiled all that much.

'Welcome. A thousand welcomes,' he muttered in a voice that seemed anything but welcoming. 'I expect the fortune-teller forgot to tell you to remove your sandals when sitting on the carpet.'

'I'm sorry,' Theo stammered, quite flustered by such a cool reception. 'I didn't know it was rude to keep them on.'

As he took off his sandals, their host picked up two glasses from the remains of a fire and carried them to the camel. The beast snorted and spat but the man whispered calming words in its ear. Then he bent beneath the animal and filled the glasses with milk fresh from its udders.

'A Bedouin can live off the milk of a camel if he has to,' he said, as he handed Theo and Bozo each a glass.

Bozo took a deep gulp and at once spat out the liquid. 'Ugh!' he exclaimed. 'But why would anyone *want* to?'

The Bedouin focused his gaze on Bozo and his eyes seemed to bore holes into the Bloon's head. Bozo couldn't bear to meet the look. He began to feel very small. He covered his face with his hands and seemed to shrink where he sat, looking for something to hide behind.

Theo stepped in to save him. 'Excuse me, but are you the Sandman that Lou told us about?'

Reluctantly, the man withdrew his searing gaze from Bozo's trembling form and switched his attention to Theo. 'Sandman?' he repeated with a wince. 'Is that what she called me? My name is Ali Aziz Abdullah Mohammed and my family has walked these sands since the Storyteller first breathed life into the Hoomans. I, who have seen civilisations rise and fall, dust returning unto dust; I, Ali, whose name is known, respected and feared in all corners of the desert - and she calls me the Sandman?' Ali snorted and tipped back his head to stare at the sky as though it were a mirror.

'I'm sorry if I offended you,' Theo mumbled. 'I'm sure Lou didn't mean any harm by it - and she apologises for keeping your carpet so long.'

'The only flying carpet left in the Story,' Ali snapped, tilting his head to look down his long nose at Theo. 'Made from the feathers of a thousand birds and sewn with winds captured from the heart of the desert. And where has it been for the past century? Gathering dust in the cellar of some cheap teller of fortunes in a drab suburb of Paris.'

Ali went on with his angry monologue but Theo's attention was distracted by

the smell of something burning close behind him. He met Bozo's eye and they turned round with the dreadful certainty that there was something very wrong. To their horror, they saw that sunlight, magnified by the crystal ball, was searing a dark hole in the carpet. They jumped up to move the orb but were too slow. Flames sprang up and the carpet shook itself free of its passengers, sending them head over heels into the sand.

'A flying carpet such as this would once have fetched the price of ten thousand camels...' Ali declared, but broke off as the carpet sprang up in pain and tried to smother itself against the sand. But it was too late. Flames engulfed the fabric and within seconds it was reduced to ashes. The winds trapped inside the carpet burst free and tore through the oasis with delight, throwing sand in everyone's faces and charging out into the desert sky to freedom.

Bozo and Theo looked up at Ali in trepidation. Ali pulled back the shawl around his head to reveal a thick, black beard and an expressionless leather face. He strode forward and picked up the crystal ball as though it were a piece of camel dung. 'An eye for an eye,' he muttered. 'And a crystal ball for a flying carpet.' He leant back and hurled it with surprising strength some 50 metres into the side of a dune. It landed with a thud and rolled down a little way before being swallowed in an avalanche of sand.

'It is fated that we must cross the desert by camel,' the Bedouin declared with a resigned tone of voice. He turned and went to untie the animal from its tether on the palm tree.

'Are you sure this guy is an AO?' Bozo whispered.

Theo shrugged. 'I guess he must be if he knows about the Storyteller. And the carpet *did* bring us here. But I know what you mean. I thought all of the AOs were going to be nice.'

'Maybe a person gets like that after a lifetime of drinking camel milk.' Bozo giggled but then swallowed his laughter as he looked up to see Ali towering over him with his hand on the camel's head.

'It is time to leave. If you will please take your seats.' He made the camel kneel down so that they could clamber on to the saddle between the hump and its long, curving neck. As Bozo hopped on, the camel sniffed and then spat a thick ball of green mucus into Ali's face. He paused for a moment with a comic blank expression and then wiped it off with his sleeve. 'As much as my heart and soul belong to the desert,' he said, with no trace or irony, 'I sometimes wonder if it's really worth it.'

He handed them long white cloths to wrap around their heads and, to their surprise, the extra clothing served not only as protection against the sun but also kept them cool. The camel rose and they set off at a slow pace, Ali steering the animal by its harness. He guided them in silence.

While the prospect of riding a camel seemed exciting to Theo, he could never

have guessed how uncomfortable it would be. His seat was just behind the camel's neck, and it dipped and swayed with each step the beast took. The glare of the sand in the midday sun made him feel even more dizzy, and only the fear of falling off kept him awake. Bozo resolved this problem by tying his tail around the hump, and he now snored contentedly behind Theo.

There was nothing to see except a landscape of blinding sand and the cloudless blue sky. Ali still said nothing as he led them. His eyes were trained on the horizon. He stopped only to check the direction of the wind by wetting a finger and holding it above his head. The camel seemed quite content and gave the impression that it could march 1,000 miles on just a teaspoonful of water.

Time passed slower than Theo had ever known it. It seemed to him that they were forever climbing or descending the same dune, and the view never appeared to change. The desert was so empty and vast that he felt they might be swallowed up at any moment.

Theo wondered whether he would die first from heat or exhaustion, or simply from boredom. Why had the Storyteller written deserts into the Story? Were there places in the Storyteller's mind that were as bare and empty as this landscape? There was no sign of life anywhere, and Theo asked himself if the desert might be a part of the Storyteller's mind that had already died.

Somehow the day passed and, as the fierce sun reluctantly sank lower in the sky, the desert again recovered its beauty. Shadows grew around the dunes and the grains of sand began to glow with a nostalgic light. By the time the sun was setting in an eruption of red, green and blue, Theo was almost beginning to like the place again.

'We will camp here for the night and tomorrow you will continue to Cairo, where you will meet my nephew, Omar,' Ali said, as he helped Theo climb down from the camel. 'He knows everyone there is to know and will manage your onward transport.'

'Where to?' Bozo grumbled, hoping it might be somewhere that served cool drinks.

'Is it not enough to appreciate where you are?' Ali barked, and Bozo fell silent before he got another withering stare. But the AO was too engrossed in the majesty of the evening sky to pay the Bloon further attention. 'Is it not beautiful?' he gasped, his stern eyes melting in awe. 'No matter if I have seen a million desert nights fall, no matter if I have counted the stars so often that I can see them with my eyes closed, the arrival of evening in the desert never fails to move me.'

Ali raised his arms and inhaled deeply the cool air. In that moment a lone plastic bag came tumbling across the dunes and plastered itself to the side of Ali's face. He snatched it away and turned to Theo. 'Do you see? The Enemy at work,' he spat into the sands. 'What is plastic? It is oil, the blood of the desert sucked up by giant machines. Then it is burnt and the fumes poison the sky

and turn our lungs black. The waste is thrown into the rivers and fish die and float to the surface. And for what? So that a plastic bag may be used for an instant before it is thrown away.

'And do you know how long it will take before this plastic bag decomposes?' Ali demanded, pouring grains of sand through his fingers.

'A rather long time, I expect,' Theo shrugged, with a sympathetic smile.

'Three thousand years. And that's being hopeful.' Ali let go of the bag in disgust and it continued across the desert, carried along by the evening breeze. 'Still, to sand it will return in the end, like everything else,' he muttered, as he turned his back and wandered off to gather some branches of wild shrubs for the evening fire.

Bozo and Theo turned to each other and exchanged looks of disbelief.

'Do you suppose he was always like that?' Bozo asked."

'I think he's been alone for too long,' Theo sighed. He jumped down from the camel, which then wandered off to graze on wild bushes. 'I don't think he intends to be so mean and scary. I think he's forgotten how to talk to people out here in the desert.'

'What a dump,' Bozo muttered. 'The dunes remind me of Bloonland. I keep forgetting that these ones aren't made of powdered cheese.' He stuck out his tongue in disgust and tried to extract a few grains of sand that were embedded in his gums.

With nightfall, the heat of the day vanished without ceremony and they shivered at a sudden cool breeze. Ali was trying to coax life out of some dry leaves. They went to join him. The Bedouin crouched over the kindling and rubbed two sticks together furiously. A faint wisp of smoke rose and he blew to encourage the fire. 'The *jinni* are a little reluctant to join us tonight,' he declared, after some minutes of unsuccessfully wooing the fire.

'Excuse me, but I don't know what *jinni* are,' Theo said.

'I do,' Bozo announced smugly. 'The Storyteller told us all about them. They're the spirits of fire. They're all around us in the air but they only come alive when there's a spark. Then they squeeze through it and burst into flame.'

'I'm sorry for my friend,' Theo interrupted. 'He can speak a lot of nonsense at times.'

'On the contrary, the Bloon is quite correct,' Ali said, observing Bozo with grudging respect. 'There are many kinds of *jinni*, but they especially love to manifest themselves in fire. They are a mischievous, capricious lot, and they enjoy the sight of cold, tired travellers.'

'But fire isn't *alive*,' Theo objected.

'Then what is it?' Ali snapped.

'It's...well, it's just a...*thing*, that's all,' he concluded doubtfully. Bozo and Ali looked at him unimpressed. 'OK, OK, so they're spirits. Whatever.' Theo gave in. 'So what do we have to do to make them come? I'm freezing.'

'It requires patience to call the *jinni*,' Ali told him. 'Which is ironic, as they are the most impatient and frivolous beings in the entire Story. They are hungry, restless spirits who long to feed on the material world. Once they set their teeth into something, they will spread and devour all they can until they are either put out or there is nothing left to burn. Then - poof! They fade back into the air.'

'As for summoning a *jinn* now, why don't you try yourself?' Ali gestured towards the pile of sticks and leaves. Theo leant forwards doubtfully and blew as the Bedouin rubbed the sticks together. In response, he received nothing more than a face full of sand.

'Try again,' Ali encouraged him. 'But this time think of how much you want to be warm this night. The *jinni* are creatures of desire, after all.'

Theo shrugged and blew once more, but this time he painted a picture in his mind of sitting in front of a cozy campfire. He imagined it so vividly that he could almost feel the warmth of the flames chasing away the darkness. Suddenly, a small, yellow jinn leapt up from beneath the twigs, puffing smoke to announce his arrival. He danced about from stick to stick and, as Ali fed him more branches, he grew to twice his size, consuming the twigs with a ravenous appetite.

It was the first time Theo had ever imagined fire to be alive and it made him a little nervous. 'Is it dangerous?' he asked, afraid that the *jinn* might leap on to him and set his clothes alight.

'Most certainly,' Ali replied, settling on some coals a tin kettle. 'The *jinni* are the spirits of desire and that is what makes the world turn. Yet they in themselves are not evil. One may desire many things for the good, too. All too often, however, the Enemy has used the *jinni* to stir the self-destructive impulses in Hoomans.' A branch fell from the fire and he reset it on top of the flames. 'The fire *jinni* are easily managed, but there are others that are far more powerful: the *jinni* of desire that enter the hearts of Hoomans and move them to greed, ambition, lust...'

'Or maybe even hunger?' Bozo added hopefully.

Ali dealt him a sharp look, but his stare was less effective by firelight and Bozo just smiled back. Ali gave up and rummaged around in his shoulder bag, producing some hard, flat bread and lumps of dried cheese. As pitiful a supper as it might have been, after a day of nothing to eat it seemed like a banquet to

Theo and Bozo. Especially when the kettle boiled and Ali served them sweet mint tea to wash it down. Even the *jinn* seemed calmer, chewing on old branches and laying down to rest in red embers.

Theo finished his meal and straightened his legs to warm his feet by the fire. He stretched out his arms and looked up at the sparkling desert sky. He almost began to feel at ease. Almost. There was a tingling at the bottom of his spine that invaded his sense of wellbeing like an unwelcome visitor. It was the same sense of imminent fear that he'd felt in Lou's garden. He peered into the shadows and had the disconcerting feeling of being watched.

The desert was still but light breezes rustled around Theo's body and he was glad he wasn't alone. Bozo chewed on a stale piece of bread and Ali sat opposite, staring fixedly at the dying *jinn*. Theo remembered that he was supposed to learn something from each AO if he was ever to find the Cure for the Storyteller.

'Mister Ali,' he began respectfully. 'I'm finding it quite hard to understand. The Enemy and the Storyteller *are* the same person, right?'

'Think of it as two sides of the same coin,' Ali replied, withdrawing from a pocket in his robes an old bronze coin. 'On one side, you have the Storyteller who first dreamt up all of this. On the other, you have the Enemy - the self-destructive urge within the Storyteller. Catch.' With a surprisingly quick flick of the wrist, he sent the coin over the sleepy *jinn* to where Theo sat. The coin landed neatly on its edge in the sand.

'And if it lands on its edge?' Bozo asked, much intrigued by this new possibility.

'The edge represents your quest.' Ali frowned. 'Either you will save the Storyteller, or the Enemy will prevail and all will come to an end. For myself, I hold little hope.'

'What do you mean?' Theo asked.

'Look at the coin.'

Bozo picked it up and eyed it curiously. He shrugged and passed it to Theo.

'But it doesn't say anything,' the boy objected. 'All the writing has worn smooth.'

'That coin is 1,000 years old. It was made by a king who thought his empire would last for ever. He built great cities and founded temples and monuments to his gods. It was one of the greatest civilisations to arise in the Story. And do you know what has become of it?' His guests shook their heads. Ali raised a handful of sand and let it slip between his fingers.

'It all goes back to sand in the end,' he declared. 'If there's one thing the desert has taught me, it's that all is vanity. Our hopes, dreams and ambitions

will all eventually fade away. Every living thing will one day die, be forgotten and turn to dust.

'Do you know where you sit now? On this very spot, great kings and philosophers of centuries past lived their finest hours. What were their names? Nobody remembers. What did they do? Nobody knows. What is left of them?' Ali picked up another handful of sand and let it pour through his fingers in answer, daring his guests to meet his gaze.

'But even if Hoomans must die, surely the Story still has meaning?' Theo protested, unable to accept such a gloomy philosophy. 'Surely it's still worth restoring the Storyteller to health?'

'What makes you think that you can?' Ali taunted. 'Because an Italian actress, a deranged street preacher and a delusional old fortune-teller told you so? And just wait until you meet the others!

'You are young, so I will forgive you your naivety. What makes you think you can even trust an AO? Because we are awake to the fact that life is merely a Story told by a schizophrenic old man on a planet inhabited with cheese-obsessed Bloons?

'Beware, young man. You learnt the truth only a few weeks ago. We have had to endure that terrible knowledge through centuries. You do not know what a burden that knowledge is. You do not understand what such a secret can do to a man.' Ali sank his head in his hands and fell silent.

'But...but it's prophesied that I will save the Storyteller,' Theo mumbled, quite taken aback. Ali looked up slowly.

'Even if by some miracle you do, there is no hope for the Story. All that is good and beautiful is gone. They have cut down the forests, filled the skies with smoke and scarred the earth. Whatever sense Hoomans once had, they have now exchanged for the love of money and bright, flashing lights. Believe me, the Story has been poisoned beyond hope.'

The *jinn* finally died and the embers grew faint. 'Do you see?' Ali continued, pointing at the smouldering fire. 'The *jinn* has consumed all we had to offer, and now it dies leaving only ashes behind. Do you not see how it will pass with the Story also? Tomorrow a wind will scatter these remains across the desert, and it will be as though we had never met.'

'But *I* will remember,' Bozo protested, bored of this pessimism. He thought for a moment and then, pointing towards Theo, added, 'At least, *he* will.'

'But for how much longer?' Ali hissed, his eyes wild and paranoid now. 'Do you not know that the Enemy haunts your every step? How far do you suppose you will get with with all the power he has at his command?'

'What can he do?' Theo asked, glancing around again at the shadows that

seemed to move when he wasn't looking.

'I told you. The Enemy lives within our evil desires. You can be sure that at this moment he is awakening the vanity of every police chief in the area, the greed of every bounty hunter who hopes for a generous reward, the ambition of every reporter who hopes for a good story.'

'But how will the Enemy know where I am?'

'He feels it. He cannot see as the Storyteller does, but when two awakened people come together, the Enemy knows.'

'But we're safe here in the desert with no one else around, right?' Theo asked with a shudder.

Ali gave a cruel smirk. 'Because you cannot see anyone, you imagine we are alone? Have you forgotten the winds released from the flying carpet? They, too, are *jinni* of a kind. Stirred by thoughts of revenge, travellers in the desert make easy prey for them.' Ali pointed with his long index finger towards the western horizon, where the stars were fading from view.

'What is it?' Theo whispered, swallowing hard to stay calm.

'The winds have returned to hunt us. Now do you understand the reach of the Enemy? Be fast - there is no time to lose. In a few minutes the air will be thick with howling gales and waves of sand.'

Ali went to untie the camel and Theo turned to see with dismay that Bozo had fallen fast asleep. 'Bozo, wake up! We're in danger!'

'Why does it have to happen in the middle of the best dreams?' the Bloon complained, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. 'What's going on, anyway?'

'A sandstorm,' Ali announced, bringing the camel alongside them. 'You must take Jamillah - she is the fastest camel this side of the Sahara - and ride to Cairo. My nephew will meet you there.'

'What about you?' Theo asked, as Ali helped them both up on to the anxious camel.

Ali shrugged. 'She is not strong enough to carry us all. Take this letter and give it to my nephew when he meets you. He is a good boy, even if he has forgotten the ways of the desert. He will help you along your way. If there is any hope left, it is in you two. However unlikely that may seem.'

'But what will happen to you?' Bozo asked, staring at the approaching winds in horror.

'I belong here. From dust to dust and sand unto sand.' Ali smiled for perhaps the first time that day. 'Do they not call me the Sandman? Now go!' He

slapped the camel hard on her hindquarters and the beast needed no further prompting to escape the terrible storm.

'We can't leave you here,' Theo yelled, aghast at Ali's terrible fate. He was a miserable old man but he deserved better than this. But the boy's words were lost in the wind and already the sand was flying through the air and blinding him. The camel galloped away at breakneck speed and it was all they could do to hold on. Theo risked a backward glance and saw the distant figure of the Sandman half-buried in sand where he stood. He made no effort to free himself.

After that Theo found it was impossible to keep his eyes open as the sand whipped against his face. The winds howled around him, attempting to drag him off the camel, but Bozo held them in place with his tail. The camel shrieked and entered into a frantic sprint that tossed Theo and Bozo around like saddlebags.

They tore through the desert, clambering up dunes and shunting down the other side, blind to the night in a fury of lashing sand. More than once their camel stumbled and the *jinni* of the wind tried to drag her on to her side - but each time she recovered her footing and set off again at a desperate pace.

Eventually, they felt the winds give up pursuit and drop off one by one. The camel slowed to a canter and the desert slowly regained its tragic stillness.

Theo looked up and saw the lights of Cairo in the distance. Bozo turned his head and gazed back sadly. 'Even if he did call the Bloons "cheese-obsessed", that was a bad way to go,' he said.

Theo sniffed and wrapped one arm around his friend's shoulders. The camel showed no signs of grief at having lost her master, though. The beast carried them under the starry night as though this kind of thing happened in the desert all the time.

Chapter 15

Cairo

The sun rose on the weary travellers as they entered the outskirts of the city. Bozo had discovered a bag of dates in the camel's saddlebag and they chewed these in silence. Theo's head swam with fatigue, hunger and grief. With the swaying pace of the camel, each time he closed his eyes he met the image of Ali half-buried in the sand, awaiting his death with a stoic fatalism.

The first settlements they passed were little more than improvised huts put together with whatever spare materials could be found. Walls of clay, concrete or wood were roofed with cheap sheets of tin kept in place by large stones. The road was dust and gravel, and the wind blew debris into their eyes. Old men wheeled barrows of sorry-looking fruit around and bargained in the doorways of the houses with Egyptian mothers wrapped up in cloth.

Men on worn-out scooters rattled past, swinging dangerously close to the feet of the camel, which didn't even blink. Children playing handstands against a wall laughed and called out in Arabic as Theo and Bozo passed.

'They want to know where you have come from and why you are riding Jamillah,' Bozo whispered.

'Jamillah?' Theo repeated dumbly. 'Who is Jamillah?'

'She is the camel that has carried you so far to my city. *Salaam Aleikum*, my friend. A thousand welcomes. I am Omar, the nephew of Ali Aziz. Again, I say, a thousand welcomes.' Theo looked down in search of the origin of this new voice. He saw a short, kind-looking man with clean-shaven cheeks and a balding head. Jamillah paused in recognition and Omar laid a comforting hand upon her ear.

'I'm...I'm so sorry,' Theo stammered, and fainted into Omar's arms.

Theo awoke to the sight of Bozo wiping crumbs from his lips with his tail. He raised himself on his elbows. He was on a mattress on a dusty rooftop in the heart of Cairo. There were no clouds in the sky, but the air was thick and heavy because the sunlight and the pollution mixed to form a yellow stew. The distant drone of traffic punctuated with the shrill voices of car horns provided a constant background.

Theo returned his attention to Bozo, who was now licking a plate clean. His friend added it to a pile of others that had been treated in the same manner.

'Where are we?' the boy asked feebly, his voice barely crawling out of his throat. 'What happened to me?'

'You fainted,' Bozo replied matter-of-factly, trying to pry loose a piece of

tomato skin that was stuck between his yellow front teeth. 'Frankly, it was very embarrassing. You fell into Omar's arms, and he carried you into a taxi and brought you back here. I had to ride on the roof again, incidentally, and it's not an experience I'd care to repeat. They drive like madmen here. I almost fell off three times.'

'But where are we?' Theo insisted, unmoved by these tales of hardship.

'In the house of Omar's family. They made you a bed here and Omar took from your front pocket the letter the Sandman gave you. He got this very serious look on his face and rushed off. Since then, his mother has been bringing you plates of food,' Bozo concluded.

'I see. Well, thanks for saving me some,' Theo muttered.

Bozo glared back indignantly. 'And how are you supposed to eat anything while you're busy snoring? It would have spoiled in the sun. Anyway,' he added with a smile, 'you should see how happy she gets when she comes back and finds that it's all gone.'

Theo shrugged and swung on to his feet. He felt better for a good nap but he was still exhausted from the adventures of the past few days. He made his way over to the edge of the rooftop and looked over the city. Hundreds of rooftops stretched as far as the eye could see - some higher, some lower, some saturated with junk and old furniture, others covered with lines of drying washing. It seemed like every inch of available space was in use.

The next rooftop was only a few metres away and a narrow street lay below, where children skipped and played. Cries of laughter and light hearts echoed up. Theo longed to join them and lose himself in the innocence of play, but his heart weighed too heavy. None of them would be able to understand what he had been through and what weighty responsibilities lay on his young shoulders. In truth, he had felt a small piece of his childhood slip away for ever when he had gazed into the crystal ball back in Paris. It was as though all he had seen and learnt was dragging him towards a future he wasn't ready to face.

Why me? he thought, and then remembered Simon's answer back in London: *Why anyone? We all have our missions in life. Yours is just a bit bigger than most people's, is all.*

He was shaken from this memory by the flutter of wings on his shoulder and a coo at his ear. He turned his head slowly and saw a grey, speckled pigeon perched on his shoulder. There was a small note tied to its forked foot. Theo undid the message string and unrolled the piece of paper.

It was a picture drawn in pencil of a boy sleeping on a bed while a Bloon ate a very large breakfast. Theo gasped as the pigeon wheeled back off into the sky. 'How could it have flown all the way from Paris?' he said.

'Lou isn't the only pigeon-keeper in the world,' Bozo smiled, pointing at the opposite rooftop. The pigeon swooped down to land on the shoulder of a rather fat Egyptian man standing shyly in the shade of a large pigeon coop. He smiled sheepishly in their direction and then turned his attention to feeding his faithful messenger, who perched on his elbow.

'If he can see me, I guess he must be the next AO,' Bozo proposed, eyeing up the portly man who seemed to have the expression of a child.

'I don't know,' Theo responded uncertainly. With the other AOs I got a special feeling: everything somehow seemed more intense when I was with them. This guy looks a bit simple.' He scratched his head in thought. 'Do you remember what Simon told us? *Basically, you're invisible to all but seven of us, very small kids, mad people and animals.*'

'So you think he's a bit potty, then?' Bozo giggled.

'I don't know,' Theo replied hesitantly. 'But he does seem to be having a good dialogue with his birds.'

The man in question was whispering sweet nothings to his pigeons, perhaps asking them what they had seen during their morning flight around the city. He tickled them under the chin and fed them seeds from the palm of his hand. The smell of the pigeon house was thick and musty but their keeper was obviously quite used to it.

Before Theo and Bozo could reflect further on the man's sanity, they heard the trapdoor open again. Omar's mother climbed up the wooden stepladder on to the roof. She was a heavy woman in a long, dark gown. She had a white scarf wrapped around her hair. Her cheeks were full and rosy, and her smile showed that she was happy to have someone to take care of.

She brought with her a tray laden with sweet pastries and a jug of orange juice. When she saw Theo out of bed and the empty plates, she cried out in delight and began speaking rapidly in Arabic.

'She wants to know how you can eat so much and still be so thin,' Bozo translated.

'Well, *that's* no mystery,' Theo muttered under his breath.

Omar's mother hurried over and gave Theo his first hug in days. She straightened his unruly hair and then popped a pastry into his mouth.

'She's feeding you like a pigeon,' Bozo cackled, lying down on the floor so that he could have a good laugh without hurting himself. Theo opened his mouth to reply but found another pistachio pastry shoved between his teeth. He started to protest but then reflected that it was, in fact, delicious - and he was ravenous.

Omar's mother fussed over Theo for a while longer and then hurried off to answer a call from within the house. Before she did so, though, she drew from her gown a small circle of blue glass with white markings that hung on a black chord. She tied it around Theo's neck while maintaining a flurry of words that seemed to praise, worry, tease and tell off all at the same time. A rustle of her gown down the trapdoor and she was gone.

'She says it's for protection against the Evil Eye,' Bozo explained, peering at the amulet curiously. 'She says that it's clear you're in some kind of trouble and that you're far too young to be wandering about in a foreign country.'

Theo shrugged. 'I'm not sure I believe in any of this,' he said. He slipped the charm off his neck and put it in his jacket pocket. 'It was very nice of her, all the same.'

The stepladder creaked again and Omar's balding head came into view. He smiled a little too broadly as he stepped out to greet them, and Theo got a funny feeling at the bottom of his stomach.

'Good afternoon! Did you sleep well? I expect my mother has been force-feeding you since you've been awake? Forgive us - affection in Egypt is often expressed by overeating.'

Omar came and sat next to Theo on the small wall that lined the edge of the rooftop. 'So it seems you're a great friend of my uncle, Ali?' he asked cheerfully, but his eyes seemed to scan Theo nervously.

A lump rose in Theo's throat as he remembered the Sandman's terrible fate. 'Oh, Omar,' he stammered. 'I'm so sorry. The Sandma- I mean, Ali...he died in a sandstorm. He died to save our lives by putting us on Jamillah.'

'Dead?' Omar blinked and something inside him seemed to quiver. He pulled at his hair and shook with grief. He wailed out loud and beat his head with his fists. 'Oh, Ali! Star of my sky! Oasis of my desert! My teacher! My guide! My uncle!'

'Omar, I'm so sorry,' Theo cried. 'It should have been me. But Ali said he belonged to the desert and didn't even try to escape.'

'Oh, well.' Omar brightened, letting his grief fall to the floor like a used dishcloth. 'To be honest, we never really got on that well. He was family, but he and I went our separate ways years ago. The desert has nothing to offer a young man, after all.'

Bozo stared at Omar in disbelief. 'This guy is weird,' he said. 'One minute he's crying his eyes out and the next he's all smiles again. I don't trust him at all.' Theo pretended not to hear but deep down he felt the same.

'I last saw my uncle one week ago,' Omar began. 'And he warned me to be on the lookout for a special guest. In his letter he said that you're here on a very

important mission?' Omar grinned, peering into Theo's eyes, as though wondering what kind of business a child could possibly have in Cairo.

'Um, yes. Very,' Theo replied awkwardly. 'Did he say anything else in his letter?'

'Only that you are to be my guest and that I must assist you in your travel plans.' He hesitated. 'And that you are to be given this. I don't know what you could possibly do with it - unless you happen to be a scholar in ancient languages?'

Omar handed Theo a large book bound in leather. Its cover was inscribed with gold lettering that seemed to dance across the page like a wave. Theo opened the book at random and was met with a deep, musty sense of history. There were no letters on the pages, but rather a language comprised of pictures and peculiar symbols.

Theo became aware that Omar was staring at him strangely and, feeling uncomfortable, he distracted his host's attention by asking, 'Please, who is the man over there?' He pointed at the opposite rooftop.

Omar sighed, a wistful look settling in his eyes. 'Ah, that is Mustafa. When we were children, we played together in the street like brothers. But humans are a cruel species, and we grow up.

'Mustafa was born with six fingers on each hand, and every child in the neighbourhood made his life a misery. The ridicule and teasing was relentless, and one day he just cracked. He refused to talk or listen to anyone and retired to his rooftop to tend his pigeons.' He stared at Mustafa sadly. 'What a world we live in. Someone is born a little different, and we make his life hell.'

For a moment Theo thought he saw Omar in a new light and was touched by his concern for poor Mustafa. Omar noticed Theo watching him, though, and seemed to be gripped once more by a fidgety unease. 'I expect you'll want to rest a while longer?' He ran his hand over Theo's hair and Theo tried not to wince. 'Meanwhile, I have some business of my own that I must attend to. If you'll excuse me, we'll catch up later.' And with that he disappeared down the trapdoor, closing it behind him. A moment later they heard the sliding of a bolt.

Bozo ran over and pulled the door, but to no avail. 'We're trapped!' he cried. 'Boy, what a kook! I've never seen anyone so worked up. What do you suppose is going on?'

As if in answer, a pigeon landed beside Bozo on the trapdoor. The Bloon undid its message and, shrugging his shoulders, took it to Theo to interpret. The picture depicted a balding man clearly meant to be Omar. There was an arrow pointing towards his head and another pointing towards his heart, and a question mark beneath each.

'What is that supposed to mean?' Bozo asked, scratching his head.

Theo shrugged. 'Maybe it's saying that Omar is confused about something. Like he thinks he knows what he should do, but his heart tells him differently.'

'So what has that got to do with us?' said Bozo.

'I don't know. Maybe it has something to do with the book. Can you read it?'

Bozo squinted at the pages, scratched his head and grimaced. 'Doesn't make much sense to me. Looks more like a kid's sketchpad than a book.'

'Shame. I'm sure it holds some clues,' Theo sighed, thumbing through the ornate pages. The words danced before him but refused to yield their meaning. He turned another page and came across an illustration of the Storyteller sat on a rock surrounded by Bloons. 'Bozo, look!' he gasped.

'The old man gets everywhere!' Bozo whooped. 'From stamps to dreams to crystal balls and now to ancient books.'

'I wish we knew what it said. Maybe it would give us an idea about how to cure him.' Theo paused. 'You know, we've met more than half of the AOs, and I still don't feel closer to fulfilling my quest.'

'Hoomans,' Bozo sighed. 'You're never happy.' He grabbed the book from Theo's hands and began thumbing through the pages at random. 'Hey, look - there's Michelle! And Simon! And Lou! And the Sandman!'

Theo looked over his friend's shoulder and saw the portraits of the AOs. Each had their own page. They appeared in quite different guises to those he had known, but there was no doubt it was them. Michelle was dressed in the gown of a priestess and her hair was plaited with flowers. Dark blue symbols were painted on her forehead but she still had the mischievous look that had prompted Theo to seek his freedom.

Simon was barefoot in white robes. He was surrounded by disciples, half of whom looked on in adoration. The other half seemed to be arguing among themselves. Although dressed no finer than a beggar, Simon carried himself with the self-assured air of a king.

Lou was as pudgy and red-faced as ever. She was stirring a large cauldron which simmered with blue smoke. It seemed as though she was in the middle of potent magic, but her face wore the absent-minded look of someone wondering where the onions might be.

The Sandman was painted as a much younger man, and his hair and moustache were oiled. He was studying a book beneath a palm tree. There was a slight scowl on his lips, and his eyes trailed off into an indistinct distance.

Then came a portrait of a thin lady of indeterminate age but with shiny grey hair. She wore a long black dress that hung awkwardly on her skeletal body. She was depicted in the midst of heaps of books and manuscripts, stacked into erratic piles.

Next was an Indian street magician who seemed to be demonstrating the rope trick. A coil of rope ascended vertically from a basket and he was inviting members of the crowd to climb it. His eyes sparkled with magic and mischief.

Last, there was a street sweeper. It looked to Theo as though he were in some Asian city. Amid the dust and rubbish of the street, he leant upon his broom in silent contemplation. The passers-by appeared to hold him in contempt but he seemed to be in a universe entirely of his own.

'If these are in order, I guess we have to go and see the old lady next,' Theo concluded.

'But how?' Bozo demanded irritably. 'I don't see her address anywhere.' He tossed the book carelessly over his shoulder.

Theo snorted in disbelief. 'That is just so like a Bloon. You give up before you even start. You...hey! Look at this.' The book had landed on its spine and had flopped open to reveal the inside cover. There, in the top right of the page was a small label that read in English:

Please return to the Milim Library of Rare and Ancient Scripts.

109 Levi Yehuda St, Jerusalem.

'I think that's what they call a clue. We need to get to Jerusalem,' Theo laughed. Then his brow furrowed. 'Bozo, do you know where Jerusalem is?'

'Are you kidding? I have little enough idea where my tail is most of the time. You should have a look on one of those pieces of paper that stop the countries moving around.'

'You mean a map?' Theo asked, a little confused. 'That's a good idea, but I think they're a picture of where countries actually *are*.'

Bozo rolled his eyes. 'Do I have to explain everything to you? Look, in the old days, the islands and continents floated around all over the place. No one knew where to find them half the time, and occasionally they even crashed together and made mountains.'

'But then they invented maps and the countries had to stay put once and for all. Although, they do sneak a few inches each year when no one's looking,' he added with a wink.

Bozo's explanations for things tended to give Theo a headache. He knew there was a grain of truth in there - he just wasn't sure where exactly. All in all, it

was easier to accept the Bloon's version and not think about it any more.

He was saved from making any sense of Bozo's ramblings by the arrival of another pigeon. He looked over to the other rooftop and saw Mustafa watching them with boyish anxiety. This time the message showed a picture of Theo putting something around his neck.

'I think he wants me to put on the amulet against the Evil Eye. He must have been watching earlier,' said Theo, and he withdrew the charm from his pocket. 'I guess it can't do any harm.'

He had just put it on when the trapdoor opened again and Omar emerged with a big, toothy grin. 'Ah, there you are, Theo,' he said.

'How did you know my name?' Theo asked sharply. 'I never told you.'

'The letter from my uncle mentioned-'

'But he wrote it before he met me,' Theo countered, backing away from Omar. A chill ran down his spine.

'Ah, yes. To be honest, I must confess I couldn't help seeing your face on the news when it came on the TV yesterday. It seems a lot of people are very worried about you.' Omar moved towards him and Theo backed away towards the edge of the rooftop. 'Don't you think it would be better to go back home? After all, the Middle East is no place for a child alone.'

'He's not alone!' Bozo shouted, but Omar couldn't hear him.

'But I have to go to Jerusalem,' Theo cried.

'Now come, Theo. We must all be realistic. I realise that you're a friend of my late uncle, but he became a little mixed up in the head after all those years in the desert...'

'How dare you speak about him like that!' Theo yelled. 'He gave his life for me and said that you would help us, not hand us in to the cops.'

Omar looked deeply uncomfortable and stared at his feet. 'The guest is indeed "the face of God" in Egypt... But you must understand - I must think about my family also. Times are hard and they are offering a large reward...'

'He's selling us out!' Bozo screamed. 'I knew he was up to something.' He sprang to the edge of the rooftop and looked down. 'There are police jeeps in the street. He's betrayed us!'

Theo scanned the area but there was no way out. Mustafa's rooftop was too far to jump and, even if it wasn't, how would he find his way out of the neighbourhood? He glanced at Omar and saw a man torn between greed and guilt - his head and heart pulling in opposite directions, just as Mustafa had

predicted.

'Omar, please - look at me. I know it's hard for you to understand, but it's very, very important that I get to Jerusalem. Didn't Ali in his letter ask you to help me in any way you can? Don't the dying words of your uncle mean anything to you?'

Omar trembled at Theo's words and focused on his feet again. Theo could hear heavy footsteps climbing the stairs of the building and the harsh shouts of the soldier's voices.

'Omar, please!' Theo pleaded. 'Look in your heart and ask yourself what you need to do.'

Omar looked up and, in doing so, caught sight of the amulet around Theo's neck. He stared at it in wonder and seemed to awaken from a spell. The shifty air he'd worn all day dissolved and he raised his head high.

'Theo, I am so sorry,' he uttered, wiping the dust from his eyes. 'I was possessed with greed. I heard only the voices within me that spoke of the reward and how I owed it to my family to provide for them. I was blind to my duty as a host and to a friend of my late uncle. Forgive me. I have let everyone down and have brought shame upon my family.' A tear rolled down his cheek.

'An Oscar for the speech but how are we going to get out of here?' Bozo hissed. The head of a soldier appeared through the opening to the roof and Bozo slammed the trapdoor down on him. An enormous crash came from below, followed by a cry of pain. Omar turned in shock.

'It was just the wind,' Theo hastily explained. 'Please, Omar, is there any way out of here?'

'If we could just get to the street, no one would ever find me in this neighbourhood. No one trusts the police here and I have friends who could help you get across the border to Israel.' Omar looked about desperately. 'But how can we escape the rooftop? We do not have wings.'

In reply, a clack of wood came from behind them. They turned to see that Mustafa had laid a wooden ladder across the gap between the buildings. He stood on the other side with a big grin.

'Let's go!' Bozo whooped, leaping across the makeshift bridge with ease. Theo approached the edge but made the mistake of looking down and his nerve failed. He began to tremble and his muscles froze. Omar ran up from behind and wrapped a thick arm around him. Hoisting Theo onto his back like a bundle of rags, he began to make his way across on all fours. At the same moment a soldier burst through the trapdoor and sprinted toward them. He was tall and athletic and, stretching out a long arm, he caught hold of Theo's ankle.

'Hey!' Theo cried, unable to break free and terrified of falling. Bozo looked on helplessly as more soldiers appeared on the roof, hoisting rifles on to their shoulders. They yelled something at Omar and it seemed they were preparing to shoot.

That might have been the end of it but for one forgotten player in this rooftop drama. Mustafa gave a long, piercing whistle and waved his arms in a complicated series of movements. The soldiers laughed at him, imagining he was just another madman. They waved their arms back and shouted coarse insults.

But the runaways had the last laugh.

A hundred pigeons flew out of their coop, arced high in the air and then swooped down at the soldiers, scratching at their eyes. In a crazed blur of wings, beaks and claws, the soldiers dropped their guns and fell to the ground in agony. The man holding Theo's ankle let go with a yelp, and Omar carried him across to the other side. He pulled in the ladder and began to hurry Theo downstairs.

But Theo fought his way free of Omar's arms and ran back to give Mustafa a big hug. His arms barely reached around half of the man's waist, but Theo could feel the pigeon-keeper's warmth gently engulf him. Mustafa pushed the boy towards the stairs, gesturing that he must hurry. Theo ran after Omar with a backward wave, and Bozo walked up to Mustafa.

'You know, I think you're the sanest Hooman that I've met since I entered the Story,' he said with a smile. 'Your pigeons don't know how lucky they are.' He shook Mustafa's six-fingered hand solemnly and his new friend beamed an ecstatic smile. Bozo gave a parting grin of shiny, yellow teeth and then dashed down the stairs in pursuit of his destiny.

Chapter 16

The Road to Jerusalem

'Where are we? Theo?'

'I don't know, Bozo.'

'I can't see anything.'

'I think that's the point.'

'How is wandering around in the dark going to help?'

'That way, no one can see us either.'

'What?'

'I said, THAT WAY...'

'Shhh!' a rough voice from behind interrupted. 'Are you crazy, kid? You want to talk to yourself, you do it the other side of the border.'

Theo stumbled on in the dark in silence for a few moments. Then he whispered, 'See? You got me into trouble again.'

'I don't understand what all the fuss is about. A border is just a line drawn on the map. I'll bet anything that if it was daylight, this desert would look just as empty on both sides of the line. And why do we have to *walk* across it, anyway?'

'They already told us,' Theo hissed. 'Don't you ever listen to anything? The Israeli army watches this crossing point all the time. We have to keep quiet.'

'What?'

'I said, WE HAVE TO...'

'Shut up!' came the harsh voice from behind again. A bony hand landed on Theo's shoulder and spun him around. He heard the sound of a match being struck, and one of the Bedouin guides cupped the flame in his palm. His angular face was contorted in fury. 'Listen, kid. Friend of Omar or not - if you make another sound, I leave you in pieces for the soldiers to find in the morning. Understand?'

Theo nodded meekly and tried not to cry. Only when the flame was blown out and they trekked on over the rocky ground did he allow a tear to fall. He stubbed his toe against a stone and forced himself to swallow the cry of pain. He wanted to crawl under a rock and wait until the whole stupid adventure

went away.

'Hoo! What's *his* problem?' Bozo exclaimed. 'No, don't answer or he'll do something that might permanently spoil my appetite. Sheesh, I thought these guys were meant to be *helping* us.'

It had been another long day. Omar had led them through side streets and alleys in his neighbourhood until the cops had got lost. After that, Omar had driven them north for the rest of the day, through stony desert plains and dramatic red hills. Every now and then, oncoming cars roared by within inches on hair-neck bends. Theo was sure they'd end up falling off the cliff and into the turquoise waters of the lapping sea below.

It was already night by the time they arrived at the Bedouin village. A group of men came out of their huts and surrounded Omar, laughing at his city clothes and delicate, scar-free hands. Only when he pulled out a thick wad of bank notes did they begin to take him seriously.

'These men will take you across the border to Israel,' Omar told Theo.

'Can we trust them?' Theo asked.

'That depends on what you mean,' Omar replied. 'They would just as soon slit your throat as light a cigarette if they had reason to. But once they have been paid, you will travel among them and they would give their lives for you. Everything is done to extremes in the desert.'

Since then, Theo had been piled in the back of a jeep like a parcel, thrown on to the back of a camel to cross a rocky pass, and now he was being subjected to a forced march of ten miles. All in complete darkness. Still, with no passport and every law-enforcement agency in the world on the lookout for him, this was probably the only way into Israel.

Theo didn't know for how many hours they'd been walking but he knew he couldn't go on much more. His legs were slowly turning to jelly and his feet were bruised and aching from kicking large rocks in the dark. It was freezing, and the heat was being sucked out of his body by a persistent breeze that found its way in through every chink in his clothes. Their only guiding light came from a thousand pinpoints of stars in the dark blanket sky that covered the earth. Even Bozo had gone quiet. Theo felt his eyelids becoming too heavy to remain open for much longer.

Just as he thought he might collapse from exhaustion, he was pushed down to the ground.

'Shhh. Voices up ahead,' his Bedouin guide said, as he held Theo's head against the sand. 'Could be soldiers.'

The voices in front had also gone quiet and an awful tension filled the air, like a breath held for too long. The two Bedouin escorting Theo cocked their rifles.

Theo pressed himself closer to the ground, convinced that the air would soon be thick with bullets.

Neither side made a move.

Finally, Bozo got a little bored and, despite Theo's frantic gestures to stay put, he picked himself up and strolled on ahead. He returned a minute later in fits of laughter. 'You should see yourselves,' he wept. 'There's a jeep up ahead full of Bedouin as terrified as you!'

That was all very well, Theo thought, but how could he make his guides believe him? They were hardly going to take *his* word for it. He tried to relax and told himself that this kind of thing happened all the time. These Bedouin had lived in the desert for countless generations and had probably evolved a secret language to communicate in the darkness. He expected they would start to imitate the call of an owl or fox or something to announce their presence.

He felt a steady vibration at his side and one of the Bedouin near him pulled out a Fone. After a few tentative whispers, the man stood up laughing:

'Allah be praised! It is my cousin, Mohammed!'

Dark figures advanced on them and the two parties embraced warmly, kissing each other on the cheeks and play-fighting. The tall Bedouin who had threatened Theo was now visibly relaxed. He turned to Theo with a smile and said:

'We are safe now. The Israeli patrol has already passed tonight. You will continue your journey with Mohammed.' He bent down on one knee and looked Theo in the eye. 'You walked like a man tonight. May Allah protect you on your travels.' Then he and his companion turned and marched back the way they had come, under a night sky that was also ready to depart.

'I don't get it,' Bozo declared, watching the guides disappear into the distance. 'One minute he threatens to cut your throat, and the next he treats you like a long-lost brother or something.'

'I guess it's like Omar said about extremes in the desert,' Theo replied with a shrug. 'Like, here it's either completely dark or blindingly bright. It's freezing at night and baking hot during the day. Everything is so dead that they live everything to the fullest.'

Bozo stared back him in amazement. 'Since when did you become a philosopher?' he demanded.

'I don't know. I guess I've just had a lot of time to think about things on the road.'

'Of all the ways to waste your time,' Bozo exclaimed in disbelief. 'You could have invested many a good hour in picking your nose or learning to whistle

between your teeth or cracking your toe joints or...'

'If I'm to save the Storyteller, I'd better start trying to put the pieces together in my head,' Theo interrupted. 'I think I'm beginning to see some kind of pattern, but it's all still out of focus.'

Bozo stared at him long and hard. 'Yeah? Well, as long as you don't go all serious on me. There are enough Hoomans walking around with faces like concrete as it is.'

The ignition of an engine brought an end to their conversation. Mohammed beckoned Theo to jump in the back of the jeep that was silhouetted against the sky. The boy and the Bloon climbed up the back step and took a seat on the side against the canvas. The wheels skidded out of the sand and they drove off into what was left of the night with their lights turned off.

Theo woke to the smell of coffee. He opened his eyes to see Mohammed brewing a pot over a flickering paraffin stove in the back of the jeep. He let the pot boil seven times, withdrawing it from the flames and replacing it on the heat. Then he poured out four small glasses of coffee: two for the driver and his companion in front, one for Theo and one for himself.

'No one knows how to make coffee like the Bedouin,' he smiled proudly, handing Theo his glass.

Theo took a sip and winced at the bitter taste. 'Do you have any sugar?' he asked.

Mohammed's face turned grave and he took a deep breath. 'I forgive you, as you are but a child and don't know our ways. But you must know that among the Bedouin the quality of our coffee is a source of great pride. It's considered good manners to hold the glass between your thumb and little finger to show your eagerness to drink, even though it's so hot.'

He demonstrated how to hold the glass and took a noisy, satisfied slurp. 'To add sugar would destroy the taste. Besides, we seem to have run out of sugar lumps.'

Theo took another sip of his bitter coffee and shot a murderous sidelong glance at Bozo.

'Hey, don't look at *me* like that!' said the Bloon. 'I don't see anyone offering *me* a glass of coffee.'

Theo ignored him and looked out of the back of the jeep. They were passing through a landscape of dry gravel hills. From the position of the sun, he guessed it was already midday.

'When will we arrive in Jerusalem?' he asked.

'In five hours, *enshallah*,' Mohammed replied.

'What does *enshallah* mean?'

'It means "If God wants".' Mohammed smiled, revealing a set of golden molars. 'Every good Muslim should add "*enshallah*" to every plan he has. Who are we to know the future? We are but toys in the hands of God.'

'You remind me of a taxi-driver I once met in London,' Theo laughed. 'I think he was from India.'

'India?' Mohammed sneered. 'A land of heretics who believe in a theatre cast of gods with blue skin? Do not confuse me with those blasphemers. No, my friend. God is one and his name is Allah, and we Muslims are his people.'

'What do you have to do to be a Muslim?' Theo asked.

'We pray five times a day, we don't eat pork and we go to the mosque every Friday.'

Theo couldn't remember seeing anyone pray so far. He counted on his fingers: he'd left the hospital four days ago.

'But isn't it Friday today?' he asked.

Mohammed looked down into his glass of coffee. 'Yes, but in these hard times we must sometimes attend to business first.'

'Oh, I really don't know much about religion,' Theo apologised. 'Maybe I'll learn more about it in Jerusalem.'

'*Enshallah!*' Mohammed answered with another broad smile of gold teeth.

At that moment they heard an awful crunching from the engine. The driver pulled up roughly to the side of the road and everyone jumped out to see what was wrong. They lifted the bonnet to clouds of dense smoke. The three Bedouin shook their heads regretfully.

'Is it anything serious?' Theo inquired.

Mohammed shrugged and exchanged some words in Arabic with the other passenger. They came to a decision and pulled out from the jeep a long carpet, which they laid by the side of the road. While the driver struggled to fix the engine, they produced a backgammon board from somewhere and began to make more coffee.

'You've got to admire how they handle a crisis,' Bozo commented approvingly.

Theo wasn't quite as impressed. 'So when do you suppose we'll get to Jerusalem?' he asked Mohammed.

'Who can say for certain?' his guide answered distractedly, his attention fixed on a pair of dice and some wooden counters. 'Later today. Tomorrow at the latest. *Enshallah.*'

Theo stared at him in disbelief. Then he turned to Bozo and sighed. 'Come on,' he said. 'These guys are going to be here for ever. We'll have to make our own way to Jerusalem.'

'How?' Bozo asked, ever ready to follow but rarely to lead.

'I thought we might hitchhike,' Theo answered doubtfully.

'Great. Does it take much practice?'

'I don't think so. You just stand by the edge of the road and sort of stick your thumb out...'

'And cars stop?'

'Hopefully. Look, here comes one now.'

An expensive sports car careered around the bend. It was a flashy red vehicle that seemed like it was from another planet in these bleak hills. A young guy with sunglasses was at the wheel. A woman with dyed blonde hair sat beside him, doing her lipstick in the rear-view mirror. Theo and Bozo stuck out their thumbs and the car sped up, churning dust into their faces.

'You know,' Bozo coughed, 'I get the feeling there's a fine line between hitchhiking and standing by the side of the road like an idiot.'

Theo couldn't help but agree. He wiped the dust from his eyes and looked down the road again. There were no vehicles in sight. The Bedouin continued to play backgammon. They seemed to have completely forgotten about him.

What car was going to stop for a child, anyway? And if they did, wouldn't they just imagine he was lost and take him straight to the police?

Theo pinched himself and banished these negative thoughts before they could root themselves any deeper in his mind.

'Come on, Bozo. Let's think positive: we have to believe someone will take us. Let's imagine our dream ride.'

Bozo closed his eyes and began to concentrate intently. 'OK, I'm picturing a truck on its way back from the biscuit factory. Maybe it will break down from being overloaded and we'll have to help lighten the load...'

'Bozo, can't you ever take *anything* seriously?'

'Now you're getting the idea. Give the lad some time and he'll work anything

out.'

'I'm trying to get us out of this desert, OK?'

'And a fine job you're doing, too. We've moved almost ten metres in the past 15 minutes.'

They were so busy arguing that they failed to notice a Volkswagen van coming round the bend, playing loud, bouncy music. It pulled up beside them. A man with long, curly hair and beard, and wearing a skullcap, stuck his head out of the window.

'Why be angry when you can be happy?' he cried merrily. 'God wants us to be happy!'

He laughed and began to pull away. Bozo and Theo stared at one another and then began to run after the van.

'Wait!' Theo yelled. 'Are you going anywhere near Jerusalem?' By way of an answer, the van slowed down to walking pace and the side door slid open to let them in.

Inside the van there was something of a party going on. Six men in long white shirts, all with long, curly hair and beards, were clapping hands and singing along to the accordion music that blared out of the van's stereo. They placed a skullcap on Theo's head and encouraged him to clap along too.

'Is it someone's birthday?' Theo asked, raising his voice above the music.

'Every day is *someone's* birthday,' they yelled back with a whoop, and turned up the stereo.

'Now these guys I like!' Bozo cried, jumping up and down on his seat.

Theo smiled uncertainly. He felt like he was the only sane person in the van.

They stopped in every town that they passed and all the men poured out into the street to dance ecstatically around the van. They did back flips and bounced up and down in the middle of the road, holding up the traffic and not caring less. Bozo performed acrobatics on top of the van, fully in his element.

'This is just like being back in Bloonland!' he whooped. 'Do you think these guys would let me join, even without the hair and beard?'

After one of these stops, Theo climbed into the front seat and the driver handed him an orange as they drove off. 'Are you also Muslims?' Theo asked, as he endeavoured to pull back the peel with his thumb.

The driver's fixed smile wavered for a moment. 'Where did you get that idea, my boy?' he eventually replied. 'We are Jews - Bretslav Jews.'

Theo nodded and then inquired, 'And what do you have to do to be a Jew?'

'Jews are the Chosen People. We Bretslav also believe that the only way to find God is through joy. And possibly loud disco music.'

They drove at a leisurely rate through the afternoon, stopping everywhere and anywhere to disrupt the flow of traffic by dancing in the street. The signs to Jerusalem showed they were getting closer all the time, and Theo felt a sense of excitement growing within him. The hills began to rise around them and the land turned green again. As the sun sank low in the sky, the van pulled up in a village just five miles from Jerusalem and the music was turned off.

'Are we stopping to dance again?' Theo asked, a little confused.

'No, no, my boy,' said the driver with a cheerful grin. 'The sun is almost setting, and on Saturdays Jews are not allowed to work. No driving. No music.'

'But it's still Friday,' Theo protested.

'But for Jews, each new day begins at sunset. Come! Join us for the evening meal.'

'That's very kind of you,' Theo replied. 'But I'm in rather a hurry to get to Jerusalem. Thanks for the ride.'

He waved goodbye and began walking down the road. After a minute or two, he noticed Bozo was lagging behind as usual. Theo turned to see where his friend had gone. The Bloon was wearing a skullcap and appeared torn between choosing life as an eternal dance party or following his best friend.

Theo continued along the road sadly. He couldn't make up anyone's mind for them. Even if it did break his heart.

Moments later, he heard the flap of Bozo's long feet catching up from behind. 'All right, all right,' Bozo puffed. 'I'm coming. No need to hurry off like that.'

'What about your new friends?' Theo asked with a lump in his throat.

Bozo slapped him on the back. 'Hey, kid, since I've met you, we've escaped from a hospital, stowed away on a bus, looked into crystal balls, flown flying carpets, been attacked by desert winds and smuggled across borders. Whatever else I can say about life with you, Theo, it's rarely boring.' Bozo curled his tail around Theo's shoulders. 'It's just been a while since I had a good party, is all.'

The path they followed curled up around a slope that faced various other hills, all covered with scattered white stones like broken teeth. Villages rose from the green slopes like colonies of mushrooms, and the valley was ominously silent in the absence of traffic on the road.

From around the corner, they heard what sounded like a group mumbling. Seconds later, there emerged a procession of nuns marching up the hill, chanting old prayers in Latin.

One old nun saw Theo and paused. 'Are you lost, my dear?' she asked in a couple of languages before trying English.

'A little bit,' he admitted. 'I'm going to Jerusalem.'

'Why, you're almost there.' She smiled. 'Why don't you walk with us?'

'Thank you. But don't you have a car?' Theo wondered, exhausted from the desert trek of the night before.

The nun frowned and waved her finger at him. 'Only through suffering and hardship will we account for our sins, my dear,' she tutted. 'I don't know. Children today. I expect you've never walked a mile in your life.'

'She's having a laugh, isn't she?' Bozo cried indignantly. 'She'd collapse at less than half of what we've been through.'

Theo nodded in agreement but dropped in at the nun's side. At least she knew where she was going.

They climbed the slopes as night began to fall, and the nuns continued to chant, if a little less enthusiastically than the men in the VW van.

'Are you Jews?' Theo asked, as they paused for a breather.

The nun looked back at him in shock. 'I should hardly think so,' she snorted. 'We are Christians, the only true religion of God. Come to our church on Sunday and repent of your sins.'

'What sins?' Theo stammered, wondering what he might have done wrong.

The nun looked down at him patiently: '*Everybody* is a sinner, my dear.'

'Does that include God?' Bozo giggled, and it was all Theo could do to keep a straight face.

The nuns trudged up the hill with the long faces of the righteous and pure until they came to the outskirts of Jerusalem. Although all the buildings were made of stone, it seemed to Theo quite a modern city, with rows of shop fronts and parked cars. At that hour, though, there was no traffic in the street. The only visible movement was the men in black suits and hats, with their long, curly beards and hair, hurrying to the synagogue. They glared at the nuns as if they were aliens.

'These Jews don't look quite as happy as the ones in the van,' Bozo observed. Theo couldn't help but agree - their severe expressions and resentful looks

reminded him more of the nuns.

Their path led them down the hill and towards the enormous stone walls that represented the borders of the Old City. They came to a wide stone gateway, where Israeli soldiers eyed them suspiciously. Once they had passed through this gateway, the atmosphere changed completely. The streets became narrow, with old houses and shops towering up around them and there was room for only pedestrians to pass. It felt as though they were deep within the heart of the city and Theo had the sense of walking somewhere ancient. Long, stone streets stretched out before them, descending in steps a metre in length, and the houses grew tighter on either side. The lighting was dim and the prayers of the nuns echoed in the alleys around them.

Theo chanced to look up and caught sight of a street sign: *Yehuda-Levi St.* 'Bozo,' he whispered excitedly. 'There it is. The library must be down there somewhere. Lets go!' He started towards the street but a bony hand grabbed the back of his trousers.

'No, my dear,' the nun said. 'I think it's best if you come and see our head nun. This isn't a safe place to be wandering around at night. Come now, no more nonsense...Eeeek!' She screamed as the teeth of a Bloon sank into her habit.

Bozo pulled with all his might: the dress tore loudly and some young Arab guys on a street corner blew piercing wolf whistles. The nun gathered up the shreds around her and Theo took the chance to slip away.

They had barely run 30 metres down the street before they collapsed against a door in hysterics.

'Did you see her face?' Theo giggled. 'She turned as red as ketchup.'

'Still, look on the bright side,' Bozo cackled. 'At least she'll have some new sins to repent of this Sunday in church.'

Bozo lay down to enjoy his fit of laughter and Theo soon joined him. They guffawed until the tears came and they just had to look at each other for waves of mirth to wash over them once again. They struggled for air and hoisted themselves up on their elbows, wiping the tears from their eyes.

'What seems to be so funny?' a surly voice demanded.

They looked up and saw a security guard in the entrance of the doorway they'd been lying in. He glanced down at Theo, as if daring him to make any sudden moves. Naturally, this sent the pair into further hysterics. The security guard scowled, unsure what he should do.

In all his 15 years as a guard, he'd been feared, shouted at, threatened, even bribed once in a while, but never had someone simply stared at him and broken into fits of laughter. This wasn't why he went to the gym five times a

week and practiced his most menacing expressions in front of the mirror. Maybe he had something stuck between his teeth.

'Look,' he said, trying to reason with Theo. 'If I wanted to be laughed at, I'd have found a job in the circus. You know, like a clown. But no, with muscles like these I was meant for better things, see? So I chose to guard a place of culture and learning. A library. But I don't suppose a brat like you even knows how to read. So beat it!' He slammed the door in their faces.

Theo looked up and read the lettering on the door: *Library of Ancient and Exotic Scriptures*. He straightened himself out and knocked on the door. Instantly, it swung open and the security guard glanced at him doubtfully. It wasn't against his principles to hit someone less than half his height - it was just a long way down.

'Now look, kid...' he began.

'I have a book to return to the library,' Theo smiled.

The guard scowled. This was going from bad to worse. 'This isn't a place for your pop-up books, kid. And there aren't any comics inside, either.'

'No? What about this?' Theo asked, pulling from his rucksack the book Omar had given him. 'I'll bet the lady with silver hair would like this one back.'

The security guard took the book into his hands with profound disappointment. There was definitely more to this brat than met the eye. His first impulse was to roll him down the hill and see what sound he made when he hit the bottom. But it was as well to be on the safe side...

'Wait here,' he barked. 'And no more laughing.' As he stomped up the steps, he swore he could hear muffled hysterics from behind the door.

'The Storyteller was in a good mood the day he wrote the Giggles into the Story,' Bozo chuckled, wiping his eyes with his tail.

'The what?' Theo asked, his smile so wide that it hurt his face.

'The Giggles. They're the spirits of pointless laughter. They roam through the air and lay their eggs in people's ribcages.'

'The ribs?'

'Also under the armpits and in the soles of the feet. That's why people laugh so much when they're tickled there. Then, every so often, the eggs hatch and you get an attack of random, hopeless laughter. Usually the Giggles choose the bodies of children to lay their eggs in, but any old Hooman will do if he's not too serious.'

The door swung open and a large shadow fell over them. 'She'll see you now,'

the security guard said with disgust.

Theo and Bozo took one look at each other and cracked up once again. Leaning upon one another for support, they staggered up the staircase of the library. Their laughter echoed throughout the whole building.

The security guard watched the boy go and hoped he might fall down the steps. Then he stepped outside to smoke a cigarette and see if he could scare some shadows. Maybe I should change jobs, he thought. Go somewhere I'm appreciated...

Chapter 17

The Librarian

Theo and Bozo arrived at the top of the stairs and met a heavy wooden door with a dusty window through which they could see endless shelves of books. They pushed open the door and their light spirits were immediately smothered by hundreds of years of history. The air was thick and musty in a way that suggested no outside windows opened on to this enormous chamber. Rather dusty chandeliers cast a gloomy yellow illumination. The library was in utter silence save for the echoes of their own footsteps and the sound of their own breath.

Small study tables with wooden stools were set at the end of the rows, or else antique armchairs rested in the corners, occasionally with an old book propped against the leg. They wandered down the library aisles without saying a word, awed into silence by the age and grandeur of the place. The books on the shelves were weighty tomes bound in leather. A falling bookcase could have crushed them to death.

Theo inclined his head to read some of the titles and found that most of them were in languages he couldn't even recognise. When he did come across some texts in English, the titles were too intimidating to invite a closer look:

A Study of the Folk Demons of Medieval Mongolia

Bloodlines of the Ancient Celtic Priests

Law and Ritual in Sumerian Society

Theo stepped away from the bookcase and his spine bumped against that of Bozo. They leaned against one another, back to back, gazing up at the towering shelves and growing dizzy with the mountains of learning and knowledge that surrounded them. They didn't have to read them to guess that the books represented millions of hours of work of the best minds that ever lived in the Story. What Bozo and Theo knew would barely have filled a page. They began to feel very small, shrinking beneath the looming bookcases to either side.

Clack!

The enchantment was broken by the harsh clack of two wooden boards clapping together. They picked themselves up and followed the sound down the aisle.

Clack!

'Ha! Got you that time, you hooligan!'

They rounded the corner and saw a skinny old woman with a shabby black dress draped over her skinny frame. Her hair was like long, thin strands of silver, and her face resembled that of an old, wise mouse. It was the woman depicted in Omar's book as the fifth AO, and she held the book under her arm.

'Moths,' she explained, taking in the visitors with a single glance. 'They lay eggs in the bindings of the old books and eat away at the pages. I spend entire days hunting them but I never seem to get them all.' She scraped the dead body of the moth off a wooden slat and eyed up Theo again.

'Anyway, I don't expect you've come all this way to hear the complaints of an old librarian. My name is Cynthia. Thank you for returning this book. It's 170 years late, but I'll overlook the fine. You must be exhausted. And hungry, too - I suppose Ali gave you only a few dates to eat?'

'Worse,' said Bozo. 'He made us drink camel milk.'

'I'm so sorry,' Theo broke in. 'Ali...he died in a sandstorm.' His voice cracked with grief as he broke the news of the Sandman's death for the second time in 24 hours.

Cynthia paused and nodded to herself slightly. 'Yes, yes, I thought something must have happened. Poor Ali. He wasn't made for the modern world. He chose to isolate himself in that damned desert of his.' She began to amble down the aisle and they followed her as she spoke.

'Then again, I suppose I'm no better,' she rambled. 'I scarcely set foot outside the library these days. Tell me, did they ever get to the moon?'

'Um, yes,' Theo mumbled. 'About 40 years ago, I think.'

'There you are, then,' Cynthia continued. 'I must talk with Ali about this the next time I see him. No one is an island - not even an Awakened One.'

'What do you mean "next time you see him"?' Bozo yelled. 'The man's buried under half the Egyptian desert. He ain't gonna be dropping by for tea anytime soon.'

Theo elbowed him in the ribs. 'Bozo - show some sensitivity!' he said.

'It's all right, dear,' Cynthia sighed as she turned a corner. 'You see, AOs are always reborn. Once someone understands what the Story is about, he becomes a conscious part of it. His body might pass away but his soul will soon find a new one. Of course, the AO then has to be found and reminded who he is - or was - and then it all comes flooding back.'

'Have you ever died?' Theo asked, his curiosity piqued.

The old lady spun around and gave him a wide smile that revealed a set of beautifully crooked teeth. 'Five or six times, I suppose. And I don't mind telling

you that I'm not in the least looking forward to doing it again.'

'Is it scary?' Bozo asked with a sudden curiosity.

'No, it's just that you have to spend nine months in someone's belly each time you come back. You have to go where they go, feel what they feel, and if they have bad taste in music, well...'

Bozo and Theo exchanged puzzled looks and wondered if each AO was going to be progressively more potty.

'Ah, here we are,' she said, as they arrived at the end of an aisle where there was a small round table with three antique armchairs. She set down Omar's book and lit the candlestick in the centre of the table. There was already enough light from the chandeliers overhead, but there was nothing like candlelight to give that sense of gothic drama so appropriate for an old library.

They took their seats and Cynthia produced a silver tray from somewhere, laden with a pot of tea and plates of biscuits. They needed no invitation to pile into the snacks and, while they munched, Cynthia took out a pair of tiny glasses to get a good look at Theo.

'Remarkable,' she murmured to herself. 'Right down to the last dimple.'

'Pardon?' Theo asked between mouthfuls.

'Hmm. You'll see soon enough. 'She took off her glasses and sighed. 'A lot is expected of you, young man.'

'I know,' Theo answered glumly. 'Sometimes I wonder if Bozo floated through the wrong hospital window. What makes anyone think I can save the Storyteller?'

'Because it is prophesied.'

'Simon mentioned something about that but he didn't get much chance to explain. How do you know it's really meant to be me?'

Cynthia smiled and poured tea into the little glasses. 'Theo, we AOs have been awaiting your arrival for approximately 2,500 years. It was around then that the very first AO awoke to the truth about the Story. The knowledge almost tore him apart. Imagine being the only person in the world to know such a secret!

'He understood, though, that most Hoomans were not ready to receive this wisdom, that only exceptional individuals would be able to bear such an awakening. So he decided to create a secret society of seven Awakened Ones who would keep the knowledge alive. It took him 30 years to find someone able to handle such a revelation, and he entrusted him with the responsibility of awakening another and thus continue the chain. Each AO since then has

awoken another until the youngest of us fulfilled her responsibility by setting you on your path.'

'Michelle,' Theo guessed.

'Correct. I've never had the chance to meet her but I hear she's quite a charming creature?'

'Lady, Michelle could talk her way in and out of the mouth of a crocodile just to check her reflection in its teeth if she wanted to!' Bozo laughed.

'She had a good teacher,' Cynthia confirmed. 'He was always more into persuasion of the multitudes, though. He loved playing to a big crowd.'

'You mean Simon?' Theo asked.

'Hardly a big name in Hollywood, though, is he?' Bozo scorned. 'He had trouble enough getting the pigeons to listen to him from his old soapbox.'

'I suppose Bloons cannot be expected to look beyond the surface of things.' Cynthia smiled, wagging her wrinkled old index finger. 'In his day, Simon was a mover and a shaker. Everywhere he went there was a crowd at his heels. He was the only one of us who thought that the secret of the Story could be told to all the Hoomans. He never mentioned the Storyteller or Bloonland directly, of course, but he managed to get the message across using other names.'

'But, as we know too well, the influence of the Enemy reaches everywhere, and Simon's message was changed and corrupted by his followers for their own ends. He was warned that would happen by his teacher, but he always believed that the future was firmly in our own hands.'

'Lou,' Theo broke in excitedly. 'You're talking about Lou. She was the one who awakened Simon?'

'Indeed she was.' Cynthia smiled at the memory. 'Lou was ever the curious one. She always wanted to know what would happen next.'

'She wasn't very good at it, was she?' Bozo giggled, a little of his merriment returning now that he had a warm feeling in his belly once again. 'She didn't foresee that I'd...borrow her crystal ball.'

'You pinched it, Bozo. Be honest,' Theo rebuked him.

Cynthia's eyebrows arched. 'Oh really?' she laughed. 'And what was the result of your *borrowing* the crystal ball, Bozo?'

'Well, the ball burnt a hole in the flying carpet, so we had to come here overland.'

'And how was the trip?' Cynthia asked with a wry smile.

'Crossing the desert by camel isn't something I'd care to do again,' Theo said.

'It made us feel really small,' Bozo agreed with a shiver.

'But it wasn't as scary as being smuggled across the border...'

'Could you believe that Hoomans invent imaginary lines like that?'

'And all those crazy religions when we were hitchhiking...'

'They each thought they were the only ones who talked to God!' Bozo laughed.

Theo joined in the mirth as he thought about what they had learnt on the way here. Then he looked up at Cynthia's knowing smile and the penny dropped. 'You mean to say Lou *planned* it?' Theo gasped. 'She wanted us to see all of that stuff on the road and not just fly here?'

Bozo froze in the middle of a giggle and gave a low whistle. 'Wow. Outsmarted by a Hooman. And I thought she was simply a senile old witch.'

'Apart from the "senile" part, you wouldn't be far off the mark,' Cynthia tittered. 'Lou always liked to dabble in the mysteries of the Story. She was rarely without a cauldron and some strange brew on the fire. Or else she was trying to read the future from the innards of a newt. She paid the price, though.'

'Was that her we saw burning at the stake?' Theo asked anxiously.

Cynthia nodded sadly. 'We AOs have always stood out. Refusing to touch money, for example - no one could ever understand that. In better times, we were able to influence the Story for the good, offering counsel and advice to Hoomans in all walks of life. We taught and healed, cared and fought for the rights of whoever asked for our help. We were to be found in the streets, the temples and the palaces of rulers the world over.

'In worse times, though, the Enemy poisoned the minds of Hoomans with paranoia, war and fanaticism. The AOs were feared to be witches, devil-worshippers or enemies of the state. We were persecuted, imprisoned and even murdered. After some time, most of us decided to live incognito while we waited for you to arrive, Theo.

'Lou's mentor always reminded her of the fickle nature of Hoomans. When she complained about a broken promise or some treachery, he'd hold up a handful of sand and let it slip through his fingers.'

'The Sandman!' Bozo and Theo cried in unison.

'Yes, Lou used to call him that and he hated it. Although Ali was the one to awaken her, they never really got on and they parted on bad terms. Then again, Ali was never close to anyone except his camels. He's barely sent word

to me for centuries.'

Theo leant forwards and opened up Omar's book. He flicked through the pages until he came to Ali's picture. 'Ali looks like a reluctant student with that old parchment,' Theo noted. 'But he didn't seem the academic type when we met him.'

'I never could convince him of the value of history,' Cynthia nodded sadly. 'He'd do his handful of sand trick and ask me where it all was now. That was his answer to everything. He had a point but he took it a little far, I think. Just because things don't last, isn't to say they have no value.'

'Think about the passing of a season: however beautiful a summer or an autumn is, it must by its very nature move on. Yet the memory of a starry summer sky or an autumn rainstorm might stay with you for ever.'

Cynthia gestured at the bookcases around her. 'For me, these old books are like seasons that have passed on. Browse through one of them and you allow the past to live again.'

Bozo was growing bored of the lecture. He flicked through the book, past Ali's and Cynthia's pictures, until he came to the street magician performing tricks in the street. 'So you were taught by Mister Hocus Pocus here?' he grinned.

'Jadooji. But he would have liked the name you gave him. He was fascinated by illusion, and his magic tricks were an expression of that. He saw the Story as the greatest magic of all. We'd been written into the Story to think that everything centred around us. The way the Storyteller hid himself from us was the greatest disappearing act of all time, he said.'

'Where can we find him?' Theo asked.

'Somewhere in India,' Cynthia replied vaguely.

'We're going to India?' Bozo whooped. 'Elephants and incense and curry and jungle!' His tail got so excited that it tied itself into a knot and he had to bend down to try and untie it.

'Whereabouts in India exactly?' Theo said. He had an idea that India was a pretty large place, and the chances of simply bumping into Jadooji on the streets were a little thin.

Cynthia sipped her tea and gave an embarrassed smile. 'The truth is, I don't know. Some time ago he went through one of his changes and left the cities. I heard rumours he'd become a holy man in the Himalayas, but I can't be sure.'

'You see, Theo, being an AO isn't easy. The truth might set us free but it also drives us a little loopy. Knowing you're only a character in a Story told for the amusement of a bunch of drunken Bloons...well, it makes you wonder what's the point of it all. Perhaps that's why we each have our little manias: Michelle

has her intrigues, Simon has his preaching, Ali had the desert and I have my books. A little madness helps keep us sane.

'But when you see what the Enemy is doing to the Story, well...you saw what state of mind Ali was in by the end,' she concluded sadly.

'Do you mean to say the same thing happened to your teacher?' Theo asked. 'Has he lost hope like the Sandman?'

'She's telling us that Jadooji has become a bit of a fruitcake,' Bozo laughed. 'He probably sits around on a rock all day acting like the Storyteller, while a bunch of Hoomans gather round, hoping he'll teach them to levitate...'

Clack! Two wooden slats slammed together a hair's breadth from the end of Bozo's nose and he swallowed his voice in fright. 'Those moths. They get everywhere.' Cynthia smiled demurely. Bozo gazed back in astonishment but decided to abandon his little speech.

'Even harder to find will be the First AO,' Cynthia continued, turning a page of the book to reveal the portrait of the street sweeper. 'He, we can safely assume, has gone quite mad. He started life as a simple sweeper, and found all his truths in the street and in the things that people threw away. He was such a nobody that he was free to ask himself the hardest question of all: *Who am I?*

'One night, he sat under an old bridge and stayed awake as he tried to work it out. An hour before dawn - kazam! He closed his eyes and travelled through the Storyteller's mind until he looked through the Storyteller's eyes and saw Bloonland.

'It was quite a shock, and after that he went for three days straight without closing his eyes at all. When he couldn't resist anymore, he found that with his eyes shut he could see all that was happening in the Story. If you had a hard time looking into the crystal ball, imagine what it was like for him every time he fell asleep.

'The presence of the Enemy in the Storyteller's mind was so well hidden that it took the first AO a long time to discover the truth. By the time he realised the Storyteller was dying, his own mind was too scarred to be able to find the Cure. But he was able to foresee that one day someone would be sent to save the old man. That was when he decided to awaken others to prepare for the day when you and Bozo came along. He disappeared shortly afterwards, but before he left he wrote this book in which he prophesied your coming, Theo. He was our guiding light and now all we have left is the Prophecy.'

'But you didn't answer my question,' Theo insisted, wiping his hair out of his eyes. 'How do you know it's supposed to be me? How do you know it's not all a huge mistake?'

'Turn the page, Theo.'

He did as she requested and to his wonder found a painting of himself and Bozo sitting on the magic carpet, their reflections staring back at them in the crystal ball.

Bozo leant forwards with interest. 'Not a bad likeness. My pot belly isn't quite that big, though,' he lied.

For Theo there was little he could do except stare the truth square in the eye. He allowed it to sink in for a few moments and then took a deep breath. 'So what does the prophecy actually say?' he said.

'*Kzinimgas ha voluri zsaya lleinkono verklizas,*' Cynthia intoned in an austere voice. 'Which means "Only the child who is awakened may save the Storyteller". Actually, *lleinkono* translates as "the telling of the Story", but it comes to the same thing.'

Theo nodded, although a small voice inside him suggested something different. He tried to hear what, but that was no simple matter with a Bloon around.

Bozo sat up and snapped the book shut right in front of Theo's nose. 'A moth,' he explained with an innocent expression. 'It was about to lay its eggs up your nostril.'

Theo smiled and closed his eyes to listen again but the voice had gone quiet, scared into silence by Bozo's antics.

'So if your teacher the magic man thinks he's a storyteller himself, and the street sweeper has gone loco, how are we supposed to find them?' Bozo asked, impatient with any conversation that lasted more than ten minutes. He gave a big grin but took the precaution of sitting back in his seat, out of range of Cynthia's moth slats.

'It may be that my old teacher will have some clue as to where the First AO is. And as for getting to India, it seems that he's already thought of that.' Cynthia passed Theo an envelope that featured a stamp of the Taj Mahal.

Theo opened it and found a programme for the touring All Star Indian Circus, which was playing in Jerusalem that night. The brochure was accompanied by two front-row tickets and a small note that read:

Is it not every boy's dream to run away and join the circus?

Theo looked up at Cynthia for guidance.

'Don't look at me, dear. In your three weeks in the Story, you've been through more adventures than I have in the past 500 years. You'll have to follow your

own nose on this one.'

Bozo grabbed the programme and his eyes lit up at the pictures of the clowns and elephants. 'Are we going to the circus?' he yelled happily. 'Maybe they'll take me on as an acrobat.'

He jumped up and began practicing cartwheels down the aisle. These he did so well that he got carried away and attempted a double spinning back flip. He landed with expert precision on the seventh shelf of the bookcase.

He bowed triumphantly but then got a sudden attack of vertigo, and as he jumped down his long feet sent the bookcase tumbling. It fell against the next, which fell against the one behind, creating a domino effect that sent each bookcase in the row toppling to the floor in a deafening avalanche of books and timber shelves. The wood splintered and snapped, and pages of books floated up into the air like leaves in an autumn wind.

Bozo sat on a pile of books and watched the chaos unfold in silent horror. He didn't dare turn around to meet Cynthia's eyes.

'I'll be waiting outside, then,' he murmured and made a dash for the door.

Theo raised himself, trembling with shame. 'Cynthia, I'm so sorry. All these books...all this knowledge...and then two idiots like us come along and make a mess of everything.' A lump rose in his throat as he spoke, and he braced himself to receive the worst telling off of his life.

He heard Cynthia sob, but when he looked up she was wiping tears of laughter from her eyes. 'Please,' she gasped between breaths, 'please don't trouble yourself. Your friend has done me a great service.'

'But all this *learning*,' Theo insisted. 'Written by all these wise people...'

'Theo, please listen. Why do you suppose it is that even learned and intelligent AOs cannot find the Cure for the Storyteller? We've had thousands of years to study the problem. The truth is that collecting knowledge can only take you so far. Trust me, you can fill your head with all kinds of facts and theories and still be a total nitwit.

'The Storyteller chose someone who knew nothing to find the answer, someone who could look at things with the fresh perspective of a child. For all the cleverness of adults, we have become blind to some of the essential things in the Story. Bozo showed me that today - what vanity all of this is!' She gestured at the fallen books. 'What a random array of intellectual bric-a-brac I cherish and preserve here! Still, it is the little madness that keeps me sane.'

She leant forwards and placed a dry pair of lips on Theo's forehead. 'Thank Bozo for me and be on your way.'

'But couldn't I stay to help you...'

'No, my dear. After all, you can't be late for the circus. The future of the Storyteller depends upon it.'

Chapter 18

Sympathy For the Storyteller

The Storyteller sat on his old rock and stared at the crescent first moon in the early evening sky. Darkness had fallen and, as it was the season when both suns set at the same time, dark red embers smouldered on both sides of the planet.

In the distance he could see the Bloons surfing the sand dunes. The odd drunken cry reached him on the wind and he guessed they'd been at the wine-streams all afternoon. Soon the second moon would rise and they'd come running to hear that night's chapter. These days, he noticed that their usual exuberant joy was tainted with anxiety each time they saw him cough and gasp for breath. He resolved to make more of an effort to hide his illness.

He wondered, as he had done thousands of times before, if he would ever have begun the Story had he not stumbled across Bloonland on his travels. Until arriving on this planet of blue cheese, he had told countless Tales on countless worlds to all manner of audiences. There had been planets of psychics who drank in the narrative telepathically without a word needing to be said. Then there had been moody giants who had taken offence at his jokes and forced the Storyteller to flee for his life. On some worlds, his arrival had been celebrated as that of a prophet; on others, as an omen of ill luck and disaster. Elsewhere, the locals saw him as an old wandering vagabond with the odd amusing yarn to spin.

But, whatever the reception, the he always made an impression. After all, that was the role of the Storytellers: they told their Tales. The rest was up to the listeners.

We are as the insects spreading pollen, Aleph had told him as a youth. We Storytellers must collect and absorb all we hear, see and feel on our travels, and inseminate the galaxies with our experiences. Our words are like seeds planted in the hearts of our listeners, and it is they who must burst into flower. We are but the messengers.

The Storyteller paused as he thought of Aleph. Why did the memory of his visit still trouble him? Was it possible that his old friend and teacher was right? That it had been a mistake to stay in one place for so long and tell the same old Story?

You have lost control, Aleph had insisted, your Story has taken over your mind and awakened thoughts and passions that should have been left forever buried. It has become poisonous and addictive - as much for you as for the foolish blue creatures you hold so close to your heart. Your Story is doomed and that will spell the end for you both: do you not see what your Story means to them?

Yes, he knew. The light in the Bloons' eyes as they came running each evening was what kept the Storyteller going. He had arrived on this planet as a weary old traveller who had been too long on the road. He had found himself scattered around a dozen galaxies, drifting through space from world to world with a knapsack full of tales, no longer knowing his place in things. Upon discovering Bloonland, he knew in his heart that he had come to the end of the road. He had found a home.

The innocence and spontaneity of the Bloons was a tonic to his spirit. Their readiness to see and believe cured years of bitterness and fatigue accumulated on his travels. The Bloons loved the Story with all their hearts, and thus they loved the Storyteller too.

Or at least in part.

It had taken him a long time to admit that he had avoided telling whole chapters of the Story. For thousands of nights, he had pretended that there was nothing to worry about. Now he wondered whether he had skipped over the dark and painful parts in fear that it might frighten away the Bloons. Could they have handled seeing the truth? Was he right to keep all the pain and suffering hidden?

He didn't know. No one from his race had ever dared to undertake such a Story. Among the Storytellers, it was a strict rule to tell a Tale for no longer than three days. The characters and plot lines were then shed like the skin of a snake, and they moved on.

But why? he had asked as a younger man. *Why can't we go on with our Tales a little longer to see what happens next?*

It would spell disaster and ruin, he was firmly warned by his elders. *We Storytellers are but vessels for the Universal Muse. Creativity flows through our veins and fills us up - but wait too long and we overflow. We would drown in the flood of our own minds.*

He had not believed their words back then. Yet he had no choice but to submit to the wisdom of his teachers. Then he had come of age as a Storyteller and for a time he forgot his early curiosity. He joined the ranks of thousands of other Storytellers travelling through space like stardust.

The distances between the galaxies were great and it was a lonely life. The Storytellers were trained to endure solitude and silence, wandering through the blackness and darkness without losing the tiny flame of the spirit that burned within. They arrived on unknown worlds and were warmed for three days by the attention of their audiences. Then they took a deep bow and departed without ever looking back.

Now that the Storyteller was old, he didn't have to listen to anyone. When Aleph had arrived he had tried every argument in the book. Throughout that long night, his old friend had encouraged, scorned and even threatened him.

The council of Storytellers planned to expel him from their order, Aleph warned, and he would never be able to return.

The Storyteller heard these arguments passively. *I have chosen my course*, he replied. *Please grant me the peace to follow it.*

All right, Aleph snorted. *If you care not for yourself or for the good name of the Storytellers - what of them?* And he gestured at the distant rocks where the Bloons hid, trembling with fear. *What will happen to them when your Story poisons itself, and you along with it?*

Aleph then turned his back and floated off into space, his cloak flapping around him.

His old friend was right, the Storyteller knew. But all the arguments in the world couldn't change the basic facts: it was simply too late. He could not stop telling the Story now, even if he wanted to. It had been out of his control for some time now and all he could do tell the Story with as much skill as he knew how, however much events surprised him.

Take the Hoomans, for instance. The Storyteller had never planned to write them into the Story. They had started off as rather charming apes with a fondness for bananas. Then began that business with the reversible thumbs... And now look at them: they had taken over much of the Story for themselves and all but forgotten their hairy origins.

The antics of the Hoomans amused, astonished and sometimes horrified the Storyteller. His Creation was a mirror of his own mind and it was both the most wonderful and terrible revelation of his life. Why hadn't he realised what kind of trouble the Hooman would make? The answer was painfully obvious. He had chosen not to see their true nature for fear of what it might reflect of his own troubled soul. Instead, he had stayed deaf, dumb and blind to the dark side of Hoomanity and, in doing so, he had locked a part of himself away. Numb to the pain, the Storyteller became half the man he used to be.

There were times that he found himself sitting on his rock with no idea of what he had been doing for the past few hours. He felt the dark side of his nature struggling to take control of his mind and it seemed to be getting stronger all the time. Even when he was himself again, he could still sometimes hear mocking whispers in the corners of his skull. Dark secrets echoed through his mind and he shuddered to think what happened to the Story on the occasions when he lost control.

The whole thing was overwhelming. Despite his years of training, the Storyteller was frequently on the brink of losing his sanity. It was only by telling the Story each night that he managed to keep a grip at all. When he saw the merry expressions of the Bloons as they gathered each night, he remembered why he carried on. It was for them that he continued to fight for breath, even though his lungs burnt each time he inhaled.

These days, the Bloons wanted to hear little else but the adventures of Bozo and his Hooman friend, Theo. They didn't understand much of what went on, but they did sense that the entire future of the Story was at stake. Though the Storyteller tried to explain the meetings with the AOs in terms they could grasp, in reality he was also striving to understand. The Story was so close to him that it was only now, through the eyes of Theo, that he could perceive where it had gone wrong.

He looked up at the Kraggy Mountains and saw that the second moon would soon rise. Overhead, a star trembled and then fizzled out in a streak of light. *Will that be how it is when I die?* he asked himself. The moon then pushed over the lip of the mountains and the conch shell sounded in the distance. Bloons all over the slopes picked themselves up and ran full pelt over rocks and cheese dunes in their eagerness to arrive early.

The Storyteller watched with a poignant blend of love and regret. What would become of them if he died and the Story faded away? Would the Bloons lose hope and drift off into space, as Aleph had suggested? How did he have the right to give them something they could then no longer live without?

He didn't know. The juices of the Muse were flowing through him and it was time to tell the Story. His eyes simmered red, then yellow, then green, and his rolling, sonorous voice poured out the first images of the Story.

As there are currents in the oceans and winds in the skies of the Story, so too there are invisible patterns of energy that have moved the Hoomans to great and terrible deeds over the ages.

One of these centres of energy they now call Israel, and the continents can be seen to spin slowly around this point like the flailing tails of a kite. Armies and empires have long conquered this dry patch of stones and sand without ever knowing why.

Even today the religions still fight to control the ancient city of Jerusalem, each adapting their history and beliefs to suit them. No wonder, then, that our brave adventurers, Bozo and Theo, should also make a call.

Having destroyed half a library, they find themselves in the front row of a circus, a place where Hoomans come to see themselves in ways they never thought possible....

Chapter 19

A Clown, an Elephant and a Passage to India

'Buntree, why is there an empty seat in the front row? I thought you said the show was sold out.'

'I don't know, princess. Help me on with my shoes, would you?'

'And why is that boy sitting next to the empty seat talking to it as though someone was there?'

'I don't know. Maybe he's got an imaginary friend. As long as they both laugh when I come on, I don't care.'

'Clowns. You don't have the sensitive nature of a dancer. For me, an empty seat is like a thorn in my soul. I feel it eating into me as I perform.'

'But you do your act blindfolded.'

'Like I said. Clowns. No sensitivity.'

'Shhh. We're on in a minute.'

Theo could feel the envious stare of half the kids in the arena trained on the back of his neck. It was bad enough that he had one front-row seat - but two? And he wasn't even using the other one! Only the children too young to speak could see Bozo, and they gurgled happily when he waved to them. Their mothers instinctively held them closer.

Bozo kept his eyes on the darkened stage excitedly. He trembled slightly in anticipation of the show to come and squirmed in his seat to get comfortable. He hoped there would be a clown. The Storyteller had told them that clowns were as close as could be found to Bloons anywhere in the Story. He turned to ask Theo but saw that his friend was deep in thought, his face set in a frown as he concentrated. Where did the kid get it from? Whatever good came from thinking about things? Bozo asked himself. He thought about it. By the time he came up with an answer, he'd already forgotten the question. He gave up and poked Theo in the ribs.

'Hey, kid. What gives?'

Theo turned and, feeling a little conscious of the people in the seats around them, whispered, 'There's just so much to think about. I mean, take the Enemy - back in the hospital, I thought all the evil in the world could be found in Dr Bunsen. Then we had the police on our trail and that terrified me. Then the Enemy attacked us with the desert winds....It makes me wonder what more he's capable of?'

'Nothing your average Bloon can't cope with,' Bozo smiled, puffing out his chest and patting Theo on the back. 'Just stay close, old pal, and you'll be OK.'

Theo smiled gratefully. 'It *is* great to have you with me. I couldn't go on alone. But, Bozo, can you protect me from myself?'

'What the Bloon do you mean?'

'Remember what happened to Omar - how he almost turned us in? I think it was the Enemy trying to convince him to go for the reward. Omar didn't think he was doing anything wrong, because his family needed the money.'

'But he came through for us in the end.'

'Only because the amulet reminded him of the values he believed in,' Theo insisted, sweating a little. He hesitated and added, 'I have strange thoughts sometimes.'

'Like what?'

'Like sometimes I feel like giving up.'

'What?'

'No, really. I mean, you saw what the crystal ball showed us in Paris. What's the point of saving the Story living if it's so full of pain and horror?'

'Because there's a planet full of Bloons who depend on it!' Bozo yelled, unable to believe his ears.

'But only because they never hear the bad stuff. I expect the Story is a lot of fun when you see the edited version. Think of all the wars, the mad religions. Think of Mustafa rejected by everyone because he had one extra finger.'

'Hello, Bloonland calling Theo. *I've* seen the whole picture and I'm still here.'

'But what choice do you have? How would you ever get back to Bloonland anyway?'

Bozo opened his mouth to reply and closed it again. Truth be told, he'd been having so much fun that he'd barely given a thought to the return journey. He liked it here in the Story, on this big adventure and all, but the thought of never going back to Bloonland was too awful to consider. So he didn't.

'Enough already! That's exactly why we have to track down the rest of these dumb AOs and save the Storyteller.'

'So you don't really care about me or the Story at all. You just want to save your own blue backside,' Theo sniffed, his voice turning bitter and distant.

Bozo gaped at him. He had never seen his friend like this. 'What's going on with you? So there's lots of bad stuff going on inside the Story - enough to make you want to cry an ocean. So it might all come down to dust in the end, like the Sandman said.

'But think of everyone who has befriended and helped us along the way - think of all the risks they took just to help us along! '

Theo trembled as he listened and Bozo pressed home his point.

'Think of Michelle, Simon and Lou. The Sandman and Cynthia. They risked all they had to help us. Us, Theo, think of us! I left my friends and home behind to travel with you through this Story, and it's been the best few weeks of my life.

'And you know what else? When we asked the crystal ball what was the Cure for the Storyteller, I don't think it was broken at all. It showed our reflection. We are the Cure. Or at least, we're the ones who are going to find it.' Bozo collapsed on his seat in exhaustion. It was probably the longest speech he'd given in his life. He looked up to see how it had gone down.

Theo stared at him as though delivered from a spell. His face trembled like a rain cloud and then he burst into tears. He wept on Bozo's shoulder, not caring what anyone thought of him.

'That's good, kid. Let it all come out,' Bozo murmured, patting Theo on the back. 'Just remember to turn it off afterwards: the sea level is high enough as it is.'

'I'm so sorry,' Theo sobbed. 'Sometimes it all gets too much and I lose hope.'

'Ah, don't worry about it. Just sit back and enjoy the show.'

At that moment a spotlight illuminated a circle two metres wide on the arena. Theo sniffed back some tears and his heart calmed as he became absorbed in the circus.

Into the spotlight stepped a tall, gangly man in a suit, holding a mop. At first it seemed he was dressed normally, but something seemed to be wrong. Then the crowd noticed that his trousers were too baggy, the jacket too short and the shoes a few inches too big. The hair was an unruly carrot top mess and the face was painted white with a red nose. A clown.

He waltzed into the light, apparently focused on mopping the ground. He paused to wipe the sweat from his brow, and jumped back in fright as he looked up and discovered the crowd. This won a small titter from the back rows, and his confidence returned a little. He gave a small wave and then pointed at his mop to indicate that he had to get on with his work.

He walked off to the right, mopping the ground before him. The spotlight

followed. He paused for a moment to scratch his head but the spotlight kept on going and he had to run after it. Once back in the light, he relaxed and began to mop the stage to the left. This time the spotlight stayed still and the clown walked off into the darkness. He marched back indignantly, but now the spotlight jumped in fright to the centre of the stage. The clown exchanged looks with the audience and then tiptoed towards the spotlight - but as he made a final leap, it shifted back to the left of the arena. Now he lost his temper and began chasing the spotlight around the circus, up and down the aisles between the audience, and then back down to the arena.

Finally, the clown stopped to gather his breath. He looked up at the audience as though he'd just had an idea. He leant on his mop and whistled to the circle of light as though it were a dog. The spotlight twitched uncertainly. The clown whistled again and slapped his thighs in encouragement. Cautiously, the spotlight crept closer and, when it was just inches away, he leapt on it and beat it into submission with his mop.

Back in the spotlight and exhausted, the clown swung the mop upside-down so that the working end rested on his shoulder. He sighed happily and then gasped as he glanced around to his left: the fronds of the mop hung down exactly like the hair of a woman and it trembled suggestively. The clown gulped and leant forwards to kiss the mop but it moved away modestly. A violin began to play backstage as the clown took his mop in his arms and danced away out of the arena, madly in love.

'Just like the Storyteller told us,' Bozo laughed merrily amid the general applause. 'That clown would fit right into Bloonland.'

He would have said more but a trumpet sounded, and to a resounding cheer an elephant marched into the arena. The elephant had short tusks and long, silky ears that flapped at its side. Its trunk was held aloft and there was a merry gleam in its eyes. Behind the elephant's head sat an Indian dancer dressed in thin silk shawls. There were golden bangles around her ankles and wrists, and she was blindfolded with a black sash.

The dancer was a beauty and she carried herself with the air of someone quite at home in the limelight. She raised herself and, as though fainting, did a forward roll down the elephant's trunk, up into the air, and landed after a double somersault. She seemed to take her bearings from the applause of the crowd and began cartwheeling around the edge of the arena, still blindfolded.

She made a full circuit and then concluded by throwing herself backwards to be caught by the elephant in the fold of its trunk. It flipped the acrobat up on to its back. Then the elephant began to stamp its feet to a drum beat. It turned and marched out of the arena while the girl balanced on one hand on the back of its head.

After that, the clown came out again and demonstrated his daring by walking along a tightrope laid flat along the ground. He then performed a complete

juggling act with one ball, and for the finale he rode a unicycle (with stabilisers) along the tightrope while juggling the ball.

The last act was reserved for a small, fat man, who introduced himself as Marvello the Marvellous, Man of Mystery and Magic. With a triumphant smile, he pulled a bunch of flowers from his sleeve. He received only the faintest applause. He then took off his top hat and out popped a small rabbit. While he took his bow, the bunny began to eat the flowers and the crowd gave a loud cheer.

Marvello's face turned bright red with suppressed fury as he realised what had happened. He kicked the rabbit out of sight and snapped his fingers for his assistant. The dancing-girl tumbled out in a glitzy showbiz dress with so many sequins that it blinded to look at her.

'I, Marvello the Marvellous, will now demonstrate the amazing powers of hypnosis. A volunteer, please!'

Theo felt the urge to step up but felt shy in front of so many people. Come on, Theo, he urged himself, you've got to make contact with these people somehow. Before he could find his nerve, however, a young Israeli boy had bounced down the steps. The dancer led him to the centre of the arena.

Marvello drew from his waistcoat pocket a silver watch that hung on a gold chain. He began to swing it back and forth in front of the boy's eyes. 'Watch the watch,' Marvello droned. 'Watch the watch. It makes you feel sleepy, so very sleepy.'

Moments later, the crowd was amazed to see the magician fall asleep on his feet. He had succeeded in hypnotising himself.

The boy took a bow to a round of enthusiastic applause. He headed back to his seat while the dancing-girl tried to revive Marvello. Finally, she walked off stage and returned with a bucket of water, which she dumped over his head.

'What the-' Marvello cried, and then turned red again, trembling with anger at the laughter of the audience.

He snapped his fingers and his assistant wheeled out a large wardrobe. 'Another volunteer - and no wise guys this time,' the magician yelled.

Before Theo knew it, he was stumbling down the steps with two blue arms pushing from behind. Marvello grabbed hold of him, pushed him rather rudely into the wardrobe and closed the door. Theo heard him say, 'I will now demonstrate the amazing Disappearing Boy trick. I simply turn the wardrobe around like so, tap on the front three times and, abracadabra, the boy has gone!'

The door swung open and the crowd fell apart with laughter to see Theo still sitting inside the wardrobe, looking confused. Marvello scowled and stuck his

head inside the wardrobe until his moustache bristled inches away from Theo's face. 'Kid, if you know what's good for you, you'll pull that lever next to you this time. Got it?'

Theo turned and saw a handle that read *Pull me*. He nodded and Marvello closed the door again. 'Just a little joke, my friends. This time we really will make the little...our little *friend* disappear into thin air.' He swung the door open and the crowd was rather disappointed to see that Theo had actually gone somewhere. It was much more fun when it all went wrong.

Theo pulled the red lever and a thin sheet of wood fell down in front of him, trapping him in the back of the wardrobe. He felt himself being wheeled off somewhere and then heard the end of the circus being announced by the trumpeting of the elephant. The wardrobe door swung open, the sheet of wood slid back and Theo saw Marvello smoking a cigarette.

'Go on, kid,' he said. 'Beat it. Go back to your family.'

'But I don't have any.' Theo pointed out.

'I'm heartbroken.' Marvello scowled, spitting on the ground. 'Just go home, will ya? We got a lot of packing up to do.'

'I haven't got a home, either. Couldn't I just come along with you?'

'Kid, do you see a sign saying "Home for Runaway Orphans" here?'

'No.'

'Do you want to know why you don't see it? Because it's not there, is why. Now beat it.'

'You don't have to be so rude about it. He's just a kid, Marv,' the dancing-girl said, as she came over dressed in a long silk gown. 'Come on, dear. You don't want to join a bunch of losers like us.'

'Losers? Who are the losers?' Marv bellowed, his chest puffing up.

'We are!' she screamed back. 'You promised me fame and fortune, you cheap trickster. *Your name up in bright lights*, you said. And where am I? Stuck in the lousiest three-person-and-one-elephant show in the world.'

Theo slipped away unnoticed while the argument escalated. He trudged through the backstage area and ran into a breathless Bozo. 'I've been looking for you everywhere,' the Bloon puffed. 'I'm glad to see you, kid. I thought you'd been vapourised.'

'No. Just shouted at, as usual. I tell you, Bozo, we don't have to travel the world to see what's wrong with the Story: it's all around us. Look at those two going at one another.'

Bozo glanced back at the magician and the dancer, who bared their teeth as they tore into each other with insults and screams. 'So what to do now?' he asked.

Theo shrugged. 'I guess we'll have to find a way to India by ourselves,' he said.

They strolled thoughtfully past the tents and the trailers until they saw the elephant tied up to a post. It was chewing on some straw and eyed them carefully as they passed.

'Psssst.'

They turned and saw the clown standing in the shadows. He extended a finger of his white gloves and beckoned them to approach. 'Do you really have no home to go to?'

'No,' Theo replied truthfully. 'But I was hoping to find someone in India.'

'Whoa! That's like looking for a drop of water in an ocean. Who are you looking for?'

Theo hesitated. 'I suppose he's some kind of a teacher.'

'Ah, that's a different matter,' the clown sighed in approval. 'As we say in India, *when the student is ready, the guru will appear*. And what may be his name?'

'I'm not exactly sure. I know he used to be called Jadooji. He used to do magic in the streets.'

The clown slapped his forehead in disbelief. 'But that is my godfather! Ah, the strange twists of fate! As Jadooji used to tell me when I was young: *Buntree, all the plot lines of a story must cross somewhere*.'

'Then do you know where he is?' Theo asked excitedly.

Buntree frowned. 'Not exactly. He pulled a disappearing act of his own a few months before we began this crazy world tour. But if anyone can find him, I can.'

'Can we - I mean, can *I* - come with you?' Theo asked hopefully.

The clown looked him up and down as he considered the situation. At last he nodded carefully. 'When I was young, I also ran away to join the circus. How can I refuse you? But it won't be easy. We're returning to Bombay tomorrow by ship, and I'll have to smuggle you aboard with Raj, the elephant. Don't worry, he's a great friend of mine.'

'We're going with the elephant,' Bozo whooped. 'Oh, boy! The Storyteller told

us that they never forget - which blew our minds, because Bloons never remember anything.' He danced off to get a closer view of the elephant.

Theo smiled and continued talking to the clown as they walked over to a large trailer filled with straw. 'You were very funny tonight,' he complimented Buntree.

'You think so? Sometimes it feels like Marv gets bigger laughs than me.'

'He had the crowd laughing too,' Theo agreed. 'The angrier he got, the more they laughed and the worse his magic became.'

'Clowning is all about the art of failure,' Buntree explained. 'Most people want to be a success, but for a clown the point is to be spectacularly bad at what we do. Look at Marv - a worse magician you won't find anywhere - but he fails so badly that his act has a comic magic of its own.'

'Why did you become a clown?'

'Even as a kid I couldn't do anything right.' Buntree grinned. 'I tripped over my own shoelaces ten times a day. I would fart or burp at the worst times imaginable. And if there was a basket of mushy fruit within 20 yards, I was destined to tumble into it. When I grew older people came to watch for kicks while I electrocuted myself trying to change a bulb or a fuse. Or when I got shut out of my house for hours while I fumbled with the key in the lock.'

'Finally, my godfather, Jadooji, advised me to transform my curse into a blessing. He invited me to work with him and I learnt my trade as a clown on the street as a warm-up to his magic show. It was strange, though: he never accepted any payment from the crowd. Only food and shelter for the night. Eventually, I wanted to make some bread, so I joined this circus,' Buntree concluded, leaning back on some empty crates, his face dissolving in horror as they collapsed under his weight. The clown disappeared head over heels with a resounding crash.

'Can't you do the simplest thing without blundering it, you incompetent fool?' Marv yelled angrily from around the corner.

'Leave him alone!' the dancer cried. 'The poor darling might be hurt.'

'Don't worry. I'm all right,' Buntree yelled back. He emerged from the wreckage with blades of straw lodged at ridiculous angles in his hair. 'That was Parvati, the dancer. Marv wants to marry her for her family's money, so she likes to wind him up by doting on me. She only joined the circus because Marv told her he had big connections in Bollywood. She claims to have royal blood. Leastways, she acts like a princess most of the time.'

Theo grinned appreciatively. It had been a while since he had met someone who was so nice to talk to. It seemed like he had to say goodbye to everyone he met along the way, but he hoped that he might be travelling a while with

Buntree.

'Now, we have to get you on board the ship,' Buntree said, leading Theo into Raj's trailer. The elephant was eating outside but watched them closely while Bozo whispered into his ear. Buntree set down some fresh straw on the floor for Theo to sit on. 'Do you think you'll be all right here?' he said.

'I'll be OK,' Theo replied, forcing a smile, but his heart beat in trepidation at the size of his new roommate. The straw smelt of elephant sweat and dung. Theo gazed at the sagging skin of the enormous beast. What if it rolled over in its sleep?

Buntree patted him on the back. 'I have to get moving - when you're in a three-person circus, you have to do the packing up and driving too. We set sail for Bombay tomorrow morning.'

Buntree slipped off and Theo could hear Marv begin to bully him again about something. Then he heard Parvati leap in to defend the clown and another furious row broke out. Bozo stuck his head into the trailer with an impressed look on his face.

'Some pretty squashed Palabras flying around out there,' he observed.

'Palabras?' Theo asked, puzzled but sensing another the-Story-according-to-Bozo lecture coming on.

'Palabras are all the words you have in your head,' Bozo explained patiently. 'The air is thick with them and they're longing to be spoken. The thing is, they have to be invited into your head by the thoughts that you have.'

'So you mean that if I start to think about dinner, then all the Food Palabras will come rushing into my mind?'

'Yep. So you can imagine that those ones get around a bit. And when they're spoken, they multiply by lodging in the heads of whoever hears them. But Palabras to do with stuff like abstract mathematics have to wait quite a while before they find a home.'

'What about joint words like "school trip" or "free lunch"?' Theo asked.

'Oh, Palabras are very social creatures,' Bozo laughed. 'They're always trying out new combinations like "tulip fantasy" or "boredom science". If they don't find a matching thought, then they split up and try again.'

The idea appealed to Theo. It would certainly explain why sometimes he couldn't find the words to express himself - sometimes there just weren't the right Palabras hanging around. 'So what did you mean by "squashed Palabras"?' he said.

'Back in Bloonland, our brains are much closer to our lips, so we usually say

stuff before we know we're thinking it. You Hoomans, though, have this strange valve that separates your mind and your mouth, and the Palabras don't always get through. The weaker ones die out pretty fast, but the Palabras attached to strong feelings get mangled under the pressure of being shut up in your head. They get bent out of shape and, by the time they come out, they're bound to hurt.'

A large grey trunk came around the edge of the trailer and lifted the Bloon high up into the air. 'Of course, some creatures don't need to speak to express themselves,' Bozo laughed, as he tried to squeeze his way free. 'Old Raj here makes do with his eyes and his trunk.'

Raj swayed into the trailer. It was clear from the gleam in his eyes that he was in a good mood.

'Put me down, you fat, grey monster! What do you think I am - a blue banana?' But Bozo was giggling and Raj tossed him on to a pile of straw. Then the enormous creature advanced a few paces to examine Theo more closely.

Raj had small white tusks but it was his trunk that took centre stage: like a gigantic snake, it wriggled forwards and sniffed Theo from head to toe. Huge ears like silk twitched at the elephant's sides, and for a moment Theo was reminded of the Storyteller. It was the eyes, though, that truly revealed the majesty of this mighty creature. For all the tons of flesh and muscle that could have crushed Theo like an ant, the eyes of the elephant were glistening and tender, pools of memories both pleasant and painful.

Theo felt very small and afraid, but he lifted a trembling hand to Raj's head. The skin was smooth and warm. Raj lifted his trunk to blow softly on Theo's head.

'He likes you,' Bozo announced. 'He says you're welcome in his trailer and hopes his snoring won't keep you awake.'

'How do you know that?'

'I'm a Bloon. I already told you: I understand all the languages in the Story.' Raj snorted in agreement and let his head droop a little. 'Now he says that he's sorry, but it was a long show and, as he's an old elephant, he could do with a rest.'

Raj knelt down on the floor and let himself flop to his side, his legs facing Theo like grey logs. Just then, Buntree stuck his head in the door and smiled: 'I see you guys are getting on well. Here, in case you get hungry on the way to the port.' He tossed in a large bundle of bananas. 'I'm going to have to close the door now. Once we get you on board, you'll be able to move around a little. Till then, *mamaji* is the word, right?'

Theo nodded and smiled in gratitude. Without the help of the likes of Pierre, Mustafa and Buntree, how would he ever have come so far? Not to mention the

courage and wisdom of the AOs. And, of course, his faithful and loving friend, Bozo, ever ready to help and share...

'Hey! Leave some bananas for me, you overfed Bloon.'

After a feast of bananas, they drifted off to a well-deserved sleep. The sounds and jolts of the trailer being towed barely entered their dreams. Sometime later, Theo woke to complete darkness. He had no idea whether morning had arrived or if it was still the middle of the night. Theo knew that many children were afraid of the dark, but he loved it: it left his mind free to think things through in peace.

It was only a few hours ago that he had let despair take hold and begun to doubt even Bozo's good intentions. He remembered what the Sandman had said about the Enemy's ability to stir the jinni of desire in people's minds. He wondered whether the Enemy could get inside *his* mind?

Since arriving in Israel, however, Theo had felt quite safe. Perhaps the two sides of the Storyteller's mind fought for control, and the balance of power swayed from side to side. After urging the desert winds to raise a sandstorm, and the attempt to corrupt Omar, the Enemy had grown weak. If so, then surely he was gathering his strength to attack again. But how would he strike this time?

If Theo had any more thoughts on the matter, they were lost to another bout of deep sleep. He would have slumbered for half the day but for a blast of hot air in his face some hours later.

'He says, "Good morning, sleepyhead." ' Bozo translated. 'Incidentally, I think we're flying.' A jolt of the trailer seemed to confirm that they were swinging in midair. They could hear the mechanical grunts of a crane and the trailer tipped a little as it swung around. Raj got to his feet and began to pant nervously. The king of the jungle was not used to being treated like a crate of bananas.

Finally, they were set down and they heard large doors close behind them. The shouts of the workmen and the grinding of the crane engine grew dimmer. Not long after, a long steam whistle sounded and the trailer began to pitch around from side to side.

They were at sea.

Half an hour later, the door of the trailer swung open and a sudden rush of daylight poured in. It blinded them and it took a few seconds before they recognised Buntree at the entrance, dripping from head to toe.

'I slipped off the gangway when we were leaving the harbour,' he explained, blushing slightly. 'Anyway, welcome aboard! We'll be in India in five days if all goes well.'

Chapter 20

All At Sea

Life as a stowaway had always seemed a romantic idea to Theo. In the comics he read, it was one way to be sure of an adventure. The trouble with adventures, he had come to realise in the past few weeks, was that they were often dangerous, uncomfortable and even downright boring at times. Staying hidden meant that he was stuck in the hold for most of the day, and all he could do was count the hours until nightfall. Then he risked a stroll around the decks. Each night he went to bed later as he watched the waxing moon set. Before it melted into the ocean, the grapefruit moon cast a silver bridge across the waves and the chinks of light danced upon the water. More than once Theo thought he saw the Storyteller in the dazzling collage of images - but he was gone in the time it took to blink.

Bozo spent a great deal of time chatting with Raj below decks and Theo felt a little left out. He couldn't follow the silent discourse the two shared, and when they broke into laughter he forced a smile but had no idea what was so funny. When Bozo wasn't talking to Raj, he was on the prowl in the kitchens, and the head chef grew more enraged by the day.

'I've lost seven Swiss cheeses, three bags of cakes and a case of wine in the last three days,' he complained to the captain.

As the circus performers were the only passengers on board the cargo ship, they were summoned to account for themselves. 'As if I were even capable of eating so much. With a figure like mine,' Parvati sniffed. 'I should have thought you would be more sensitive to a lady, captain.'

The captain, an old sea dog from Portugal, sighed: 'To be honest, ma'am, I couldn't care less about the food. But the wine - that's another story.'

'Are you suggesting that my princess is an alcoholic?' Marv yelled, turning red in the face and puffing out his stout chest.

'*Your* princess?' Parvati sneered. 'Let me tell you, you miserable little trickster, *that's* something I will never be.'

'You ungrateful harlot! You'd be doing back flips in the street for spare coins if not for me.'

'Sir, please...' the captain interrupted.

'And my prospects would be better than they are now, I expect. My mother would die of shame to see me in such a fleabag circus as this.'

'Madam, calm down!'

'I have it on good information that your mother *did* die of shame.'

'SILENCE!' the captain shouted at last, and both Marv and Parvati turned to stare at him in shock.

'Why, captain, I wonder if it wasn't *you* who drank all that wine,' Parvati remarked. 'You've certainly got a bad temper from somewhere.' With that she sauntered off to her cabin to try out a new hairstyle.

The captain, Marv and Buntree watched her depart in awe. Whether or not she was of royal lineage, they agreed with the clown when he concluded that she certainly acted like one.

Buntree finished the banana he was eating and tossed the peel over the edge but the wind blew it straight back on to the deck. 'If we're all done here, I'll go and check on Raj. He seems to have something of a headache today,' he said. He turned around, slipped on his own banana skin and was prevented from falling overboard only by crashing on top of Marv.

'You fool!' the magician yelled from beneath him. 'Get off me or for my next trick I'll turn you into shark food.'

After that the captain lost patience and ordered the entire ship to be searched. The crew went through every cabin and cargo hold until at last they reached Raj's trailer. There they discovered 12 empty wine bottles, a hungover elephant and a rather well-fed young boy.

'What have we got here, then?' the captain laughed.

'A freeloader! A stowaway!' Marv yelled. 'I'll throw him overboard myself, captain!' He dashed at Theo but a grey trunk wrapped around his waist and flipped him ten metres across the deck of the hold. He landed in a heap and began to moan with pain but no one paid him any attention.

'Poor darling!' Parvati cried. 'What on earth are you doing here?'

'Erm, I ran away to join the circus?' Theo offered, not knowing quite where to look.

'Oh, how cute!' she cried. 'And what can you do?'

'What could a brat like that possibly do?' Marv grunted, pulling himself to his feet. 'He's barely old enough to blow his nose.' He lurched forwards menacingly but then caught Raj's eye and held back. No one messes with an elephant with a hangover.

'Tell him you can do magic tricks,' Bozo mumbled from his bed in the straw. From the tone of his voice, it was evident he'd had his share of the wine the night before.

'I can do magic,' Theo repeated, to the amazement of all.

'Oh, really?' Marv sneered. 'I suppose you know how to make a bag of cakes disappear in record time?'

'Now, now, give the young chap a chance,' the captain intervened. 'After all, everyone has to start somewhere. Go on, young man. Show us a trick.'

Bozo raised himself and picked up a squashed, black banana.

'Er, I can make bananas fly through the air,' Theo declared, pointing at Bozo. His audience gasped: all they could see was a banana being peeled as it floated through the air. They watched, mesmerised by this stunning display of telekinesis. Marv froze in horror and disbelief as the banana grew closer and then squashed all over his face.

'Bravo!' the captain cheered.

'Yes, what a talent,' Parvati smiled. Then she turned her beautiful brown eyes to the captain: 'Captain, might we not find a cabin for the young sorcerer?' She accompanied her request by batting her long eyelashes in a way that few men in the world would have been able to refuse.

The captain was not one of them. 'I...I don't see any reason why not,' he said. 'Come along, young man. Let's find you a change of clothes. It looks like you've been wearing those for about a fortnight.'

After that, life on board the ship changed dramatically for Theo. Parvati took every opportunity to spoil him and gave him lessons in acrobatics each morning on deck. 'Life will make you turn cartwheels, my dear, so you might as well be prepared,' she laughed, when she came to rouse him each morning.

Marv did little but send him dagger glances and Theo did all he could to avoid the magician. From the puzzled but hateful look in Marv's eyes, it was clear he was dying to know how Theo had pulled the trick with the banana. Sometimes Theo felt a chill run down his spine and would turn to see Marv glaring at him from the other side of the deck, muttering darkly under his breath.

Bozo still slept in Raj's trailer and the two were getting along famously, although it was quite impossible to know what they were saying.

'I'm learning all about India,' Bozo announced one day. 'It sounds like my kind of place. They have the same word for "yesterday" as for "tomorrow"; their cows walk freely everywhere, causing traffic jams; and, best of all - get this - their gods have blue skin. Just like Bloons!'

Buntree often accompanied Theo on his visits to Raj's trailer. The clown enjoyed Theo's company as much as Theo appreciated his. Buntree was just a little too

foolish to make friends with the other adults on board.

'Judge a man by the company he keeps,' Buntree laughed. 'And if I'm to be judged for hanging around with elephants and kids, then that's fine with me.'

Buntree cleaned out the straw each day from the trailer, and made sure the elephant had enough water and food. Theo often helped him wash the creature with buckets of water and a broom. Sometimes Raj picked Theo up afterwards and gave him a seat on his back. Theo grew a little more used to the elephant but his heart never failed to skip a beat in sheer awe when Raj drew close.

'I'm so glad our tour is over,' Buntree reflected on the last day of the voyage. 'It was great to see the world, yaar, but I love my India.'

'What did you think of Jerusalem?' Theo asked from his seat behind Raj's ears.

'Tcssh! All those religions fighting over one place - and all certain that they're right. In India we accept everything. For example, the Elephant God, Ganesh, rides upon a rat. So even the rodents are sacred.' Buntree gazed into the eyes of Raj as though he saw a god there.

'But these mad desert religions,' he continued. 'They think they have the only way. In India we tell a story about this way of thinking. There is this elephant, and one day five blind men come to visit. They each grab hold of a part and are asked to say what they think it is:

"It's a snake," the first says, holding the trunk.

"No, a tree trunk," says the next, grabbing a foot.

"Are you crazy? It's a silk sheet," the third concludes, feeling the ear.

"More like a piece of string," the fourth argues, holding the tail.

"Guys, it's just an old bone," the last one insists, running the tusk through his hands.'

'But it's the same elephant,' Theo grinned.

'Exactly,' Buntree agreed emphatically, before getting his foot stuck in a bucket and tumbling backwards into the straw.

The best part of the voyage was getting to hang out on the captain's bridge. Each day, the captain invited Theo to come and check their position on the radar screens and read the weather forecast. The ship was an old junk but some of the navigation devices were quite modern.

'In the old days we navigated by the stars,' the captain told him. 'But that wasn't much use when it was cloudy. Now we've got GPS and computerised maps to make sure we don't get lost.'

The sun was setting after yet another glorious day, and Theo stood by the captain's side as the golden orb sank into a fiery bed. On the screen Theo could see the Indian coastline wasn't far off. The captain reckoned they'd be there by early the next morning.

Just then a small alarm sounded and a message arrived on the computer screen. The captain frowned and checked the radio for any weather warnings. There were none.

'That's odd,' he murmured, looking out at the eastern horizon. 'There's no mention of a storm on the airwaves but the monitor shows some heavy rain coming our way. It must be the last gasp of the monsoon.'

'The monsoon?' Theo asked.

'Where you come from, rain is something you can count on all year round,' the captain explained. 'Here in the tropics, it has a season to itself and then all but disappears for the rest of the year. You can imagine the trouble it causes when it doesn't arrive on time.'

The captain spoke calmly but it was clear from the look in his eyes that he was nervous about the incoming storm. The waves were already getting choppy and a strong wind had begun to blow. The sunset still glowed in the western sky but to the east the clouds were dark and ominous.

'I think you'd better run along to your cabin, young man.' The captain smiled grimly. 'It could be a rough night coming up.'

Theo didn't want to be alone during a storm, so he headed in the direction of the cargo hold to join Raj and Bozo. But before he could reach the steps, someone jumped out and grabbed his arm, twisting it painfully up his back.

'Nasty storm on its way,' Marv hissed. His breath stank of whisky and old tobacco. 'Some big waves. No one would notice if a little stowaway washed overboard. Tell me, what good would your banana tricks do you then?'

'Leave me alone!' Theo yelled, struggling to break free, but the magician was strong and he tightened his grip, causing Theo to gasp in pain.

'*Leave me alone,*' Marv mimicked in a squeaky voice. 'In this world, boy, there are the predators and the prey. The hunters and the hunted. The eaters and those that get eaten. And right now, I guess you know on which side you find yourself.'

'What's going *on* here?' Parvati shrieked as she emerged from her cabin, somehow managing to look chic in a plastic raincoat.

Marv gave Theo a Chinese burn on the wrist and let him go. 'And that, my boy, is how to do an arm-lock. It looks like it's getting dark now, so we'll continue the wrestling lessons tomorrow. Good evening to you, Parvati. Quite some

weather we're having.'

Marv bowed to Parvati and walked off down the deck, making a slit-throat gesture to Theo behind her back as he went. Parvati glared at the magician and hurried down to comfort Theo. She found him nursing his arm and trembling with shock, but she mistook it for cold. 'Come, my little stowaway. You're going to need a jacket on a night like this.'

A driving rain had begun to fall and the waves were capped with foam as the wind began to howl. The ship started to heave and pitch, and the crew ran around, fastening hatches and securing the decks. Parvati found a waterproof jacket for Theo, and they would have stayed in her cabin but Buntree arrived and persuaded them to come down to the hold.

'But it smells of elephant down there,' Parvati whined. However, given the choice of staying above deck alone or getting her new raincoat dirty, she pouted and followed them below.

'This is all very cosy,' Bozo laughed, as he watched them arrive. 'I don't suppose anyone thought of bringing anything to eat?'

No one else had food on the brain for the next couple of hours, though. As the ship reeled and lurched and swung about, Buntree's face turned bright green. Parvati grew more faint with each creak and roll. They could hear enormous waves buffet the sides and spray across the deck. The rain hammered down above like it was angry, and the wind screamed eerily about the ship.

Then there was a long, jagged fork of lightning that seemed very close and a few seconds later a drum roll of thunder followed. After that, every few seconds through the portholes they could see the sky turning electric-blue with lightning. The thunder was so loud they clapped their hands over their ears.

No one spoke in the hold. They had instinctively drawn closer to the warmth and protection of Raj, who stood passively throughout the show. Parvati began to sob and Buntree dared to wrap an arm around her shoulders in comfort. A fork of lightning hit the sea not far away and there was an enormous hiss as the electric was absorbed. The thunder that followed was a deafening monologue and seemed as though it were some ancient language.

'What does it want from us?' Parvati wept. 'I just want to be home again.'

'Easy, princess. It will soon be over,' Buntree murmured, stroking her hair.

'And the salt spray will ruin my hair.'

'We'll find you a hat or something until you can get to your beauty parlour.'

'And has my little stowaway got his jacket on?'

'Theo? Why he's...hey, where's he gone?'

While the others had heard nothing but pounding drums in the thunder, Bozo and Theo heard the message loud and clear. This time Theo needed no translation as the storm clouds called out:

'Theo! Theo! Come out and meet your maker!'

They exchanged grave looks and crawled out on to the deck to meet the challenge. Bozo lashed them to a pole with his tail and, though huge waves crashed over them, he held firm. The rain drove into their faces but they squinted up into the dense black skies in search of the voice. The storm clouds began to shift and mould into the shape of a face. They swirled and merged until they formed an unmistakable profile.

It was the Enemy.

In every way he resembled the Storyteller, but with none of the kindness or love in the face. His eyes were swirls of angry black clouds and his expression was gaunt and grey. Lightning danced around the edges of his cheeks and cast long shadows over his face. The lips moved and a thunderous voice bellowed:

'Fool! Do you really think you can undo in a few weeks what took me thousands of years to create?'

'What do you want?' Theo cried, steeling his heart for the encounter. The Enemy's face contorted in a sneer of black vapour and the sky rippled as he spoke:

'Do you not know? I want to see every tree rot and fall, every stream poisoned and the skies filled with toxic fumes. I want all laughter and joy to be choked. All love and trust to be betrayed and broken. I want the Story itself to shrivel up and die.'

'But why?' Theo shouted. 'Why do you hate the Story so much? The Storyteller-'

'The Storyteller is an old fool,' the Enemy interrupted. *'He is a pathetic dreamer and he is going to die.'*

'He is *not* going to die,' Theo yelled furiously into the air. The rain increased in strength so that it pounded on his head like nails. The wind bit viciously into his neck.

'Oh really? And I suppose you're going to save him? You and that blue food monster. What makes you think you have a chance? You're a very small child in way over your head. Your mind has been filled with the lies of the so-called Awakened Ones. But what do they know about anything? You found your face in a book written by a madman and you call it a prophecy?'

'Do you really think that I'd let a few meddling Hoomans thwart my plans laid over millennia? It's too late to save the Story, Theo, and it's too late to save your friends. Like the Sandman buried in his own dust, all those who have helped you have met with terrible ends. They're dead, each and every last one of them.'

'No, no!' Theo sobbed, biting his lip.

'Don't listen to him,' Bozo urged. 'Can't you see he's lying? He's telling you your worst fears so that you'll want to give up.'

'Lies?' The Enemy cackled in a long, rumbling clap of thunder. *'Why would I need to lie? Can you not see it is I who am Master of the Story?'*

In his heart, Theo knew Bozo was right, but his head span with the doubts stirred by the Enemy's taunts. 'It's not over yet,' he found himself shouting defiantly. 'There's still time.'

'But why bother?' And now the Enemy spoke with a gentle menace. *'Don't you see how much easier it would be to lie down and surrender to the inevitable? To let the ocean claim you and to rest in peace? The Storyteller is going to die anyway. How much longer do you think you'll live without him?'*

'I can conjure thunder and lightning, fear and dread – Tell me, What do you have?'

Theo shivered in the rain and gritted his teeth as he yelled back, 'Hope!'

'And friendship!' Bozo shouted, breaking free. One look at the contorted features of the Enemy in the clouds sent him darting back behind Theo, however.

'If I wanted to speak to Bloons, I'd spread my poison in Bloonland instead of within the Story,' the Enemy sneered. *'Hope? Tell me, what kind of madness is that?'*

'And what good is friendship when you're lost at sea?'

With these words, a blinding bolt of lightning surged from the sky and struck the ship's bridge. Masses of glass and wood came tumbling down and a fire ignited above. The Enemy's face melted back into a storm cloud and lightning struck the ship's hull and aft, causing the vessel to shudder ominously. The ship rode up an enormous wave and then careered down the other side into a dark valley of swirling ocean. The next wave crashed on to the deck with such force that it put out the fire, but the ship began to take in water.

'Say, "Bye, bye boat," ' a new but familiar voice hissed. Theo turned to see Marv standing at his side with an iron bar in his hand. The magician had a mean, possessed look in his eyes and his mouth formed a snarl: 'They say that death by drowning is very peaceful. Now jump!'

Theo froze in horror and gripped the rail tightly as Marv swung the iron bar behind his head. But as he waited for the blow to fall another huge wave swamped the deck. Marv gripped his weapon so tightly that he'd forgotten to hold on to anything else. With a terrible cry, he was knocked off his feet and swept overboard.

Theo looked over the side but the magician was gone. As the storm raged, the boy stood and stared at the convulsions of the furious ocean. One minute, Marv had been a pulsating, murderous presence at his side; the next, no more than a terrible memory under the unforgiving mountains of waves.

Bozo appeared at Theo's side and wrapped his tail around his friend. 'That was a pretty good disappearing act for a finale,' he remarked.

Theo stared back at him, badly shaken from the ordeal of the last half an hour. He opened his mouth to reply but in the same moment the ship was struck again by another bolt of lightning and everything seemed to happen at once. A clap of thunder sent them to their bellies in fear, and the main structure of the bridge tumbled down, narrowly missing them. The entire ship shook and it began to list to one side. Waves swept over the deck and the air was full of shouts and screams from various parts of the ship.

The skies flashed with electric and the moments became strobe-like, each following the next in an awful slow motion. The captain's torso emerged from beneath the remnants of the bridge and he yelled, 'Abandon ship! Man the lifeboat!'

But though the crew began running to and fro to get the lifeboat in the water, the captain simply lay where he was. Theo ran over to help but found that the old man was trapped under a pile of rubble too heavy to be moved.

'I'll run and get help,' Theo cried, but the captain shook his head.

'No, no, my boy. Leave me be. My body is broken and soon my spirit will be free. Save yourselves and the others while there's time.' He winced in pain and coughed as a wave broke over his head. He summoned all his strength to give Theo a final smile: 'Be brave, young man. Don't you know every captain should be proud to go down with his ship?'

Then the captain shouted something to one of his sailors, and Theo felt a pair of arms lift him from behind and carry him to the edge. There, he was shoved down a rubber chute to the lifeboat that bounced around on the waves below. A cheer went up as he landed. Buntree pulled him into a seat and Parvati clutched him close to her chest.

'We thought we'd lost you for ever,' she sobbed, quite hysterical. The lifeboat tipped up and down precariously, and bashed against the ship as the sailors endeavoured to untie the ropes and cast off.

With a sudden stab in his heart, Theo realised that Bozo wasn't with them. He

looked up in horror. On the edge of the ship he could see the Bloon waving frantically.

'Jump!' Theo yelled desperately.

'What about Raj?' Bozo cried, tears running in torrents down his face, as his eyes overflowed.

'An elephant can't fit in a lifeboat,' Theo shouted back.

'Poor Raj,' Buntree moaned, realising the extent of the tragedy for the first time.

'Theo!' Bozo cried plaintively. 'I don't know what to do. I'd follow you anywhere but how can I leave Raj to die?'

The sailors cast off from the ship and Theo ran towards the front of the lifeboat to hurl himself at the ladder. He was restrained by the powerful arms of the sailors, who assumed he had gone quite mad. Theo felt a piece of his heart crack in agony as the boat pulled away from the ship. He screamed in anguish. The Bloon seemed on the verge of throwing himself into the water to come after Theo, when he heard a long, plaintive trumpet from below decks. The lifeboat surfed down a large wave and they lost sight of the ship for a moment. When it reappeared, Bozo was nowhere to be seen.

Theo was handed back into the arms of Parvati, who clutched him to her chest and wept into his hair. Buntree gazed sadly back at the ship, thinking only of Raj. 'Poor fella,' he moaned. 'But what could we do?'

There was a powerful motor on the lifeboat and they soon put a good distance between themselves and the sinking ship. A few minutes later, they saw it keel over and the waves engulf it with a passion.

Theo's heart was ready to burst out of his chest. He fought desperately for a view of the ship. But as the lightning died away, the storm grew in intensity and soon there was nothing to be seen but the driving rain.

In the midst of a boat full of friends and sailors, Theo found himself alone in his quest for the first time since Bozo had found him in St Jude's Hospital, ten days earlier.

Chapter 21

Bombay

No one on the lifeboat got any sleep that night. Whether because of the turbulent seas or their personal sorrow, the passengers stared bleakly at the sky until the stars winked out of existence and gave way to a tropical sunrise. The sea calmed to a gentle swell and the sun burst out over an Indian coastline of beaches lined with palm trees. Theo gazed into the turquoise waters and watched silently as they passed families of purple jellyfish, their tentacles trailing 12 feet behind them in the water.

The Indian sailors conferred among themselves and set a course straight for the mainland. They ignored the passengers, as though they were simply an inconvenient cargo.

'They mean to land us on the beach,' Buntree observed, sizing the men up. 'That way they'll be able to avoid any awkward questions about the captain and the ship. They can keep the lifeboat for themselves this way too.'

'But we need to get the boy to a hospital,' Parvati protested, as she stroked Theo's thin hair. Buntree shook his head.

'No. He has no passport or visa. You know what the bureaucrats are like. They'll smell the scent of *baksheesh* - ready cash - and he'll be taken away from us.'

Parvati nodded. She had no illusions about corruption in her country. She thought for a moment and then declared: 'We must go to my parents' house. We can take care of the poor darling there.'

Buntree nodded uncertainly but in truth he had no other plan to suggest. In any case, there was no arguing with Parvati. Barely had they beached on the sand than she hopped off and marched into the palm trees in search of a telephone. She looked faintly ridiculous wearing her plastic yellow raincoat in the sweltering morning, but the look on her face was so stern that no one dared get in her way. By the time she returned to the lifeboat half an hour later, a small crowd of curious Indians in shorts and *lungis* had gathered. They parted as she approached.

'It's all fixed,' she announced. 'A taxi is coming to pick us up in ten minutes and we'll go to our villa in Bombay.'

Theo did as he was told without a word. Losing Bozo to the elements like that had robbed him of the strength to go on. Not even the sight of Marv, Dr Bunsen and 100 policemen could have evoked a reaction at that moment.

The worst part was that he had to mourn alone. No one else had known Bozo, and his friends supposed that Theo was upset about losing the elephant. How

could he possibly explain that he had lost his best friend in the world, a four-foot-high Bloon?

For all but a few hours since Theo had awoken in the Story, Bozo had been by his side. It had been Bozo who told him the truth about the Story and turned Theo's world upside-down. The Bloon had been by his side through thick and thin, and Theo couldn't imagine how he could go on alone.

He remembered how he had once suspected Bozo of being an alien or an escaped science project, and felt a pang of guilt. He wished he'd taken the time to express his fondness for the Bloon more often.

Buntree carried him to the taxi. Theo thought about all the things Bozo had told him about the Story, and how he'd fought so hard not to believe him: the Fones with teeth, the Flash-boxes that made you thin, the Hypnosis-box, the Eleckytrons and the Palabras. Not to mention the Giggles, the Maps and the Roses with bad attitude.

While Parvati arranged some fruit juice and biscuits for the journey, Theo replayed behind his eyelids the crazy stuff Bozo had done since they'd met: he'd eaten Theo's flowers, smuggled him aboard a school bus into France and got into a fight with Pierre's cat. Then he'd robbed Lou of her crystal ball, destroyed the flying carpet and knocked down half a library.

And yet, for all of the chaos that Bozo left in his wake, there was no one Theo had cared for more in the whole wide Story. Bozo had been the best friend he'd ever had: faithful as a shadow and ready to follow Theo anywhere.

Until last night. Theo felt a wave of bitterness when he considered that Bozo had chosen the elephant above him. But his hard feelings soon melted when he thought of poor Raj trapped in the wooden cargo hold, destined for a watery grave.

'Bozo, Bozo - why didn't you come?' Theo repeated sorrowfully to himself, but deep down he understood perfectly. The Bloon had too big a heart to leave a friend to die, even if that meant abandoning another to live.

The journey to Bombay should have been an amazing collage of foreign sights and sounds for Theo, but he was too immersed in his own sadness to appreciate it much. The taxi bumped along over the potholes in the road, and weaved in and out of large, colourful trucks that wore painted slogans like:

Please horn.

Speed thrills but kills.

Time flies but sweet memories remain to inspire.

They passed through winding hills and jungle. Every hour or so they drove past roadside restaurants with rope-beds set outside and multi-coloured kiosks

selling bottled water and snacks. The trees were old and gnarled, sprawling out into the sky, and crows sat in their boughs and cackled. The Indians they passed all stared at Theo behind the windows of the taxi with undisguised curiosity, and it was a relief to leave them behind.

The taxi itself seemed a classic relic of a car. It was decked out with all the superstitions and beliefs of the driver. Buntree tried to cheer up Theo by pointing them out.

'See, there's Ganesh, the elephant god - just like good old Raj,' he said, indicating a small plastic altar of an elephant sat on his throne on the dashboard. But it only reminded Theo of the previous night and his head sank into his hands in despair.

Buntree frowned and attempted to distract him by pointing out the marigold flowers around the steering wheel. 'See those? The driver buys fresh ones each day. They're a natural barrier between a man and his machine, a reminder to remain independent of technology.'

'Let the poor darling sleep, Buntree,' Parvati complained, and the clown gave in without a fight. The driver wanted to talk about cricket and Buntree obliged him. If only to make the time pass.

To give in to sleep was to let go a little of the sadness, and Theo didn't want to forget a thing. He was too exhausted to resist for long, though, and eventually the rocking motion of the car lulled him into a deep slumber.

He awoke early the next morning to the sounds of car horns in a traffic jam outside Bombay. Before his mind could remind him why, he felt the hole in his heart. Instinctively, he looked around for Bozo before the memories came flooding back. The grief wracked his body and stole all colour from the world.

Parvati saw his pain and wrapped her shawl around him. 'There, there, young man. Don't be afraid. You're going to come and stay with me. It will be all right.'

Theo allowed her to console him and reflected that he had never known what it was to have a mother. Now he felt what a comfort it might be.

The taxi pulled up outside a villa in a wealthy suburb, where security guards patrolled the edges of green, leafy compounds. They pulled in through the main gates and Theo noticed that, while the roadside was littered and overgrown with weeds, inside the compound the gardens were kept in immaculate condition.

Parvati's parents ran out of the villa to greet them. Her mother was a chubby woman in a bright purple sari. Her face showed a heady mixture of delight and worry. Her father seemed a little more severe and it was clear that he disapproved of the way his daughter chose to lead her life. Still, it emerged that, unusually for India, Parvati was the only child, and they were hardly likely

to disown her.

'Now, God willing, you will leave this circus nonsense behind and lead a normal life at home,' her father growled, but he was clearly happy to see his daughter safe and sound.

Theo was welcomed heartily into the house. Parvati's mother fussed over him until they had to beg her to give the boy a little room to breathe.

Theo accepted whatever was brought to him and barely said a word. To smile or laugh seemed to him to be a betrayal of his sadness at losing Bozo. He wondered if the Bloon would have felt the same had it been the other way around.

But the most uncomfortable of all was Buntree. Parvati's parents practically ignored him and, though he was given a room, they shot him dark glances whenever anything to do with the circus was mentioned. Buntree sat uneasily at the dinner table each day, unable to take part in the gossip of high society, and no one ever asked him any questions or invited him to speak. He felt altogether out of place amid such luxurious wealth, and winced at the offhand way Parvati and her family addressed the legions of servants, maids and cooks. He had worked such jobs himself in the past and it pained him to see how badly the staff were treated by their rich employers.

Parvati also sensed the distance between them now that she was home again. The democratic air of the circus had passed and, as she began to resuscitate her social circle, Buntree became something of an embarrassment to her. He didn't know anyone, didn't own anything and aspired to nothing. That wasn't something Parvati's film star and college friends could understand. They made fun of him and called him 'our little clown from the country'.

The only reason that Buntree hung on at all was to keep an eye on Theo, who, though not as sparkling as he used to be, was recovering a little of his will to live. He had been confined to bed with flu after the ordeal of the storm and it was only after a week that the doctors pronounced him restored to health.

Parvati's parents were good people, if a little prejudiced. They took Theo straight to their hearts - partly out of love and partly because they associated his arrival with the return of their rebellious daughter. When they found out that he had no known family, they investigated the possibility of adoption and spoke with a local school about enrolling Theo for the spring term.

Theo gave in to everything with hardly a word. He was lost in a world of private grief. Parvati's family tried to lift his spirits with movies and new toys, encouraged him to use the cricket bat in the garden, and even hinted at a new computer when he started school. Theo accepted everything with a quiet 'thank you' and continued to keep his own company.

One morning, however, Theo woke to the sound of crows squabbling in the treetops. He looked out of his bedroom window and saw Buntree hoisting a

knapsack over his shoulder. The clown threw a backward glance and met Theo's reproachful stare.

'I...I have to go,' he stammered. 'You've got a home here now, Theo. You...you don't need me anymore.'

'No way,' Theo said. 'You're not going anywhere.'

Buntree shook his head. 'You're a good lad,' he said. 'But there are things you can't hope to understand yet. These are not my kind of people. I belong in the street, not in some posh villa. They hold their noses when I'm around. I have to go.'

'Then I'm coming with you,' Theo said, and before Buntree could protest he leapt out of the first-storey window and into the clown's arms. Buntree was caught so by surprise that he fell backwards and Theo was sent head first into a birdbath. Buntree pulled him out and set him on his feet. Drenched from head to toe, Theo met Buntree's gaze and something happened: he felt a warmth stir in his belly, inflate his chest and come roaring out of his mouth.

Theo burst out laughing for the first time since the storm.

Buntree gazed at him in astonishment and then cracked up also. They leaned upon one another in hysterics and staggered down the garden path, possessed by the Giggles.

They found the security guard fast asleep at his station and they climbed over the garden gate, almost dying with the effort of muffling their laughter as they went. A moment later they were walking down the shady street, Theo leaving a trail of wet footprints behind him.

'So where are we going?' Buntree asked, now that his breathing had come back to normal.

'Where else? To find your great uncle, Jadooji,' Theo replied. He looked back at the villa that was beginning to show signs of life as the sun struck the roof. 'Do you suppose they'll understand? They were very kind to me, after all.'

'Parvati will,' Buntree assured him. 'She's become a Bombay snob again for the moment, but there's too much of the circus performer in her to stay home for long.'

Buntree pulled an apple from his pocket, took a bite and passed it to Theo. They hitched a ride on a passing cart hauled by two strong bullocks, and set off in search of the sixth AO.

Chapter 22

The News

The Storyteller's eyes turned from red to amber and then to green, and a hush fell upon the Bloons. They gazed at the old man with a creeping anxiety, as each evening the Storyteller seemed to be shrinking, collapsing into himself. His eyes bulged a little from their sockets and beneath them lay long, dark bags of lifeless skin. Deep wrinkles of fatigue and worry were etched all over his forehead and chin, and his head seemed to shake ever so slightly. Even as he spoke, his voice no longer poured out like a river but rather trickled like a stream on the point of drying up.

'One of the discoveries made by Bozo and Theo is that, I have not always been entirely truthful. Or at least, I have been selective in what I have told you of the Story. Storytellers are as prone to vanity and pride as anyone and, as Hoomanity draws its nature from my own mind, I have perhaps focused only on the aspects that have flattered me. Or when I tell of their foolishness, it was with a gentle, forgiving eye that also forgave my own mistakes.'

'Well, it no longer matters. It is too late to change my ways and, were I to try, I should be dead within a week. No, don't stuff your fingers in your ears: it does not change anything. Do not make the same mistake that I have made.'

'Ironically, the Hoomans have often done just the opposite. Just as you gather around the rock each evening to hear the Story, so millions upon millions of Hoomans plant themselves in front of the Hypnosis-box each night to hear the highlights of the Story. But while I have focused on the beautiful, the touching and the funny, the Hoomans report back only on the pain, the violence and the fear that take place every day. The headlines report the bomb-blasts, the murders and natural disasters of the Story. Never do they report the seven-year-old growing his two front teeth, or the young couples falling in love under trees in parks across the world.'

'These days, in some parts of the Story, the Hypnosis-box spoke of little else but the Boy Fugitive, Theo. For while his present was buried each day under an avalanche of new experiences and adventures, his past had a far harder time in forgetting him....'

Dr Bunsen sat in his armchair and realised with a scowl that he'd left the remote control on top of the television. Was the entire world conspiring against him? This was supposed to be the 21st century - so where were the robots that would do everything for him and take the effort out of life?

'Mother!' he yelled, and a moment later a nervous woman with curly grey hair and spectacles rushed in to attend him.

She hovered in the doorway awkwardly, half a smile quivering on her cheeks. 'Yes, dear?' she stammered.

'Can't you work it out?' Bunsen sneered, as he mimed the act of pointing a remote control at the television. His mother grew tense as a pupil facing a tricky question in front of the class. Finally, her eyes alighted on the remote control and she scurried over to bring it to her son. Bunsen snatched it away from her impatiently and turned on the TV, ignoring the further presence of his mother completely.

'I...I was thinking of making eggs for tea tonight,' she stuttered, and caught her breath as Bunsen glanced at her suspiciously.

'Boiled or fried?'

'I thought some fried eggs would be lovely with-'

'I want them boiled.'

'Yes, dear, of course...'

'And make sure they're cooked properly this time. I was sick for days on the last occasion.'

'Sorry, dear. I'll be more careful,' she mumbled, as she retreated towards the kitchen.

'But if the yolks aren't runny, I shan't eat them at all,' Bunsen called after her, a vicious smirk on his face. He enjoyed a moment's satisfaction from relishing the fear on his mother's face but then remembered it was almost time to see himself on TV. The old bag had nearly made him miss it. 'She'll pay for that,' he muttered, as he found the right channel.

The Box came into focus and a well-groomed young woman came into view with an intelligent but concerned look on her face. She spoke with the little jerks of the head and raises of the eyebrows that were so essential to landing a job as a TV presenter:

'Good evening, and welcome to News in Focus. My name is Camilla Davis. It has been more than a month since the dramatic escape of a young boy from St Jude's Hospital for Children in London. Theo, famous for sleeping his way to celebrity status, has since been sighted in Paris, Cairo, Jerusalem and now reports suggest he may even have reached as far away as India. With me tonight is Inspector Brown of Scotland Yard, who has been assisting Interpol in their efforts to track down the boy. Inspector, just what is going on here?'

The camera swung round to a rather chunky individual in a flannel suit who sweated heavily under the studio lights. 'Yes. That remains something of a question mark at this stage. You must remember, Camilla, that we have no record of Theo's existence before he was found asleep in the gardens of St

Jude's-

'How is that possible?' Camilla interrupted, with the hawk-like ferocity of a professional interviewer. 'How have your detectives failed to locate birth records, doctors' reports or school attendance? Inspector, with Theo's face known to everyone in the nation, how can it be that no family or friends have stepped forwards?'

Inspector Brown glared at her with the look of a man more used to asking the questions than answering them. Remembering the camera, he gave a hollow chuckle and replied:

'Oh, people have come forward all right. According to the response we've had, Theo's got 173 mothers, 58 fathers, 17 grandmothers and three long-lost cousins. None, however, was able to produce any satisfactory evidence to back up their claims. As for records, we've had teams of detectives turn the files upside-down and there's simply nothing there.'

'Then let me ask you this, inspector: Theo slipped through your grasp in London, bamboozled the police in Paris and, despite the mobilisation of a regiment in Cairo, he's still on the loose. Inspector Brown, is this not an awful lot of trouble to be going to over one small boy? After all, people go missing every day the world over.'

Brown blinked. One moment he was under attack for not doing enough, the next he was called to answer for trying too hard. He drew a deep breath and answered calmly:

'It is the very ingenuity of Theo's escape that draws our attention so keenly,' he explained. 'It defies belief that a nine-year-old boy on his own should be able to evade the best efforts of the international police forces so easily. And remember, he has no passport or money. So the only reasonable conclusion we can come to is that he has been kidnapped.'

'Kidnapped? By whom?'

'By anyone hoping to draw a bit of attention to themselves,' Brown snapped. 'Thanks to the intensive campaigns of the *media*, Theo has become a celebrity in much of the western world. He is also a rallying point of public morale.'

'And what do you intend to do about it?'

'I'm working closely with Interpol to establish international co-operation in locating the boy. We have also received generous offers from various social and business organisations - notably the Tigers Club - and are able to offer a reward of £100,000 to anyone who can bring Theo to a police station anywhere around the world.'

Camilla's eyebrows arched. 'So your solution to a scenario in which a nine-year-old boy has outwitted the combined police forces of the world is to offer a

huge cash reward and spawn a wave of bounty hunters? And inspector, forgive me if I'm wrong, but isn't India rather large? I was under the impression that hardly anyone in the countryside even *owned* a television set. What are the chances of your message reaching them and tracking down Theo in a country of that size?'

Inspector Brown made to reply furiously but Camilla switched off his microphone and turned to face a new camera: 'We at News in Focus went to St Jude's Hospital today to see if we could get a psychological perspective on Theo's disappearance.'

Dr Bunsen gripped the sides of his armchair as the show cut to a recording made earlier in the day. This was the opportunity he had been waiting for to launch his career into the spotlight.

'My name is Camilla Davis and today I'm in the famous ward where Theo, the Sleeping Celebrity of St Jude's, first awoke. With me here in the ward is Dr Benson...'

'Ah, that's B-u-n-s-e-n.'

Camilla glanced at her notes. 'Whatever. Now, doctor, you were Theo's psychologist. Can you offer us any insight into this whole mystery?'

The camera swung to a close-up of Bunsen's gleaming forehead and he switched on his most enigmatic yet learned smile. 'Of course, in the time that Theo was here, we struck up a very close relationship. We spent hours chatting and I have no doubt he considered me more a friend than a doctor-'

An enormous crash interrupted his speech and the camera wheeled round to see Nurse Sandra kneeling down to pick up a dropped breakfast tray. 'Sorry,' she beamed. 'I don't know what came over me.'

The camera swung back to Camilla, who gave a devastating smile and, turning to Bunsen, asked, 'So what's up, doc? Why did Theo run off like that? Can you tell us what might be running through his mind right now?'

Dr Bunsen looked thoughtful for a moment. He had his answer already prepared but the chance to look intelligent on TV didn't come every day. 'I think the key question to ask is: What is he running from? A past he claims not to remember? A future that he fears? Or simply a present he would rather not face?'

Bunsen continued to pontificate but the sound went dead. He was left to mime for a few moments before the show returned to Camilla in the studio. She fixed her most radiant smile. 'Oops, some technical problems there. Apparently the cameraman got bored and went off in search of a coffee,' she laughed.

'No!' Bunsen yelled from his armchair. 'You can't do that to me!'

But Camilla couldn't hear him and she continued: 'That about wraps it up for Theo, everyone's favourite runaway. His photo has been circulated to officials at every major dock and airport around the world. And with £100,000 on his head, I'm sure there will be plenty of people looking for him. I'm Camilla Davis. Goodnight.'

Bunsen switched off the TV and threw the remote control over his shoulder. He'd been robbed again of his chance to become a celebrity. He'd make that brat pay if it was the last thing he ever did.

There was a scream from behind him and the sound of clattering plates. His mother had slipped on the remote control and gone flying backwards, landing in a heap on the floor. Bunsen barely blinked as his mind worked feverishly.

'I'm sorry, dear,' his mother groaned. 'I'll go back to the kitchen and make some more.'

Make the brat pay. If they were offering a £100 grand reward for finding Theo, why shouldn't it be the doctor that found him? Feverishly, Bunsen took an atlas from the shelf and spread it across the dining-room table. He took out a felt-tip pen and plotted Theo's course around the world. From London to Paris, then to Cairo and up to Israel. Now they thought he was in India. Bunsen saw that Camilla had been right: it was a large place and he had no intention of going there simply to get diarrhea.

Something told Bunsen that Theo would keep moving, though. He'd been remarkably elusive until now, but sooner or later he'd slip up. And when that time came, Dr Bunsen would be there to cash in on it.

His mother set down a fresh plate of eggs, salad and soldiers beside the map with a weak smile. When she received no response, she backed away warily, careful not to disturb her son's meditation. Bunsen eventually noticed the meal and gave it a desultory sniff. Ignoring the plate, he walked across the room and lay back on the sofa. He pulled a Fone from his pocket and rang for a pizza. Then he closed his eyes. While he waited for the delivery man, he thought about all the ways he could spend £100,000.

Chapter 23

On the Road In India

A mangy-looking dog with three legs and its ribcage showing snuffled its way through a pile of rotting garbage in search of something edible. It thought it had found something but then a bare foot connected with its nose and a loud voice yelled, '*Chalo!*'

The dog whimpered but moved on as requested. It threw a sorry glance behind it to see that the foot belonged to a young Indian boy who was already setting the rubbish heap on fire. The smell of burning plastic in the morning air mingled with the scent of incense and hot chai boiling at a roadside stall - tea leaves stewing in milk.

A few trucks added their noxious fumes to the cocktail. Their wheels trundled noisily over a surface that seemed more potholes than road. They kicked up clouds of dust as they passed. The sons of the drivers rode on top of the trucks, munching their way through a cargo of melons on its way to market.

The dog felt hunger pangs again and edged cautiously closer to the chai stall in the vague hope that the man working there might throw him a morsel. A stern glance from the chai wallah dispersed any such hopeful illusions, though, and the mongrel crept off.

Damned mutt, the chai wallah thought, shooing away flies from his pot of chai. Seems like everyone wants something for free these days. Even old dogs. His scowl dropped as two potential customers jumped off the back of a truck and waved goodbye to the driver. He squinted and rubbed his eyes but the two new arrivals seemed to be dressed in circus costumes - their faces were daubed in white and their noses were red. They both wore long, blue, baggy trousers and shirts, and the younger one had a strange look about him, something foreign. At least that much could be guessed by the way he stopped to stroke the mangy dog. Foreigners were known for being sentimental about animals.

'*Namaste,*' the taller one called in a cheery greeting. 'For how many smiles will you part with two cups of chai for a couple of weary travellers this fair morning?'

'Not for a thousand smiles of a stranger,' the chai wallah sneered. Typical. How was an honest businessman supposed to turn a profit in a world of penniless vagabonds and dogs?

'Indeed, we would not sell you any of *our* smiles at any price,' the older clown retorted, nudging his comrade in the ribs. 'For they are quite priceless. But it looks like you haven't played host to a good grin - much less a hearty laugh - in many a moon.'

'What cause have I to be merry?'

'We would give you cause if you would wet our lips and perhaps fill our stomachs a little in return?'

The chai wallah looked them up and down and sighed. 'All right, if you can make me laugh, I'll give you each a cup of chai and a biscuit. But I warn you, you're wasting your time.'

'What's going on?' Theo whispered, for he had not understood a word of this chatter in Hindi.

'It's time for you to do your banana trick,' Buntree smiled, gesturing at a bunch next to the pot of chai.

'I already told you - I can't do it anymore,' Theo sighed, stroking the dog's back distractedly.

'Can't or won't? Maybe your magic is too good for us peasants,' Buntree snapped, his fatigue and hunger overcoming his gentle nature.

'Oh, honestly. I left the home of Parvati and her rich family to travel with *you, Buntree.*'

'And maybe you should go back there. At least then you'd have teams of cooks and servants to serve you three meals a day. On the road you have to work for every crumb!' Buntree yelled.

The dog watched the argument unfold with growing impatience. Theo's fingers were spreading the warmth of love and acceptance through his bones for the first time in years. And now this big guy was bullying his new friend. Yes, he knew what it was to be pushed around by others.

'So wake up, Theo,' Buntree continued, leaning over him as he shouted. 'You have to learn how to...aaaargh!' The clown screamed in pain as the dog jumped up and sank its teeth into his behind. There was a ripping sound and the mongrel came away a mouthful of Buntree's trousers between its teeth.

'Hahaha!' the chai wallah chuckled. 'Not bad at all. Ha ha! That was worth a breakfast.'

Buntree froze in shock and then relaxed with a grin as if it had all been planned. He hopped over to claim his reward while trying to cover the exposed part of his bottom with one hand.

The chai was sickly sweet but it gave them a warm feeling in the stomach and that was a welcome change. The sun had yet to climb above the tree tops and Theo sipped his tea gratefully. He was grubby, bruised and travel-worn - but altogether rather happy.

It had been more than a month since he and Buntree had hit the road, travelling north through India by the lesser-trod routes in the countryside. They passed through villages with no electricity and where water was drawn from a well. Women cooked pots of rice using cow dung as a fuel and everyone went to the toilet at dawn on the edge of a field.

'It's like time travel,' Theo told Buntree one day, as they caught a ride in the back of an old cart pulled by a young bull. 'I often wondered what it might be like to visit the past, and here it is - in India.'

Buntree listened carefully to everything his young friend said and, apart from occasional quarrels, his respect and love for Theo grew by the day. It wasn't easy to explain to the endlessly curious Indians why he was travelling with a small foreign boy, but he usually claimed Theo was half-Indian and that he was his nephew.

In truth, the boy was more like a son. Although Buntree had the face of a child, the lines around his eyes betrayed that he was well over 30. The older he became, the more he missed not having a family.

'Why have you never married?' Theo asked him one day.

Buntree shrugged. 'It's hard enough to feed yourself in a country like this,' he explained.

'What about your folks?' Theo asked another day.

Buntree bowed his head and Theo understood that he wasn't ready to talk about his past.

A week later, though, they passed a gang of workers repairing the road. They were the thinnest, darkest, most hopeless people Theo had ever seen. The men carried enormous rocks on their small heads, cushioned by a thin scarf. The women and children sat on the ground and broke large rocks into smaller ones with a chisel and mallet. They all worked non-stop under the cruel afternoon sun, while a foreman marched around and yelled at them if they paused for a break.

'There,' Buntree said, his eyes far away and his voice like lead. '*That* is how I grew up. My parents were enslaved to a contract to work with the road gangs. A day after giving birth to me, my mother was breaking rocks again while I took milk. They barely made enough to eat, and when they fell ill, with all the dust in their lungs, they couldn't afford a doctor.'

'Why didn't they walk away and do something else?' Theo asked, appalled at such a life.

'They didn't know how,' Buntree replied. 'They didn't know where they could go or what they could do. They weren't even sure the foreman would let them go. After they died, I was put to work breaking and carrying stones to fix the

roads. I was four years old. When we had finished one patch of road, the foreman packed us up and moved us on somewhere else. In a country the size of India, it's a task that has no end. The workers get into debt with the foreman and there's no way out.'

'So how did you escape?'

'I learnt to juggle. When work was over at night, I'd throw five or six stones in the air and try to catch them. One day the foreman caught me at it and I panicked, expecting a beating. Instead, he looked at me with a new greed in his eye. He took me to a roadside café and made me perform for the truck-drivers there. Naturally, he kept all the rupees they put in the hat he passed around.'

'After that he took me along every day, until one time he got so drunk that he passed out under a tree. While he snored away, I climbed on to the back of a truck and hit the road alone.'

When Theo thought back to his days in St Jude's, it seemed like a life of luxury: water when you turned the tap, comfortable beds, plenty of food, and everything clean and in good condition. On the other hand, there was a lightness of spirit in the Indians he met, a readiness to laugh or to be amazed that he'd never seen anywhere else in the world.

Theo finished his chai and Buntree tugged his elbow to draw attention to an old man walking barefoot down the road as if he owned it. He had long, grey dreadlocks and wore only a saffron cloth around his waist. His face was covered in ash and he had strange beads around his neck. Buntree ran over and touched his feet in respect before humbly making a few inquiries. The old man replied grumpily at first but then seemed to change his mind about Buntree and began to speak freely and with enthusiasm. He blessed Buntree by daubing ash between his eyebrows and then departed down the road without looking back.

'Who was that?' Theo asked, his curiosity aflame.

'That,' Buntree rejoined merrily, 'was a sadhu. Sadhus are people who have left the world of society to go looking for Ultimate Truth by themselves.'

'How do they survive?'

'They receive donations of food from villagers in return for their blessings. Some heal the sick, others grow wise and give sage advice. Some learn to live on wild roots or simply on one banana a day. They don't marry, work or live indoors. Some refuse even to touch money.'

Just like an AO, Theo thought.

'Often they're also just bad-tempered old men,' Buntree admitted. 'And some are little more than con men and fakes. But once this sadhu heard the name of

Jadooji, he got very excited and told me all the news.'

'Really?' Theo gasped. In the past few weeks of getting by on the road, he'd almost forgotten the next stage of his quest. 'But how did he know?'

'Sadhus love to gossip as much as anyone,' Buntree laughed. 'Whenever they meet on the road, they share the latest news from all corners of India. This sadhu recently met a pilgrim who had returned from paying his respects to Jadooji in the mountains.'

'So you know where we can find him now?' Theo cried excitedly.

'I do,' Buntree grinned. 'It seems my great-uncle has set himself up as a wise man in a cave and receives hundreds of visitors a day, all seeking the answers to their lives. But the big news is about an invisible saint who has set up shop a little further down the mountain. Apparently, he meets often with Jadooji and he consumes vast quantities of food that the villagers bring.'

'Ha,' Theo laughed. 'I thought holy men and saints were supposed to lead strict lives of hardship and fasting, not stuff themselves on the generosity of others.'

Buntree shrugged as if to say this-is-India-there-are-no-rules. 'I don't know. But a miracle is a miracle. And another thing about this saint - only the young children can see him.'

Theo's heart stopped. It couldn't be, could it? He felt the tiny sprouting of a hope inside his heart and squashed it at once. He had told the Enemy that hope was Hoomanity's great strength but it could be dangerous as well. To lose someone once was bad enough - to lose them again through a vain hope would be too painful to bear.

Still, suddenly every minute of delay weighed on him like a rock. 'What's the fastest way to reach this mountain?' he asked, jumping to his feet.

' "Start early, go slowly, arrive safely," as Jadooji always used to tell me,' Buntree laughed.

If Bozo was here, he'd say, 'Get up late, drive like the blazes and arrive in a spurt of dust,' Theo thought with a giggle. He turned around and threw his biscuit to the crippled dog that lurked a few paces away. He and Buntree started off down the road and stuck out their palms to hail the passing trucks.

Chapter 24

Voices in the Head

He'll never make it. All the airports are watched.

He'll find a way.

What if he does? It's too late for you now, anyway.

For me, maybe. But there is more of me in them than you know.

The Story is mine, you fool. The wars, the disease, the corruption. Anyone can see the end is near. The only question is not if but when. What will an old man do about that?

Me? Nothing. It's them you must worry about.

The end is inevitable. Wherever you have planted a seed, I have sown a weed. Where you have given hope, I have spread despair. I have corrupted the innocent and poisoned the pure. My voice spreads like a cancer in the minds of Hoomanity. I am the secret face of their inner yearning for self-destruction. I am their death wish.

We shall see. There are other voices yet to be heard.

'All right, move along. You wanna talk to yourself, you do it somewhere else. You're scaring the kids,' the cop barked, and patted warily the torn trouser leg of the tramp with his truncheon.

The hobo in question was skinny and small but the policeman knew from experience they could be the most dangerous when they went nuts. Jeez, how did these guys get to be like this? He looked pretty young by the acne on his face but his teeth were bleeding and receded, and he mumbled some nonsense about secrets and stories. It was only the real crazies who hung around New York in the winter: those with any sense hopped on a freight train south.

'I said come on, buddy. Move along.'

The tramp's eyes flickered open feverishly and the cop took a step backwards under the piercing glare that seemed to strip the skin from his bones.

'Why did you join the force, officer? Was it the power of carrying a gun and a club? The money? The prestige?' The hobo's voice was shaky but fearless. It emerged from his small head in a shrill volley of words like sharp flints.

The cop scowled and swung his truncheon into the thigh of the hobo, who grunted in satisfaction. 'Ah, the violence,' he chuckled, and pulled himself up from the sidewalk where he lay. He lurched off into the flow of human traffic

that is Manhattan.

The cop watched him depart uneasily. He looked at the club in his hand and wondered why he had reacted like that. The bum had put his nerves on edge. He put his club back in its holster and continued his patrol, wondering just why he *had* joined the force.

Meanwhile, the tramp let himself be guided by the flow of traffic like a pinball being flicked around a table. Everyone assumed he was drunk or worse, and avoided making eye contact even as he bounced off them. Only young children stared at him curiously before their parents pulled them quickly away.

He was not surprised by the reaction. He, who had lived among Hoomans for longer than anyone, was used to being almost invisible in their company. It was ironic, then, that he could see them more clearly than anyone. True, he had trouble making out whether they were male or female, old or young - but when it came to seeing into their souls, he was in a class of his own.

'If only you could eat your precious money,' he teased a passing businessman who was tinged with the brown-gold glow of greed and love of wealth. The man jumped away, afraid that he was about to get mugged.

The hobo's attention was attracted to a well-dressed woman with the green and scarlet hues of deceit and guilt wrapped around her like a cloud. 'You'll have to tell him the truth sometime,' he called merrily. 'Why not spill the beans before he finds out for himself?'

She stopped and stared at him in utter shock before fleeing in tears.

No one else paid him any attention at all. The arrival of an alien wouldn't have held up the flow of traffic in rush hour, much less some street prophet voicing hidden truths. He leant against a lamp-post and he seemed so frail that it was a wonder he did not blow away in the wind. His face trembled as though there was a battle going on inside his head, and he grimaced his way free. Frowning, he tentatively closed his left eye. Now, through his right, he saw a Story where self-interest made the world go round. The eyes of all who passed were pools of desire and fear; their lips span webs of deceit; their words, faces and manners were simply masks for souls too lost and scarred to face the light.

Then he closed his right eye and opened his left. Now he saw a Story that gravitated around love. Each Hooman seemed to be a single candle flame that longed to unite with the others. Lost and afraid, their hearts were reserves of courage and creativity that helped them make meaning of their own personal stories.

Then he took a deep breath and closed both eyes. He never knew where this would take him: a battlefield in Ethiopia, a family dinner in Ohio, or inside the belly of a whale migrating north through the Atlantic. In addition, these days the visions were often accompanied by two voices arguing over their dominion. How well he knew those two - had he not been the first to understand?

But what he witnessed on this occasion astonished him. Behind his eyelids he saw a vision of an Indian clown and a young white boy climbing a mountain path. Suddenly, he understood everything.

'At last, it is time,' he murmured. 'It has been so long.'

The vision shifted to take him through the front doors of a hospital in New York and down the corridor to the psychiatric wing. He saw a private ward and understood what he must do.

He opened his eyes and walked out in front of a bus.

Chapter 25

Gurus in the Himalayas

The air swept down from the mountains with the cool, crisp taste of distant snow but also with the aromatic hint of wood smoke. Glacier-white mountain peaks rose on either side of the valley and pierced a perfectly blue sky. The slopes of the mountains glowed a vibrant green from the recent monsoon rains and the trees of the forests lined up like soldiers awaiting their orders.

'The Himalayas,' Buntree whispered in awe, as he and Theo climbed a windy stone path. 'They say that to see the Himalayas is to cleanse your soul of the sins of a lifetime.'

Theo nodded thoughtfully, though he wondered how many sins he might have accumulated in the few weeks since he'd woken up.

'There is a Hindu story,' Buntree continued, his eloquence rising to the occasion, 'that tells us how, once upon a time, the mountains ran about the place and played like children. Finally, one of the gods got sick of all the noise and tied down their roots so that they would stay in one place.'

Theo blinked. That could easily have been one of Bozo's explanations. The Bloon had been right - he would have been perfect for India. But the loss of his friend was still too painful to consider, so he changed the subject.

'Have we far to go now, Buntree?'

'Not far,' the clown smiled. 'Sometimes I forget that you're still so young, Theo. In these past few weeks it has often been I who has followed you. Now that we're almost there, won't you tell me *why* you want to meet Jadooji?'

Theo looked up at his friend and hesitated. Would the clown be able to understand and accept the truth about the Story? The last person he had tried to tell was Pierre and he had fallen asleep in the middle. Simon had warned him that no good had ever come of trying to tell the average Hooman the truth - but did it have to be that way? Maybe someone as nice and open-minded as Buntree would be able to understand and help share the burden....

Who am I trying to kid? Theo concluded. *Even I believed only because I could see Bozo.* 'It's probably best if I let Jadooji explain,' he replied with a nervous smile. 'I imagine he's expecting us.'

Buntree shrugged and led the way up the mountain. He picked up the pace and soon they found themselves approaching a village. The houses were made of wood with long balconies on the first floor with steep, windy staircases leading up to them. The roofs were made of clay tiles and, as it was shortly after the autumn harvest, they were covered with corn drying in the sun.

They passed a courtyard covered with stray blades of straw. A rooster clucked nervously about, looking outraged about something. The reason quickly became apparent as two young boys, no older than six, came tottering across the courtyard, one of them balancing on his friend's shoulders.

'Oh ho! What do we have here?' Buntree wondered aloud, his circus instincts inclining him to pause and watch the scene in amusement. His smile soon turned to shock as he saw that the boy on top carried a long stick. With a tremendous swing that sent both boys tumbling to the ground, the stick flew through the air and smashed a light bulb hanging from the balcony.

'Hey!' Buntree shouted, his eyes unable to believe the mischief they'd seen. He grew even more outraged when the culprits looked up from their crash-landing positions and giggled by way of an answer:

'Eleckytrons!'

Theo froze in shock. He waited impatiently for Buntree to translate the conversation that followed. The clown turned to Theo with a bemused expression on his face:

'Seems that this new invisible guru up the mountain has ordered the children to destroy all the light bulbs in the village. He says they are prison cells for-'

'For invisible creatures of light called Eleckytrons,' Theo finished excitedly.

Buntree eyed him curiously. 'How did you know that? Do you understand Hindi now?'

'No, no,' Theo replied. 'Listen, I can't explain now, but did they say where he is, this guru?'

Buntree asked the boys and they nodded emphatically. 'They say they'll take us to him if we buy them some cakes in the village first.'

'Have you got any money?'

'Hmm. About seven rupees,' Buntree answered hesitantly. 'But we'll need to eat later and I don't feel up to a performance after that climb...'

'Never mind that. Let's go!' Theo cried, jumping to his feet. His enthusiasm was infectious, and in a moment he and Buntree were rushing into the village square after their two young guides. The children picked out some cakes from behind the counter of a kiosk and Buntree handed over his worldly wealth with a look of regret on his face. No sooner had the boys received the cakes than they dashed off through the village.

'The scoundrels!' Buntree cried. 'They've hoodwinked us! They've bamboozled us. They've-'

He would have stood there and moaned all day but Theo grabbed his arm and implored, 'Come on, then! After them!'

They weaved their way through the crowded square that teemed with pilgrims, rich Indians on holiday and locals drinking tea - all of whom watched the scene with interest. The boy and the clown pursued the boys down a series of long, stone steps to a plaza where water gushed out of pipes in the wall and the local women scrubbed away at their family's clothes. The women paused from their soaping and rinsing to laugh at the pursuit and speculate what the boys had done this time.

The chase continued out of the village, across a tumbling stream and up a windy path through glades of apple trees. The grass was still wet with dew, and Theo and Buntree slipped and stumbled where the six-year-old boys landed foot-perfect. Theo felt the blood pulsing through his head. His thoughts and feelings collided rudely as he fought for breath. All of his attention was focused on the two pairs of disappearing feet a little way ahead, and he stubbornly ignored the pleas from his lungs to give up the chase. Buntree collapsed behind him with a terrible grunt but he waved Theo on. Theo needed no more encouragement. He dashed around the corner and scrambled up a muddy path between two pine trees, emerging on to a grass plateau, where he fell on his face, gasping for air and incapable of speech.

Which was probably just as well.

For there before him were about 20 children gathered in front of the guru. Their faces were painted with adoration and love as the saint gave audience. The two fugitives walked to the front and humbly laid down their cakes. The guru took a sniff of the offering and nodded his head in approval.

Even after Theo had recovered his breath, he was still dumbstruck - and not because of the evident devotion of the rows of young disciples, or because of the piles of cakes, sweets and cheese. It was that there - surrounded by sticks of burning incense and raised on a pink, satin cushion - sat the mystery saint of the mountains, who was invisible to the world of adults: a four-foot high Bloon with an insufferably smug look on his face.

'Bozo!' Theo half-yelled, half-cried at last.

The Bloon took in the new arrival and gazed wistfully at the clouds. 'Bozo,' he murmured softly. 'Bozo. Yes, I was once known by that name. I suppose you may still call me that. Although these days I usually assume the title of His Illuminated Grace and Sage of-'

'Bozo, what is going on? How did you survive the storm and what's all this guru nonsense about?'

The children stared in shock at this presumptuous foreigner who shouted at their beloved master with such disrespect and familiarity. They fingered sticks and stones to teach the white boy a lesson, but Bozo extended a gentle palm

to calm them.

'No, no,' he said. 'For though the boy does not know our ways, there is hope he may learn.' Theo gazed back at him in a paralysed mixture of annoyance and disbelief. Bozo's tail twitched at his side as he continued: 'You have heard me say that what we forget is usually not worth remembering? In the mind of a sage, memories pass freely through the holes in his head, yet the events of that night are still clear to me. As the water came pouring into the ship, I opened Raj's trailer door and he ran out into the cargo hold. The ship turned on its side and Raj aimed his foot at the wooden rafters. The wood must have been rotten because with a few good elephant kicks the roof splintered into pieces and we escaped the ship.'

'But you were in the middle of the sea,' Theo protested, joy and incomprehension flooding his heart.

Bozo smiled that irritating smirk of one who believes he has all the answers. 'Elephants are excellent swimmers, my friend. We reached the shore by the middle of the next day and made our way through India, liberating mangoes and bananas from their orchards as we went, until we arrived here two weeks ago. Jadooji found good grazing for Raj lower down the hill - he doesn't like the cold - and I set up shop as guru here.'

'But...but...' Theo spluttered helplessly.

'It's easy. You think of something quite obvious and then say it really slowly with this wise look on your face,' Bozo explained, and he demonstrated his most radiant expression of other-worldly serenity.

It was a look that invited a knuckle sandwich. Theo dived at Bozo and they tumbled backwards into the Bloon's stack of cakes in a flurry of fists, feet and a long, lashing tail. The fight was only interrupted when they heard someone yell, 'Theo, what *is* going on here?'

The fighters looked up from their mêlée at Buntree, who had arrived to see Theo in fierce combat with thin air. Bozo took advantage of the interruption to crawl to the side and salvage his cakes from the mud. Theo pulled himself up sheepishly and said, 'Erm, Buntree meet Bozo. Bozo, remember Buntree?'

Buntree stared at the piles of cakes and biscuits that Theo was pointing at and watched with amazement as they moved of their own accord.

'Charmed, I'm sure,' he stammered at last. He scratched his head as an idea flew in one ear. 'So that's how you did the banana trick on the boat...'

'I had some help, yes. This isn't going to be easy to explain.'

'That's right,' Bozo added. 'And we're late. Jadooji asked me to escort you to his cave as soon as you arrived.'

He waved a dismissive hand at the children and they departed hesitantly, unsure what to make of the newcomers but committed to obeying the orders of their guru.

Theo turned to Buntree. 'Looks like we're off to see your great-uncle,' he said. 'The *Illuminated Sage* will show us the way.'

Buntree nodded, too amazed to say much. He followed Theo meekly as Bozo led them along a path into the forest. Despite their long separation, Theo and Bozo didn't share a word as they climbed up through the trees, the air still and musty in the shade. Only once when Theo got out of breath did Bozo turn and begin to preach about the wisdom of pacing oneself - but one dark look from Theo was enough to silence the Bloon into a sulk.

Mushrooms as big as faces grew between the roots of the trees and damp moss covered the bark. The hundreds of trunks produced an almost hypnotic effect, and Theo hoped they'd never have to come this way at night. It was the kind of place that would be full of strange sounds with no obvious explanation.

They eventually emerged from the forest on a path that rewarded them with a sweeping view of the valley. The village below seemed like a tiny toy town. The summits of the mountains were closer and their complexity opened up like a knot: what had seemed like a single peak now proved to be a series of crevices, paths and jagged, snowy rocks.

They were just above the tree line and the only sounds to be heard were the rustle of the breeze and the distant rumble of the river in the valley basin. The quiet was otherwise disturbed by the crunch of their feet on the path and the odd, distant croak of a crow. They continued a little way, cooling rapidly as the breeze whipped the sweat off their bodies. They rounded a corner and the ground leveled out into a clearing in front of a cave with an overhanging rock.

Outside the cave were gathered a few local men and women, and an Indian man and his son who were clearly not from the area - their clothes were western, while the locals wore earthy suits and dresses that resembled the colour of the mountains. One of the old women tended a fire on which bubbled a large pot of chai. She handed Buntree and Theo a glass each and bade them squat down along with the rest.

'It feels like a doctor's waiting-room,' Theo murmured, looking at the queue hoping for an audience with the great master. He sipped his chai and, after a moment's hesitation, passed it to Bozo who sat on his left. Bozo took the glass and their eyes met briefly. They both looked away but the corner of a smile broke on their lips.

'Ah, heck. It's good to see you, kid. Even if you did blow my cover as the invisible guru. I was on to a good thing there. Free cakes for life.'

Theo laughed and threw an arm around his friend's shoulders. 'I thought you were dead,' he smiled, his eyes turning glassy. 'I thought I'd been left

abandoned.'

'I knew you'd be OK as long as Buntree was around. A clown isn't a bad substitute for a Bloon in the short-term,' Bozo mused.

'You've changed,' Theo observed uneasily. His joy at finding Bozo again was muted by a nagging doubt: would they be such good friends as before?

'Too much time spent with Hoomans,' Bozo agreed, shaking his head. 'After a while, a Bloon starts to take on a little of their madness. That's why we have to get on with it and save the Storyteller so I can get back to Bloonland.'

Theo was about to agree when a young couple exited the cave with radiant expressions on their faces. A spot of red paint had been daubed on their foreheads and they made their way down the mountain like they had not a care in the world.

'Buntree!' a deep, rumbling voice from inside the cave bellowed.

Buntree jumped up anxiously to duck into the dark, smoky cave and meet his summons.

'You've changed too, kid,' Bozo laughed. 'You don't look so afraid any more. You're growing up.'

'I've seen a lot these past few weeks,' Theo said thoughtfully. 'I'm beginning to understand more and more about the Story.'

'Well, I hope so, 'cause there are only two more AOs to go, and then bingo! You better have the Cure or else we're toast. Here comes the clown.'

Buntree emerged from the cave with a big grin on his face. 'I'm being sent to the village for supplies. You're wanted in there.' He waved at the cave and then jogged down the path towards the village with the excitement of a child.

Theo and Bozo exchanged puzzled looks and picked themselves up from the ground. 'I'm sorry to jump the queue like this,' Theo said to the Indian who waited with his son at the side.

The father wagged his head merrily and gave a smile that could have sold toothpaste: 'It is no bother. We have flown all the way from our home in New York to be here, so an extra few minutes is nothing.'

'You've come all the way from America just to see Jadooji?'

'America has the money but only India has the wisdom,' the boy explained with an charming earnestness. Theo nodded respectfully and ducked his head as he entered the cave.

The inside was so smoky from a smouldering fire that it took the better part of

a minute for their eyes to adjust and see anything. Wiping away the tears, they took a seat on an old rug beside the fire. On the other side sat an old, fat, bald man wrapped in a blanket, with his rippling belly hanging out. His head was large with a strong forehead and glistening eyes. An ironic smile was carved into his podgy features. He gave the impression of a man who expected the entire world to arrive at his doorstep.

'What's with all the smoke?' Bozo complained. 'Are you trying to scare away your visitors?'

'The flies are conspiring to drive me insane. The smoke is my only defence,' Jadooji replied with an infectious laugh that caused a chuckle to rise from Theo's chest and helped him relax.

'So you traded flies for lung cancer. Easy to see why you're in the wise man business.'

Theo was amazed to see how casual Bozo was around the AO. He remembered how much he had missed the Bloon's irreverence for almost everything.

Jadooji turned his gaze on Theo. His eyes seemed to belong to an old man and a child at the same time. 'So, young pilgrim, what do you think of India so far?' he said.

'At first it freaked me out a little,' Theo admitted shyly. 'But Buntree looked after me well.' Jadooji hummed in approval and gestured for Theo to continue. 'It's made me think a lot about the Story as well. Like, here in India everything's out in the open - the dirt, the death, the madness - but in England that stuff is hidden away.'

'And?' the old man prompted him.

'Well, it made me think: hasn't the Storyteller done the same thing? I mean, by ignoring the bad parts of the Story for so long?'

'Hmmm,' Jadooji mused, rocking his head in the ambiguous Indian lilt that was always halfway between a yes and a no. 'It reminds me of an old Indian tale that concerned a friend of mine. He was born the son of a great king who wanted him to grow up in utter bliss, ignorant of illness, death or hardship. He lived the first 20 years of his life in luxury within the palace walls, wanting and needing for nothing.

'Curiosity struck one day, though, and he scaled the walls of the palace early one morning and saw his first beggar. The man was crippled and his ribcage showed from his meagre diet. This led the king's son to a kind of awakening: he realised that he had led his entire, protected life in illusion. So he left the palace and spent the rest of his life dedicated to discovering the Truth.'

'What a mug!' Bozo laughed. 'I'd have stayed in the palace. Why swap a life of endless cheese and wine for something as tasteless as the truth?'

'Oh, really?' Jadooji chuckled with his laugh that echoed throughout the cave and had everyone within earshot grinning. 'Then why ever did you leave Bloonland behind to risk this adventure within the Story?'

Bozo opened his mouth to protest but not a single Palabra came tumbling out - a sure sign he was beat. He sunk his head and hid his embarrassment by poking at the fire with the tongs. Jadooji watched him closely and then swung his attention on to his other visitor: 'So, Theo. You're approaching the end of your quest. What have you worked out so far?'

Theo shifted uneasily on his rug and felt the usual pressure of having to come up with the right answer. 'I've learnt something from each of the AOs,' he said. 'Even though sometimes I'm not sure quite what.' Theo scratched his head and chose his words carefully from the collage of thoughts inside his head.

'I guess it seems to me that everything that happens inside the mind of the Storyteller happens here, too: the Story is as sick as the old man himself. But I still don't know how to stop the Storyteller from dying.'

'And what do you know about death?'

'I saw Ali die,' Theo answered quietly. 'And I thought I'd lost Bozo too. Finding him alive was like seeing him reborn.'

'Ah, reincarnation,' Jadooji said.

'What's that?'

'In India they believe that when someone dies they come back as a king, a cow or an insect, depending on how they led their lives.'

'Cynthia told me that happens to AOs,' Theo remembered. 'Except they always come back as themselves.'

Jadooji nodded and picked up a flower. 'Now Theo, what is this?'

'A rose?'

'And if I crush it between my hands like this, what is it now?'

'Just a pile of crushed petals, I guess.'

'Good. Now if I throw them on the fire?' Jadooji tossed them on to the embers. They wrinkled up like they were dying before burning with a crackle.

'They go up in smoke,' Theo observed. 'And leave some ashes behind.'

'Excellent. Anything else?'

Theo concentrated. 'Well, there's still the scent of the rose burning...'

'Well done. The smoke will mingle with the air, the ashes will fertilise the ground and the aroma will hide my bad breath. But there is one more place the rose can still be found.'

'Where?'

'In here.' Jadooji leant over with surprising agility and tapped the side of Theo's head. 'And even if the memory should fade away, the experience may inspire some future thought or action like a seed planted within you. See, Theo, everything that dies enters the cycle of life again somehow.'

'And when we die?' Theo asked, reminded of his own mortality.

Jadooji smiled gently. 'We come from the mind of the Storyteller, and back unto it we return like a stream returns to the ocean. But then we evaporate and fall back into the Story like a raindrop.'

Theo thought about this and sipped his glass of chai. Bozo had managed to hypnotise himself by staring into the flames. Jadooji sat cross-legged and as relaxed as it was possible to be.

'I've been thinking a lot about the Prophecy,' Theo began. 'Cynthia told me that it actually translates as "save the Story", but that without a Storyteller there can be no Story....' He trailed off, not sure how to phrase his question.

Jadooji rocked on his heels and took a deep breath. 'Remember, Theo, no Hooman, however wise - not even an AO - can know everything. We'd go insane if we did. All we can do is make our best guess. If you want to hear mine: Can a story live without a storyteller? Maybe the answer is both yes and no. The tale I told you about the king's son born to luxury is more than 2,500 years old. How has it survived? People have kept it in here,' he tapped his head, 'by *telling* it. A story will last as long as it is told.

'But in the end it is you, Theo, who must make sense of the Prophecy as well as fulfill it. We AOs may be able to guide you a little, but saving the Story is beyond us. Guarding the secret of the Story for so long has driven us each a little doolally!'

'Really? I never would have noticed,' Bozo remarked innocently, trying hard not to laugh.

Jadooji shrugged in agreement. 'The truth is, the Story is a heavy burden for seven shoulders to bear. It's like seeing how a magic trick is done. And what a trick! Seven billion Hoomans across the planet all thinking that life revolves around them. Running around all over the place, chasing after something they never seem to catch. Oblivious. Completely unaware that they are just fragments of the Storyteller.'

Seven billion fragments is an awful lot, Theo thought.

'The reason I left my old life as a street magician behind,' Jadooji continued, 'is that I started to tell the audiences how the tricks were done. Funnily enough, many of them still thought it was magic even after I explained the illusion. Others didn't want to see and turned their backs. Only a few were open-minded enough to accept the explanations.'

'But then there's no magic left,' Theo reasoned.

'No magic?' Jadooji snorted merrily. 'Just because something has been explained? Scientists can tell you exactly *why* a sunset is beautiful but does that make it any less spellbinding?' Theo shook his head and Jaoodji smiled. 'And why should that be? It's because the magic and beauty we see in the world is a reflection of our own Storyteller souls.'

The fire crackled and the walls of the cave seemed to resonate with the words of the magician-come-sage. The three of them sat in silence in a mountain cave on top of the world, contemplating the great mysteries of the Story.

'I could kill for some pizza and ice cream,' Bozo announced suddenly. 'When do we go to New York?'

'Already tired of the guru game?' Jadooji teased.

Bozo shrugged: 'It was good while it lasted. But I can't leave Theo alone to follow this quest, can I? He'll get into trouble without me around to take care of things.'

Theo burst out laughing. 'Oh, yeah, like everything goes so *smoothly* when you're around,' he said.

'When will you learn to leave the past behind?' Bozo sighed piously. 'Time flies but sweet memories remain to inspire.'

'No more!' Jadooji begged. 'You read that on the back of a truck somewhere, didn't you? It's *definitely* time for you to hit the road.'

'But how are we going to get to New York?' Theo asked, remembering that he was sitting in a hole in the side of a mountain with a man who never touched money. International transport seemed an unlikely option.

'I think first-class window seats will do,' Jadooji declared happily, stretching his legs and pulling himself to his feet.

'But how?' Theo demanded. 'We've got no money and no way out of this country.'

Jadooji just waggled his head and pulled his blanket around his rolls of fat. 'Nothing a little magic won't solve. Come on.' He picked himself up and they followed him out of the cave to the clearing where the Indian father and son waited patiently.

Buntee arrived, running around the corner. He dropped a cloth bag at Jadooji's feet before keeling over to catch his breath. Jadooji pulled out an enormous camera with a flourish.

'For my next trick I will need an ordinary nine-year-old boy,' Jadooji giggled. 'Stand over by the wall, please, Theo. Now say "cheese dunes". Perfect. You too, Buntee. There. We'll put the camera to the side for a moment and progress to the next stage of the trick.' Jadooji was in his element, sauntering about with an enormous grin plastered on his face that had everyone else smiling too.

'Now, Prakash?' The Indian boy in jeans, T-shirt and trainers looked up dutifully. 'You and your father will be staying with me for some time to further your spiritual education. Please give me your passports and plane tickets.'

Prakash's father nodded obediently and they handed over their documents with bowed heads. Theo wondered whether they would have thrown themselves off the cliff had they been asked to.

Meanwhile, Jadooji opened the back of the camera and pulled out some fresh, passport-sized photos of Theo and Buntee.

'Why, the camera just loves you,' Jadooji giggled, as he rummaged in the bag that Buntee had brought from the village. He pulled out a knife and a small stick of glue. 'Now, I take the passports like so. I pull back the plastic covering and stick Theo's photo on top of Prakash and Buntee's on top of his father. And abracadabra! We have two new citizens of the USA returning home in two days' time. Please check-in a couple of hours before departure.'

Chapter 26

A Plane to the New World

Once it became known in the village that Theo and Buntree were favourites of Jadooji, they received an enthusiastic welcome from the locals. The baker pressed bags of cakes on them, the bus driver promised them a ride in his cabin down to Delhi for their flight, and the postmaster made Theo a present of some postcards and stamps. After a little thought, Theo dropped a line to Cynthia and Lou, thanking them for their help and assuring them that things were going well. He supposed Lou might already know, despite the loss of her crystal ball.

He didn't know where to send a card for Simon or Michelle but he remembered Pierre's address and sent a card asking if he'd got his new bike yet? Lastly, he sent a postcard to Nurse Sandra, promising that he was happy and in good health and would soon be finishing his world tour in New York.

Bozo was still trailed after by his juvenile followers but they kept their distance now that Theo and Buntree were on the scene, and gradually they dropped away, disillusioned with the search for spiritual truth.

Theo and Buntree could hardly pass a house in the village without being invited in for chai or to share a meal. Theo had long since become accustomed to the art of eating with his hands, and the more he ate, the happier his hosts became. Less comfortable was answering the never-ending stream of questions aimed at him: How old was he? Where did he come from? And where on earth was his family?

Buntree often stepped in to rescue him from these relentless question times by explaining that they were pilgrims and had left the past far behind. Then he'd change the subject by asking the villagers about their apple crops or their opinion on the Indian cricket team.

In reality, of course, Buntree also had precious little idea of who Theo was or what he was up to. The boy had entered his life with the randomness of a falling star and Buntree accepted this with the fatalism so typical of his countrymen. If he and Theo were to travel through India together, and then on to New York, it was simply their Destiny.

Theo never ceased to surprise him though and the recent series of events had left Buntree in quite a daze. It was remarkable that his great-uncle knew who the boy was and even more amazing that he was sending them to the USA together. What was truly difficult to understand, though, even for one as open-minded as Buntree, was the existence of Bozo.

'Put it there,' the Bloon had teased him up on the mountain.

Buntree felt a hand groping his but didn't see anyone in front of him. Like most

Hoomans, Buntree's eyes refused to see what they couldn't understand. 'I must be going mad,' he whispered, trembling slightly.

'No. If you were mad, you'd be able to see him,' Theo explained.

Buntree shrugged and tried to get used to the idea that they'd be travelling with an invisible saint. But it still freaked him out from time to time when Theo talked to thin air.

The travellers took advantage of the free day before their flight to rest and regain their strength. They took a short trip down the valley to the plains where Raj was now the guest of honour. Draped in marigolds and with his tusks painted red, the elephant was surrounded by fussing attendants. He gave a jubilant trumpet when he saw his old friends.

Buntree was overcome by emotion and wrapped himself around one of Raj's legs in a tight embrace. 'I don't believe it,' he cried, choking back the tears. 'I feel like I'm living in a dream these days.'

Raj answered by blowing hot air over Buntree's head. No translation was necessary to understand that the elephant was just as happy to see him. They rode on Raj's back into the jungle that afternoon, picking wild fruit as they went. When they grew hot, Raj sprayed cold stream-water over their backs, and one of the three was forever falling off and clambering back on again.

As the four old friends capered around and explored the hills and jungle, Theo mused that it was one of the few really carefree times he had enjoyed since waking up. There were no police to run from, no puzzles to solve - just fun to be had among dear friends.

But magic or no magic, there was no way they were going to fit an elephant on a plane. The three travellers took leave of Raj and it was clear from the expression in his eyes that he would never forget them. Jadooji joined them too, as they waited for the overnight bus to take them to Delhi.

'How will we find the First AO? Does he have a name or an address?' Theo asked the old master, as they drank a farewell glass of chai beside the road.

'It has been long since he was concerned with details like a name or a home,' Jadooji chuckled. 'When I knew him he was called Siddharta - or Sid for short. These days, I hear he wanders the streets of New York. But it's more than likely that he will find *you*.'

'How? Does he know we're coming?' Bozo asked.

'I already told you. He knows just about *everything*,' Jadooji explained. 'Which is why he's lost to us all. He can close his eyes and see everything that's happening anywhere in the Story. Yet at the same time he would have trouble telling you what colour clothes he's wearing that day.'

The journey to Delhi was tedious and uncomfortable. Accepting the offer of the driver to ride in his cabin meant that they had to endure Indian pop music at screeching high volume all night. The road curved a thousand times and it felt like their stomachs were left behind on each bend. The driver stayed awake by drinking flasks of coffee and by chewing a mixture of tobacco and betel-nut from a packet. His eyes were consequently bloodshot and feverish. Although very kind, he didn't inspire much confidence as a driver.

'I only bother sleeping every third night,' he informed Buntree, who decided not to share that information with Theo.

They drove at breakneck speed, overtaking everything on the road and missing the oncoming traffic by inches each time they did so. Theo found it impossible to sleep, convinced that if he did the bus would surely crash. As if to confirm this fear, all along the roadside were small shrines in memory of buses that had plunged over the cliff.

By dawn they were shooting along the highway. A mist hung over the fields of wheat and vegetables on either side of them. The roadside was covered with litter, and there were no bins, anyway. The wandering cows ate anything that was remotely organic. Through bleary, dazed eyes, Theo saw plastic bags flapping in the wind. He could almost hear the Sandman whispering in his ear curses about the self-destructive instinct of Hoomanity.

Delhi proved to be more chaotic than anywhere Theo had ever seen - even worse than Cairo. Haphazard streams of mopeds jostled with rickshaws, carts, dogs, cows, beggars and never-ending crowds. The shouts and cries of the multitudes mixed with the horns of bikes, and the air was as thick with sound as it was with colour, smells and movement.

Bozo's eyes widened at the potential mischief he could cause in such a playground. Theo caught the look in his eye. 'I think we had better get to the airport as fast as possible,' he warned Buntree, and the clown pointed towards a bus by the side of the road marked:

Indira Gandhi International Airport Service.

They ran up to the bus. The grumpy driver glanced at them and grunted, 'Twenty rupees.'

Buntree fished in his pockets but found only biscuit crumbs. 'The funny thing is,' he explained with a sheepish grin, 'that we don't seem to have any money left. If you-'

'Yes, very funny,' the driver agreed, and he slammed the door in their faces.

Buntree turned to Theo and shrugged. 'What now?'

'If we could distract his attention for a moment, then we could climb on to the roof,' Theo suggested.

'Distraction is my specialty,' Bozo announced with a mischievous smile. He waited until the door opened again to let in a couple of Swiss backpackers and he slipped in behind them. Then he threw one long arm over and held down the excruciatingly loud horn of the bus. The driver looked on in shock as the screeching sound caused the nearby stallholders to shout abuse at him. Nothing he tried would stop the noise. He watched helplessly as people began to pick up rotten fruit from the ground and throw it as his windscreen.

While he leant out of the window to argue with the small mob that had formed, Theo and Buntree clambered up a ladder at the back of the bus and hid beneath a pile of backpacks and suitcases. Bozo then let go of the horn and the driver reversed the bus away from the crowd, hurling insults from the window as he went.

On top of the bus, Buntree pulled out the flight tickets and passports. 'So we're flying in three and a half hours,' he said with trace of wonder in his voice. 'It will be my first time. How about you?'

Theo thought about the flying carpet but decided not to complicate things. He replied truthfully: 'I've never been in an airplane either.'

Buntree handed him a black passport. 'That's yours...*Prakash*.'

Theo giggled as he saw his photo next to the Indian name. He leant over to see Buntree's passport. 'Um, thanks, *Amir*...I mean, *Dad*.' They laughed until a thought occurred to Theo. 'Buntree, won't it seem strange that father and son are such different colours?'

Buntree went blank for a moment at this rather obvious observation. 'We'll tell them you're adopted,' he finally suggested.

They rolled up at the airport half an hour later. Bozo stuck his head out of the window. 'How do *you* like riding on the roof for a change?' he taunted them. 'Did you see the nice little riot I started back there? Man, I'm going to miss this country.'

Theo smiled and had to admit that he felt the same way. He'd spent more than half his waking life in India and had learnt more about the Story here than anywhere else. Still, the prospect of travel gripped his stomach in excitement - was he really about to enter a metal bird and emerge 15 hours later in another world?

'Any bags to check in?' the lady with sterile, tied-back hair at the check-in desk asked them.

'No,' Buntree smiled back.

'Ah, travelling light. What about hand luggage?' she asked hopefully.

'None of that either,' Buntree told her happily.

The airline lady slid their boarding passes across the desk and stared at them suspiciously. What kind of people took international flights with only the clothes on their backs? They were either filthy rich or bums who had struck it lucky, she decided.

Any worries they might have had about their new identities were unfounded as, when they came to the immigration desk, the official seemed half-asleep. He stamped their passports without even looking up.

They took their seats on the plane and Bozo declared he was off to explore the pilot's cockpit. 'Please don't touch any of the buttons there,' Theo begged.

If travelling by plane had been an exciting prospect, it soon proved to be fairly tedious. After the excitement of take-off and seeing India below like it was a toy set, they settled into a mundane routine. While they hurtled through the sky at 300mph in a tiny metal shell, everyone acted like it was simply another day. Hypnosis-Boxes played movies, passengers flicked through magazines, and stewardesses pushed trolleys down the aisle from which they served dinner. The only incident was when around 20 people complained that their desserts were missing.

'Something to do with your invisible friend?' Buntree asked wryly.

'Seems like you're getting to know him, even if you can't see him,' Theo sighed.

Buntree nodded and then asked, 'Theo, you know me - easy come, easy go - but, tell me, why exactly are we going to New York?'

Theo looked at Buntree's trusting face and gulped. It hurt him to hold things back from his friend, but how could he possibly begin to explain? What if Buntree thought he was crazy? The most important encounter was still to come and only then would everything fall into place. It was surely too much for a simple clown to understand.

'I'm looking for the last piece in a very complicated puzzle,' Theo said vaguely. 'I can't really say any more than that for now.'

Buntree nodded, but there was a hurt look in his eyes that left Theo with a heavy guilty feeling. The clown hid his disappointment by trying to open the plastic-wrapped cake on his dinner tray. It burst open and sprayed crumbs on all the seats within a two-metre radius. Before anyone could work out who was to blame, he turned off his overhead light and pretended to sleep.

As the plane zoomed through the night, the other passengers also dropped off and Theo finally found the quiet to do some thinking. He looked out of the

window and held his breath in wonder at the dazzling array of stars. According to Jadoozi, each time he saw something beautiful it was a reflection of something in his own soul - and what was that except a fragment of the Storyteller?

In a way, Theo thought, I *am* the Storyteller, and so is everyone else in the Story. We just forget it all the time. In fact, Bozo is the only one here who is not.

But where *is* here? Theo suddenly wondered. Is the Story only inside the head of the Storyteller? If so, when he dies it's all over. But the Story must also be alive inside the heads of the Bloons back in Bloonland. Theo quickly dismissed this - what chance was there of Bloons remembering anything for long? If it was left up to them, then whole sections of the Story would disappear overnight after a few too many gulps of wine.

The mass of questions and ideas became more and more tangled as the weight on his eyelids grew and he gave in to the pull of sleep. His last thought was whether falling asleep was anything like dying.

Chapter 27

A Rough Landing

'Ladies and gentlemen, we will soon be landing in New York. The time is 9 a.m. and the temperature outside is five degrees above zero. Please fasten your seatbelts and remain in your seats until the aircraft has come to a complete stop. On behalf of Trans-Pacific Airlines, we hope you have enjoyed your flight today and will fly with us again soon.' The intercom message ended but recommenced a moment later - though this time only Theo could hear it:

'And for the fugitives among you, next time consider using Flying Carpet Express for your clandestine travelling needs.'

'Bozo,' Theo yawned as he wiped the dust from his eyes. Buntree passed him a cup of lukewarm tea and a moment later they began the descent. The plane began to shake and Theo felt a terrible pressure on his eardrums.

'Do you know why your ears go pop?' Theo heard the familiar voice of a Bloon at his side. 'It's because the change of altitude forces the Palabras out of your ears. That's why the stewardesses only ever say "tea, coffee or juice" - they're the only words they have left in their heads.'

'Oh, shut up!' Theo moaned. He was feeling far too bleary and disorientated to argue with Bozo.

The plane landed with only a small bump and a round of applause went up from the passengers. The pilot taxied them over to the terminal and everyone started getting up to haul their luggage out of the overhead compartments.

The intercom crackled into life again: 'Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking once more. We have a request from the American authorities for Mr Amir and Prakash Vishal to come to the front of the plane.'

Theo and Buntree exchanged nervous looks.

'What do we do?' Buntree asked.

'What choice do we have?' Theo replied in a small voice. They stood up and walked down the aisle, followed by the stares of the other passengers. Each step seemed to take a minute and, though Theo's mind raced through all the possibilities, he could see no way out. The chill of the New York morning blew in their faces. At the door of a plane waited a short woman with cropped hair and thin lips. She had three large policemen with her for back-up.

A badge identified the woman as an immigration official. She took one look at Theo and Buntree and nodded curtly. 'Take him away, fellas.' she said.

Two of the policemen stepped forwards and slipped metal handcuffs around Buntree's wrists.

'What's going on, folks?' Buntree protested nervously. 'Have I or my son done anything wrong?'

'Your *son*?' the immigration official sneered. 'Save it for the judge, Mister. You're in deep trouble.' She turned her beady eyes on Theo. 'And you had better not try anything pretty, either. You've got a lot of explaining to do.'

Theo's head drooped and a pit of despair opened up like a whirlpool in his stomach. It was all over. Somehow the Enemy's agents had got hold of him and now he'd never meet Sid, the First AO. And just now when he was so close! It was unbearable. But how had they known where to find him?

'Want me to tie their shoelaces together?' Bozo offered, flexing his muscles. 'Or squirt mustard in their faces?'

Theo shook his head and Bozo could read the defeat in his eyes. This time there would be no more tricks, no more magic escape plans. He had been caught, once and for all. Theo watched miserably as Buntree was led away to a waiting car. It was like the departure of hope.

The clown looked back at Theo with a brave smile on his face: 'Cheer up, kid. It was good while it lasted.'

The clown's show of courage made the cruel turn of events even more painful. Theo stared sorrowfully after him. He hoped that they wouldn't give Buntree too hard a time. He felt a strong grip on his own arm and was led by the immigration lady to another shiny black car. The door was opened for him and he could smell the stuffy leather seats. He climbed into the back and almost had a heart attack.

Dr Bunsen was sitting there waiting for him.

Theo stared at him in disbelief and hatred. 'How-'

'How did I find you?' Bunsen smirked. 'It was easy, really. You were bound to slip up eventually. What more could be expected from a child? Let me see,' Bunsen rummaged in his jacket pocket and pulled out a postcard. 'It says: "Dear Sandra, blah, blah, blah, I'm flying from Delhi to New York in a couple of days, blah, blah, blah, Theo." '

He gave Theo a knowing grin. 'You see, all I had to do was fly over here and arrange this little reception with the airport officials. We had the stewardesses on the lookout. They called ahead to say you'd be arriving soon.'

Theo let his head drop into his hands. How could he have been so stupid? He should have guessed the postcard would be intercepted.

'That schmuck!' Bozo yelled beside Theo. 'I'll make him pay for this.'

Theo shook his head. This was it. No more heroics. No more last stands. His past had caught up with him and that was that. 'So what now?' he mumbled.

Bunsen's eyes danced merrily to see Theo so subdued. He replied slowly, savouring every word of his long-planned revenge: 'Now is only the beginning, Theo. You've caused quite a stir with your criminal escapades. You're the most unique pathological case of child insanity in history, and I am the one who is going to cure you. From now on, it's you and me together, my boy.'

'What do you mean?' Theo asked, dreading the answer.

'I am to assume legal guardianship of you in a boarding house for disturbed children. Following a regime of strict daily exercises and punishment for misbehaviour, we'll soon bring you back to your senses. And, incidentally, get rich and famous in the meantime - the offers are pouring in.' He tapped his Fone in his shirt pocket. 'Newspapers, book contracts, movies - it's all in the pipework. Play your cards right, my boy, and there might be a new bicycle or computer in it for you.'

Bunsen's victory speech was interrupted by the gnashing teeth of his Fone. As he answered, a big smile spread across his ugly chops. 'Oh yes? Seven o'clock it is, then. A blue suit? Good idea. See you backstage.' Bunsen turned his hateful smirk on Theo. 'That was the TV producers. We're appearing in a televised show tonight at Carnegie Hall so that I can receive my reward money for having rescued you.'

'But you didn't rescue me!' Theo yelled, his frustration overcoming his despair for a moment.

Bunsen's smile vanished. It was replaced by a murderous glare. He leaned over Theo and his breath stank of tobacco. 'Listen and listen good. You are a very small boy in a very large world, Theo,' he hissed. 'You'd better understand just how hard I can make things if you don't play ball. You belong to me now and you play by my rules. At first, we were going to make you spend the day in jail before the show.'

'You can't put me in prison,' Theo gasped. 'I'm just a kid.'

'That's what the police said,' Bunsen nodded ruefully. 'So instead we're putting you in solitary confinement in a hospital. You'll have plenty of time there alone today to reconsider your attitude before starting your new life in a boarding house for traumatised children.'

'But there's nothing wrong with me,' Theo insisted.

'Ooh, I don't know. *Amnesia*, paranoia, forever on the run - it's clear you have problems, Theo. Accepting that is the first step to being cured, understand?'

The Fone bit into Bunsen's threats and he exchanged his snarl for a smile as he listened. 'Oh yes? Mmm. Let me check in my diary. OK. The 23rd should be fine. A working lunch, then.' He snapped the Fone shut and turned his attention back to Theo.

'Our stars are on the rise, Theo. As your doctor and soon-to-be legal guardian, good times are ahead. You'll be grateful to me some day. Wait and see. Of course, I always knew I was destined for greatness...'

Bunsen's voice droned on dreamily of future prosperity but Theo was no longer listening. He was becoming smaller where he sat, withdrawing into himself now that the world had let him down. His body became as numb as a shell and his spirit retreated deep inside to where it could not be hurt any more.

'Hey, kid,' Bozo nudged him but got no response. 'We're not beat yet. We've been in worse fixes before. We'll get out of this one somehow and then go find this Sid character. If he really does know everything, then he must know the Cure for the Storyteller. It can't all end like this. Remember the Prophecy?'

But none of Bozo's words evoked the slightest reaction. Theo just stared sadly ahead. A light had gone out of his eyes. Bunsen looked on approvingly and continued to trail his clouds of glory, tapping out his schedule on his personal organiser.

Bozo scratched his head and looked out of the window at New York in winter. The first Christmas decorations were already up in the shopping streets, and children dragged their parents to look at displays in shop windows. Everyone was dressed in warm layers and large snowflakes began to drift earthwards as in some timeless dream.

Bozo looked up at the pieces of falling sky like the scattering of ashes and said, 'Old man, if you could ever help us, help us now.'

As he uttered this prayer, the Bloon felt an emotion utterly foreign to his kind: fear. Since arriving in the Story, he had always counted on Theo to lead the way. Although he had prided himself on being the boy's protector and envoy from the Storyteller, in reality he was lost without a plan of action. Seeing Theo like this frightened him and he felt a burden of responsibility pass on to his shoulders. He trembled a little beneath it.

Still, this wasn't the Bloon of a month before. Change might not be a welcome phenomenon in Bloonland, but Bozo was far from home. He listened to the anxious beats of his heart and reflected that since the shipwreck he had gone in all kinds of new directions.

'If I can survive storms, ride elephants through India and set myself up in the wise-man business,' he said to himself by way of a pep talk, 'who says I can't help save the world too?'

'...and we still need to find out who the Indian is,' the immigration lady in the

front was saying. Bozo pricked up his ears. 'They're taking him to the station on 31st Street for questioning. It doesn't look like he'll put up much of a struggle.'

Bozo snorted. There was still one player left in the Story with some fighting spirit. Buntree had been a good friend to both Raj and Theo, and it pained the Bloon to think of the clown alone at the hands of these mean officials. Besides, maybe Buntree would be able to bring Theo to his senses.

The car pulled up at the traffic lights down the road from where the St Bartholomew Hospital could be seen.

'Don't worry, kid,' Bozo said. 'I'll go break Buntree free and we'll come back for you. Don't give up.' He gave Theo's arm a squeeze but received no response. Bozo frowned, opened the car door and slipped out into the traffic.

'Trying to pull a fast one, eh?' Bunsen sneered at Theo, as he slammed the door shut. 'I already told you - no more Houdini tricks. It's in your interest to play ball, Theo. Why don't you take the next six hours to decide if you'd rather make things easy on yourself or learn the hard way?'

Theo stared ahead in silence. They pulled up at the hospital and Bunsen experienced a warm feeling inside to see the kid so broken in spirit. The brat had had it coming for a long time.

Chapter 28

Question Time

In a room lit by a lukewarm overhead light, two detectives stalked their prey: an Indian sat on a chair with his elbows slumped on the table before him. He held his head in his hands and moaned, 'I don't know what you want me to tell you.'

The larger of the two detectives, a fat man with ginger hair and moustache, winked at his colleague, a thin, nervous type with the look of a rat.

'OK, pal,' he said. 'Let's start with some basics. You come from India, right? So what do you do for a living there?'

'I'm a clown,' Buntree sighed.

'Don't make me laugh,' the ratty detective snapped, advancing aggressively. 'We're not here to fool around.'

'Easy, Joe,' the ginger detective intervened. 'He's a clown. Making people laugh is what he's supposed to do - right, Mister Funny Man?'

Buntree looked up and his earnest face broke into a grin. 'Oh, right. I saw this in the movies. This is where you play good cop, bad cop, yes?'

The ginger-haired detective sighed and leaned his considerable weight forward on to the table in a menacing posture: 'Look, you fleabag. I don't think you understand the trouble you're in. We're going to charge you with kidnapping, theft of flight tickets and documents, forgery, flouting of immigration laws and - who knows? - maybe the murder of Amir and Prakash Vishal.' He pulled himself upright and sauntered towards the door that the ratfaced detective already held open. 'You'd better have a good think about that, Mister Clown, 'cause unless you got a whole lot of gold buried somewhere to pay for a hotshot lawyer, you're looking at 20 years in the clink at least.'

The door closed and Buntree was left in the interrogation room feeling more alone than ever before in his life. Here he was, a stranger in a strange land, and already they were trying to lock him up in a prison cell.

And what had he done wrong? Encouraged a young runaway to join the circus? Put his trust in his wise old great-uncle who insisted on this crazy plan? He didn't even know what they were doing here. He couldn't bring himself to feel angry at Theo - he was just a boy - but he felt a touch of resentment at Jadooiji for having landed them in this mess.

The entire situation left Buntree feeling jumpy. He stood up and began to pace around the room like a caged animal. There was no window, but a long mirror ran along the side of the room. He walked towards it to check his reflection. He

had never seen a clown look so sad.

'Run out of smiles?' he asked himself in the mirror, and he pulled his lips back to form a toothy grin. He wiggled his nose and stuck out his tongue as far as it would go in an attempt to cheer himself up. It was also part of a special form of face yoga for clowns.

'I'll be damned if that wise guy isn't making faces at us,' Joe, the ratty detective snarled as he stared at Buntree from the other side of the one way mirror. 'For a dollar, I'd walk in there and wipe that stupid grin off his face.'

'Relax, Joe. These ain't the old days. Gotta do it by the book now. Let's make him sweat by playing the waiting game. The poor fool ain't even got enough sense to ask for a lawyer. Sit down and drink your coffee. Maria just brought in some doughnuts.'

Buntree was left alone in the stuffy interrogation room for more than an hour. He felt like he was going insane. It was as if the air was running out and the walls were closing in on him. Each time he glanced round, they seemed to have got a few inches closer, but they stopped moving the moment he looked. He was about to scream for help when the door opened. The fat, ginger-haired detective walked in with a cup of coffee and a doughnut.

'The ball's in your court, chief,' he said. 'Just give us a sign when you're ready to talk.'

He walked out again. Buntree stared at the polystyrene cup of instant coffee and the pasty doughnut with a knotted feeling in his stomach. How he longed to be eating samosas at a chai stand in Bombay, perhaps with a Hindi pop song playing on an old crackly radio while he argued with someone about cricket.

Instead he was in a cell thousands of miles from home surrounded by people who hated him. He would have told the detectives anything but he was scared to implicate Theo in any way. For all he knew, the boy might be in an even worse situation than him. Besides, what chance was there that these hard-nosed New York cops would believe such an outlandish tale of circuses and shipwrecks?

The silence and suffocation of this closed room began to play on his nerves once more. He twitched nervously. His breathing became erratic and a sweat broke out all over his body. He had the terrible feeling that people were looking at him. Every time he stood up he was overcome with dizziness. So it was only natural that he assumed he was becoming delirious when he heard the sounds of screaming and a revving engine.

'Come on, Buntree. Don't crack up now,' he told himself as he heard the echoes of nearby gunshots. 'This is a police station. What could possibly happen?'

The next moment his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

The door to the room flew open and in rode a police motorbike with no one at the wheel. Clouds of smoke rolled in behind it, and a terrible burning in his throat and eyes left him crying and coughing. Helpless as he was, he felt a hand pull him off his chair and on to the back of the motorbike. Buntree obliged as if in a dream. The next minute they were roaring down the main corridor at top speed, through dense, noxious smoke, sending bodies flying to either side.

The entire station was awash with tear gas. Cops of every rank crawled on the floor, clutching at their mouths and eyes. Buntree could no longer see anything, but he felt the bike take several sharp turns before it sped through the main foyer and smashed through the glass doors and out into the public square in front. Crowds of shoppers screamed and leapt out of the way as the motorbike revved so hard it did a violent wheelie and burnt rubber towards the main road. The two detectives who had questioned Buntree ran out of the police station with handkerchiefs to their noses and guns drawn. They fired five shots, but with eyes full of tear gas they succeeded in hitting only a bunch of Christmas lights in front of a store and setting thousands of Eleckytrens free.

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The Bloons cheered and whooped riotously as Bozo and Buntree made their getaway in a cloud of smoke and gunshots. They danced jigs and performed impromptu and disastrous group acrobatics in celebration, chanting all the while: 'Bozo! Bozo! Bozo!'

It was a full three minutes before they settled down enough to hear the rest of the Story. In fact, they were so excited that they failed to notice the Story was going on for much longer than usual that night. The first moon had already set and the second was beginning its descent. It would be only a matter of hours before the first sun rose.

No one had any thoughts of sleep, however, and the Storyteller waited patiently for them to calm down. Tonight his shoulders were slouched and his head drooped forwards as though it had become a terrible weight for his neck. But it was his voice that said it all: his words rolled out like a resigned sigh, the life seeping out of him with each breath, and his inhalations seemed sharp and painful.

His eyes resembled candle flames burning the last of their wax, yet there was a flicker of excitement as he related the Story this night. For though it had not occurred to any of the Bloons, tonight the Storyteller told the Story live as it happened. Only he understood how much hung in the balance.

He summoned all his strength and continued:

The clown shivered as he doused his head in a public fountain. It felt as

though the water was turning to ice in his hair. The effects of the tear gas diminished a little, but now Buntree's head was frozen stiff. He staggered over to sit on a wall, and trembled with cold and astonishment while his invisible rescuer chomped through the doughnut he'd swiped from the interrogation room.

'Mister Bozo, I presume?' Buntree finally asked the thin air. Bozo laughed and teased the clown:

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'Who else did you think was going to save the day?' Bozo laughed. Then he remembered that the clown could neither see nor hear him. This troubled Bozo greatly - not because of the difficulties in communication that now faced them, but because he wanted to boast about how well his rescue plan had gone.

He was dying to tell the clown about how he had stolen a policeman's motorbike who was busy checking his complexion in the wing mirror, too preoccupied to notice that Bozo had also pockpocketed his cans of tear gas. It was his wildest caper yet and there was no one to relate it to. The injustice of the situation was unbearable. Then he remembered a planet full of Bloons followed his every step. He cleared his throat and gave a deep bow.

That still left the problem of how he was going to reply to the clown who was watching the doughnut disappear. Licking his lips, Bozo jumped up in the air and landed on Buntree's sandaled left foot that already ached with the cold.

'Ow!' Buntree yelled. 'Are you trying to cripple me now?'

In reply, Bozo jumped on to his other foot.

'Ow! I suppose you think that's funny?'

Bozo had to admit that the sight of the clown hopping up and down with water dripping off his head was quite amusing. So he jumped on Buntree's left foot again.

When the pain had passed the clown suddenly understood. 'Wait a minute. When I asked if you were Bozo, you jumped on my left foot to say yes. And of course you weren't really trying to hurt me, so you jumped on my right foot to say no - right?'

A squashed left foot confirmed that. Buntree winced: 'You don't need to jump on my toes quite so hard, I suppose?'

The answer came with a reluctant pressure on his right foot. The clown heaved

a sigh of relief. 'Thank goodness. Now, how are we going to find Theo?'

But that wasn't a yes or a no question, so Bozo couldn't reply. However, in the same moment a newspaper came tumbling across the park. It wrapped itself around the clown's face.

'Damned litterbugs,' he complained, but as he snatched the newspaper away something caught his eye. A look of wonder came over his face.

'Listen to this,' he said. ' "Extra: Child fugitive found at last. Indian kidnapper apprehended". Humph. And...look! Theo and his doctor to star in televised welcome home party at 7 p.m. in Carnegie Hall.' He put down the newspaper with his first real smile of the day.

'Mister Bozo, are you thinking what I'm thinking?'

A crushed left big toe and a scream from the clown confirmed that the Bloon was definitely in the mood to party.

Chapter 29

The Last AO

The Storyteller rubbed his temples and strove to concentrate. His body was on fire and a rising fever threatened to disrupt his focus. He inhaled deeply, painfully, and allowed the Story to pour through him once more. The Bloons could barely sit still for excitement. They looked up at him expectantly as he swallowed the pain and narrated:

'The sterile smell of a hospital filled Theo's nostrils. The insipid white walls, the identical wards filled with resigned patients whose groans, chuckles and complaints echoed down the long, empty corridors. Yes, it was all too familiar and he felt he was back to square one. He had hoped never to see the insides of one again.'

It was only to be for the day, but the return to hospital life felt like the symbol of failure to Theo. Buntree was in jail and even Bozo seemed to have disappeared - but what did it matter anyway? He had failed to find the first AO and now the Prophecy would not be fulfilled. The Storyteller would die and Theo's world was doomed.

Bunsen left him in the hands of the nurses and gave him a big, false wink. 'Good times ahead, Theo,' he simpered. 'You might want to spend the afternoon composing a little thank-you speech for tonight's show. Nothing special. Just a few lines of gratitude to your doctor for finding you.'

Theo looked so crushed that Bunsen whistled for joy as he strode out of the hospital and hailed a taxi. It was 1 p.m. That still gave him time to see his tailor, barber and masseur. This was the biggest day of his life.

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Theo's nurse - a tall, black man - led him down the corridor past the other wards. He looked down at Theo with wide, friendly eyes and wondered what on earth had happened to this kid. Supposed to be dangerous, he'd been told, and so they were giving him a little ward by himself in the psychiatric wing.

Since when was a kid this small dangerous? he asked himself. The world was a strange place and getting stranger. Take for instance that guy who came in a couple of days ago after walking straight out in front of a bus - and he was still smiling!

The nurse pushed open the door of a private ward and Theo wandered in glumly. There was a single bed, a table and an armchair by the window. He

took a seat at the table and stared morosely at the sterile breakfast tray that was on it.

The nurse could see Theo was in a world of his own and so didn't try to strike up a conversation. 'You need something, my man, you push that green button on the wall there, all right? Now, I want to see that tray empty when I come back. It doesn't look like you've eaten in weeks.' He gave Theo a wink and then closed the door behind him.

Theo glanced without interest at the breakfast of eggs, toast and orange juice. He pushed it away. The magazines on the table also failed to attract his interest and he made no move to turn on the Hypnosis-box in the corner of the room.

Instead he stared out of the window with his back to the door and gazed at the falling snow. The street outside was already covered with a sheet of white that melted under the wheels of the cars. On the rooftops, though, and on the bonnets of the parked cars, the snow lay like icing on a cake. The flakes fell like a million poems. Each one told Theo that this was the end.

He heard the door open behind him and supposed the nurse must have come back to hassle him about breakfast. Footsteps came slowly in, and he heard someone breathing heavily behind his chair. He felt someone bend down and then whisper in his ear:

'Do you feel it, Theo? The despair in the pit of your stomach, sucking in all your hope and dreams like a black hole?'

Theo felt an electric shock of fear run up his spine. He turned his head around slowly. There, in a patient's white gown, he saw a skinny man covered in bruises and cuts. The man's eyes were wide and bloodshot. As he spoke, his mouth formed a cruel sneer, exposing grimy teeth and receding gums.

'Sid?' Theo asked tentatively.

The first AO pursed his lips: 'It's an interesting question. This is clearly the body of the Hooman that you call Sid. However, his mind has been open to me for so long that there's very little of him left.' The words were callous and mocking. They reminded Theo of a voice he had heard long before.

'No. It can't be...the Enemy!' he whispered, shrinking back into his seat. The man nodded triumphantly but then his face seemed to distort and crack. He shuddered and the evil expression vanished to be replaced by a dazed and fragile look.

'Sid?' Theo asked nervously.

The First AO nodded faintly and fought for control. He winced as though a painful battle was taking place inside his head. He made a great effort to meet Theo's terrified eyes.

'This...this is the end,' he stammered. 'They are inside me. They are both inside everyone. I have waited so long for you to come.' He gritted his teeth and gasped. 'Now it is almost over. Now there is only you.' He exhaled heavily. As he breathed in again, his face took on a tired and calm look.

'Hello, Theo.'

'Who is it now?' Theo whispered, staring intently at the new expression on the face before him.

'Can you not guess?' he asked in a long, rolling tone.

'The Storyteller?' Theo gasped.

'Yes,' the man nodded. 'At least, what's left of me. I've watched you every step of the way, Theo. You have taught me so much, though you did not know it. Now you must teach everyone else - it is too late for me.'

'No!' Theo cried as the AO's head sank.

The AO looked up again but now the Enemy's look of malice was in his eyes. 'Oh yes. What else did you imagine, you snotty little meddler? Did you really think you were going to save the old man all by yourself?'

'Not by myself,' Theo muttered.

'Oh?' the Enemy smirked. 'I see no one else here. Your friends have deserted you along with your luck. It was always going to end this way, Theo. Face it.' He stretched out Sid's long, skinny arms for Theo's throat. But then he hissed and his arms fell to his sides as the tortured personality of Sid returned.

'Theo, I'm sorry. I can't help it. You must run...go from here...I....' His features drooped and the exhausted voice of the Storyteller came trickling out.

'It is not his fault, Theo. Sid is no longer himself. This struggle takes place in every Hooman, but so deep that most never notice it. Over the past few millenia, Sid's defences have been worn down like rocks eroded by the sea.'

'What can I do?' Theo begged, his heart bursting with desperation and anxiety. 'How can I fulfill the Prophecy? How can I save you?'

The Storyteller smiled. 'Do you not yet understand? Your duty is not to me but to the Story.'

'But the other AOs said...'

'They said what they understood to be true. No one can know the whole of the truth, Theo. We simply catch passing reflections of it and then make our best guess.'

'I've tried so hard to understand,' Theo cried. 'I wanted to save you. All the people and places I've been to they...they swirl in my head like pieces of a puzzle that won't stay still long enough to form a picture. I've tried and tried but...'

He looked up to see the Enemy had resumed possession of Sid. He was laughing cruelly. 'But you were just too young and too small and too dumb to understand. The truth is, Theo, the Storyteller was already out of his mind when he wrote you into the Story. Had he been in possession of his senses, he would have chosen someone strong and intelligent to fulfill the role, not a dim little cry baby like you.'

Theo shook with grief and the Enemy seemed to grow in strength at this reaction.

'See? Even now you're utterly out of your depth. What else did you suppose might happen? The old fool was doomed from the moment he allowed his mind to split and give life to me. This is how life is, Theo. Hope leads to despair, freedom to slavery, light to darkness and life to death.'

Sid's face shook as he fought for control of his own mind, but he couldn't hold on and the gaunt spirit of the Storyteller stepped in:

'Do not listen to the voice of doubt, Theo. It feeds upon itself and grows until it blocks out any other perspective. You remember what Jadooji taught you about death? It is simply a place where one story ends and another begins. Nothing just disappears, Theo.' He smiled tenderly but then felt a terrible pain in the chest and collapsed on to his knees.

Theo jumped up to help him but the Storyteller waved him away. 'Do not come too close,' he whispered, and then broke down in a coughing fit that sounded like he might break apart.

Theo ignored his warning and stood up to get him a glass of water. But before he could go for help, a hand grabbed his heel from behind and knocked him onto the floor.

'I will always be stronger in the end,' the hateful voice of the Enemy growled. 'I can destroy in a moment what takes centuries to create. Kill in a second what took a lifetime to grow. Why fight it, Theo?'

Theo sprang up and yelled defiantly, 'It's not over yet!'

The Enemy chuckled and moved forwards. 'Oh, but it is. The old man grows weaker by the moment. Soon he'll fall off that damned rock, hopefully crushing one of those irritating Bloons as he goes.'

He reached out Sid's long arms and grabbed Theo by the neck. The boy tried to break free but the AO's fingers were cold and strong and they fastened tightly around his throat. Fighting for breath, Theo swung his fist and hit the

green button on the wall.

The Enemy laughed: 'And so that's your last trick? How quickly do you think they will come? Maybe the nurses will dash in and pull me away? Or maybe your Bloon will make a heroic entrance and swing in through the window? Dream on, Theo. In but a few moments, these hands will choke the life out of you and you will fall to the ground dead. The nurses will arrive and assume that a patient went crazy and killed a small boy. This is the end, Theo. Goodbye and good riddance.'

Theo turned bright red as the pressure in his lungs bottled up around his neck. His face swelled up as he fought for air. But before he passed out the fingers around his throat slipped away and Sid's body fell to the floor. Theo also collapsed, gulping air and coughing violently. On the carpet Sid's body jerked uncontrollably as though he were having a fit. The convulsions came to an end and only the faint light of the Storyteller remained in his eyes.

'Remember, Theo, you are not alone,' he gasped. 'Just look inside. Goodbye and good luck.'

His face darkened suddenly and Sid's chest stopped moving.

'No!' Theo cried, coughing terribly as he crawled forward towards the body. The door flew open and the nurse stared at the scene in disbelief. Without a word he picked up the trembling Theo and carried him out of the room.

*

The Bloons heard these words and their eyes stretched wide open in horror. The skies above them had gone quite dark now that both moons had set, and the dawn was still an hour away. The Bloons trembled as much with fear as with the cold, and their tails reached out to find solace in one another. Distant stars pulsed away like tiny beacons but they only reminded them of the awful, overwhelming darkness of space that swallowed the night.

The Storyteller gave a violent gasp and seemed to freeze with the sharp intake of breath. His eyes swelled and, as he took in the shocked faces of his beloved Bloons, his heart filled with tenderness and regret. Then he glanced at his own body and it seemed no more than a worn-out shell: his wrinkled skin, his stiff joints, his rasping lungs. He thought of all the journeys on which he had lugged this body through the stars until he had said 'no more' and come to rest in Bloonland. More than anything his body reminded him of the other Storytellers - his kin that he had forsaken.

A part of the Storyteller would have loved to do that: to unite with his kin for the annual Festival of Tales and share stories as of old. But he had chosen to

follow another path - an extraordinary choice, maybe, but one he was compelled to follow to the bitter end.

Now that moment had arrived, he understood himself in his entirety for the first time in his life. *Maybe the Story will be better off without me*, he smiled. An enormous weight lifted off him in that moment and he remembered how he had felt as a fledgling Storyteller on his maiden voyage through the stars.

A delicious thrill surged through his body like a long-awaited wind, and he felt as though he were poised on the edge of a great new adventure. He was leaving behind all he knew, like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon and discovering its wings. He heard a distant call on the breeze like a familiar melody. It was one he felt compelled to follow: it sang of his origins and of his journey; it sang of an irresistible love. His soul floated up in readiness.

He took one last look inside himself at the Story and felt a pang of regret that things had gone as they had. It was out of his hands now, though, and he felt his creation separate from him like the fraying of a thread. He breathed the last of his love like a bubble into the Story, and he sensed it float away, beyond his sight. He felt a final wave of pity for the distraught Bloons he was abandoning, but in truth he could barely see them now. He left his life behind, taking off into the unknown like a migrating bird following a mysterious call, flying in the direction of diminishing homesickness.

The Storyteller exhaled and his head slumped on to his chest. The final flicker of light in his eyes went out like a candle and the night became ten times darker. The Story dissolved in front of the Bloons' eyes and they unleashed a collective wail of utter despair. They screamed with all the anguish of losing their most trusted guide and finding themselves alone in a universe too large for its own good.

They wailed until they dropped to the ground with exhaustion, falling one by one into an anaesthetic sleep from which none wanted to wake.

Dawn broke not long after and the first sun's rays struck a planet that seemed to know nothing of the night's tragedy. The wine-streams gushed with the same vigour and the cheese dunes glowed with the footprints of yesterday's play. The sunbeams reached like outstretched fingers down the slopes to warm the bodies of a handful of passed out Bloons and a dead Storyteller, still slumped on his rock.

*

Within the Story, traffic slowed to a halt and Hoomans everywhere came to a standstill. A silence fell in the cities as computers jammed and clocks stopped. Lions in the savannah lost the desire to hunt and their prey forgot to run. The

clouds froze in the sky and the waves ceased their rhythmic assault upon the shores.

Hoomans fell silent wherever they were. They closed their eyes, feeling more alone than ever before. Their minds ceased to generate thoughts and all they could hear was the decreasing beat of their hearts.

For some, it felt like they were standing on a stage and they suddenly understood there was no one left in the audience to watch them. Others felt the despair of abandonment and a sudden fear of the dark. For a few, however, it was like waking from a dream with a blissful sense of freedom, as though now anything was possible.

And then, in the same moment that everything stopped, it all began again. Fones continued to nibble at Hoomans as they spoke, cars shunted forward in traffic, wild animals continued their dance of survival, and the winds and waves resumed their relentless ways.

Yet everyone knew something fundamental had changed. On the outside everything looked the same as before, but there had been a revolution deep within, like a tremor far beneath the Earth's crust. An invisible veil had been torn away and, though everything looked the same, it was as if they were seeing, hearing and feeling for the first time.

The overwhelming response of Hoomans everywhere was to deny it. They turned up the volume on their Hypnosis-boxes and popped all the pills they could find that promised to kill their fears. They pursued their self-interested ways with a desperate vigour and crammed their minds with a thousand thoughts and worries.

Yet no matter how they tried to drown it out, they heard a small voice from deep within, patiently calling them to look inside themselves.

Chapter 30

Carnegie Hall

'Which do you think goes best with the blue suit – black or a grey tie?' Dr Bunsen asked Camilla Davis backstage as he stood in front of a mirror trying out last-minute colour combinations.

The presenter glared in dislike at his expensive but tasteless clothes. 'Whichever,' she said, and read a list of camera shots handed to her for approval. She made a few minor corrections and then handed back the list to her assistant who dashed off to brief the cameramen.

'And should I put my arm around Theo's shoulder to express affection or should I maintain a professional distance?' Bunsen queried.

Camilla looked at him with utter revulsion and tried to put herself in Theo's place. 'Stay as far away as possible,' she advised. She pretended to occupy herself with the lighting.

Camilla Davis had been in the entertainment business for 20 years and had brushed up against some of the slimiest creeps to be found anywhere. But her guest tonight was among the most revolting and loathsome she had been obliged to work with in her entire career. Still, she was a professional and there was a job to be done. She would smile for the camera and she would look like she meant it, too.

Her eyes alighted on Theo, who sat on a stool in the corner with a faraway look in his eyes. She supposed he was in shock from the traumatic events at the hospital that day. She hesitated for a moment and then strolled over and laid a hand on his shoulder.

'Theo, are you sure you want to go through with this?' she said. 'The producer will kill me if you're not on stage tonight, but we can get by without you if you don't feel up to it. I mean, after what happened today you must be-'

'It's fine, thank you,' Theo said.

Camilla marveled at his courage and resilience. She had been prepared to deal with an unruly brat, but Theo's calm and manners had caught her off guard. She felt sorry to think that he would end up in Bunsen's clutches.

'OK. It's up to you. We're on in three minutes, so I'll go through the programme with you. A few of the bigwigs are going to make their usual dull speeches, the crowd will clap a lot and then we'll write the cheque to the doctor. He'll probably yak on for a while - if he goes on too long, we'll cut his microphone and claim technical difficulties - and then it's your turn.' She bent down to straighten Theo's collar. 'Everyone wants to know about your adventures around the world but you just tell as much as you feel like, OK?'

'OK.' Theo nodded.

Camilla brushed back his floppy hair and then went to await her position on stage. Funny, she thought, I must be getting soft. Since when did I care about the feelings of people on the show? Maybe it's something to do with the gravitational shift the scientists were talking about today.

Theo was watching the same broadcast on a Hypnosis-box just above him. A spokesman for the government reeled out vague scientific explanations, which he clearly didn't understand, either:

'As a result of...ah...unusual solar activity, there has been a...a gravitational anomaly today at 2.30 p.m. East Coast time. Across the nation, reports have come in of people feeling unusual emotions as a result of the energetic phenomenon, but Nasa has assured us there is nothing to worry about. Health clinics in all major cities have been authorised to hand out pills to counter any residual sense of uncertainty or loss of motivation caused by the...ah... gravitational shift. We are quietly confident that any disturbance will shortly pass, and that we'll soon see everyone in their cars, in the shops and in front of their TVs as happy as they were before.'

A chubby finger turned the set off.

'What are you doing back here?' Bunsen growled. He was nervous and so felt the need to bully someone smaller than himself. 'You'd better not let me down tonight, you sniveling brat. You caused enough trouble today at the hospital. Now move it.'

Theo got to his feet obligingly and Bunsen was disturbed to note that the boy was calm. The abject depression of the morning seemed to have passed and he moved with the air of one who still had a few cards up his sleeve.

'I'm warning you!' Bunsen hissed.

They took their seats on a long, yellow couch at the side of the stage, and a technician attached microphones to their shirt collars. Camilla stood at the front and, as she prepared to face the audience, she had the look of an Olympic diver preparing to leap. The curtain went up and a cry of 'Theo! Theo! Theo!' rang out. It took several minutes to abate. Many of those sitting in Carnegie Hall that night wore T-shirts with Theo's face on the front and badges that read '*Where can he be?*'

'Good evening and welcome to this very special show here at Carnegie Hall, New York. I'm Camilla Davis and tonight we shall finally meet and learn the truth about the boy who's been in our thoughts and hearts for so long.' She paused to allow a burst of applause. 'Theo, the Sleeping Celebrity and Child Fugitive, is back with us, and tonight we will present the man who found him with a cheque to the value of 100,000 British pounds.'

The crowd gasped, although they knew perfectly well how much the reward

money was.

'And now it's my honour to introduce Cecil Diggory, the president of Tigers Club International, the association that supervised the raising of the reward money from philanthropist societies around the world.'

An old man in a tweed suit ambled on stage. The crowd sighed. Their eyes were trained on Theo sitting on the couch. They wondered how long they'd have to wait to hear the whole story.

Diggory began: 'Some may wonder why the search for a single child should merit so much attention and money. The answer is simply that Theo has become a symbol for today's youth, lost and astray...' He waffled on in the same vein, boring everyone senseless.

A police chief followed. He explained to the world how the international co-operation of highly trained police forces around the world had led to a sting operation to apprehend Theo and his accomplice. No one had yet been charged, he stated, but the public could expect the culprit to be brought to justice soon.

The audience shifted in their seats uncomfortably as they waited for the star of the show to step up. They were not alone in their impatience: across the world an estimated 500 million people were tuning in via television or radio to follow the show live. Indeed, among them were a street preacher in London with a beautiful Italian woman at his side, a fortune-teller in Paris, a librarian in Jerusalem, and even an old sadhu in the Himalayas, who tuned in through an ancient, crackly transistor.

The mayor came on next and declared how delighted he was that Theo should have been recovered in New York, the showcase for Freedom, Democracy and the American Way. He hoped that voters would remember that when it came to his re-election.

'I'm sure we will,' Camilla said with one of those professional smiles that could mean absolutely anything. 'And now, it is our great pleasure to present the cheque for £100,000 to the man who deserves our gratitude and admiration for bringing Theo back to us.'

Dr Bunsen straightened his tie. His heart pounded wildly as he prepared to go forwards. Would his bald spot shine in the studio lights? Would his voice crack under pressure? He felt the blood rush to his head and he steadied himself desperately.

'Will you please give a big hand for...' Camilla began, and then, for the first time in her career as a TV presenter, she froze. Fortunately, she wasn't the only one: suddenly everyone's attention was drawn to the back of the auditorium.

An Indian man wearing sandals came crashing through the doors on a police

motorbike. He drove down the aisle towards the stage - *and he wasn't even touching the handlebars*. The bike wheeled up on to the stage and screeched to a halt, sending Buntree head over heels and into the arms of Camilla.

'Buntree!' Theo cried ecstatically.

The crowd looked on in wonder and picked up the name in chorus.

'Buntree! Buntree! Buntree!' they cheered, delighted by the welcome excitement. Theo ran forwards to meet the clown.

'What's going on?' Camilla whispered, striving to keep her composure in front of the cameras. 'Who is this guy?'

'Buntree is the one who looked after me in India and brought me here,' Theo explained.

Camilla took in the situation: Theo's explanation, the response from the crowd and her intense dislike of Dr Bunsen. She came to a snap decision. Spontaneity was the name of the showbiz game, after all.

'How about that for an entrance!' she smiled, and the crowd were on their feet in excitement.

Bunsen jumped up angrily to protest but no one heard what he said - someone had tied his laces together and he fell flat on his face, passing out as his head struck the stage floor. The crowd loved it - after a dull start, the show had certainly picked up.

'So Mr...Buntree. It's our pleasure to award you the £ 100,000 reward for finding Theo.'

Cecil Diggory stepped forwards with the cheque book and a fountain pen. They all poised for the Flash-boxes that were so numerous it seemed a lightning storm had broken out overhead. Camilla gave a beaming grin and announced,

'And now, the moment you've all been waiting for. I give you everyone's favourite fugitive: Theo!'

The applause threatened to bring the house down and it took a full five minutes for the cheers to die away. Theo stood there, bathed in adulation and at last he understood what it was the Storyteller wanted him to do. He looked out at the sea of smiling faces and he let the Palabras pour forth.

'The last time I had to make a speech was when I stood on a soapbox at Speaker's Corner in London,' he began, and received a collective titter.

Very good, Camilla thought, start with a joke.

'I didn't have anything to say then and it went down quite well. Now I do have

something very important to tell, something that should have been told long before,' - he glanced affectionately at Buntree - 'but which no one was ready to hear. That changed today at 2.30 p.m.' A silence descended on the audience and they shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Theo had struck a raw nerve. He cleared his throat and continued:

'You see, once upon a time there was this Storyteller....'

That night Theo told 500 million people the secrets of the Story. He told them about the origins of Hoomans and their connection to the Storyteller. He told them about the divisions in the old man's mind that had given birth to the Enemy and the self-destructive urge within Hoomanity. He explained about the Storyteller's sickness and his quest to save him. Finally, he told them about the Storyteller's death that afternoon.

The audience listened as though being reminded of a long-forgotten dream. They longed for someone to burst out laughing at the absurdity of it all, and then they could join in and dismiss the whole thing as showbiz nonsense. But no one did. Because somewhere deep within they knew the boy was telling the truth.

Even Camilla struggled to respond. 'If we suppose for a moment that what you say is true,' she said, a little dazed, 'then why didn't the world simply vanish along with its Creator - if, as you say, he died today?'

'We're alone now,' Theo answered, without a trace of doubt in his voice. 'The Story is in our hands to tell. Its survival depends on us.'

'And what if, in our ignorance,' Camilla gave the camera a wink, 'we suppose that your wonderful explanation today is simply the product of an overactive imagination?'

'Then the Enemy will prevail,' Theo replied. 'War, sickness and exploitation will continue to spread through the entire Story. Trees will rot and fall, streams will be poisoned and the sky will fill with toxic fumes. All laughter and joy will vanish from the world. The Story itself will shrivel up and die.'

A silence followed that even Camilla Davis, with 20 years of celebrity experience, struggled to fill. No one in Carnegie Hall stirred. All eyes focused on Theo in shock and awe. Most tried to block out his words, but the voice that had stirred in their hearts earlier that day grew louder, and they found it was saying the exact same thing.

The only audible sound in the entire hall was heard by Theo alone as Bozo shook himself awake after a quick nap on the sofa.

'Man, I needed that,' he yawned, stretching his long arms up to the ceiling. 'Hey, what's everyone looking at you for?'

The producer cut the transmission, and across the world people stared at their

blank Hypnosis-boxes in wonder. In Carnegie Hall everyone began to stir a little, as though waking from a deep dream.

The tranquility was shattered as police stormed in through the side entrance and ran towards the stage, their guns drawn.

'You! The clown! Freeze!' they ordered.

Officers jumped on stage and pulled Buntree violently down to the floor, cuffing his hands behind his back. The crowd went wild, rising to their feet and shouting abuse at the police. As the officers frogmarched Buntree from the stage, they had to defend themselves from a barrage of shoes and handbags thrown at them by the outraged audience.

'Don't worry, Buntree. We'll think of something,' Theo shouted. He turned to Camilla with a shrug and asked, 'I don't suppose you know any good lawyers?'

Things moved quickly after that. Camilla did indeed know the best lawyer in New York, and, though his fees were outrageous, he had excellent contacts. Within a few hours he had managed to cut a deal with the authorities for Buntree's release. Camilla took Theo to the police station to meet the clown, and Bozo tagged along for the ride.

Buntree was brought out in handcuffs. His guards took a few steps back to allow them to chat.

'What's going on?' Theo asked indignantly. 'I thought the lawyer got you free?'

Buntree wagged his head somewhere between a yes and a no. 'That lawyer is a magic man,' he said. 'He pointed out to the mayor that there was a good chance of riots if they tried to prosecute. So they agreed to let me go on the condition that I take the next flight back to India.'

'Then we're coming with you,' Theo declared.

The clown shook his head regretfully. 'Alas, they say that will not be possible. The authorities were of the opinion that we simply attract too much trouble together - and they may be right!' he laughed, trying cheer up Theo, whose head drooped sadly at the news. 'Do not worry. If it is true that the Storyteller is within us all, then a piece of you is in me and vice versa!'

Theo nodded but it didn't seem to change a thing. 'What will you do now?' he asked, swallowing a lump in his throat.

'After paying the lawyer, there is about £10,000 reward money left. I will buy my plane ticket and leave the rest for you.'

'No!' Theo responded fiercely. 'The money belongs to you. You saved me,

Buntree. We would never have made it otherwise. Besides,' he added thoughtfully, 'I don't think I want to touch money any time soon.'

'You are becoming like my great-uncle,' Buntree chuckled. 'Very well. £10,000 is a princely sum in India. Maybe I will meet up with Raj and start my own travelling circus. I might find a dancing-girl to marry, and hit the road.'

The guards approached and whispered something in Buntree's ear. He turned to Theo:

'I must go to the airport now. It...it has been an honour.' He bowed low. Theo and Bozo responded in kind with the result that they hit their heads together and burst out laughing. 'It is good to part in mirth,' Buntree grinned as the guards pulled him away. A squashed left foot confirmed that Bozo agreed.

'How will we find your circus next time we're in India?' Theo called out as Buntree was led down the hall.

'You, of all people, will surely find a way!' the clown called, before he disappeared around the corner.

At the request of Camilla, who had taken a personal interest in Theo, her lawyer did a little research on the question of his forthcoming adoption. When it was discovered that Dr Bunsen still lived with his mother, it was understood that his plans had hinged on getting the reward money. As a result, he was ineligible to apply for guardianship of Theo.

'This is an outrage!' Bunsen fumed, when Camilla told him the news by Fone.

'I'm afraid you simply don't qualify, you self-important quack,' she laughed.

'Now hang on-'

'No. I think I'll just hang up.' She grinned and put the Fone away. Then she turned to Theo as they took breakfast in the hotel where the mayor had lodged him.

'So I really never have to see him again?' Theo asked, scarcely daring to believe his luck. Camilla nodded.

'We do need to find you a home, though. Thousands of couples have volunteered to take you. My lawyer forwarded me some of the most promising files for you to look through.'

She laid a pile of folders on the table and Theo began to examine them. The papers gave full personal details and photos of the couples applying. Theo needed only to look at the first one before announcing, 'They'll do.'

'Mr and Mrs Valentino,' Camilla read. 'Are you sure you want to decide so quickly? This is a big decision, you know.'

'Oh yes,' he assured her. 'I've got a good feeling about this one.'

The meeting was set for that afternoon in the hotel restaurant. While the elite of New York dropped by to eat expensive lunches and get a closeup glimpse of the most famous nine-year-old in the world, the waiters stared at the child in amazement. Where did he get his appetite?

'Good food here,' Bozo grunted approvingly. 'So how did you choose your new parents so fast?'

Theo grinned and nodded towards the door, where Camilla was showing in the chosen couple.

'I don't believe it,' Bozo groaned.

'Theo,' Camilla called. 'It's time to meet Simon and Michelle Valentino. Is that an Italian accent I hear, Mrs Valentino?'

Epilogue

The taxi wound its way through the slippery New York streets and the driver eyed his passengers in the rear view mirror. Normally, he would have been all over them, asking questions and telling them more about the life of a cabby in New York than anyone could possibly have wanted to know. But since that gravitational anomaly, or whatever it was, things had changed. He didn't know what was wrong but he felt more like listening than talking these days. He found himself keeping quiet on each ride and soaking up whatever his passengers happened to tell him.

He thought about seeing his doctor, because with every new fare he got more and more curious about the lives of other people. Take, for instance, the family getting in now. Wasn't that the kid from the TV? Damned if he could make head or tail of what they said, he'd have to ask his wife later to explain it. She was certainly happy about his new ability to listen.

'Tell me, lady. Is there anywhere you couldn't talk yourself into?' Bozo asked as he climbed in the front seat. Michelle took her place next to Simon and Theo in the back and laughed:

'Sure. I couldn't go anywhere I didn't want to.' Theo felt a sense of anti-climax now that his adventure had come to an end. He gazed out of the window and watched the homeless begging for spare change in the snow. One or two swigged from bottles of cheap booze. Some had made their homes in cardboard boxes in the doorways of closed shops.

'Do you think Hoomans are going to make it?' he asked.

Simon clucked his tongue. 'Who knows?' he said. 'You had the guts to explain that it's up to them. They didn't listen the last time I tried. But I was on a rock in a desert: you got it across to 500 million at once.'

'That's right,' Michelle agreed. 'I was never into this whole secret society thing anyhow. Seven people could never hope to keep the Story alive on their own. Now that there's no one to tell the Story in Bloonland, it's up to us to keep it going here.'

'And what about the Enemy?' Theo asked, a little nervous that a storm, earthquake or possessed Hooman might still have it in for him.

'I wouldn't worry about that, mate,' Simon said. 'His spirit might still be here but he himself died along with the Storyteller.'

Theo noticed that Bozo had gone very quiet and was staring out of the window with tears in his eyes.

'What's up, Bozo?' he asked.

'Is it really true that the old man is dead?'

Theo nodded and he held the Bloon's hand to share the grief.

'It just isn't real for me yet, I guess,' Bozo shrugged.

'You Bloons need to see something to believe it, right?' Michelle suggested.

Bozo nodded thoughtfully. 'But what about all the other Bloons?' he asked. 'They won't know how things have turned out. They must be out of their minds with grief. They'll be lost without the Story. I have to get back there to help them.' Bozo paused as he remembered the flaw in the plan: 'But if the Storyteller's gone, how am I going to get back to Bloonland?'

In truth, they had all been so wrapped up in fulfilling the quest that no one had given much thought to Bozo's return. Theo was saddened at the idea of losing his friend but he knew how much Bozo missed the other Bloons. How could he hold him back?

'You know,' Michelle mused. 'There are many ways into a person's psyche, many doors. If the Story is a projection of the Storyteller's mind, I'll bet there are a few emergency exits in here somewhere.'

'And one of them might take me back to Bloonland?' Bozo asked anxiously.

Michelle reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. 'I don't know,' she said. 'But I have some friends who might.'

The taxi continued to drive through the New York streets, where the slush was beginning to freeze. As evening fell, city trucks were out spreading salt to prevent the build up of ice. Theo sat back and let his mind wander, feeling safe for the first time in a long while. The quest was over, and in the end he had been only a messenger. The Cure for the Story was something he was able to discover but not something he could deliver alone. That depended on the will of seven billion other Hoomans and the choices they made.

What more did he expect? The Enemy had been right in one respect: he was a very small person in a very large world. Yet the tiniest stone could start an avalanche. A tree began with a seed. And a movement to save the Story? Well, it had to begin somewhere.

Theo knew that many children of his age liked books that ended 'And they lived happily ever after'. Theo, on the other hand, preferred the stories that left the ending open for the reader to decide where things might go. After all, what was an ending but the place where the author took a back seat and let the characters continue their lives off the page?

Theo pondered. If *his* particular story was written one day, would the reader finish the last page, put down the book and wonder:

Could I do anything to save a Story like the one I live in?