

KERRIE O'CONNOR has been a journalist for thirty years. Her career has spanned print and radio and she has won awards for investigative reporting. The first book in the Telares series was published after she travelled to war-torn Eritrea to make a series of documentaries for ABC Radio National.

The two previous books in the series are *Through the Tiger's Eye* and *By the Monkey's Tail*.

Praise for *Through the Tiger's Eye*

'A skilful balance of mystery, suspense and issues . . .
A great read.' www.aussiereviews.com.au

'Hard to put down, boasting non-stop adventure and action!' *The Sun-Herald*

'Has all the ingredients of a best-seller.' *Geelong Advertiser*

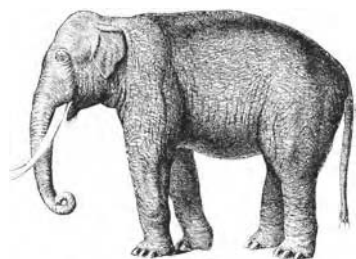
Praise for *By the Monkey's Tail*

'Full of gripping action and adventure, clever language, courage and loyalty in dark moments.'
Sally, teacher/librarian

For Aung San Suu Kyi

With thanks to those who stepped in to entertain my own golden monkey – Ros Walker, Alys Rose, Melinda Wishart, Felix and Otis – and to chief monkey-business handler Michael Panckhurst.

ANGEL'S ELEPHANT



KERRIE
O'CONNOR


ALLEN & UNWIN

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Before You Begin

When Lucy, her little brother Ricardo and their dog T-Tongue move into the Mermaid House in Kurrawong, their lives change. A weird old rug on their bedroom floor seems to be growing itself alive. Then the mysterious Tiger-cat leads them through a tunnel into the dangerous world of Telares. The Bull army from nearby Burchimo has invaded the island and made its people, even the children, slaves. Lucy and Ricardo help slave children Rahel, Toro, Pablo, Carlos and Angel escape, and then find themselves caught up in a desperate tussle with the Bull Commander.

Later, with Lucy's friend Janella, the Kurrawong kids return to Telares. Their task this time is to smuggle tiny Angel back under the noses of the Bulls to her home in Telares City. After a perilous journey, Angel is reunited with her grandparents, Madam Eleanor and Eduardo. But in the process Carlos has been shot and needs rescuing. Meanwhile their enemy Nigel Scar-Skull is up to his old tricks. Not content with getting rich from the child slaves who make carpets and soccer balls, he steals the extraordinary Carpet of All Creation . . . and the fate of all Telares hangs in the balance.

Now it is up to the children to get the carpet back.

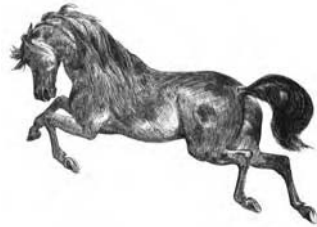
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Prologue

The baby elephant had wandered some distance from his mother to splash in his favourite mud-pool when the men with spears came. They were riding elephants the baby had never seen before. Trumpeting in fear and fury, the herd turned to flee. The baby heard his mother scream, but then she was gone and a strange elephant was charging towards him with a man on its back brandishing his spear. The baby sank back into the water and, for the first time in his short life, swam. When he reached the far side he called for his mother, again and again, but no answer came.

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Horse Talk



'Janella, where do you find this stuff?' Lucy threw yet another set of reins off her bed. A bright horse blanket was lovingly draped over the midnight-black stallion woven into the rug on her floor. Slung over her bookshelf were several leather saddles.

'Garage sales and eBay,' said Janella proudly. 'I've spent all my pocket money.'

'And all mine!' said Lucy. 'Mum thinks we've gone mad. She keeps asking what's the point – there's no way she's buying me a horse.'

'I know, my parents are the same,' said Janella. She didn't sound at all concerned.

'This book is great, though,' said Lucy, picking up the copy of *Horses for Dummies* she had asked Grandma to take out of the library for her. 'I'm at the chapter on bits and bridles,' she said with a sly glance at Janella, who was determinedly plaiting the 'tail' of one of Lucy's ancient Barbies. 'It says we've got to learn to put the bits in their mouths.'

‘No way!’ said Janella. ‘My horses listen to me without a bit and I’m not having you lot yanking on their poor mouths – and I’m going to teach the rest of you the natural—’

‘I know, I know,’ laughed Lucy, ‘You’re going to teach us the natural way to ride a horse.’

She must have heard that promise a hundred times since returning with Janella and Ricardo from Telares a month ago. Their last mission in Telares had taken a sickening turn when the invading Bull army captured their Telarian friend Carlos. With the other Telarians, Pablo, Rahel and her little brother Toro, they’d rescued him from the Bull Commander. And thanks to Janella, they’d had help from some wonderful horses from the Bull army and it had been a terrible wrench to leave them behind.

‘The horses will be OK,’ Lucy kept assuring her. ‘They’ll be having the best time in the mountains with the rebels. No one will be making them ride patrol, or whipping them. They’ll just be eating all day. Rahel loves animals. They’ll really be fine.’

Lucy knew that if Janella had anything to do with it, she would be back up on one of those horses this very weekend. In a few days, when the full moon rose, the Kurrawong kids had another appointment in the jungle, one that couldn’t be missed – the survival of Telares depended on it.

Lucy turned another page.

‘It says the stirrup leathers have to be the right length for your legs. That’s what was wrong in Telares. The soldier who had been riding my horse must have been heaps taller than me. I had to keep stretching my

toes or the stirrups would fall off my feet and bang on my horse.'

'That's cruel,' said Janella accusingly.

'I couldn't help it,' said Lucy defensively.

There was an awkward silence – then they both laughed.

'It's all right, I've got that sorted too,' said Janella, the horse queen. 'If you jump up on one of those saddles on the bookcase there, I'll get you measured up ready for when we get there. We'll make sure your stirrup leathers have holes in the right places and . . .'

'There is no way,' interrupted Lucy, shaking her head disbelievingly, 'you are getting me to ride a bookcase.'

'Oh, go on!'

'No way!'

'I will!' said a voice from the door. And little brother Ricardo galloped at the bookcase, vaulted aboard – and crashed to the ground in a shower of books, stirrups and saddles.

'It says here,' said Lucy, looking thoughtfully at *Horses for Dummies*, 'that if you fall off, you have to get right back on again or your bookcase will lose respect for you.'

Ricardo threw a book at her. She ducked and it landed on the rug behind her head. Lucy picked it up, ready to chuck it back – and dropped it.

'Check it out!' she said, pointing at the rug in the middle of the room.

'A baby! It's so cute,' exclaimed Janella.

'Not as cute as my monkey,' puffed Ricardo, but even he sounded impressed.

The rug's dazzling menagerie, including a formidable tiger, a terrifying snake and, of course, a golden monkey,

had now 'grown' a new animal. Woven lovingly between the protective legs of the big elephant with the lustrous jewel on its forehead was a baby one, its tiny trunk curled up as though it had never been used.

'It wasn't there yesterday, I know it wasn't!' said Lucy, feeling that tingling in her feet that always meant adventure . . . and trouble.

Trouble was in store, she could sense it with every nerve in her body. Starting as soon as the moon was full.

2

Let's Go Trekking



'I still don't know why Mrs Hawthorne has invited you to her family's horse trekking camp,' Lucy's mum said suspiciously a few days later.

'Nina likes us,' Lucy said somewhat uncomfortably. 'She's really grateful to us for visiting her when she was sick and she knows how crazy we are about horses.'

Her mum, standing in the doorway of Lucy's bedroom, rolled her eyes. 'Well, until a month ago, that was news to me. What's brought on this thing about horses?'

'Well, Janella started it,' Lucy admitted. 'But we can still go, can't we? We'll be careful, promise.' Lucy's voice trailed off and she burrowed further under her doona to escape her mum's gaze.

'You can go, Lucy, but just don't come back expecting me to buy you a horse!'

'I won't,' came Lucy's muffled voice. She was deeply relieved when she heard her mother's footsteps retreating up the hall. Lucy hated lying to her mum, but they faced another dangerous mission in Telares and three nights

and three days, starting tonight, was all they had. Three! They had to find where the precious Carpet of All Creation was hidden and retrieve it before disaster struck. Lucy, Ricardo and Janella had promised the Telarian kids they'd meet them next full moon – and that was tonight.

The master stroke had been Nina Hawthorne paying for the fake 'Te Lares Trekking' website, complete with pictures of happy trail-riding children at the farm in the little village of 'Te Lares' (too small to be on a map!), four hours drive south of Kurrawong. Nina had even arranged for her friend, Blue Uniform (that was the kids' name for her) to answer the mobile phone number listed on the website.

'Te Lares Trekking, can I help you? Yes, of course, ask any questions you like.' Blue Uniform had been Matron of the Little Flower Nursing Home and she knew how to reassure anxious relatives. She didn't like bamboozling people any more than Lucy did, but she agreed it had to be done.

The best thing about the plan was that they would naturally be out of mobile phone range on a horse trek – the perfect alibi. They might as well be in another country . . .

Feet pounding down the hall warned Lucy and she sat upright, lest she be jumped on. Ricardo burst into her bedroom, sweating even though it was a cold afternoon. 'Anything else?' he asked eagerly, his cheeks flushed.

He spied a sheepskin saddle pad poking out from under Lucy's bed and grabbed it. 'See you,' he called and cavorted sideways from the room, laughing gleefully. It used to take

wild horses to get Ricardo to help with anything, but the thought of being reunited with his pet golden monkey tonight in Telares had changed all that. He wouldn't shut up about it, but Lucy didn't care. In the past hour he had hauled all the horsy booty that Janella had collected over the past month up the hill behind their house, leaving it at the entrance of the tunnel that, somehow, mysteriously, led them to Telares.

'Mum didn't see you, did she?' Lucy asked anxiously. It would be a little tough to explain why they were dragging all their hard-won horse gear out into the bush. Ricardo looked at her scornfully.

'Of course not!'

Ricardo had even refrained from telling Mum about his golden monkey for the whole month – he just made up songs about it, that luckily were so far-fetched that Mum thought they were hilarious.

Lucy looked at the clock for the fiftieth time. Nina was going to pick them up late this afternoon to 'drive them to Te Lares'. What she would really do was drive everyone down the road for a pizza, wait until dark, drive back up the winding bush road, stop just before they reached the house – and let the kids disappear into the rainforest. The tunnel, Telares and their friends (except for one) would be waiting for them. And the Bull soldiers . . .

There was a knock at the front door and T-Tongue barked furiously. The enormous black 'puppy' with the white chest and white-tipped tail was even bigger than he'd been a month ago and just as enthusiastic. He threw himself at the door and whined joyfully when he heard Janella's voice outside. Lucy ran to open it. Her smile

slipped a little when she saw Janella's parents, because she felt bad about being part of this big lie – but the excited glow in Janella's face was contagious.

Janella hugged her. And then she hugged Ricardo. And then she hugged Lucy's mum.

'Pretty excited, huh?' grinned her dad, shaking his head.

'I'm cool,' said Janella, galloping back down the front stairs to haul another bag of horsy gear out of the car.

'I really don't think you need all that stuff,' her mum said, 'The website said Te Lares was fully equipped. You'll be able to open a saddlery at this rate.'

'I bet they don't know about—'

'Natural riding,' said her parents, Lucy's mum, Lucy and Ricardo. Resignedly.

And everyone laughed.

Then Nina and Blue Uniform pulled up in an orange-and-black double-cabin ute and the rush was on, because of course only Janella was ready.

3

Strangeroni Pizza



It was the strangest pizza Lucy had ever had. Sitting in the restaurant with the elderly Nina, whose long white plaits fell past her waist, and Blue Uniform in another of her magnificent tiger-print outfits, Lucy and Janella got disbelieving looks from the ten thousand or so kids from school who were buying takeaway that evening. But the girls didn't care. No one in Kurrawong was going to have anything like the weekend that was in store for them. Fear, leavened by a million bubbles of excitement, meant Lucy could barely stay in her seat. Ricardo couldn't. He kept jumping up to look in the drinks fridge until Blue Uniform hauled him back and said severely, 'Mrs Hawthorne has something serious to discuss, you monkey.' At the word 'monkey' Ricardo's eyes lit up and he started to wriggle again until Nina uttered the fateful words: 'The bad news is that my nephew is back in Telares.'

Everyone shut up and leaned forward.

'What's he doing there?' asked Lucy breathlessly. She couldn't ever quite wrap her head around the fact that

Nigel Adams – or Nigel Scar-Skull as she preferred to call him – was related to Nina. How could someone as nice as Nina be in the same family as the man who knowingly imported rugs and soccer balls made by child slaves in Telares? But, she thought, looking at Ricardo, no one got to choose their family.

‘We are not sure why Nigel is there, Lucy, but our spies tell us he has had several meetings with the Bull Commander,’ Nina said. ‘It is not looking good. You young people must operate with the utmost discretion.’

Lucy soaked all that up and then remembered something that had been bugging her during all their complex preparations.

‘How do we know for sure the Carpet of All Creation is still in Telares?’ she asked. ‘What’s the point of going all the way there if Nigel has flown it back to Kurrawong?’

‘That brings me to my good news,’ Nina said with a smile. ‘The rebels, the Telarian Tigers, have located the carpet.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I have been in contact with my dear sister Eleanor and it seems her husband, Eduardo’ – here Nina’s voice sank conspiratorially – ‘has his ways.’

Lucy could well imagine. Madam Eleanor’s softly spoken giant husband was formidable.

‘Well, why don’t Eduardo and the Tigers get the carpet back?’ asked Lucy, a small part of her hoping she could just nip into Telares, see her friends and come home again, telling her mum that horse-riding wasn’t really her thing. But that left out a little detail called Carlos. Where was he?

The last time she had seen him, he'd been horribly injured, shot in the leg by the Bull soldiers. She knew she had left him in good hands: Eduardo had promised to get him to a safe house and doctor. But was he really OK? She had asked herself this a thousand times. Lost in thought, Lucy did not register that Nina was speaking until Janella elbowed her in the ribs with a knowing look, as though she knew exactly what (and who) Lucy was thinking about.

Lucy blushed. 'Sorry. What did you say?'

'I said it is not so simple. The Bulls, you see, have locked down those parts of Telares they still control. You caused something of a stir, children, spiriting your friend Carlos away the way you did, and the Bulls reacted with a heavy boot. They raided many homes in the following days.'

Lucy's stomach sank. 'Madam Eleanor . . .?'

'My sister and her dear Eduardo have lived long enough to read the signs,' Nina said gently. 'By the time Eduardo returned with your young friend, Eleanor had already packed her houseboat. And it was not long before she and Eduardo had set up that rather impressive computer bank in another grand old house some way up the river – in the utmost secrecy, I can assure you. And (with a compassionate glance at Lucy) Carlos is still with them. He is, I'm told, responding well to treatment. And he is very patient when a certain grand-niece of mine demands he reads countless stories to her.'

'How is Angel?' asked Lucy quickly, partly because she really wanted to know, and partly because Janella had begun to grin at the mention of Carlos and Ricardo had launched into a snorting giggle.

‘That strange little girl, as I am sure you are aware, has a habit of running her own affairs,’ Nina said quietly. ‘For the most part she is well, apart from . . .’

‘Apart from what?’ said all three kids, leaning forward urgently.

‘Some unexplained disappearances. At least they were unexplained until Euphoria informed me of some of Angel’s more unusual activities.’

At the mention of the Tiger-cat, the faces of all three kids lit up, but none more than Lucy’s.

‘I haven’t seen the Tiger-cat for a month. I was starting to get worried!’ she said breathlessly.

‘Euphoria is in splendid form,’ said Nina, looking distinctly cat-like herself as her face crinkled into its familiar ginger smile and her eyes shone golden behind her cat’s-eye glasses. ‘But she is a feline with much to do. I have learned not to make demands.’

‘What did the Tiger-cat say Angel was doing?’ demanded Ricardo at the top of his voice, making a passing waiter swing about and almost drop his tray of drinks. With a shock, Lucy realised the waiter was Blake Edwards. Their eyes locked – and he really did drop his tray.

Poor Blake had never got over that scene in the bus just before Easter, when Lucy had tigered him out in front of his friends. Now he was on hands and knees desperately trying to pick up broken glass and ice cubes. A big man from behind the drinks bar strode up, impatience in each step. ‘Not again!’ he muttered and Blake looked mortified. Before Lucy knew what she was doing she was out of her chair and squatting next to Blake, helping him pick up ice.

‘Sorry,’ she said loudly, so the frowning barman could

hear. 'My brother really shouldn't have stuck his leg out like that. Apart from school, we haven't let him out in public for a year, and it will be another year before we do again.' Blake looked at her disbelievingly and the barman appeared equally startled.

'I don't suppose you often have primary-school kids attacking your staff,' Lucy said understandingly to the barman. 'Don't worry, we're seeking professional help for him. These two consultants' – she indicated Nina and Blue Uniform, who managed to look suitably professional and concerned under the circumstances – 'say they can help him. They've already given us some great ideas this evening. If you don't mind, we'll just finish our pizzas and then we'll get him out of here.'

Janella was trying not to laugh and managed to look as though she was crying instead.

'Please enjoy the rest of your meal,' the barman said with a tight smile and then, to Blake, far more kindly, 'I'll get a broom.' As his boss turned to go, shaking his head at the strange ways of guests, Blake shot Lucy a bewildered but grateful glance.

Lucy, feeling a distinctly feline satisfaction, thought she'd better get back to her seat before she started to purr and freaked Blake out all over again with her tigerish talents. He had learned the hard way not to bully her. One memorable afternoon on the school bus, when Lucy had been pushed too far, she had let a mighty roar build up in her chest, fixed him with her tiger eyes – and watched him tremble before all his friends.

'I believe we were discussing Angel,' Nina said, interrupting Ricardo's outraged defence of his own character.

‘I have been informed that Angel has developed the habit of wandering into the jungle around Telares City for hours at a time. If she were any other child I would be alarmed but she has . . . matured in certain ways since you last saw her. She is only five years old, but in many ways seems so much older.’

Lucy knew exactly what Nina meant. She had always had that feeling about the tiny girl with the black eyes.

‘And she has developed certain skills.’

‘What skills?’ said three eager voices.

‘That I will tell you another day. Now, I believe we have something much more pressing to discuss. The Bull soldiers have locked down the area of the country where our spies tell us the Carpet of All Creation has been concealed. It has been installed on a loom in yet another jungle camp, and the Bull Commander has ordered more slave children be trained to weave it. Of course, he has no idea of the real pattern. Nevertheless, the Commander is obsessively determined it will be completed, correct design or not. He has the carpet under heavy guard.’

She inclined her head towards Lucy. ‘Of course, Lucy is correct, it would be so much easier if the Telares Tigers sent a raiding party in to seize the carpet, but you must understand that for the rebel leadership a piece of ‘folk art’ (as they see it) is not a priority. Out of loyalty and gratitude to Eduardo and Eleanor for all their services to the Tigers, the leaders did send out their spies to locate the carpet for us, but an outright raid on the camp – that, I am afraid, is out of the question.’

A tense silence fell on the table, finally broken by Lucy.

'You mean we are in this alone? Madam Eleanor and Eduardo can't help?'

'Yes, and no,' agreed Nina gently. 'I'm afraid it is up to you children to retrieve the carpet again. We have, however, been able to secure a map for you.'

She passed a folded sheet of paper to each of the three children. 'Memorise this – and then dispose of it so it does not fall into the wrong hands.'

The children studied their maps carefully, even Ricardo maintaining silent concentration.

'We estimate the camp is a night's ride into the mountains from the Telares end of the tunnel,' Nina said. 'You should be there by dawn, if all goes well.'

'So let's get going,' said Lucy.

'Waiter!' said Blue Uniform crisply, snapping her fingers in the air.

When Blue Uniform had paid, the barman escorted the party all the way to the front door – after first waiting for Ricardo to finish chewing what appeared to be a piece of paper.

4

Flying Tunnel Class



T-Tongue, who had been waiting patiently in the ute, was delighted to see them and even more delighted to get a slice of peperoni pizza. They all piled in and drove back up the mountain road towards the Mermaid House, keeping a close eye out for Mum's car.

Parked in the shelter of some trees just off the road, they said their farewells to Nina and Blue Uniform.

'I still don't understand why you're flying to Telares tonight, instead of coming through the tunnel with us,' Lucy said.

Blue Uniform snorted. 'I will believe all this nonsense about a "magic" tunnel when I see you in Telares City,' she said. 'Much as I have grown fond of you children, I can't take all this seriously. But Mrs Hawthorne believes you and your stories, and my job is to make sure she doesn't get into any more trouble than she has to. So, there'll be no swinging down into pits and wandering around getting lost in old mine shafts. It's a nice comfy aeroplane for us.'

Nina smiled. 'What my friend has failed to mention is that she has raised a large sum of money to purchase medications and bandages for hospitals in Telares that have completely run out of such supplies. She has collected far too much to carry through a tunnel, even if she were prepared to accept the existence of such a thing. So, we are on a humanitarian mission. We consider it Kurrawong's gift to Telares. I only hope Nigel hasn't found out yet, and given us away to the airport authorities.'

Lucy shivered. 'Be careful. Remember, the Bulls murdered Carlos' parents.'

'And took my niece prisoner,' Nina reminded her gently. 'And enslaved Angel. No, the brutality of the Bulls is not news to me. I will take every precaution.'

'I guess it is goodbye then,' said Lucy. 'But how will we find you when we have rescued the carpet? How do we talk to you?' As she spoke, T-Tongue began to whine excitedly and she felt a strong, furry body rubbing and twisting sinuously about her calves and shins. 'About time,' she said delightedly to the Tiger-cat purring at her feet. 'I was getting really worried about you.'

'I believe our communication system has just arrived,' Nina smiled. 'Hello Euphoria.'

Lucy scratched behind the strangely rounded ears of the striped Tiger-cat. The creature purred loudly, a sound that always made Lucy catch her breath.

'Enough of this. I must insist we depart,' Blue Uniform said briskly. 'We simply cannot afford to miss our flight.'

As the ute sped off down Old Mine Road, the children melted into the shadows, following the lithe shape and white ear-spots of the Tiger-cat as it loped deep into the

forest and cut back up the mountain towards the entrance to the tunnel.

They could see through the trees the lights of houses, burning further and further apart the higher the bush road climbed. And the last lights of all shone from the Mermaid House. Lucy cast a final longing look in its direction as they reached the mossy stairs where this wild adventure had begun just a few months ago. Waiting for them in a pool of moonlight at the base of the stairs was a rickety old wheelbarrow.

‘Is that how you moved all that horse stuff?’

‘Up here for thinking,’ said Ricardo smugly. ‘I found it in the shed.’

‘Where’s the gear?’ Lucy asked.

‘I used the rope to lower it all down into the pit and then I hid it in the tunnel,’ said Ricardo, wounded. ‘I wouldn’t just leave it where anyone could see it.’

Janella laughed. ‘You’re a genius, Ricardo,’ she said. ‘Help me get the wheelbarrow up the stairs. I had no idea how we were going to carry all my stuff into Telares.’

‘I kind of hoped I was going to talk you out of it,’ said Lucy ruefully.

They hauled the wheelbarrow up the stairs and lashed the rope that always hung from the tree above the pit around its front wheel. The moon was not yet high enough in the sky to illuminate the depths of the steep pit, but with every moment Lucy’s cat’s eyes were yawning and stretching themselves awake, soaking up every available ray of light. Her heart missed a beat as a pile of rubble and broken timber at the bottom of the pit came into focus. That meant only one thing: the tunnel to Telares was open.

As if she had been waiting for Lucy to notice, the Tiger-cat gave an impatient yowl. Hurriedly, the kids began to lower the barrow down. It took the strength of all three to land it gently on the floor of the pit. Tail lashing, the Tiger-cat leaped down after it. T-Tongue gave out a strangled yelp and followed. Lucy, Janella and Ricardo stood on the lip of the pit in the moonlight and stared at the gaping hole that led into the mountain.

Lucy felt that familiar hunting feeling rise through the soles of her feet into her bones. Her cat self was now fully awake. She took a big breath, crouched and sprang, landing neatly on the floor of the pit as Ricardo abseiled down, grinning with excitement. She expected to see Janella haul the rope back up and do the same but her friend stamped each foot and leaped, with all the panache of a show jumper at the Royal Easter Show. Then she trotted into the tunnel with the wheelbarrow, saying cheerfully over her shoulder, 'You're not the only one who's learned a thing or two.'

Lucy and Ricardo sprang after her and soon all three were enveloped in darkness – the bat senses they had acquired in earlier adventures stretching out to listen to the permanent night of the tunnel. It wasn't really listening, but that's how Lucy liked to think about it. Much as she had hated being swooped on by bats, the sonar gift they had given was invaluable, letting her find her way easily in the dark.

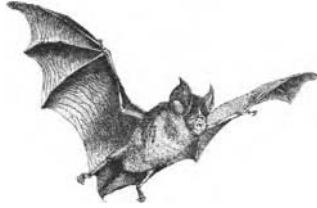
They made excellent speed, taking it in turns to push the barrow. Soon a whiff of water and a stir of fresher air told them they were approaching the fork in the tunnel. Lucy felt the emptiness that marked the long passage to the River of Souls, stretching away on one side.

They sped down the other tunnel towards the Telarian exit and soon the bat cave yawned about them.

‘This place still gives me the creeps,’ whispered Janella. ‘Me too,’ agreed Lucy, ‘but I tell myself I’m almost in Telares.’ At those words Ricardo put on a burst of speed and Lucy rushed to catch him, leaving Janella with the barrow. A strident miaow urged them on as they rounded the final bend. Lucy felt sandy soil underfoot and saw moonlight spilling gently through the curtain of greenery that protected the entry to Telares. The Tiger-cat leaped, the vines fell away and Lucy stepped onto Telarian soil – and fell to the ground, crying out involuntarily as a tremor shook every bone in her body.

5

Earthshaking Discovery



Lucy hauled herself upright (the only way to stop T-Tongue licking her face) and stood trembling under the bright Telarian full moon.

‘What happened?’ Janella whispered anxiously.

‘I don’t know. It felt as though the whole world was trembling.’ Lucy shook her head, trying to clear a dreadful ringing from her ears.

‘Jump into the wheelbarrow – I’ll push you.’

Lucy smiled gratefully but shook her head. ‘I’m fine, really, but we’d better be quiet. There could be Bulls close,’ she whispered.

She felt the brush of the Tiger-cat’s fur against her legs, the creature’s rumbling purr reassuringly loud. If there were any Bulls around, there was no way the Tiger-cat would be so relaxed. But then she stiffened at a vibration underneath her feet. Was that weird shaking pain coming back? At the same time Janella threw her head up, sniffed the air enthusiastically and stamped both feet. Ricardo let out a strangled screech and leaped into

the nearest tree, swinging gleefully through its branches. T-Tongue gave one excited bark and then, at Lucy's command, dropped, whimpering in anticipation. Lucy fell to the ground too, but this time she was in control, palms flat on the earth.

'They're coming!' Personal jinx.

Into the clearing trotted a glorious horse, as dark as the night itself, and trotting to meet it was Janella, singing for joy.

And then the jungle glade seemed filled with stamping, snuffling beasts and Lucy was stepping up to high-five Rahel astride her grey horse, which shone silver under the moon. She was leading the strong, dark one Lucy had ridden during their rescue of Carlos. Pablo, grinning from ear to ear, rode his glowing chestnut, and led a smaller grey pony. Out of the corner of her eye Lucy saw a streak of dull gold leap into the branches of the tree Ricardo had climbed, with Toro and another golden flash not far behind. The monkey business had begun.

Under that same tree, its reins dragging, another small grey pony was grazing peacefully, seemingly unconcerned at the delighted squealing that had broken out just above its head.

'You made it!' Lucy said excitedly to her friends. Her voice dropped to a whisper. 'Is it safe? Are there any Bull soldiers about.'

'We don't think so,' Rahel said confidently. 'We've combed the jungle carefully and there's no sign of anyone. But even if there had been a platoon of Bulls, nothing would have prevented us from coming here tonight.' Rahel, usually so calm, was bubbling with excitement.

‘However, we were exceedingly concerned your party would be delayed in Kurrawong!’

‘We weren’t having a party,’ called Ricardo from the trees. ‘Should we have one now?’

‘She means us, monkey-brain, we’re the party.’ Then Lucy rounded on Rahel and scolded her good-humouredly. ‘As if we could wait to get here! Janella would have flown here if she had to – anything to see her precious horses!’

Rahel and Pablo laughed as they looked at Janella, still crooning softly to her stallion, who was on his fiftieth carrot by the look of the almost-empty bag in her hand.

With a flourish Rahel handed the reins of the brown horse to Lucy. ‘It is time for you to be reacquainted with your friend.’

‘Well, friend is probably stretching it, but I’ll give it a go,’ said Lucy, looking warily about for the Tiger-cat in case she spooked the horses into a stampede right over the top of her. She led the brown mare into a brighter patch of moonlight. ‘Hello,’ she said awkwardly, and felt in her pocket for the pieces of apple she had prepared for just this moment. ‘Remember me?’

As if in answer, the horse nickered and nuzzled her pockets. ‘You want some more? Here you go, Greedy.’ By the time her pockets were empty, Lucy had lost her nervousness and the mare seemed entirely comfortable in her presence. Lucy put her foot in the stirrup and the horse stood quietly while she swung up into the saddle.

‘Well, I guess you’d better have a name,’ she said. ‘What should we call this horse, T-Tongue?’ But T-Tongue just looked up at her, crouching with his ears on full alert, as though ready to give chase if the horse moved one step

away. After last time, Lucy didn't blame him for not wanting to be left behind.

'All right, I guess I'll think about it as we go,' said Lucy, rubbing the strong, arched neck and trying to remember anything *Horses for Dummies* had said. Looking about, she noticed the world looked completely different from on horseback. Suddenly she was enjoying herself. She looked across to find Rahel and Pablo grinning at her.

'The horses are in very excellent condition, yes?' said Rahel proudly. Lucy had to agree. Even at night, it was clear their coats were shiny and they looked sleek and well muscled.

'We have spent many hours learning how to care for them,' said Pablo happily. 'We brush them and clean out their hooves and take them to the kind of grass they like best.'

'Aunt Larissa and the other rebel leaders were very angry with us for running away, but when they saw that we had taken horses from the Bull army, even they were impressed,' laughed Rahel.

'So then,' Pablo said, proudly gesturing towards the two grey ponies, 'we went back to Telares City and got some more for Ricardo and Toro.'

'Good on you,' said Lucy delightedly.

'And thanks so much for looking after them,' said Janella, beaming. 'I missed them every single day.'

'No worries,' said Rahel and Pablo in their best imitation of Lucy, and everyone laughed.

'I believe they missed you too,' said Rahel, without a hint of jealousy, as the two grey ponies trotted up for a scratch from Janella. 'Even the ones that have never met you before!'

‘Have you ever fallen off?’ Lucy asked the Telarians.

‘Only when the headaches come upon me,’ said Rahel darkly, rubbing her shoulder gingerly. ‘Like the one I had a few minutes ago.’

‘Me too!’ cried Lucy. ‘It felt as though the whole world was shaking.’

‘I believe it was,’ said Rahel quietly. ‘With the snake sense that you and I share, we can feel it before anyone else.’

‘You mean, I was feeling an earthquake?’ Lucy’s voice rose a note.

‘I believe so,’ said Rahel sombrely. ‘I studied this phenomenon in zoology texts when I was in the tiger reserve. Time and again scientists have noted that the behaviour of snakes changes about five days before humans detect an earthquake on their seismographs. Now they are starting to keep snakes as alarms. They are not sure how or why, but snakes certainly seem to know the warning signs of earthquakes. I believe that you and I are feeling the first early tremors.’

‘Which means we haven’t got much time,’ breathed Lucy. ‘We have to get the Carpet of All Creation back before the earthquake triggers a tsunami and Telares is flooded!’ As she said the words, the memory rose unbidden of Telares City a month ago, when Madam Eleanor had revealed the secret of her Telarian ancestors, the story of the terrible injustice done to the weaver of the first Carpet of All Creation, and the magical gift passed down through the generations of her family. The family had carried the burden of protecting Telares ever since. For the island to be saved, Madam Eleanor and Nina must

complete the partly woven Carpet of All Creation that Nigel Scar-Skull had stolen. But first the kids had to get it back.

‘Yet we have no clue as to the carpet’s whereabouts,’ Rahel said despondently.

‘Yes we do,’ said Lucy and Janella. And both girls pulled from their pockets the maps Nina had given them in the restaurant.

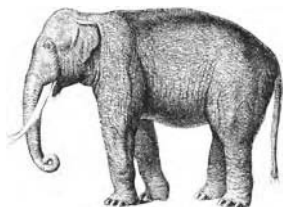
There was an outraged screech from a nearby tree.

‘Hey! That’s not fair. You were supposed to eat them!’

And to Rahel and Pablo’s bewilderment, Lucy and Janella almost fell off their horses laughing.

6

Tacking Up



‘Where did you get these?’ Rahel asked wonderingly, squinting at the map markings. Cats’ eyes were fine for prowling through the jungle at night, but not much good for map-reading.

‘Nina gave them to us. She said the Tigers owed Eduardo and Madam Eleanor a few favours. I think it was their way of saying thanks, even though they don’t believe in the prophecy of the Carpet of All Creation . . .’

‘Not even my aunt Larissa does,’ Rahel interrupted with a disgusted snort.

‘It doesn’t matter. They tracked down the Bull Commander anyway, and sure enough he does have the carpet,’ continued Lucy. ‘Nina says his new camp is about a night’s ride from here, over the mountains.’ She handed her torch to Rahel.

‘This map says the Commander has set up his camp in the Tiger Lands!’ exclaimed Rahel.

Pablo abandoned his usual politeness and grabbed Janella’s map and torch. ‘It is true,’ he breathed.

‘Well, I don’t know anything about the Tiger Lands, but your rebels tracked him down and wherever it shows on the map is where they found him.’

‘He will be shooting tigers on the reserve, I am sure of it.’ Rahel’s voice was hard. ‘After what the tiger did to him at the jungle jail, he hates them. And after what we did to him at the hospital in Telares City . . .’ her voice trailed off.

Suddenly, Lucy was back in the garden of the hospital where Carlos had been held prisoner. She remembered her tiger self in full growl, teeth bared, hungry for the Commander’s blood. She shook herself and patted her horse’s neck to snap herself back into the present. ‘It’s all right,’ she told the mare, ‘I’m a sweet teenager from Kurrawong. Tiger Girl doesn’t come out unless I let her.’

Her horse just kept munching away at the grass, but at least Lucy’s words had distracted Rahel and made her laugh.

‘I understand why you say this,’ the Telarian girl said ruefully.

Pablo nodded. ‘At first the horses were a little wary of us after Janella left, as if they thought we would turn into tigers again, but we kept taking them to the sweetest grass we could find and soon they became our friends,’ he said proudly.

‘But you still practise being tigers, don’t you?’ Lucy asked.

Rahel and Pablo grinned at each other.

‘Only when we are not supposed to leave the rebel base,’ Rahel answered.

‘So, that would be . . . every afternoon,’ Pablo said straight-faced. ‘It’s easy. We don’t even have to be mad at anyone to turn into tigers now,’ he added.

‘But we never let the horses see us,’ Rahel was quick to reassure Janella, who was looking extremely concerned.

Lucy giggled. ‘Good. You know, there are still people who think they see tigers in Kurrawong. Usually on a Friday afternoon during Geography.’ She couldn’t resist purring a little at the thought, but Janella, who didn’t approve at all of Lucy’s extracurricular activities, soon put a stop to that. With an innocent smile she asked the others, ‘Have you heard from Carlos? Nina says he is with Eduardo and Madam Eleanor.’

Lucy felt herself blushing and was glad of the night shadows. Janella was her best friend, but that didn’t stop her teasing Lucy about Carlos at any opportunity. It was even worse if Ricardo joined in. Luckily, he had climbed so far up the tree with Toro and their golden monkeys, he could no longer hear anything they were saying.

Lucy’s friendship with Carlos had not come easily. They had to learn to trust each other. Together, when Ricardo was kidnapped, they had dared to challenge the Bull Commander. When Carlos himself was shot and captured Lucy was devastated and risked her life to help. Back in Kurrawong, she had thought about him every day. She had to admit she liked Carlos more than any other boy she had ever met.

She had finally confided in Janella, who simply said, ‘Well, duuhh! Anybody could see you liked Carlos. How come it took you so long to work it out?’ And she had cracked up laughing.

Rahel, oblivious to Lucy’s thoughts, said, ‘Larissa tells me Carlos is in very good health, but I am convinced she

was keeping something from me. She says the rebels in Telares City are looking after him and not to worry. She says for security reasons she cannot reveal anything else. As if I would divulge anything of importance! It is extremely aggravating.'

Lucy shared what little news they had. 'Well, Nina says Eduardo and Madam Eleanor had to get out of their house in Pasadena Square because the Bulls were going to raid. They took Carlos with them. Nina says the Tiger-cat keeps her informed and Carlos' leg is good. And Madam Eleanor has set up her computer hacking office somewhere else. And Nina and Blue Uniform are on their way to Telares tonight.'

The Telarians had heard many stories about how Nina and Blue Uniform had helped the children, but suddenly Lucy remembered that she had not told them the best one, about how Nigel had organised a funeral for his aunt, but Nina had wrecked it by showing up alive and getting her picture on the front page of the *Kurrawong Crier* and on the TV news.

'And the paper and the TV had all this stuff about Nigel selling Ten Star Jumbo soccer balls and carpets and how they are made by child slaves,' Lucy said triumphantly.

'Then our letter to the newspaper alerting them to this outrage was successful!' Rahel cried.

The Telarians were so elated they didn't ask anything further about Carlos, which suited Lucy.

'But when are Nina and Blue Uniform coming to Telares?' asked Pablo.

'And how?' asked Rahel, her tone telling Lucy just what she was worried about.

‘No, silly, we didn’t show them the tunnel,’ Lucy reassured her. ‘But, remember, Nina already knew about it. She owns the Mermaid House, after all. Anyway, they’re flying over on an aeroplane tonight, and they’ll be in Telares City in the morning. So we’ve got to find the carpet as quickly as possible so she and Madam Eleanor can get weaving,’ she said firmly.

‘But how will we know where to take it, if we manage to get it back?’ asked Rahel.

‘The Tiger-cat is back in business,’ said Lucy. ‘She’ll tell us what to do.’ The Tiger-cat had a talent for showing up at the right time with a video clip and Lucy hoped nothing had changed.

Rahel looked dubious. She went on. ‘Our route is hazardous and it will take us all night to reach the camp. Then we must plan our attack, secure the carpet and transport it to Nina and Madam Eleanor, wherever they are, and then . . . there are far too many flaws in this project.’

‘If it’s going to take us all night to get there, we’d better get moving,’ Janella said. She seemed to have adopted another more excitable personality now she was back with her horses. She urged her mount to turn and head towards the jungle. ‘We can make plans as we ride.’

‘But you don’t even know where you’re going,’ Lucy called after her, hauling on the reins to stop her own horse from following, but succeeding only in half slipping out of the saddle.

‘It’s not me that has to know!’ Janella called over her shoulder blithely, her long blonde plait swinging silver. ‘Dark Star knows where to go. And he’s told your horses too.’

And she disappeared into the trees. Sure enough, all the other horses wanted to go too. Even the two grey ponies that had been quietly grazing under the trees now trotted after Janella and Dark Star. Lucy struggled to hold her mount as she shouted at Ricardo to get down from his tree and catch his pony. Rahel too was urging Toro to hurry up. Combined, they were making such a ruckus that any Bull within five kilometres would hear them. Then Lucy spotted the wheelbarrow. 'You forgot something,' she called after Janella. Her friend must have been circling the clearing in the darkness, because she trotted back from the other direction, grinning, Dark Star stamping proudly.

'This is so great,' she said.

'OK, crazy horse girl, but what are we going to do with all this stuff? We can't just leave it for the Bulls to find,' Lucy said exasperated, pointing at the overflowing barrow.

'Now, let me see,' said Janella alighting, her eagerness to be gone momentarily reined in. 'Please, everyone, dismount.'

'Why?' asked Rahel and Pablo together.

'Just do what she says,' Lucy said resignedly. 'It will take far too long to argue with her.'

With everyone on the ground, Janella began to hum softly. Dark Star had not left her side and as the sound rose in pitch, all the other horses walked quietly to Janella, necks outstretched, sniffing first Dark Star and then the teenager curiously. They stood quietly while Janella took off their bridles and bits and replaced them with simple halters. Lucy checked the wheelbarrow and counted another twenty halters in there. Twenty! Apparently Janella had ambitions of expanding her herd. Janella put

smaller saddles, bought from twin girls at a garage sale especially for the smaller boys, on the two greys. Then she produced light saddles for everyone else, and saddlebags and bright blankets which did nothing to help them blend into the jungle but did make the horses look less like army escapees. When they were all tacked up, Janella began to hum more loudly to each horse in turn, rubbing them gently behind the high point between their shoulders, which Lucy knew from *Horses for Dummies* was called the withers. After a few minutes of this treatment, Lucy was rolling her eyes impatiently, but the horses seemed to be rolling their eyes in ecstasy. Ricardo and Toro, who had quickly established the saddlebags were the perfect size to hold their golden monkeys, were wriggling in their eagerness to get going, and it was all Lucy and Rahel could do to restrain them. Finally Janella came out of her trance, looking very pleased with herself.

‘The horses will do whatever you need them to now,’ she said. ‘Dark Star and I have explained the situation. And they say they never want to wear bits again. And they definitely don’t want to go back to the Bull army ever, ever, again.’

‘If it’s OK with the horses, could we go now?’ asked Lucy dryly.

But she was talking to the night air. Swift as an acrobat, Janella had swung expertly into the saddle and disappeared into the jungle.

Lucy shook her head and hauled herself into her saddle with much less panache. ‘Janella’s gone a little mad, but we still love her,’ she assured Rahel and Pablo. ‘We’d better catch her up. C’mon, T-Tongue!’

At first Lucy felt like a sack of potatoes, bouncing all over the saddle, but soon she got the hang of rising up and down in time with the horse's trot, the way *Horses for Dummies* had described. She kept turning anxiously to check that T-Tongue was keeping up, but he didn't seem to be having any trouble, even running ahead sometimes to sniff the trail. And Janella was right, the horses did seem to know where they were going. It wasn't long before they caught up to Janella, waiting at a curve in the track. Rahel urged her horse up to the head of the party and addressed them.

'From this point on, we really must be silent,' she cautioned. 'I have no information regarding who controls this section of forest, but I have no enthusiasm to meet either side, especially not my Aunt Larissa. We were not supposed to leave our camp and she may already be searching for us. And please remember, we are following an ancient trail through extremely wild country. Anything could eventuate.'

Lucy didn't need telling. As they rode deeper and deeper into the jungle, every feline instinct urged caution. Even on horseback, she felt that familiar hunting feeling rise in her bones, and her heightened senses were tuned to the tiniest sounds, every crack of twig, every rustle of leaves. Part of her wished she was prowling the jungle track, following the Tiger-cat's white ear-spots. But Lucy had to admit that it was great fun being up high on such a magnificent strong beast as this horse. Now that she had got the hang of trotting, Lucy was enjoying the sensation of speed. The horse seemed to eat up the distance in easy strides and Lucy got the impression it could go all night,

like one of those African long-distance runners in the Olympics who smiled while they ran even though everyone else looked as if they were about to die. Lucy stroked the mare's neck and bent to whisper, 'Well, there's no way I'm calling you something wet like Dark Star, but how about we call you . . . Marathon? Mara for short.'

7

Caught by Surprise



When they finally stopped, the moon still shone brightly but had begun to slip into the western sky and the small boys were swaying in their saddles from exhaustion. The horses had, apparently by mutual consent, slowed to a walk some time before and Lucy had felt the sweat on Marathon gradually dry. Eventually, Dark Star led the party off the track and Lucy soon smelt water. Then they arrived at a clearing near a running stream and she dismounted gratefully. Muscles she hadn't known about ached and her legs felt like jelly. She stumbled and leaned against Marathon, who smelled strongly but pleasantly of horse.

'I am soooo tired,' she exclaimed, not caring who heard her.

'Shhhh,' said Rahel, but she put her arm sympathetically around Lucy's shoulders and helped her collapse on the grass under a tree. 'It is hard at first, no? Pablo and I are a little stiff, but we have got a lot of practice in since last full moon.'

They both watched Janella leap nimbly off Dark Star, as though she undertook all-night horse treks regularly, and walk with free-swinging stride up to them, grinning. In contrast, Toro and Ricardo almost fell off their ponies and stumbled over without saying a word, not even bothering to let their monkeys out of their saddlebags. Within seconds, Ricardo was snoring on the ground. The others couldn't help giggling.

Of one mind, the horses plodded into the stream and stood knee-deep, slurping the water greedily. Her charges happy, Janella rummaged in her backpack and passed chocolate around. Not even the sound of crinkling silver foil, which he could usually pick up from a distance of a kilometre, disturbed Ricardo's slumber, but a piece of chocolate waved under his nostrils did the trick.

'Hey, where's mine?' he demanded, and sat up.

When Lucy could walk again, she drank from the stream and took off her riding boots and socks to soak her feet. Limping gratefully back to the others, her cat's eyes picked up the stones of a circular fireplace under a tree. She placed her palm over the ashes. They were cold.

'Someone has been here, but not recently,' she warned Rahel.

The Telarian shrugged. 'It is a traditional resting place. Travellers pause here to prepare themselves for the assault.'

'What assault?' said Lucy, looking about nervously.

'Our next challenge,' said Rahel. 'Observe behind.' Lucy turned and saw a dark mountain mass silhouetted against the moonlit sky.

‘The mountain?’

‘Yes, but not just any mountain. That is Mount Katerina, from whence the River of Souls flows. We must climb no small distance up the south-eastern flank and then cut across and around to reach the lowlands where the Commander has his camp.’

‘Can’t we just go around it?’

Rahel began ticking off on her fingers.

‘If you prefer swamp, quicksand, and a suspected Bull training camp, then yes. Otherwise, no.’

‘OK, OK,’ Lucy flung up her hands in mock surrender. ‘The scary mountain it is.’

‘Are we ready?’ called Janella eagerly, already walking towards Dark Star.

To collective groans, the others hauled their boots on. Lucy limped towards Marathon, who was munching grass near the stream. As she passed under the branches of a tree, her warning senses kicked into overdrive – but it was too late. A strong grip pinned her arms to her sides and a hand was clamped over her mouth. ‘Not a word, little hunter,’ a voice hissed. Lucy struggled but her assailant was too strong. She tried to bite the hand over her mouth, but couldn’t even bare her teeth. She heard T-Tongue’s urgent bark and then her captor shrieked and lost his grip. Lucy struggled up as T-Tongue chased her assailant into the bushes, eager for a second bite. Rahel and Pablo were straining to get free from the shadowy figures that held them. Only Janella, astride Dark Star, had managed to avoid capture, but then a shadow dropped from the tree above and hung tight to her back. Janella twisted to grapple with her

attacker and the horse reared up, hooves flailing, screaming in fury.

Lucy felt strong hands grab her again. ‘T-Tongue!’ she screamed before a hand closed over her mouth, but the dog was charging across the clearing to where another dark figure was bundling Ricardo up like a bag of potatoes and hauling him away. Lucy felt a familiar tingling in her feet. She stopped struggling and went floppy, surprising her captor into momentarily relaxing his grip. In that second Lucy took a deep breath, caught and controlled the rumbling in her chest – bunched her muscles and broke free with a mighty snarl. In two bounds she sprang to face her little brother’s attacker, teeth and claws bared, crouched for the kill. With a cry, the person dropped Ricardo, who scurried up the nearest tree in two seconds flat.

Then all hell broke loose as the horses screamed and wheeled in panic and stampeded across the stream.

‘My monkey!’ implored Ricardo from his tree, as a little golden head emerged from a retreating saddlebag. He scampered down and took off after the horses. But it was Janella’s high C note that cut through Lucy’s feline intent and she blinked, taking her furious eyes for a second off the attacker still frozen before her. Dark Star was bucking insanely and the shadow still trying to cling to Janella’s back slipped to the ground with a sickening thump and lay still. But Janella, for all the world like a rodeo jumper, leaned back in the saddle, one arm flung back to balance herself – and kept singing for all she was worth.

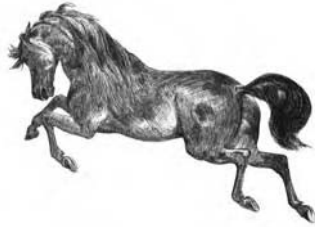
Somehow the craziness of the scene got through to Lucy’s human self. She shuddered back into her own skin, to find herself staring at a ponytailed figure in a ninja

suit – who shone a torch in her face and screamed. Lucy moved to kick the torch from the person’s hand, but whoever it was had already crumpled onto the ground, unmoving. She shook her head to clear her cat’s eyes. She turned in time to see two other tigers, crouched snarling over ninja-suited figures, blur before her eyes and become once again the familiar shapes of Rahel and Pablo.

Then a hiss of horror from Rahel. ‘Larissa?’

8

Now Do You Believe Me?



'Larissa, what are you doing here?' demanded Rahel.

Lucy couldn't help thinking this was not the most diplomatic of questions when you had once again run away from home, even if that home was a cave.

Rahel's aunt's thoughts must have been tending in a similar direction. She snapped something in Telarian and those ninja attackers still able to walk slipped obediently back to her side – then a furious argument broke out between her and Rahel, not a word of which Lucy could understand. Pablo joined in, and all of a sudden it seemed everyone was looking at Lucy.

The group fell silent. There was a scuffling at Lucy's feet. Holding tight to T-Tongue's collar, she stared incredulously at the man on the ground before her. 'Ponytail Zombie?'

He scrambled up and took off into the jungle.

Larissa issued a sharp command and, to Lucy's surprise, the panicked rebel stopped and trudged unwillingly back, avoiding all eye contact with Lucy. Then he too began to

argue heatedly with Larissa, with many arm gestures in Lucy's direction.

As his voice rose, Larissa put up her hand to stop him. 'Enough!' she snapped in English and strode up to Lucy. 'If you truly can assume the shape of a tiger, do it again now, before all of us, and convince me once and for all that we were not hallucinating.'

'They can do it too,' said Lucy weakly, gesturing at Rahel and Pablo.

'Let's all do it,' said Pablo happily. Rahel didn't need to be asked twice, padding over to join Lucy with a triumphant glance at her aunt. The group of rebels took a pace back and Ponytail Zombie covered his eyes. He'd had enough psycho encounters with Lucy in previous adventures to last a lifetime.

'Sit, boy,' Lucy said to T-Tongue. 'It's all right.' She padded into a patch of moonlight for the benefit of those without cat's eyes. 'Ready?' she asked, holding out her hands to her friends. 'Ready,' they said eagerly and as their hands connected, Lucy felt electricity surge between them. It was not as overwhelming as when they had joined forces to save Carlos, but the link was strong enough for showing off.

Lucy felt that familiar bubbling of energy in blood and bone, and as she breathed, she drew energy from the earth itself. The roar rose through her body and rumbled sweetly in her chest. She held it, controlled it, savoured it, then the surge of energy from her friends was gone – but who minded, when hands became paws and all three teenagers were crouched on the ground,

drinking in the night scents, tiger senses awhisker in the moonlight?

It was as though Lucy's human self watched from a great height, enjoying the spectacle of her feline self padding towards the rebels. Her fearsome roar was held to a mere rumble in her chest as she watched the rebels step backwards, Ponytail Zombie shrinking completely out of sight behind Larissa.

T-Tongue gave an outraged yelp. Enough, Lucy's human sense insisted, and reluctantly her tiger self gave way. She shivered back into her body, smiling like a Cheshire cat at the rebels' awed faces. Pablo and Rahel, back in their own skins, clearly shared her satisfaction.

'Now do you believe?' asked Rahel triumphantly.

But Larissa's attention was taken by a wild neigh. Lucy turned in time to see Janella and Dark Star trotting through from the other side of the stream, the herd of runaways following. Janella must have taken off after them in the confusion. Holding their reins loosely, Janella was still singing, but at least a little more quietly. Astride the grey ponies, clinging to the saddles like tiny jockeys, were two golden monkeys. The smaller heads of two other golden monkeys poked out of the saddlebags.

Hang on! Four golden monkeys?

'Toro?' asked Rahel, thunderstruck.

'Ricardo?' asked Lucy, with dawning horror.

Four monkeys leaped from the ponies and scrambled up into the trees, screeching with glee.

Rahel turned to Larissa. 'There's something else we have

to tell you,' she began, but the Ponytail Zombie's hysterical laughter interrupted her. Lucy felt a giggle rising just like a roar and she didn't even try to contain it. She was still giggling when Janella reached her.

'What happened?' asked Janella. 'And why are you laughing? We've just been attacked by these people. Don't they know it's really cruel to freak horses out? Lucy, it's really not funny. Oh, yeah, and the little guys, they've learned . . .'

But Lucy's helpless laughter was soon echoed by Rahel and Pablo. Janella gave up and joined them. Larissa just shook her head in disgust.

When calm had been restored and Janella had fed everyone (rebels and all) chocolate, Larissa listened wordlessly as Rahel explained their mission and the story of the Carpet of All Creation.

'So, we weren't just running away for fun. We're trying to protect Telares,' Rahel finished on a pleading note. 'And you must admit, Larissa, some exceedingly strange events have occurred that support our story.'

'I have no choice but to believe the evidence of my own eyes,' Larissa conceded, 'and of my ears,' looking ruefully up into the tree where her nephew, who showed no eagerness to return to his human form, was indistinguishable from the other monkeys engaged in a screeching contest with each other.

'Toro!' she commanded. 'On behalf of the rebel leadership, I order you to get down here right now!' It did the trick. Sheepishly one of the larger golden monkeys swung down to the ground. Then Lucy detected a strange distur-

bance in the air – and Toro stood in front of his aunt, smiling proudly.

‘You didn’t know I could do that, did you?’

‘No!’ Personal jinx.

‘Ricardo!’ Lucy commanded, hoping to have the same success. All she earned was a rude shriek.

9

Word of a Ninja



When Lucy's party finally left the clearing, it was with the blessing of the rebel leadership. Larissa had walked a short distance away into a patch of moonlight with her satellite phone and commenced a brief conversation in Telarian. Lucy, who didn't understand a word of it, was suddenly struck by how small and thin Larissa was. With a start, Lucy realised she was taller. But Larissa moved with graceful confidence and had a definite air of command. The other rebels seemed content to follow her orders.

At one point in the phone conversation, Larissa threw back her head and laughed.

'What is she saying?' begged Lucy.

'I cannot tell you,' said Rahel, vexed. 'She is speaking in some kind of code. Something about a party at a country club. And some extra guests.'

None of that made sense to Lucy, but what Larissa had to say when she finally got off the phone cheered everyone up considerably.

‘You will find you have company when you arrive at the Bull Commander’s camp,’ she said with a flashing smile, but in a tone that brooked no argument. ‘The rebel leadership is in the mood for a celebration. A surprise party for the Bull Commander. Your business may be with the Carpet of All Creation, but ours is with the Commander and the generals. And your plans have hastened our own. You may not notice these extra guests at first, but they are . . . preparing a fireworks display. You have our word.’

Larissa turned to Lucy.

‘I understand it was you who provided the list of the Ten Star Jumbo factories and bank accounts to one of our supporters,’ she said, smiling for the first time that night. ‘It has been very useful. This is our favour in return.’

‘Did you tell the leaders about the Carpet of All Creation?’ Rahel asked excitedly.

‘Would you have advised that?’ Larissa returned.

Rahel’s face fell. ‘I suppose they would have doubted your sanity if they didn’t observe us transform into tigers for themselves,’ she acknowledged, a catch in her voice.

‘I did observe you, but even so I question my sanity,’ said Larissa. ‘Therefore, not wanting them to strip me of my command, I merely told them that I had been unsuccessful in tracking you down, but that my spies had informed me you intended some festivities at dawn in a certain place. And I also told them I had intercepted intelligence about an earthquake warning, which could possibly trigger a tsunami. Those two facts alone have brought their plans forward. But your friend here,’ Larissa was gesturing at the Ponytail Zombie, ‘is a little shaken. And,’ she continued mysteriously, ‘we have

many . . . celebrations to organise in the next few days. Things are coming to a head in Telares.'

'What do you mean?' asked Rahel eagerly, but Larissa refused to answer any of her questions. She gestured at the moon, now markedly low in the western sky. 'We have just a few hours left before sunrise. We all must hurry.' With a snap of her fingers, the rebels in their black ninja suits melted into the jungle. In a few seconds, even Lucy's cat's eyes and ears could no longer see them. She dropped to the ground with Rahel and, activating her snake sense, picked up their fading vibration – just. The rebels were good, very good – even Ponytail Zombie.

Janella's singing seemed to have done the trick for the spooked horses. With many words of apology to Marathon, Lucy remounted.

'Ricardo,' she hissed in the direction of the tree. 'Tigers eat monkeys, and I'm still hungry, so you'd better be down here looking like my little brother by the time I count to five, or . . .'

It was all she had to say. Ricardo leaped out of the tree a golden monkey but landed an irate boy.

'You wouldn't eat my monkey?' he asked, outraged.

'No,' assured Lucy, 'but I'd eat you!' And she growled theatrically. He returned it with a scowl but leaped agilely onto his grey pony.

Soon the party was back on the track, trotting towards the hulking shadow of Mount Katerina.

At first, Lucy expected an ambush from every tree, but soon she relaxed. Aboard Marathon, her snake sense was not much good to her, and if attackers were going to drop from above it didn't help either, as she had just found out.

They were in a hurry, the horses were necessary, and if the rebels or even the Bulls heard them coming, so be it. They would just have to deal with it as best they could.

Lucy was almost asleep in the saddle by the time they reached the foothills of Mount Katerina, and then she had to snap awake or she would have slipped right off as Marathon gathered her haunches to attack the flank of the mountain. As they climbed, the sheer mass of the slope rising steeper and steeper before them obscured the moon, and cat's eyes and the skills of the horses were all they had to rely on. The track entered denser jungle and it was left to Dark Star to pick out the path for the rest to follow. Up and up they climbed, criss-crossing the apron of hills below the mountain.

The air was alive with bats swooping and hurtling. The distinctive cry of an owl and the shriek of some strange beast followed them up the track. Once, Lucy saw up close the white flash of an enormous bird of prey, its wingspan more than a metre across. She caught her breath at the sheer power and freedom of its movement and then it was gone with two strokes of its monumental wings, gliding up into the secret recesses of the mountain itself, making their own progress seem ineffably slow.

Then there was no time to think of anything but hanging on, as the horses huffed and puffed, straining up the relentless gradient. Soon the track was nothing but dust and rock. The jungle had given way to sparse trees and shrubs, the only kind that could hang on in such unforgiving terrain. And the wind picked up, the higher they climbed. The few trees that survived here were bent and misshapen, leaning out of the slope as though to beg

forgiveness of the elements – but no mercy was forthcoming. Lucy craned her neck, grateful that they did not have to attack the bulk of the mountain.

‘If this is cutting around the easy way, I don’t know what hard would be like,’ she said to Rahel, clinging with knees, heels and hands to her horse. ‘Shhh!’ Rahel said, but then she whispered, ‘it is extremely gruelling, yes?’

Then, just as it seemed they would never stop climbing, Dark Star crested a ridge and stopped. Janella’s gasp could have been heard back in Kurrawong. And when Marathon bravely vaulted the last rocky outcrop, Lucy understood her friend’s emotion. Their twisting path had carried them around a massive skirt of the mountain and once again the moon was visible in the west, poised ready to drop below the horizon. They were so high they could see the lights of what could only be Telares City shining away in the distance, where Carlos waited with Angel, Eduardo and Madam Eleanor. And flowing inexorably towards those lights Lucy could just make out in what little moonlight remained the black ribbon that was the River of Souls. Lucy followed it with her eyes but it was soon lost in the darkness of the foothills.

Rahel moved her horse closer to Lucy. ‘Our river faces a long journey to the sea,’ she said softly. ‘This is one of the few places you can see it above ground. Downstream, it plunges into the underground caverns.’ Her words made Lucy shudder, reminding her of how the Bull soldiers had chased them as they had tried to escape the vast river cave in their flimsy boat. Now, somewhere between the city lights and where Lucy now stood was the camp of the Bull Commander and another army of slaves.

Dark Star pawed the ground impatiently and at Janella's word sprang down the other side of the ridge. Lucy stopped thinking and followed. The descent was as difficult as the ascent. They just had to hang on with different muscles, leaning back to balance their mounts. But it was certainly quicker going down and it wasn't long before they were trekking across the foothills. They splashed across the River of Souls and stopped in a sandy clearing. Everyone, horses, dog and humans, almost fell into the river, so eager were they to drink. Only the golden monkeys, tucked up tight in their saddlebags, could resist. The water was cold and pure and Lucy filled her water bottles for the journey ahead. As she returned them to her saddlebags she heard the purr of the Tiger-cat. The creature was draped along a low branch.

'How did you get here? Were you going to ambush us too?' Lucy asked smiling, immeasurably pleased to see the creature. She reached up and stroked its wonderfully soft fur and scratched behind those rounded ears. The Tiger-cat purred even louder and, as ever, the sound cheered and heartened Lucy. Which usually meant she was about to get into deep trouble. She stared into the animal's golden eyes and felt that strange shifting of consciousness . . . and then she was diving in the Tiger-cat's golden mind – a place every bit as mysterious and wild as the River of Souls. She had no idea how long it was before she shuddered back into her own skin to find the Tiger-cat purring smugly and Rahel looking at her strangely.

'Are you paying attention, Lucy? I said we can rest here for a short time, then we must execute our plan at dawn.'

‘Who do we have to execute?’ asked Ricardo.

‘What plan?’ demanded Lucy, wondering what else she had missed while the Tiger-cat was playing with her mind.

‘I will devise one while I am resting,’ returned Rahel, apparently confident.

‘Righto,’ said Lucy, ‘but look, the Tiger-cat just told me we have to take the Carpet of All Creation back to the jungle jail.’

‘The jungle jail!’ exclaimed Rahel, thunderstruck.

‘Don’t ask me,’ shrugged Lucy. She never again wanted to see the place where her friends and so many other children had been held prisoner. ‘Ask her,’ she said, gesturing at the tree where the Tiger-cat had been a few seconds ago, but the animal was gone. Typical!

Janella, of course, made them unsaddle the horses and rub them dry. After that, everyone except Rahel collapsed under a tree. ‘I will stand guard,’ the Telarian girl said. ‘I have much to contemplate.’

Lucy didn’t argue. She wouldn’t have cared if the Bull Commander himself was coming, she and her aching, saddle-sore body had to sleep.

Assault at Dawn



Lucy's rest was short-lived; she awoke to a grey pre-dawn sky and not to a headache, but a headquake. Rahel's cry of distress, quickly repressed, meant she was not alone. Shuddering, Lucy counted her way out of it. One, two, three . . . thirty seconds of bone-shaking pain and then . . . over. She sat up, clutching her head as though to stop it falling off, and whispered, 'Rahel?'

'I am recovered,' Rahel said, but her voice held a vestige of the tremor.

Janella's concerned voice came next, 'Did it happen again? I didn't feel a thing but Dark Star is upset about something.'

Lucy didn't need telling. It hurt her overburdened snake sense to hear the horses' nervous stamping in a clump of trees. She tried to block the vibrations out but it was no good. Once a snake, always a snake. Gradually the animals calmed, but another more distant pounding caused Lucy more disquiet.

‘Are you feeling what I’m feeling?’ she asked Rahel, with growing alarm.

‘Indeed I am,’ Rahel confirmed quietly.

Lucy concentrated, which hurt, but soon an image formed briefly in her mind.

‘A group of horses,’ she gasped, ‘coming the same way we did, down Mount Katerina.’

‘You speak truly,’ said Rahel, grim-faced. ‘They are some way off, but we must make haste. It would do no good to be caught here by a mounted Bull patrol. They would recognise these horses by their army brands immediately and all would be lost.’

That was all it took to get Janella on her feet, singing almost silently to her herd as she rose. With a whicker, Dark Star trotted up and the others followed, standing quietly to let Janella and Pablo saddle them.

‘Bulls,’ Lucy whispered in the small boys’ ears and they jumped up, concern for golden monkeys their primary motivation. Within a few minutes the group was trotting down the track with Lucy praying that no member of that ominous party behind them had a vestige of snake sense.

As they threaded their way down into the flatlands, Lucy realised the sun was about to rise. Within minutes, as a red gleam crested the eastern horizon, they trotted over a small hill and found themselves looking down on the Bull Commander’s camp.

Lucy urged Marathon back into the shelter of a stand of trees, quickly dismounted and put her palms flat to the ground.

‘Nothing behind us,’ she said to Rahel, relieved. ‘Whoever it was, they must have stopped at the river too.’

‘And there will be light enough for them to see our tracks,’ Rahel returned ominously.

‘Nothing we can do about it,’ said Lucy. She remained on the ground a moment longer. ‘At least nothing is stirring down there,’ she said, standing and gesturing at the cluster of buildings, one of which (she sincerely hoped) held the Carpet of All Creation. With the sun inching higher over the skyline, the camp below was thrown into sharper relief. Lucy counted several trucks and motorbikes and ten buildings. It didn’t look like a factory at all, just a series of wooden huts, one obviously more fortified than the others, surrounded by barbed wire.

‘I guess the one with the tallest fence is our one,’ she said ruefully. ‘OK, Rahel, what’s the plan?’

But the answer came from elsewhere.

‘Ricardo and I shall ascend the fence,’ said Toro, rather grandly.

‘No!’ said Lucy and Rahel rather firmly.

‘As monkeys,’ said Ricardo, rather loudly.

Silence.

‘Okaaaay,’ said the girls.

‘But,’ said Pablo, ‘even if you get into the hut, how will you get the carpet back out through a locked gate? You two on your own aren’t strong enough to even drag the carpet, let alone carry it.’

The two younger boys had to acknowledge Pablo was right. Everyone remembered how heavy the carpet was, after lugging it first through the Telarian jungle and then through the tunnel into Telares City. Being chased with it was just not an option. That was how they had lost it in the first place.

‘We must get the key to the gate before we do anything else,’ said Rahel.

‘Look!’ hissed Janella, the only one of the party who had not dismounted.

Lucy followed the line of her pointing finger.

‘I think we’ve run out of time,’ Janella said.

By the first rays of the rising sun, a horde of black-suited figures seemed to emerge from behind every tree and every rock and every crack in the ground, swarming in terrifying silence towards the camp buildings – Larissa’s ninja troops. Someone must have been on guard for the Bulls because there was a cry of alarm, cut horribly short. And then everything went psycho.

A millisecond before her ears registered the sound, an appalling wave of energy smashed through Lucy’s senses. She fell to the ground. When the actual explosion came, it was almost a relief. After the first blast of heat had subsided, she opened her eyes to see a Bull truck in flames and Rahel cringing on the ground as well. So that’s what Larissa had meant by ‘fireworks’. Dark Star reared, screaming his defiance, and the other horses plunged in fear, only Janella’s sustained note preventing a stampede.

The eruption brought every Bull soldier in the camp running from their barracks. Then the camp was a sea of black-suited attackers and semi-dressed defenders, all moving so fast Lucy could not keep track.

‘Now’s our chance,’ said Pablo, but Lucy and Rahel were not listening. Their eyes were locked on each other.

‘You hear it?’ Rahel demanded.

‘I’ve never heard anything like it in my life,’ said Lucy.

‘Whatever it is, it’s big,’ warned Rahel.

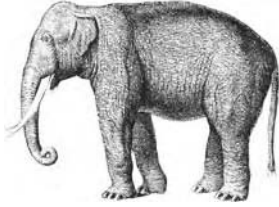
‘And that’s not the only thing,’ whispered Lucy, palms flat on the ground. ‘The horses that were following us, they’re moving again. We’ve got to do something.’

She jumped aboard Marathon and looked desperately about for Ricardo – but he was gone.

‘There,’ said Rahel, astride her horse, pointing. With a sinking heart, Lucy saw four golden monkeys loping over the open ground towards the barbed-wire fence.

And then the shooting began.

Wild Child



A machine-gun flash came from behind one of the Bulls' trucks. Its thud-thud-thudding was another assault on Lucy's mind. The rebels seemed to be armed only with knives and swords, perhaps relying on stealth to take the enemy by surprise. For the most part it had worked. For every Bull soldier it seemed there were three black-suited assailants. The attack had come too quickly for the camp to be adequately defended. But now one of the Bulls had broken away from the barracks and armed himself. Lucy winced at another burst of machine-gun fire and then cried out involuntarily as two rebels fell to the ground. The next blast from the gun was cut short, followed by a strangled cry. The rebels must have snuck up on the shooter.

'Now!' said Janella and urged Dark Star on. The other horses, including the riderless grey mountain ponies, followed, charging towards the hut that was furthest from the action, where four golden monkeys could be seen dropping over the tall fence and scurrying towards the

door. The horses pulled up short at the fence and its locked gate and Dark Star reared in frustration. So intense was the battle that neither warring side seemed to notice the kids.

Lucy and Rahel stared at each other again as the strange thundering they had noticed earlier began anew. A high-pitched trumpeting overshadowed even the shouts of the Bulls, fighting for their lives, and caused the rebels to shift their attention momentarily from the task at hand. It sounded as if an entire army was approaching.

A screaming challenge tore the air and Lucy turned to see not an army bearing down, but an elephant! Yes, a small elephant, but still an elephant, and aloft it, wielding a tree branch, was a familiar child, teeth bared, shrieking triumphantly to the sky. Angel!

Rebels and Bulls alike fled the elephant and its wild child's path, and for a moment everything froze as though some unseen controller had hit Pause on the battle scene. The children's horses leaped aside and the elephant ran full tilt at the gate, stopped just in time, and then turned around and simply sat on it!

Gate and fence collapsed with a pathetic groan, posts keeling over into the soft earth, and then the elephant stomped enthusiastically on the wreck before picking its way delicately over the strands of barbed wire and charging at the door with Angel clinging on determinedly. The monkeys must have realised they were outclassed, because they were nowhere to be seen.

The battle had broken out again behind Lucy, as though the addition of an elephant and a few teenagers on horseback was of no concern to anyone. Lucy watched in

admiration as the baby elephant turned its back on the door and leaned against it. The bamboo was no match for an immature but still elephantine bum and the door collapsed inwards, taking half the wall with it. A man's voice shouted from inside but the elephant was apparently enjoying itself and had no discouragement from the child on its back. It sat on what remained of the front wall, collapsing it. A soldier in the brown Bull uniform, a bunch of keys clanking on his belt, stumbled over the wreckage and ran, only to halt at the sight of the battle near the barracks. Then he was gone, fleeing towards the jungle.

'I'll get him,' shouted Janella, and she wheeled Dark Star around to give chase.

Then came a familiar demanding voice. 'Lucy will get Angel's rug!' Lucy didn't need a second command. She slid from her horse and ran towards the elephant, which had stopped its demolition duty and was standing near the wreckage, trunk raised, trumpeting furiously. Lucy looked up and met Angel's eyes and the little girl grinned like a maniac. Then Rahel and Pablo caught up with Lucy. Four monkeys swarmed past them and Lucy turned to see the elephant commence a furious charging pattern, looping again and again in front of the broken building. No Bull or Tiger fighter in their right mind would have tried to get past it. It was as though the elephant had erected a forcefield of safety for the kids. They scrambled over the pile of bamboo and into what was left of the hut – and there found a familiar shape at the far end. The Carpet of All Creation was stretched over a frame. Chained to it were five small children staring in terror at

the latest creatures to crash so dramatically into their lives.

‘Where’s Janella? We need those keys!’ cried Lucy urgently, staring at the chains around the children’s necks.

Over galloping hooves came a shout, ‘Catch!’, and Lucy turned to see Janella toss a set of keys into the shell of the broken building. She lunged to catch them instinctively and rushed to release the first child. A golden monkey appeared at her side and then Ricardo was staring up into her eyes. ‘I’ll do that, you get the rug,’ he said, sounding very serious. If the slave children thought a golden monkey becoming a child before their eyes was any stranger than a child on an elephant smashing the house down, they gave no indication, sitting frozen and silent on the ground as Ricardo unlocked their collars. Pablo had already produced a knife and was cutting the carpet from its frame.

‘We’ll get one of these others too,’ said Rahel, gesturing at a pile of rolled-up rugs in the corner. ‘A decoy,’ she explained, panting, dragging one rug out over the fallen bamboo as Angel and her elephant made another trumpeting pass.

‘I’ll take it,’ offered Janella. With Lucy and Rahel’s help, she gently balanced the rolled-up rug behind Dark Star’s saddle, securing it as best she could with saddlebag straps. Then Pablo emerged staggering under the weight of the Carpet of All Creation. Marathon stood beautifully still while it was lashed to her saddle as Rahel ran back inside. Lucy heard her speaking urgently in Telarian. The only words Lucy understood were ‘Tigers’ and ‘Bulls’, but whatever Rahel said must have had the required effect because she emerged with the small children clinging to

her. In a flash, Rahel lifted a child each up to Ricardo and Toro, who had mounted their ponies.

‘You have to stay human,’ she warned the boys. ‘They’ve been through enough.’ The boys nodded seriously and put their arms about the tiny bodies, suddenly appearing very large and grown-up in comparison. Lucy and Pablo and Rahel took the remaining trio. Their horses were stamping, eager to flee the chaos.

‘Angel!’ Lucy called. Angel turned her head at Lucy’s voice. ‘We’re going. Come with us!’ But the little girl just laughed and the last Lucy saw of her was her back as the small elephant, with another unearthly trumpet, gave up its patrol duty and thundered back towards the jungle from where it had appeared, scattering rebels and Bulls alike.

Then Dark Star plunged and screamed. He was answered from up on the ridge where the children had first looked down on the camp. Upon a rocky outcrop, a strange horse reared, its white coat and the matching white hair of its rider flashing silver in the rising sun. Then it was charging towards them, four riders in its wake, and Janella was shouting, ‘Dark Star says leave the white horse to us!’

Her mount neighed a furious challenge to the approaching horses, then wheeled about and galloped away, the decoy carpet clearly visible on his back. As the white horse’s rider swept past in pursuit, her eyes locked on Dark Star, Lucy saw it was a woman with close-cropped white hair, riding hard, spurs slashing the blood-streaked sides of her mount. Instantly, Lucy knew who she was.

‘Out of here, now!’ she called and the party, holding tight to their various precious cargoes, headed for the hills, leaving the raging battle and the chase behind.

Buying Time



The children galloped east towards the sun and then swung south towards the foothills of Mount Katerina. They splashed across the River of Souls and the horses climbed determinedly into the foothills, seeming to understand the desperate nature of their mission, even without Janella and Dark Star to urge them on.

Janella. Lucy's heart sank. *Please, please let Dark Star outstrip the white horse.* Her arm tightened about the little boy perched in front of her. She had not been able to keep Janella safe, but at least she could get this little guy back to refuge, if you could call the jungle jail that. Why did the Tiger-cat want them to go there, of all places? Maybe the house had once been beautiful, a long time ago when it was still Nina and Madam Eleanor's home, but to Lucy it would always be a jail, rotting in the jungle. It would always be the place where the Bull Commander had kept tiny children like Angel locked up. Not that she felt like arguing with the Tiger-cat. Anyway, where was the Tiger-cat right now?

The little boy made a small squeaking noise and Lucy realised her grip had tightened uncomfortably.

‘Sorry, buddy,’ she said, even though he would have no idea what she was saying. Then, because it felt good, she decided to talk to him anyway.

‘You’re going to be OK, little guy. Those Bulls aren’t going to get anywhere near you again, not if I have anything to do with it.’ At the mention of the word ‘Bulls’, the little boy flinched and seemed to shrink smaller. Lucy could have kicked herself. She tried to rack her brains for some reassuring words in Telarian and realised she hadn’t bothered to learn any. She’d always relied totally on Rahel and the others speaking English. What a slacker!

‘If we ever get out of this, I’m going to learn Telarian,’ she assured the little boy, and he seemed to relax at the word, and leaned back against her. He was shockingly thin, dressed in smelly rags just like the ones Lucy remembered her friends once wearing, and his hair was a matted mess. But there was no time to get angry about that, as Marathon shortened her stride to attack the steeper skirt of the mountain and it was all Lucy could do to stay on her back and not lose hold of the little boy. Finally, with the sun full up in the sky, they reached the peak from where they had first caught sight of the camp. Lucy turned one last time. She could still see the column of smoke from the burning truck and several others as well. It looked as though the Tigers had let off more ‘fireworks’. Then she began threading down the pass, leaning back to help the horse balance.

Lucy looked curiously around at the trail they had last travelled by moonlight. Had that arduous ride only been

last night? In the morning light, the jungle was moist and mysterious, gems of dew shining in the leaves, mist rising slowly to reveal the majesty of the taller trees. To Lucy, everything was eerily silent. The mist seemed to dampen sound and the birds she was used to hearing in the fertile Telarian rainforest were strangely quiet. But there was movement. Some kind of striped, furred animal she had not seen before scurried up the path a little too close for comfort for the horses. Lucy was aware of the urgent movements of other small animals, too fast to be seen in the long grass that lined the path. At one point Marathon stopped and snorted in alarm and refused to budge. Lucy scanned the ground carefully and finally saw a green snake twisting through the grass. Then it was gone and Marathon, with sound of distinct disgust, agreed to keep going. Later a brown monkey with a white ruff and a baby on its back swung through the trees close to the path, again startling the horses.

As the morning wore on, a steady stream of animals headed uphill. A posse of golden monkeys set off the pair in Ricardo and Toro's saddlebags and their screeching frightened the little girl and boy aboard the ponies, until the boys showed them how to stroke the monkeys' silky heads to put them to sleep.

Lucy turned to Rahel. 'This is strange. All the animals seem to be heading in the other direction, up the mountain,' she said.

'Yes,' said Rahel. 'Like the snakes, they know what is to come.'

The most impressive was a column of plodding elephants, unmoved by the horses trying to pick their way

carefully down the trail. Without needing to be asked, as though conceding to some natural law of courtesy, the horses squeezed off the track to let the herd past. Lucy counted ten, including four young ones, one about the same size as Angel's sidekick. It showed none of the same wayward symptoms as Angel's friend, though, and Lucy wondered who was being a bad influence on who. Knowing Angel, she gave the baby elephant the benefit of the doubt.

As the sun climbed in the sky, the heat became intense and the children began to sway with exhaustion. Lucy was never more relieved than when she heard a stamping and neighing behind them, and Dark Star overhauled their column, his sides foaming with sweat. Janella's face was pale and determined. Lucy almost cried. 'I was so scared,' she whispered, walking Marathon beside Dark Star.

'I'll tell you about it later,' said Janella. 'They're still out there somewhere, but we're safe for now.' Soon Dark Star led them off the track into the clearing where Larissa had surprised them the night before. It seemed like a year ago. After being unsaddled and rubbed down, the horses plodded gratefully to stand in the stream. The children lay on the bank under a tree with their feet in the water. The five little newcomers were too tired and scared to do anything except huddle in a group, although Lucy noticed that the kids who had sat with Rahel and Toro seemed a whole lot more relaxed than the others.

'The kids are really freaked out,' she said to Rahel. 'They don't understand anything that happened.'

Despite her tiredness, the Telarian girl hopped up and went to sit with the children. Ricardo, who understood

these things, began rummaging in his backpack for something that spoke all languages, and trotted over with his special stash of bananas. The kids looked at him warily, but at Rahel's smile took them. Then Toro offered his water bottle and the kids slurped greedily.

Lucy caught Janella's shocked expression as she took in the state of the children.

'Pretty bad, huh?' Lucy said, deliberately cheerful. 'Hard to believe that's what Rahel and the others looked like a few months ago. And you should have seen Angel! She was the worst. But a few months of food and better clothes and these kids will be fine.'

As she said the words, Lucy realised something. Helping kids like these be kids again – there could be no better goal than that, not in the whole world.

'So don't worry about them,' she said, punching Janella playfully. 'All we have to do is get them to the rebels and they'll be looked after.'

'Yeah, right and that's going to be soooo easy,' Janella said sarcastically, but she did look happier and soon set about making a bed for the sad little group with spare horse blankets that appeared miraculously. Then, with the little ones tucked up under the trees, it was time for a meeting.

'We'll be back at the jungle jail by dusk,' estimated Rahel, 'and, no, Toro, I have no indication as to why we are required to go there, but that is what the Tiger-cat has directed, so that is what we are doing.'

'I bought us some time from that crazy woman who was chasing me,' said Janella, 'but she and the others were pretty determined to catch me. They must want the carpet

pretty badly. Lucky they thought I had the real one.’ Her face lit up. ‘Hey, Lucy, remember when I first touched the carpet Dark Star in your bedroom in Kurrawong?’

‘As if I could forget!’ Watching her best friend transported simply by touching the carpet had inspired Lucy to tell her about Telares.

‘Well, this morning, I was in the scene the carpet showed me all that time ago! It actually happened. I was riding and Dark Star told me we were in huge danger. I’m telling you, Dark Star knows that horse, and its rider means trouble.’

‘And I know who she is,’ Lucy said quietly.

‘Who?’ came a question in five voices.

‘She’s Nina and Madam Eleanor’s sister. The third triplet.’

‘Carlotta!’ breathed Pablo.

‘Yep! Nigel Scar-Skull’s mother.’

‘Yuck!’

‘What do you believe her objective is?’ asked Rahel.

‘Well, if she’s anything like Nigel, she’s after the carpet and the pattern, or both.’

‘Do you mean she was trying to take it from her own son and the Bull Commander?’

‘Maybe she was going to double-cross them and take it. Or maybe they’d invited her to take a look and she arrived just in time to see us pinch it. I don’t know. But I know she’s trouble. You should have seen the look on her face, Janella, when she was chasing you. She looked insane and she had spurs on and she was ripping the side of her horse with them. It was bleeding.’

Janella’s face hardened. ‘She doesn’t deserve a horse like that. It galloped like the wind.’

Lucy had the distinct impression that Janella had made a decision about mistreated horses similar to the one Lucy had made about locked-up kids.

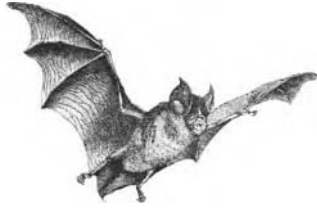
‘What about the Bull Commander?’ Pablo asked. ‘Did anyone see him?’

No one had.

‘But that doesn’t mean he wasn’t there,’ said Rahel. ‘It was chaos. Larissa could have been there for all I know.’ Her face was suddenly pinched with fear. Obviously she was thinking of the black-suited bodies that had fallen in the battle.

Lucy knew she had to change the subject. ‘Well, there’s nothing we can do but keep going to the jungle jail and if Carlotta Spur-foot is still after us, we’d better get moving.’

Jungle Jail



They arrived on dusk to find the jungle jail lit up like a Christmas tree.

‘I expect you’re all hungry then,’ boomed a familiar voice. Blue Uniform was standing on the rickety steps, as though the tumbledown house were her new nursing home and a few Bull soldiers would never be allowed to interfere in the smooth running of her establishment. Somehow, her very presence made everything seem more spick and span. She had abandoned her tiger suit, perhaps for security reasons, and was dressed in the blue uniform that had earned her a nickname in the first place. And in the doorway behind her were two elderly woman with white plaits and golden eyes – Nina and Madam Eleanor, their smiles brighter than the candles that shone in every window.

‘Yes,’ said Madam Eleanor, watching their dumbstruck faces. ‘We have reclaimed our childhood home.’

But Lucy had eyes only for the young man who stepped gingerly out of the shadows, trying for at least two seconds

to be cool before vaulting awkwardly over the verandah railing and limping up to his friends.

‘Carlos!’ everyone cried. Everyone, that is, except Lucy, who couldn’t speak at all. She just sat hugging the little child in front of her as though her life depended on it.

‘Slow down, young man,’ boomed Blue Uniform. Facing the kids, so she couldn’t see his face, Carlos rolled his eyes theatrically. That broke the ice for Lucy. She burst out laughing.

‘How are you?’ she asked amid the clamour of everyone else asking the same question.

‘I’m fine,’ Carlos said. ‘Still hobbling, but apparently’ – with a cheerful glance in the direction of Blue Uniform – ‘if I never ever have any fun again, it will all be OK.’

Luckily, Blue Uniform was distracted by the small child in Lucy’s arms. She reached up to take him. Nina and Madam Eleanor seemed to understand the situation without needing to be told and hurried to usher the ragged slave children inside the house. The kids were so tired, they seemed to have lost all fear, or perhaps the party atmosphere won them over. Then Ricardo and Toro were mobbing Carlos and giving him high-fives and bear-hugs and Rahel and Pablo and Janella did the same, and when it came to Lucy’s turn she was so pleased to see him alive and happy, she wouldn’t have cared if the whole of Kurrawong High School was watching. She might like him more than any other guy she had ever met – but he was still her friend, first and foremost. And that felt good. And if someone was your friend, you couldn’t act like a dork around them and forget how to speak and be normal. Something deep inside

Lucy relaxed. She reached out to hug him and that felt good too. And she didn't care who saw.

Then the kids were dragging the Carpet of All Creation up the stairs of the jungle jail and down the hall to the big room at the end. Lucy experienced the usual eerie tingle of recognition when she stepped inside. The room was a mirror image of her own bedroom back home in the Mermaid House. When Nina had moved to Australia, her husband Theodore had built a replica of her childhood home to ease her homesickness. Now, the room was lit with countless candles.

'Wow!' said Lucy, impressed. 'Did you buy every candle in Telares City?'

'I believe we came close,' said Nina, her ginger eyes smiling a crinkly smile. 'We plan to weave day and night until our task is completed. Now, if you youngsters would unroll the carpet for us . . .'

Tired as they were, the kids were eager to help. As the carpet's pattern was revealed, it seemed to Lucy's tired eyes worn and brown and shabby – and not nearly special enough to warrant the effort so many people had put in to get it. It looked as dull and lustreless as the tiger rug in Lucy's bedroom had seemed the first day she saw it. But as Nina and Madam Eleanor knelt on stiff knees and began to run their palms over weft and warp, lovingly stroking the woven strands, the room seemed to grow warmer. The air felt charged, and the hair on the back of Lucy's neck stood on end. Then, it was as though the room itself took a deep breath and, like a camera shifting into focus, the pattern in the carpet emerged, glowing, and growing rich and real in the candlelight.

‘Yes!’ said Nina appreciatively. ‘Our work begins.’

Lucy heard a thump, and turned to see Blue Uniform looking quite pale, leaning heavily on the door frame. ‘Jetlag,’ she declared stoutly, standing hurriedly upright, but Lucy suspected practical Blue Uniform had just witnessed her very first wacky Telarian moment and was having trouble processing it.

In the corner, on a makeshift mattress of cushions, the small Telarians too were observing the scene, wide-eyed and silent. Looking at them seemed to remind Madam Eleanor of something. ‘You did not see Angel in your travels?’ she asked the children curiously.

‘Well, as a matter of fact . . .’ said Lucy. She regaled them with the story of this morning’s battle and the role the wild child and her elephant had played. Neither old lady seemed at all perturbed or surprised at the idea of Angel storming about the countryside on a baby elephant. Perhaps that was what Nina had meant when she said Angel had developed some new skills? Carlos’ grin split his face as he made Lucy describe the elephant sitting on the hut again and again. The boys rolled about hysterically.

‘But there is a problem,’ said Madam Eleanor presently. ‘Whether she arrives by elephant or helicopter, Angel must be here in order for the rug to be completed. She does not have to weave herself, but tradition demands that as the youngest member of the true line, she must be here in this room when the final knot is tied. So, after you have slept, I am afraid we will have to send you out again to retrieve my unusual granddaughter.’

Exhaustion got the better of Lucy’s manners. ‘Forget it,’ she said. ‘Angel has other plans. I don’t know what’s going

on in her head but she had no intention of coming with us this morning.'

'Perhaps,' said Madam Eleanor gently, 'you will have to find out what her plans are and render her any assistance she requires.'

Lucy wasn't all that sure what 'render' meant, but it didn't sound good.

Thinking about things that did not sound good reminded her of Carlotta. 'Oops! I should have told you straight away,' she said to Nina and Madam Eleanor. 'Your sister is out there in the jungle trying to get the carpet. She chased Janella and Dark Star.'

'And I'm going to report her to the Horse Protection Society,' said Janella ominously, then looked a little worried, as if nervous at saying the wrong thing about a family member.

But Carlotta's sisters shook their heads in disgust at Lucy's description of the spurs and the blood-soaked flanks of her white horse.

'That does, unfortunately, sound like our sister,' Nina said resignedly. 'She was always a dashing rider, but she rather dashed the spirits of her horses too. Old age must have been kind to her if she is riding still.'

'It was the horse who was doing all the work,' snapped Janella.

Lucy had a mental flash of Carlotta's determined face as she galloped past. White hair aside, she had ridden with the intensity of a young girl. A foe to be wary of, Lucy's feline bones warned her.

'Why has she shown up now?' asked Carlos, with a trace of his old grumpy self, eyes narrowed and brow knitted.

‘Greed,’ replied Madam Eleanor. ‘She does not believe in the old ways, she puts no store in the prophecies, she does not understand the true value of the Carpet of All Creation – but Nigel capturing one of my partly completed carpets would have excited her immeasurably. Whatever her plans are, we can be sure money plays a part. And, with the Bull Commander involved, I believe they will go to great lengths to get the carpet back.’

‘Well, with any luck the Bull Commander was at the camp this morning when the rebels raided,’ said Lucy. ‘We may never see him again.’

‘There is still Nigel to contend with,’ said Nina.

‘What about Eduardo?’ said Ricardo, disappointed not to see his hero. ‘Where’s he? He’ll help us.’

‘My dear husband,’ said Madam Eleanor, ‘is gathering reinforcements on our behalf. We are unprotected here, as you can see, but our task is so important that we must begin. Eduardo is attempting to convince the rebel leadership that it is worth guarding two silly old ladies as they go about their country pursuits. Not an easy task, as you would imagine. The rebels, we are told, have other priorities over the next few days.’

‘I reckon!’ said Lucy. ‘You should have seen it. They blew up a truck when they attacked the camp. There were hundreds of them.’

‘And Larissa,’ said Rahel rather proudly, ‘said there were more surprises in store.’

Carlos’ face lit up.

‘Whatever the rebel leadership has in mind,’ said Madam Eleanor, ‘I hope to see Eduardo with some kind of

bodyguard by tomorrow morning. This news of Carlotta is unsettling.’

‘We’ll protect you,’ said Lucy.

Both women shook their heads. ‘No,’ insisted Madam Eleanor. ‘Eat and sleep now, but in the morning set out to bring Angel to us. All will be lost without her to help us finish the carpet. We will keep these small children here until we can arrange for someone to see them to safety at the rebel base.’

Lucy suddenly felt dizzy with exhaustion. She leaned against the wall, her head spinning. And then the shuddering began. At first it was just an ache in the arches of her feet. She was dimly aware of Rahel shaking beside her and then the tremor pounding through her body. She felt as though her head would explode under this seismic jackhammer. She slumped to the floor, holding her head.

Blue Uniform was on her knees beside the two stricken girls immediately. ‘What happened?’ she demanded.

‘A headache!’

‘Headquake?’

It was left to Pablo and Janella to explain the girls’ reptilian predicament, while a thunderstruck Blue Uniform took their temperatures. ‘Fiddlesticks!’ she snorted when the kids had finished, but with another searching glance at the carpet’s glowing menagerie, she put away her thermometer and marched out of the room. She returned a few minutes later with a tray of saucepans and bowls.

‘In my experience, most nervous headaches can be traced to hunger,’ she said in a tone that brooked no debate, and gave everyone a bowl of rice and beans. Lucy and Rahel fell on the food like tigers.

‘Elephants,’ snuffled Pablo through a mouthful. ‘The elephants know the tsunami is coming too. They’re all heading for the hills.’

‘Yes,’ said Madam Eleanor quietly, ‘We too observed the animals of the jungle seeking higher ground – those not restrained by their hobbles.’

Lucy had a flash of insight. ‘That could be what Angel is doing! She’s running around warning all the elephants.’

‘But my dear, the elephants don’t need warning. They know already.’

‘Well, she’s got something going on. You should have seen the look on her face! Maybe she’s trying to free all the working elephants, the ones who are chained up. Just like your ancestor did.’

‘Perhaps,’ Madam Eleanor mused. ‘But that is too huge a task for one little girl, even on an elephant. Either way, she must be brought to us.’

On that momentous thought Lucy fell asleep in the lounge room of the jungle jail, which was miraculously transformed via Madam Eleanor’s sumptuous cushions and rugs and candles into an Aladdin’s cave of comfort. She dreamed of flying horses and a wild child astride an elephant.

Carlotta Returns



Despite Blue Uniform's protests, Carlos left with the Angel search party at dawn, riding one of the boys' tough little mountain greys. Ricardo and Toro were surprisingly grown-up about the whole thing. Both were so pleased to see Carlos again that they fell over each other to be the first to offer their pony. In the end no one else was sure whose pony had actually been donated, but someone's was because Ricardo and Toro, in the shape of golden monkeys, were sharing the other. That transformation really did do something to Blue Uniform's blood pressure, and Lucy wished she could have hung around a little longer to enjoy the moment, but there was work to be done. And she had had a very strong feeling that finding Angel would be no easy task.

They had been riding only a short time when Lucy's cat's ears picked up the faint clink of metal ahead. At the same time, Dark Star lifted his head excitedly and Janella shot Lucy a look of alarm. Lucy threw up her hand to warn the others, dropped from Marathon's saddle and

pressed her palms to the ground. 'Riders, coming this way,' she hissed. Stealthily, the party moved off the track, sheltering behind a stand of trees where the undergrowth was at its thickest.

Lucy threw her reins to Janella. 'I'm going to go back and see who it is,' she whispered, already dropping on all fours to crawl through the brush. It was a few seconds before she realised what she had done, or rather become, and by then she had reached the track and had to still the wild lashing of her tail so the approaching riders would not see her. She shrank to the ground, eyes narrowed, as her sensitive nose took in great gulps of air. Horse and human smells mingled in an intoxicating cocktail and it took all her self-control to remind herself that she was human and here to spy, not hunt. Lucy was still Lucy enough to count five mounted horsemen – and Carlotta, with her severe white crewcut. As the white horse trotted past Lucy, it seemed to sense something awry and balked, trying to head back the way it had come. Carlotta raised her whip and shouted, whacking the horse smartly on its haunches. It gave a whinny of fury, but submitted and moved on.

When they were out of sight, Lucy headed back to her friends, becoming human in time to prevent the horses freaking out, but wishing rather a lot she could have padded up to Carlos and shown him how easy it was these days to change her skin.

'It's Carlotta,' she whispered, 'with five guards. They must be heading for the jungle jail. Nina and the others are in danger. We must go back. We'll have to search for Angel later.'

‘Let’s take them by surprise at the jungle jail,’ said Carlos, with more than a hint of relish.

Janella dismounted and spent a few seconds with each horse. ‘I’ve asked them to be quiet,’ she said, ‘but they all said I didn’t need to tell them. They all know that white horse. They say it is always in a foul mood and bites and kicks them if they get too close.’

‘We’ll sneak back and turn into tigers,’ said Lucy eagerly.

‘That will severely alarm our horses,’ said Rahel.

‘Once we get back to the jungle jail, I’ll take the horses away,’ offered Janella. ‘and you do whatever you think is right.’ But she looked a little nervous.

They walked their horses quietly back up the track and soon heard Blue Uniform’s booming tones. ‘Could I interest anyone in a cup of tea?’

The kids looked at each other in amazement. Why was she offering Carlotta a cuppa?

They hid as close as they dared, to watch what happened. Nina, Madam Eleanor and Blue Uniform stood on the verandah of the jungle jail. In the clearing before them was Carlotta, still astride her white horse, but the men who accompanied her had dismounted and were standing, arms akimbo, rather too close to the stairs for Lucy’s liking. The weapons in their holsters were clearly visible. There was no sign of the little Telarian children and Lucy hated to think how much this turn of events would frighten them.

‘My dear Carlotta,’ Nina said, as if she meant it. ‘It is so delightful to see you again. I was afraid—’

‘Cut the pleasantries,’ her sister snapped rudely. ‘You know why we are here. Where is the carpet?’

‘Agreeable as ever, I see, my dear sister,’ said Madam Eleanor calmly, but without a vestige of Nina’s sweetness. She had arranged her white plaits into a neat coil, which looked distinctly crown-like. Despite her stick, she stood straight and tall, with queenly bearing.

‘We all know I am not here to make small talk,’ said Carlotta. The words were tough, but to Lucy’s sensitive ears, Carlotta’s voice had a quaver, as if Madam Eleanor’s chilly reception had rattled her. ‘Just give me the carpet and I’ll be on my way.’ The last word was delivered with a distinct squeak.

Perhaps to cover her show of weakness, Carlotta dismounted and pulled something small and squirming out of her saddlebag: a dog, fat and white with black patches. It had a small pointed nose but a broad forehead as though, disturbingly, a pig had been crossed with a rat. At that exact moment, the Tiger-cat, who Lucy had not seen all morning, materialised beside her, every hackle raised, growling low in her throat. The dog Carlotta was caressing with such (to Lucy’s mind) misplaced affection pricked its ears and gave a sharp bark. Lucy quickly gave T-Tongue the hand signal to be quiet before he could follow suit.

‘But the carpet is not complete,’ said Madam Eleanor. ‘I had rather hoped that was why you had come . . . to help us with our labours.’ Even though her words were unflinchingly polite, there was something insulting in her tone.

The news that the carpet was not complete seemed again to throw Carlotta, but she recovered quickly. ‘Oh, I’ll be here,’ she said menacingly. ‘But as you know my fingers lack . . . aptitude.’

‘Attitude would perhaps be more accurate,’ said Madam Eleanor, now openly contemptuous.

‘Now, Ellie,’ said Nina soothingly, ‘you know it would be delightful if our long-lost sister were here to help us tie off the last knot. We have much work to do, Carlotta, but it would be so lovely if you would stay.’

Nina’s invitation, despite the armed men before her, seemed to have a strange effect on Madam Eleanor. She lifted her head proudly and Lucy noticed she had gone rather pale, and then she inclined her head once to Nina in an almost imperceptible signal of assent, and spoke no more.

At that point, Carlotta also seemed to remember she had the upper hand, at least in having a bodyguard. ‘Oh, I’m not going anywhere,’ she said haughtily, once again the formidable woman Lucy had seen riding last night. She strode up the stairs of the jungle jail. ‘And neither are you until this carpet is done. Bring them inside!’ she commanded and the guards surrounded the other three women.

Lucy felt rage begin to take hold, but Carlos’ hand fell on her shoulder.

‘I must speak to you,’ he whispered urgently.

Nina’s voice rose a little as though she wanted it to carry some distance. ‘There is really no need for force, gentlemen, we are quite aware of our responsibilities. We intend to finish this carpet and we are exceedingly grateful another member of the true line has arrived just in time to help us!’ This last was said with some force.

‘See,’ hissed Carlos, as Lucy growled softly. ‘Do nothing. I must speak to you . . . as a human.’ Reluctantly, Lucy let

her roar subside and allowed herself to be hauled back to where Janella waited with the horses. The monkey boys had followed, strangely subdued. Carlos rounded on them all immediately. 'They need Carlotta. I've just worked it out. She has to be there for the tying of the last knot, just like Angel.'

'But we can't leave those three with Carlotta and the horrible guards!' Lucy was outraged.

'It's what Nina and Madam Eleanor want,' Carlos implored. 'Didn't you hear Nina trying to tell us? She knew we were out there and she wanted us to hear.'

'Carlotta's horses,' said Janella thoughtfully. 'I wonder if they would listen to me? Whatever Carlotta has got planned, she will need her horses to do it. Perhaps I can slow her down.'

That made Lucy more cheerful.

'You're right! They won't be able to steal the carpet without their horses. Do you think you can do something?'

Janella's wide grin was all the answer she needed.

Attacked



Janella's low hum, delivered while lying on her belly in the long grass on the edge of the clearing, had a dramatic effect on the group of grazing horses. They lifted their heads, ears pricked, and swung in her direction, whickering softly as though greeting a friend. The tantalising song must have promised apples and carrots and bucket-loads of oats, thought Lucy. The guards reclining on the verandah had not noticed anything amiss. Then there was a high-pitched bark from the doorway of the jungle jail and Carlotta's horrible little dog burst out and charged down the stairs, heading straight for the section of jungle the kids were hiding in. What happened next was so fast Lucy would later have trouble describing it. The Tiger-cat, in a flash of orange and white fur, flew into the clearing, spitting and snarling. The dog halted and then the two creatures circled each other like mortal enemies. Lucy held tight to T-Tongue's collar, lest he join the fray and give away their presence.

'Go Tiger-cat,' she urged silently, but it was the dog that

leaped first. Incredibly, instead of jumping out of reach, the Tiger-cat seemed frozen to the spot. Lucy just had time to think, 'Something's wrong!' before the dog had the Tiger-cat by the throat and with two shakes of its powerful piggy neck flung the beautiful creature from side to side. Outraged, T-Tongue exploded free of Lucy's grip and charged through the undergrowth. He must have looked like a T-rex to the smaller dog, who dropped his prey and ran squealing back to the jungle jail.

The Tiger-cat lay in a limp heap on the ground with her neck at a sickening angle, and Lucy's scream was echoed, twice, from the window of the jungle jail.

'Euphoria!' The guards blocked Nina and Madam Eleanor at the door and only Carlotta walked down the stairs, holding her little dog. She jabbed at the Tiger-cat. With a powerful spring and a terrible snarl, Lucy landed in the clearing, her tail lashing. Carlotta turned, screamed and ran for the house. As the soldiers raised their weapons, Lucy morphed back into her girl self and gathered the Tiger-cat in her arms to stand facing the guards. They lowered their weapons in shocked disbelief.

'Shoot, you fools!' screeched Carlotta, but Lucy wasn't hanging around for them to recover their senses. She ran for the sheltering jungle. She reached the enemy horses, shaking and snorting in terror at the edge of the clearing, as though every instinct was urging them to flee into the trees, but some unseen force held them fast. Janella! Singing an eerie, high-pitched tune, Janella dashed past Lucy and grabbed the reins of Carlotta's white horse. Then she was suddenly silent. Released from whatever thrall she had them in, the other horses stampeded into the jungle,

leaving Janella holding fast to the white horse's reins and running with Lucy.

'Leave my horse alone!' Carlotta screamed, but the girls were already halfway back to where their friends waited. Janella handed the reins of the white horse to Carlos, saying, 'Ride!', and the group was mounted and away in two seconds flat, with the Tiger-cat tucked in Lucy's saddlebag as the soldiers' shots flew uselessly after them.

A few kilometres up the track, the group stopped to examine the Tiger-cat. 'I think her neck is broken,' said Rahel, close to tears. Lucy couldn't breathe. The Tiger-cat's eyes were open and blinking every now and then, and her heart was still beating, but she lay still and unresponsive as each child stroked her and begged her to get better.

'We've got to get help,' said Lucy tearfully.

'But it's more important to fetch Angel,' said Rahel. 'Telares depends on it.'

Torn, Lucy stared at her friend.

'I don't even know where to get help for the Tiger-cat,' said Rahel. 'There are vets at the rebel base, but that is two days' ride from here and the tsunami could come before then.'

Everyone fell silent, unwilling to voice their thoughts.

Finally, Rahel spoke. 'Besides, if her neck is broken there is nothing anyone can do.' Two big tears slid down her face.

Lucy stared at her in dawning comprehension. 'You mean, a vet would put her down?'

'Yes,' said Rahel, 'they would say it was merciful.'

'More like murder!' shouted Lucy.

'Shhhh!' said Carlos, but he put his arm around Lucy's shoulders as he spoke.

'Look,' said Lucy forcefully. 'She's listening to every word we are saying.' It was true, the Tiger-cat did seem to be following the conversation, eyes shifting from child to child, even if she was incapable of moving any other part of her body.

'Do you think it hurts?' asked Lucy fearfully.

'Not if her neck is broken,' said Rahel shortly, and then, at the look on Lucy's face, she said more gently, 'Sorry.'

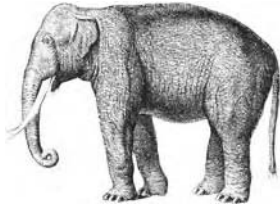
'I had a cat once,' said Carlos, 'who lay like that for three days after a dog attacked him, and the vets wanted to put him down and I refused. Everyone just waited for him to die, but . . .'

'But what?' demanded Lucy.

'He got up and walked to his water bowl and drank about a litre of water and then he caught a rat!'

'Awesome!' said Lucy. 'Right, no vets. We look for Angel . . . and the Tiger-cat comes with us.' She caught Pablo and Rahel giving Carlos some very strange looks, but decided to ignore that, and set about making the Tiger-cat as comfortable as possible in her saddlebag, throwing everything else out. As tears filled her eyes again, she felt a wet nose on her hand. She reached down to scratch T-Tongue's ears. 'You were a really good boy,' she said. 'I should have let you go earlier. You chased off that horrible, evil little dog. But why didn't the Tiger-cat fight back? She could have made that thing squeal like a pig!' She stroked the Tiger-cat's round ears. 'Why didn't you fight back?' she pleaded. But the Tiger-cat just stared into her eyes. Lucy stared back, hoping for a vision that would tell her everything was OK, but all she felt was numb.

Directionless



Not knowing where to find Angel and with the Tiger-cat in no state to direct them, the group trotted despondently down the track.

‘I believe we should go back to the where we got the carpet,’ said Pablo, not sounding too hopeful. ‘Perhaps T-Tongue can track Angel and the elephant from there.’ As if he understood, T-Tongue gave a sharp little bark. No one had any better ideas, so they trotted in silence.

‘How is your horse going?’ Janella asked Carlos eventually.

‘He is fine,’ he said, stroking its strong white neck. The marks of Carlotta’s spurs were clearly visible on its side, in ridges of scar tissue, some still angry and sore. But the horse itself seemed calm, trotting patiently along with the others.

‘I thought that horse was supposed to be trouble?’ Lucy said.

‘Not any more,’ Janella said, with a proud smile. ‘Dark Star and I had a little chat to Mr Iceman here. Dark Star

asked him why he'd been in such a foul mood for the past five years and Iceman said Dark Star would have been in a bad mood too if he'd had to put up with She of the Biting Hooves.'

'What a great name for Carlotta!'

'And Dark Star told me that the Bulls used spurs on him sometimes too,' Janella continued, outraged.

'I don't suppose the subject of natural riding came up?'

'Maybe once or twice,' said Janella, a little embarrassed. 'But only in a way a horse would understand. We promised Iceman no spurs, ever! And a bit further up the track, when we think it's safe to stop, I'll take his bit out and put on a halter. Then we'll all be happy.' She wore a hugely satisfied grin, as though the major task of the day was about to be completed. Lucy knew otherwise.

'I hope Nina and Madam Eleanor and Blue Uniform are OK back at the jungle jail,' she said quietly. 'We just have to hope Eduardo shows up soon with the bodyguard, I guess.'

'One thing is for sure,' Rahel said darkly, 'Carlotta wants that carpet badly, so she won't let any harm come to them until they've finished it.'

'But after that . . .' Carlos' voice trailed off ominously.

'Surely she wouldn't hurt them. She's their sister!' Lucy cried.

'So?'

On that happy note the conversation ended.

Lucy, who thrived on action, hated this directionless feeling. If she had a mission, no matter how crazy, with the help of the Tiger-cat, she had always found courage, and somehow her body carried her forward. But trotting

blindly about the jungle with the Tiger-cat in such an awful state and no clear idea of where they were going was torture.

However, there was something to distract her as they struggled back up the flank of Mount Katerina. Elephants: elephant after elephant, climbing ponderously up the mountain, in a dignified chain. To Lucy's mind they had a sense of purpose and determination, stopping every now and then to pull apart and eat an entire tree, but then resuming their upward march. Some displayed the remnants of broken hobbles: they must have been working elephants who had found the strength to break free and begin heading away from the imminent tsunami. Lucy couldn't bear to think about those still chained. How awful, to know danger was coming but be powerless to flee. Even worse was her own inability to help the Tiger-cat – helplessness sapped her energy and drained hope. She slumped in the saddle, bone-tired and despondent.

'What's the point?' she asked herself. 'What am I even doing here in this wacko country? I should have just stayed home. All we've done is get the Tiger-cat eaten by a piggy rat-dog, and we can't find Angel and we don't even know where we're going.'

Around and around her thoughts trudged, in time with Marathon's laboured hooves, getting nowhere, wearing a deeper, muddier rut in her mind until she couldn't even see over the top.

'Lucy!' Rahel called sharply. 'You are dropping a long way behind. We must make an effort to remain together.'

Lucy felt a spurt of anger. 'Righto, Mum!' she snapped, at the same time jabbing Marathon's side to get her moving

faster. Then she felt ashamed. None of this was the fault of either Rahel or Marathon.

'Sorry,' she said as she caught up with Rahel, who had waited for her and was now regarding her steadily from those dark eyes.

'My apologies also,' said the Telarian girl, a little stiffly. 'It is merely that I have many grave doubts about this mission.'

'You're not kidding!' said Lucy, relieved she wasn't the only one. 'What mission? If we knew where we were supposed to go and what we were supposed to do when we got there . . . it wouldn't matter how tough it was, or how many Bulls we had to fight, it would still be easier than this. It's getting to me. That, and the Tiger-cat . . .' Her voice trailed off, but from the look on Rahel's face, she knew her friend understood.

'I'm sorry I snapped at you,' Lucy said. 'It felt good to be angry, but not at you.'

'And I am sorry for treating you as if you were Toro,' Rahel said quietly. She paused, and then spoke with sudden intensity: 'You are my sister in this struggle. I will never forget you.'

'Hey!' said Lucy, suddenly embarrassed, but pleased too. 'It's not as if we are never going to see each other again. We'll get Angel back and everything will be all right. You'll see. Telares will be saved and the Bulls will all run away and I'll come back here on a plane for a holiday and I'll meet your mum and dad and . . .'

Rahel was regarding her again in that quiet, steady way that really did make Lucy feel like a little kid, but she was smiling a tiny bit as well.

‘In the fullness of time,’ she said softly, and turned her horse and trotted ahead.

Watching her friend’s retreating back, proud and ramrod-straight, Lucy realised that if anyone had the right to be angry at the world, it was Rahel. Rahel was so smart. She spoke English better than Lucy – well, she knew heaps more big words. She should be captain of the debating team, entering competitions, winning prizes for maths, not looking after her little brother in the jungle and wondering if her mother and father were still alive. Personally, Lucy would rather be captain of the soccer team than the debating team, but hey, everyone was different and Rahel was just born to be top of the class.

Thinking about what Rahel and a million other Telarian kids had missed out on made Lucy mad all over again – and she felt her energy start to return. Anger . . . it had got her out of so many tough spots. It brought out the tiger in her, made her fearless and hungry for blood. She glanced down at the limp form of the Tiger-cat in the saddlebag at her hip and held the reins in one hand so she could bury her fingers in its thick, impossibly soft fur. The creature’s golden eyes blinked open once and closed. Its breathing was barely perceptible.

Lucy felt despair clutch at her guts again. Anger was not going to make the Tiger-cat better. She couldn’t roar at the paralysis that held that mysterious creature in its grip. What good would that do? But hot tears filled her eyes anyway and a shaft of feline fury coursed through body and soul. Marathon gave a whinny of alarm and half reared until Lucy quickly grabbed both reins and brought her mount – and her tiger self – under control.

‘It’s cool, Mara,’ she said soothingly. ‘I just want to murder a certain piggy little runty rat-dog and its owner.’

Yet, trotting up the track, the more she thought about her anger the more complicated it seemed. It used to be simple. Once, all she had to do was look at Ricardo to get mad. Like, four hundred times a day. But Ricardo didn’t annoy her so much these days, not since the Bull Commander had kidnapped him. And Ricardo, even at his most infuriating, was an angel compared to the Bull Commander. The Commander took children from their families and made them work for him so he could be rich. He scared them and treated them cruelly. The anger that Lucy had for him seemed like an old friend. It had always made her strong enough to defy him.

Yet this morning Lucy somehow realised that anger was not enough, not with the Tiger-cat dying by her side. For, despite Carlos’ kind words of hope, Lucy knew they were just that, words. The Tiger-cat was slipping away from her with every weak breath and Lucy was going to have to make magic of an entirely different kind to save her.

The only trouble was, she had no idea what or how.

Follow That Poo!



In the end they did not have to look for Angel, because that contrary child found them. They had climbed almost to the top of the track and were about to tackle the climb down into the Bull Commander's camp, or whatever was left of it, when Marathon began to whinny in alarm. At the same time, Lucy's cat's ears picked up a strange thumping. She jumped down and put her palms flat to the ground.

'Elephant! Coming this way,' she shouted, 'and fast.' What she had felt had none of the stately quality of the forty or so elephants they had passed that morning. They had moved with purpose but not panic, as though they had all the time in the world to outwalk a tsunami. What Lucy had just detected could never be described as stately. And then Angel hove into view on the slope above, astride her baby elephant and brandishing what looked suspiciously like a spear.

'Yeeaaaaoooww!' shouted the little girl, heading straight for them. The horses turned and took off back down the

track. Somehow, with Janella's vocal assistance, everyone managed to hold their seats and get out of the path of the rampaging elephant and its lunatic small rider. Lucy saw Angel's face split in a wide grin and then she was gone again, charging down the mountain towards the jungle jail.

'No way!' said Lucy. 'What is she doing?'

'Who knows,' said Carlos, resignedly, 'but at least she is heading in the right direction.'

'No she's not,' said Rahel, palms on the ground. 'She's coming back this way.' This time everyone had their spooked horses under control when the tiny banshee screamed past them. As if disappointed not to have caused more of a panic, the little girl and the elephant swung about and began charging down again.

'Stop showing off! The Tiger-cat is hurt!' Lucy shouted. It worked. Angel seemed to whisper something in the elephant's flappy ear, making the creature grind to a stop halfway down the track and come swaying back.

'You horrible auntie's dog got her,' said Lucy. Angel seemed to shrink at the news, looking less like a banshee and more like an ordinary child, despite her wild hair, her once neat plaits now a frizzled mess.

'She's lying in my saddlebag.' There was a catch in Lucy's voice.

Angel slid down the backside of her elephant, who did not seem to mind her using its tail as an abseiling rope, and rushed to Marathon. The Tiger-cat's eyes were open and Angel stared into them as though she could learn everything she needed in their golden depths. Then she turned to Lucy with an expression Lucy had seen before.

'Lucy will fix Tiger-cat. Lucy will, Lucy will!'

Lucy groaned. 'I know, Angel, I know you want me to and I know I've done things for you before, like get the carpet back and take you home to your grandma, but I just don't know what I can do about this. We think her neck is broken.'

All the little girl said was, 'Lucy fix neck. Mmmm. Lucy will fix neck.' Then she ran back to her elephant.

'Angel, you have to come with us,' Lucy called desperately. 'Your grandma wants you back. You have to be there when they finish the rug!' But the little girl swung up onto her elephant, which raised its trunk and trumpeted challengingly at a tree – then swished its tail extravagantly and did a poo the size of a small soccer ball.

'Angel – please don't go!' Lucy cried.

Angel urged the elephant up towards the kids and stood up on its back.

'Lucy will . . .' she began and Lucy felt like screaming, but the next words surprised her.

' . . . and Rahel will and Pablo and Carlos and Janella will and monkey boys will and T-Tongue will.'

'Will what?' said Lucy, hardly daring to ask.

'Will help find my Orlando's mama.'

'Orlando?'

'Mmmm,' said Angel, stroking her elephant's head and nodding in a satisfied fashion as if she had won a really big argument, and then she and her mad mount were gone, crashing off through the jungle.

'At least,' said Rahel resignedly, looking down at the steaming elephant poo that had been planted right at her feet, 'it will not be a difficult task to track Angel's Orlando.'

Where There's Smoke



Orlando and Angel led them to smoke and chainsaws. Lucy's sensitive cat's nose smelt the blaze first and immediately she worried about bushfire. The trail took them to the north-east, until they were scaling the eastern flank of the mountain, far from any true path, with the horses' hooves scrabbling desperately on loose gravel and treacherous rocks. Finally, with the smell of smoke overwhelming, they had dismounted before the lip of a particularly unforgiving rocky rise, fearful of what might await them on the other side. They tethered the horses and slithered up on their bellies to a rocky plateau, barely raising their heads to peer over. Lucy's stomach dropped and she was grateful they had not tried to ride this far. A steep cliff plunged down to the river that wound through the valley like a bright snake in the afternoon sun. On the other side of the water was a wasteland. What should have been an unbroken blanket of trees rolling off into the distance was slashed with a ragged scar the size of a hundred soccer fields. Giant trees lay felled like so many

scattered matchsticks. The whine of chainsaws rose and fell and the smoke of bonfires hung in a pall over the river valley. White-clad figures were dragging huge branches to the flames, while a handful of others wearing the brown uniforms of the Bulls watched.

‘The sacred forest,’ breathed Rahel. ‘They are destroying it.’

A shout carried from below. The army of chainsaws was momentarily stilled, and an awesome crack split the air. Instinctively the kids ducked their heads, even though the massive tree toppling to the ground was far away. Lucy put her fingers in her ears, knowing it was pointless but dreading the mini-headquake that monster would surely engender when it hit the dirt. She saw Rahel do the same and then, thump! – a violent wave shuddered through her, before the chainsaws whirred into brutal life again and a swarm of white-clad figures ran to the fallen tree and began to strip it of its branches with axes. As usual, the Bulls let everyone else do the work, while they kept guard with their rifles.

‘Look,’ Janella said suddenly, pointing. At the far edge of the clearing, as far away from the the chainsaw mayhem as possible, a group of tethered horses grazed quietly, with a Bull soldier watching over them. But something else had seized Lucy’s attention. Trudging over the wounded earth below was a conga line of elephants, their handlers perched atop their shoulders like armed monkeys, wielding sharp sticks. Each elephant was dragging a giant log across the open ground to a huge stack at the edge of the clearing, while the felling continued, tree by tree, about them. Another twenty trees were toppled in just a

few minutes. To Lucy, the humans suddenly appeared not as individuals but as an enormous mechanical caterpillar, with chainsaws for teeth, eating its way out of the sacred forest.

The largest elephant in the work party seemed particularly rebellious, refusing to stand still so a log could be hitched to its strong back. It was controlled only with much prodding and poking of ears and trunk. Once harnessed, it seemed to submit, hauling the log easily to its destination. It stood quietly as its masters unchained the load – and then suddenly moved with surprising speed towards the forest. But the handlers were ready, as if this were an old trick, surrounding it with spears, forcing it back to the centre of the clearing.

Lucy felt a shudder in the ground behind her. She had been so intent on the scene below she had forgotten to stay on guard. She looked in alarm at Rahel and knew she had felt it too. Then Orlando stumbled awkwardly up onto the rocky platform, with Angel balanced precariously on his shoulders. They moved dangerously close to the cliff edge, both staring intently at the drama being acted out in the clearing, where the handlers were still forcing the large elephant back. Orlando was rumbling away like a tiny car with its engine idling, but at a particularly vicious prod from a Bull soldier on the larger creature's trunk, he raised his own. His was only a small trumpet, but the effect was startling. Every elephant in the convoy turned, regardless of what task it was performing. The reaction of the largest elephant was most dramatic. When Orlando's call came it stopped dead in its tracks. Then, despite the renewed shouts and blows of its handlers, it raised its trunk and

trumpeted a reply. Orlando screamed again, and this time all the elephants called back. Then the largest elephant began to violently heave and haul, scattering its terrified handlers.

‘I think Orlando has found his mama,’ Carlos said quietly. But Lucy wasn’t listening. She was staring at the Bull soldier raising his rifle to aim at Angel, who was silhouetted on her elephant against the skyline. Lucy opened her mouth to shout, but she was beaten by a white-clad figure below whose cry echoed through the river gorge. The figure raced across the clearing and threw itself at the Bull soldier – and was in turn thrown aside. The soldier took fresh aim and fired across the river.

Jungle Cubby



Crack! A branch of the tree that Orlando was standing under crashed to the ground, narrowly missing him and his rider. With impressive speed for one so rotund, Orlando charged off the rock platform back into the jungle, an instant before a second bullet slammed into the tree. The children ran to their dismayed horses. They pounded back the way they had come, the baby elephant's fleeing bum their only street directory. Galloping hard, Lucy drew alongside the wayward Orlando and his even more wayward rider. She signalled to Angel to stop. For once, Angel obeyed, whispering in Orlando's flapping ear. When the elephant pulled up under a tree, the riders urged their stamping and blowing horses to surround him. The elephant did not appear to care, but calmly began to eat the tree.

'They almost shot you, Angel,' Lucy remonstrated, but the little girl just turned those big black eyes on her and said, 'We find Orlando's mama!'

'I knew it!' cried Carlos. He was quite pale apart from two red spots on his cheekbones and Lucy wondered if his

leg was holding up to the adventure. Those gunshots couldn't have brought back any happy memories.

'What was that place?' Lucy asked.

'A logging camp in our Sacred Forest. Soon there will be nothing left of it,' Rahel said heavily. 'This is a terrible turn of events. We must find somewhere where we can plan.'

'Angel,' Lucy said, tapping the little girl on the shoulder. The Telarian turned her head expectantly. 'Lucy will . . .' she began.

'Yes,' Lucy interrupted. 'Lucy will help rescue Orlando's mama, Lucy promises, but only if Angel promises to do whatever Lucy says!'

There was a pregnant silence, then Angel bent and whispered in Orlando's ear.

'Angel and Orlando promise,' she said solemnly, sitting up straight.

'Good,' returned Lucy. 'First, you know this jungle better than any of us, so take us to a place where the Bulls won't find us. We've got some serious talking to do.'

After half an hour of following Orlando's bum through the undergrowth, the kids found themselves heading uncomfortably close to the river cliff again, but Angel did, in the end, know what she was doing. They emerged a long way downstream and the scar of the logging camp could no longer be seen, even though smoke still choked the valley. Orlando picked his way delicately through a pile of boulders scattered over the ground as though a giant had left his marbles behind.

'Except it's us who have lost our marbles,' Lucy reminded herself silently. Once again, she and Ricardo and Janella were in deep trouble, and the show had only just

begun. She rode with one hand in the saddlebag at her side, stroking the Tiger-cat's tawny head with its distinctive chalk-and-charcoal markings and rounded ears. Then she had to stop thinking about her, because Orlando was splashing through a small waterfall and squeezing between two boulders, and soon the kids found themselves dismounting on the sandy floor of a huge cave, light spilling in fingers through chasms in the walls. A deep pool of fresh water was at their feet, fed by a hole in the roof at the back, trickling through the centre of the cave to be reunited with the main body of the waterfall at the front.

Angel alighted from Orlando and turned expectantly as though ready to be enlightened with every detail of the plan Lucy had nussed out on the way here . . . not! Everyone else tumbled off their horses, and let them drink greedily from the pool. Ignoring Angel, Lucy lifted the Tiger-cat gently from the saddlebag and sat down against the wall, cradling her on her lap.

'How is he?' asked Carlos.

Despite the Tiger-cat's plight, Lucy couldn't help smiling. No one had ever been game to check, but Rahel and Lucy had always been convinced the creature was a she, while all the boys insisted she was a he. 'She's the same,' Lucy said. Then her smile faded as her own words sank in. 'I feel completely useless.'

'Still, he does not seem to have any trouble breathing,' said Carlos encouragingly. 'This is a positive sign.'

'I don't know,' Lucy said despondently. 'I wish I knew how to help.' There was a hopeless silence and everyone looked downcast. Then Rahel stood up. 'We must do what we can about those things we can do something about,'

she said commandingly. ‘Lucy, how do you plan to attack the logging camp?’

‘Me?’ said Lucy in an outraged tone, but secretly she was relieved at Rahel’s call to action, insane as it was. There was an expectant silence and then Lucy said slowly, ‘Actually, I have been thinking . . . Angel, do you think Orlando can get his mum and all the other elephants to be on our side if we sneak into the camp?’

Angel, giving her a pitying look, rapped out something in Telarian that Rahel had to translate.

‘The elephants are on our side, Angel says, and she wonders why we don’t understand that already,’ Rahel said in a voice heavy with irony.

‘Mmmm, that would be because none of us speaks Elephant,’ Lucy snapped back. ‘OK, smartypants, what did the elephants say?’

Again Angel abandoned her rudimentary English for a disdainful speech in Telarian.

‘She says Orlando’s aunties and his mama were overjoyed to see him but were worried there was a monkey on his back, but he explained Angel and the other monkeys had come to help them . . .’

‘Monkeys!’ Lucy interjected, outraged.

‘Yep, monkeys rock!’ screeched Ricardo, and he and Toro began cavorting about the cavern.

‘No, monkeys get rocks thrown at them,’ Lucy retorted, which did absolutely nothing to stop them.

‘Desist!’ commanded Rahel. ‘To recapitulate,’ she went on when all was quiet, ‘the elephants understand that we are here to render assistance. And they have much hatred for the Bulls.’

‘Angel got all that from a couple of trumpets?’ Lucy couldn’t keep the dubious tone from her voice.

‘Absolutely,’ Angel said, staring challengingly at Lucy, as though she had been using complicated words in English all her short life.

‘Whatever,’ said Lucy.

‘How,’ said Carlos, who still had his mind on the job, ‘are we going to free the elephants? They’ll be chained up tonight.’

‘I believe this could be a fortuitous moment to deploy some simians,’ said Rahel.

‘She means you,’ Lucy said to the small boys.

Ricardo and Toro, still puffed up with pride at the role they had played in rescuing Carlos from the clutches of the Bull Commander a month ago, were instantly focused.

‘We shall endeavour to succeed in our mission to steal the keys to the elephants’ chains,’ Toro said solemnly, sounding remarkably like his big sister.

‘What he said,’ added Ricardo helpfully.

‘And we’ll be tigers and take out anyone who gets in our way,’ said Lucy, determined not to be outdone by anyone’s little brother, least of all her own.

‘And I’ll stay with the horses and keep them calm,’ offered Janella. ‘I’ve got a feeling we’re going to need a fast getaway. And who knows, my herd may have grown by the end of the night,’ she said mischievously.

There was a brief silence while everyone considered the immediate future.

‘It’s not much of a plan,’ Carlos finally concluded.

‘And we are outnumbered,’ said Rahel.

Lucy remembered something. ‘The people in white were

Telarian slaves, right? Will they help us? There are so many more of them than there are of the Bulls!

‘Some will, some won’t,’ returned Carlos, with a hint of his old bitterness.

‘The one who tried to stop them shooting Angel would help us,’ said Pablo stoutly.

‘And others would sell us to the Bulls for a plate of rice,’ Carlos snapped.

There was a screech from one of the monkeys and, unexpectedly, Toro was on his feet. ‘If our parents are in the camp they would never sell us to the Bulls, not even for a truck of rice,’ he shouted passionately.

Carlos looked appalled. ‘I didn’t mean your parents,’ he said apologetically. ‘And I’ll help you find them, if we have to search every Bull camp on Telares. OK?’

He stuck out his hand and, after a painful minute, Toro shook it with a muffled ‘OK’, keeping his face averted. At a burst of applause from the others, however, he turned and smiled. Lucy felt a lump in her throat, struck by how young he looked – and how brave he was 99.9 per cent of the time. He had not seen his parents for how long? She could not remember. And neither, she suspected, could Toro. He must have been tiny when his parents were taken to a Bull prison, while he and Rahel were forced to make soccer balls for the Bull Commander. Sitting there stroking the Tiger-cat’s back, Lucy knew that she would do whatever it took to help bring her friends’ families back together, tsunami or no tsunami. She couldn’t help everyone on Telares, but she could help Toro, Rahel, Pablo and Angel . . . oh yes, and Orlando.

Raiding Party



That evening, after crossing the river and putting a safe distance between themselves and the horses (waiting on the other side under Janella's watchful gaze), Lucy, Rahel and Pablo became tigers without too much fuss – much to Carlos' disgust. 'That is just not fair,' he said, surveying their feline forms without any attempt to conceal his jealousy.

Before they left the cave, Lucy tried to convince him that he could become a tiger too.

'If you get mad enough, it will happen. I just know it.'

'Indeed,' Rahel had chipped in. 'If it had been up to you to rescue us from the hospital last month, you would probably still be a tiger.'

But Carlos was sulking, cursing the Bulls for not only shooting him but depriving him of such an extraordinary chance to run as a pack with his friends. In such a mood, he had insisted on coming along to scout out the logging camp, injured leg or not.

Now, in the early moonlight, appraising her friend through her tiger's eyes, Lucy was tempted to become

human again to tell him that if he concentrated on becoming a tiger as much as he appeared to be concentrating on sulking, who knew what might happen? But there was work to be done. Her tail twitched impatiently and the tiger self took over, springing upstream in one smooth bound. Her Lucy self was considerate enough to slow to a steady prowl so Carlos could keep up, but every instinct was stretching out joyously to welcome the night and the hunt. She felt a charge of electric energy from whiskers to tail tip.

Not far behind, T-Tongue hunted with her. The young dog was more his natural self at night than at any other time, his nose drinking in every scent, his ears alert to the slightest sound. Unlike the horses, T-Tongue had seemed to take her shape-changing in his stride. Perhaps it was the influence of the Tiger-cat? But Lucy did not want to be reminded of her ailing friend, left in Janella's care.

Above her, easily keeping pace, four golden monkeys were swinging through the trees. Lucy's tiger self had much the same reaction to them as her human self did, except her tiger self also wanted to eat them. Rahel and Pablo loped along beside Lucy and behind them, walking dutifully with Carlos, was Angel astride Orlando. She was on her best behaviour, allegedly just there to watch until she was asked to play a more active role.

The smell of smoke and some kind of cooked meat grew stronger with each prowling step and soon Lucy could see the glow of the bonfires through the forest. She slowed to a crawl, dropping to her belly to inch forward as far as she dared. Then she rested her nose in her paws and drank in the scene before her.

To her right, several large tents were pitched and between them was a campfire with about twenty Bull soldiers sitting around, drinking and eating. A couple of them remained on guard, supervising at rifle-point several slaves who were serving the soldiers some kind of stew from a huge iron pot on the fire. The soldiers seemed relaxed, as though the appearance earlier that day of a child riding an elephant was nothing unexpected.

In the centre of the clearing was a large compound, constructed of stout bamboo stakes driven into the ground, each one sharpened on the top end to make it very difficult for anyone to get out. The fence was too high for Lucy to see over, but it was obvious that was where the slaves were locked up at night. Two sentries were making their rounds of the compound, rifles at the ready. As they disappeared around the corner of the fence, Lucy began to count. She had reached 240 before they appeared again. A four-minute window of opportunity.

Surrounding everything was the string of bonfires marking the reach of the logging camp, most of them reduced to mountains of red-hot coals. Such was their heat that entire branches glowed red and gold, yet they had kept their shape, even down to their growth rings. Staring at the closest fire, Lucy felt herself becoming mesmerised, until Pablo's urgent nip on her ear brought her back to reality. Tail twitching, he made it tigerishly obvious he wanted her to follow him.

Lucy trailed him back into the trees and about thirty metres to the left, aware that Rahel and Carlos were doing the same. She had no idea where the monkeys or Angel and Orlando were. Pablo waited for them all to catch up

and then struck a course back towards the clearing, but at an angle designed to bring him closer to the other side of the compound. The three tigers and Carlos hid in the bushes just as the sentries appeared around the far corner of the fence. Lucy's cat self was aware of the elephants tethered further away on the very edge of the clearing, making a series of strange rumbling sounds. Were they aware of the feline intruders?

Then she realised what Pablo had brought her to see. She felt a growl rising from the earth through her paws and had to fight to hold it. Some distance away from the bamboo compound a bonfire burned, and uncomfortably close to the heat, secured to a stake, was a white-clad figure, with his or her head slumped forward in exhaustion, defeat or something worse. Sitting on a rock a safer distance from the fire was a soldier, rifle cradled in his lap. As the sentries walked past, he acknowledged them with a bored wave.

When the sentries disappeared around the corner, Lucy felt a disturbance in the air and turned to see that Pablo had resumed his human self.

'This is punishment,' he hissed and Lucy did not need to be told who the bound slave was: the one who had tried to stop the soldiers shooting Angel and Orlando. Pablo half stood and took a step towards the unsuspecting guard. Before his other foot hit the ground it was a paw again. That was creepy, even to Lucy's tiger self. But Pablo was on a mission, one stealthy paw at a time, his tiger self alive with purpose. Lucy had to act fast. She slipped after him, Rahel at her side. They caught up with him a metre from the unsuspecting soldier, but Pablo was already leaping

and in one fluid motion struck a controlled blow to the soldier's head with his paw, then crouched over him, teeth bared in a silent snarl. The whole episode took just seconds, and the only sound, apart from the muffled thud of the soldier's body hitting the dirt, was a strangled gasp from the prisoner lashed to the stake. Lucy glanced sideways and by the light of the bonfire, saw the prisoner had raised his or her head, eyes wide open in shock.

Carlos rushed up and began to strip the soldier of his boots and brown uniform. 'Help me,' he said to Lucy. There were some applications paws were useful for (as Lucy had just witnessed rather dramatically) but undoing the buttons of a shirt was not one of them. Remembering the brief time they had before the patrolling sentries re-appeared, she shivered back into her skin to help Carlos. He was dragging his own jeans off and donning the brown combat pants and boots of the soldier. Together, he and Lucy rolled the soldier out of his shirt and in a few seconds Carlos was saluting her, the brown cap of the Bulls pulled low over his brow. His flashing eyes showed that he found humour in the situation, despite the danger. He picked up the soldier's rifle with obvious relish and Lucy shook her head in disgust.

Then Rahel was at her side, pointing urgently at the Telarian prisoner. Pablo was desperately trying to undo the bonds. Carlos searched his new pockets and produced a Bull knife. Pablo caught it with one hand and knelt.

At that instant, T-Tongue growled and Lucy knew they had run out of time. She dashed to Pablo and hissed, 'Sentries!' He made one last desperate cut and ran for cover, leaving the prisoner still standing at the stake. They made

the bushes just in time and Lucy stroked T-Tongue's head gratefully. Watching the sentries round the far corner of the compound, she knew she couldn't congratulate him out loud, but she thought with all her might, 'Good boy!' Then her heart sank as she noticed the prisoner's bonds hanging loose. The Telarian had the presence of mind to remain still, head slumped forward as though nothing had changed. But Lucy realised it would not be long before the approaching sentries noticed their comrade had lost consciousness and his clothes. She looked desperately back to where his body lay – but it was gone!

One of the approaching sentries called out a query. There was a grunt in reply and Lucy saw Carlos standing with his back turned and his legs apart in a distinctive pose. He raised his hand, keeping his face averted and muttered something to the passing soldiers in Burchimese. It must have done the trick, for they returned ribald laughs and kept going. Their joke lasted as long as it took for Lucy and Rahel to reassume their tiger forms. As the soldiers marched towards the corner, the girls stalked . . . and pounced, using the technique Pablo had so effectively demonstrated. In no time the senseless soldiers were also stripped of their clothing.

Immediately Pablo scrambled into his new outfit, pulled on his boots and he and Carlos took their rifles and marched off on their first patrol, a role they both seemed to adopt with some relish. The freed Telarian slave stumbled towards Lucy and Rahel.

Rahel dashed to the bamboo stake and grabbed what was left of the ropes. She and Lucy quickly bound the knocked-out Bull soldiers' hands and feet. The slave, too,

was thinking quickly, despite the night's strange events. She (Lucy could see she was a woman now) pulled off her white tunic and tore it into strips and by the time the boys returned, grinning widely, both soldiers were gagged and the slave was dressed in the remaining uniform of her captors.

Lucy ran to Carlos. 'Where's the other guard?' she asked urgently. He abandoned his military role with some reluctance, pointing over to where he had been peeing in the bushes before his elevation in rank. 'You didn't?' Lucy said, in dawning disgust. But Carlos was back in character and refused to answer, merely saluting her seriously and marching off on his next circuit, in tandem with an equally serious Pablo. The girls ran to the bushes and Lucy was relieved to see the first soldier was still out to it, and apparently had not been peed on. That would have been too low an act, even if he was a Bull soldier.

Finally, the girls took the slave's hands and led her into the undergrowth. When they had gone a safe distance Rahel began whispering urgently to her in Telarian. Lucy kept guard. She felt, rather than heard, a distinctive rumble and she wasn't surprised to see Angel trot up astride Orlando a few minutes later. The slave swung around and gave a hastily muffled cry. Angel fell off her elephant. The next instant she was wrapped in the slave's arms.

Four golden monkeys dropped from a tree above. 'Why is that slave cuddling Angel?' asked Ricardo, his curiosity forcing him to abandon his monkey persona.

'I believe,' Rahel said, 'that it is not just Orlando who has found his mama.'

‘Cool!’ said Ricardo.

But Lucy was putting the pieces together. She turned to the slave.

‘But that means you must be Madam El—’

‘You are correct,’ the slave whispered. ‘But I don’t believe we have time to talk.’

‘We don’t,’ Rahel agreed firmly. ‘We are here to rescue the elephants. You must help us.’

Angel’s mother did not appear at all disconcerted to meet a group of children planning to come to the aid of a herd of elephants.

‘Of course,’ she said calmly. ‘How may I be of assistance?’

‘You can tell us where the keys to the elephant chains are kept,’ said Lucy, recovering her composure.

‘That is a simple task. Near where the elephants are tethered is a shed where the Bulls keep the harnesses and saddles. The keys to their chains are hung on the wall.’

‘Easy peasy,’ said Ricardo.

‘If you please, there is something you could also help me with,’ Angel’s mother said.

‘No worries,’ said Lucy. ‘What?’

‘I want you to help me free all the slaves.’

Breakout



The monkeys completed their part of the mission in about thirty seconds flat. The shed was not secured, so it was very easy to creep in and swing up on the harnesses to steal the keys. Lucy examined the bunch of keys given her by one of the golden monkeys (she didn't know which) and her heart sank a little. Ten keys, ten elephants, but which was which? The elephant-handlers must know them off by heart, but for Lucy it would be trial and error.

'Angel, tell Orlando to warn the elephants about our plan,' she ordered, twisting the keys from the iron ring they were attached to. She distributed two each to Rahel and Angel's mum and beckoned urgently to the golden monkeys. Ricardo and Toro morphed back into human form and excitedly took two keys each. That left two for Lucy.

At this point, Orlando could contain himself no longer and trundled up to the largest elephant, so close that the tip of his trunk met hers. Lucy's snake sense kicked in and she became aware of a most unusual vibration, growing in

intensity as the large elephant wrapped her trunk around her baby's. They were rumbling at each other and the other elephants who had gathered about them were too. Lucy felt the vibration as a snake, but understood it as a human: it was a song of love. Rahel met her eyes and smiled delightedly. Angel was grinning and trotted over to the mother elephant to examine the padlock on her hobbles, seeming to have no fear whatsoever. Lucy took heart and followed, bending down as close as she dared to try her key. It didn't work and neither did the next one. Rahel tried hers as Lucy moved on to the next beast. Again, she tried the first key and almost cried in frustration when it didn't work. Then she felt the softest tickle on her hand and jumped as she realised the elephant she was trying to unchain had stretched out its trunk. Without hesitation, the sensitive tip of the trunk found the right key. Again Lucy's snake sense awoke, and she knew the elephant's urgent rumble meant, 'That's the one!'

After an excruciating time all the elephants walked free and stood in a rumbling, ear-flapping mob on the edge of the clearing. Angel mounted Orlando, which seemed to cause a thunder of consternation amongst the older elephants, but at what could only be described as a rumble from Angel herself they grew silent. Then Orlando turned to face the children. Angel met Lucy's eyes and said grandly, 'Orlando say Lucy is thankyou. Everyone is big thankyou.'

'That's OK,' said Lucy, a little embarrassed.

'It was merely our duty,' Rahel began, but Angel had not finished her speech.

'Now Orlando say we must sit on the Bulls.'

There was an approving rumble from each giant beast and much ear-flapping and raising of trunks. As for Lucy, anything sounded better than Rahel's decoy plan. Rahel had tried to convince Lucy that if the girls revealed themselves to the soldiers as tigers, they would induce mass panic and the Bulls would start shooting at them and not notice the other children releasing hundreds of slaves from the compound. The more Lucy thought about that, the better a herd of charging elephants began to look. But a loud crack on the other side of the compound changed everything. 'I think,' said Lucy, grabbing Ricardo and Toro's hands and dragging them towards the jungle, 'the shooting has already started.'

The matriarch elephant raised her trunk, trumpeted and charged around the corner of the compound towards the sound of gunfire. She barely missed trampling Carlos and Pablo, who had just skidded into view.

'Run!' Pablo yelled. A shot slammed into the elephant shed. The elephants thundered after their matriarch, but Orlando charged straight for the wall of the compound, turned and sat on it. Then he trumpeted gleefully and repeated the performance, charging and squashing, taking a metre of fence with each bum blow. Screams of terror rose from behind the collapsing wall.

Angel's mama, holding the rifle of the Bull soldier whose uniform she wore, ran towards Pablo and Carlos. She shouted in Telarian and when the boys stood stock still, she reached out and wrestled the rifles from them. She ran to the semi-collapsed wall of the compound and threw her own and the boys' rifles over the fence, then got out of the way fast as Orlando's mother came charging back

around the corner of the compound. With a wild trumpet, the matriarch joined Orlando in his destruction mission and in seconds the entire wall of the compound had caved in, revealing the slaves staring in shock. There was a frozen moment until Angel's mother shouted again and three slaves darted forward and grabbed the rifles that she had thrown.

Amid crazed trumpeting, a volley of shots burst out from behind the far fence and Angel's mama and the three armed slaves took off. The others swarmed after them, some heading straight for the jungle, others arming themselves with broken stakes and disappearing around the corner of the compound, obviously determined to take on the Bulls in whatever way they could.

Lucy, crouched with the small boys in the bushes, felt a hand on her shoulder. Rahel's face was alight in a way Lucy had never seen it before. 'This is a very special night,' she said, and then, with a deep breath, the Telarian girl was a tiger again, tail lashing, mouth asnarl. And then she was gone, loping towards the sound of battle on the other side of the compound.

Pablo was next, springing after her. Lucy turned to Carlos, who was breathing raggedly and limping on his injured leg. She reached out her hand, and as he took it felt a jolt of electric energy that made her sway. She closed her eyes and held tight as her mind opened to his. She tasted fear, grief and anger – and then, as Carlos took a breath, something new: acceptance, and with another breath, elation. When she opened her tiger eyes and the growl in her chest became a roar to match his. Together, the two tigers sprang to help their friends.

Battle of the Beasts



If any owls or bats had ventured over the logging camp that night they would have observed trampled Bull tents, flattened fences and a trail of destruction continuing into the jungle. Lucy could hear wild trumpeting receding and hoped none of the herd was hurt. Still the battle in the clearing raged between a ragtag army of freed slaves and those Bulls who had stayed to fight. The soldiers had taken cover wherever they could, firing from behind piles of pots and pans, hastily built barricades of broken bamboo, branches, bonfires and the jungle itself. Lucy was horrified to see people from both sides falling with awful cries, but mostly the victims were the heavily outgunned slaves.

In a blur, she saw Rahel and Pablo, tiger bellies to the ground, creep up behind one of the barricades and rush. Each knocked a soldier to the ground with a well-aimed paw and sprang for safety before the Bulls had realised the danger. Then it was Lucy and Carlos' turn. The Bulls were firing relentlessly at the advancing human wave of slaves. Lucy felt a hunter's hunger take over and she sprang for

her target, felled him, and then pivoted and was safe under cover, with Carlos a heartbeat behind her. Again and again they sprang from the darkness, downing many soldiers, but soon it was too dangerous, as the Bulls began firing into the forest towards them.

Not to be outdone, the golden monkeys rained mangoes from the trees with their usual deadly accuracy. Soon it was clear to Lucy that the balance had shifted. The four tigers lay panting, watching, as metre by metre the lines of slaves advanced. They too had taken shelter behind whatever was to hand, pushing whole sections of fence up so those few slaves who had rifles could shoot. Others ran with burning brands dragged from the bonfires. Lucy could see combatants fighting hand-to-hand on the edge of the jungle and heard the moans of the wounded. Soon the battle was concentrated in a tight circle near where the tents had stood and it became clear, despite the number of injured, that the slaves had the upper hand. The Bulls could simply not fire fast enough to stem the tide of Telarians rising inexorably in every direction.

When chainsaws whined into life, even the Bulls jumped. A line of slaves marched into the clearing, chainsaws screeching their deadly threat. With a roar, a wave of unarmed slaves stood ready to charge behind the chainsaw battalion. And that's when a Bull soldier stood up, waving a white slave tunic over his head. Lucy didn't need to speak either Burchimese or Telarian to understand his shouted plea. To a man, his soldiers threw their weapons away and put their hands over their heads. The Bulls had surrendered.

That did not halt the advance of the chainsaws. The Bull soldier waved his makeshift white flag desperately but the relentless slaves pushed closer. Then, into the clearing, ran Angel's mama. She sprinted ahead of the marching slaves and turned to face them, her hand high in the air, shouting just one urgent command. Again Lucy needed no translation. 'Stop!' She still wore the brown Bull uniform she had taken from the guard but with a desperate gesture she swept her cap off and a mass of black hair tumbled down.

The leader of the chainsaw column halted just a metre from where Angel's mama held her ground, her head lifted proudly. The leader gestured with a cutting motion and the clearing was suddenly deathly quiet as the slaves turned off their machines. Their leader said something impatient in Telarian to the woman before him, but she raised her voice and addressed the entire clearing in ringing tones. Lucy had no idea what Angel's mama said, but after a charged silence in which everyone, Telarian, Bull, Australian (and, indeed, elephant) seemed to stop breathing, the chainsaw leader nodded and said just one word. Lucy did not know what that meant either, but the chainsaws stayed silent, the Bulls' weapons were quietly gathered and the Bulls themselves lined up with their hands tied behind their backs.

The battle of the elephants was over.

23

Celebration



Slaves now worked frantically to stem the bleeding of the wounded, tearing strips of their tunics into bandages while about them, incongruously, a wild celebration broke out. At Angel's mama's insistence, Rahel led Toro, with golden monkey wrapped about him, out into the clearing. Rahel's shoulders were square and her chin was up. The celebrating slaves fell silent at her approach and then erupted in applause. Pablo allowed Carlos to push him forward and he received the same treatment. As Angel's mama introduced her long-lost daughter to the crowd there was a mighty roar. Lucy glanced at the Bull soldiers, sitting bound and cross-legged on the ground and saw their heads bowed in shame.

Rahel made a brief speech in Telarian. At the mention of their names, Lucy looked at Carlos and said, 'Oh no! Here we go!' But Carlos was already walking out into the clearing to an uproarious greeting. When Carlos turned and called to Lucy and Ricardo, she knew there was no point dodging it. Pretending this was just another version

of a soccer trophy presentation she stepped out, feeling herself grow bright red and wishing the ground would open up and swallow her. Ricardo, of course, basked in the limelight. He bounded up to Toro and the two of them raised each other's hands in the air to soak up the cheers. Carlos and Rahel obviously decided Lucy was hanging back a little too much and grabbed her hands and dragged her centre stage. They shouted something in Telarian and the crowd roared.

Lucy was relieved to hear a whinny from the trees and turned to see Janella lead the horses into the clearing. Rahel called her name. Blushing, Janella stepped forward, long blonde hair swinging, and bowed her head awkwardly to receive the thanks of the crowd, before slipping back to her horses. Rahel addressed the crowd again. At her words there was a sudden hush, as though the mood had changed. Lucy heard the name 'Larissa' and there was a brief ripple of applause and then everyone listened seriously to what Rahel had to say. Lucy, observing her friend in this new situation, suddenly saw her no longer as a girl, no longer even as a teenager. Rahel was a leader, whatever her age – and the crowd knew it too.

One by one, Telarians stood up to have their say, and soon a serious discussion was under way. Lucy looked for Janella, but could no longer see her or the horses. She went looking, glad of the quiet, and found them with the herd of frightened Bull horses tethered on the other side of the clearing. Janella was busy making friends with them all.

'So, how does it feel to be a hero of Telares?' Lucy teased.

‘Get out of here,’ said Janella, embarrassed. ‘Why were they clapping me? I just looked after the horses. I didn’t do anything!’

‘But they did,’ said Lucy gesturing towards the crowd in the distance. ‘They made the Bulls surrender and I reckon they’ll be clapping someone or other all night. How much did you see?’

‘Dark Star got bored waiting so we crossed the river and hid. We saw pretty much everything. I thought the horses were going to bolt when the chainsaws started up, but luckily it didn’t last long. I can’t believe they won.’

Lucy walked up to stroke Marathon’s nose and then opened the saddlebag to examine the Tiger-cat. The creature’s eyes were open and Lucy stroked her head tearfully. ‘We’re going to take you back to the jungle jail and I don’t know how, but I am going to fix you,’ she promised. There was a gentle touch on her arm and Lucy looked up, expecting to see Janella’s sympathetic gaze, but instead met the eyes of Angel’s mama. Holding her hand, like any ordinary little girl, was Angel.

‘Thank you, Lucy,’ the Telarian woman said simply. ‘It has been a very difficult time.’ She reached out and shook Lucy’s hand. ‘My name is Sofia,’ she said. ‘I believe you are acquainted with my mother and aunt?’

Lucy nodded, a lump in her throat.

Sofia turned to stroke the Tiger-cat, a sad smile on her face. ‘You know, Lucy, I believe you have the skills necessary to help Euphoria.’

‘But I don’t know how!’ Lucy cried.

‘Let us travel to my mama, Madam Eleanor, and see what can be done,’ said Sofia gently.

‘Nina and Madam Eleanor are trying to finish the Carpet of All Creation,’ Lucy blurted out. ‘And there’s a tsunami coming!’

Sofia nodded as though none of this surprised her. ‘So Angel has informed me,’ she said with something of Madam Eleanor’s regal serenity. ‘As a member of the true line of weavers, I must help them.’

‘And Carlotta is there,’ Lucy warned, thinking Sofia should be more excited. ‘With armed guards.’

‘Aunt Carlotta,’ Sofia said softly, ‘will not be a problem. But the guards we must take seriously. I suggest we send an advance party to scout out the situation.’

Rahel, Carlos and Pablo appeared, full of excitement. ‘Some of the Telarian prisoners are part of the rebel command,’ Rahel said triumphantly. ‘They have some good ideas. We searched the Bull soldiers and found this.’ She produced a satellite phone. ‘I’ve already phoned Larissa. Before sunrise, a party of rebels will arrive to collect the injured and take the Bull soldiers into custody.’

‘Cool!’ said Lucy. ‘Good on you!’

‘I have warned the prisoners about the tsunami,’ Rahel said. ‘Some panicked and left for higher ground, up on Mount Katerina. But most of them . . .’ she said with a pointed look at Carlos, ‘have voted to join our uprising. They believe there is a strong chance a tsunami will not reach this far inland.’

‘Well, all the elephants marching up Mount Katerina seem to think it will,’ said Lucy.

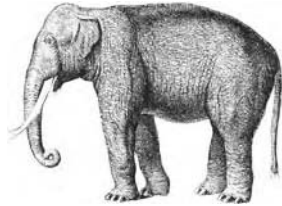
‘We will soon find out who is right. In any case, when the rebels arrive here at dawn, they will be greeted by hundreds of people eager to join them. They plan to march

on the closest Bull stronghold,' Rahel said. She turned to Carlos with a wicked grin, as though waiting for him to say something.

'OK, OK,' he said, throwing up his hands. 'I was wrong when I said most Telarians would sell us to the Bulls for a bowl of rice.'

But for once Carlos did not look as though he minded being wrong.

Ouch!



Half an hour later, as the moon swung low in the sky, a string of horses splashed through the river, bearing the children and Sofia towards the jungle jail. Angel rode with her mother, while Orlando followed his, his little trunk wrapped about her tail. The rest of the camp elephants lumbered behind. They passed many other elephant families on the track, many baby trunks wrapped around mother tails, but all of them heading in the opposite direction. It seemed that, in all Telares, only one herd could ignore the pull of the mountain.

The journey was slowed by the increasing frequency of Lucy and Rahel's headaches, but by the time the midday sun had begun its descent, the party was approaching the jungle jail. Lucy, Rahel, Carlos and Pablo went ahead to check things out, leaving Janella with the horses and the smaller boys. All was quiet, a wisp of smoke from the jungle jail's kitchen chimney the only sign of life. Then the front door opened and one of Carlotta's guards emerged. He walked down the stairs and sat in the shade of the tree to smoke a cigarette.

‘Let’s just get him,’ whispered Carlos. ‘His uniform will come in handy for something.’ He and Pablo were still dressed in the uniforms they had taken last night.

‘We agreed we were spying right now, not attacking!’ hissed Rahel severely, and Carlos shot her a wicked grin.

‘Shhh!’ said Lucy. ‘Look.’ The door had opened again and another guard emerged, yawning. He clearly found guarding three old ladies and a few small children less than challenging. He strolled down to the other guard and slumped lazily to the ground.

Lucy felt T-Tongue’s hackles rise and understood why a few seconds later when Carlotta appeared in the doorway with her piggy-rat dog. It darted past her legs and ran around the clearing sniffing everything in sight.

‘Let’s at least get Carlotta and her monster,’ Lucy hissed, but Rahel just shook her head, exasperated.

Carlotta stood on the steps, tapping her foot, and then looked at her watch as though she was waiting for something. She snapped out an order to the Bull soldiers and reluctantly they got to their feet.

‘What are we waiting for? Let’s go,’ urged Carlos, but Lucy couldn’t answer. She braced herself for another headquake as an ominous shudder gripped her. Then she met Rahel’s eyes. ‘Truck!’

Was this what Carlotta was waiting for? Or could it be Eduardo, come with a guard for Nina and Madam Eleanor? The roar of the approaching engine gave no clue.

They did not have long to wait. A large twin-cabin truck roared into the clearing and Carlotta stepped down from the verandah with a winning smile. Suddenly the clearing was a sea of brown uniforms as Bull soldiers swarmed

from the back of the truck, pointing their weapons into the jungle. The driver, with the air of performing a service for someone very important indeed, opened the door of the passenger cabin and stood to attention, saluting smartly. The Bull Commander emerged, followed by Nigel Scar-Skull. Then both men turned as a third person began to alight. The Bull Commander saluted respectfully. Nigel tried to salute but Lucy was pleased to see he used the wrong hand and had to swap mid-air.

By the sheer number of flashing stars, medals and ribbons on the uniform of the soldier stepping from the cabin, Lucy could tell he was one special Bull indeed. Carlotta, blushing, dropped to a deep curtsey before the General, or whoever he was. Someone, however, had failed to notify her piggy-rat dog that this was a man who should be treated with the utmost respect. The little monster darted forward and sank his teeth into the General's ankle.

The General cursed and tried to shake off the attacker, while Carlotta shouted increasingly panicked commands, but the little dog would not release his grip. The Bull Commander drew his pistol as if to shoot, but the General and Carlotta shouted for (Lucy thought) different reasons. Nigel Scar-Skull kicked at the animal but succeeded only in kicking the General in the shins. A Bull soldier pointed his rifle at Nigel, who looked horrified and kept trying to apologise and explain himself in English, a language the soldier clearly did not understand. Finally the General raised his shiny boot, with the determined dog hanging like a mutant monkey from his trousers, and swung his leg towards the corner of the truck. The dog's body made a sickening thump and he fell

to the ground. *Please be seriously injured*, Lucy prayed, but he jumped up for a second go. Carlotta roared, stopping the animal in its tracks. He cringed as she advanced threateningly, clearly remembering past punishments. He seemed to shrink pitifully inside his skin as he allowed himself to be leashed. And then Carlotta kicked him again and again and his howls were horrible. Despite what he had done to the Tiger-cat, Lucy finally felt some sympathy. Treating a dog, any dog, like that was just not on.

It was clear the welcoming party was cancelled, along with any happy family reunion that might have been anticipated between Nigel and his mother. Carlotta despatched a soldier into the house and he emerged with Blue Uniform, resplendent in her matron's uniform and looking every inch the professional. The soldier tried to hurry her along with curt words in Burchimese, but Blue Uniform would not be rushed, walking serenely across the clearing towards the General, who was sitting on a hastily fetched chair in the shade of the tree. Three soldiers pointed their weapons as Blue Uniform knelt by his side, opened her bag and produced a pair of scissors to cut away the torn fabric of his trousers. She examined the wound and then held a syringe and needle up to the light. There was a sharp query from the Bull Commander and he stepped forward threateningly. Blue Uniform's reply boomed throughout the clearing.

'My dear sir, if you don't wish your commanding officer to succumb to rabies I suggest you allow me to complete my task.'

'Rabies?' cried Carlotta, outraged. 'Tyson does not have rabies!'

'Rabies!' cried the General, demonstrating an unexpectedly good grasp of English, and hastily rolled up his sleeve to reveal his biceps.

'Rabies,' confirmed Blue Uniform, dabbing his exposed arm with antiseptic. Then she took a firm grip and jabbed him with the needle.

Lucy heard a jumble of words such as 'tetanus', and 'stitches' and 'anthrax', and then the soldiers carried the General up the stairs and into the house, followed at a respectful distance by Carlotta, Nigel and the Commander. Tyson was tied up to the verandah rail in disgrace. The only soldiers who remained in the clearing were the driver of the truck and his offsider, who seemed interested only in sheltering from the afternoon heat in the shade of the tree. Before long, both were asleep. The kids took their chance to wriggle back into the undergrowth and sped back to where the others waited.

Another Plan



‘How many soldiers?’

‘About twenty,’ Carlos answered Janella cheerfully. He clearly had plans for all their uniforms.

‘It is far too many,’ said Pablo shaking his head despondently.

Lucy was thinking hard. ‘What about your decoy plan?’ she asked Rahel. ‘That could work. They chase us into the jungle in all directions and then . . . and then . . .’ Her voice fizzled out. ‘Well, I don’t know, we’ve got to get rid of them somehow.’

‘No!’ said Rahel, suddenly animated. ‘We must make them welcome!’

Everyone looked at her blankly. Rahel tapped the precious satellite phone thoughtfully.

‘If the rebels know a Bull general is here, I don’t think we will have any trouble convincing them to give Eduardo his reinforcements.’

Carlos’ face was a study in contradiction. He knew Rahel’s plan made sense, but the idea of sitting around

waiting for someone else to take out the Bulls was anathema.

‘There is one problem with your strategy,’ said Sofia.

‘What?’

‘I believe I must enter the house as soon as possible to help complete the rug. I have a terrible feeling time is running short.’

As if to illustrate her words, a headquake engulfed Lucy. It was worse, much worse, than before. She felt as though she were not just being pounded and shaken, but picked up and spun by her feet. She sank to the ground. When she could finally sit up, clutching her head, she knew by the expressions of the others that something fundamental had changed. The jungle was eerily quiet, except for the concerned rumbling of the elephants, who had gathered in a circle, shaking their large heads as though they hurt. Not a bird sang and the other children were deathly pale.

‘What?’ asked Lucy.

‘We felt the tremor too,’ said Carlos, and pulled his Bull cap lower over his eyes as though it might afford him some protection.

‘You are right, Sofia,’ said Rahel, who was also huddled on the ground, and very pale. ‘If everyone else is feeling it now we do not have time to waste. There is only one course of action.’

‘Yeah?’ Lucy was glad someone was thinking clearly.

‘We must kidnap the General.’

This caused an outcry. The small boys were overcome with excitement, resuming their monkey forms to leap about screeching in the trees. Pablo wasn’t much better,

but at a sharp look from Rahel he sat down again. Carlos, eyes blazing with excitement, couldn't speak at all. Janella looked from one Telarian to another and shook her head in disbelief.

'You guys are nuts,' she said. 'How is that going to help?' She considered a moment longer. 'Yep. You're totally nuts.'

'Completely,' agreed Lucy cheerfully.

Carlos was finally able to speak. 'The truck. We must disable their truck. Just like last time. I'll go and do it now!' He jumped to his feet, with Pablo copying.

'No,' said Rahel. 'The truck must be allowed to leave.'

Carlos and Pablo stopped short and looked at her as though she had really lost the plot this time.

'The question is, my soldier friend, who will be at the wheel?' Rahel asked Carlos, who really did look like a Bull, albeit a skinny one, in his brown uniform. The expression of joy that dawned on Carlos' face as he realised what she was thinking was all the answer Rahel needed.

Lucy looked at Janella for help but it was clear her friend had no idea either what crazy plan the two Telarians were hatching.

'What are you guys talking about?' she demanded. 'It sounds insane, whatever it is.'

'Yes,' Rahel said proudly. 'Janella is right. It is insane.'

'But,' Sofia said quietly, 'it just might work. If Carlos drives the truck . . .'

'You can drive a truck?' Lucy asked Carlos incredulously.

'But of course,' he shrugged, as though it were the most natural skill in the world for a teenager to have. 'My father taught me just before . . . just before, everything went

wrong. He taught me to drive in the Telares Tigers' bus. We travelled all over the island to play. Whenever no one else was around he let me drive it. A truck cannot be so very different.'

Lucy wasn't so sure of that, but she was beginning to see how Rahel's idea might work.

'The driver and the other guy in the clearing . . .'

'Yes,' said Rahel, 'We're going to give them a little holiday from the army. And when it's time to take the General back to Telares City, Carlos and Pablo will be in their place.'

'But how do we know they want to go back to Telares City?' Janella asked, perplexed.

'My aunt has not invited them here for a party,' Sofia said ruefully. 'This is strictly business. It is clear Carlotta and Nigel and the Bull Commander intend to sell the carpet for a very large sum of money, possibly overseas. They have included the General in their plans and have brought him here to verify for himself that it is a genuine Carpet of All Creation.'

'That won't take long,' said Lucy. 'You should see it. It's so beautiful it freaked out Blue Uniform. It's amazing!'

Sofia smiled. 'I am sure it is. Once the General has seen it, he will have no reason to stay. It is my guess he will want a Bull doctor to examine him immediately. He will go, but he will leave some soldiers behind to ensure Aunt Carlotta does not double-cross them and run off with the carpet herself.'

All that made sense to Lucy.

'But what if they notice Carlos and Pablo? The Bull Commander will recognise Carlos, for sure!'

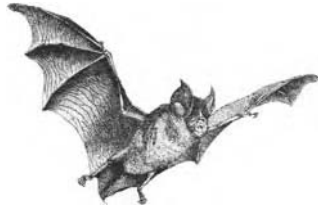
At the mention of the man who had murdered his parents, Carlos drew himself up to his full height.

‘In that case,’ he said, eyes narrowed, ‘we need to arrange a holiday for the Commander too.’ It didn’t sound like the kind of holiday the Bull Commander would enjoy.

‘That is why,’ said Rahel, with a worried glance at her friend, ‘Some of us must show ourselves to the Bull Commander. We must give him a reason not to get in that truck. We must give him a reason to shoot at us.’

That was the part of the plan Lucy thought needed more work.

Carlos the Truckie



They discussed the plan from every angle, but with each minute of ‘What if?’ and ‘How will we do this?’ the sun sank lower in the sky.

‘Well,’ Lucy finally said, ‘if we are doing this, we’d better do it. The Bull General will want to leave before nightfall. He might be leaving now!’

Everyone jumped up, ready for action.

Rahel looked at them, one by one. ‘You have all memorised your tasks?’

The small boys nodded importantly, for once very serious. Lucy noticed that Janella was pale, but she sat in Dark Star’s saddle with an air of quiet determination. Once again, Lucy said a silent thanks to her friend for sticking out this crazy quest. Kurrawong High School seemed a long way away.

Lucy held out her hand to Sofia. ‘Thanks for taking the Tiger-cat,’ she said, trying not to choke on the words.

‘You must not concern yourself about Euphoria,’ Angel’s mama reassured her softly, stroking the soft head barely

visible in her saddlebag. 'I believe your Blue Uniform may be able to help.'

'I don't know about that,' Lucy said despondently. 'But I can't keep dragging her around the jungle from one fight to another. Just keep her away from that piggy-rat dog. And don't let Carlotta see her.'

Sofia tucked another sarong over the saddlebag so those distinctive ears were no longer visible and said again, 'Do not worry.' Lucy turned away, urging Marathon down the track towards the jungle jail, not really caring if the others followed or not, because she knew she would burst into tears if she stayed a second longer. The Tiger-cat had been Lucy's guide and champion since this psycho adventure began, somehow able to make her feel strong and brave in the midst of terrible danger. Now she seemed to have slipped into the deepest of sleeps – and Lucy could not stand it.

The little group gathered on the rise overlooking the jungle jail. The two guards were still lolling in the shade and the house itself was quiet. Lucy noticed Carlos staring at the truck, licking his lips a little, as though it was a huge chocolate cake he intended to eat all by himself. Then one of the guards stretched a little and rolled over.

Lucy poked Ricardo in the ribs. 'Now!' she hissed. He needed no encouragement. Instantly, he and Toro shivered into their monkey selves and then four golden bodies were swinging through the trees towards the lazy guards. Lucy met Carlos' eyes. 'Don't forget your driver's licence,' she quipped, but even before the words were out she found herself staring into golden eyes instead of dark brown ones. Carlos held her human eyes for a long moment, and

then he was gone, tiger belly low to the ground, creeping down through the underbrush towards the unsuspecting soldiers. Pablo and Rahel, in tiger form, were not far behind him.

Sofia, holding Angel perched on the saddle in front of her, nodded at the girls. 'We will wait, as planned, until we can enter safely.' If Lucy thought she detected a slightly mulish expression on Angel's face, there was no time to do anything about it. She looked about for Orlando. He was happily tearing a small tree apart, while his mama and the other elephants munched on much larger specimens. Lucy reached out and touched Janella's arm.

'You ready?'

Janella nodded. Lucy scanned the clearing. Still quiet. She prayed that everyone was in position. Then, patting Marathon's neck to reassure her all was well, she gave the signal, her best impersonation of a monkey screech. It was instantly answered from below. And then a mango missile flew from the branches of the tree the two soldiers were dozing under, striking one of them in the head. He sat up with a cry, rubbing his skull. His mate suffered the same fate and soon both were on their feet, scanning the branches above them for a chattering culprit they could hear but not see. The noise sent Tyson nuts and he burst out from under the verandah steps to the very limit of his lead, barking frantically, but a curt word from one of the soldiers sent him whimpering, belly down, back under the verandah.

With a triumphant screech, a golden form leaped through the air into the branches of the next tree, and

threw another missile, this time striking one soldier in the back of the head. He swung about, cursing savagely, only to be struck on the bum from the other direction. He drew his weapon, as a second golden form leaned out of the branches and lobbed a mango.

‘C’mon, Ricardo,’ Lucy said under her breath. ‘Cut the crap. You know what you are supposed to do.’ As if responding to her thoughts, one golden monkey scampered down the tree and danced cheekily up behind the soldier with the gun. In a very human gesture, he leaned forward and pinched the man’s brown-clothed bottom – hard! Then he screeched at the top of his monkey lungs and skedaddled for the trees, as the outraged soldier swung about, weapon raised. But Ricardo was too quick for him and suddenly the clearing was quiet again. Lucy counted to five, and three other monkeys swung down from the trees, scampered tantalisingly close to the soldiers and disappeared into the jungle. Their cheeky gibbering made it very clear they had not gone very far. The soldiers looked at each other. Rubbing his clearly aching head, the second one drew his weapon and gave a signal. The two soldiers crept slowly towards the bushes.

As they disappeared into the undergrowth, Lucy felt the hair on the back of her neck rise. Her tiger self, barely contained, was hungry. Lucy couldn’t help licking her lips and sniffing the air impatiently; but her job was simply, at least for the moment, to wait. She narrowed her eyes and stared at the bushes where the soldiers had disappeared, as though her tigerish regard alone could help her friends. But there was nothing to see or hear. Then she

remembered she was supposed to be keeping watch in case anyone came out of the jungle jail. She hurriedly scanned the building and then looked back in time to see two brown-uniformed forms emerge from the bushes, caps pulled down low over their eyes – Carlos and Pablo in stolen Bull uniforms. They glanced nervously at the house and at Tyson, bristling again on the end of his lead, then scurried for the truck, slithering up into the cabin just as Tyson burst into full-throated alarm. By the time Carlotta appeared at the door, Carlos was resting his head on the steering wheel as though asleep, and Pablo couldn't be seen at all.

Tyson's high-pitched bark subsided to a petulant whine at his mistress' threatening tone. Carlotta scanned the clearing, eyes narrowed, and then shouted something rude at the truck. Carlos waved his hand dismissively, without lifting his head, as though he did not have to follow orders from a mere woman. She shouted something again and went back inside. Lucy felt a shift in the air and then Rahel was at her side, red-faced and breathing hard.

'What did Carlotta say?'

'They are leaving in a few minutes. We must be ready.'

'Lucky we got here in time,' Lucy breathed.

'It was indeed fortuitous,' her Telarian friend agreed.

'Fortwhat?'

Rahel started to explain, but then there was a disturbance at the front door of the jungle jail. Carlotta walked out, looking a little frazzled, and made sure Tyson was well out of the way. She was followed by a party of Bull soldiers trotting down the stairs, fanning out, their weapons covering every point an enemy might spring

from. Next to emerge were Nigel and the Bull Commander, smiling and laughing as though it were Christmas and Santa had been especially kind to them. When he reached the bottom of the stairs the Bull Commander turned and shouted something back through the open door of the jungle jail, where a soldier stood guard. Everyone, including Carlotta, laughed. Their mirth had an ugly ring to it. Rahel stiffened.

‘What did he say?’

Her friend’s eyes were blazing. ‘He told the soldier to ensure those lazy old ladies did not sleep until the carpet was complete. They must not stop working.’

‘Lazy!’ hissed Lucy. ‘I’ll show him lazy!’

‘Wait,’ said Rahel.

Two soldiers appeared, supporting the Bull General, who for some reason seemed very sleepy. He yawned and rubbed his eyes as his men helped him down the stairs.

‘What did Blue Uniform give him in that needle?’ Lucy whispered, feeling better. Rahel smiled and nodded at the truck. The Bull Commander hurried over, banging briskly on the window of the front cabin to ‘wake up’ the sleepy driver, and opened the back cabin. Accompanied by his gun-toting guards, the General was helped inside. Lucy heard the troop doors slam, and from the corner of her eye, was dimly aware of a flash of golden fur in the bushes near the back of the truck. But she had eyes only for the Bull Commander. He was looking hard into the front cabin at the driver, who was trying his best to stare off into the jungle in the opposite direction. She felt a disturbance in the air and then Rahel, tail twitching, was padding quickly towards the clearing.

'Let's go!' shouted Lucy to Janella, and in the next instant the two girls, whooping like warriors, had urged their horses down the hill. They reined in at the edge of the clearing and Lucy had a second to thoroughly enjoy the shock on Nigel and the Bull Commander's faces at the sight of the two foreign girls, one dark, one strikingly blonde, before she shouted out brazenly, 'If you Bulls want us, you're going to have to catch us!'

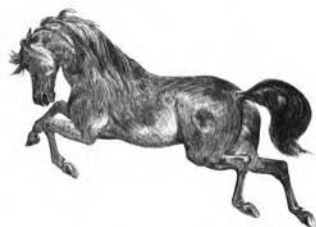
The Commander was already reaching for his gun. Then everything happened very quickly. Lucy saw a tiger leap up the jungle jail stairs and fell the guard at the door. At the same time, a monkey bounced from the bushes and scrambled for the truck, slamming the General's door closed. The truck's engine burst into throaty life and jerked across the clearing with a series of violent kangaroo hops. Nigel had to dive out of its way and take off into the jungle. The Bull Commander aimed at the front window, but clearly thought better of it. Then he had to leap aside as the truck performed a massive doughnut and careered out of the clearing, wiping out a series of small trees as it went.

It was too much for Dark Star, who reared and screamed. The Bull Commander rolled onto his stomach commando-style, trying to take aim at the horse's chest. A monkey landed on his head and his wayward shot brought a branch crashing down horribly close to Janella's head. The sound and vibration of his weapon was deafening, snake sense or not.

Then came an answer from the jungle, an inhuman scream. A massive shuddering seemed to suffuse the air itself, and a herd of elephants, led by a baby carrying a

small dark-haired girl, thundered into the clearing. The Bull Commander had no time to take fresh aim. Just as it seemed he would surely be trampled, Orlando halted and, with a strange delicacy, stretched out a foot and stomped on the gun. Then he stomped on the phone that had slipped from the Bull Commander's pocket.

Elephant Jail



The elephants had formed a formidable barrier about the unfortunate Commander. He might carry a military title, but it was clear who was now in charge: Angel. The little girl seemed to be enjoying herself, whispering in Orlando's ear and making sure the elephants never allowed a gap large enough for the Commander to sneak through. In desperation, he tried rolling under their bellies, at risk of being trampled, but there was always another elephant to lazily block the gap. Again, Lucy was struck by how graceful and athletic such huge beasts could be. The matriarch, in particular, seemed to have a sense of humour, reaching her trunk out from behind the Commander to nuzzle his neck whenever he turned his back, making him jump.

Lucy cantered to the steps of the jungle jail where Carlotta stood, her face glistening with sweat. She appeared unable to take her eyes from something crouched a metre or so away.

'It's only a tiger,' Lucy said cheerfully. For an instant the

white-haired woman locked eyes with her. Carlotta's were the same shape and almost the same colour as her sisters', but there the resemblance ended. Lucy had never ever seen such a murderous expression in Madam Eleanor or Nina's golden eyes as Carlotta's held now. As she bared her teeth, Lucy was reminded of a crocodile.

'Get away from me!' Carlotta hissed and took a step sideways, clearly intent on releasing Tyson's lead. The little piggy-rat dog was brave, Lucy had to give him that. He was rigid with concentration, every hackle raised and every sense bent on the feline form crouched so close to his mistress. He was making a strange, low, rattling growl deep in his throat. Such loyalty for a mistress who clearly had no qualms about sacrificing him to a tiger!

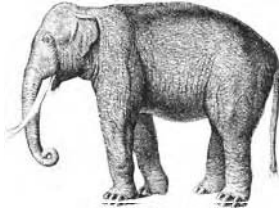
'I wouldn't do that if I were you,' said Lucy calmly. Carlotta stopped mid-stretch and looked back at the tiger, who chose that moment to shiver back into the skin of an ordinary Telarian teenage girl. And Carlotta, who surely must have seen a few strange things growing up with Nina and Madam Eleanor, fainted clean away. Tyson, as though sensing defeat, issued a pathetic whimper and slunk back under the verandah.

Lucy became aware of an excited barking. 'T-Tongue!' she called, but the barking just became more frenzied. 'Over here!' called Janella from the other side of the clearing. Lucy trotted over to discover what all the commotion was about. She found that T-Tongue, extremely proud of himself, had treed something. And that something was wearing a loud Hawaiian shirt.

'Hi Nige,' called Lucy in a sunny voice. 'What is about you and trees? Need some help getting down?'

Thanks for asking, but Nigel preferred to stay right where he was. Well, that wasn't quite what he said, but Lucy gave him the benefit of the doubt and decided that was what he meant. Leaving T-Tongue on guard, Lucy trotted back to the jungle jail, feeling happier than she had for days – in fact happier than she had the last time she'd seen Nigel stuck up a tree, at Nina's fake 'funeral'.

The Ugly Truth



Blue Uniform kept muttering about the ethical issues involved in what she was doing, but she really looked quite cheerful when she gave the Bull Commander the injection that sent him to sleep. The Commander, once the elephant guard had become distracted by the sight of the luscious-looking trees surrounding the clearing, had made a futile effort to flee, but tiger Rahel had soon persuaded him otherwise. With the Commander feeling the effects of a tigerish biff to the brainbox, Blue Uniform had emerged from the house with her bag of tricks to make sure he stayed that way. It took a lot of effort to drag his dead weight up the stairs, down the hall and into a room the Bull Commander had himself once locked children away in.

‘I hope the irony is not lost on him when he awakes,’ said Madam Eleanor, standing at the door.

‘The what?’ said Lucy, and Rahel did her best to explain what irony was as they walked back to Nigel in his tree, where Nina was trying to persuade Nigel to climb down.

‘Now, Nigel,’ she said reasonably. ‘You know there is no point staying up there all night. This jungle is riddled with ravenous tigers. They can climb trees, you know! And it’s getting dangerously close to sunset – feeding hour.’ As if to punctuate her words, Rahel, who seemed reluctant to stay human for more than five minutes, morphed, gave an impressive growl and lashed her tail violently. That seemed to do the trick.

Nervous as he was of tiger Rahel, Nigel couldn’t resist shooting Lucy a filthy look as he walked past. ‘Don’t think you’re going to get away with this,’ he spat. Then he smiled. At least that was one way of describing the way he stretched his lips apart and bared his teeth.

‘Sorry, but I think we have got away with it,’ said Lucy, hoping it was true.

Then she morphed into a tiger because she didn’t want to talk to him any more and Nigel practically ran to the verandah, up the stairs, and down the hall to where Madam Eleanor, leaning on her stick, was waiting. ‘Welcome, nephew,’ she said graciously. ‘I hope your friend the Commander does not snore too much. Just let us know if you have trouble sleeping. I’m sure we could help.’

‘Now, Ellie,’ Nina said reproachfully, but her sister just opened her ginger eyes wide, radiating innocence. Madam Eleanor, Lucy decided, had quite a wicked streak.

As for Carlotta, she awoke from her faint to find herself tied to a chair in the weaving room. Her initial outburst of spitting and shrieking soon petered out when no one paid her any attention. The weavers were catching up on precious lost time and she was left to gaze bitterly at the masterpiece taking shape before her.

Lucy was amazed to see how much work Nina and Madam Eleanor had done in the short time available to them. An entire side of the carpet had been taken up with an intricate underwater scene, very similar to the one in the ballroom of the Mermaid House in Kurrawong. As in a scene from the Great Barrier Reef, angelfish and stingrays seemed, in the flickering candelight, to slip in and out of a forest of seaweed. A blue-grey dolphin leaped in a graceful arc, and bright coral flowered in the corner. A sandy patch was studded with starfish and crabs, before the woven beach gave way to green jungle again. Just a few patches of the carpet remained to be filled in. On the far side of the loom, Lucy could see the pink and grey of another baby elephant taking shape under Nina's skilful hands. Angel had abandoned her own elephant adventures and was curled up on a cushion at Nina's feet, watching her every move.

On the edge of the room, snuggled in a bank of cushions, were the children from the camp. They looked at Lucy with big black eyes but did not reply to her greeting, slurping up bowls of steaming stew that Blue Uniform had given them. Between spoonfuls, they watched intently as the women wove.

Sofia, as though she had spent the last year practising her art instead of hauling branches in a Bull camp, was twisting and knotting the dark threads that made the finishing touches of a distinctive shape in a corner of the seaside scene: the tail of a whale.

A very serious Madam Eleanor was stooped over a basket of glowing threads in every shade of blue, grey and green, from the deepest turquoise to a silvery grey.

Grasping a handful of azure threads, she rose with some difficulty, rubbing her back, and turned to face her loom. Lucy's astonished expression made her smile.

'As you see, my dear Lucy, we did not require the Bull Commander to instruct us to keep our minds focused on the task,' she said.

'But it's impossible! You've done so much. How did you have time?'

'Time?' said Madam Eleanor, with a gentle smile. 'I think you know, Lucy, that on Telares time is a slippery concept.' She paused reflectively and by the faraway look in her eyes, Lucy knew that asking any more questions would be futile.

She turned to Rahel who was lolling on a cushion against the wall, exhausted from her tigerish tricks.

'Are you sure Carlos and Pablo will be OK?' Lucy asked for the fifteenth time. 'What if the soldiers escape from the back of the truck?'

'Toro promises he bolted it. They won't get out until the rebels let them out. And then they will wish they had been left in.'

'And the General,' said Blue Uniform with brisk satisfaction, 'will sleep like a baby all night.'

At that, Nina looked up and smiled at her friend.

'Perhaps I should weave a portrait of you with your medicine bag next,' she teased, ginger eyes crinkling.

'I should think not!' demurred Blue Uniform stoutly, but Lucy could tell she was pleased, by the blush that rose from her throat to the top of her forehead.

But Lucy was still worried.

'What if Carlos has crashed the truck? He's the worst

driver I've ever seen! What if he gets ambushed? What if some of the soldiers in the back have phones and call in reinforcements?' She knew Rahel had not thought of that by the horrified look on her face.

Lucy quickly tried to think of something that would make her friend less anxious. 'But there were no windows in the back of the truck, just airholes up high, so the soldiers won't know where they are,' she said hurriedly. 'Even if they have got phones, they won't be able to tell the Bulls where to find them.'

Rahel tapped her satellite phone pensively. Lucy knew what she was thinking. She wanted to ask Larissa if the rebels had met the truck yet. But she was under strict instructions not to. Every call risked giving away Larissa's position. Larissa had been delighted to get the news that a sleepy Bull General and his men were on their way to the outskirts of Telares City where the rebels might like to meet them, but she had warned Rahel, 'No more calls!'

With nothing else to say on that subject, there was no avoiding the moment Lucy had been dreading. Gently she lifted the Tiger-cat from the saddlebag that Sofia had carried inside, and placed the animal on a cushion. Her eyes were no longer open.

'Excuse me,' Lucy said to Blue Uniform, in a voice that sounded stronger than she felt. 'I need your advice.'

For an instant Lucy caught a look of the utmost sympathy and regret on Blue Uniform's face, which made her stomach sink, but then a professional mask dropped over the matron's features and she picked up her bag and marched over. She examined the Tiger-cat from head to toe, lifting eyelids to shine her penlight into the pupils,

listening to the heartbeat, feeling every bone for a break or swelling. Finally, she shook her head and met Lucy's eyes with a direct, businesslike gaze.

'I can find nothing wrong with this creature.' Just as Lucy allowed her hopes to rise, Blue Uniform shook her head and continued, 'But clearly something is wrong. Either we are looking at a broken neck and paralysis, in which case, I am sorry, there is little hope . . .' Blue Uniform delivered these ugly words as though they were commonplace, a necessary truth to be said as plainly and quickly as possible.

Lucy felt the beginnings of a headache and squeezed out the word still hovering in the room: 'Or?'

'Or she has slipped into a coma, and may recover in time.'

'How much time?' Lucy almost didn't dare to ask.

'Remember what I told you, Lucy,' said Madam Eleanor's voice at her shoulder. She had abandoned her weaving but her hands were still full of the white threads of the sea foam she was creating on the border of the rug. 'Time on Telares is as slippery as sea foam.'

Indeed, when Lucy looked at the rug, the freshly woven foam seemed to shimmer and dissolve. She shook her head to clear it and wanted to shout in frustration at the slippery nature of the riddles the old lady was throwing at her. Then she felt a hand slip into hers. Angel. She met the little girl's dark eyes and felt an electric charge pass between their palms. Nina padded quietly to Euphoria's side, her hands filled with burnt-orange, white and charcoal threads. With the grave air of someone performing a task of life and death, she rubbed the threads

over the Tiger-cat's limp body. Then she closed her eyes and, stroking the creature from head to tail tip, took three deep breaths. When she opened her eyes she looked deep into Lucy's and said, 'I believe you know what is required.'

'That's what she said,' Lucy said angrily, pointing at Sofia. 'But I don't. I really don't. I don't know what to do. I'm not a vet. I'm only in Year 7. The only thing I'm good at is getting mad.' But Nina had turned away and Lucy was talking to her back. The old woman returned to the loom and began work on the centre part of the rug. She was weaving a tiny image that Lucy had not noticed before: a striking likeness of the Tiger-cat. Nina twisted a dark thread into the tail and turned to Lucy. 'You do know what to do,' she said quietly.

Lucy heard the words as though from a very long way away. A great shuddering gripped her, and she fell to the ground. The headquake seemed to go on and on, until she could no longer tell head from toe. The shuddering gradually subsided but it seemed forever before Lucy could move. When Lucy could finally sit up, her head swam sickeningly and she wanted to vomit. Rahel didn't get up at all, but lay moaning softly with her eyes closed.

Ludy saw that the loom had warped slightly, as though a giant hand had picked it up and twisted it.

The children on the cushions had gone awfully quiet, seeming to shrink down as small as they could. Part of her brain was thinking that it was somehow worse that not one of them had cried out. They must be so accustomed to their cries not bringing any help that they had simply given up.

Madam Eleanor's clear voice rang like a bell. 'I fear grave danger awaits us. We must weave as fast as we dare.'

'Dare?' asked Lucy.

'In weaving a Carpet of All Creation, one takes on awesome responsibility,' Madam Eleanor said in level tones. 'It would be . . . unwise, shall I say, to make mistakes. But we will accomplish our task, I promise you.'

'Nooooo!' screeched Carlotta. 'Burn the stupid thing. Can't you see a silly carpet isn't going to stop an tsunami? I wish I had never seen it. I hope I never see any of you ever again!' She began drumming her heels on the floor and screeching at the top of her voice. Finally she subsided into sulky silence.

'My dear sister,' Madam Eleanor said sweetly, 'you were so desperate a short while ago, when your friends were still here, for us to finish it as quickly as possible. We are merely trying to fulfil your wishes.'

Her sister's response was to drum her heels even more violently on the floor, until she succeeded in toppling the chair she was bound to. Luckily the floor was covered in cushions. Lucy and Rahel looked at each other and silently agreed to help her out, even if she didn't deserve it. As they righted the chair, Lucy noticed streams of tears running down Carlotta's face. She refused to look at them or say thank you, but seemed to have made a decision to be quiet, and just sat sniffing, like a petulant child.

Nina took pity on her.

'Carlotta, we are weaving as quickly as we can and then you will be free to go. It is for your safety too. You know all living members of the true line must be present for the completion of a Carpet of All Creation.'

But Carlotta turned her face to the wall and refused to speak. Which was OK by Lucy. She had plenty else to worry about, like how she was going to help the Tiger-cat recover from whatever terrible thing Carlotta's piggy-rat dog had done to her.

She began to stroke the Tiger-cat from head to tail and soon the quiet in the room, the candlelight and the enormity of the past few days' events conspired to leach away any strength left in her bones. With one hand draped over the Tiger-cat's dappled tummy, her head dropped onto the cushion and she drifted away into dreams of fur and forests and flying on Marathon into a carpet that was growing itself alive for ever and ever.

Shudder and Shake



Lucy awoke to an ominous rumbling and a bolt of pure fear. *Please no*, she willed. *Not yet*. But the vibration was painless, and suddenly she knew what it was. ‘Carlos and Pablo!’

The children on the cushions jumped in alarm at her cry and the three exhausted weavers turned, bewildered, as though dragged from a dream of sleep. Lucy was struck by how much deeper the lines on Nina’s face were and how stooped Madam Eleanor was. Sofia, too, had dark rings about her eyes and her face was gaunt. Only Angel (who had done no weaving) seemed energised, one hand stroking the tiny woven image of the Tiger-cat. She fixed Lucy with a challenging stare, a strange light in her eyes.

The thunder outside drew Lucy like a magnet. Rahel was already out the door, and Lucy flew after her, with Janella hot on her heels. When they burst out onto the verandah, the rising sun was smiling through strands of mist woven through the trees and the clearing was lit with a mysterious pearly glow.

Four golden monkeys scampered up the stairs.

‘Ricardo! Toro! We forgot about you!’

Two bright-eyed monkeys morphed back into very excited boys.

‘We slept in the tree. Inside the tree! In a hole. It was fantastic.’

‘Good,’ said Lucy. ‘Don’t tell Mum. Now listen, Carlos and Pablo are on their way back. We can feel their truck.’

‘How do you know it’s them?’

Lucy and Rahel stared at each other, the same horrifying thought striking them at the same time.

Then the strident tone of a mobile phone pealed through the mist. It seemed horribly out of place in the misty dawn

‘What the—?’

T-Tongue barked excitedly and the two golden monkeys went nuts.

‘Can you hear the truck yet?’ Lucy asked Ricardo urgently. He shook his head.

‘Right, we’ve still got a bit of time. We have to find that phone.’

‘It sounds as if it’s coming from the jungle,’ said Rahel, mystified. ‘Someone could be there.’ She began to shepherd the small boys back towards the house, but Lucy was shaking her head. She had a sinking feeling in her stomach.

‘I don’t think there’s anyone there . . . yet,’ she said despondently. ‘They would have answered it or turned it off.’ As she said the words, the insistent ringing suddenly stopped. The girls looked at each other, ready to bolt, but then the ringing started again. Lucy ran towards the jungle.

'This way,' she cried. She ploughed in through the trees and when she others reached her, she was standing beneath the tree Nigel had taken shelter in last night, just as the chimes ended abruptly again.

'Come on boys, do your stuff,' Lucy said to Ricardo and Toro. They needed no second asking, and four golden monkeys swung up into the branches, chattering excitedly. It was only a few seconds before one of them scurried down clutching something small and dark. Ricardo had to become a boy again and remonstrate with his monkey before it would agree to hand over Nigel's phone. And Lucy had to threaten to become a tiger again before Ricardo would give it to her.

'Check recent calls,' said Rahel, displaying surprising savvy for someone who had spent most of her time recently living in a cave.

'I am,' said Lucy, clicking urgently. 'He made a call last night.'

Rahel looked over her shoulder and made a quick calculation. 'After Carlos and Pablo left with the General.'

'He must have made it while he was up in the tree and left it in there so we wouldn't know he had it,' Lucy said, furious with herself for not thinking of such a possibility yesterday. 'Only he forgot to turn it off.'

But the vibration of the approaching truck was suddenly overwhelming and Janella, Ricardo and Toro shouted at the same time, 'They're coming!'

'Quick, boys! Go warn the others it might not be Carlos and Pablo. Tell them to blow out the candles and stay quiet. Then get back here, just in case.'

The boys scurried off.

'I'll get the horses ready in case we have to get out of here,' said Janella over her shoulder, already racing away. Rahel and Lucy looked at each other and, with deep breaths, called once again on what lay within. In a heart-beat they were crouched in the bushes, claws unsheathed, eyes, ears, noses and whiskers trained on the metal monster that approached.

The Bull army truck swept into the clearing but the light was not strong enough to see if the two figures inside were friend or foe. Then the driver's door swung open and the cabin lit up, and Lucy saw Carlos' eager face. Without thinking she stood up and sprang forward, sensing Rahel at her side. It seemed forever before Carlos caught sight of them rushing through the grass. He jumped in shock, and then smiled. Pablo leaped out of the driver's side as well, too excited to get out his own door. The boys looked at each other, and in the blink of a golden eye there were four tigers in that crystalline morning air, sniffing and nuzzling each other in greeting and relief.

There was a cough and a huge shadowy figure emerged from the other side of the truck.

Lucy was so startled she morphed back into her human form without even realising it.

'Eduardo!'

And then she was wrapped in the formidable bear hug of Madam Eleanor's ninja husband.

There was a commotion at the front door of the jungle jail and the monkeys burst out, with Sofia and Angel behind them. 'Papa!' 'Grandpapa!'

As Sofia hugged her father, Lucy felt something stir inside her. It could have been the beginning of a roar, but

had none of the violence she knew could erupt if she did not keep iron control. Instead, the feeling rose warmly and steadily, like a little sun in her chest.

‘Rahel?’ Pablo took his friend’s hand. ‘I have someone I think you should talk to.’ He led her towards the truck just as a group of people appeared from around the other side. Rahel’s knees seemed to crumple and then two of the strangers were stumbling towards her. At the same time, a golden monkey flew out of the nearest tree and landed on all fours, but it was Toro who stood up on two legs and shouted, ‘Mama, Papa!’

Now Lucy knew what the feeling in her chest was. She began to purr. Not out loud, but in her heart. Then Carlos was smiling beside her.

‘Cool, hey?’ he said, sounding just like a Kurrawong kid.

‘The coolest,’ agreed Lucy, looking him square in the eye, with a smile as wide as his. ‘You OK?’

His gaze didn’t waver.

‘My parents would love watching this,’ he said, gesturing at his friends. ‘They’d be jumping up and down screaming for joy. So who am I to get jealous and wreck the party?’

‘So go on then,’ said Lucy, her head tilted to one side.

‘What?’

‘Jump up and down screaming!’

So he did.

‘Not bad,’ said Lucy, considering him as if she were a judge at the Olympics, ‘but I prefer purring.’

‘Well there’s something to purr about behind you,’ said Carlos, rubbing his injured leg with a grimace.

Lucy swung about to see Pablo with two tall Telarians by his side.

‘Lucy, it gives me great pleasure to introduce you to my mama and papa.’

And then Rahel, with tear tracks on her dirty face, was introducing Lucy to her mama and papa, while Toro buried his face in his father’s neck, just like a golden monkey.

Carlos was right. It was reason enough for a little more purring.

‘I see you made an excellent choice in reinforcements,’ a voice called from the verandah and Eduardo, moving silently but very fast, crossed the clearing and gently picked up Madam Eleanor as though she were a doll and hugged her.

Lucy would have purred some more if she hadn’t remembered Nigel.

‘Crikey! Nigel rang the Bulls last night. They could be here soon!’

A deathly silence smothered the happy scene. Eduardo sped back down the stairs towards Lucy.

‘Young lady, please inform us of which you speak.’ That was more words than Lucy had ever heard him use, but she guessed the circumstances warranted it.

‘Nigel is inside with the Bull Commander. We found his phone in the tree. He made one call last night just after the boys took off with the General. And I bet it wasn’t to order a pizza.’

‘Pizza!’ said Ricardo eagerly.

‘I will discuss this matter with Mr Nigel,’ said Eduardo and everyone fell silent as he slipped across the clearing towards the house.

‘I think,’ said Carlos, ‘that Mr Nigel will wish he had ordered a pizza.’

A Little Discussion



The entire party followed Eduardo inside. The conversation with Nigel was brief.

Eduardo: 'If you please, you will inform us of who you telephoned last night.'

Nigel: 'As if! I don't even have a phone.'

Eduardo: 'This is not your phone?'

Nigel: 'Give me back my phone!'

Eduardo: 'Perhaps you should first answer my question.'

Nigel: 'Perhaps you should get out of your pyjamas!'

Madam Eleanor: 'Four, five, nine, two.'

Nigel: 'What did you say?'

Madam Eleanor: 'I believe you heard me, but if you wish to pursue parlour games, I am happy to indulge you: four, five, nine, two.'

Nigel (very red in the face): 'But how?'

Madam Eleanor: 'Did I discover your PIN number? I suggest you answer my husband's question.'

Nigel sat down with a thump and said, 'I rang the

garrison. They're going to raid an hour after sunrise. Please tell me my money is safe.'

'Your money is still in your account,' said Madam Eleanor soothingly, just as a furious voice rasped from the corner of the room, 'You are a half-brother, but a full traitor!' The Bull Commander was more furious than Lucy had ever seen him. He looked as if he were about to explode.

Lucy would have enjoyed that moment if another headquake hadn't risen to engulf her. She fell to her knees, uncomfortably close to Nigel. Eduardo stepped between them and gathered her in his arms. Above the roar and destruction in her head, she heard Madam Eleanor say, 'We must hurry. Our time is almost up.'

When she came to, she was lying on soft cushions in the room with the carpet. Nina was tying off one of the last threads on a seahorse and turned, as though sensing her regard.

'Feeling better?' she smiled calmly, as though it were any ordinary day.

'Kind of,' said Lucy and at a rustle beside her, became aware of Rahel struggling to sit up.

'That was exceedingly severe,' the Telarian whispered, her face pale and drawn in the candlelight.

Madam Eleanor, stretching to reach the top of the loom, said without turning. 'There is worse ahead.'

'Great!' said Lucy.

'But we have almost finished our task,' continued the old woman, finally stopping to look at the girls. 'Observe!' She gestured at the last visible strands of brown warp and weft at the top edge of the carpet, as if it were a row of dark soil waiting for rain.

It was true, Lucy could see the carpet was almost complete, and the thought made her breathless. Then she saw Carlotta tied to her chair in the corner and remembered the Bulls. She tried to jump up, but her legs were wobbly and her head still hurt.

'Sit!' commanded Blue Uniform from her chair in the corner where she was reading a textbook: *Nursing in the Aftermath of Natural Disasters*.

'But the Bulls!'

'The Bulls, my dear, are not your primary concern,' said Madam Eleanor, turning back to her loom.

'But they'll be here any minute. How long have we been asleep?' Lucy finally got her legs to work and stumbled to the door only to find it locked. Horrified she turned to the weavers.

'But we're needed out there!'

'No,' said Madam Eleanor calmly, 'Eduardo and his reinforcements are outside. They will do whatever is needed.'

'Orlando helping too,' piped up a little voice from the cushions. Angel! Lucy looked desperately about the room and realised Ricardo, Toro, Janella, Carlos and Pablo were missing.

'I've got to look after Ricardo and Toro,' she cried.

'I would challenge even the Bulls to catch those monkeys,' said Madam Eleanor, a little smugly.

'What about Janella? She's my friend. She's not used to this kind of thing!'

'Janella is a remarkable young woman,' said Madam Eleanor firmly.

'And Carlos still has a sore leg,' Lucy said, knowing she was running out of excuses.

‘And you, Lucy,’ said Nina gently, ‘are needed here.’

‘Why?’ Lucy felt like stamping her foot. ‘I can’t weave. And I’m not of your straight line, or whatever you call it.’

‘The true line, my dear. No, you are not,’ said Nina, ‘but you have shown your heart is true on many occasions. And you have also, Rahel. No, both you girls have a very important task to perform right here in this room. Have you forgotten Euphoria?’

The Tiger-cat! Lucy had indeed forgotten her, in all the danger and excitement. She was on the other side of the room in a flash, bending over the silk cushion that held the helpless feline.

‘Lucy, there is more than one way to defend your friends,’ Nina continued softly.

‘I hate this. I’m sick of you all speaking in riddles. Why don’t you just tell me what to do?’

But Nina turned back to the loom, and standing between Sofia and Madam Eleanor she began, with extraordinary swiftness, to twist another set of knots into the last blank rows.

Lucy stroked the cat. The golden eyes were still closed but she could feel a steady, if faint, heartbeat.

‘What are they talking about?’ she appealed to Rahel.

‘Perhaps,’ said the Telarian, ‘you really do know? You just have to think about it.’

‘Thanks a lot! I thought you were on my side.’

‘I am,’ said Rahel and stepped up to stroke the Tiger-cat too.

Lucy, despite her frustration, was grateful for her presence. As they stood there without speaking, stroking that silky fur, Lucy felt her panic start to subside.

‘All right, but if you’ve got any suggestions, I’m all ears.’

Rahel considered Lucy’s words with a frown, her head to one side.

‘I have given this much thought. I have considered all the occasions on which you have summoned a tiger, and how you developed your ability to roar. How we all developed this ability.’

‘I just got really mad every time,’ said Lucy, feeling her frustration rise afresh. ‘But getting mad is no good now, we know that. That’s not going to help the Tiger-cat.’

‘I do not believe you were simply angry,’ said Rahel.

‘You mean I was crazy too? Totally mental? The psycho chick from Kurrawong? Thanks a lot!’

‘I was under the impression that you had abandoned the concept of becoming irritated,’ Rahel said, offended.

‘Righto, sorry, I’m just sick of people talking in puzzles.’

‘It is not my intention to obfuscate,’ said Rahel, a little loftily.

‘Obfu . . . what? Oh, whatever, just get on with what you’re trying to tell me.’

Rahel took a deep breath.

‘I will attempt to explain myself. No, that has not worked. I will employ my father’s method of solving problems and instead ask you a series of questions.’ Lucy rolled her eyes but Rahel ignored her and continued. ‘Please think back to the occasions on which you summoned a tiger or roared.’

‘Why?’ But seeing the determined frown on her friend’s face, Lucy gave up. ‘Oh, OK. I guess we have nothing to lose. There’s just a truckload of Bulls on their way here that I should be ambushing. But seeing as you insist,

the first time was in a dream. I got mad at the Bull Commander.'

'Why?'

'Because of how mean he was being to you and Toro.'

Rahel nodded, satisfied, but Lucy had no idea why.

'And another occasion?'

'I thought the Bull Commander was going to break your arm.'

'And?'

'And then, at the warehouse in Kurrawong, I thought the security guard was going to hurt Angel, or take her away. And that would have been terrible, her being locked up again. And there was no way I was going to let the Bull Commander take Carlos to the tower, not after what he'd been through.'

'Absolutely not,' said Rahel, a smile starting to compete with her frown.

'And I turned into a tiger because Janella begged me to stop the Commander shooting Dark Star. She'd gone nuts, but I couldn't let her down.'

'You couldn't let her down because you were angry?'

'No! I couldn't let her down because she's my friend and I could see how upset she was.'

'And you assisted Toro and myself because you were angry at us?'

'Of course not!' Lucy said heatedly.

'Why did you come to our aid, then?' Rahel's question sounded casual but Lucy, pausing to think, had the sudden sense that the whole room was hanging on the answer. Nina, Madam Eleanor and Sofia had paused mid-knot to gaze at her expectantly. Even Blue Uniform had lowered

her book to peer over her glasses, and Angel had come very close, her dark eyes trained on Lucy. Only Carlotta ignored her, staring bitterly at the carpet as though adding up just how much money she had lost.

‘What?’ said Lucy, irritated again.

‘I suggest you answer your friend’s question,’ said Blue Uniform quietly.

Lucy took a deep breath. ‘I helped you because Toro was so little and scared and hungry. And you were trying to look after him all on your own. That would have been horrible. I imagined being stuck there with Ricardo and I would have wanted someone to help us. So I got mad.’

‘Exactly!’ said Rahel.

‘But that’s no help!’ Lucy’s shout finally got Carlotta’s attention and now the whole room was staring at her.

Rahel was smiling at her eagerly, as though waiting for Lucy to hurry up and open up an intricately wrapped birthday present.

‘Am I being really dumb?’ said Lucy.

Carlotta snorted and Lucy was about to say something rude but was suddenly struck by how uncomfortable it would feel to be tied to that chair. And how disappointed Carlotta must have felt when she knew she had lost the Carpet and millions of dollars. And how pointless this whole exercise must look to someone who really didn’t believe in the Carpet of All Creation’s importance. And how embarrassing it must have been when piggy-rat dog bit the General. And how annoying it must be when your sisters were always right. Lucy’s thoughts tumbled in a cascade of understanding and suddenly she got it.

‘What’s that word, when you understand how someone is feeling?’

‘Empathy?’

‘Yeah, that’s it. Well, I reckon, if I can even feel sorry for piggy-rat dog’s mum, here,’ gesturing rudely at Carlotta, ‘I must be pretty good at this empathy thing, then, right?’

‘Right!’

‘So you’re saying if I can raise a roar when I’m mad, I might be able to raise something else when I’m empa-whatsing?’

‘Empathising.’ Rahel’s voice was very quiet.

‘So you reckon I should try some of that on the Tiger-cat and see if I can find out what’s wrong?’

There were so many heads nodding that Lucy felt dizzy.

She rounded on Rahel. ‘But there is no way I’m doing this without you. Remember when you helped me rescue Ricardo when he was kidnapped? And you practically organised Carlos’ rescue yourself. You’re pretty empa-thingy yourself.’

‘No worries,’ said Rahel, and Blue Uniform gave a hrumph of laughter and returned to her book. The weavers turned back to their task, but Angel came closer and touched the limp form of the Tiger-cat gently once, and then stood between the two teenagers and determinedly took a hand in each of hers. Rahel reached out to scratch a round ear and its cute white spot. Lucy took a deep breath.

‘All right. It looks as if Angel is along for the ride. So here’s my idea: if getting mad isn’t going to help, let’s try purring.’

‘Purring!’

‘Well, none of us were prepared for where roaring would take us.’

‘That is indeed true,’ Rahel mused.

‘Ready?’ said Lucy, a little catch in her voice.

‘Ready,’ agreed Rahel and, without need of further words, the two bigger girls began to stroke the Tiger-cat rhythmically – and closed their eyes.

At first, Lucy felt nothing but a faint bubbling in her veins, more of a giggle than a purr, but as she focused on trying to recapture that feeling she had noticed in the clearing, when her friends had been reunited with their parents, she felt a steady warmth grow in her chest. It reminded her of the very first day she had seen the Tiger-cat on the mossy stairs leading to the pit and tunnel. Then, she’d felt as though her whole body had learned to smile under the golden gaze of that mysterious creature. Now, with each purring breath, she felt bubbles of contentment rise and dissolve, rise and dissolve in a dance of lightness. Suddenly she was free of her body again, carried aloft as though in a hot-air balloon, and with a rush of elation she realised she was floating somewhere near the ceiling. She looked down on the three weavers, their heads bowed in concentration, Sofia bending to select bright threads, Nina rubbing her aching back with one hand, Madam Eleanor leaning on her stick. There was Blue Uniform reading in her chair and Carlotta, still sulking.

Lucy knew Rahel and Angel were floating with her. She couldn’t exactly see them (she had already checked either side) but she sensed their undeniable presence.

But hang on! There they are, down there next to the

Tiger-cat and Lucy! Lucy? . . . but that's me, and I'm up here. Oh, whatever, I can see myself and that's cool. And what is even cooler is that I can kind of feel myself down there as well, I can feel Angel's hand in mine, and Rahel and I are stroking the Tiger-cat, and that feels nice because her fur is soft and it feels nice because my fur is soft, but I'm up here and I don't have any fur, ha ha, unless I've turned into a tiger again without knowing, ha ha ha, but I haven't, so I don't know what's going on, but who cares, ha ha, because this feels great.

This conversation with herself that was half purr, half giggle continued for some time. Then Lucy saw the Tiger-cat's eyes open on the cushion below her and her levity bubbled down a notch. With enormous effort the Tiger-cat found Lucy's gaze and held it. Lucy felt that golden rope that linked them, the one she had come to depend on, pull and hold taut, but so much more weakly than ever before. Lucy was still purring, she still felt wonderfully happy, but now her eyes were open to what the Tiger-cat was feeling too. In a flash, she knew the Tiger-cat suffered no pain, but instead was floating in a sea of nothingness. Lucy felt no separation from her body in the room below, but her consciousness flew above with the clarity of a bird. Mind and body were finely balanced, neither one stronger than the other. Angel's hand squeezed hers and Lucy understood that the little girl's intensity and Rahel's intelligence were gathering like a coiled spring. The awareness of all three girls was now drawn fully to the Tiger-cat. Then they were diving into the Tiger-cat's mind – and into her broken body.

Lucy had never really felt bones before, apart from the ones that arrived on her plate when Grandma cooked lamb chops, but the Tiger-cat's bones were nothing like a lamb chop. As she watched her own hand stroke the injured body below, fingers questing gently for information, it was as though her mind was nudging along each vertebra from her vantage point on the roof. From the narrow tip of tail to the base of that delicate skull they travelled, feeling what was right and what had gone wrong. And somewhere close to the skull, something was horribly awry. With a shudder, Lucy's body almost overcame her mind and, nausea rising, she came dangerously close to rocketing back down to the floor below. But in that instant, Angel's grip tightened and Lucy felt Rahel's cheerful willingness to keep going, no matter what, and she found her balance again.

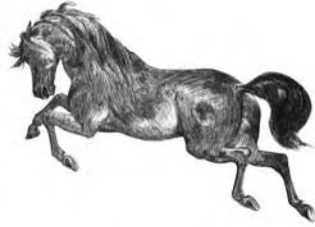
There! They had it! Lucy's whole being became a rumbling purr. She abandoned everything she knew and slipped gently but inexorably into the memory of the injured Tiger-cat. She was . . .

. . . in the clearing, back arched, hair on end. Piggy-rat dog coming too fast. Fury, fear, alarm . . . sudden brutal pain. Then . . . nothing.

Nothing but Angel's aching grip and Rahel's mute anguish. Lucy gasped, and probed deeper, her consciousness stretching like a cat, and with a twist and shudder she felt the Tiger-cat come back into her skin from wherever mind, body and soul had fled.

Ceiling-Lucy looked down as the Tiger-cat lifted her head with a strange purring miaow, sniffed delicately the hands of the girls stroking her, then rose on all fours, stretched as though she had been merely dozing in the sun, and began to wash her ears and face.

Last Threads



The headquake that gripped them a few minutes later cut short any self-congratulation for Lucy and Rahel. Carlotta cried out in alarm as the room trembled, but her sisters did not pause, taking it in turns to work away at the postage-stamp-sized patch of warp and weft that remained bare. The tremor was so intense that Lucy almost blacked out. She lay helpless as the whole world shook. Through half-closed eyes she saw Madam Eleanor slip another thread from the basket and hobble back to the vibrating loom. As she reached up to tie it, the other weavers stepped back to make way for her. With enormous effort, Lucy hauled herself to her feet. Madam Eleanor cried out and stumbled, and Nina and Sofia rushed to support her. The old lady squared her shoulders, and with the arms of the others about her she tied the last thread in the Carpet of All Creation, even as the loom twisted and broke.

The carpet seemed to shimmer with a silken fire. Trans-fixed, Lucy saw a forest grow and bloom, felt the sun on her face and soft rain on her hair. She walked in snow that

melted into a rushing stream. She heard the thunder of hooves, the padding of paws and the breath of a butterfly's wing. She joined with the chorus of a thousand birds.

Then the world stood still. The strangest silence descended on the room. Lucy waited, breathless, for another headquake to grip her, but Rahel finally whispered what Lucy had not dared even to hope. 'It's over!'

And the Tiger-cat's purring filled the room.

What a Load of Bull



If Lucy hadn't been so elated at the carpet's completion, she would have been miffed at how easily Carlos, Pablo and the others seemed to have dealt with the truckload of Bulls that had arrived while she was busy inside. Having Eduardo, a few spare adults, a herd of elephants and some trick horses on their side had helped, she told herself. The group of Bull soldiers huddled near the remains of their truck, the elephants forming a tight circle about them. The truck looked as though all the elephants had taken a keen dislike of it. It was crushed against a tree as if it were an aluminium can. Then she noticed a familiar form emerge from behind the wreck.

'Ponytail Zombie!' The man in the rebel uniform twitched at the sound and sight of Lucy but made a supreme effort at self-control and stood his ground.

'My efforts to convince him you are not a ghost appear to be bearing fruit,' said a humorous voice in her ear, and Lucy turned to see Rahel's aunt, looking very sinister in her black ninja outfit but smiling broadly.

‘You came to help us after all!’ Lucy cried.

‘Of course!’ Larissa said. ‘Even the leadership had to concede that your capture of the Bull General and his men deserved something in return.’

‘We were doing very well without you,’ Carlos said with a sour smile and Pablo nodded vigorously.

‘So you were,’ said Eduardo, striding up with Rahel and Toro’s parents, who were grinning broadly.

‘And the leadership will hear about your efforts, too,’ Larissa said.

Carlos and Pablo tried hard not to look too pleased at that. ‘Where are Ricardo and Toro?’ Lucy asked, suddenly anxious. A shriek from the trees answered her question. ‘Did they behave themselves?’ she asked Eduardo.

‘From our perspective, they were exemplary,’ the giant Telarian said, with the faintest hint of a smile.

Lucy looked at him carefully, then over at the group of Bull soldiers huddled under guard near the truck. ‘I see,’ she said, noting that some of them appeared to be nursing very sore heads and were trying to wipe sticky mango from their hair.

‘Where’s Janella?’ she asked.

‘She won’t be long. She’s gone to catch the horses,’ Pablo said.

‘Did they run off?’ Lucy was worried.

‘Only because Janella told them to,’ said Pablo. ‘That’s what started everything. When the Bulls arrived we were all hiding. They thought the clearing was deserted. They got out of the truck, and didn’t even really bother looking about them. They must have thought they had the element

of surprise. They began creeping towards the house and then, bam, Janella did her thing.'

'What?'

'She sang. You know how she does. And the horses just stampeded, straight for the soldiers. Even Carlotta's horse. The Bulls had no idea what was happening. They just took off – and we were waiting for them in the jungle.' Pablo's face was alight.

'Any tigers get involved?' Lucy asked. Carlos and Pablo tried to look innocent.

'Then the elephants got to work on the truck and Larissa's ninjas were hiding in the jungle too and they tidied up the stragglers,' said Carlos.

'Sounds as if you did OK without me . . . for once,' said Lucy, straight-faced.

'If you were too scared to help, we didn't want to force you,' Carlos returned, without batting an eyelid.

'Don't you dare—' Lucy began – and caught the smile in his eyes just in time.

There was the stamp of hooves and Janella rode back into the clearing, eyes bright in the morning sun. 'They were heroes!' she said to Lucy.

'Thanks!' said Carlos and Pablo.

'I think she means the horses,' said Lucy.

'What happened with the carpet?' asked Janella. 'We felt another tremor and the horses and elephants were starting to freak out. I thought we were done for, but then it just faded. Did they get the carpet finished?'

'We'll show you,' said Lucy. 'And there's something else Rahel and I want to show you too. Ricardo! Toro! Bring your monkeys and get over here.'

Four golden monkeys scampered down from the trees and Janella quickly dismounted. Rahel and Lucy led the way up the stairs and across the verandah, where Larissa was engaged in a serious discussion with Rahel and Toro's and Pablo's parents. As they walked down the faded mermaid carpet past the room where the Bull Commander and Nigel were locked up, they heard an outraged 'Let me out of here!' and a series of vicious thumps on the wall. The trembling wall didn't look as though it could take too much more of that.

When they entered the carpet room, the Tiger-cat's purring greeted them and Ricardo and Toro were so startled they instantly became small boys again.

'Wow! He woke up!' cried Ricardo.

'Well, it was actually a bit more complicated than that, but she's OK now,' said Lucy proudly.

The carpet had been taken from its broken loom and laid on the floor. The Tiger-cat was sitting regally in the centre on the image of itself, as though atop a throne, and the group of small children rescued from the camp were crawling all over the carpet, exploring with their tiny hands the glorious patterns. To Lucy, the carpet still seemed to shimmer in the light streaming through the window. Ricardo and Toro ran towards it, but then were overcome by uncharacteristic reverence and stopped and took their shoes off before tiptoeing over to the Tiger-cat.

'I knew you'd be OK,' said Ricardo. Then he went strangely quiet for some time, stroking the Tiger-cat's fur over and over. On the other side, the golden monkeys seemed overcome by the image of one of their own species in the carpet and crouched at the very edge, hiding their

eyes behind skinny paws and peeking out periodically to check the strange monkey was still there.

Finally, Carlos and Pablo and Janella shouldered the small boys aside to pay their respects to the Tiger-cat, who lapped up the attention as though it were her due.

The three weavers had collapsed exhausted on the cushions the other children had abandoned, and Blue Uniform had opened her black bag and was briskly taking temperatures and blood pressure.

'I can assure you, we are in perfect health,' Madam Eleanor said weakly, rubbing her aching hip, but Blue Uniform just popped a thermometer in the old woman's mouth. Lucy was impressed. She had never seen anyone boss Madam Eleanor around before.

There was a rustle in the corner and Lucy turned and saw Carlotta standing up.

'She's untied!' she cried, alarmed, and the boys moved as if to restrain Carlotta, but a word from Nina brought them to a halt.

'No! Leave her alone. We untied her ourselves as soon as the carpet was completed. Our work is done and there is no further need to detain our sister. She is free to go.'

'But what if she tries to get the carpet again?' asked Lucy, but even as she said the words, she looked into Carlotta's eyes and saw resignation and, in the set of her shoulders, defeat.

Carlotta turned to her sisters.

'I wish to see my son,' she said, her voice cracking a little.

'Of course,' said Madam Eleanor courteously. 'There is something we all wish to say to Nigel and the Bull

Commander.’ And the entire group, except the smallest children and the golden monkeys, who had gathered the courage to sit on the carpet monkey, marched out of the room and down the hall. They met Larissa and Eduardo at the door to the prisoners’ room.

‘We have something to discuss with these people,’ said Larissa.

‘Join the queue,’ said Blue Uniform.

Larissa took the keys from Madam Eleanor and unlocked the door, while Eduardo made sure he had a good view of both prisoners before allowing anyone inside. Out of courtesy to Carlotta, Nina insisted her sister be allowed to enter first. Carlotta ran to Nigel and hugged him and he seemed to return the embrace with genuine feeling. They actually like each other, Lucy marvelled. This empathy thingy was weird.

But the warm moment didn’t last long.

Larissa turned to the Bull Commander, who was wide awake and standing to proud attention. ‘I have been in communication with Telares City. A short while ago, a tsunami triggered by an earthquake struck the coast. Many old houses on the river,’ – here she gave a sympathetic glance to Madam Eleanor, Eduardo and Sofia – ‘have been flooded, but the main damage was at the entrance to the harbour.’

The Bull Commander seemed to pale, as though anticipating her next words.

‘The Bull garrison has been washed away and those Bulls who did not drown have fled in disarray.’

‘We have bases all over the island,’ said the Commander with a steely look, but Lucy detected a tremor in his voice.

‘You did have bases all over the island,’ said Larissa. ‘Last night, after months of preparation, the rebels raided every camp and base on Telares. Most of the villagers were only too willing to help. Tonight we were to raid the garrison in Telares City. That, thankfully, seems no longer necessary. The day of the Bull in Telares is over. Along with the General we detained last night, you will be placed under arrest and held until you can stand trial for war crimes.’

As the room erupted in cheers, only the Bull Commander continued to stand rigidly. Nigel slumped to the floor and put his head between his knees. Carlotta shot her sisters a burning look and leaned on the wall, as though she too had lost her strength.

Madam Eleanor appealed for quiet. ‘There is another matter that must be clarified. Nigel, some time ago you asked me if your money was safe and I said yes. And it was – at that time. Eduardo, please pass my nephew his mobile phone.’

Nigel lifted his head and Lucy could see a horrified thought forming in his mind. He failed to catch the phone Eduardo tossed over and had to pick it up from the floor.

‘I suggest you check the balance of any one of your many bank accounts,’ Madam Eleanor advised.

Frantically, Nigel punched figures into the phone. As he held it to his ear, Lucy saw horror dawn. Madam Eleanor leaned forward and gently took it from his limp fingers. She held it to her ear, pressed another few buttons and then the polite tones of a recorded message sounded loudly from the speaker. ‘The balance of your business saver account is zero dollars and zero cents. Press zero to repeat this balance.’ Madam Eleanor obligingly pressed zero.

It was all too much for the Bull Commander. He cried out in anguished fury and flung himself at Larissa. That was a mistake. Larissa did something complicated involving a twist and a kick and the Bull Commander found himself sitting on the floor with Eduardo standing over him.

‘It gives me great pleasure to inform you, Nigel and Commander, that one hour ago every cent you and the generals have made from enslaving children on Telares was transferred out of your many accounts. These children here,’ she gestured to Lucy and the others, ‘were able to lead me to your money trail, and over the past month I have rather enjoyed following it wherever it led. The transfers were programmed to take place simultaneously and I have every confidence they were completed.’

‘That’s stealing!’ said Nigel, outraged. ‘You’ll go to jail for this.’

‘Except, my darling nephew, that the money was transferred to a range of charities that look after the needs of small children, all around the world. Some time today your letters, with your signature on the bottom, advising them of your generous donations will also arrive. The hardworking people who look after these children will be delighted. And the press releases explaining why you have decided to give away all this money should be arriving on the fax machines of every newspaper, TV and radio station as we speak. At the first possible opportunity, nephew, I would also check your Ten Star Jumbo website. I think you will see you have had an extraordinary change of heart regarding the exploitation of small children. And . . .’ – she held up a hand up to silence the

excited buzz from the children behind her – ‘if everyone would cease their conversations, right about now I believe you should be receiving your first phone calls from a curious press. A humble speech, Nigel, might be in order. Unless, of course, you wish to tell them that it is all a big mistake and you are still making money from enslaving children.’

The room fell silent and Nigel stared at his phone as though it were about to bite him. When it rang, he dropped it.

‘Aren’t you going to pick it up?’ inquired Madam Eleanor kindly, but it was Ricardo who couldn’t resist. With the alacrity of a monkey, he scampered out and grabbed the phone, punching a button to answer the call.

‘Hi,’ he said, as if he had been speaking to reporters all his life. ‘Yep, Mr Adams is here. He’s a really cool dude, isn’t he? Did you know he’s given all his money to kids who don’t get enough takeaway food?’

Lucy grabbed the phone. ‘Good morning. This is Mr Adams’ phone. I’m sorry, one of the orphans Mr Adams has adopted got to the phone first. How can I help you? You wish to interview him live on the radio. Great. I’ll put him on.’ And she handed the phone to Nigel. ‘You’re on air!’

‘Hello,’ said Nigel weakly.

The Wash-up



Outside, Lucy found her empathy muscle had grown even stronger. She looked at the Bull soldiers sitting in a dispirited circle under the watchful gaze of Orlando's elephant family, and found herself feeling sorry for them. When she looked past their hateful brown Bull uniform, most of them seemed very young and frightened. They kept shooting anxious glances at the circling elephants and at the armed rebels standing at the ready nearby, including a heavily frowning Ponytail Zombie.

'What will happen to them?' she asked Larissa.

'They will probably go home to Burchimo.'

'Why?' asked Carlos, shooting a dark glance at the prisoners. 'They deserve to go to jail!'

'Their leaders will go to jail,' Larissa assured him, 'but only after a fair trial. We cannot make the same mistakes as the Bulls, or we would be as bad as they are. Some of my own people within the rebel leadership disagree with me, but I feel this very strongly. Revenge will weaken us as we try to build our country again.'

'You speak wisely,' said Eduardo, and Carlos shot the giant Telarian an amazed look.

'Besides,' Larissa continued. 'most of these young people,' gesturing at the captured Burchimese, 'had no choice about coming here. They were conscripted.'

'Conscripted? What's that?' asked Lucy.

Rahel answered. 'The Bulls made them join the army. And told them that if they ran away they would be shot.'

'Oh,' said Lucy. 'You mean they didn't want to come here?'

'The Bulls began running out of real soldiers some time ago,' Larissa explained. 'They told their country that the war would be over in a few weeks, and at first the people believed them, but it has been years. The Tigers were too strong and determined. So the Bulls had to start taking students out of the high schools and universities in Burchimo and off the streets. I think these young people will be happy to go home, don't you?'

Even Carlos had to shut up and think about that.

Blue Uniform's booming tones came from the verandah.

'Any children involved with Te Lares Trekking please report to me!'

What the—? Lucy had forgotten about their alibi. She had almost forgotten about home! The Kurrawong kids straggled over, knowing what was coming.

'I believe your time in Telares is up,' Blue Uniform said, not unkindly. 'If you don't stick to your word and return to Kurrawong, your parents will be inspired to send out the police.' Lucy and Janella looked at each other, regret all over their faces. Lucy wasn't game to look at the Telarian kids.

‘But—’ started Ricardo.

Lucy put an arm around him. ‘She’s right,’ she said softly. ‘We have to go. But . . .’ – she looked up at her friends and spoke more loudly – ‘we’ll be back. I don’t know how or when, but we’ll be back. Soon.’

The next few minutes passed in a blur of hugs and handshakes and thank-yous. Suddenly Lucy just wanted to go. She mounted Marathon and cast one last look at the jungle jail. The image of Madam Eleanor, Nina and Sofia standing waving on the verandah, with Eduardo, Larissa and Rahel’s and Toro’s parents, seemed like a painting hung on someone else’s wall. It just didn’t seem real. But Angel accompanying Marathon on Orlando was definitely real and Lucy began to cheer up. Who else in Kurrawong got to ride beside a baby elephant?

The Telarian kids insisted on accompanying them through the jungle. Everyone rode in thoughtful silence to the tunnel entrance, where Lucy, Janella and Ricardo reluctantly dismounted. Ricardo passed his monkey to Toro without saying a word. Lucy had expected more of a fight, but her little brother seemed resigned. He turned to walk into the tunnel but Toro stopped him.

‘When I grow up, I’m going to come to see you, and we are going to make millions of dollars as performing monkeys,’ he said and stuck out his hand for a high-five. Ricardo’s face split in a blinding grin and he enthusiastically returned the gesture. ‘Millions and millions,’ he said. Then the big boys were high-fiving him and even Rahel got in a hug.

Janella passed Dark Star’s reins to Rahel. ‘He’ll be happy with you,’ she said, which was possibly the highest

compliment she could have paid anyone. 'See you later, everyone, I'll be back when I finish high school.'

Then Rahel was hugging Lucy and both of them got a bit emotional.

'Just make sure,' Lucy said, 'you keep coming top of the class, I don't care if it is in a cave!'

'No worries!' agreed Rahel. 'And you keep scoring goals for me.'

'It's a deal. And maybe,' Lucy said, looking up at Pablo, 'maybe the Telares Tigers can play again soon.' The very thought sent Pablo into a kind of trance and he almost fell off his horse.

Marathon was happily grazing. Lucy picked up her reins. There was nothing else for it – she passed them to Carlos, which meant she could avoid shaking his hand or hugging him. She looked him straight in the eye. 'You never had a cat in your life, did you?'

'No.'

'You just made up a story about a miracle cat to make me feel better when the Tiger-cat was sick?'

'I did.'

'Righto.' There was a brief silence. 'Thanks.'

Carlos inclined his head graciously as if to say no thanks were required.

'Carlos?' Lucy felt herself going red, but she pushed on.

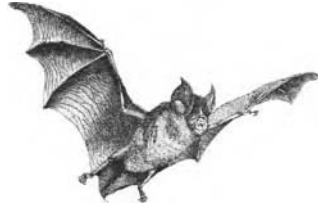
'Yes?'

'I'm really glad I met you,' she said simply.

His smile was like the sun coming out. 'I too am glad.'

And that was all that needed to be said.

News Flash



A few days later, Lucy and Ricardo were watching their hundredth TV report on the tsunami that had struck the tiny nation of East Burchimo, as the reporters insisted on calling it. Dad had come over, which was always good. He'd got back from overseas the same day the kids got back from Te Lares Trekking. These days, when he was in town, he often came over for dinner. He and Mum were getting on heaps better. They could even make each other laugh.

'We're not getting back together, but we're friends again,' is all Mum would say about it when Lucy pressed her.

That night, watching the news, Lucy suddenly sat bolt upright. A familiar figure in a blue uniform was taking temperatures in a huge tent, full of people and children lying on stretchers.

'An Australian nurse has joined the relief effort in East Burchimo,' the reporter said. 'The former matron of the Little Flower Nursing Home in Kurrawong was holidaying

on the island nation when the tsunami struck and she immediately volunteered her services.'

'Isn't that . . . ?' asked Mum sitting up. 'Oh my goodness! And there's Mrs Hawthorne. What a dangerous place for an old lady to be!'

'Oh, it's not that bad—' started Ricardo, until he caught Lucy's eye. Then Blue Uniform was talking right into the camera: 'Yes, there's a lot of work to be done. The damage could have been far worse but there are still many people homeless and injured. The children are especially vulnerable. In this climate, even a small cut can become terribly infected. We need donations of drugs and medical equipment and more volunteers. And a planeload of trained nurses as soon as possible.'

Mum cleared her throat and Lucy saw she had a funny look on her face, but when Lucy turned back to the screen the camera cut to Nina, looking very tired, but still smiling her crinkly smile. 'There's something I'd like to make very clear,' she was saying to the reporter. 'This country is not called East Burchimo, it's called Telares, and now that the Burchimese army has withdrawn, we should all get used to calling it that again. My friend here is right, we do need as many trained nurses as we can get, but anyone with a capable pair of hands would be welcome.'

The camera cut away to scenes of homes scattered like matchsticks in the area around the mouth of the harbour.

'I didn't think it was that bad,' Lucy said without thinking. 'All the houses near the river are gone. We should have helped.' Too late, she remembered where she was. Her parents were looking at her strangely. Uh oh. Not again.

But this time, her parents seemed to have something on their minds other than their weirdo daughter.

‘Should we tell them?’ asked Dad. Lucy’s mum nodded and turned to the kids. ‘Your father and I have been talking. We have been impressed by how much interest you children have been taking in the world around you. You’ve got us really interested in East Burchimo.’

‘Telares,’ said Lucy automatically.

‘OK, Telares,’ said Mum. ‘Anyway, you’ve made us think. We’re very proud that you kids are as compassionate as you are. You seem to care very much what happens miles away from here. I feel you have taught me something.’

Lucy went very still. She had no idea what her mum was about to say, but something told her it could be huge.

‘So, yesterday I made inquiries about joining a team of nurses in East . . . Telares. And, if there are no tremors between now and then, I’ll spend the next school holidays there.’

Lucy and Ricardo were struck dumb.

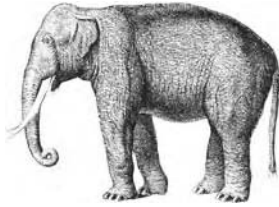
‘And I wouldn’t be much use in a hospital,’ said Dad, ‘but I can teach. They want teachers to come too. I’m sure there are lots of smart kids over there who want to learn about science.’

‘So, will Grandma look after us for the holidays?’ said Lucy, feeling as though she was about to get another headache.

‘No, Grandma doesn’t want to come overseas,’ said Mum.

It took Lucy about half a second to work that one out. Speechless, she flung herself into first her mum’s and then her dad’s arms.

Epilogue



By the waning moon, a herd of elephants made its way up the slope of Mount Katerina. There was a moment where they were strung out, silhouetted against the skyline near the summit, then one by one, they disappeared.

Tail to tail, they picked their way cautiously down the mountain track, their great bulk making this downhill stage of the journey precarious. Then they reached the plain below and picked up speed, but never going so fast that the baby elephant in their midst was left behind. Every now and again they rumbled to each other, but whether it was directions or gossip or just to pass the time, no one but those who understood Elephant would know.

By first light they were walking confidently through familiar terrain and, as the sun lit up the ancient forest, the elephants walked, tired but eager, through the mud towards their very own waterhole.

This time, when the baby elephant paddled into the water to swim under his mama's watchful eye, he was rumbling and tumbling for joy.