

Chapter Seven

Dina Plays the New Dot Game

Dina wasn't abducted or "got rid of". Hella's "chauffeur" as he was called, took her home to the Moon. All the way, she was dying to ask Hella about the two men in the playground who had asked about the game. But Hella had warned her not to talk about the game in front of adults.

'I wonder if there's been any news of Tom?' she asked before getting out.

The other girls shrugged.

'Who cares?' Hella muttered, before adding cheerfully as the chauffeur got out to open the door, 'I'm sure you'll see him soon.'

The others grinned and waved to her as they pulled off. Then she saw them laughing. She knew they were up to something, but she didn't know what. Oh well, at least, she had the Dot Game. Was it in some way connected? But a game couldn't exactly "get rid of people" could it? Besides, Tom didn't have it the night he disappeared. It may, however, provide a clue though and she would, at least, find out what all the fuss was about.

'What are you doing next week Dina?' her stepmother asked when she went through to the kitchen to get a drink. Dina shrugged, failing to understand why it should matter what she did.

'Maybe you could visit your grandmother?'

Dina's grandmother (her father's mother) was completely insane and lived in a home so quite why she should visit her she wasn't sure. Then she realized: Double Hell wanted her out the way.

'Yes, maybe,' she replied. She had more important things to think about.

Later that night, when everyone was in bed, she switched on the computer. She'd asked to use the modem and her stepmother had said 'no'. But, for once, Dina wasn't bothered. Hella had assured her that she

didn't need a modem. She put the disk in and the screen exploded into a mass of colours like a million fireworks exploding simultaneously.

“Welcome to the Game”, a male voice boomed out of the computer.

‘Shush!’ Dina hissed. She would have her computer confiscated if they heard her. She turned the sound down but as if in response a text message appeared on the screen: **Press return to continue.**

Dina did.

Out of the fireworks, the following text appeared against a red background.

Welcome to Doctor Dot's Game Park. We hope you enjoy it. There are three possible Games. Each Game has 7 levels. For the first level you can score 100 points for the second 200, third 300 and so on. To date only a handful of people in the world have ever got as far as Level 7. If you too can gain 600 points, you could win a fabulous mystery prize!

IT COULD BE YOU!

To play, select one of the following games:

- 1. Quest (you will go on an incredible journey in search of something)**
- 2. Rescue (you will go on an amazing adventure on your way to rescue someone or something)**
- 3. Invasion (you will find yourself involved in an intergalactic war in which you will fight the enemy)**

Dina stared for a minute. Didn't Hella say she'd got to level nine? Maybe she'd misheard. She certainly hadn't mentioned a fabulous prize. Dina chose game two. The screen darkened and the following text appeared:

Thank you for choosing Game 2. Your mission is to rescue a young boy caught in the Games Mountain. To reach the person you can use your arrow keys and press the space bar to fire if you do not have a joystick or a games pad.

Press return to continue.

Fire! Dina thought. What was special about this game then? It was like all the others.

As soon as she pressed return, the screen became lighter, creating a twilight zone which filled her bedroom, even penetrating the dark forest in her curtains. The moon and stars on screen glowed a silvery white. Then she noticed in the right hand corner there was a figure about two centimetres high on a mountainside waving its arms. Another figure appeared at the bottom of the left-hand screen. It was up to her to control it and get to the figure on the mountain. She moved several spaces to the right but then massive airships, like Zeppelins, started flashing from the top right-hand corner and proceeded to bomb her. She was blown up and the screen shattered in to a million colours again.

'Oh no!'

You did not make it. Please try again.

Dina tried again. And again. On the third go she made it, but by then she was tired and frustrated.

'Stupid game!'

Yet she still didn't want to go to bed and when she did she dreamed of how to avoid those nasty big airships that dropped their bombs on her. By the time she heard Charlie crying in the morning, she was exhausted.

'I'm going out, Dina. If you can't be bothered to get up you can get your own breakfast. I've left a list here of things for you to do and let us know if

you go and visit your grandmother,' her stepmother called out. Her words were thrown through the door like knives.

'Okay,' Dina shouted out. For once she wasn't bothered by Double Hell's nastiness. She would have the flat to herself.

Dina got up and put on an old red dress and her red socks and went to make herself some breakfast. In the kitchen she found a list on the table. It read:

If you decide to stay you should,

- 1. Clean the kitchen (including oven and floor)*
- 2. Make beds*
- 3. Go shopping - buy organic for Charlie*
- 4. Do ironing*
- 5. Prepare dinner (boiled potatoes, grilled sardines and salad)*

Yuck! Dina thought. She hated grilled sardines. And salad. It wasn't fair, she thought. Even Cinderella had a fairy godmother. Then she remembered The Game and got herself a glass of orange juice and some toast, and retreated to her bedroom. Maybe she would go and visit her grandmother later. She peeked out of the old curtains which in the daytime lost their deep forest look, but the world outside looked cold and grey. She decided to keep the curtains shut.

'Yes!' Within minutes Dina had reached Level 2. Her night practice was coming in useful. Level 2 provided the same setting. The mountain was still over to the right. The only difference was that the figure looked slightly bigger, or closer, depending on your perspective. There were also three bright green trees, almost luminous in the twilight.

Dina moved her character to the right and took cover beneath a tree just as a huge red asteroid appeared from out of the top of the screen. It was heading slowly, but directly, for the tree she was under. Her character was

now carrying a weapon which looked like a remote control. Dina fired the remote and a red laser beam shot out towards the rock but missed. She waited to be blown up but the asteroid bounced off the tree. Dina fired again and it splintered into a thousand pieces before disappearing.

'Got you!' she exclaimed.

The next tree was twelve paces or so away and now the red rocks were appearing from all over the place. Dina fired again from the tree and shattered a few more. The fragments that slowly landed on the ground left a slight indentation. Dina fired more shots, and then ran to the next tree. An asteroid crashed behind her. She shot down a few more, but there were hundreds of them and the next tree was a long way away. Beyond that the boy still stood on the mountain, waving his arms at her. If she failed she would have to go back to Level 1. She dashed out from under cover and blew up an asteroid above her head and made it to the safety of the third and final tree. But the impact of the asteroids had reduced the trees to battered scarecrows. She took a deep breath, fired, and ran with her arrows on the keyboard. With one on the mountain, she fired at an asteroid but it exploded on top of her.

'Oh no!' she cried.

But then she saw herself lying on the ground and quickly got up and climbed to the safety of the mountain and hugged the figure, which she thought was a boy, and the game ended.

'This is fun!' she said to herself. No wonder everyone was raving about it. She never knew these games even existed. She no longer thought it had anything to do with Tom's disappearance. How could it? It was only a game.

Dina entered Level 3. There was a pre-game warning that at this level she would encounter Hoppers. If they landed on her she would be "dead". Dina surveyed the surroundings. There were no Hoppers that she could make out. This time, the little boy was even nearer. She thought he was wearing glasses, which was quite funny, almost lifelike. The trees were gone but there were bushes dotted all over the place. There was also a

strange vehicle near to where she was standing, like a bubble car – the type that take people up mountains. She pressed 'enter' and immediately something jumped out a bush and headed towards her. She got in the bubble car and, having pressed the space bar, leapt up as well, even higher than the jumping things - presumably Hoppers.

These Hoppers could only be described as giant, mechanical grass hoppers with bulging, white eyes and black, thick antennae. They also appeared to be weighed down with bricks so that they crashed to the ground with an enormous thud. Where they crashed the earth was brown.

'Out the way!'

Dina kept firing. She could go higher than the Hoppers but she also fell back to the ground faster. Then she discovered that when she was up in the air, she could press the spacebar and fire down on them. But she had to be careful not to land on her own ammunition. She skilfully pushed forward, killing the Hoppers as she went. Up, Fire, Down. Like a Yoyo. In fact, she thought, that was exactly how it felt. She soon reached the mountain to rescue the boy. They embraced and she saw the boy's mouth say, 'thank you'. It looked very real.

Then the screen exploded into multicolours and the words appeared,

Well done Dina! You have scored 300 points. Only three hundred and thirty one people have ever got this far.

Dina was too busy puzzling over how come so few had got this far that she failed to notice that the computer suddenly knew her name. She felt slightly nauseous after all that upping and downing so she went to get a glass of milk and some more toast.

'Oh dear,' she said when she saw the list of things to do on the table and knew that she'd better start cleaning up. It was nearly eleven o'clock and if Double Hell came home and found that she'd been playing games, there would be Double Trouble. So she began to do the washing up from Their

Breakfast, but she'd only done a few plates, when she dropped everything and ran back to her bedroom.

'I have to continue,' Dina said. She didn't know why, but it was almost as if she didn't have a choice.

Daylight flooded into her bedroom on Level 4, even though the curtains were still drawn. It was as if the sun had risen in the world in which she was playing since she'd been away. The sky was as blue as her eyes. The larger figure of the boy waved to her. The female figure now looked remarkably like Dina herself with her long black hair and red dress.

Odd, Dina thought. She decided to turn the sound back up.

'Help!'

She thought she heard the boy shout but it must be her imagination. This time, there was no jumping bubble car, but she could see a blue river winding its way to the mountain. If she listened hard, she thought she could hear the fast, flow of water.

'Wow, good soundtrack,' she mumbled.

Then as soon as she pressed 'enter' she heard a strange, high pitched sound. She headed straight for the river as fast as she could, chased by thousands of giant ants with legs built like stilts and mouths like crabs' pinchers. Several of them caught up with her. She had no way of defending herself. Speed was her only option.

Dina yelled out.

They were biting her. Each bite slowed her progress but she made it to the river. As soon as she dived in, the ants disappeared and she swam to the mountain and reached the boy.

Dina breathed a sigh of relief when she knew she had scored four hundred. Only three more levels to go, she thought. And then I will have done it. The strange thing was: her legs itched as if she'd been really bitten. She leant down and scratched them.

Level 5 was also daylight but, this time, the sun was setting and everywhere looked red, hot and barren. The character, which was now undoubtedly her, was in a large cage of sorts and still wearing red. There

was nothing but rocks. No shelter, no water, no flying machines. All she had was one spear. This scene was silent.

'Something terrible's going to happen.'

It no longer felt like a game. Her heart pounded as she pressed 'enter'. Then something else began pounding. Thunderous hooves. It was almost a relief when she saw that the biggest blackest bull she had ever seen was on the right hand side of the screen and not about to charge into her bedroom. But relief turned to fear as her cage door opened and Dina faced the beast as it stopped and pawed the ground, its horns pointing in her direction.

'I hate bulls,' she muttered.

Dina's hands shook as she moved the arrows. The spacebar did no good. All she could do was walk towards the bull. She was as good as dead. As the creature pawed at the ground, Dina had an idea and arrowed herself back to the metal cage. The bull charged towards her. She lingered outside the cage until the last second and then dived inside, facing him with the spear, and pressed the space bar. The bull slammed into the cage and the spear shot out to greet him. He groaned and stumbled about as the blood poured out of him and seeped into the landscape like ketchup oozing out of a burger. Dina ran as fast as the arrows would allow her to the mountain. She'd just reached it when she saw another one waiting in the wings digging the ground with one hoof and snorting at the dust. A few seconds later and it would have skewered her. As she stood there hugging the boy, the sun set.

After that Dina felt exhausted.

Congratulations Dina! You have scored five hundred points! Only one hundred and thirteen people have ever got this far - IN THE WORLD!

'Thank you,' Dina replied absent-mindedly, scratching her leg. She really should do her chores. But there were only two levels left. Surely she would

have time? Her legs hurt. Rolling down her tights she noticed several big red bites and she was also mysteriously dusty.

Dina stood up and shook herself. This was getting odder and odder. But she had to continue. What prize would she get if she finished?

Level 6 was pitch black. The computer must have crashed or something. It was so dark she could hardly see her room. Then gradually she could make out a few stars and the moon on the screen. And there was the vague shape of the mountain. On the left was a shadow which must be her character.

'But I can't see anything!'

She hit the enter key and pressed the down arrow key just as a strange shape fill the screen. There were loud primeval screeches followed by the heavy foot-thumps of an Unidentified Ginormous Monster, ten times the size of the bull. She could feel the ground shake as her character crawled along. If it trod on her she would be dead. She lay still for a long time. She could hear its breathing as it appeared to be looking for her. It moved towards her again and she pressed the down arrow.

'Oh no,' she yelled.

Dina tried the right arrow but nothing happened. The monster was almost on top of her. She opened her eyes and there she saw a large, black shadow. It almost filled the whole screen. One of its legs, which looked like a giant tree trunk with claws, was about to mangle her. In a last attempt she hit down again but nothing happened. This was it. She waited for The End. There was a crack of thunder and the monster's primeval scream pierced her ear and, for a moment, she thought she felt its hot breath. Then a space opened up beneath her and the monster trod over the little trench, like an elephant's foot over a mousehole.

In fact, it was a mousehole. At least, the small black shadow crouched in the corner of the screen squeaked remarkably like a mouse or rat. Dina jumped when she heard it. Even more so when she heard it speak.

'Phoo!' it said in disgust. 'You're so stupid! If you've got any sense, you'll stop playing. But seeing as you've got this far it seems a shame for

Sabena to kill you. I'm not exactly doing you a favour though, I can assure you. Oh, what do I care!' Its red eyes flashed in the dark.

'Thank you,' Dina muttered out loud.

'You have nothing to thank me for,' the rat said and was gone again.

It seemed to have replied directly to her. But Dina had other things to worry about. Once the monster had passed, she crawled slowly and laboriously up the mountain. The nearer she got to the boy the lighter it became. There was no sign of the monster. In fact, the mountain now took up the whole screen. Dawn had broken.

'Help!' the boy called out, waving his arms. He had grown to about twenty centimetres high.

Dina looked at him and she had the biggest shock she had ever had: Game or no game, the boy looked like Tom.

'Help me Dina, please,' he begged. 'Get me out of here.'

It was Tom.

But before she could say anything, the screen exploded into fireworks and the words appeared,

Congratulations Dina! You are only one of thirty four people in the world who have made it this far. Hurry we are waiting. Put on your boots and grab your bag. Your prize is waiting. The imagination is the limitation. Don't delay, you must stay and play. Press Enter to Enter the Final Level.

It was then that Dina noticed her name. But she had no time to think. Her mind was tumbling about like clothes in a washing machine. What had Hella done? Boots? A bag? Then, the key in the lock of the apartment clicked and the door opened.

'Dina!' her stepmother called.

Oh no, now what was she going to do?

Chapter Eight

The Journey into the Altercibe

Dina stuffed her feet into her boots and grabbed a small, shiny red bag which she could wear on her back like a miniature, triangular rucksack. And Entered. She knew she would be in trouble but she didn't care. Tom had asked her for help. They had made a deal. She had to rescue him and find out how Hella was "getting rid of people". It was, after all, only game, wasn't it? Whatever lay beyond couldn't be worse than her stepmother.

'Dina!' Her stepmother's angry voice echoed through the house but the darkness of the screen was engulfing her.

'Dina? Why the hell haven't you...'

The voice faded until Dina could no longer make out what she was saying. Silence and darkness replaced her bedroom. She was no longer in front of her computer. She was somewhere in between.

She got up and walked around, her arms feeling for something, anything. All around her was dark, empty space, as if she had been gobbled up by a silent night. Even her feet felt as if they were walking on air. She bent down only to discover that they were, indeed, walking on air. But if there's nothing beneath me, I must be...

She panicked and flapped her arms, just in case, but it didn't seem to make any difference. The strange thing was she didn't feel as if she was moving at all. There were no sounds, no smells, no sights, no tastes. Nothing to touch. It was a senseless world. Was this what it felt like to die, she wondered. Was this it? Was this, in fact, how Hella got rid of people?

Then she heard Tom's voice crying out like before. It sounded further away, echoing as if coming from across a vast mountain range.

'Tom?' she whispered. She called again, louder this time.

No reply.

Then she heard a screech that shook her spine. It was that same monster she had encountered in Level 6 - 'Sabena' the mouse had called

it. Except it sounded ... Bigger. More Terrifying. It sounded like a dinosaur having its belly cut open. Or a prehistoric T-Rex being electrocuted while attempting to escape from Jurassic Park.

Maybe this wasn't a good idea. She couldn't save Tom. If it was Tom. She had been foolish to think she could. Maybe it was all a trick. She must turn back and grovel to her stepmother and do all the chores and never play the computer again. The palms of her hands were sticky.

But as she turned round, Tom's voice bounced out of somewhere again, 'Hell-p!'

Dina began to run but she ran like those men on the moon without gravity. Then she heard a crackling noise as if a thousand and one volts were burning through a forest. The last of her bravery evaporated.

'Oh no, please, I want to go home!' Dina yelled. She had been tricked into playing the Game. Hella had not played this far. There was no such thing as Level 9. She had been fooled. 'Got rid of' by that horrible girl. This was her final journey.

Only a big wind from out of the darkness answered her. She screamed. An invisible force curled her up into a ball and blew her along at a million miles per hour. She was hurtled through nothingness so fast that her screams were left a thousand miles behind her. The voltage crackled and the great surge pushed her forward, further, faster. It felt like forever.

But then it stopped and Dina hit the ground. Hard. She found herself as motionless and blind as before, but this time there was something beneath her feet. Something hard and gritty, like coarse sand on rock. Perhaps, she thought, she had fallen out of her bed during a nightmare and was crawling around on her bedroom carpet?

Dina wished.

She touched her head which hurt. Her breathing was irregular so she tried to take deep breaths but the air was heavy making her wonder if she was breathing in darkness itself. Her legs felt heavy too. And she had absolutely no idea where she was, except that she knew that the Game

was no longer a game and that she was in trouble. But I'm here now, she told herself, dead or alive. So pull yourself together.

She thought she was outside and yet it wasn't cold. She inched forward a little and, as she did, she began to see a twilight glow in front of her. Thank goodness, thank goodness, she muttered. Encouraged, she pushed herself further forward on all fours; her legs still shaking too much to be stood on. But ahead there was purple haze instead of thick darkness. She didn't understand how but it appeared she was in some kind of enormous cave. In front of her was an opening the size of a bus depot.

Holding onto a rocky ledge in the side of the cave, she lifted herself onto her legs. There in the faint dawn light from the mouth of the cave she could see the familiar black shadow of mountains. She stepped forward. Above her, the moon and stars looked as if they'd been specially painted, then cut out and pasted onto the dark blue sky.

She blinked in astonishment.

She was in the game.

Somehow she had been transported to the purple mountainous world of the New Dot Game. There was the mountain she had climbed often enough. The only difference was it was to the left and not to the right. And it was real.

Tom no longer called out.

What she heard was far more frightening. It was that prehistoric screech again. The ground beneath her feet shook. She retreated silently into the cave and slid down behind a protruding rock. From there in the shadows she spied the monster come into view and her heart missed at least ten beats. The moonlight shone directly on it. It was huge and reddish, huger than a double decker London bus, and almost as red, with a tail as long as a train's carriage. Its skin looked like a tree's, and its legs, although small compared to the size of the body, were still bigger than the biggest tree trunks Dina had ever seen, and on the end of its feet were long claws which ripped through the sand as it slowly moved. It stopped outside the cave. Dina realised that she was probably in the monster's home.

It turned and looked to where she was crouching. Its barkless head was like a giant crocodile's and its dozens of jagged teeth, like rows of broken bottles, were crunching down on something. Some dinosaurs are vegetarians, she tried to convince herself. But if it was a dinosaur it wasn't one she knew. It was more like a dragon. The light of the moon lit up one of its small black eyes so that it shone like molten silver. The creature spat something out before thumping towards her. She rolled herself into a ball behind the rock and didn't breathe. The red monster passed her, grunting and grinding its teeth, heading back to the darkness.

Dina crept to the entrance again and slipped out into the purple dawn. Anywhere would be safer than staying in a cave with a dragon-like dinosaur. As she tip-toed out she passed what it was the creature had spat out. It was a small black boot. She picked it up by the heel. It was covered in grit and sand but it wasn't a boot. It looked like a small girl's shoe. Inside were the bloody remains of a foot.

The monster had been eating a little girl.

Dina stopped, not because she wanted to but because her feet refused to do anything else. She couldn't understand. How could this have happened? How could a game turn into reality? How could a game transport a human being into another world? What kind of a world was this? Was this the Altercibe that everyone was talking about? And how had Hella known? Nothing made sense. She rubbed her eyes and stuck her fingernails into her arm, but still she didn't wake up.

'Pst!'

Dina nearly slipped over.

'Pst! Over here!'

Dina looked over to a bush but couldn't see anything. Then she spotted a pair of red eyes.

'Yes here! Hurry! You think I've got all day? Even if I had, you haven't - unless, of course you want to end up in the remains of a chewed up shoe.'

Dina took a hesitant step towards the bush.

'Come on! Follow me!'

From out of the bush appeared an extremely large, grey rat with those red eyes she had seen in the Game and a long, wiry tail.

'Quick! Quick! You're very fortunate I'm here.'

Another prehistoric screech came - now from behind her. She ran after the giant rat as he darted around bushes and eventually disappeared into a tunnel. She hesitated as his long tail got shorter. The ground was still trembling every few seconds as the monster moved in his cave.

'Are you coming in or not?' The rat had turned himself around and was looking up at her, his blood red eyes now a softer shade of pink.

'What are you?' Dina hissed.

'Em, of course. Get in.'

Dina, feeling that this was perhaps the best option after all, got down on her hands and knees and crawled in to the tunnel which was less than a metre high and half a metre wide. 'Em what?' she asked.

'Em for Mouse. What are you?'

'Dina, my name's Dina.' She realised he must be the mouse she'd met in the Game. Or someone like him.

'You don't look like a Dina,' Em complained. 'But not to worry, there's another one like you in here.'

Dina was about to say that he didn't look much like a mouse but didn't get a chance as they'd entered an underground room, slightly higher than the tunnel, which was strangely lit by a whitish light. And there in the corner was indeed someone else. A boy, slightly older than Dina, with shoulder length, mousey hair which he swept back, stretched out his hand to greet her.

Dina, who had felt uncomfortable shaking the policeman's hand, felt even stranger shaking this young boy's hand. As it happened, their hands merely touched and parted.

'This is a Sasha and this is a Dina,' Em said, by way of introduction.

Sasha muttered something in a different language and looked up to the ceiling a few inches above his head as if he had been saved from something terrible.

Dina stared in surprise at Sasha. He was too tall to stand in this underground room. Even Dina had to bend her head. He was very thin and he had pale skin, almost as white as the walls. He was dressed in a dark jumper and blue worn jeans and shoes even older than Dina's. Sasha smiled and as he did so, his dark, intense eyes lit up. Dina smiled back.

'I'm Sasha from St. Petersburg,' he began, but Dina wouldn't let him finish.

'Sasha!' she exclaimed happily. Could it be? 'Sasha Lermontov?'

Sasha nodded, his brown eyes widening, questioning.

'Dina, my name's Dina Jones. We email each other...' Dina's excitement dissolved. He looked completely devastated and she wasn't sure why.

'Dina,' he muttered. 'Dina Jones... But you...' He was about to say something, then changed his mind, leaving his mouth hanging open.

'What?' Dina asked, puzzled at his reaction.

He seemed to recover from his shock, waving it away with his hand and asked her how she had got here. He spoke English slowly and clearly. Dina told him how she had played the game. She remembered that Sasha, too, had said he was going to play the New Dot Game at the weekend.

'I can't believe we're meeting like this... Where are we anyway?' Dina hissed, looking around at the white underground cavern. 'And where is the light coming from?'

'You're in the Labyrinth of course!' Em squeaked, adding helpfully, 'Just outside of Altal. And the light comes from the white walls.' He didn't look very impressed with the level of intelligence of his visitors.

'What's the Labyrinth?' Dina asked.

'This is the network of mouse tunnels where we used to live, of course.' Em sighed deeply, stroking his whiskers.

'This is the Altercibe, Dina,' Sasha said. 'Somehow, we have been transported here by the Game.'

'The Altercibe... The Labyrinth... I'm not sure if I'm dead, alive or dreaming...' Dina whispered.

'You're alive, of course!' Em said, before adding, 'but probably not for much longer.'

Dina tried to ignore Em's predictions. So if they weren't dead or dreaming, they must really be in this Altercibe; the place, until a few minutes ago, she didn't believe in. 'But how could a game do this?' she muttered, her mind now on tumble dry. So many questions were spinning round.

'I don't know. Who gave you the game?' Sasha asked slowly.

'A horrible girl called Hella,' Dina said.

Sasha nod knowingly, encouragingly. He was more friendly now: perhaps he had been shocked to see her. She remembered from his email that someone he disliked had given it to him as well.

'But why...how? How could these kids like Hella have known?'

Sasha looked puzzled as he shook his long hair. He clearly didn't know.

'So there's no way back?' Dina asked quietly.

'Perhaps. We arrived in the cave so I reckon that is how we get back. But how to do that with the monster there? Besides, if anybody else comes, they will be eaten. I am trying to think how we can do it. Em will you go out again?'

Em shook his whiskers vigorously. 'He's back in his cave. I'm not going in there. No way no way.'

'What is the monster?' Dina asked quickly. 'I met a... mouse in the Game who called it Sabena.'

'You met an Em?' Em squeaked, his nose twitching, clearly upset.

Dina nodded.

'What was it doing?'

'It saved my life, well, my life in the Game that is,' Dina said not really sure what it was doing. 'And it did warn me that it wasn't doing me a favour. Did you not meet it?'

Sasha shook his head. It turned out they had played different games. Sasha had played Game 1. It sounded fairly similar. He had been on a

quest to find new, habitable lands in the universe. 'From my bedroom in Petersburg I thought,' he added bitterly.

'That out there, Dina, is not Sabena,' Em said, his nose twitching, as if searching for something in the underground room. 'That is Seberus. Rumour has it that they came from over the Alts together and Sabena was captured by Doctor Dot. Like so many of us.'

'Doctor Dot?'

'The one who makes the games, of course!' Em stopped twitching and sat up on his hind legs stared in disbelief at the visitors.

'So Doctor Dot captures you and puts you in his games?' Dina asked Em, slowly putting the pieces together.

Em began to wash his whiskers, nodding. Dina thought there were pink tears in his eyes when he looked up.

'And so we reckon he's done the same with us,' Sasha said.

'But how?' Dina puzzled. 'It's impossible. Surely, we created the Altercibe.'

'Maybe we didn't create the Altercibe,' Sasha said quietly. 'Maybe it was already here.'

Em paused in his washing and challenged them with his pink eyes. 'Of course it was already here.'

'Even if we did create it, maybe they've taken control?' Sasha muttered to Dina.

Em's round ears twitched uncomfortably, but he resumed his wash and didn't say anything.

Dina didn't like to argue. Having never believed in other worlds, this was not very digestible. She swallowed hard. 'But why take kids from out world?'

Sasha frowned and deep furrows appeared on his forehead. 'I've been trying to think. Maybe to make better games. More real?'

Dina nodded. Of course! The Games were real all right.

'It doesn't quite make sense though,' Dina said slowly. 'If Doctor Dot wants us why have a great big child-eating dinosaur in the cave?'

'I'm not sure,' Sasha said.

'I saw the Doctor's metamarine before I found you,' Em said, now washing behind his ears with his paws.

'What's a metamarine?' Dina asked feeling dizzy. Here she was talking to a giant mouse, bigger than a cat, who had decided to wash itself, and a boy who, in their world lived thousands of kilometres away from her, hiding in an underground room in a place which she had been convinced didn't exist. But the really strange thing was: it was beginning to make sense. Either that or Dina was taking after her grandmother.

'It's a big airship,' Em sighed.

'So maybe Doctor Dot's picked the other kids up, you mean?' Sasha asked Em.

'Of course.'

'Well, we have to rescue those who have been captured. My friend Tom is there,' Dina said remembering why she was here in the first place.

'No,' Sasha said. 'That's probably what Doctor Dot wants. And then we'll be captured too.'

'Where does he take them? I mean where does he keep the people he captures?' Dina looked at Em for an answer.

'In the Games Park, of course. Up the mountain.'

She remembered that the Game told her that thirty four people had made it onto Level 7. That meant there could be at least thirty others held prisoner in this Games Park. She told Sasha and Em. 'Unless, of course Seberus has eat...' but Em shook his shining whiskers.

'Not all,' Em said. 'He couldn't eat more than a few a week.'

That was reassuring, Dina thought darkly. 'Well, at least one girl didn't go with Doctor Dot,' she said telling Sasha about the girl's shoe.

'That must have happened between you two arriving,' Em said. 'I couldn't rescue you all.'

'We have to get rid of Seberus,' Sasha said again.

Dina disagreed. She thought that they should go and rescue the others and then worry about Seberus and how to get back to their world – after

all, visions of her stepmother towering over her bed, almost matched the horror of Seberus. But Sasha had a point: what kind of rescue team would they be if they were immediately caught?

Their thoughts were broken by a loud whistling sound from above, shortly followed by an enormous explosion. The room jumped up and down several times. Everyone, including the giant mouse, curled into a ball until the room settled down.

'Doctor Dot knows you're here and he must want you pretty bad,' Em said. 'Look at the cracks appearing in the walls.'

'What's happening?' Sasha asked.

'L-Bombers,' Em replied, his whiskers twitching nervously. 'If they keep attacking, I don't know how long the Labyrinth will last.'

There was another explosion. The white walls flaked leaving behind black patches. The underground room was darkening.

Dina suddenly had an idea. 'Who made the Labyrinth?' she asked Em.

'We did, of course.'

'Who's we?'

'The Ems...'

'Of course,' Dina said saving him the trouble. 'And where are these Ems?'

'In Altal,' Em replied sadly. 'They all left for the city after a while. They said it was too boring here in the Alts. And what with Seberus around, life wasn't easy as you know. That's where you should go too. There's no life for you here...'

'How far is it?' Dina asked.

'Far enough and not far enough,' he replied.

Dina and Sasha looked at each other as they tried to work out how far that was exactly but gave up.

'Would they come back?' Dina asked excitedly, 'To help us.'

'Why would they do that?' Em said wiping his little nose with his paw.

'I don't know... But if they could help us build a tunnel into Seberus' cave, we could at least rescue anybody coming through.'

'And find the way out!' Sasha exclaimed, now looking at Dina in admiration.

'Then when there were more of us, we could take on Doctor Dot!'

Sasha didn't look so sure about this.

'They wouldn't come back,' Em said solemnly. 'Why should they?'

'Well, we at least have to ask them. Come on Em. You helped us. Why did you help us?'

Em twitched his whiskers uncertainly but didn't reply.

'Well?'

'I couldn't watch you be eaten could I?'

'And maybe the others will think the same.'

'They won't have to watch will they,' Em muttered.

'We have to try.'

'Perhaps I should wait here?' Sasha suggested.

Dina was surprised. Why would he want to stay here? But she didn't have time to question him. She shook her head instead.

Em stared at the whitish walls now showing black lines before speaking, 'No, it's no good staying here. But, I'm telling you, they won't help you and quite how we're going to get to Altal, I just don't know. Now that the L-Bombers are out in force.'

'What are L-Bombers?' Dina asked.

'They drop Line Bombs of course,' Em said shaking his head in despair.

'Are you ready then?'

They agreed they were.

Chapter Nine

White Wolves and a Snake

Em led the way through the increasingly dark and shaky tunnels, followed by Sasha and Dina crawling on their hands and knees. The ground beneath and around them reminded Dina of well thumbed plasticine. The white flaked off paint provided shards of light on the ground. As they knelt on them, the light crumbled. Behind her, Dina could see the shattered fragments, twinkling like stars.

The L-Bombers were still bombing - or lining - and, every so often, in the distance, Seberus shrieked. Dina worried about any potential breakfast which might arrive into his cave at any moment. She knew that, despite everything, she had been very lucky. Not only was she still alive but she had also met one of her best e-friends. She still thought it odd that Sasha had been shocked to see her and wanted to ask him why, but now wasn't the right time. Perhaps he had just been surprised to see another person. Perhaps she wasn't how he'd expected? Sasha was quieter and more reserved than she'd thought. She wondered as well who else they might meet. If she had met someone from Russia, maybe she would meet Yuki from Japan - after all, she said she had the Game. Or maybe even Tessa?

One person she didn't want to meet here was Hella. But if she ever made it back to her world, she vowed she would make Hella very sorry for this. She stopped as she almost bumped into Sasha.

'Shush!' Em ordered.

They shushed. They couldn't hear anything. The L-Bombers appeared to have gone.

'Okay, we'll surface, the tunnel doesn't go much further anyway,' Em shouted from the front. 'But keep to the bushes!'

Of course, Dina thought. She was aware that Em thought her very stupid. What a strange creature he was. What a strange world this was.

They emerged from the tunnel into a bright world. Dina gasped when she saw how blue the sky was now. On the reddish ground, lime green bushes and dark boulders were dotted all over the place while several giant trees sculpted the landscape. There was also a large round yellow ball which she supposed was the sun, but it wasn't usual because she could look at it without squinting. It lay just above the mountains, which were no longer purple, but red-orange and it was warm, pleasantly warm, like a centrally heated house. A world away from the cold, grey - dark-grey world she'd come from.

'That's Doctor Dot's Games Park where the Games are made,' Em said, pointing to a distant disneyland castle with four onion shaped domes on one of the mountains.

The castle was pretty impressive. So that's where Tom and the others were, Dina thought. It looked fairly daunting. It reminded her of something and she couldn't remember what.

'I think we should forget about rescuing them,' Sasha said.

Dina didn't say anything, but she was beginning to get annoyed with Sasha. He didn't want to do anything.

'Of course,' Em squeaked.

Dina shrugged. She wasn't going to forget about rescuing Tom, but first things first.

Em led them to the right, away from the mountains. It could be a long walk. Dina was glad she was wearing her boots, old as they were. At least Doctor Dot had told his victims to put shoes on. Her stepmother would no doubt tell her off for the state they would be in - if she ever got back. Her dress and black tights were also grubby. Maybe she wouldn't go back. Even with Seberus, she thought this world an improvement on the one she had come from.

The reddish hue to the ground was the same as she had seen in the Game. It reminded her of Western films set in wild America. Their footsteps stirred up dust and yet the air wasn't dusty. Then Dina noticed the boulders around them moving.

'Did you see that?' Dina called out quietly.

Sasha stopped and watched the boulders creep along.

Em looked at them impatiently. 'Snails,' he said with contempt.

They were enormous; the size of footballs. But they didn't have time to admire the giant snails, let alone talk to them, or inspect the insects buzzing in the trees, as Em was beckoning impatiently from one of the bushes.

'Do you have to be so obvious?' he hissed, his whiskers twitching again. 'Here, put these on.' He broke off branches from the bushes and made Dina and Sasha put them on their heads, like hats.

'What do we have to watch out for?' Sasha asked nervously.

'Everything,' Em replied.

'How far is it?' Dina asked again.

'Far enough.'

Dina and Sasha looked at each other and shrugged. What to do? Sasha looked worried.

'If we encounter trouble we head for the river. Okay?' Em told them.

Like in the Game, Dina thought, except she couldn't see a river. Then as they began to move from bush to bush in a very non linear, crocodile fashion, they spotted the shiny, silvery blue river meandering in much the same direction they were heading in. All cities are built on rivers, Dina remembered from their recent classes on cities. Altal must be too.

'I hope we don't have to go in the river. I can't swim,' Sasha muttered.

This time it was Dina who was shocked. 'Don't you have a swimming pool at school,' Dina asked. Then she remembered that he hardly went to school.

Sasha muttered something about hating sports, particularly swimming. Dina was beginning to worry about the lanky figure slouched behind her. He'd always seemed fairly outgoing in his emails, but then she remembered that he didn't go out much. He spent nearly all his time on the computer.

Em kept stopping, standing up on his back legs and twitching his nose. Dina couldn't hear anything except for the buzzing of insects, or see anything, and yet she couldn't shake off the feeling that they were being watched.

'Did you see that?' Sasha asked Dina, again grabbing her arm and then letting it quickly go.

'What?' Dina tried to keep the panic from her voice.

'Snake,' he hissed.

'You saw a snake?' Em called back fearfully.

'A big red and brown snake over to the right.'

Dina looked but couldn't see anything.

'Snakes eat mice!' Sasha muttered. 'Em's scared.'

He's not the only one, Dina thought. She didn't particularly like snakes either and certainly didn't relish the idea of one following them.

But follow it did. At a distance. Em was getting increasingly nervous as they darted from bush to bush, scanning the blue sky for anything that might come and attack.

'I hear something,' Em said on one of his twitching stops. 'I think we'd better go to the river.'

'Oh no!' Sasha muttered.

'Quick!' Em called.

They began to run. Dina thought that Em was just trying to outrun the snake, but the snake increased its speed, gliding gracefully behind them like a skier down a mountain. They all ran full pelt. Em scurried ahead on all fours, while Dina and Sasha followed close behind. Dina could now hear what Em had heard: the howls of dogs coming from the mountains. The river was just ahead but how were they going to get to the city? Besides, dogs could swim couldn't they? And what about Sasha? But Dina didn't have time to worry. They were getting nearer. She dared to look behind and she could see white shapes coming after them getting bigger and bigger. They weren't dogs. They looked more like wolves. And Dina had the feeling the snake was still skiing along with them.

Em was at the river bank now and he stood up and shouted at them to hurry up before diving into the river.

‘Oh no, I can’t do this!’ Sasha panted.

He was slowing down so Dina had to half pull him along. Sasha was tall and thin but clearly not used to running. The sound of breaking branches, the yelps and the growls, was getting closer and louder.

‘They’re coming!’ Dina shouted.

The snake slid past them. ‘Take a deep breath and grab hold of me,’ it hissed. ‘You Sasha, as you can’t swim, go first. And don’t let go before you have to.’

Too astonished to protest, Sasha and Dina did exactly as the snake told them and they all jumped into opaque blue water that looked like thick blue paint. The snake wasn’t as slippery as it looked and they held on tightly as it swiftly pulled them underneath the water while watching the shadows of the wolves prowl the river banks. Their ghostly howls echoed above the water and Dina was sure they were going to dive in. But the snake slipped through the water so fast that within seconds they had meandered many bends and travelled great distances. At each turn, the shadows began to fade and the howls sounded further away until Dina could no longer see or hear them.

Only then did the snake and its two human go to the surface. Sasha’s pale face was now as white as the shadows which had chased them.

‘Take some air!’ the snake ordered.

And then they were under again, being pulled along a fast water chute through warm turquoise waters. Many more bends later, the snake came to the surface and took them to the river banks where there was a shallow section covered in pebbles and surrounded by reeds. They sat, dripping, still fairly hidden from both sky and land. Sasha spluttered and out came a torrent of Russian. Dina thought how beautiful the language sounded. She asked him if he was all right and he nodded, breathing deeply. There was no longer any sign of the wolves.

‘That was close,’ the snake said. He had beautiful yellow eyes.

'Who are you?' Dina asked.

'Cybil.'

'Where is Em?'

'He's not far away,' Cybil said. 'He's afraid that I will eat him. But I ate a couple of days ago so I'm still full.'

'What did you eat?' Dina asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

'I think you have more important things to worry about than what I ate. Em! You can come out now,' Cybil shouted.

But no Em.

The snake curled up like rope and sat on himself. 'Bad reputation, we have.' He didn't seem bothered by it. 'You'd better keep going, the white wolves may not have gone yet. You will be safer in Altal.'

'What are they? Why were they following us?' Sasha asked, colour now beginning to seep into his wet face. In fact, Dina thought he looked fresh and bright, much better than before. He shook his hair and began to wring it out.

'Doctor Dot set them on you. He must have released them from one of his games to round you up. I haven't seen the white wolves for ages.'

'Do you know what's going on at his Games Park?' Dina asked quickly.

'Bad things. All across the Western Altercibe creatures are being captured and put into his games. Hundreds of snakes have been caught. And now it seems your world is also affected. We have never had these problems before in the Altercibe. I think most Voyds are ignoring the actions of Doctor Dot. He is a powerful wizard, or a Policom, as we call them here. Besides, most Voyds love to play games. And so, I hear, do you.'

'What are Voyds?' Dina asked quickly.

'The inhabitants of the Altercibe,' Cybil explained.

The snake knew a lot more about what was going on here than Em. Or, at least, he was more willing to explain. And he didn't add 'of course' to everything so Dina felt comfortable asking him questions.

'But we must be able to do something about this Doctor Dot?' Dina asked.

The snake shook his head.

Dina explained the problem of Seberus and the young people arriving into his cave and asked if Cybil had any idea what they could do but he continued to shake his head as if dancing to the imaginary sounds of a flute.

'Your idea of getting the Ems to help is the best,' he replied at last. 'If you dig the Labyrinth under his cave you may stand a chance.'

'Were you listening to us all the time?' Dina asked, astonished.

The snake looked at her cunningly.

'But what about those who are already caught? We need to rescue them.'

The snake became thoughtful and Sasha stopped wringing his hair out and looked up at Cybil.

'You should also visit Syber,' he said, 'She will give you some advice.'

'Who's Syber?' asked Sasha quietly.

Syber was one of the great minds of the Altercibe. She was fairly difficult to meet because she was so important. 'Tell her I sent you,' Cybil added.

'Will you come with us?' Sasha almost pleaded.

The snake swayed from side to side: they took this as a "no".

'How will we find this Syber?' Dina asked.

'Ask anyone in the city.'

Dina suddenly had an idea and asked Cybil if he would go back and look for any more humans entering the Altercibe, and if there were, to lead them somewhere safe until they managed to return.

He didn't look too happy with this plan. Apparently, Seberus was rather partial to snake.

'Then maybe we'll try to rescue the snakes as well!' Dina declared. She thought this rather optimistic under the circumstances but she was still determined to at least try to rescue Tom. And she was sure more kids would arrive.

Sasha opened his mouth to say something but closed it again.

The forked tongue of the snake darted about.

'I'm not promising,' Cybil said at last. 'It depends what else Doctor Dot sends out from the mountains. I can outrun most things but not all. Ah look, there he is. Time for you to go. Make sure you keep close to the river.'

Em was poking his head out of the water and shaking his wet whiskers.

'It's all right Em. Cybil won't hurt you,' Dina called out.

But Cybil seemed to know what was required of him and slithered up the bank and disappeared. Em emerged from the water.

'Right are you ready?' he asked as if nothing had happened.

Dina didn't feel that it was fair to question him so she nodded and climbed up the bank, her red dress and long, black plait almost dry.

'So how do you like swimming?' Dina asked Sasha, who looked transformed since his guided under water tour.

'Incredible,' Sasha muttered, his eyes fresh and shining.

They were both completely unprepared for the sight that greeted them.

Chapter Ten

Altal

There, further along the river, rose an enormous city. Well, not so much a city as a collection of hundreds of black, metal and glass symmetrical shapes which appeared to grow out of the ground, rising high up into the blue sky - much higher than any building Dina had ever seen in London.

Em, of course, remained unimpressed.

Dina and Sasha were mesmerised by the futuristic landscape looming out of the desert.

'What's the matter now?' Em asked, 'Have you never seen a city before?'

'Of course we've seen a city before. But not one quite so...' Dina struggled to describe the cold, monstrous yet baking and beautiful forest of buildings.

'Dark,' Sasha finished.

He was right, Dina thought. At first she'd thought it was because the sun was so bright the buildings were so dark, but now she wasn't so sure.

'It looks very quiet though. Does anyone live here?' Dina wondered out loud.

Em stopped and looked at her incredulously. 'Of course anyone lives there!'

An answer which left her confused.

Dina remembered what Cybil had said. 'Em, do you know where we'll find Syber?' she asked.

Em stopped. 'Of course! Everyone knows Syber. But you'll never get to see her.'

Dina didn't like to argue. They quickly followed the river until they reached the edge of the city. There was no wall or enclosure but Em chose to move away from the river, which looked as if it ran to the heart of

the city, and led them around the outskirts. The buildings now towered above them like giants frozen in time. They had only had to take cover once and that was when the sky above them was speckled with L-Bombers flying very high around the city. Em made them hide in the bushes until he was sure they wouldn't be spotted.

'They're not supposed to fly into the city,' he told them, 'but we must be careful.'

They were careful and they entered the city between two of the smallest black buildings unharmed. There still didn't appear to be anyone about. Dina looked back towards the red desert behind them. The mountains were a long way behind them now. There were no roads as such in the city - instead there were wide, earthen avenues where bushes and small trees, not much taller than Sasha, grew randomly. At the side of one avenue, there were a couple of parked objects about the size of small cars, except oblong in shape and filled with dark glass. They looked a little like the bubble car Dina had seen in the game. She wanted to take a closer look. But rather than let them sightsee, Em led them to a big bush.

'Can't we have a look at the city?' Dina asked Em as they followed him into the bush where there was a black hole concealed in the middle, not much bigger than a cat flap. No one would ever guess that it led into a secret tunnel.

'Of course you can't. You don't want to meet the Policoms - they might be working with Dr Dot. At the very least, you would be brought in for questioning by the Altercops. Hold my tail,' Em told Sasha.

Sasha did as he was told and Dina took hold of Sasha's hand. Dina wondered what these Policoms and Altercops were like as they went into the dark hole.

The walls were painted black here which made the tunnel much more frightening than the Labyrinth. The three hung on to each other. Dina and Sasha couldn't see a thing.

'Who made these tunnels?' Dina asked.

'We did, of course, when we were made to come to the city.'

'So it's the city Labyrinth?' Dina confirmed expecting another 'of course'.

'Yes, except it's known as the Underground.'

'Who uses these tunnels?' Sasha asked.

'Anyone with any sense,' Em replied.

'Even snakes?'

'Even them. They don't hunt in the tunnels though. There would be an outrage.'

'What's that ahead?' Dina asked.

It was another mouse with red eyes, even bigger than Em.

'Hello Em,' Em greeted.

'Hello Em.'

'We're having a meeting - pass the word.'

The other Em pulled in his nose in disgust, nodded, and went on his way.

'You have the same name!' Dina exclaimed.

'Of course.'

The black tunnel finally became a dark blue tunnel which emitted a blue light so they could see at last. Then they turned into a brown tunnel, followed by a green tunnel, a purple tunnel, red, yellow, orange... Dina began to think that perhaps they were walking through an underground rainbow. It wasn't at all dark in the coloured tunnels, but Dina for one had no idea how they'd find their way out again. Head for darkness, she supposed.

'Are the tunnels colour coded?' Sasha asked.

'Of course.'

Dina and Sasha smiled to themselves.

Finally, they reached a white room, not dissimilar to the one in the Labyrinth, except, of course, much bigger. Even Sasha could stand upright in it – just. By now, word had passed through the Underground that there would be an important meeting and there were ten or so mice looking around expectantly. There were also a few giant snails and small snakes present. Neither groups seemed overly impressed with events and some

of the snakes decided to disappear and the snails began to trail after them, but they didn't get very far. Dina wondered how long it would take them to get out of the tunnels so, feeling bold, she went and approached one.

'Excuse me Snail, how long does it take you to get out?'

All the other mice and snakes looked at her as if she were mad. Em tried to get her away. 'They can't talk, you silly girl,' he said quietly.

Dina felt even smaller than the snail. Well, how was she supposed to know? Mice talked, snakes talked, but snails didn't. What kind of logic was that?

'They're far more simpler organisms,' Em said as a way of explanation. 'Their genetic makeup is much more simpler.'

Dina wasn't quite sure what he meant but she nodded anyway. In all fairness even in the other world she had never heard a snail make any noise whereas she had heard a mouse squeak. But then she couldn't think what noise snakes made.

'They don't look very interested in us,' Sasha said looking round at the Ems coming and going. 'There are more going than coming.'

'Meeting! Meeting! Spread the word!' Em cried out, going from group to group.

After about thirty minutes a couple of hundred grey mice had gathered in the big underground hall, grumbling about what was so important that they must be here.

'You address them Dina. It's your idea,' Em said, after he'd got everyone reasonably, albeit reluctantly, quiet.

Dina stood forward and cleared her throat. She had never addressed a large crowd before. Their small eyes flashed red. Many of them looked glazed.

'Hello Ems. Thank you for coming. You probably know that we are not from this world, we are from...'

'We don't care where you're from!' one Em shouted out from the back. 'Get on with it!'

Dina hesitated. They weren't very friendly. Some of them had already sat down and looked like they'd fallen asleep. She took a deep breath.

'Doctor Dot has created a game which links the Altercibe to our world. The kids who are arriving here either have to face Seberus, the red monster, or they are kidnapped by Doctor Dot and put in his games together with many other creatures of the Altercibe. Em here rescued us but there may be others coming through and we thought that if we could build a tunnel, we might be able to help them.'

'You mean we might be able to help them,' an Em said grumpily.

'Well, yes... I thought that perhaps you could help us build a tunnel from the Labyrinth to Seberus' cave,' said Dina unhappily. She couldn't think why they were so hostile.

'Why should we help you?' another Em called out. 'What have you ever done for us?'

There were some cheers from the other Ems. Others snored. Others ignored. For whatever reason, they clearly had no desire to help them.

'Nothing, but then you've never asked us to do anything. If you asked I'm sure we would help you.' Dina looked at Sasha who was looking down. Em twitched his whiskers nonchalantly. Dina felt a huge wave of frustration crash on top of her. She took a deep breath and tried again. Please, they were their only help. If they didn't help, hundreds of innocent victims may be killed.

One Em burped.

Please. But the Ems weren't interested. In fact they were so disinterested that they started to leave. They were thirsty, they said. Dina could hardly believe her eyes. She looked at Em but he was still twitching his whiskers and looked at her as if to say 'what did she expect?'

Then she had an idea.

'What about the captured Ems?' she shouted. 'They're in the games too. Don't you want to help them? And what about all the other creatures in the Altercibe? Don't you care about anybody?' Dina stood there, hands on hips, challenging them.

There were a few awkward scratches. She had hit a sensitive spot.

'Look little girl, we have our own problems.' An old and whitening Em spoke in a gravelly voice. 'We don't like what we've heard about Doctor Dot, but there's nothing we can do. We have made a new life for ourselves here and we're not going back. You're welcome to stay here as long as you like, but we are not setting out on any heroic quests.' With that he shuffled out. Other Ems followed him.

'Well!' Dina said indignantly.

'You tried at least,' Sasha said. 'But what are we to do now?'

'I don't know. Is there somewhere we can get something to drink?' Dina asked, her mouth parched from either the dessert, the speaking or the immediate rejection.

'Of course.'

Sasha and a very deflated Dina followed Em and a hundred other Ems out into a yellow corridor. The overgrown, grey, silky mice brushed past them as if they weren't there.

They found the bar in the silver tunnel. It was more like a hall than a bar. It was the biggest room Dina had ever seen; larger even than the Sports Hall at school – albeit only half the height. What's more, it was packed. Dina and Sasha found themselves staring in astonishment at the creatures drinking there which included all the Ems who had been at the meeting, a few snakes and, even more astonishing, several small human-like creatures. There was one strange man wearing a red pointed hat and a red cloak, and several very non-human-like creatures, including some with very reddish dragon-like features and who were having great trouble, it seemed, holding their bottles of drink.

The bar itself took up the whole of one wall. Behind the bar were small men with large moustaches, dressed in typical waiter's outfits of black trousers, black waistcoats and white shirts. The bar was propped up by hundreds of Ems. Some of them sat on stools which was a fairly comical sight. Others were content to remain on the floor picking up what looked

like peanuts that were knocked off the bar. Most of them were clutching bottles which they would put to their mouths, tilt back, and suck.

'They're drunk!' exclaimed Sasha in disgust.

'Of course,' replied Em.

'We don't have any money,' said Dina, wondering why Sasha was so upset by the drinking. She thought it was funny. The only time her stepmother was not horrible to her was when she'd had a few glasses of wine. 'What's the currency?' Whatever it was, she knew they wouldn't have any.

'Roms.'

'I have some Russian rubles,' said Sasha still frowning at the creatures in the silver room. 'Are they any good?'

'Rubles? I doubt it but we'll try. If not, I'm sure Mario will look after you.'

They climbed over a few snails and made it to the bar.

'Do you take rubles?' Sasha asked one of the waiters hopefully.

The waiter who was shorter than Sasha shook his head. Another little man sitting at the bar turned to look at them. He too had a dark moustache and soft brown eyes. He was dressed in dark blue overalls as if he'd just finished work. Em introduced him as Mario, a friend.

'Rubles!' he exclaimed. 'Ho! Ho!' He laughed hysterically.

'What's so funny?' Sasha asked indignantly. No one found rubles particularly funny in his country. He pulled out a few notes and started examining them.

The man stopped laughing when he saw them. 'Can I have a look?'

Sasha gave him a twenty ruble note and the man stared at it and then stared at Sasha and then again at the note. His brown eyes lit up in excitement.

'You're from the Other World!' he announced as if having discovered the concept of gravity. Then he looked around nervously as if he didn't want anyone to hear. But no one else, whether they'd heard or not, seemed to be interested.

'Why don't you want anyone else to know?' Dina asked.

He spoke quietly. 'You don't know who to trust anymore - especially, the Policoms, or wizards, and there's one over there. Not with what's going on with Doctor Dot at the moment. You have to be very careful.' He meant the little man with a red pointed hat and cloak sitting at a table in the corner.

Dina and Sasha looked at one another. Dina thought that the fact that Mario had mentioned Doctor Dot meant that he knew what was going on. Perhaps he would help them.

'Well, well, well,' Mario was still whispering. 'I can't believe it.' He swizzled round on his stool and stared at them.

'What can't you believe?' asked Sasha.

'I always thought that the other world was a story, a fiction, a fairy tale, make-believe. I never believed that one day I would meet real living humans. But, forgive me, I am being rude, as you know my name is Mario. Em I know, of course! And you are?'

Dina and Sasha introduced themselves, smiling at Mario's "of course". Em put his nose in the air and spotted another Em he knew and scuttled off to join him (or her), promising to be back soon.

'Honoured to meet you,' Mario said grinning, his moustache almost moving on its own. 'Will you have a drink with me?'

They all agreed.

Mario pulled some Roms out of a pocket with a spanner poking out. Dina and Sasha stared in astonishment at the object. Mario saw them looking. He patted his pocket and lowered his voice.

'I work as a private detective, but dressed up like this, most Voyds assume I'm a plumber. It makes things easier. Two Vibejuices and two Yads please, Sam,' Mario asked the barman.

Dina raised her eyebrows in surprise, but didn't say anything. A private detective could come in useful.

Sam, the barman, placed four bottles on the table. Mario gave them out. As he did, Dina noticed that his hands were shaking. Sasha had a green bottle, Dina, a red one. They drank thirstily, hoping they wouldn't turn into anything strange. They didn't, but the drinks didn't really taste of anything.

‘What’s “Yad”?’ Dina asked looking at all the brown bottles.

‘In Russian, “yad” means poison,’ Sasha said quickly.

Mario laughed. ‘Then I think you’ve got that from us. It certainly is poison.’

Dina could see Sasha wasn’t sure about this but he didn’t say anything.

‘Excuse me a minute,’ Mario took a bottle of Yad over to Em.

‘Do you really think he’s a private detective?’ Dina whispered.

Sasha shrugged. ‘Maybe we can ask Em?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Dina replied, looking over at Em who was still on his stool, but who already had two paws around the bottle Mario gave to him and was holding it upside down over his mouth.

‘If he is, maybe he can help us get back,’ Sasha said. ‘But I don’t know. They are all drunk. In Russia they do this and afterwards, all they want to do is fall asleep.’ He looked gloomy again.

Get back! Dina thought sadly. After the hostile reception she had received from the Ems, going back was perhaps not quite so terrifying, but now that she was here, she was determined to at least try to rescue Tom.

Mario returned with a thousand more questions. He wanted to know what or who had brought them to the Altercibe and what they were doing with Em in the Underground. When they could get a word in, Dina quickly explained about Doctor Dot and the Game, how Em had rescued them from Seberus and how they had got to Altal. She whispered to him what they had hoped the Ems would do for them. Now they had refused they were unsure of what to do next.

‘I thought as much,’ Mario said, with traces of Yad around his moustache. He looked worried and shook his head. ‘I’m not surprised the Ems won’t help. They have enough problems - as you can see.’

There was a timely crash as another Em fell victim to Yad and fell off his or her stool. The Ems were getting drunker and louder by the minute.

Dina suppressed a great urge to laugh loudly at him. Even Sasha looked faintly amused. The Em wasn’t bothered. He just sat where he’d fallen and

continued drinking his drink and talking to the floor where there were plenty of other Ems.

'Why are they like that?' Dina asked.

'They're redundant, no longer necessary. They used to lead the way through the Altercibe, but now they're not needed. They have been replaced by other technology. So there's nothing for them to do except drink - which they've become very good at.'

'What are you doing here?' Sasha asked suspiciously.

Mario looked shifty. 'I like it here. Not that many Voyds, other than the Ems of course, know about the Underground. It's a good place for my work - to find out things, you know.' He put a finger against his nose.

'We have been advised to find Syber and ask her advice. Do you know where we might find her?'

'Syber?' Mario sounded surprised and then he drank his drink thoughtfully. 'Who told you about Syber? Not Em surely?'

Dina told him about their encounter with the snake and how he had saved them from the white wolves.

'If Cybil told you, then you should be able to gain access to Syber. But I'm not sure. Things are much more serious in the Altercibe than I thought.'

'Do you know Cybil?' Sasha asked.

'Yes, he's often in here. He was one of the first to know about Doctor Dot. Cybil knows most things.'

'Will you come with us?' Sasha asked. 'I mean, as you are a private detective, perhaps we could hire you if you'll accept rubles?'

Dina, pleased that Sasha had asked, looked at Mario pleadingly.

He looked chuffed at being asked, but pretended not to be. 'Oh, I'm rather busy at the moment...'

'But you must know your way around Altal. Please!'

'Well, I'll have to think about it.' Mario ordered some more drinks and apparently thought about it as he drank some more Yad.

Sasha handed him a roll of rubles, 'For the drinks if nothing else,' he said.

'Okay, let's go!' Mario said putting the rubles in his overalls and the empty bottle down on the table.

Dina and Sasha cheered quietly and ran over to Em to tell him where they were going. They had difficulty identifying him at first but they found him at the bar in deep conversation with other Ems. Drunk as they were, they fell silent as the three humans approached. Em listened to their plans and nodded solemnly.

'I wish you luck,' he said licking his whiskers which were coated in Yad – like most things in the silver bar.

'What will you do now?' Dina asked. 'Will you go back to the Labyrinth?'

Em twitched his nose indignantly. 'Of course not,' he said. 'There's probably nothing left of it anyway.'

Dina felt guilty. It was their fault that the Labyrinth had been bombed. They thanked Em for all he had done and left with a slightly wobbly Mario. The yellow tunnel came first, then an orange, then red, then green, then blue, then purple, then brown. Just as it was getting dark they heard a strange noise: a crackling, buzzing, high pitched sound which was filling the whole tunnel. A sound which, to Dina, was frighteningly familiar.

Mario stopped and turned very pale. 'I don't believe it,' he said again and again. Sasha and Dina kept asking him what was wrong.

'Dig!' he said at last, 'Dig for your lives!'

Chapter Eleven

The Giant Formicas

They all turned to the nearest wall and began to dig with their hands. It seemed an impossible task but they were surprised at how easily the walls of the tunnel crumbled. It wasn't like earth or plasticine as Dina had first thought, more like compressed sand. They soon carved out spaces for themselves.

'Cover yourselves with the brown sand,' Mario muttered.

Sasha and Dina did as he said. Just in time as the high-pitched sound was getting nearer and louder. Sasha got the brown sand in his eyes and couldn't see the hordes of what looked like giant ants coming down the tunnel but Dina and Mario could see them and Dina, at least, wished she couldn't. They were the same as the ones that had chased her to the river and bit her legs in the game. Except they were much more frightening in real life.

Their antennae came first, almost as long as Dina's arms, feeling their way along the tunnel. These were followed by large bulbous heads, on top of which perched two large black eyes the shape of oval saucers. The creatures marched forward on their six spindly legs which were broken into various higgledy-piggledy sections. They were as big as the Ems themselves. They were not hurrying, but they advanced purposefully, as if on a mission.

One of them turned and looked at the three figures covered in sand and, for one horrible minute, Dina thought that this was the end. She was sure that it could see her. But it passed. Hundreds more followed. The high-pitched sound increased to almost unbearable levels. Dina wished she knew what they were saying as they seemed to be communicating with one another. The next couple of minutes were the longest Dina could remember. Then, when several hundred had passed by, the giant ants

suddenly fell silent and all that could be heard was the soft scraping of the many feet on the sand. Yet more kept coming.

At last, they were gone. 'Quick,' said Mario emerging from the wall like a moving sculpture. 'We have to get out of here before they come back.'

Dina and Sasha stepped out of the tunnel wall. Sasha tried to rub the sand from out of his eyes, practically crying with the pain.

'Wh-wh-at were they?' he stammered.

'Formicas,' Mario explained, brushing the dust off his moustache. 'Doctor Dot must have released them from a game to come and find you. Somehow, they've found out about the Underground. And, found out that you were here. I'm worried about the Ems but for now we have our own worries. Follow me!'

Dina and Sasha brushed off the sand as best they could although Dina had long given up about the state of her red dress and black tights which were both now brown. Sasha seemed oblivious to the way he looked. They took hold of each other's hands and followed a slightly wobbly Mario. Dina wanted to tell Sasha what she had seen, but she didn't want to frighten him any more.

The tunnel was strewn with dead snails - and, even a small dead snake. They stepped over the dead creatures, Mario all the while shaking his head muttering 'impossible'. He led them through the now black tunnel.

'We must be nearly there,' hissed Sasha who was nearest Mario.

They were. They began a steep ascent to what should have been a closed trap door, except it had been left ajar.

'The Formicas,' Mario said, his moustache quivering in disgust. 'The Formicas have done this.'

'Did they kill all the snails as well?' Sasha asked.

'It looks like it. We'd better take a Bubble,' Mario told them. 'It might be dangerous otherwise. But first we have to find one. At least it's dark.'

They climbed out of the underground tunnel, but could hardly tell the difference. Mario was right. It was night time. The buildings loomed out of the ground like black monstrous shadows. In comparison, the sky between

the buildings was like blue velvet and pasted onto the dark blue backdrop were hundreds of stars; some were twinkling, most were shooting. To those watching it from the ground, it looked like a busy place as hundreds of stars travelled across the sky, leaving behind them a trail of light.

'Clickstreams from Streamers,' Mario explained seeing Dina and Sasha stare at the sky. 'Voyds travelling across the Altercibe.'

'Wow!' Sasha said, clearly impressed.

'Why?' Dina asked.

Mario shrugged. 'Work, travel... who knows? There's an awful lot of them tonight though.'

'How big is the Altercibe?' Sasha asked, still mesmerized by the shooting stars.

'Infinite I suppose.'

'Have you ever been anywhere?' Dina asked.

'No. They say that this is the best place to live in the Altercibe. Anyway, follow me, we have to find a Bubble.'

'How come there are hardly any lights in the buildings?' Dina asked.

'I don't know,' Mario replied. He sounded worried.

'You mean there usually are?' Sasha asked.

'Usually, yes, at least some, but this is a quiet part of the city.'

'Maybe there's a blackout? We often have them in Russia..'

'Maybe. We must be quiet now.'

Keeping to the edge of the buildings, they practically tip-toed through Altal. They passed by a few human-like Voyds who were also hurrying, but there were no Bubbles. Then they turned a corner and saw hundreds of Bubbles parked in the open avenues. Here, the buildings were brightly lit and all kinds of Voyds were coming and going. There were restaurants, bars and cafes. It looked like any other city on a Saturday night – well, almost, Dina thought. Mario let out a sigh of relief.

'Come on, get in the nearest one.'

Mario pressed a button on the outside, but it announced that it was reserved. They tried another and another but they were all reserved.

'Who's reserved you?' Mario asked.

'That is confidential,' the computerised voice replied.

Sasha and Dina were amazed that the glass, oblong cars could understand and speak.

'Where are these Voyds who have reserved you?' Dina asked one car. 'Maybe they'll let us borrow you: it is important that we have a Bubble as we have to find Syber.'

Reasoning with a Bubble seemed to work. It appeared to think for a while and then said, 'On the fourth floor of Search 2 you will find many Policoms in a meeting. Ask one.'

'Thank you!' said Dina.

Mario looked even more worried and went to stand in a darkened doorway. The others followed.

'We can't barge in on a meeting of wizards,' he said.

'Why not?' Dina asked.

'Policoms are responsible for the running of the Altercibe. They're wizards who act as politicians. And some of them may be in league with Doctor Dot. We don't want them to know we're here. Besides, you see those Voyds in white?' Mario said quietly.

They looked in surprise at the shining creatures dressed in white uniforms walking outside the building of Search 2. Most were like the small human Voyds, one looked like a bipedal miniature dinosaur.

'They're Altercops. And they would be under orders to take you in for questioning.'

'How do you know?' Sasha asked.

'I'm a private detective remember.'

'Come on then,' Dina said. 'Let's find another one.' The last thing she wanted was to be arrested.

They were about to walk away when a couple of giant Voyds came out of the rotating doors of Search 2 and crossed the road towards them.

'Get back,' Mario whispered.

They huddled in the doorway. This time they all kept their eyes open. Sasha's and Dina's popped out in amazement at the appearance of the Voyds: they looked like tall, pale men and they were dressed in black cloaks and black trilby like hats. Just like the ones Dina had seen in the playground at school.

'Do you think he'll accept the offer?' one of them asked in a quiet American accent.

'Shush! Not here. The walls have ears these days.'

The two men got into a Bubble which shot up vertically before heading down the street.

'Who were they?' Sasha hissed as they started to walk quickly down the street. 'I've seen one of them, the one like a marble statue, in St. Petersburg just the other day. They were talking to some kids outside a museum.'

'They were in our town as well talking to Hella, the one who gave me the disk.'

Mario looked surprised. 'I've never seen them before. As far as I know they're not Policoms. They must be from your world.'

Dina and Sasha looked at each other. They were confused. What did it mean? And what offer were they talking about?

'We were told to ask Syber for help. We must go to Syber,' Dina said.

Agreed, they crept along the edge of the buildings, past the reserved Bubbles, and turned the corner. There they saw a battered old Bubble.

'Come on. Let's take this one,' Dina said excitedly.

Dina pressed the button. Its doors opened reluctantly. 'Identify yourselves,' it said as they all stepped in. Once inside, they could see perfectly well out of the dark glass.

There was a small camera at the front of the bubble. Mario stood in front of it and said a password.

'Verified. But I cannot find identities for the other two Voyds. Without verification I can not transport you.'

They all looked at each other. Dina stepped forward and stood in front of the camera. 'Please, you must help us. We are going to see Syber.'

'Without verification, I cannot transport you,' it reiterated, before adding emotionally, 'It's too dangerous. Look at the damage that has already been inflicted on me! There are all sorts of terrible things going on in the Altercibe. I am not prepared to take risks anymore without verification of identity.'

'We quite understand,' Mario said, stepping before the camera again. 'But we are here to help. We want to stop all the bad things that are happening in the Altercibe. That is why we need to see Syber.'

The Bubble didn't speak for a few seconds and then suddenly its doors shut. They all looked at each other triumphantly.

'If I'm attacked, my doors are opening,' it grumbled and then in a more monotone voice it told them to fasten seat belts and prepare for take-off. There were four seats as well as various vertical positionings.

'It's better to stand,' Mario told them.

They did as he advised and stood against the side of the Bubble while Mario activated the security codes. Cushioned metal arms sprang out and locked themselves around their middles.

'Easier to get out in emergencies,' Mario explained.

'Ready to take off,' the Bubble announced.

Dina and Sasha looked at each other. Sasha was very pale again. What was the matter with him? He really didn't like adventures. The Bubble took off vertically and jumped up to the equivalent of the first floor on the avenue. Dina and Sasha let out various squeals as the Bubble hovered in mid air before heading down the street.

'How does it know where to go?' Sasha gulped, clinging on to the arms.

'Bubbles know all locations in the city,' Mario said, watching intently out the window. 'Besides, everyone knows where Syber is, the problem is getting in to see her.'

The Bubble flew through the dark streets. Everyone peered intensely out of the glass but beyond the shapes of the buildings, they were going too

fast to make anything out. They stopped mid-air and the Bubble dropped to the ground.

‘That’ll be five Roms.’

Mario fed a note into a computer and the Bubble opened its doors and released the metal arms.

‘Will you wait for us?’ Dina asked.

‘Perhaps,’ the Bubble muttered and refused to say anything else.

They found themselves out on the streets again. It didn’t look much different to where they’d come from except there in front of them stood a very tall building. Dina thought it was one of the highest they’d seen but she wasn’t sure.

‘That there is Sybersity,’ Mario said pointing to a building next to the very tall building. ‘It’s one of the largest shopping malls in the Altercibe. And this is Syber, one of the biggest search engines.’

‘A snake lives in a search engine?’ Sasha said. ‘It looks more like a shopping arcade.’

‘Who said anything about a snake?’ Mario asked.

They all looked at him in surprise. Dina as well had assumed Syber was a snake.

‘What is she then?’ Dina asked.

‘Syber is Syber. I hope we can get in to see her. The building is probably closed up by now and we usually need passes to visit at night.’

They headed for the main doors, but Mario was right, it was locked.

‘There has to be another entrance for the Agents, the people who work here... only I don’t know where,’ Mario admitted.

They weren’t sure what he meant by this but they kept on examining the front wall of the building for a door. Dina sighed. It didn’t look like she would ever get in to see Syber (whoever she was), or out of the Altercibe. As for rescuing Tom... He was miles away in the mountains. But I must try, she told herself. Even if Sasha won’t go with me I can not abandon Tom – and all the others. Who knows Tessa might be amongst them. It’s all that Hella’s fault, Dina thought for the thousandth time. Although it was still a

puzzle as to how Tom had got hold of the game in the first place. And, at this rate, she would never find out.

Then, as if by magic, a small door appeared in the wall before Dina's very eyes.

'I think it's here,' she yelled.

'Open it Dina,' Mario told her. 'Quick, I hear something.'

There was a drone in the night sky which was getting louder. Dina pushed the door and it opened. They all piled in quickly. Mario was last. Just before he closed the door he turned and looked up above the street.

'I don't believe it!' he hissed and slammed the door.

Dina and Sasha would have asked what it was Mario didn't believe, but they were more concerned about the hundreds of transparent human shapes wandering about the biggest enclosed building Dina had ever seen. The roof disappeared into infinity and, within the space, there seemed to be a thousand other spaces. There were library spaces full of books, there were images of the universe, of their earth, of other worlds, of parks and seas and cities. Each one moving both apart and together.

'It is unbelievable,' Sasha cried, before talking to himself in Russian.

'Can I help you?' a man in a uniform sitting at a desk behind the door asked them.

'We're here to see Syber,' Dina muttered still staring into infinity.

'Yes, she's expecting you. Go over to the lift. She will meet you there.'

'Thank you.'

They slowly danced to where the man pointed, all the time spinning around in amazement. Even Mario was staring up in wonder.

'Look down there!' Sasha called in English.

As they moved nearer the lift, the world beneath them was also revealed. An invisible floor separated them from the other worlds.

'It is unbelievable,' Sasha whispered again, treading tentatively on the floor, as if afraid that he would suddenly fall through. But the floor, at least, was solid. 'It's a search engine isn't it?' he said excitedly. 'We are inside a search engine!'

'It is supposed to be the greatest search engine in Altal,' Mario said proudly, looking pleased that it had produced such an effect on the visitors.

'But who are they? Can they hear us?' Dina asked amazed that Sasha was so excited. She wasn't really sure she understood what a search engine was.

'Oh don't worry, they can't hear you. You have to enter that particular space for them to see you. They're Agents. They work here. Information is needed all the time, so they do shift work. It's a well paid job.'

'But what do they do?' Dina asked confused unable to take her eyes away from the ghostly figures that were running through and about the transparent worlds.

It was Sasha who answered. 'They do everything don't they? They organise and deal in Information?

Mario looked surprised that he knew and twiddled the side of his moustache, nodding thoughtfully. 'Yes, from what I understand, they sell Information across the Universe. I suppose they're really the backbone of the Altercibe.'

They reached the lift, mouths open. Its doors opened.

'Come in,' a deep female voice called out impatiently. 'Took your time in getting here didn't you!'