

Chapter 1

ELEPHANTS RULE

Annabelle yelled upstairs for Noah to hurry down, she made his favorite pancakes for his birthday, and the bus would be arriving soon. Thank goodness he was going on a field trip to Safari Land Zoo with his classmates, which she knew he would enjoy rather than spending the day with his sister, and grandparents—for that small miracle, she was grateful. If only his father were showing up this evening, then Noah's thirteenth birthday would be a total success. Early this morning, Ben had called to say he wouldn't be able to come over for the celebration, but he intended to make it up to Noah just as soon as he returned from his business trip. Same excuse just like the last two birthday's he had missed.

Annabelle knew her son would be upset, but she was hoping that being surrounded by animals (even if they were all caged up), would elevate his spirits.

Noah rushed downstairs with his dog, Cicero, leading the way. His sister, Gigi, beamed a wide smile when she saw that he was wearing the tee-shirt she had bought him for his birthday; it had an image of a great, white elephant with long, golden tusks, and at the top were the words 'Elephants Rule'.

When Noah sat down at the table, Annabelle placed a dish of shortcakes smothered in syrup in front of him. She could see that his hair was covering his eyes, and casually combed it back with her hand making a comment about getting it cut, then grimaced at the sight of the eye-patch he had to wear. "It makes you look like a fierce pirate, son," she said, kissing his forehead.

Last evening when he had come home with his eye swollen and red, she thought she'd have a heart attack. She had to rush him to the emergency clinic. After waiting for an excruciatingly, slow hour she was relieved to learn that it wasn't a serious injury, all he needed to do was wear an eye-patch for a few weeks until the swelling went down. This was the third time in a month her son had hurt himself playing outside. She knew he wasn't very athletic, even though he did swim well. Unlike his sister, who practically ran and jumped in her sleep, her son preferred quiet walks with Cicero or swimming whenever possible. But at least she was pleased he was making an effort to participate with other boys in sports activities.

Noah never told his mother the truth about how he had hurt his eye. He knew she worried about him too much as it was, and if she had found out what really happened she'd never let him go out on his own anymore, even with Cicero.

"Mom, if I'm going on the Unity for Girls camping trip this summer, I need to submit the fifteen-hundred dollars by the end of the week," said Gigi, with a mouth full of food.

"You need to talk to your father about that, and please Gee, don't talk with your mouth full." Just then, Annabelle didn't know whether to mention that their father was not coming over this evening.

While they continued eating breakfast, Petey the Parrot began screeching, "It's Noey's birthday, it's Noey's birthday."

Looking over at the corner of the family room where Petey was sitting on top of his cage, Noah saw a big box next it. His mom said the package was for him. Even though he didn't say a word, she could see the disappointment on his face, sensing that he must have figured out his father wasn't coming over tonight. He turned his attention back to his breakfast picking at the little square bits of pancakes circling them around in the syrup.

"Noah, darling," said Annabelle, "Nana and Grandpa are coming over this evening, we'll have cake and ice-cream, okey-dokey."

Noah nodded.

A few minutes later, they heard a loud honking sound coming from outside. Gigi jumped up and ran over to the kitchen window. “The bus is here,” she yelled, craning her neck to look through the window facing out onto the street.

The small charter-bus arrived right on time—nine o’clock. Noah grabbed his hat and his iPod. Annabelle picked up his backpack and handed it to him.

“What do you have in this thing—it’s heavy? You’re not planning to go on a real safari, are ya?” she said, half-jokingly.

“Nothing much,” said Noah, looking at the floor, “just a mini-flashlight, animal cards, animal book, a few snack bars, a whistle, notepad and pen, and my camera.”

“Seriously?” his mom gave him a quizzical look. “Very well, you never know what might happen,” she stooped down. “Come on then, give your mom a kiss.” Noah managed a light peck on her cheek.

“Don’t forget to keep your hat on at all times today. You don’t want to get sunburned.” Annabelle straightened his hat on his head the way she thought it should look. “Did you remember to put plenty of sunscreen on your face and arms?”

“Yes, Mom,” he said softly, as he walked over to Petey. The colorful parrot screeched out, “It’s Noey’s birthday, it’s Noey’s birthday.” He touched Petey’s beak with his finger, and then stooped down to say goodbye to Cicero. He stroked the dog’s head staring into his eyes, and quickly remembered his mother didn’t like him doing that, so he gave Cicero a hug.

Annabelle smiled. She never ceased to be amazed at the connection he seemed to have with animals; if only he were like that with people.

Gigi yelled out “Happy Birthday” as she and her mom stood at the doorway watching Noah board the bus. He turned around to wave good-bye.

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Chapter 2 SAMPSON

Three years ago, the Goodartes moved from Chicago to Los Angeles so Noah, the younger of the two children, could attend Brighton House Academy. The school had an excellent curriculum and an expert staff that could deal with special needs children.

After taking Noah to see several experts, and listening to several diagnoses, his parents were shocked to learn that their son was afflicted with what was medically termed as, Avoidant Personality Disorder. His parents were relieved that it wasn't a terminal disease, but still, just the idea that their son was afflicted with something as bizarre as APD, didn't make them feel any better. But at least they knew why he behaved rather strangely, and it would explain why he preferred being around animals rather than kids his own age. Well, it was something that they would all have to live with, especially Noah.

On a positive note, at least he seemed happier at his new school for a few good reasons: he wasn’t harassed or bullied like he had been at the previous school; and the other students were considered to be different, just like him; plus, he got along famously with Dr. Tobias, the head counselor at the Academy. He was also taught many interesting subjects, in which he had become quite good at like, Hand-signing, Astronomy and Art.

At the end of the school year, the Administrators at Brighton House had arranged for the eighth grade class (all ten of them) to go on an outing to the popular Safari Land Zoo in San Diego, which just happened to fall on Noah's thirteenth birthday. Supervising the students were two teachers, plus Dr. Tobias. It was the doctor’s priority in life to help cultivate the minds of students who were considered impaired, and had special needs. She firmly believed

that extracurricular activities (like field trips) were a good, healthy way for those children to intermingle with the outside world. The Safari Land outing was all that the children had talked about for weeks until the big day finally arrived.

As the mini-bus turned into the entrance of the zoo, crowds of spectators, young and old, were waiting in line to purchase tickets. It was especially busy today because of the new birth of a baby African elephant, called Hera, and events such as these always piqued public interest, which called for the attention of the local media, and local politicians to make an appearance.

Noah's group stood to one side of the entrance trying to decide which path they should follow as there were several leading to specific attractions within the zoo. Dr. Tobias suggested for them to begin with the elephants that were kept in a large area at the far end of the facility. The quickest way to arrive there was by taking the chairlifts.

Noah was the first in line standing behind three young girls who were with a tall man. One of the girls turned around and smiled at him, which caught him by surprise. No other girls, except for his sister, had ever taken notice of him, let alone smiled a friendly smile. For the first time in his young life, he actually enjoyed looking at a girl, and this particular girl was the prettiest one he had ever seen. She had a dimple in her right cheek, brown eyes, and light-brown, curly hair worn in a ponytail.

Again, the girl looked back at Noah, only this time he noticed she was staring at his eye-patch, then her gaze shifted to the image on his tee-shirt. She smiled. She then noticed the name-tag he had pinned to his tee-shirt that read in big, bold lettering, Brighton House Academy with his name underneath. She glanced at the other students who wore the same tags, and then looked back at him. His face reddened. He immediately lowered his head to avoid further eye contact. He put on his earphones and turned up the volume of his iPod.

When it was Noah's turn to board the lift, he had trouble removing his backpack, which was extremely heavy. Dr. Tobias helped out, as she ushered him, Janice, and Charlie into the chairlift. As soon as their chair took off, Noah felt immediate exhilaration at being raised so high up in the air. However, he couldn't help but focus his attention on the girl up ahead. He watched her ponytail swinging from side-to-side, as she looked down at all the features they passed over.

About ten minutes into the ride the chairlift began to jerk a few times, and then came to a halt leaving them suspended sixty feet in the air. Dr. Tobias assured them that everything was okay saying, "All is well".

Noah didn't feel the least bit frightened. Looking ahead he noticed the girl whispering to her friends and then the three of them looked back at him, smiling and giggling at the same time. He looked down pretending to be interested in watching all the spectators walking and talking amongst one another, families carting around their toddlers in strollers, husbands and wives accompanying their children, and couples casually strolling from one exhibit to the other. Janice broke the silence by asking Dr. Tobias to take a picture of her with Noah and Charlie. She obliged the request.

After a few minutes of dangling, the chairlift started to move forward again, and soon they reached the end of the ride. When the students were all accounted for they set off toward the elephant compound, which was a vast field of grassy mounds, large ponds and a few scattering of trees surrounded by a sensitized fence and moats. A matriarch, several mature cows, and three adolescent calves were separated from two bull elephants that were kept in another

fenced-in area. At least a dozen African elephants stood around looking at the crowd who was looking back at them.

Most of the spectators had already gathered at the holding pen where the baby elephant slept. Apparently, baby Hera would only come out for short periods at a time remaining mostly inside the large, barn-like structure with her mother. Dr. Tobias and the two teachers decided there were too many people crowding around the fence waiting for the baby's appearance, and thought it would be best to observe the other elephants instead.

The students hurried over to where the two large males were standing. Even though Noah was no stranger at seeing elephants in the zoo, he always felt such awe at being in their presence. When he becomes old enough to travel on his own he was going to use the money he had saved, and head to Africa to see the elephants in their natural habitat—if, of course, they were still in existence. The idea of these great tuskers teetering on the brink of extinction was something that he could not accept. Whenever he read reports from various elephant conservation groups about the slaughtering of elephants for their ivory, he'd get angry, and would imagine the worst possible punishment against the humans responsible for these despicable crimes.

Noah snapped back to his senses when he noticed that too many people were crowding around him. He quickly moved to another spot where it was less congested. He turned on his iPod and then gazed out at the most majestic mammal on earth. He wasn't surprised that this particular group of elephants looked extremely dispirited. He knew most of the ones kept at zoos were either rescued from maltreatment or were born in zoos like baby Hera. Most of them would never experience the freedom of their ancestral home and that was profoundly upsetting for him, something had to be done to rectify this problem.

For several minutes, the children kept calling out to the elephants trying to entice them to come closer. Finally, the larger of the two bull elephants began lumbering towards them and stopped in front of where Noah was standing.

Thrilled that their enticements worked, the other boys and girls began snapping pictures while Noah remained fixated on the animal in front of him. The elephant lifted its trunk high in the air and began trumpeting out a loud noise causing *oohs* and *aahs* from the excited crowd. Something strange started to occur between the elephant and Noah. It seemed as though the two of them were locked in a gaze with each other. Then, a peculiar sound came through his earphones, but he ignored it; he was too engrossed with the elephant. Seconds later he heard the sound again, only this time it was a deep, heavy voice that spoke, "Seek the Avaraj of Shivadam."

Noah was surprised at what he had just heard, but thought he might have imagined it. He slipped the earphones down around his neck looking right, and then left wondering if anyone else might have heard that strange voice. But the others seemed too preoccupied with encouraging the elephant for more elephant-like gestures.

The elephant raised and pointed its trunk at Noah, and again he heard a deep voice say, "Seek Jahru, the Avaraj of Shivadam."

Now he was certain that the voice was coming from the elephant. Glancing around to make sure no one was watching, he then squinted his eyes and focused all his attention on the elephant, and using the inner-hearing, he transmitted a thought, "Are you talking to me?"

"Yes," replied the deep, baritone voice.

"Jumpin' jackasses," Noah kept squinting his eyes and then quickly transmitted another thought, "who is Jahru?"

"The great Avaraj of Shivadam," said the voice.

"Holy Ravioli!" Noah pointed to the image on his tee-shirt and then squinted his eyes relaying another thought, "Are you referring to this elephant?"

“The Avaraj of Shivadam, the ancient kingdom of the Great Ones,” said the voice, as the elephant raised its trunk and trumpeted out a loud lament.

Noah looked around checking to see if anyone might have become aware of this unusual exchange. By this time the younger bull elephant had sidled up next to the larger one. The other students were ecstatic snapping pictures and guffawing at the two large animals. Even the little girl from the chairlift looked curiously over at Noah, and then at the two elephants. Dr. Tobias remained standing in the background keeping an eye on this strange interplay.

“What is your name?” Noah asked, still squinting every time he transmitted a thought.

A deep, rumbling sound came from the elephant, “Sampson is what they call me.”

“Sampson! That’s a great name. My name is Noah Goodarte. Why do you keep saying to seek Jahru?”

“Go to Shivadam—seek Jahru—Deiawala is near,” Sampson let out another deep, rumbling sound and then pointed his trunk at Noah.

Noah transmitted another question, “What do you mean by day-ah-wala?”

“End is near—Great Ones will vanish—All will vanish!”

“What do you mean the end is near?” Noah’s heart began beating fast, and his mouth became dry.

“End is near for Great Ones—Deiawala to come—Sampson must fade away—Go to Shivadam—seek Jahru.”

“Do you mean ME?” Noah was shocked by what he had just heard. “Am I supposed to seek Jahru?”

“Noah,” said the elephant in a commanding voice, “seek Jahru—stop Deiawala—go to Shivadam!”

Sampson then turned around and ambled towards the female side of the enclave with the younger one following close behind him.

“Wait, Sampson—don’t go—I don’t know what you mean!”

But the elephant no longer responded. All Noah could do was watch with great trepidation as Sampson marched toward the rest of the herd. Soon all the other elephants gathered as closely as they could, and with raised trunks began trumpeting a loud resounding lament that echoed throughout the zoo. Then they began nodding their heads in an agitated manner, and swaying their bodies from side-to-side; even the young calves seemed to be alarmed.

In turn, the spectators appeared concerned by the actions of the elephants, and started whispering amongst one another. Blood began pulsating in Noah’s ears. He needed help. When he turned around to look for Dr. Tobias the ground began to shake underneath his feet practically knocking him over.

The elephants continued trumpeting loudly and still swaying their bodies. By this time, the other animals in the zoo joined in with shrieking cries and deafening roars. Then someone from the crowd yelled out “earthquake” and all hell broke loose. People began running in every direction, frantically searching for safety.

Seconds afterward, a powerful wind swept through the zoo causing more havoc. Noah became caught up amidst the panicky crowd, and was carried along as if by a powerful wave being pushed and shoved about. He lost his balance and fell backwards hitting his head against the pavement.

Dr. Tobias quickly gathered the rest of the children making them hold hands while the two teachers led them to a safer place. She went out into the chaotic stampede looking for Noah, but couldn’t see him amongst all the screaming people running about. She came to the spot where he was last seen and saw his name-tag lying on the ground.

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Chapter 3 NORTH TO SHIVADAM

When Noah opened his one good eye, he noticed that he was lying on a grassy knoll. Feeling dazed and confused, he wondered by what circumstance had he arrived at this unfamiliar spot. He tried standing up, but felt woozy then quickly sat down. He felt a huge bump on the back of his head. He took off his backpack and began emptying all the contents onto the ground looking for clues that might jog his memory, but none of those things seemed to help. Reaching inside his pants-pocket, he pulled out a ticket stub from Safari Land Zoo dated June 26, 2009.

“My birthday . . . the school trip . . . the elephants!” Noah started to recall some of the events that had taken place that day. “The elephant, I was talking to Sampson and then the 'big one' hit. So where is everyone? Where’s Dr. Tobias?” At that moment, a rush of adrenaline shot through his body causing him to stand up in a hurry. He began to take stock of the surrounding area, and then he heard a strange sound from above. As he glanced up something gooey plopped down onto the top of his hat.

“Screech, what’s up Noey?” said a familiar voice.

Noah’s mouth gaped wide as the parrot landed on his shoulder. Petey was a strikingly handsome red-lored parrot with green plumage and a red crested-head with two yellow circles around his eyes. He was eighteen years old and had been with the Goodarte family for fifteen of those eighteen years. He could chat up a good conversation with anybody using his vast vocabulary of words and phrases he had learned. He could even sing songs that he had picked up from listening to the radio, and to Annabelle’s CD collection. One of his favorites was Hey Jude by the Beatles.

“Leapin’ lizards, how did you find me, Petey?” Noah bent down to clean the bird poop off his hat by wiping it on the grass.

“You asked where everyone is so here I is,” screeched the parrot, rapidly turning his head from side-to-side.

“That is AM not IS, Petey. Do you know where we are?”

“Nope!” The parrot flew off and then landed on top of a signpost.

Noah made his way down from the mound toward Petey. The signpost was faded and old and the writing on it was barely legible. He thought he saw the words Borderlands and underneath that was north to Shivadam with a symbol of an arrow pointing towards a dirt road that wound over hills as far as the eye could see.

“Shivadam,” said Noah curiously, “that name rings a bell, Petey. But I can’t remember everything that happened after the big one hit. I can’t even remember how I got this bump on the back of my head. I keep thinking that maybe I’m dreaming all of this up. But it feels like this is really happening. Where are all the others? Where’s Dr. Tobias?”

“Screech, go to Shivadam, Noey, go to Shivadam.”

“Maybe you’re right, Petey, only I don’t know where Shivadam is.”

“Follow the road, Noey, follow the road . . . screech, this way.”

Noah put his belongings back inside the pack, swung it over his shoulder and set off following the dirt road. Perhaps he wasn’t dreaming after all. If that were so, then how did they arrive at this unfamiliar place? He shrugged his shoulders and began whistling along with Petey screeching the lyrics to Hey Jude.

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Chapter 4

NOTHING IS AS IT APPEARS

Thousands of colorful flowers blanketed the hillside displaying an array of deep-violets and azure-blues, to reddish-oranges and sunbursts of yellow, each shimmering as Noah passed them by. He stooped down to get a closer look and when he went touch one, it suddenly turned into a beautiful butterfly. Then more flowers began turning into butterflies all flitting around him. After a few seconds, they landed, and again, reappeared as flowers. Then from out of nowhere Noah heard a soft voice say, "Nothing is as it appears." The words lingered in the air and then faded away.

"What? Who said that?" He looked around and from what he could tell, there wasn't anyone else save for him and Petey. Yet, the words remained in his mind causing him to feel a little spooked. He chalked it up to his active imagination, and soon put the thought out of his mind, and set off in the direction they had been following.

The landscape was breathtakingly beautiful. The sun was a giant pale-yellow orb amidst a soft, violet sky with white, windswept clouds. The air was pure and clean, the temperature was comfortably warm, unlike the summer's stifling heat and smog in Los Angeles. Petey kept circling about sometimes going off in search of other life, and reporting back to Noah on what he could see ahead.

After hours of walking he felt tired. "I need a break, Petey. I need to lie down for a while," he yawned, stretching out his arms and saw a nice patch of meadow to lie on. Using his backpack as a pillow, he asked Petey to keep watch.

"Screech, okey-dokey, Noey."

Noah muttered the same word as he fell asleep. He dreamed he was flying high in the sky with Petey and could see for miles and miles all around. "Great balls of fire," he shouted out, as they soared high across a magnificent mountain range with a cascading waterfalls and aquamarine lakes. He could see a grassy savanna where herds of gazelle, buffalo and zebra were grazing. In the distant horizon, he saw a golden arc of light shimmering as bright as the

sun. It seemed as though he could reach out and touch it, and yet, it was farther away than he could have imagined. His attention was quickly diverted by a flock of geese that flew past him. He followed them and oddly enough he could hear the geese singing a song: "The ancient secret lies in the deepest . . . seek, seek the Cave of Secrets . . . the Cave of Secrets!"

The geese sung the lyrics repeatedly until Noah found himself joining in with them. He smiled and laughed feeling exhilarated as he flew with the winged ones, until something wet smacked against his face. Instantly, he came flailing down from the sky, and just before he hit the ground, he woke up to see a familiar hairy animal licking his face.

"Cicero . . . is that you?" said Noah, completely stunned.

Cicero barked loudly.

"Leapin frog-legs! It's really you! What are you doing here?" he asked, hugging his dog tightly.

If any animal had a distinctive personality it was Cicero. He always looked as if he already knew what you were going to do. But if you got it all wrong, he would simply tilt his head to one side giving you a look that indicated, "I told you so". He was five-years old, and had been with the Goodartes since he was a puppy. He was a medium-size Border collie with a silky black and white coat (mostly white) that became slightly curled around his chest and hind legs. He had two large black patches over his eyes that made him look like a masked marauder.

Cicero had the class and breeding of a pure pedigree, but to Noah he was simply Cicero. It wouldn't have mattered if he were a mongrel mutt, Noah loved his dog more than anything.

"I heard your voice, Master Noah," said Cicero, barking and wagging his tail incessantly.

"You did? "What is it boy, what's the matter?"

"Master Noah, Cicero can speak words?"

"You're right, Cicero. You're communicating in human words. How weird is that?"

"Weird, screech, weird," said Petey.

Cicero barked a few more times.

"Cicero," said Noah in a serious tone, "I have no idea where we are, but I have a feeling we are supposed to go to Shivadam. I remember being at the zoo talking to Sampson the Elephant, and then the big one hit and everything after that happened so fast, the next thing I knew I woke up here. Wherever HERE is? So what do you think, boy? Are you up to helping us find the way to Shivadam?"

"Cicero will help you, Master Noah," said the Border collie wagging his tail.

"You don't have to call me Master Noah. I am your friend, not your master".

"Cicero likes you as master, Master Noah, and you are the best master a dog can have," he barked and then licked Noah's face.

"Okey-dokey! If you want to think of me as a master, then I am proud to be yours. Lead on you two—we shall follow the road to Shivadam."

The very fact that Noah's two best friends in the whole world had now joined him in this mysterious place didn't seem strange to him at all. In fact, it was like having a dream where everything appeared real, but in reality was only an illusion.

After walking for miles and crossing over endless hillsides and through more meadows, they came upon another old-tattered signpost that had red cross-marks over the word Shivadam. Something else was written over the markings but Noah couldn't make out the words. The signpost also had an arrow pointing toward a boundless wall of trees. It looked like a dense jungle forest that blocked out the horizon. The path they had been following came to a dead end. They looked around for an alternate route, but couldn't see any. The obvious choice was to go through the forest, which was not more than a quarter of a mile from where they stood.

“What do you think, guys? I, I don’t know what the sign actually says, and we don’t know what’s on the other side of that forest; it could be a dangerous jungle? Do you two think we should go through there?” Noah asked, pointing toward the forest.

“With any luck we will find a path that will lead us to Shivadam,” said Cicero.

“Go into the forest, screech, go into the forest,” Petey flew off toward the canopy then circled back towards Noah and Cicero.

When they came to the edge of the forest, Noah asked Petey to go out and scout for something edible. They were starving after their long journey. Noah and Cicero waited until they heard Petey’s loud screeching.

“Petey see something, screech, Petey see something . . . follow me.” They followed the parrot as he flew through what looked like the beginning of a dense forest until they came upon a small clearing. In the clearing they could see something glowing and shimmering up ahead. As they advanced closer, the glowing image took on the shape of a large apple tree brimming with all sorts of glistening apples, red ones, green ones, yellow ones, all plump and ripe. Noah’s mouth watered at the sight of a huge red one.

“Do you guys like apples?” asked Noah.

Cicero barked an affirmative.

“Petey like apples, Petey like apples.”

Noah reached up for a red one and just as he was about to pluck it from the branch, he heard a strange hissing sound coming from above the treetop.

“So you want to eat from the Master’s tree, do you?” said the sibilant sounding voice.

Noah looked up and gasped when he saw a gigantic snake coiled high on a bough of the tree with piercing, red eyes glaring down at them; its black forked-tongue darted in and out its wide mouth.

“Sor . . . sorry,” Noah said nervously, “we didn’t mean to steal from your tree. We were hungry.”

The giant snake looked over the diminutive two-legged creature with intense curiosity then shifted its gaze to Petey and Cicero, and then rested its attention on the one-eyed stranger. Hmmm, this could be a fortuitous encounter, thought the snake.

“If you wish to eat from the Master’s tree . . . hiss . . . then first you must pay me. Answering riddles is all that one must oblige to pass through this forest feeling sated and wise,” said the snake, smiling widely.

Noah was completely mystified by the presence of this huge snake in an apple tree. He shook his head and then pinched himself to see if he were imagining it. He then gave Cicero a strange look asking him if he saw the snake as well?

Cicero gave a light whimpering noise that meant yes.

The large snake uncoiled its body from the bough and slithered down to a lower branch. “And what are you nice little morsels doing all the way out here in this big, vast jungle?”

“I, I don’t know where we are, but if you can tell us how to get to Shivadam then maybe someone there can help us,” said Noah, feeling apprehensive. “You see I was talking to Sampson the Elephant, and then there was this huge earthquake, and after that I can’t remember a blasted thing.”

The snake lurched its body forward hissing loudly when it saw the white elephant on Noah’s tee-shirt. It recoiled and slithered to another branch farther left from where the one-eyed stranger stood.

“Hmmm . . . Shivadam you say . . . and may I ask, where are you from?” said the snake, giving Noah a furtive look.

Cicero started barking and growling uncontrollably. Noah had to hold onto his collar. "It's okay boy, calm down," he said, patting Cicero's head. "My name is Noah Goodarte. I'm from California. You probably don't know where —"

"I don't like canines much," the snake interjected, "hiss . . . they smell. You say you are from . . . where is it again?"

Noah didn't appreciate the rude comment about Cicero, but refrained from reproaching the snake. "We're from California. It's in another country."

"Hmmm, I have never heard of this place," the snake then slithered down closer to the one-eyed stranger.

"Excuse me, but I've told you my name—could you tell us yours?" said Noah, politely.

The snake hesitated a few seconds before responding. "You may call me Le Passe-Partout, pronounced Leh Pahsss-par'TOO."

"Par-toot, par-toot," Petey screeched from on top of the tree.

Noah mumbled the name to himself before saying it aloud. "We are pleased to make your acquaintance Mr. Partout. This is Cicero," he pointed at the Border collie, "and up in your tree is Petey."

The snake glared up at the parrot, "I am charmed, as well, to acquaint myself with you and your companions. Now that we have exchanged niceties, tell me about you, Noah. What purpose do you have in the Borderlands?"

"I don't know what I am doing here, or how we got here. But I do believe that if we can get to Shivadam, someone there can help us."

"Hmmm, maybe I can be of some assistance. But, first things first," Partout glared down at Noah. "I will give you three riddles. If you answer the first one correctly, you can have as many of the Master's delicious apples as you desire. Then I will give you a second riddle, and if you answer that one correctly, I will personally show you the quickest way to Shivadam."

The snake lifted its head and pointed its tongue to a luscious, red apple dangling above Noah's head. "And for good measure," he stressed, "because I am such a generous sort, I will introduce you to the Master, as he will want to reward you deservedly."

Noah gazed up at the apple. "What about the third riddle?"

"Ah, yes, the third . . . well let's see if you can answer the first one, shall we," the snake smiled.

"But, but what would happen if I fail to answer any of them?" Noah felt anxious.

"Worry not, my little friend, they are simple riddles. Any miteball with an ounce of wit can answer them," the snake arched one of its eyes, adding, "if at first you don't succeed, then come back and try again."

That seemed fair enough thought Noah. But the only problem was that he didn't want to have to come back. For some unexplained reason, the urgency to reach Shivadam had pressed upon him and that's all he could think about. A knot formed in the pit of his stomach causing him to feel nauseous.

"Um, Mr. Passe-Partout, I'm not trying to be rude or anything, but what if we don't want any of your apples? Or your help?"

"Tut-tut-tut, such bravado from one who is lost and hungry." Partout was beginning to lose patience with the scrawny one-eyed creature. Yet, this one was proving to be far less gullible than all the other dim-wits that had strayed into his traps.

"Why don't we proceed with the first riddle, shall we?" Partout insisted.

At first, Noah hesitated, then he swallowed loudly before nodding his head.

Partout smiled as he coiled up on the branch raising his head. "Very well, let's begin. What runs as swiftly as the wind, night and day, day and night, can be heavy and fierce or calm and light?"

Right away an answer came to Noah. He wanted to shout it out but composed himself before answering. "It's a river," he said, feeling triumphant.

Le Passe-Partout peered down nodding his head once, "Very good, Noah."

Cicero barked and wagged his tail in excitement. Petey repeated the verses to the riddle screeching out the answer that Noah had just given. The parrot alighted into the air and then swooped down against a branch of apples knocking a few to the ground. Noah bent down to collect one and looked up at Partout waiting for his permission. The snake nodded giving a smile of approval.

Noah handed the apple to Cicero who took hold of it between his teeth and then dropped it to the ground. Rather than devour the apple, he rolled it around while sniffing at it. He licked it once then quickly kicked the apple away with his hind leg. Petey carried on trying to knock down more apples from the tree.

Meanwhile, Le Passe-Partout watched Noah pluck one from the branch and gloated as the two-legged took a bite.

Noah looked down at Cicero. "Didn't you like the apple, Cicero?" he asked, chewing and then swallowing the first bite.

"That one didn't taste good, Master Noah," said Cicero, feeling suspicious about the apple.

Just as Noah was going to pluck another one for Cicero to eat he started to feel woozy. Partout had already slithered down to a lower branch and was dangling just above Noah's head.

"Are you ready for the next riddle, Noah?"

Noah slowly nodded his head to Partout's question.

"What is a place dark and cold? What is hidden and untold? Both are shrouded and obscured from sight. One gives shelter, the other guarded with might. What are these two things?"

This was a difficult one. Noah had no idea what the answer could be. His mind was a blank and he felt as if he were floating up and down on waves. Blinking his good eye a few times, he shook his head trying to resist the strange sensation that washed over him. He then began humming the melody to the song he had heard when he dreamed of flying with the geese. He started singing out the verses: "The ancient secret lies in the deepest . . . seek, seek the Cave of Secrets . . . the Cave of Secrets!"

Immediately, Partout straightened his head upon hearing those words. Can it be? After waiting crocodile years for someone to go beyond the first riddle, finally someone has done so. This is an auspicious day, indeed, he thought. He was more than elated, in fact he could have jumped out of his own skin. For it was his sole duty to snare anyone who could lead the Master to the cave of secrets, and provide food for the Master's minions. He surmised that Noah must know the answer to the third riddle, which he, himself, didn't know. For some odd reason, the Master withheld that information. But this much he knew for certain, Noah must not eat any more of the tainted fruit for it would render his mind useless, and what good would that do him? He realized that an opportunity like this might never come again. The Master will definitely reward him for this great accomplishment.

Noah tried standing without swaying, but it was difficult to do so. His mouth was terribly dry and all he wanted was something to drink.

"You are truly a clever little tadpole, Noah. A cave of secrets is the correct answer. My master will be quite interested in this particular cave of secrets of which you sang of in your lovely limerick."

It took a few seconds for Noah to respond. "I, I don't know of any particular cave. I just heard it being sung in a dream," he said, slurring his speech. As he spoke he could hear a voice telling him "nothing is as it appears". He shook his head trying to remain focused.

“Why don’t we all go and meet the Master?” said Partout, smiling triumphantly, adding, “I am most certain he would like to meet you to reward you for answering the second riddle!”

Meanwhile, Cicero saw something laying on the ground next to the apple he had kicked away, and went over to investigate. What he saw was a large rodent lying on its back with its eyes wide open. At first he thought the creature was dead, but it was still breathing.

Again, Noah heard a voice in his head saying, “Nothing is as it appears” and then in the next second he heard Cicero barking loudly trying to get his attention. He kept trying to shake off the woozy feeling he was experiencing.

While all this was going on Petey was circling above the tree trying to knock down more apples. Noah’s mouth felt like he had swallowed a cotton ball. Noticing the apple in his hand, he thought it might take the edge off his thirst, and just as he was about to bite into it, Cicero shot over to him jumping up in the air trying to knock the apple out of Noah’s hand. But at that same moment, Partout lurched forward and in the blink of an eye snatched the apple and spat it onto the ground. This action stunned Noah, and incited Petey into a fury causing the parrot to screech hysterically. He shot high up into the air and then homed down onto a branch of apples.

Cicero told Noah that he thought the apple had poisoned one of the jungle creatures. The two of them looked over to where the large rodent was lying, and then at Partout who had recoiled on the bough appearing to be agitated by Petey knocking apples onto his head.

“STOP THAT YOU PESTERING BAG OF FEATHERS, OR I WILL SWA—,” Partout stopped in mid-sentence trying to compose himself. “Sorry, Noah, I believe the apple to be a bad one.”

“Mr. Partout,” said Noah, still feeling a bit shaken, “it seems another one of your Master’s delicious apples was bad. Look at that poor creature over there,” he pointed toward the rodent.

The snake peered its red eyes in the same direction. “Oh, I see, hmmm, well that happens from time to time,” he proffered a wide grin.

“Now where were we? Oh yes, why don’t I take you and your companions to meet the Master, and then I shall show you how to get to Shivadam. I’m sure you all would like to be well on the way before dark.”

The effect of the spell was beginning to wear off, and Noah started to feel more aware. He now knew something wasn’t right about the snake. “I don’t believe we will be going with you to meet your master, Mr. Partout,” Noah said, sliding the front of his hat to the back of his head. “So far, I would say that your promises are not what they appear to be. Your apples are not safe to eat, and I don’t believe it is in our best interest to continue with this game anymore.”

Partout hissed loudly as he stretched forward a few more inches, his tongue darting in and out of his mouth, thinking there are more ways than one to snare a hare. You might have outwitted the Master this time, but he will know what to do about you, little Noah.

Now that he had the answer to the second riddle, and knowing that the Master would be pleased, he decided what his next move would be. “Since you feel that way about the Master’s kind generosity, well, I guess I shall have to be on my way.

“But know this, Noaaah, when you enter the Borderlands, nasty accidents can happen anytime, anywhere. There are no laws in the jungle and we wouldn’t want anything to happen to you or your friends, would we?” He then glared at Noah’s tee-shirt. “Jahru has no power over here. This is the Master’s domain.”

“Jahru,” Noah whispered the name as if he had heard it before.

“Be seeing you, Noah,” Partout hissed and then slithered down the tree and quickly disappeared through a thick hedge leaving behind a powerful stench. The once luscious apple tree was now a pile of rotten detritus.

“What in hell’s fire was that all about?” said Noah gagging at the foul odor. He began fanning his face with his hat and then scratched over the eye-patch wishing he didn’t have to wear it anymore.

“Hell’s fire, hell’s fire,” screeched Petey, as he landed on Noah’s shoulder.

Noah stooped down so he could look at Cicero. “Well, we know that Partout can’t be trusted and neither can his master. Plus, he gives me the creeps. Look at what happened to the apple tree, and that poor creature. We need to be careful and alert because we don’t know when he’ll show up again,” he said, waiting for the others to chime in.

“It will be dark soon. We should try to be as far away from here as possible,” said Cicero tilting his head to one side.

“You know, I think the name Jahru has something to do with us being here, wherever here is,” said Noah, sensing that that name had the utmost importance to their well-being.

They went over to check on the sick rodent, but it had already disappeared, just like the snake and the apple tree. They looked at one another wondering what had happened to it. In reality, what Noah really wanted to believe was that he was just having a whopper of a dream, and any minute he would wake up. But if he wasn't dreaming, and if these things were actually happening, then what Le Passe-Partout had said about how accidents can happen anytime, anywhere, gave him reason to be extremely worried. They needed help fast before something terrible happened to them.

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Chapter 5 CHUFI DA MAGICUS

Towering high in the jungle forest stood the crowned heads of ancient trees festooned with vines and wild orchids. And where the sunlight broke through, the fragrance of the Nandi flame trees with their large, orange-red flowers filled the air. The broad canopy obscured what little sunlight remained making passage difficult for the little threesome as they cautiously stepped through the dense forest feeling hungry, tired and scared. Petey flew off into the canopy to keep a lookout from above, while Cicero sensed for danger below. Noah listened and looked for any sign of movement other than their own.

Strange noises could be heard from high up in the treetops. Noah had a feeling they were being watched. Cicero kept sniffing around like a Bloodhound on a scent. Then from out of nowhere a huge coconut, the size of a bowling ball, fell from above crashing down right in front of them.

Cicero started barking and growling at it, which incited a loud cacophony of animal shrieks and cries around them. Noah stared down at the coconut relieved that it hadn't hit one of them on the head. Then he heard a familiar screech through all the other noise. He looked up ahead and could see Petey flying towards them weaving in and out through the trees. He was screeching with something following him from close behind.

"Noey has company, Noey has company . . . MONKEYS."

Sure enough a small troop of monkeys were leaping from branch to branch towards them. More appeared and soon there were dozens of gibbering monkeys all swinging from tree branches. One of the monkeys dropped down from one branch to the other until it was above from where Noah was standing. It had a puffy white face with golden, yellow whiskers and a white underbody. Draped over its shoulders was a black cape, with a tiny red fez on its head.

"Are you NUTS?" said the monkey with big bulging eyes, "walking around in the jungle like you're on a stroll in the PARK? Whaddaya have for brains in there, COCONUTS?"

The monkey and its cohorts jeered with laughter.

"Coconuts . . . get it? IT'S A JOKE," said the monkey in a high-pitched voice, jutting out its chin.

Noah remained silent feeling embarrassed by the wisecracking animal, which was no larger than a squirrel. Clearing his throat, he then introduced himself, "My name is Noah Goodarte, this is Cicero, and I see you have already met Petey."

"So, you're the One-eyed Warrior—" the monkey could barely finish the sentence before erupting into more uncontrollable laughter causing the same hysterical gibberish to break out.

Even though Noah was used to being made fun of, he felt more humiliation at being ridiculed by animals, especially by this little critter.

"Sorry, Noah Goodheart," said the monkey catching its breath, "Me was expecting someone, um . . . a little older, and . . . um . . . BIGGER!"

The group burst out again with laughter, but this time Noah was not going to stand for anymore monkey mischief. He reached into his backpack, pulled out his whistle and blew into it as hard as he could. A piercing sound echoed throughout the jungle followed by immediate silence. The caped-monkey and its ilk looked dumbfounded. Cicero kept barking and growling at them to keep them from pulling any more pranks.

"Enough with the bad jokes already," said Noah, putting the whistle inside his pants pocket.

The mischievous little monkey jumped down to get a closer look at the one-eyed stranger. Once he saw the image of the albino elephant with tusks of gold on the stranger's garment its eyes widened in excitement.

“Are you an emissary of Avaraj Jahru? Are you going to get rid of the Conjuron?” said the monkey, inflecting a serious tone, adding, “Please allow me to introduce myself, me is Chufi Da Magicus!” The monkey swooped the cape over his shoulder and bowed his head. “No hard feelings, eh Noah, we was just jokin’ around.”

Chufi then examined the two-legged stranger up and down wondering why he wasn’t covered with hair or fur for that matter, except for the strange bit on his head.

Noah’s eye widened with interest upon hearing the name Jahru being spoken of again. Then he remembered that it was the same name Sampson the Elephant kept repeating to him at the zoo. Jahru . . . Shivadam . . . and something else. He couldn’t remember it all. But maybe Chufi Da Magicus could help?

“Nice to meet you, Chufi Da Magicus, and no hard feelings. We’re looking for the way to Shivadam, and I have to admit I have never met Jahru. I was asked by my friend, Sampson, to find this elephant in Shivadam,” said Noah, pointing to the image on his tee-shirt.

“By the way, if me can be so bold to inquire, if you’re not an emissary of Jahru’s, then what tribe are you from?” Chufi asked, tilting his head to one side waiting for the answer.

“I’m a . . . a HUMAN,” said Noah, slowly.

“A U-mun . . . is that tribe far from here?” The monkey’s eyes beamed with interest.

Noah explained that he didn’t know where HERE was, and yes, he believed that they were from far away.

Chufi then told Noah that they were in the Borderlands, on the planet of Oliphum.

“Holy meat-balls,” said Noah, in disbelief mouthing the word Oliphum. I always new there was intelligent life on other planets, but I never actually believed I would get to see it for myself, he thought in amazement. I must be dreaming. He explained to Chufi that they were from a planet called Earth, which was in another galaxy.

“Well ME is a monkey’s uncle!” said Chufi, taking off his red fez to fan his face. “Me has heard of places like that from Cousin Wyzl, but me never imagined me would ever meet a celestial traveler. You see Noah, ME has never even been to Shivadam. We have only heard about the great Avaraj and Shivadam from the Old Ones. We don’t get out of these parts much, ‘cos, well, you might say we have nowhere else to go.

“The land-bridge to Shivadam was destroyed a long time ago, and this is the only home we have, and we protect it. We are the keepers of this jungle forest. We try to scare off any unwanted trespassers if you get me drift,” Chufi gestured with his head toward the fallen coconut.

The little monkey hopped onto a small bush so he could speak without yelling. Cicero went up to sniff him but Chufi shoed him away. One of the other monkeys leaped onto Noah’s shoulder to inspect the strange one-eyed visitor, and Petey screeched off the intruder.

“So, Noah . . . is it true, you came face-to-face with one of the Conjuron’s slimy minions? And you scared it away?” asked Chufi, nodding his head rapidly.

Noah looked confused by the question. “If you mean Le Passe-Partout, I don’t think I scared him away, he just sort of vanished. Exactly what is a Conjuron?”

Chufi could hardly believe his ears. Was this two-legged for real? Didn’t he know who the Conjuron was? Before Chufi could explain, Noah interjected more about his experience with the snake.

“Le Passe-Partout also said that, if I answered the second riddle he was going to show me the quickest way to Shivadam. And right before he disappeared he said something about Jahru not having any power over here. What did he mean by that?”

“You really don’t know, do ya?” said Chufi.

Noah shook his head.

“Well, pal, let me explain it the best way me can,” said Chufi, as he jumped down onto the ground. “The Conjuron can put spells on things like trees, bushes, and scary looking habbies. He can also conjure huge pelu storms that can pour down over our heads. And, me must emphasize me point here, the Conjuron is most dangerous on his turf—in the Wasteland.

“One of the nastiest things he has done so far is conjuring these creepy looking things we call the “dreghuls”. They live in the darkest trenches of the Wasteland and believe me brother they are skerrrreee. When any of the poor habbies are caught unawares in one of the Conjuron’s traps, well then its lights out,” said Chufi, gesturing with his arms.

“Wha, what happens to them?” asked Noah, swallowing loudly, thinking about the poor rodent that had eaten the bad apple.

“You don’t even want to know what happens to the habbies when the dreghuls capture the poor slobs,” Chufi munched up his face, and with his hand crossed his throat sideways making a strange sound.

“What does this Conjuron look like?” asked Cicero.

Chufi looked a little perplexed by the question. “Well, to tell ya the truth, me don’t know. In fact, me thinks that no living habbie has ever seen the Conjuron and lived to tell about it.”

“Well, if you don’t know what it looks like, or what it is, then how do you know when it is around?” asked Noah, feeling a little scared about we he got them into.

“That’s the problem! Ya never will know, and that’s got all the habbies acting weird,” said Chufi.

“I see,” responded Noah, not really sure of what Chufi had just said.

“So, what kind of riddles did the slimy minion ask you?”

Noah told him about the first riddle and how easy it was to answer. He then elaborated about the second one.

Chufi became ecstatic, maybe this one-eyed stranger was the mighty warrior Cousin Wyzl had been talking about for the past few lumars.

Noah now felt it was his turn to ask some questions. He wanted to know what did he mean by “habbies” and why hadn’t Jahru offered any help in getting rid of the Conjuron, especially when the Conjuron was frightening everyone?

“A habbie, my friend, is short for habitual dweller, it’s what we’re called here on Oliphum. And as for Jahru not being able to help, well it’s a long story,” Chufi arched his eyes.

He began explaining how a long time ago, a most beautimous kingdom located in the northern tip of the Borderlands was once known as Emypreal. It was the last stretch of land connecting Mastodonia Ridge to Shivadam. All the land habbies traveling to and from Shivadam used to make their passage across the land-bridge through Emypreal. But ever since the land-bridge had split apart and tumbled into the great waterway, the land dwellers on either side can no longer travel across. “And now Emypreal is a wasteland,” concluded Chufi in a serious tone.

Noah asked him why they had not been able to find another way to cross the waterway. Chufi explained to Noah, Cicero and Petey that, for the past five solar ages, Jahru had a team of workers trying to build a bridge to reconnect Mastodonia Ridge. But something had always gone wrong, so Jahru had given up on the project.

“Me cousin Wyzl says that ever since that dreadful day when the land-bridge fell apart, an evil presence,” Chufi 's eyes brimmed widely, “has taken over the Emypreal, and things have never been the same in the Borderlands.

“We call that evil thing the Conjuron 'cos whatever it is, it can take hold of your mind, and make you do things you wouldn't ever do in a bagillion lumars. But you gotta get caught first, so stay away from the Wasteland, buddy, it’s a dangerous place.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do?” said Noah, feeling agitated. “I mean, there has to be another way to get to Shivadam. I remember Partout asking me about a cave of secrets, and then after that he said he wanted me to meet the Master. I’m guessing that the Master is the one you call the Conjuron?” Noah gulped loudly.

Chufi’s mouth fell slightly open, and then nodded his head. Cicero gave out a low whimper, as Petey kept screeching out, “Conjuron, Conjuron.”

“Me can’t even think about what would have happened to you’s if you’s had followed the slimy minion to the Conjuron, geesh,” Chufi began fanning his face with the hem of his cape.

“And he never even gave me the third riddle,” Noah sounded depressed.

Then Chufi shouted out, “Or maybe there isn’t a third riddle, and, and, me don’t know, but me thinks Cousin Wyzl can figure it out.”

“Or, maybe he just plays games with innocent victims before they get, you know, put under a spell and then,” Noah scrunched up his face.

Chufi pondered what Noah had just said. “But you didn’t get put under a spell. So there’s a reason for that, me thinks.”

“There must be another way to get across,” Noah opened his mouth wide giving a big yawn. Hunger and weariness had suddenly crept up on him.

“Can you suggest a place for us to rest tonight, Mr. Da Magicus?” Noah tried stifling another yawn.

“You mean the minion just let you pass through without doing anything else, no dreghuls, no nothing, just because you answered the second riddle? Did you eat anything?”

“I, sort of took a small bite of an apple.” He began explaining how he had started feeling peculiar, like he was floating on waves and the lyrics were all that he could remember.

“Well me is a monkey’s cousin,” said Chufi. “You must be the Warrior me Cousin Wyzl has been talking about!”

Chufi began jumping up and down excitedly turning somersaults in the air shouting out, “The One-eyed Warrior, the One-eyed Warrior.”

The rest of the monkeys began imitating their leader jumping up and down and chanting loudly.

“STOP! PLEASE! No more noise! Noah’s head started to throb. “We just need a place to rest until morning, and a little bit of food if you can spare some, thank you.”

Chufi was tickled to his bones. Wait until the tribe meets Noah the Goodheart. He was fantasizing about how the Goodheart would use his power to defeat the Conjuron, and then help him leave the jungle and journey across the waterway to Shivadam where his magic tricks would be more appreciated. He would be more famous than, than, he didn’t know of any famous magicians, but the thought of fame raised his spirits high. He imagined that he would meet the great Jahru and all the wonderful possibilities that awaited him in Shivadam. He would be a guest at the Palace Imperia and there would be dozens of good-looking hairy females to hang around with.

While Chufi was lost in his fantasy, one of the other monkeys yanked his cape snapping him back to reality. “Huh? Oh yes, we would be honored to have you and your pals rest here in our humble resort,” Chufi said graciously. “We have been waiting for someone like you for a very, very, and me MEANS a very long time.”

Noah blushed with embarrassment. He had no clue as to what Chufi was talking about. He asked the monkey how far away was Shivadam from the Borderlands. Chufi used a stick to draw a map of the Borderlands in the dirt. When he finished he pointed to where they were, and then drew a river running north through a long, winding canyon.

“If you follow the Tponga River to the North, it will eventually flow into the great waterway,” Chufi flashed a wide grin. “Me has never been on the Tponga, but me Cousin Tojo and Wyzl have journeyed north before.

“Anyway, follow alongside the river all the way to where it empties into the mouth of the great waterway. High above that is the old Mastodonia land-bridge, or at least part of it, and right next to that is the Wasteland.

“Me doesn’t know what Shivadam looks like, but from what Cousin Wyzl says, it is supposed to be shaped like a gigantic head of an oliphant. There is no other way to get across other than by flying or swimming. Either of which me is not skilled at doing,” said Chufi, shrugging his tiny shoulders.

“Jumpin cat-eyes,” said Noah, removing his hat. One of the monkeys tried grabbing it, but Cicero snarled at the creature and it scampered up a nearby tree.

Noah’s stomach plummeted. “That seems impossible to get to. I mean Shivadam might as well be on the other side of the universe.” He wondered how he would ever be able to reach Shivadam on foot.

“Maybe all we need to do is find this secret cave,” said Chufi.

“And maybe there is some kind of secret passageway hidden in this cave!” shouted Noah and Chufi in unison.

“And then we are HOME FREE!” Chufi somersaulted in the air as the other monkeys followed suit.

“But how do we do find this cave? For all we know Partout probably made it up. To tell you the truth, I don’t even know how I got here, if, of course, this is not one heck of a dream,” said Noah, shrugging his shoulders and feeling unworthy of Chufi’s praise. “I’m more concerned about getting us lost or killed.”

Noah thought about his encounter with Le Passe Partout and guessed that the menacing snake more than likely allowed them passage into the jungle knowing they would never find a way out. They would be lost forever, and they would never see Dad, Mom, Gigi and Dr. Tobias again. Yet, there was something else he had to do, something more important than going back home to earth? If only he could remember what it was he was supposed to do.

Chufi sensed Noah’s concern and felt sorry for him. “Hey, come on Noah, don’t look so depressed. You’ll find a way to Shivadam. You made it this far, didn’t ya?” He patted Noah on the back.

“Cheer up, pal, you’re breaking my heart. Hey whaddaya say we have some food?” Chufi waved the cape over his little shoulder and a tiny, wooden table-set materialized decorated with a tablecloth of banana leaves, and dishes and cups made from coconut hulls. He motioned for the three of them to sit.

Noah ended up on the ground with Petey sitting on his shoulder. The table was only big enough for someone or something the size of Chufi. Cicero sat next to Noah looking curiously at the miniature table.

“So what will it be? We have coconuts, bananas, and mangoes. We have tiwas and magwat pie, my specialty,” said Chufi, grinning from ear-to-ear.

The magic trick worked; it diverted Noah’s attention to his stomach. “Can you make smoothies?”

“Smoothies, Shmoothies, me is Chufi Da Magicus. Me can get you any food you want—your wish is my command,” he grandly swept the cape over his shoulder taking a bow.

Noah was surprised. “How about a quattro formaggi pizza and a mango smoothie?”

Chufi tilted his head to one side. “Pizza?” he looked confused.

“Never mind,” said Noah, “I’ll have one your specialties. By the way, what is a magwat?”

“Trust me you’ll love it!”

A loud rumbling sound from Noah's stomach caused Chufi to jump up on a high bush. Noah blushed. Usually he hardly ever felt hungry. His mom always had to coax him into eating his food. But for some reason he was now starving, and couldn't wait to eat. Just the thought of food made his stomach rumble even louder.

"Me thinks you have a wild beast inside your belly," said Chufi. "Better hurry with your dinner."

"Also, if you have any nuts or seeds, Petey likes them."

"Petey like nuts, Petey like nuts," screeched the parrot.

Noah looked at Cicero. "What do you want to eat, boy?" Cicero was panting and drooling at the thought of food.

"How about a nice big, tiwa biscuit for Cicero?" Chufi suggested.

"The sound of a tiwa is inviting," said Cicero.

"Me will be right back with your meals." The little monkey dashed off and was back in minutes with their dinner.

Much to Noah's delight, Chufi brought him a delicious magwat pie that tasted like sweet cornbread, plus a huge fruit smoothie. Petey enjoyed the assorted seeds and ate as many as he could. Cicero was chomping down the last bits of a huge biscuit.

While they were eating, it had become unusually dark rather quickly. Chufi was boasting on and on about how his troop of monkeys looked up to him as a V-I-M (very important monkey), because of his magical acts. As he was embellishing on his favorite topic of conversation, he abruptly stopped in mid-sentence then leaped up onto a branch shrieking out something to his comrades. The entire troop halted what they were doing, and began scampering up trees.

"Sorry Noah, hate to eat and run, but we gotta curfew in these parts—it's a rule never to be out after dark. Psst," Chufi whispered, "that's when the dreghuls come out."

As soon as the words left Chufi's mouth, the monkey was already half way up the tree.

"Dreghuls! Wait a minute . . . what about us? What about finding the secret cave?" Noah yelled out.

"It's every monkey for himself. It's been real fun having you—me hopes to see you again. Good . . . luck . . . Noah . . ." Chufi's words faded as he and his cohorts disappeared from sight.

"Leapin' Lizards! What do we do now?" Noah was frustrated and scared.

The three of them huddled closely together. Noah searched inside his backpack for the flashlight. "Maybe this will help some," he said, with a hint of uncertainty.

With Petey sitting on his shoulder, they moved through the jungle forest as quietly as possible following the meager light beam. All along he kept thinking that no matter where they went, it wouldn't be safe enough. They had to rely on Cicero's keen sense to help them find a safe shelter.

"Petey scared, screech, Petey scared."

"We'll be okay," said Noah trying to sound brave, but all along he felt the same dread as Petey.

Again, Noah had a sense that something was watching them. The hairs on his arms stood on end, and Cicero's ears pricked at every sound he heard.

After several minutes of walking, Cicero stopped dead in his tracks and began growling. Petey was too scared to screech, and Noah felt his own solar plexus contract, his legs went weak.

"What is it, Cicero?" Noah whispered nervously.

Cicero was still growling when they saw something glowing in the distance, and then it disappeared for a few seconds only to reappear closer to them. They could now make out what looked like two fluorescent, green lights approaching in their direction, followed by another pair of lights, and then another pair of beaming lights.

Noah froze, too afraid to move. He was hoping that whatever they saw, didn't see them.

Petey screeched out hysterically, "Run for safety, run for safety." But before Noah could stop him, the parrot flew away.

"Petey come back here, come back here," he whispered loudly.

From the corner of his eye, Noah spied a huge tree that they could hide behind; it wasn't too far from where they were. He and Cicero made a mad dash for it.

The beaming lights were getting closer by the second, and Noah's heart was pounding louder, and faster with the blood rushing to his head. He couldn't think clearly, and was too afraid to cry. Poor Petey and Cicero, they're here because of me, and now we're all in danger.

With every ounce of courage he could muster, he peered around the trunk of the tree to see what was happening. What he had thought were lights were actually the huge eyes of some kind of strange animals making loud swooshing noises. There were three creatures flying low to the ground weaving through the trees. They had long, bat-like wings rising from their backs, and heads shaped like owls with big, gleaming eyes. They were larger than a vulture and had spindly, scaly arms with long, claw-like fingers. Those creatures must be the dreghuls that Chufi had warned us about, thought Noah.

One of the creatures quickly swerved towards them making a high-pitch screeching sound. Cicero snarled and began growling and barking furiously. Then from out of nowhere, with an abrupt thump, the creature fell to the ground.

Alerted by the noise, the other two dreghuls turned and flew towards the tree, and then, thump, another one hit the ground even harder than the first one. The third creature shrieked out wildly, wheeled around and sped off flapping its wings.

Noah and Cicero looked up at the giant tree, and even though it was hard to see in the dark, they could tell that the tree was enormous with a very broad canopy and long, loose vines dangling from thick branches.

"Nasty little buggers those dreghuls! Can't stand the sight of them. Who do they think they are anyway?" said a deep, angry voice that seemed to be coming from within the tree.

Cicero let out a low whimper. Then they heard Petey screeching from somewhere above the same tree.

"Come down here, Petey," Noah was relieved at seeing his friend again. "You had me worried."

Petey landed on Noah's arm. "Screech, this is Noey," Petey said to the tree.

Noah raised his eyebrows. "Are you talking to this tree?"

"Yup, screech."

"Jumpin Jupiter!" Noah touched the tree asking if it had a name.

"Name . . . what is a name? I have been rooted in this soil for hundreds of solar ages. I have seen many things come and go, and have always stood my ground. I am firmly planted here and I refuse to let that wicked demon spread its poison in my land," said the deep, rumbling voice, adding "I have never felt so disheartened as I am now, by the dread that has been spreading throughout the Borderlands."

"Well, I can understand how you feel, but if we can reach Shivadam we can ask Jahru for help," said Noah.

"The whispers in the breeze speak of a stranger called the One-eyed Warrior. If, indeed, you are this one, then please, rest under my canopy for the night. I will watch over you and your comrades. Don't worry about the dreghuls, they will not harm you. Those two will sleep for days, and by that time you will be well on your way."

"Thank you, but I don't know where I am, I'm kind of lost," Noah slouched onto the ground resting against the huge tree-trunk, his eyes started drooping with tiredness.

"Don't worry, young one, just rest for the night."

The tree shook its enormous branches until Cicero and Noah were covered in a blanket of leaves. Petey decided to rest on one of the tree boughs for the night. It took only seconds for them to drift into a deep slumber.

Noah dreamed he was standing before a bright, luminescent light, and as he walked towards it, he heard a voice coming from within the light:

*“Stay afloat on currents so swift,
Round twists and bends til the river ends.
At first stop look for the songbird’s nest,
Inside the hollow the little one rests.
Listen to the verse for clues and keys
Follow the river into the sea.”*

“Heed well this message, Noah Goodheart, it will lead you to the Cave of Secrets,” and then the voice, and the light faded away.

Immediately, Noah sat up wondering if what he had just dreamt was real or imagined. But the words were crystal clear, and he knew that he needed to write down the lyrics as he had heard them. Grabbing the flashlight, he searched inside the backpack for his notepad and pen. He was so relieved at remembering to pack those items. Cicero’s ears twitched, detecting the minor disturbance. He opened one of his eyes to see what was going on, and then after feeling reassured that nothing was wrong, he went back to sleep.

Noah put the flashlight under his chin and held it there so he could write. After he finished writing, he turned off the flashlight, and kept repeating the verses like a mantra, until he dozed off to sleep.

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Chapter 6

The trek

The morning light dappled the forest floor causing Cicero to begin licking his master's face. He then noticed that the two dreghuls were gone. He asked Noah if he knew where they went?

Stretching out his arms, and yawning widely, Noah responded with a half-awake "dunno". He then wondered whether last night's events actually happened? Or if it was only a dream?

"Good morning, Madame Tree," said Noah, but the tree did not respond.

"Good morning," he yelled. Still no response. The only thing that moved from the tree was Petey flying down from his night perch screeching loudly.

Why does everything have to always be so strange? thought Noah, shaking his head. He then remembered about the vision he had had standing in front of a bright light, as a voice gave him clues to find the Cave of Narwah. He quickly grabbed the notepad and saw the words he had written down just as he had heard them. If those words are real, then why isn't the tree talking? It didn't matter, he was excited about the possibility of finding another way to Shivadam. He now believed that there was a secret cave after all. And even though he had no idea of where to start looking for it, he now knew someone who could help—Chufi. Just as he was about to say something to Cicero and Petey, they heard a commotion not too far away.

"NOAH . . . IT'S ME . . . CHUFI . . . YOUR FRIEND . . . WHERE ARE YOU?" Chufi was swinging from vine-to-vine making his way closer to Noah with his fellow monkeys following him.

"I'M OVER HERE!"

In a very short time, Chufi appeared with a dozen or so of his followers. They stopped overhead from where Noah was standing.

"Boy, me is glad to see you! Me was worried about you," said Chufi, relieved at the sight of his one-eyed friend. "Me has good news, and then not so good news. Which do you want to hear first?"

Before Noah could respond, Chufi interjected, "You all look like you could eat a dozen magwats." He jumped from the branch onto the ground waving his cape over his shoulder and then two magwat pies and a tiwa biscuit appeared. Petey screeched loudly for nuts, and again, the little monkey quickly swooped his cape up and then down came a shower of nuts and seeds.

The morning couldn't have been lovelier with soft, warm breezes and glimpses of deep blue skies peeking through the sky-scraping canopy. Noah thought he would be having the time of his life, if it were not for the urgency he felt in reaching Shivadam, and, of course, there were the dreghuls and the Conjuron lurking about. He fantasized how they could stay here indefinitely with their new friends.

After finishing breakfast, they walked deeper into the forest beyond the place where they had first encountered Chufi. The monkey pointed to a large tree encouraging Noah to climb up with him. Cicero and Petey remained below playing around with some of the other monkeys.

It was a breeze for Noah to climb up to one of the highest boughs where he discovered a small-size, monkey hut wedged into the fork of two branches. Hunching his shoulders, and crouching low he followed Chufi inside the hut.

"Welcome to me sticks," said Chufi proudly. "Sorry we had to leave you in the dark like we did last night, but us monkeys have to be careful, 'cos it can be a jungle out there."

Noah looked over his friend's hut noticing how neat and tidy it appeared. Two small capes hung from a wooden hook against the thatched walls, and little, coconut hulls were neatly stacked on a wooden shelf. The thatched, bamboo flooring was quite comfortable for Noah to sit on, as long as he didn't raise his head. Chufi explained that once he had left his mother's hut, he decided to build his new home as far away from his family as possible, because there were too many females that were looking for a permanent mate. His mother was always trying to match him up with one of the clan, and he wasn't ready to settle down just yet.

Noah found this to be quite amusing, and would have laughed if it weren't for the urgent news Chufi had to tell him. "What is the bad news, Chufi?" his stomach tensed up.

"Well, me sources bring news that the dreghuls and the minions of the Conjuron are capturing more habbies, so you need to be on your toes at all times? And, the winged ones bring news of a large gathering taking place at the Dome of Justice in Shivadam, something to do with the Act of Deiawala, that's the bad news.

"The good news is, me is offering you me services as a trail guide to help you find a way outta here. Nobody knows the jungle like Chufi Da Magicus. So whaddaya think, eh?" He heaved out his chest giving it a big pat.

Noah's eyes widened upon hearing the word Deiawala. Somehow, that word and Jahru were all tied in together. He asked Chufi to explain more about the Deiawala.

Chufi's eyes bulged slightly. "The Act of Deiawala is serious bizzyness me friend. At least that is what me has heard. Is that why you need to see the Avaraj?" he asked, with a worried look.

Noah arched his eyebrows, "I, I don't know." Then as if a light bulb went on in his head, he shouted, "I almost forgot to tell you about what happened to me last night."

He pulled out the notepad and showed Chufi the verses he had written down and reiterated to him about his vision.

"I think we are supposed to travel on water, and then find a hollow tree with a nest in it." His neck was getting stiff from sitting hunched over, so he began stretching it from side-to-side.

Chufi was stunned. He scurried out of the hut, jumping up and down in frenzied excitement, turning somersaults and shouting, "The One-eyed Warrior! The One-eyed Warrior!" which was immediately echoed with much enthusiasm by the rest of the troop. A huge ruckus ensued with Petey screeching wildly, and Cicero barking and trying to climb up the tree to be with his friends. Through all this excitement, Noah had to take out his whistle to get everyone's attention. What they didn't notice was a large, black gnat with piercing red eyes had flown into the hut and was listening to Noah telling Chufi about the clues he was given.

After Chufi calmed down from his excitement, he noticed the gnat flying out of the hut. He tried catching it, but it was too quick, it got away. "Ah doogie-butts, that would have been a good snack."

"We only have a few clues, so we need to make the most of them," said Noah.

After things settled down, he told Chufi that he would make an excellent trail guide. The little monkey could hardly contain his eagerness in telling the One-eyed Warrior about Cousin Tojo, the Silverback gorilla.

"Me Cousin Tojo has been to the end of the Tponga River many times, and maybe he knows how to find this secret cave," he nodded his head repeatedly. "Tojo can help us devise a map with landmarks and trails. And, me thinks we need to build a raft."

"A raft?" Noah's face lit up with excitement.

"Yup! A raft. You'll see. It'll be a snap. We can get some of the habbies to help."

Later on, Chufi asked Noah whether he had an encounter with the dreghuls. Noah told him about the talking tree and how it had knocked two of the dreghuls unconscious. Then when he woke up this morning they were nowhere to be seen, and the tree didn't talk anymore.

Chufi informed him that it was good fortune to have encountered the Mother Tree. She was only active at night, protecting the habbies who got lost or were caught unawares after dark when the dreghuls trolled around. "Best stay hidden from them. Unless, of course, you're well protected, and by that, me means something big and fearless like the Mother Tree or Cousin Tojo." They both agreed that it would be in their best interest to find Cousin Tojo as soon as possible.

While Chufi was busy preparing for the trek, Noah took out his deck of animal cards to show him pictures of the African animals on his planet. Chufi was amazed at how some of the same habbies from Oliphum were also living in Noah's world. He pointed to the pictures of the chimpanzees and gorillas, guffawing at the strong resemblances to some of his relatives in the jungle. When he saw the card of an African bull elephant, Chufi became very excited and explained how the Great Ones reigned supreme in Shivadam, and how they were revered by every habbie from here to kingdom come.

After Chufi stuffed Noah's backpack full of provisions, because his own rucksack was only big enough to carry his cape, he then paraded around in a safari outfit, which was a pith helmet and a hunter's vest. Noah was amused by the monkey's theatrics and took a few snap shots of him in different poses.

Suddenly, Noah slapped the top of his head. "Of course, that's it!" he shouted. "Sampson said that the Great Ones are vanishing, and that is what the day-ah-wa-la must be, it has to do with the elephants. And from what I understand, unless we can reach Jahru to ask him for help in preventing this day-ah-wa-la, I think life in my world will never be the same."

"Don't worry. We'll find the Cave of Secrets. Hey, Cousin Wyzl knows about everything. He can help you understand more about the Deiawala," said Chufi, trying to reassure his friend that all was not lost.

"Cousin Wyzl is old now, but he is the wisest of all of us. You'll love him. In fact, he has even met the great Avaraj in the flesh." Chufi really loved his elderly cousin and regarded him with as much respect as the Great Ones themselves.

Some of the events that had taken place at the zoo on that day of the earthquake had become clearer to Noah. He felt relieved at remembering Sampson's message. He also realized that he was not caught up in some weird hallucination. There was great urgency in what Sampson had been trying to tell him. He now had a sense of purpose. But those feelings quickly gave way to waves of doubt as to why he, of all people, had been chosen for this very serious mission? Why not some adult or another boy who was much stronger and smarter than him? From what he could surmise his chances of accomplishing this task were very slim, if at all. The fate of his world rested on his shoulders. If he failed, then something bad will happen at home and nothing will be able to stop it! "I must find Jahru," he said, softly.

The safari crew was ready. Chufi was the trail guide, Petey was head-scout, Cicero was the anchorman, and Noah would act as the observer. A large troop of Guenon, Mangabey, and Langur monkeys along with other jungle dwellers had gathered around to give the safari team a proper send off. There was a lot of crying and hugging, so much so that Noah felt guilty about taking Chufi away from his family and friends. He suggested to him that he didn't have to go, and that he could simply tell him how to find Tojo, and possibly send word for his cousin to expect them.

“Whaddaya crazy? This is me big opportunity to get away from all the bossy females,” said Chufi quietly. “They can get on a monkey’s nerves, if you get me drift. Besides me wants to have me own magic show in Shivadam—starring Chufi Da Magicus!”

Noah laughed. He truly liked the precocious little monkey, and was very happy that Chufi was joining them. He began to feel more at ease about this bizarre, yet urgent situation he seemed to be caught up in.

After the goodbyes were said, all the friends began chanting a farewell song in honor of Noah the Goodheart’s mission. This gave the safari crew a sense of valor, and importance of what they were setting out to accomplish.

Deep inside a dark cavern, the same black gnat that had barely escaped from being Chufi’s snack, landed on a pool of murky water, and quickly disappeared beneath the putrid liquid. Large bubbles began to form on the surface and within seconds a large, fleshy mass emerged from the pool letting out a huge gasping sound as it shook its head. It slithered out of the water onto the ground. With labored breath, its red, eyes, peered through the darkness of the cavern resting its gaze on some old bones. “Alas, the time has come,” whispered an eerie voice, which soon became a throaty laugh that echoed throughout the hollow chamber. Crawling on the damp ground, the large creature soon disappeared down a long, narrow tunnel.

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Chapter 7 THE RIVER'S EDGE

It didn't take long for Noah and his companions to pass through the jungle to reach the edge of a long plateau. Luckily, they were able to hitch a ride with a family of ostrich, which cut their journey time by a huge amount. Grateful for having covered so much distance so quickly, they said their thanks to the ostrich family, and in turn the ostriches wished them a safe journey.

The little safari crew stood at the edge waving at the departing ostrich watching them gracefully trot off toward their next destination. From where they stood, they turned around to look in the direction of their next journey. The land below was a steep slope, where on one side was a gorge cutting through the escarpment that formed the Tponga River, and the other side was landscaped with various trees, tall grassy patches and thick bushes. According to Chufi's calculations, they would not arrive at the river's edge until the sun entered the westward sky.

Noah turned towards the East gazing at the distant mountains. The sunlight moved lightly across the peaks changing the colors from rust-red to purple. To the left of them was a large herd of grazing zebras. Among the herd were a dozen or so young foals being weaned by their mothers. He watched them in curious astonishment wanting to go out and pet one of them, but thought it best not to disturb their calm grazing. Instead, he sat on the ground with his back against a tree staring out at the horizon.

Chufi and Petey spied a branch where they could sit while Noah rested. He sat quietly absorbed in this idyllic scene thinking how he had never imagined he could actually come to a place like this and have this kind of experience; it was like something out of one his books back home.

Several minutes later, Cicero began pacing back and forth with his nose in the air sniffing at something invisible and acting agitated. Noah asked what was bothering him?

"Strange feeling we are being watched, Master Noah. Cicero cannot see anything—sense something not far away."

"It's probably some birds, Cicero, don't worry about it." Noah raised his eye-patch up to his forehead and closed his eyes for a moment, allowing his mind to wander back to the strange meeting with Sampson at the zoo. A few moments later, he was snapped out of his reverie by Cicero's barking, and at almost the same time, he heard a gentle voice, very close by.

"Hallo" said the voice. A young zebra was standing right in front of him. It wasn't as large as the adults, but was much bigger than the foals. He was thrilled. He quickly put on the eye-patch and stood up.

"Hello," he said, holding out his hand.

The young zebra sniffed at it for a few seconds, "You don't smell familiar." It shied away from him, and then turned around to head back towards the herd.

"No, don't go little zebra. I won't harm you. My name is Noah Goodarte. I am a human from another planet, called Earth, and this is my friend, Cicero," he pointed at the Border collie. "Do you have a name?"

The young zebra stopped and turned its head eying the two-legged stranger. Petey flew down from the tree and landed on top of the zebra's back.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" the zebra began laughing at the funny little parrot.

"Screech, Petey want to play . . . Petey want to play."

"I am called Willfull Daughter by my Ma, and the others call me Willfull Sister," replied the young zebra jumping around with Petey on her back.

“Let’s play a game! I will try to throw you off, all right?” The zebra whinnied kicking up her hind legs trying to buck Petey off her back.

Noah stood by watching and enjoying the fun. “Ride ‘em cowboy! Yee-haw,” he yelled, slapping the side of his leg.

“Yee-haw, screech, yee-haw!” Petey managed to stay on but screeched when he was about to be thrown off.

Noah kept encouraging Petey to hang in there. Then Chufi jumped into the action, leaping onto the zebra’s back as well. “Yee-haw,” the two of them yelled out.

While all this excitement was going on, Cicero started tugging at Noah’s pant leg to get his attention.

“What is it, Cicero?” Noah asked, but was distracted by the zebra.

“Cicero senses something, Master Noah,” he pointed his face in the direction below where the zebra was playing.

“What do you think it is?” Noah asked, completely distracted by the fun his friends seemed to be enjoying. He casually stroked Cicero’s head, and then jogged over to where the others were playing. But, Cicero ran up ahead of him, and planted himself in front of his master, standing silent, alert, and motionless.

Noah stopped dead in his tracks realizing that something was definitely wrong. “Shush,” he said holding out his hand to quiet the others. “Cicero senses something.”

The zebra stopped jumping around while Petey and Chufi sat quietly on her back, all of them waiting anxiously to see what was bothering the canine. Cicero pressed his belly low to the ground pricking his ears, scarcely seeming to breathe. No one moved, all eyes were on him. He then let out a low growl as he slowly inched his way towards a patch of tall grass.

Petey’s head turned rapidly from side-to-side and was about to screech something until Noah put his finger to his mouth, cautioning him to keep quiet. But the parrot was not about to be silenced. In a blink of an eye, he flew from the zebra’s back up into a tree. From his new vantage point he could see something the others couldn’t see in the tall grassy patch between the young zebra and the herd.

“LION . . . screech . . . LION!”

As soon as those words left Petey’s mouth, the whole herd panicked and began stampeding towards Noah. Chufi yelled for him to make it up the tree, but he was too shocked to move. Cicero was already dashing towards the tall grass barking furiously.

The little zebra hurried over to Noah ordering him to jump onto her back. He clumsily mounted the zebra’s back trying to hold on to her short mane as she ran off just seconds before the herd would have trampled over him. He could hear a huge commotion of growling and snarling sounds coming from where Cicero had run.

“Wait . . . wait,” he hollered, “I can’t leave Cicero . . . go back . . . I need to help Cicero!” Noah tried to stop her, but it was too late. The zebra had already joined in with the rest of the herd.

After a few minutes of hysteria, the stampede finally came to an area where they thought it was safe. The young zebra went to seek out her mother whinnying so her mother could hear her call.

“Willful Daughter, what have we told you before about straying off from the herd? We thought we lost you,” said the older zebra neighing loudly. “And what is this you have on your back?” She gave Noah a conspicuous look.

“Ma, this is Noah Goodheart. He is from another tribe, called hugemun. Noah and his comrade, Cicero, tried to warn us about the clawed-one, AND I am not a child anymore,” she said emphatically.

“Hello, Ma Zebra,” Noah uttered, as he slowly slid off the young zebra’s back. He hung his head low thinking about Cicero as tears began to well up.

“Ma, his friend, Cicero, chased after the clawed-one,” said Willful Zebra, nudging her nose against Noah’s shoulder. “We need to go back and help Noah find his friend.”

“We are grateful to you, Noah Goodheart, for alerting us. And because of your friend’s bravery in fighting off the clawed-one, we shall try to find your friend,” said the mother zebra. She made a loud coughing sound to alert the rest of the herd, remarking how they had to travel in large numbers, now, for safety.

“Jump on my back, Noah,” said the young zebra. “Your friend saved our lives. We are grateful.”

“I pray to God that Cicero is not, you know, I can’t say the word,” he said teary-eyed.

He hopped onto the zebra’s back feeling tremendous grief at the thought of losing his beloved Cicero. The herd galloped back toward the slope where they had been grazing. When they came to a stop near a tree, Noah heard a much welcomed voice.

“Hey, what took ya so long?” said Chufi, sitting on a branch. “Don’t go off and leave me hanging around like that, me was scared.”

“Where is Cicero? Have you seen him?” Noah asked excitedly.

“Petey flew off after him, and me have not seen them since . . . sorry pal!” he said, jumping down to the ground.

Noah slid from the zebra’s back and walked over to where Cicero was last seen. He noticed a lot of torn up grass, but no sign of his Border collie. The zebra went to join him and practically knocked him over as she nudged his back. “I am deeply sorry,” she said.

Noah called out Cicero’s name repeatedly. He then called out for Petey but nothing happened — not a bark or a screech. He sat down on the ground and covered his head with his arms wanting desperately to cry his eyes out. The zebra stood quietly beside him.

Chufi crawled onto Noah’s lap, and the three of them sat in silence as the reality of what had just happened was sinking in. The only sound was that of the herd. They had spread out and once again, were back grazing while remaining alert.

After some time had passed, Chufi noticed that the sun was entering the westward sky. He thought it would be best to continue their journey. But didn’t know how to encourage Noah to go on without his beloved friends. He asked the zebras to gather round so he could explain to them about their plans to travel to where the Tponga emptied into the sea. He then asked mother zebra if the hoofed-ones could take them to the river’s edge where he would find Cousin Tojo. The zebras discussed the situation amongst themselves and then mother zebra informed him that they would be honored to help.

“Willful Daughter,” said mother zebra, “Let us take Noah and his monkey friend to the river—it is getting dark.”

“Excuse me Ma’am, but me is no ordinary monkey! Me is Chufi Da Magicus,” he said with great aplomb.

“Begging your forgiveness, Chufi Da Magicus, but we should be going if you need to reach the river’s edge by the fading of the red saurus.”

Noah was so overcome with grief he couldn’t respond to anything any of them were saying. Chufi urged him to get up and remount the young zebra so they could be on their way. In a listless manner, he stood up as if he were a puppet on a string. He could barely hop onto the zebra’s back. Chufi leaped up and sat in front of him. They gradually set off down the slope in silence. Word had spread that Cicero Dog had given his life to save Willful Sister. The herd began chanting, “Cicero the Hero! Cicero the Hero!”

Chufi was concerned about Noah and decided to sing a song he thought might help ease his mind:

“Oh the goose caught a geese, turned out to be his niece. She honked and honked her horn, in a noisy loud shrill, the goose flew away landing on a hill. He sat upon a frog that thought he was a hog and danced the jiggy jig. Dum-diddi-dum-diddi-doo. The goose flew down the slope, got snagged by a rope; the geese honked and honked, what a silly dope. Dum-diddi-dum-dee-doo!”

Suddenly Noah straightened up as he could hear a faint familiar sound coming from above.

“Screech . . . Noey . . . screech . . . Noey . . .”

“Petey! Petey!” Noah shouted, as the parrot landed on his shoulder.

“Noey, Noey, Cicero dog is alive,” Petey screeched excitedly.

Noah kissed the parrot on his beak. He could hardly believe his words. “Where is he?” he asked eagerly, wiping his tear-stained face.

“Not far, Noey, not far.”

Word had spread quickly that Cicero dog lived, and a new chant began rippling through the herd, “Cicero the Hero lives! Cicero the Hero lives!”

Noah jumped off the zebra calling out his name. Chufi leaped up to a tree to get a better look. “I see him, I see him, he’s okay. He’s running towards us,” he said, jumping up and down.

About a hundred feet away Noah could see the tip of Cicero’s tail as he ran through bushes and long blades of grass. He rushed out yelling, “Cicero, Cicero, you’re alive!” They both knocked each other over, as Noah embraced his beloved companion.

A loud cheer from the zebras erupted, “Hail, Cicero the Hero!”

“What happened to the clawed-one?” Mother zebra inquired stomping her hoof against the ground nervously. “How could that little four-legged one have chased off the large clawed-beast?” Upon hearing this, the herd became agitated and began twitching their ears. “The clawed-one, what happened to the clawed-one?” they murmured.

Cicero caught his breath and began explaining what had happened during his encounter with the lion. He explained that the clawed-one was not trying to harm anyone at all, he was watching the game and wanted to play. He is deeply saddened that none of the dwellers want to play with him anymore. The elders cast him out of the pride, and he is lonely.

“Please, Master Noah, the clawed-one wants to be our friend. He has just come of age—there is a lot he doesn’t understand yet. I told him about our mission to find the secret cave,” said Cicero, practically out of breath.

After listening to this extraordinary account, Noah passed on the information to mother zebra and a few others from the herd. But the mother zebra was not so eager on accepting the clawed-one’s story, as the herd had recently been attacked several times by his kind. It was too much to expect the zebras to be so trusting of his kind at this time. Especially, when there were no signs that these attacks would cease. They preferred to remain at a safe distance away from this clawed beast.

Mother Zebra stood facing Noah, her eyes steady and serious. She explained to him that ever since the destruction of Mastodonia Ridge a cloud of darkness had fallen over Empyreal turning it into a Wasteland. That same darkness had been spreading farther into the Borderlands causing fear when there was none, and separation amongst the dwellers when there used to be unity. A powerful Conjuron lurks in the Wasteland. Its dark presence has grown stronger and not one dweller knows how to defeat this demon, except Jahru. Mother zebra lamented, “It is sad for us that the Great Ones have not been to the Borderlands in many, many solar ages. None of us grazers have been able to go to Shivadam . . . so here we are, on our own.”

After listening to Mother Zebra, Noah told her he completely understood her misgivings and that the zebras should do as they wished, but he felt it would be unfair to the clawed-one not to hear his story. He at least owed him that much since Cicero dog was alive and unharmed.

The mother zebra wished him well and said she was sorry that they couldn't wait around to take them all the way to the river's edge. They needed to head for safer grazing before nighttime fell.

Neighing loudly for the herd to begin their next journey, the mother zebra asked Willful Daughter to bid her farewells to Noah and his friends. But the young zebra had other intentions. For some strange reason, she felt strongly drawn to Noah and his companions and did not want to leave with the herd. She asked her mother for her blessing to journey with the Goodheart, as she was now old enough to be on her own.

Noah felt it was his duty to explain to her that they would be traveling on the river and he didn't think it would be safe for her. He was deeply touched by her support, but he didn't feel right about subjecting her to any danger.

"What? Are you implying that I am too young? Ha! I am much bigger than you, little one, and I am faster and stronger," she said defiantly.

"Noah, Noah, Noah," Chufi interjected, "You gotta learn not to argue with a female. We can build a bigger raft, and besides me likes riding on her back. Can't beat 'em, join 'em—that's what we say in the jungle." Chufi grinned widely, feeling happy that they had a new companion.

Cicero nudged Noah's leg. "Master Noah," he whispered, "The clawed-one is waiting—he also wants to journey with us."

Meanwhile, the zebras were ready to leave, and mother zebra was waiting for Willful Daughter's final decision, hoping she would change her mind. However, the young zebra was determined to go with Noah and the others. She pleaded with her mother not to worry and that she was in good company, and would be safe from harm. She bade a sad farewell to her family promising that she would find them again.

"Please look after my daughter, Noah Goodheart," said the mother zebra with tearful eyes. "She can be quite willful at times, as you have seen. She is what she is, and one can only guide her so much of the way. We wish you a safe and successful journey. May you all fare well!"

The companions waved good-by as they watched the zebras turned around and gallop away leaving a trail of dust behind them.

"Shall I fetch the clawed-one, Master Noah?" Cicero asked, wagging his tail.

"I, I guess so," he said feeling a little apprehensive.

Cicero barked a few times, then seconds later a very large lion emerged from the tall grass, bigger than any four-legged Noah had ever seen. At first, he wanted to run and hide and he could sense the rest of his friends were feeling the same way. Nevertheless, they stood still, not moving a muscle. Cicero encouraged the lion to come forward.

In spite of the fact that the lion was a young robust male that was several feet long from his crown to the end of his tail, it was obvious that he was bashful and slightly frightened. He cowered his reddish-brown head in front of them.

"Come out, friend," said Noah calmly. "We won't hurt you, I promise. My name is Noah Goodarte and this is Chufi Da Magicus." The monkey bowed his head nervously. "And this is Sister Zee." The zebra offered a light whinny, feeling pleased with the sound of her new name. "Up there in the tree is Petey."

Noah waited for the lion's response but the lion remained silent, as he carried on talking about how they were on a mission to find the secret cave that will help them reach Shivadam. He felt sorry for the bashful lion, as he knew all too well what it was like to be considered awkward and shy.

The lion tilted his head and raised his paw to shake Noah's hand. "Honored to meet you, Noah Goodheart. Sorry I frightened everyone . . . just wanted to play," he said, cowering his massive head even lower, nearly touching the ground with his nose.

“Most grazers don’t want to play with me anymore. When I was a cub, they used to play with me all the time, but now they run away whenever the pride comes around. When I turned of age, the pride cast me out. I’m alone and no one wants to talk to me – they’re all afraid of me. I am the one who is afraid. How would you like to be by yourself all day and all night?” Tears began streaming down the lion’s face.

“Don’t cry, clawed-one, you can hang out with us—right everyone?” said Noah, waiting for their replies, but none came. “We shall give you a name that you can be proud of. I mean, we can’t keep calling you the clawed-one.”

“The pride used to call me 'clumsy'. It is not a proud name. They called me clumsy, because whenever I would run, I would always fall or bang into trees. Sometimes I close my eyes when I run because I’m so happy.”

The enormity of the lion’s physical frame was in complete contrast to his timid demeanor, which was somewhat perplexing to Noah. He needed to have a name that would reflect pride and nobility.

“We shall call you Leopold the Great! Yes, Leopold fits you well. What do you think, Leopold?” Noah looked at the lion in awe.

“Leopold has a nice sound to it. Yes! I AM, LEOPOLD THE GREAT!” He then bellowed a loud, resounding roar that struck terror into every bird and animal for miles around.

“Easy big boy,” Chufi shushed him, “there are others around these parts that are still easily frightened by the sound of roars, get my meaning?”

“Sorry everyone, it’s just that Leopold is very happy with his new name. I promise I will behave.”

“Well, what are we waiting for? We have a gorilla to find and a raft to build,” said Chufi, straightening his pith helmet and proudly heaving his chest forward. “Me is the trail guide, and the trail guide says we get the bees-knees out of here before it gets too dark.”

“Okey-dokey, let’s get the show on the road,” said Noah feeling quite pleased now that there were two more friends joining his mission.

Cicero nuzzled against Leopold’s side welcoming him to the group. They began descending the steep slope with Chufi sitting on top of Leopold giving directions and singing his little ditty about the geese he had sung earlier. Petey and Noah rode on top of Sister Zee and Cicero was the anchor. All that was heard were their happy little voices and Leopold’s baritone grunts.

Noah was looking forward to meeting Cousin Tojo, the Silver back gorilla who was last seen in the dense lowlands. Next to the elephants, he thought gorillas were the most awe-inspiring species of mammals.

“Noah, you mentioned before about something called “God” What is God?” Sister Zee asked blinking her eyes. “Can this God help us get rid of the conjuron and the dreghuls? Is God as powerful as Jahru?”

Noah was surprised by her question. “I believe God is not a person or a thing. I’m guessing that Jahru is powerful but not in the same way as God. I don't know for sure, but I think God created this whole universe,” he said throwing out his arms.

Sister Zee looked spellbound by his remark.

“God gives us the tools we need at first, and then the rest is up to us. At least, that is what I believe. But if we keep messing up life for everyone else, then we need a powerful force to intervene and sort it all out, once and for all.

“I don’t know if that force is God or something that God made to keep order in the universe. All I know is that something really big is going to happen in my world, and that is why I need Jahru’s help.”

Sister Zee's eyes widened with interest and said she now understood more about his mission. She asked if he could ask God for help. Noah smiled and told her that God already knows he needs help and left it at that. She said she would ask his God for help as well.

Cutting through tall grass and thick pockets of dense under-growth, Sister Zee kept stumbling over low, creeping vines and tree roots feeling frustrated that they were getting nowhere fast. Sometimes Petey would fly up ahead to check out the terrain. Cicero's tongue lolled out of his mouth, thirsty for something cool to drink. Leopold suggested that he should eat some grass, as it would soothe his thirst until they found water.

Halfway down the slope, several wood pigeons bolted up from the tall grass taking flight into the sky. The group stopped to watch them fly and disappear. When the four-legged ones flicked their tails they were off again. The air was filled with myriad sounds of birds, insects and the rasping song of the cicadas droning constantly in the background.

They walked until the sun began its descent. Cicero urged them to stop because he could smell water. Petey screeched from above that he had sighted the river not too far away. This encouraged the group to pick up the pace. After several more minutes of walking, the odor from the river pressed upon them, as did the animal droppings that were left behind from other dwellers that had visited the watering spot. They could now see the flowing river just ahead.

The Tponga was at least 300 feet wide. On the other side of the river were huge boulders and fallen rocks with trees and shrubs growing out of the sides of the escarpment.

When Noah jumped off Zee's back, she joined Cicero and Leopold as they started running towards the river. Once they reached the edge, Cicero leaped into the water while the other two stood in the shallows gulping down the fresh liquid. Chufi scampered up a tree propping himself up on a limb that was hanging over the riverbank, while Petey busied himself splashing around in a puddle of water. Cicero returned to his master dripping wet wagging his tail and innocently spraying water everywhere as he shook himself.

Noah laughed taking it as a sign for him to jump into the river. He placed his hat and eyepatch on top of the backpack and then ran towards the water and dove in. He played and splashed about in the water for a while, until it was time to dry off. He lied down on the sandy banks of the river with a big smile on his face reflecting on how much fun he was having. He looked around at all his new friends and felt happy for the first time in a long while. So what if I'm an oddball? At least I'm a happy one, he mused.

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Chapter 8 GENTLE GIANT

Chufi and Petey went searching for Tojo while the rest of the group began setting up camp. Chufi had left them with instructions on what would be needed to construct a river-raft, and where they might find the materials. The crew busied themselves with the task until they got hungry.

Noah decided to take responsibility in preparing dinner or what he thought was dinner, for the meal he concocted looked more like the stuff Cicero muddled himself with; it was definitely nothing like the meals Chufi always prepared for them.

Leopold and Cicero positioned themselves on a clump of twigs salivating in anticipation of their meal. Sister Zee stood by a patch of tall bamboo trees watching Noah serve them. The two four-legged ones stared down at the contents looking confused at what their friend called food.

“What’s wrong? Aren’t you two hungry?” remarked Noah, hoping they would ignore the presentation. They didn’t say a word.

“Okay, just close your eyes and pretend it’s a magwat pie.” Noah closed his one good eye, and then slightly opened it to see if one of his friends would attempt to eat the goop he had prepared. He spied Cicero nudging some of it off his banana leaf.

Leopold was the only brave one who dared to eat it, and in one swoop of his enormous tongue he gulped the substance down without even chewing. “That was delicious,” he said, licking the sides of his mouth.

Sister Zee pretended not to be hungry and offered her portion to Leopold, which he graciously accepted. She thought it best to stick to eating the bamboo leaves. Cicero whimpered forcing himself to nip a tiny portion of the goop and whimpered even louder when he swallowed it.

“That’s not necessary, Cicero! You don’t have to eat it if you don’t like it,” said Noah, scooping a hefty portion of the food onto his own leaf. “Well, here goes nothing.” Noah took in a mouthful and quickly swallowed it, “Yuck, that’s horrid.” He looked frantically for some water to wash out the bad taste. “You like this goop, Leopold?” He was still spitting out the acrid taste from his mouth.

“It is the best meal Leopold has ever eaten, Noah Goodheart,” and with one swoop of his tongue he gulped down another portion. He was just about to bellow a loud roar when they heard Chufi and Petey approaching from above the treetops.

“Hey guys, we couldn’t find Cousin Tojo, but we left word for him with some other relatives,” said Chufi, leaping down to inspect the meal.

“You’re just in time for dinner,” said Sister Zee with a smirk on her face.

Chufi shoved a portion of the goop into his mouth and with his mouth full yelled out, “You call this food!” He began spitting it out. “Why, me wouldn’t feed it to a dust mite. Noah, pal, whaddaya doing to me?” He made a gagging gesture with his fingers.

“Sorry, I never said I knew how to cook. In fact, I have never cooked before in my entire life, so there,” Noah folded his arms across his chest.

“Listen, little buddy, for now on you just leave it to ol’ Chufi,” said the monkey, looking inside his rucksack. “Where is it?” Chufi said loudly.

“What are you looking for?” Sister Zee asked.

“Me magic cape. Me was sure me brought it. Me would never leave home without it.”

“Oops,” said Noah, “I’m afraid I have it, I was going to use it for a sail.” He bent down to collect the cape he had placed with the rest of their boat supplies and handed it over to Chufi.

“You . . . you thought me cape could be used as a sail? Whaddaya NUTS?”

“Sorry! You did tell us to look for something we can use for a sail just in case we needed one, so I remembered about your cape. It’s only a cape for crying out loud.”

The rest of the group remained silent, as they looked from side-to-side at the bantering going on between Noah and Chufi.

“Only a cape, he says. Well, let me show you what this little cape can do.” Chufi flung out his cape and muttered a few inaudible words. In a few seconds, he materialized a scrumptious meal. “Now, do you still think of it as just a cape?” he said smugly. Noah’s mouth fell open and the rest of the group cheered Chufi’s magic trick.

“I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have taken your cape without your permission.” Noah’s face turned red, “I forgot about your magic tricks.”

“Chufi, you should not talk to Noah like that, he’s the One-eyed Warrior,” whispered Sister Zee, as she trotted past him, switching her tail.

Noah was embarrassed for what he did. He sat down feeling terrible and then pretended to look for something inside his back-pack.

“Here Noah, me made you your favorite meal,” Chufi held out a magwat pie. Noah looked at it for a few seconds, and then accepted the savory dish. Everyone was relieved.

“Thanks, Chufi! I still feel bad about taking your cape.”

“You can have me cape anytime you want. But, just don’t lose it, ‘cos me don’t know how to cook without it, and we could be eating your food instead of mine.”

Chufi and Noah laughed a little at first, and then the rest of the group joined in. Then they all began laughing hysterically, especially at the thought of eating Noah’s food.

Chufi was rolling over bursting with laughter as Leopold and Sister Zee were in tears from laughing so hard. Cicero was spinning round and round laughing his tail off with Petey screeching un-controllably up on a tree bough.

Then the four-legged ones abruptly stopped laughing and pricked their ears. They detected another presence nearby. Chufi stopped rolling around in the dirt trying to catch his breath. Noah was still doubled-over in laughter, that is until he heard Petey screeching, “We have company, screech, we have company.”

Loud crushing sounds came from the trees and bushes with heavy thudding steps getting closer. It was too dark to see what was causing the noise. They had no idea if it were the dreghuls or the Conjuron.

“Wha, what is it?” said Noah nervously, fidgeting with his hat.

The crushing sounds were getting closer and closer. Chufi jumped into Noah’s arms while Cicero crouched low to the ground, preparing to defend his master. Leopold sniffed the air and quickly moved behind Noah with his tail between his legs. Sister Zee boldly walked ahead of them and then trotted off towards the sound.

“Don’t go in there, Sister Zee, it could be a dreghul,” Chufi yelled out. But it was too late. Zee quickly disappeared into the bushes, as Petey flew in after her. Cicero slowly crawled his way ahead of them. Minutes later Zee came running back neighing hysterically with Petey in flight right behind her.

“It’s the Conjuron,” Chufi yelled out, before burrowing himself deeper into Noah’s arms.

Just as they were all going to run for cover, out from the bushes came a mighty thrust, as a gigantic, silverback gorilla lurched forward and planted himself right in front of the frightened group.

“Aargh!” they all screamed.

“Don’t be afraid friends,” said the huge ape, calmly munching on a bamboo branch.

The great Silverback towered over Noah casting a wide shadow over the rest of the group smiling at everyone. "I'm Tojo, Son of Shambu the Great, and cousin to Chufi," said the giant ape with a cheerful grin.

"Geesh!" said Chufi in relief. "Tojo, you scared the monkey hairs off me. How many times must me tell you not to do that; me swears me must have aged a hundred lumars right before your eyes." He began fanning his face with the end of his cape as he made the necessary introductions of his friends.

Cicero went up to the gorilla and started sniffing around him. The massive ape patted the dog's head and then Cicero licked the gorilla's leathery hand. Tojo apologized for scaring everyone. He expressed how deeply honored he was to meet Noah the Goodheart and his comrades.

Noah stared in amazement at the colossal form that was half crouching and half standing. He was a pillar of gleaming ebony with black, crewcut hair, brown, deep-sunken, moist eyes with huge protruding nostrils, and a slight, reddish-black beard.

Tojo bent down to sniff at Noah. He then extended his arm to shake the Goodheart's hand. Noah placed his puny hand, which looked like a pebble inside the Silverback's massive one as the gorilla shook it gently.

Noah's liked his smile and felt safe and calm in his presence. Leopold remained in the background feeling slightly disturbed by the appearance of Tojo. He found a tree-trunk to lie against and just watched and listened as the group proceeded with their discussion about the Cave of Secrets.

Sister Zee observed his dejected demeanor and walked over to him to find out what was bothering him.

Leopold lowered his head as he spoke, "I feel a strange sensation being in the presence of another dominant male. I guess it comes from being banished by the pride. Cousin Tojo is so big and fearless. He is the king of his kind. Unlike me, I am just an overgrown cat, not fit to have a name like Leopold," he rested his head on his paws.

"My dear friend, the whole kingdom fears your kind. You are Leopold the Great! Or have you forgotten?"

"I am the sniveling cub of the den more like it. The pride threw me out because I embarrass them. All I have ever wanted was to find my place in the kingdom, where I would fit in and others would like me. I am a disgrace to my kind."

"Don't worry, Leopold, we love you and once we reach Shivadam you shall have another place in the kingdom to fit in, just like me," said Zee, nuzzling the side of his face. Her words seemed to have eased some of his insecurity. He began licking his paws and then smiled on at his new friends.

Tojo made a map out of banana leaves. He drew on it with the tip of a feather dipped in berry juice. "Follow the Tponga where it empties into the sea," he said, as he continued drawing. He marked out various landmarks they would encounter along the way to their destination. He went on to tell them about a journey he had once made to the North Country.

"If you end up on dry land, you must be careful of the Siren of the Weeping Willow. Her lamenting song will lure you closer to the entrance of the Wasteland. The only way to avoid the Siren's spell is to first eat some puka-berries. I like the puka-berries. That was the reason for my journey to that part of the land. But you must beware, for if you fall under the Siren's spell, you will become helpless, and that's when the dreghuls come to devour you.

"Once I had a close encounter with them," said the gorilla with eyes wide, captivating everyone with his story. "They attacked me from behind, knocking me to the ground. I lost my balance, but I quickly rebounded and fought back knocking them away from me."

Tojo began punching the air in demonstration. "There were many of them. I knocked a few dozen, but then I had to retreat quickly. Look at my scars from their sharp claws and long teeth," he said, turning around to show everyone the marks on his back.

"Holy Moley," exclaimed Noah.

Chufi incessantly blinked his bulging eyes in disbelief at the size of the claw marks on his cousin's back. Part of the silver was now scarred skin. Leopold and Sister Zee swallowed loudly as they examined the scar tissue.

Zee felt anxious and her thoughts ran rampant with fear. She wished that she was back with the herd. At least they could always make a run for it and they were pretty fast runners. She paced back and forth nervously and then began stomping her hoof against the ground. The others continued to ask Tojo more questions about his terrifying ordeal.

Noah sensed Zee's anxiety and went over to talk to her. "Sister Zee, I know this seems all pretty scary, so I will understand if you want to turn back and find your family, honest," he said, stroking her short mane.

Sister Zee snorted softly, "I am a little frightened, Noah Goodheart. But if you go on this voyage, I go with you. Remember, I am bigger than you. I can run fast, so if we get into trouble on the land you make sure to jump on me, and we will high-tail it out of there, okey-dokey?"

"Okey-dokey. Hey, I got you saying it now," Noah smiled. "You know, I think you're a very brave zebra and I am happy you're with us. You remind me a lot of my older sister, Gigi. I promise to jump on your back, if we run into danger." He wrapped his arms around her neck trying to give her an affectionate hug; it seemed to make both of them feel more at ease.

Tojo carried on talking about what else he saw along the way to the mouth of the sea. He told them about a place with a magical lagoon that had clouds rising from its waters and lots of fruit trees and lovely sunsets and clear nights. He said that the lagoon had special healing powers. He also mentioned the story about a mythical tree called the Dahwah Tree. It was believed that the leaves can cause you to lose your memory. This captivated Noah's attention.

Tojo began telling the story about how a pygmy ape sat under the Dahwah tree and went to sleep. When he woke up he forgot what he was, and started acting like a peacock because that was the first habbie he had seen.

"How do we recognize the Dahwah tree?" Cicero asked.

"Look for leaves that are covered in silvery dust and shaped like half circles," Tojo replied, adding, "But it's just a myth. Don't worry little friend, these are just stories passed on from one habbie to another."

Noah was grateful that they had Tojo around to help them with devising a map. The group invited or rather they insisted on Tojo staying the night with them. They all felt more secure with him around the camp.

After they were finished discussing the map and their route, Chufi went out to ask a clan of Colobus monkeys for help in crafting a river-raft. The preparation tasks were much welcomed as it kept their minds occupied from thinking too much about what perils may lay ahead of them on their journey. Petey was the only one who didn't help as he stood watch from one of the tree boughs.

The river-raft was completed by nightfall. The first to begin yawning and ready for sleep was Leopold who stretched out his large body. When he was just about to bellow a roar, Chufi hurried over to him before he could do so. Chufi thanked him and in turn, the little monkey stretched and yawned as well, suggesting that it was time to turn in.

Sister Zee decided to sleep under a large tree along side Leopold. Cicero and Noah snuggled up together against another tree trunk, and Chufi joined Petey high up on the same tree bough.

Tojo, who was the largest of the group, pushed against a bunch of bamboos making a comfortable nest to curl up inside. They all said goodnight to the Colobus monkeys, and thanked them for helping. Without their assistance, they'd still be trying to build a raft.

Somewhere not too far from their campsite, the dusk time shrills of creatures were heard. A flock of Ibis took flight like spirits in the nightfall, their eyes for an instant reflecting the faint light of the moon. Noah could hear the deep, heavy sound of breathing coming from Leopold, and deep grunt-like snores coming from Tojo. It was a wonder to him at all that he was actually here with these amazing animals. Lying down and half-asleep, he couldn't help but think about Sampson, wondering what happened to everyone and to the animals after the big earthquake. He thought hard on whether or not he would ever be able to find the Cave of Secrets and seek Jahru's help in stopping the Deiwala.

Finally, when he fell asleep he dreamed of a magnificent albino, bull elephant bejeweled with an elaborate medallion dangling from the middle of his forehead. The finest, vibrant, colored fabrics draped down from his back, and his large toenails were lacquered in pearl-luminescent hues. The most prominent feature were the elephant's long, golden tusks that sparkled and glittered. So long were the tusks that they curved deeply at the end. It was a wonder at all that he could walk with such weight, and when the prodigious elephant did so, the ground shook with force. His trunk was thick and sinewy and when he trumpeted out a cry the entire area vibrated from the sound.

The elephant's dark and penetrating eyes gazed into Noah's eyes, and all he could do was stare in utter amazement at the elephant. He knew this was the majestic Avaraj he had heard so much about.

"NOAH," said the elephant in a deep, baritone voice.

Noah trembled upon hearing his name and the hairs on his neck rose.

"You seek an audience with me, yes?" said the mighty elephant.

Noah was so nervous he could barely utter a word. The great elephant stared down at him waiting for him to say something, but Noah was unable to respond. The elephant looked scornful. He raised his trunk trumpeting a loud, re-sounding lament, and then declared an Act of Deiwala against the Earth.

Noah panicked and began screaming, "No, No! This can't be happening!"

Cicero was licking Noah's face urging him to wake up. When he opened his eyes, he felt tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Master Noah, what is it? What happened? Are you all right?" asked Cicero, panting loudly.

Noah sat up trying to calm his breathing. He wiped his face with his arm telling Cicero that he had a bad dream, and that he was okay. He lied back down wondering why Jahru reacted so harshly toward him. It was all too confusing. He tossed and turned for a little while longer wishing the night to be over, and finally, he was able to doze off to sleep.

Close to their camp, hiding behind some bushes were two dreghuls that had been keeping watch over Noah and his companions. One of them beamed its eyes on Petey and another had its eyes on Chufi. "The Master didn't say anything about leaving those two alone," commented one of the dreghuls.

Quietly, they flew up to where Petey and Chufi were sleeping and as they got into position to snatch their prey, Leopold suddenly got up and ambled over towards them. The two dreghuls quickly fled, finding another bush to hide behind. They watched as the clawed-one sniffed at the air sensing something nearby.

Cicero ears pricked and quickly opened his eyes. He noticed Leopold scratching his backside against a tree. Seeing there was no need for alarm, he rested his head on his paws and fell back to sleep.

Leopold, however, was still uneasy and began prowling around the bushes where the two dreghuls were hiding. The intruders held their breath waiting for the clawed beast to pass them by. They watched the lion swagger back to his resting place, and when they were sure the coast was clear, they immediately alighted into the darkness to continue their night watch from a safer distance.

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Chapter 9

BIG ROCKS AND HIPPOS

The sound of animals rustling nearby meant daylight arrived. It was also time for Cicero to lick his master's face. Noah stirred a little before opening his eyes and then gave a long, deep yawn. He had forgotten about the dream he had, and was happy to be awake. Cicero wagged his tail and barked loudly to let his master know that he was hungry. Petey was still sleeping with head under wing despite all the commotion, while Leopold and Tojo were still happily snoring away.

Chufi stretched his body then scratching his backside while looking around to see who else was awake. Noah went down to the bank to join Sister Zee who was already taking her morning drink.

Brilliant shafts of sunlight cast a golden glow upon the river's surface reflecting a celestial radiance unlike anything Noah had ever seen in his world. From the banks he could see to the bottom of the riverbed, marveling at how clean and pure everything was in this magical place. He washed his face in the cool, fresh water and could see from the glassy surface that his eye was still swollen. He put on his eye-patch and then looked along the riverbank where just a short distance away he saw a group of gazelle along with a few giraffe drinking from the water. He gazed upon them with curiosity and they, too, reciprocated the same inquisitive look.

"Good morning," said Noah.

The giraffes gave him a casual glance and went back to drinking. Petey, who had finally woken up, flew to one of the giraffes screeching something at which they all looked over at Noah and bade him a "good morning".

Noah smiled. He was delighted by his first encounter with these tall, elegant animals.

"We're going to the end of the Tponga River," said Noah with an air of innocence. "Then we're going to Shivadam to see Jahru," he pointed to the image of the elephant on his tee-shirt.

"The Avaraj of Shivdam," one of the giraffes responded. "We have only heard about him from the elders. Our kind cannot make the journey to Shivadam, and he has not come to this land for countless seasons and births."

The giraffe bent her long, elegant neck to nuzzle her baby that was waiting to be suckled. "You must possess great power if you know how to cross the wide waterway. We wish you well on your journey. You are very courageous, young one, but do be cautious and alert, anything can happen when traveling near the Wasteland, something dreadful dwells in that forsaken place."

Noah arched his eyebrows nodding his head in response to her warning. "My name is Noah Goodarte. Do you have a name the other giraffes call you?"

"We do not have names, but if you like, please call me Mo."

"Mo! I hope we meet again. It's been nice talking to you. Goodbye!"

The giraffe blinked her huge doe-like eyes and then gracefully turned her neck to continue her morning drink. The baby giraffe stepped awkwardly from underneath its mother's belly, eyeing Noah up and down.

Noah held out his hand and the baby giraffe sniffed at it, and then smiled widely.

"How many lumars are you?" asked the baby giraffe.

Noah thought about the question and guessed that the baby was asking him how old he was. "I just turned thirteen years old yesterday, or was it two days ago? I can't remember."

"I am almost two full lumars," the baby giraffe announced with pride. "One day I will be tall and big enough to graze on my own."

Already the little giraffe was three times the height of Noah, and in another three years or so, it would grow to be taller than its mother. The other animals along the riverbank whispered amongst one another as they offered a “good morning” salutation to the one-eyed stranger.

Noah was deeply honored to be in their presence and felt that they weren’t frightened of him in the least. However, the auspicious moment didn’t last long. At this point, Leopold woke up and gave a loud morning roar that scared off every four legged and winged creature around scattering in all directions leaving behind a pattern of varied footprints in the damp soil.

“Leopold, couldn’t you roar a little less loud? You scared off all the animals,” said Noah, throwing up his arms.

“Sorry, Noah, I forget that I am, what I am. I will try to be quiet next time.” Leopold was clearly embarrassed.

Noah patted the lion on his thick mane and then walked over to the raft which was made of giant, bamboo sticks and roped vines. It had a mast in the center, in case they needed a sail, and a rope of woven vine securely fastened around bamboo posts for railings. There was a boarding plank made of smaller bamboos lashed together with vines. There was even a set of tiny paddles for Chufi in case they needed extra arm-power.

Noah picked up the punting pole that was leaning against a tree and looked it over, wondering how he was ever going to navigate with it when he could barely hold on to it. Even though Tojo gave him a crash course last night on how to use the pole, he was still worried that he wouldn’t be able to navigate the raft. He began feeling queasy and started fidgeting around with his eye-patch imagining all his friends drowning in the river because of his ineptitude. He made a silent prayer asking for a safe voyage and for lots of help in navigating.

After finishing a light breakfast of Magwat pies, Noah began looking over the map with Chufi and Tojo making sure that they understood every detail of it with accuracy. Tojo confirmed that he couldn’t think of anything to add, except to beware of rocks and hippos.

“Do you believe the Cave of Secrets really exists?” Tojo asked, chomping on a bamboo branch.

“I don’t know for sure, but I have to try and find it,” Noah responded, looking up at the gorilla.

Noah asked Tojo if he would help bring the raft down to the riverbank. Tojo walked over, picked up the raft as if it were a toy, carrying it to the edge and then placed it into the water. The time arrived for the crew to board the raft. Noah and Tojo held it against the bank and asked Sister Zee to board first. She nervously put one hoof on the plank and for a moment, it looked as though she was about to start walking across it.

“I can’t do it,” Zee cried out. “I’m going to fall into the river.” She reared her head, and then backed away from the plank.

“Zee, if you don’t board the raft, you won’t be able to come with us,” said Noah calmly. Transporting a lion and a zebra on a water vessel had never seemed like a good idea to him. But how else would they be able to journey to the mouth of the sea quickly? He then looked over to where Leopold was standing. “Very well, Leopold, you can board first.”

Immediately, the lion began whimpering loudly, as he slowly approached the raft. He put his front left paw onto the plank and then cried out “What if I sink to the bottom? I can’t swim. I have never been able to swim. I might drown.” He backed away from the plank with his tail between his legs.

“Geesh!” Chufi exclaimed, “What happened to all that mumbo-jumbo you said yesterday, about being alone and wanting to come with us?” He asked in an agitated tone. He paced back and forth waving his arms about waiting for some resolution to all this nonsense.

“I know it may be dangerous for everyone but I have no choice. Finding the cave is the only way for us to reach Shivadam. Traveling on the river is the quickest way. Think it over for a few minutes and let me know what you both decide,” said Noah.

Chufi boldly crossed the plank with a look that said, “I’ve done this loads of times” and sat firmly in the middle of the raft. Petey flew up and found a comfortable perch on the masthead.

After several minutes of deliberation, Leopold and Sister Zee approached the others with their heads held high. “We feel it is in the best interest of all that we don’t board the raft. We will follow you along the river as fast as we can run,” said Zee in her most dignified tone. Leopold also expressed his regrets and reiterated what Sister Zee had just suggested, pointing out that he could not swim and was afraid of drowning.

While Leopold and Zee were trying to be diplomatic about not going on the raft, Tojo began thumping on his chest catching everyone by surprise. “Tojo knows what to do!” he said with bright, eager eyes. “I will take Sister Zee and Leopold to Cousin Wyzl and Woozl’s Retreat. We will meet up with you there—see, it’s right here,” he pointed to the location he drew on the map.

“That’s a great idea,” said Zee, prancing about jubilantly.

It took a few seconds for Noah to digest what Tojo had just suggested, and beamed a wide smile. He thanked the gorilla for his fantastic idea. When they were all on board, Tojo gave the raft a huge shove and watched as it drifted with the current. The crew waved goodbye to their friends watching Leopold and Sister Zee ran along the embankment trying to keep up with them. But the current was too swift and it whisked the little raft along the stream.

Noah had never been on a raft before and was overwhelmed by how difficult it was to manage. He focused all his energy on maneuvering the pole in the strong current without losing control of the raft. After a while, he was finally able to navigate and began to relax. Chufi and Cicero sat still and kept silent, looking decidedly more nervous now than they had when they were on land. Petey was the only one on deck who seemed to be having a great time screeching with excitement from the top of the mast.

If only my dad and the kids back at home could see me now, thought Noah, they would be so surprised. Everyone, except the students at Brighton, used to think of him as some puny weirdo who acted odd and talked to animals. They had no idea that he was just as capable of being brave as any other boy, bigger or older. He imagined a huge hero’s parade with ticker-tape streaming and marching bands. His friends, Chufi, Leopold, Tojo and Sister Zee accompanying his motorcade with Petey on his shoulder and Cicero sitting next to him. Everyone was yelling out his name, “Noah the Goodheart! Hip-hip Hooray!”

While he was lost in his daydream, the raft was heading toward a large boulder that was on the left side of the riverbank.

“Watch out for the rock!” Chufi yelled out.

Noah used all his strength to push the pole against the bottom of the river to try and veer the raft around the rock. It felt like the current was going to pull the pole right out of his clutches. With every bit of energy he could muster, he held onto the pole for dear life as Chufi joined in to help paddled. Luckily, they missed the boulder by inches, but they were suddenly caught up in an eddy that spun the raft round and round.

Chufi was nearly thrown off before he managed to grab ahold of Cicero’s neck and clung onto him for dear life. Noah held on to the mast pole with one arm as he clutched the punting pole with the other. Petey, oddly enough, looked like he was enjoying the excitement.

“Whoa!” they yelled out as the raft kept spinning and spinning. After a few minutes, they had finally spun out of the eddy. However, before they could all catch their breath they were quickly swept away by rapids being bounced around and thrown from side-to-side. The raft suddenly dropped over a short waterfall causing Noah to flip overboard. His quick reaction in

grabbing hold of the rope-railing saved him from falling into the rapids. He held on tightly through what seemed like an eternity of a very long stretch of rapids.

After they floated onto a calm current, Cicero hurried over to his master with the plank rope between his teeth. Noah managed to catch the rope as Cicero assisted in pulling him back on board. Chufi still held onto the mast and wouldn't let go. It took a few minutes for Noah to stand up, and when he did his legs were shaking. He managed to get the pole back into the river and barely take control of the raft. Up above on the masthead Petey was screeching for more rapids.

"Whew, that was a close call," sighed Chufi. "Noah, me friend, me don't wants to rain on your parade, but you gotta keep a closer eye out for things like HIPPOS AND BIG ROCKS, Geesh!"

"Sorry guys, I didn't mean to scare you like that —I won't let it happen again," he said, dripping wet and feeling embarrassed by his recklessness. He felt sick to his stomach as if he were going to vomit. When he was able to fully regain his composure he focused all his attention on navigating the raft along the current.

After a while, they were once again cruising smoothly and all of them, save for Noah, were able to enjoy the different scenery they passed along the way. Giant frond plants, rhododendrons, and mangroves along with rows of various foliage decorated the river-bank. Lapsing through another stretch of current, they came upon what looked like a large mass of boulders in the river. On closer inspection they could see it was a group of hippopotamus.

Noah gazed at these magnificent animals commonly known on earth as the river-horse. The hippopotami were wallowing in the shallows and for a brief moment, they looked up casually at the travelers passing by. Noah waved to them. They grunted and then submerged beneath the river-reeds. He saw other familiar animals and some that he didn't recognize. This was more than he could ever have imagined — animals he had always read about, and was now seeing for the first time in their natural habitats. He wanted to stop for a picture, but wouldn't chance letting go of the pole. He would have to wait for another opportunity, which he was sure to come.

In another part of the Borderlands, close to that dark and ravaged area known to all dwellers as the Wasteland, a lone male panther had been stalking a strange looking animal — one he had not seen before. The animal had wings and legs and was flying low to the ground. Every now and then, the creature would land briefly, almost as if waiting for the predator to catch up. The scent of the creature piqued the panther's curiosity as much as his hunger. Yet, even though he knew he was getting too close to the edge of the Wasteland, the panther kept going against his better judgment. Crouching low to the ground, he stealthily moved keeping a safe distance when all of a sudden, a strange sound distracted him. The sound was so captivating the panther couldn't resist the magnetic pull and forgot all about his prey. He followed the source of the sound until he came upon a large tree with drooping fronds. He made his way under the canopy of the tree and immediately felt exhausted. He slumped to the ground and fell into a deep sleep. Seconds later, the winged creature sounded it's awful cry. Soon several more creatures came flying out of the Wasteland. They all lifted the panther with their claws carrying it to where their Master awaited them.

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