

## FOUR

### SEA OF DREAMS

**R**u led Gaia through the forest to an area where huge dark bushes grew in densely packed masses. He left her side for a few moments as he gazed past their broad deep-olive leaves into their tangled hearts, and Gaia watched confounded as he then proceeded to try and find the likeliest route inside one of them. The thick gnarled branches resisted his efforts at first, but as he used his considerable dexterity to slowly ease his way between them, so the branches twisted and creaked and allowed him ragged passage. She stood at the point where he had entered and watched in bewilderment as he contorted his agile frame into such unbelievable positions in order to squeeze himself in amongst the shadows. Only when he had all but disappeared from sight did he turn round and call for Gaia to follow him.

Her heart was still pounding in her chest, so strange all of this seemed, but with a quick glance at the deserted forest behind her, she took a breath and went down on her hands and knees, before following Ru into the dense undergrowth.

It grew steadily darker as she crawled beneath the thick canopy of leaves, but when eventually she reached Ru's side, she could see his eyes glittering

brightly as he looked at her, the branches creaking all around them as they tolerated the children's trespass.

"Calista will look after you," Ru told her, as if still trying to persuade her to go with him, "just like she does the rest of us."

"The rest of you?"

Ru nodded.

"There are so many of us already, and our number grows daily," he told her, smiling again. "I haven't been so happy in a long time. Come on, we should go now."

In the near total darkness, she could just make out his hand rising, and thought she could see him take hold of something in the air between them. Then, as he seemed to grasp that something and begin to pull it down, so motes of light twinkled where none had been before. Gaia could not help but gasp in wonder as the motes that had danced across the boy's skin now began to dance in the air in front of her, swirling and circling as Ru continued to slowly lower his hand. As he pulled what appeared to be a hole open wider, so more motes of light ignited and began to dance, and nor did they remain within the boundaries of the ever-widening breach. Even as Gaia watched, they strayed across her hands and face, tracing gentle lines across her skin with a touch more delicate and more wonderful than anything else she had ever felt before.

"What is this?" she whispered breathlessly.

"This is the bridge that will take us to Calista," Ru replied softly.

Gaia dragged her eyes from this precious sight for just a few seconds to see that these dust-like particles of light played across Ru's face as well. But before she could study how they danced their delicate tracks over his skin, her attention was drawn back almost immediately to the bridge that was now open. The

fingers of Ru's hand slowly closed as he withdrew it, and now the brightness coming from the breach intensified until shafts of light filled the restrictive area around them. The motes that had danced now became tendrils of white light that urged the travellers forward. Gaia could feel their insistence as they tugged at her arms. She was beginning to panic now, even as her feet slipped in the earth as she tried to resist its pull. She heard Ru trying to reassure her as she let out a yelp, but it was too late. The bridge was open, and the crossing had already begun.

She felt herself being catapulted forward, and she cast a glance back for Ru, but he was already some distance behind her. She thought she saw his lips part to speak, but if there were any words coming they were stolen by the delicate cables of light. The sensation around her limbs became warm, and as much as she wanted to be scared, it was difficult not to be partially comforted by this embrace. Another anxiety came as she realised that she was being carried away from the forest, and from a world she was certain she would probably never see again. Her thoughts drifted quickly to Tourina and to her mother now left so far behind her. Things would be different from now on, of that there was no doubt, and if Ru was to be trusted, then it would be on towards a new and better place.

## 2

The lights danced around her as the bridge bore her passage, and warm currents pulled gently at her as she trespassed into their coaxing eddies. Within those lights she could begin to make out tiny shapes and forms, the births and promises of new life and dreams

- a single cell dividing, a barely recognisable embryo, a foetus with slow-pulsing veins. There was such wonder here, and such love, in this microscopic world. The music of their creation filled the dark sea around her in which she travelled - the intonation of new heartbeats, the pitch of first breaths - all a rich symphony that rose and fell in perfect harmonies on each and every tide. The tendrils of light dappled her skin as they caressed her, and Gaia let them take her, rolling her over and over as was their will.

Larger creatures began to appear amongst the motes of brightness as the sea grew steadily lighter. Silver and gold fish darted amongst the currents, double-backing towards shoals that she had not seen before. Black rays glided from deep shadows, soaring above her head in vast deliberate formations. Crystalline orbs of soft baby jellyfish hung from invisible cords around her, their own passage as passive and mysterious as hers. And yet each fish and ray and jelly seemed to be urging her on, willing her forward to what she could only imagine. What had at first appeared to have no rules or direction, now seemed affiliated to her reaching a destination that she herself did not know. It was remarkable.

The ocean around her was still gradually becoming brighter as the gentle currents that pulled on her body became more insistent. The shoals gathered around her in mass, and almost seemed to bear her up as though they were guiding her towards the surface. Strangely, Gaia had already begun to mourn their loss, as if she expected the journey would soon be over, and then, as if echoing her thoughts, the motes of light and life suddenly left her side, their brilliance dimming rapidly as the tides carried her away from them. The pointed silver bodies of the shoals continued to dart

across her skin, until they too switched direction as one and headed into the darker depths beneath her. Gaia glanced down at them, the pang of loss coming briefly before she hit a surface that she did not know was even coming.

3

Bright sunlight flooded down from a sun that burned high overhead in a cloudless powder-blue sky. A vast glittering ocean bore her up, its waters warm on her skin, and ahead of her she could see an island, its bleached sands rising slowly to a forest set between steep white bluffs. The currents had a hold of her once more, and brought her closer to the beach with each lapping wave. The occasional flash of silver beneath the tide marked the concern of a tiny shoal beneath her still, and its fleeting sight comforted her.

Gaia's feet at last brushed over the soft sand of the island's shelf, and under her own weight once more, she began to wade from the gentle waters. The sand was blissfully soft and warm beneath her feet as she stepped slowly up the incline of the beach towards the forest. The coastline ran for several hundred yards in each direction, she could see, but the bluffs cut them off rapidly on either side, forming a channel into the forest. Blinking at the sun above her, Gaia started slowly forward towards the tall palms bowing out to sea, wondering why Ru had decided not to come with her. He had opened this bridge for her, and had now left her to find her own way. She glanced behind her again briefly, hoping that he might be wading to the shore as she had done, but the ocean was as calm as when she had left it, and she was still alone on the beach.

The tall palms cast their shadows across her as she stepped beneath them, their sheer size strangely eerie as their vast fronds bowed and whispered in the light ocean breeze. Birdcalls echoed around their canopies, and rapid wings beat as she stepped past hidden perches. It was much cooler here beneath the trees, and Gaia wrapped her arms around her as a chill came. The steep bluffs suddenly narrowed the channel considerably to her left and right, and the trees began to thin in the confined valley left behind. In a space between the rocks she came upon a small waterfall, the pool that it fed teeming with a perfect microcosm of the ocean that had delivered her here. Silver flecks darted through the crystalline water as her shadow passed across it, myriad motes of light rising from the bottom like bubbles. Gaia stood and gazed at its wonders in sheer fascination until a hollow booming from somewhere behind her snatched her attention.

Something that resembled a giant bird stepped out from behind a cluster of rocks, its long feathers of burnished gold reaching to the ground in veils as it surveyed her, booming its calls of alarm throughout the valley floor from the depths of its belly. Gaia watched as it snapped its bill a few times from a head too small to contain much in the way of brain, before it turned to retreat back into the trees. She stood gazing at the undergrowth it had disappeared into until she was certain that it had gone before she continued onward.

Turning a bend in the valley floor brought her out onto a gilded parapet that gave her a view over a vast rocky plateau, and to a sight that startled her more than anything else she had seen so far. Ahead of her, swift indigo birds circled so tightly that they seemed to become some vast stationary column stretching high

up into the sky. Bees buzzed in bands at intervals around them, only to become prey for rebel birds that broke formation. Yellow dogs ran from the cover of trees that lined the plateau to watch the display, only to chase each other back up into their highest boughs.

Gaia watched in bewilderment at this unfathomable world that Ru had brought her into. Where was he to show her what was what? He had spoken of other children, and she wondered if this was even the world that he had promised her. Were they here? And if so, did she have to find them? Slowly she circled the edge of the parapet, and caught sight of a huge oak tree down on the plateau that reminded her of home. So remarkable was everything else that it stood out by its sheer commonplaceness. Gaia gazed down at it for a few moments as she studied its vast spreading canopy, before deciding to scale the rocky slope down towards the plateau.

The oak seemed bigger once she was stood beneath it, its trunk some forty feet wide, its canopy dark and foreboding as it formed great shadows across the rocky floor. Gaia frowned as she wondered whether she should try and climb this tree, but then to what purpose? She started round its base, gazing up into its colossal gnarled branches, wondering why something so bland should even be here in this vast promised wonderland. Then she noticed a narrow opening, a split in the side of its trunk. Gaia stepped towards it and pushed her head into the hole. It was dark inside, and she could not see where the hole finished. She eased her body in further, and suddenly the smells of ripe fruit and sweet spices reached her nose from some hidden place deep inside the tree. Was this the mystery of the bland oak tree? Gaia tried to see just where such aromas could be coming from, but the darkness was

total. The smells were far too tempting for her to resist investigating after not having eaten for so long, and so with a final glance at the forest kingdom behind her, she took a breath and squeezed quickly through.

It was darker than it had seemed, now that she was inside, but the smells were at least thankfully stronger. She stood for a few moments in the blackness, waiting for her eyes to adjust, but they seemed not to want to co-operate and so she let the sweet aromas of the delicacies that were undoubtedly waiting for her guide her forward.

With her hands out in front of her, she stepped across what she thought should be the bottom of the oak, but when she had still not reached what she thought would be the other side of this hollow tree, she stopped and stared hard into the murk to try and discern anything in front of her. But there was simply nothing there to see. She glanced round to look for the opening she had stepped through, but even that had now gone.

"Ru?" she murmured quietly into the darkness, unease beginning to set in now.

Gaia started off again, the smells still guiding her forward, but after another dozen paces or so, and still no sign of reward, she gave up and stood in the darkness, gazing all around her at the endless black void, wondering what next to do. It was then that a voice came to her, from somewhere up ahead. It was not the soft voice of Ru that called to her, however, but a mellow almost husky voice.

"Keep going," the voice called to her again. "Just a little further, and we'll see what it is that you came for."

The words confused her, but with at least the promise of someone else inside the tree with her, she



pressed on, into the enveloping darkness and the rich tang that it held in the air.

The more she walked the lighter the inside of the oak became, until she saw that she was no longer inside a tree, but in what looked to be a shop. Through the gloom she could begin to make out the figure of whom she presumed to be the shopkeeper as he sat on the counter beside an oil-burning lamp. She slowed her approach, hugging a wall of book-laden shelves, as she left the shadows of the darkness. Suddenly he looked up, cupping one hand to his eyes, as he spoke to her again:

"There you are, at last," he piped. "I knew you could make it."

Now that she could see his face clearly by the light cast from the lamp, she could see that it was not a man after all, but a large white monkey. He looked at her, studying her, and she could see that his tiny eyes were intense and sparkling, an intelligence beneath them that belied his animal body. He scratched his belly with one hand as he reached to pluck something from a bowl on the counter before popping it into his mouth. As she approached, he offered the bowl to her, and all the smells that had lured her into the tree now rushed forth from the steaming bowl.

"What are they?" Gaia breathed, as she took one and tasted it. It was divine and she closed her eyes as its sweetness melted on her tongue.

The monkey grinned as he watched her take another, and then another.

"They're good, aren't they?" he said to her, taking another one for himself as he leant forward to examine her a little more closely beneath the flame of his lamp.

"Have we met before?" he asked her, his tongue flicking across his lips as the juices ran from his mouth.

Gaia shook her head slowly as she chewed on the wonderful feast, certain that they had not, her eyes half-lidded with pleasure as she studied this strange talking creature in front of her.

"Well, my name is Erikin," he told her with a small bow. "And what is yours?"

"Gaia," she heard herself saying quietly between mouthfuls.

"And why have you come to see me?"

"I... I'm not quite sure," she told him, taking another treat from the bowl. Oh, but they were good.

The monkey cocked his head to one side and sat back a little.

"Come now, Gaia," he said, scratching at his belly once more. "You must know why you're here."

"I was brought here," she replied.

"Really?" the monkey said, raising his eyebrows. "By who?"

"Ru."

The white monkey gazed at her for a moment, his long fingers still idly scratching his belly.

"And why did he bring you here?"

Gaia pursed her lips. She was not sure whether she should tell this creature anything at all. All she wanted to know was why Ru had not come with her.

"Well, I've got all sorts here," the white monkey told her, confusing her as he got to his feet and began clambering towards the endless lines of shelves that stretched out into the darkness. "Surely I must have something here that takes your fancy, hmm?"

As he scaled one of the shelves Gaia looked up at him and followed, watching perplexed as with each box and drawer he came to, he pulled out something different with which to offer her. She had no idea what she was supposed to be doing, and only knew that she

wanted Ru to be back with her, but she knew that she dare not ask for that. She followed the large white monkey from shelf to shelf until eventually he exhausted his search and came to rest on the head of a large wooden elephant set on the floor.

"Well I can't be much of a shopkeeper," he murmured sadly, "if I haven't got anything that you want."

"I'm sorry," Gaia said to him, "but I'm not sure what it is that I'm supposed to be looking for."

"Maybe..." the monkey pondered. "Just maybe Calista has got something a little bit extra special for you."

The name sparked something inside her.

"She's the one that made the place I'm supposed to be looking for," Gaia cried.

Erikin stared at her.

"Ru has told you much," he said at last.

"No, no," Gaia exclaimed. "Don't you see? Ru has told me nothing."

"Well then," Erikin said, jumping down from the wooden elephant and crossing his shop back towards the counter, "Calista is definitely the one who you must see. She knows everything."

"Everything?" Gaia exclaimed.

"Well, more than me," the monkey confessed, with a wry smile. "Step through into the back room," he said, showing her a small door that she was sure had not been there before, "and we'll see what she can do for you."