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The Secret of the Volcano

Paula King

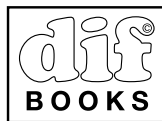
Tephran

The Secret of the Volcano

by Paula King

Deep within the volcano on the island of Tephran is a strange and powerful force. It's guarded by the mysterious Karonquin, who live in the forbidden region beyond the Endless Barrier. The evil Minister of Science is prepared to do anything to gain control of this Blue Radiance.

Tara is the daughter of a poor factory worker and Dado is the son of the secretary to the Minister of Order. Beyond the Endless Barrier is where their incredible story begins.





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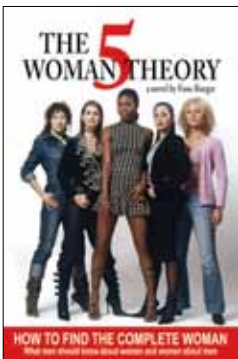
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THE BEGINNING

The ocean is as smooth as glass. By the time the sun reaches its highest point of the day there's hardly a breath of wind. At first glance, the island you see lying there in the vast ocean seems to be shaped like a giant mushroom. Tephra is the island's name, a name that has something to do with the volcano that squeezed it out of the depths of the earth thousands of years ago.

In the stem of the mushroom, on the bank of a wide river, is the capital city of Pudra. It's swarming with people: walking or riding around in cars, on bicycles or in buses. A few paved roads run from the city to the villages out in the flat, open countryside. Surrounding the villages are fields and woods where there are also lots of people, all of them working.

Farther north there's not much trace of this hustle and bustle. A big strip runs through the landscape, and beyond that strip the land and the vegetation are growing wild. No fields or villages there. If you look carefully you can see a fence running down the middle of the strip. All the trees and bushes alongside it have been chopped down. The only thing to be seen in that savage part of the island is a small camp filled with white barracks, where men are walking around in white suits. They're wearing helmets to protect their heads, and you can hear them shouting to each other to make themselves heard. There are a number of watchtowers with men posted at the top. They're standing behind big machine guns mounted on pedestals, which can turn in any direction.

A truck comes driving up, spewing forth more men in white suits.

Even from this great height you can see that something is about to happen in the camp.

But way up here in the sky is not where the story begins. It begins in a very different place: down there in Fasra, the village that lies about seven miles outside the capital, in the small house that's built right up against the edge of the woods. The home of Tara Wentertee.

1. THE BIG FLOWER

Early in the morning, Father Wentertee got out of bed and went yawning through the little house. His wife Sala was already awake and had put a kettle of water to boil on the small wood stove.

“Get up, get up,” he shouted.

Not a sound could be heard from the bedroom where his four sons were lying asleep. Father went in, and with one jerk he pulled off the blanket that was covering them.

“Get up, I said, you pile of lazybones, lead bellies, lolly loppers, limp-legged loafers. I’ve got to repeat it four times every morning. Come on, get up. Time to go to work. Mr. Blackman doesn’t take kindly to latecomers. You’ll have to work two full hours for nothing. And that means no supper tonight.”

The boys crawled out of bed, grumbling. They didn’t have to put on their clothes since they hadn’t taken them off the night before. It was spring and the temperature at night could go down to forty degrees. And because there was only one blanket for the four of them, they snuggled up close at night to keep warm.

Tara did not sleep with the boys. She had her own little room at the far end of the landing, in a blind part of the hallway. She had screened off a little spot for herself using an old curtain.

Tara had a mirror, which actually was no more than a large shard she had found on the garbage dump near the city. The former owner of the mirror must have had seven years of bad luck. But for Tara, this pointed shard was a trophy that would bring her luck forever.

She had been awake for a long time, even before her mother had

gone to the kitchen and before her father had filled the house with his daily shouting. So she had heard him shout her brothers out of bed – Peer, Roskar, Fobol and Bennabi.

Peer was the oldest, and he was also the one with the most sass. He got a beating from Father at least once a week, sometimes twice. Peer wasn't punished for no reason at all. His smart-aleck attitude was simply more than Father could bear. When he came home all tired out and Peer was there shooting off his big mouth, Father Wentertee always blew his stack. He'd chase Peer around like a wild man.

Peer and Roskar worked for Mr. Blackman. He lived on an estate near his plantation, in a splendid big white house with pillars and wide front steps. There were two lions with human heads lying on either side of the front door.

Work on the plantation was hard, and you could really hurt yourself on the plants' sharp leaves. The plants were chopped down with long knives called shavas. With one firm stroke of the shava you could easily cut someone's leg off. Or your own. Because when you chopped the plants, you had to draw the knife down in the direction of your leg. And if your stroke was too fast or the plant was too weak, you'd have to jump aside just in time. Many people in the village had tried to do that and missed. Now they only had one leg and had to earn their living by doing things that required sitting. Jobs like that were few and far between for people from the village.

Fobol wasn't exactly the smartest kid in the family. He worked in Blackman's factory, where they made paper products, although he wasn't allowed to go near the machines. He wasn't allowed to go near the packing tables, either. Or the delivery trucks. And he was never allowed to go near the office.

Fobol cleaned the latrines. That's where the men from the plantation and the factory went to the bathroom. And because there were so many men working all day long, there was a lot of pooping and peeing going on where Fobol worked. He had to make sure that the bottles of water next to the pooping holes were always full, because Mr. Blackman refused to provide his workers with any of his expensive paper products. They had to rinse their bottoms off with water.

Bennabi was the youngest of the four brothers. He had a job at the grocer's. Bennabi delivered orders to the rich neighborhoods of Tephran. That's where the Wikkadons lived, a very white sort of people who almost never went out in the sun because their skin couldn't take it. The Wikkadons did not belong to the original population of the island of Tephran, yet they were in charge of everything. Most of the Wikkadons were very arrogant. They looked down on the rest of the people of Tephran.

Tara's job was to draw water from the well. The well was in the center of the village, in the square, and every morning a friendly crowd gathered there to fetch fresh water. Staver, a tall, dark-skinned boy with kinky hair, was Tara's assistant. Staver was eighteen – much too old to be her boyfriend. Even so, it pleased Tara that Staver did his best and made sure he was at the well every morning to help her.

"Have you got any interesting things lined up for today, Tara?" Staver asked.

"Oh, lots and lots of interesting things, Staver. I'm going to bake bread, I'm going to the river to wash clothes, I'm going to make supper and sweep the house, and when I'm finished with that, my father and my brothers will all come home to eat everything up and make everything dirty again."

"Sounds like an exciting day," Staver said, and he laughed loudly at his own joke.

"And you, Staver? Do you have an exciting day ahead of you?"

"Well," said Staver, "actually my day is almost over. I went out to sea last night and I caught a lot of fish. Now I'm going to skin and clean them. And at noon I'm going to bed, because when midnight comes we're going out again."

"It's such a shame to miss all the sunlight and sleep the day away."

"You're so beautiful, Tara," said Staver. He filled her two buckets with water and noticed that his compliment made her blush. "I'm going to wait for a couple of years, then I'm going to ask your father for your hand."

"Don't wait too long, Staver, or all the nice boys will beat you to it."

"There aren't any nicer boys than me," said Staver, laughing loudly.

Tara did know nicer boys, but they were more boyish boys – not the kind you fell in love with or wanted to kiss. Well, maybe you did, but you didn't think about it because you did other things with those boys. Like going on secret expeditions on the slope of the volcano. They did that on Sundays, when everyone on Tephra had the day off.

The area around the volcano was off-limits. No one was allowed to go past the Big Green Fence, which stretched for miles from Yellow Bay to Crocodile Beach. It cut off the whole northern point of the island. On the slope of the volcano was the White Camp. People said there were scientists there who conducted research. But no one on the island knew what the research was about.

Climbing over the Fence was difficult, but trying to get around it was even more dangerous. The Fence ran all the way to the coast and even into the sea, to a spot that was popular with sharks. If anyone got it into his head to go for a swim there, those horrible creatures got a free meal. Many an adventurous islander had already served as a tasty tidbit, even if they happened to be swimming in the Yellow Bay and strayed too far from the beach.

Tara was no scaredy-cat. Despite the strict ruling, she and her friends had made a secret passageway in the Big Green Fence. They had cut through the screws on the back of a couple of the boards, using a hacksaw that one of the boys had found on the garbage dump. Then they had made some metal hooks so the boards they had cut free could be neatly hung back in place. The opening was behind a bush, and even if you looked closely you couldn't see it.

No one knew why the Central Authority made such a big deal out of the area beyond the Big Green Fence. The overgrowth there was very special, with blossoms in hundreds of colors. There were bushes with wild fruit and flowers you couldn't find anywhere else on the island. The trees looked as if they were at least a hundred years old. Some might easily have been even a thousand. In one gigantic tree Tara and her friends had made a tree hut from some branches and vines that had blown down. The tree hut was set high up against the slope of the volcano. You could peer out through the leaves and see the whole city of Pudra, but because the tree had so many leaves

and was green all year round you couldn't see the hut from the city.

Tara carried her two buckets of water back home. Her mother came out to meet her in the garden and complained about her taking so long.

"Probably gossiping with everyone," she grumbled angrily.

"No, Mom. There was just a long line of people. They were all ahead of me."

"Jibber jabber," said Mother.

She always said that whenever Tara said anything. Mother jerked the buckets out of Tara's hands and went inside, where she poured a little water into another bucket, along with a bit of green soap, and tossed in a scrub brush.

There was a knock at the door. Mother looked up with surprise. She stood up, walked to the window and looked out through a chink to see who was there. It was a big, tall man with broad shoulders. Beside him was someone more than a head shorter. He was carrying a wooden plate with a stack of papers on it. Mother went to the door and opened it.

"Are you Sala Wentertee?" the little man asked Tara's mother.

"Yes, that's my name. And who are you?"

"Rumbleton. From the Central Authority."

"And what can I do for you, Mr. Rumbleton?" asked Mother, suddenly sounding more polite.

"We're conducting an investigation. We've come to take a look inside your house."

"I'd rather you didn't, Rumbleton. We were just tidying up."

"You have something to hide, Wentertee?" asked the big man. Apparently he was supposed to keep his mouth shut, because the little man turned around angrily and snarled.

"No, sir," Tara's mother said, "I wouldn't know what that might be."

"Then we'll just come in and have a look. You realize you can't refuse the Central Authority anything."

"My house is my house," said Mrs. Wentertee.

The little man chuckled. "Your house is your house. Yes, that's right. What are you, a little soft in the head?"

He pushed Mother aside and barged in. He went into the living room, which was also the kitchen, and when he got to the table he stopped short. There were no chairs. Tara and her family ate standing up.

On the table was a magnificent flower in a vase. The flower was as big as the head of a goat. It featured seven different colors and it was a perfect combination of petals, pistil and stamens.

“Aha,” said the little man, snatching the flower from the vase. “And where does this flower come from?”

“I found it,” said Mother, a bit startled.

“Found it, eh? The flower was just lying there, nicely cut and waiting to be picked up?”

“Yes, waiting to be picked up, nicely cut,” said Mother.

“Look, Wentertee. You’ll have to come up with a better story than that.”

“The flower is mine,” said Tara, who had been listening from behind the door.

The beautiful flower in the vase came from beyond the Big Green Fence. Tara had brought it back from one of her expeditions.

“You keep out of this, little girl,” said Rumbleton.

“But I can’t. Because I found the flower. My mother really doesn’t know where you can find flowers like this.”

“She doesn’t, eh?” said the little man. “Eh” was apparently his favorite word. “And where did this little girl find this enormous flower?”

“First of all, the flower wasn’t already cut. I cut it myself. And second, the flower was just lying there, attached to a ball of soil near the Big Green Fence.”

“The Big Green Fence, eh? What were you doing around there?”

“It’s not against the law to walk there, is it?” Tara asked.

“It certainly is. You’re not supposed to be hanging around near the Fence. And nobody is going to believe any stories about flying flowers, insufferable child. We’ve discovered that people have been in the forbidden area, and as you know, the punishment for such things is very severe.”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with us?” asked Tara’s mother angrily.

“This is proof,” hissed the little man. “Proof that one of you has been over the Fence.”

“That’s nonsense. The Fence is several feet high.”

“Even so, even so,” protested the man, “we’re going to search the rest of the house.”

They went to work. They looked under the blanket in the boys’ room and in the living room where Father and Mother Wentertee slept on a mattress. The men turned everything upside down.

Tara had walked to the end of the hallway. She pulled a stone out from under her blanket and hid it in her apron. Just in time, for with one tug the men pulled down the curtain that closed off her room.

The stone was very special. At first glance it looked like an ordinary gray rock, but if you looked more closely you could see wisps of glistening gold running through it. Tara had found the stone on the slope of the volcano, beyond the Big Green Fence. If Rumbleton ever found it, she and her family would be in deep trouble.

The men looked at the mirror. The big man stroked his balding head with his hand, which made the little man laugh.

They didn’t find anything else in the house.

“We don’t believe your story about the flying flower, young lady. We’ll be back. You can count on it. And heaven help you if more unusual flowers have flown over the Big Green Fence. We’ll lock you up for good. Everyone who climbs over the Big Green Fence goes to jail.”

Mother was still trembling with fear after the men left. They had pulled the flower out of the vase and crushed it underfoot on the cement floor in the living room. Then they looked in the pan on the fire, where the family’s pumpkin dinner was cooking. Apparently the men didn’t care for pumpkin. They hadn’t found anything to eat in the kitchen cupboards, either. The sugar pot, where the people of Tephra kept their money, was empty. There wasn’t even any sugar in it.

Tara tried to calm her mother by stroking her hair. But Mother was angry.

“Where did you get that flower, Tara?” she spat out.

“Found it. Near the Fence.”

“Jibber jabber. You’re going to get us all into a heap of trouble.”

“No, Mama, really. I would never do that.”

Her mother had stopped shivering by this time and gave Tara a resounding slap on the ear. “And I never want to see flowers in this house again.”

“But Mama, you thought the flower was so pretty.”

“Flowers that big bring bad luck.”

2. A SUNNY SUNDAY

It had been very damp that morning, but the first rays of sunlight had chased away the morning dew and seemed to have dried up the wet roofs and fields. A gentle wind was blowing the first warm breath of spring through the village streets. They weren't really streets but hardened paths, not hardened by a bulldozer or a steamroller but just by all the footsteps tamping down the soft earth.

Harlo got up early. His three sisters and two brothers were still asleep. He looked to see if there was anything left to eat and broke off a bit of stale bread that was lying in the cupboard. Then he went outside. He had an appointment.

Harlo had a gift that everyone was slightly jealous of. He had an enormously rich imagination. Because of it he was able to close his eyes and be wherever he wanted to be, with whomever he wanted to be with. Harlo fantasized almost all the time: standing at the cutting machine in the leather factory, sitting at home on the porch, sleeping in his hammock or feeling bored when the cutting machine broke down again.

Usually he fantasized that he was as rich as a Wikkadon. That he owned a big house with eighty rooms, and his family and all his friends each had a room of their own. That he had horses that he rode and six cars in an enormous garage.

Just outside the village was the ball field. That's where Harlo and his six friends got together every Sunday – very early, when the sun had chased the night away and the morning was bathed in red light. The first teams were already there. They were the teams of the Kids

League, boys younger than eight, and they were warming up for their first game. The national sport was called touchball. You scored points by touching someone with the ball.

Harlo was the leader of a club that had its secret meeting place at the edge of Arman Forest. They called themselves the Secret Seven. No one was ever to know anything about this group. The Secret Seven had solemnly promised always to treat one another fairly, no matter what happened. They had just come through a rough week. Ever since Rumbleton and his investigators had arrived, things had suddenly become clear. The Central Authority didn't regard their exciting expeditions beyond the Big Green Fence as mere child's play. And it was thanks to Tara that Rumbleton's investigation had run into a brick wall.

As soon as Rumbleton had moved on to the neighbors' house to turn it inside out too, Tara had run to see Harlo. That was the tip of the message pyramid. Harlo would then warn Veder and Jawalla. Veder would warn Pert and Johrt, and Jawalla would pass the word on to Karam. In this way all the members of the Secret Seven would know within five minutes that Rumbleton was in their neighborhood looking for evidence – evidence that someone had been beyond the Fence. Jawalla had a collection of very unusual stones that she quickly buried in the little garden behind her house. Pert and Johrt still had some fruit from the Seed Tree that they hadn't eaten yet. They didn't know what the Seed Tree was really called, of course. But the round fruits that grew on it contained hundreds of tiny red seeds that were sweet-and-sour and tasted really delicious. These Seed Trees never grew on their side of the Big Green Fence, so the fruit would be proof of their secret expeditions.

Karam had a beautiful, glittering stone. If you looked at it you could see dozens of surfaces that flashed and flickered. Each had its own color, yet all were transparent. Even though the stone was no bigger than a large nut, it looked extremely valuable. Harlo said it was a treasure from the volcano. He knew there were shops in the city that sold rings with these glittering stones. Some of them cost as much as three annual salaries. The Wikkadon women walked around with them on

their finger or hung the stones from a chain around their neck. Stones like that were of little use to the Secret Seven. They were pretty to look at, but if you tried to sell them you'd be arrested.

Tara didn't believe that the Glitter Stones were the only reason the area near the volcano was off-limits. If that were true, why weren't Wikkadons there all day long, searching for stones? Why didn't anyone pick the delicious fruits from the Seed Trees? Or the beautiful flowers from the Spiral Bushes? These were bushes with fantastic arms that pointed every which way and twisted over and around each other, holding their flowers up to the sun – beautiful big flowers, like the one Rumbleton had crushed on the kitchen floor at Tara's house.

It was still early. Tara was the only one at the meeting place. The others would probably be there soon.

“Or maybe that bully and his helper scared them off,” Tara said out loud.

“It's possible,” said Harlo, and he looked at Tara. “You're not scared at all?”

“Nope,” said Tara, who really was scared but didn't want Harlo to know it. “That Rumbleton is such a jerk. He really thought the flower came flying over the Fence.”

“I don't believe that. What I do believe is that he's decided to keep an extra close eye on you. So we've got to be very careful.”

“Aren't we going to the other side today, then?”

“I don't know yet. Let's talk about it with the others.”

“I want to go,” said Tara, because she was almost sure the others would be too frightened.

“Whatever we do, we can't bring back anything with us.”

“No. But we can store our secret stones there.”

“That's an idea,” said Harlo, looking at Tara again.

Actually Harlo had a bit of a crush on Tara, but he didn't have the nerve to ask her to go steady. Tara wasn't interested in Harlo, that was obvious. She wasn't interested in boys at all, at least not the boys in the Secret Seven. Maybe she'd rather have been a boy herself. She wasn't just brave – she was also very pretty. That's why Harlo couldn't

take his eyes off her. And that's why Harlo was willing to go to the tree hut beyond the Fence today, even if none of the others came along. In fact, he thought, that might be even better.

Jawalla was the first to arrive. She came to tell them that today she had to help her father on their hillside garden. After Jawalla left, Johrt and Pert arrived. They were brothers. Johrt wasn't afraid of anything, and Pert was allowed to come along because Johrt never went anywhere without his little brother. Actually, Pert was the technical genius who had devised the brilliant passageway in the Big Green Fence. Unlike Johrt, he was very small and skinny. Johrt and Pert were always up for an expedition to the other side of the Fence. And because Johrt wasn't afraid of anything, Pert wasn't either.

Karam didn't show up at all, which wasn't unusual since his parents were very strict. Karam was a boy who could never keep his mouth shut. For instance, if his father said, "Karam, go pick some apples and be quick about it," Karam would say, "Gosh, Father, I'm really busy with something else right now. Can't you do it yourself?" – just to tease him.

"What?!" his father would exclaim. "Shake a leg and go pick some apples."

"What exactly do you want me to do, shake a leg or pick some apples?"

"You ugly little cross-eyed monkey," his father would say, grabbing Karam by the back of the pants and lifting him off the ground. Karam's father was big and strong, and Karam was very light. He would swing him high in the air, which Karam thought was lots of fun. But then his father would throw him against the apple tree growing in the garden and spank him. "Go on, you ugly little loafer. Pick those apples."

"Can I go flying again then?" Karam would ask, although he had to fight off the pain. At that his father would slap his head a few times and fling him against the tree so hard that it shook the apples loose.

"Look. Now nobody has to pick them."

Veder was the last one to arrive. Like Karam he was very thin. He did have a little round tummy, but there was only air in it. Veder's real

name was Veder Already because he was born much earlier than his mother had expected. He had weighed little more than a chicken at birth and had looked very weak. But his head was big and strong, and everything turned out all right.

Veder also had a special gift. Strange things happened in his big head, just like with Harlo and his rich imagination. Veder didn't have much of an imagination, but he could report things that were about to happen, and he did it in strange ways. Once, they were in the tree hut, for instance, and suddenly Veder broke into tears. He said his sister had fallen in the water and that she was in terrible trouble. They all ran home, but fortunately Jesra was all right.

The next day Jesra went to the river to wash clothes. She was horsing around with a girlfriend, who was also doing the laundry there. Suddenly Jesra fell in the water. She couldn't swim and neither could her girlfriend. A boy who was in the bushes nearby heard Jesra screaming and saved her. He had to press down very hard on her chest until the water came spurting out of her mouth and she began to cough and breathe again.

It had happened just as Veder had said.

From that moment the villagers began asking Veder for advice. Usually people wanted to know what the weather would be like the next night. That information was crucial for the fishermen, who went far out to sea in their little boats. When storms arose, many fishermen never returned.

Veder was the only one of the group who went to school, although Harlo had learned a bit of reading and writing from his father. Veder had a book, and he taught the other members of the group everything he knew about the letters and words that were in it. So it was logical for everyone to turn to Veder when he joined the group.

"Do you feel anything, Veder?" asked Tara.

"What should I be feeling, Tara?" Veder asked in reply.

"Well, if it's safe to go in today," said Harlo, who felt that as leader of the group he ought to take over the discussion.

"I don't feel anything," said Veder, a little bewildered.

"And do you see anything?" asked Tara again.

“Yes, do you see anything about what’s going to happen today?” Harlo added.

“I see all of you,” said Veder.

“Well, sure,” said Harlo. “I see you too. But what’s going to happen if we go to the other side?”

“We’ll be scared out of our wits,” said Veder cheerfully.

“But we always are,” said Pert.

“Yes, but now it’s different because they know we’ve been there.”

“We know that too,” said Tara.

“But it really is different,” said Veder.

“Why?” asked Harlo.

“I don’t know,” said Veder.

3. THE INDECIPHERABLE MESSAGE

You couldn't even see the place where a small opening had been made in the Big Green Fence. The gate that closed the opening was only three boards high and was located in an almost impenetrable patch of thorns. Most of the Secret Seven could easily crawl through it – except Johrt, who always scraped his back, and Veder, who wasn't very good at slinking like a tiger.

Once they had hung the gate back up, they would seal the chinks in the boards with sand mixed with the leaf of a plant that contained green pigment. This made it almost impossible to tell that there was a passage going through to the other side.

Today they crept through the Big Green Fence one by one and hid in the thorn bush on the other side. Pert then closed the gate and smeared it shut. There was no path, and they didn't want to make one, either. That's why they took a different route every time they went to the tree hut, and they always discovered the strangest plants and trees along the way. The ground gradually ran uphill and they had to make sure they walked under the trees. Otherwise they might be seen by someone scanning the area with a telescope.

It was a half-hour walk to Murai, the name they had given to the big tree in which they had built their hut. They could see the crown of this great forest giant from far away. Because they didn't wear shoes, they had to be careful about where they put their feet. Not a single expedition passed without someone coming back with a nasty thorn in his or her foot or a wound from a sharp stone.

But when they got to Murai they gasped in alarm. Where their

hut once had been there was nothing. The branches that had formed the floor were gone, and so were the vines they had used for ropes to tie the branches together. Nothing was left.

Harlo climbed the tree and checked it carefully to make sure they hadn't made a mistake and picked the wrong one. Maybe their hut was somewhere else. But there was no doubt about it: this was their tree, and their hut had disappeared into thin air.

"They discovered our hut," said Tara from below, which everyone thought was more than obvious.

"We've got to see if they're anywhere nearby. Who knows? They may be waiting for us," said Veder.

Everyone took that remark very seriously because Veder had said it.

"Can you see that?" everyone asked in unison.

"No, no," said Veder. "It just seems logical."

"Look," said Harlo, who had climbed back down and walked around the tree.

They all gathered round him. A large sign was hanging on the trunk of the tree from a big iron nail. There were words written on the sign. You could tell that it was a sign from the Central Authority because it was written with exactly the same colors and letters as the warnings that were hung on the Fence. Harlo and Veder stood right in front of the sign and tried to decipher it. But there was something strange about these words.

**Geratska ver dortav deq nortast iritwa kolny
werif serty ertub we resry qurer to.**

C.A.T.

"I haven't gotten very far with reading," said Harlo. "What does it say?"

"I don't recognize a single word," said Veder.

"It's not so hard to guess what it says," said Tara.

"What does it say then?" asked Veder and Harlo together.

"That we're on very, very forbidden land and that we'll be put in jail for ten years if we ever come back here again."

"But how can you read that?" asked Veder.

“I can’t read it, Mr. Know-It-All. It’s just what I think,” said Tara, making a sweeping gesture with her hand as if she too were clairvoyant.

“But they must know that we can only read Tephriish and not this foreign language,” said Veder.

“What do you mean, foreign language?” exclaimed Tara.

“I mean this isn’t Tephriish. It’s a foreign language.”

“Yes, that’s what you said,” said Harlo. “Do you study foreign languages at school too?”

“No, not until the Further School, if I ever get there.”

“But those letters at the bottom,” said Tara. “I certainly know what they mean.”

“Oh yeah?” said Veder and Harlo skeptically.

“Gee, it sounds like you two are sharing the same voice.”

“So what does it mean?” asked Harlo.

“It means the Central Authority of Tephriish. Look,” and she pointed to the letters as she repeated what she had said.

“Rats,” said Harlo. “So the Central Authority has hung up a sign with text on it that’s not meant for us.”

“But they don’t know that we can read, do they?” said Johrt, joining in the discussion.

“Yeah, that we can read,” said Pert, who always repeated what his brother said.

“What I think,” said Tara, “is that this message really isn’t meant for us.”

“Who is it meant for then?” asked Veder, shaking his big head back and forth as if that would help him find the answer. “And we have a visitor.”

“I don’t know that either,” said Tara.

No one had paid any attention to the last thing Veder had said. They all just stood there looking at the sign with the strange text.

“Maybe there *are* people living beyond the Big Green Fence,” said Harlo.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Tara. “They would have come to the beach or the village to have a look around. And what would they live on? Apples from the Seed Tree? Or flowers?”

“But do you actually know how big the rest of the island is beyond the Fence?” asked Harlo. “Have you ever seen a map of the whole island?”

“It so happens I have,” said Tara.

“So, how big is the rest of the island beyond the Fence?”

“I don’t know. The Fence wasn’t on the map.”

“Maybe that part is bigger than our side of the island. Maybe there are lots and lots of people on the other side,” said Harlo.

“Right. And there are monsters with four legs and eight arms who carry off little girls like Jawalla and me. And then you come to rescue us,” Tara said with a laugh. “You’re a storyteller, Harlo, and you know it.”

“But he’s nice,” said Veder.

“Of course he’s nice. Harlo is my best friend. But he’s still a storyteller,” said Tara.

A broad grin spread across Harlo’s face. He was glad to be called Tara’s best friend.

“No, I mean our visitor is nice,” said Veder.

“What visitor?”

“I really don’t know,” muttered Veder.

Everyone looked around with alarm. Was there a visitor? Where was he? They huddled close together and stared into the bushes. Then, without moving, they all turned and looked at Veder, who shrugged his shoulders and seemed a bit bewildered.

Nothing happened. They waited for about five minutes and finally decided that Veder was just talking through his hat. Then they walked into the woods, a bit uncertainly, and went farther up the hill. They never usually came to this spot because you could be seen here from the other side of the Fence. Tara walked faster and faster across the open field. She wanted to get to the edge of the woods that covered part of the slope of the volcano.

They didn’t turn around, as if not seeing anyone meant that no one else would be able to see them. It was nonsense, of course, but it worked. They reached the woods and looked at each other nervously.

“Why did you keep on walking, Tara?” asked Harlo, who felt he was losing control again.

“I had this feeling that I had to come here.”

“Oh, man, you starting in on that crazy talk again?” said Johrt.

“Yeah, you starting in on that crazy talk?” said Pert, by way of repetition.

“What crazy talk?” Tara asked Pert, to tease him.

“Yeah, what crazy talk?” Pert asked his brother without blinking an eye.

“I mean, you just shout something or do something and we’re supposed to come trotting along after you.” Veder frowned at Johrt.

Tara walked through the ferns that covered the forest floor. It was like walking through a green sea that opened up in front of her and closed behind her. There were bushes with flowers she had never seen before. And trees with four or five trunks as thick as human legs that seemed to be all woven together, with strange fruit hanging from the branches. The fruits were large and shaped like drops. When Johrt tore one open with his fingernails, liquid came spurting out. The pulp of the fruit was yellow and tasted delicious. No one was afraid that it might be poisonous because it looked so harmless.

“Look,” said Pert suddenly. “Those look like shoes.”

They all stared at the spot where Pert was pointing. Under a bush they saw the soles of two shoes, and above that a bit of a pair of pants. The shoes moved.

The friends were immediately on their guard. It was obvious that someone was attached to those shoes. They walked cautiously around the bush, and there they saw the face of a boy not much older than they were. His face was very white – at least as far as they could tell, since he was covering his eyes with his hands, as if he could make himself invisible by simply wishing it.

“Hey, who are you?” asked Tara.

“My name is Dado,” said Dado, and he lowered his hands. “Dado Palmeri. I was hiding. Usually you don’t come here.”

“What do you mean?” asked Harlo. “Have you been spying on us?”

“Sometimes,” said Dado. “When you play in your hut. I watch you from here.”

“The hut is gone,” said Johrt.

“Yeah, the hut is gone,” said Pert.

“Yes, I think the police have been here. There’s a sign there now,” said Dado.

“Can you read it?” asked Tara.

“No.” Dado looked at Tara and Tara looked at Dado.

Tara thought he was a nice boy for a Wikkadon, since that much was obvious: Dado was a Wikkadon. He was tall and his hair was almost white. He had a friendly look in his eyes. He wore a shirt with a jacket over it and long pants with creases you could see. He was also wearing a wide tie. The tie was bright green. All that came from an ironing press, a machine you only saw in the closets of very rich families.

“I also don’t think it’s a language from the Old World. It’s a strange language.”

“Do you study languages from the Old World at school?” asked Veder.

“Yes, I go to the Further School in the city. But this is a very strange language,” said Dado, and he looked at Tara.

She smiled, and when that happened Dado began to grin from ear to ear. It made Tara blush. She couldn’t remember ever having seen such a sweet grin. Dado became shy again and began fiddling with his tie.

“What are you doing here?” asked Harlo, who also had the feeling that something was happening between Tara and this new guy.

“I’m mapping out the area beyond the Big Green Fence.”

“What did you say?” said Harlo.

“I’m making a map of this whole area. I’m an explorer. Look”

He pulled a roll of double-folded paper from his inside pocket and rolled it out on the ground. Tara and the boys gathered around it. And sure enough, there on the paper was the beginning of a map. There were numbers written on it.

“That says how high it is here,” said Dado. “It’s just an estimate, of course, but it’s really quite accurate.”

“But why are you making this map?” asked Tara in an extremely friendly way. A little too friendly, in Harlo’s opinion.

“Yeah, what’s the point?”

“I ...” Apparently Dado had to reveal something about himself

and he didn't want to blurt it out. So he took a deep breath and said, "It's for the future."

"Yes," said Veder. "That map of yours is going to be very useful to us."

Everyone looked at Veder with respect because he was a specialist when it came to the future. But Veder had no more to say. And everyone knew that at a moment like this it was pointless to keep asking him questions.

Johrt pointed to the map and tapped on a spot with his finger.

"That's our tree, this is the open field and we're sitting here near this bush. So if we keep on walking ...?"

Pert wanted to repeat what his brother had said but it was too long.

"Then we get to a small lake and a little waterfall," said Dado, and pointed to it on the map. "It's dangerous there."

"It's dangerous there," said Pert, and everyone was surprised. Not only because Pert had imitated Dado instead of his brother, but also because of what he had said.

"Why?" asked Johrt, and now Pert was completely confused.

"There are dadombos there."

"Dadombos?!" they all cried out at once.

"Yes, animals, about this big." Dado spread his arms out as far as he could and then reached one hand far above his head. "They have dangerous teeth and a very long tail. They look a little like a lizard, but super big. Not as flat as a crocodile. They have scales and they're very fast."

"Yikes. If only we had our tree hut again," said Tara.

"That doesn't help. They climb trees, faster than the fastest monkey."

"Not bad. I'm glad we bumped into you," said Tara.

"Yes, and that's why it's handy to have a map," said Dado.

"But why are these animals called dadombos? They have the same name as you," said Harlo.

"I discovered them, so I named them after me," said Dado, sounding quite authoritative. "And there's one other thing I forgot to tell you. They only eat leaves and grass."

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

“But they can crush you with one slap of their tail.”

At that, everyone tensed up again.

“Shall we take a look? I’d really like to see them,” said Tara, who simply wasn’t the type that scared easily.

They all looked at one another and no one dared to object, knowing that if they did they’d be more frightened than the only girl in the group.

Dado went first, with Johrt right behind him. They were coming to a place they had never been to before. The vegetation grew thicker and thicker, yet Dado always managed to find a way through, or he made one by pushing the branches and bushes aside. This was something he was quite good at, and he was also very fast. The Secret Seven did their best to keep up with him – except for Johrt, perhaps, but he had his brother Pert in tow.

It was also getting darker. The forest closed in over their heads like a densely forming ceiling, which meant that there was much less growth on the ground.

Finally there were only ferns, and even they became thinner and thinner. They fluttered over the soft forest floor, which consisted of a kind of moss they had never seen before. It was so soft that you almost sank in up to your ankles, and it was deep purple instead of green. Ahead of them they suddenly saw a patch of light, and the closer they came the larger it grew.

It was an amazing place. At Dado’s instructions they made a detour, moving downwind from the light patch. This way the dadombos couldn’t smell them, Dado explained, since their sense of smell was very keen. The friends saw a lovely little lake pressed up against a rock, with a waterfall thundering into it from a height of over thirty feet.

Suddenly there they were: about ten dadombos jostling each other to get to the lake. It was easy to reach the water because it was edged by a narrow beach.

The dadombos looked terrifying. Two huge crooked teeth protruded from their mouths, and they had two big eyes that could turn

in every direction. They were as tall as Johrt and twice his height in length. The skin of the dadombos was green and muddy, and their legs were as wide as the lower trunk of a tree.

“Eeeuw,” shouted Pert, and everyone turned to him in horror.

The dadombos looked up and moved their heads slowly from left to right and back again. One of the animals slowly began approaching them. It was the biggest, apparently the leader of the group. Dado began pushing everyone back into the forest. But Pert was the last of the group and he was standing there totally petrified, so their escape route was blocked and they ended up tumbling all over one another. When everyone was finally on the other side, they saw that Pert had wrapped his arms around a tree and was clinging to it for dear life. Johrt tried to pull him loose, but his small fingers seemed to be locked around two trunks. Pert’s body was stuck to the tree as if he were fused to it.

Everyone began shouting, telling him to let go, as the dadombo came closer and closer. Johrt, with fear in his eyes, threw his big arms around Pert, so now both boys were clinging to the tree. Veder and Dado shrank back. Harlo followed them until he realized that Tara was still standing there. Now they all waited and looked at Tara. She had picked up a big branch and planted herself between Johrt and the dadombo.

“Get back, Tara, walk!” said Johrt anxiously.

Tara moved toward the dadombo. Johrt looked around but he didn’t let go of his brother, who was crying and clamped to the tree like a magnet to the side of an iron ship.

Suddenly Tara started to scream. She screamed so high that it made everyone freeze in their tracks and gasp. She screamed so loud that they could probably hear it on the other side of the island, if anyone was there at all. Still screaming, she jumped toward the dadombo leader, who raised its head and stood up on its hind legs.

No one was able to read any facial expression in that enormous head with its ferocious mouth, or perhaps they would have seen that the dadombo was also paralyzed with fear and had to swallow hard for a moment. The animal was only about fifteen feet away from

Tara. It stretched itself out so far that it was at least two and a half times bigger than she was. But instead of taking a flying leap and landing on top of Tara, the dadombo began screaming too. Its scream wasn't nearly as impressive as Tara's. Then it made an abrupt turn and ran. When it got to the lake, the other dadombos also reared up on their hind legs. They all turned just as abruptly and ran behind their leader, screaming and carrying on as they ran. The screaming quickly died down and finally could no longer be heard at all.

"Awesome," said Johrt, and gave Tara a slap on the back.

"Awesome," whimpered Pert, who was still hopelessly glued to the tree.

Dado, Veder and Harlo walked back to the spot where Tara was standing, the branch still in her hands. She was pale and trembling all over. Dado spoke first.

"So they're not really dangerous after all."

"No, they're more afraid of us than we are of them," said Harlo. But then he realized what he had said and corrected himself. "Oops. I mean, more afraid of Tara."

Veder hit the nail on the head. "We're just a bunch of spineless cowards, except for Tara."

Tara said nothing. She was waiting for her knees to stop knocking. She let the stick drop and turned to Johrt. Johrt raised his arm, and they gave each other a high-five. Then she bent down over Pert.

"They're gone, Pert," she said. "They don't have much appetite for scared little guys."

4. THE FIRST DISCOVERY

They walked to the lake. Dado started taking off his shoes, and the others looked with interest at his handsome brown leather loafers. He placed them neatly on a stone, stuffing a sock into each shoe. Then he took off his jacket, loosened his tie and opened the top buttons of his shirt. The rest of them looked on in amazement. Dado walked from the beach into the water.

“Aren’t you afraid there might be weird fish in there?” asked Harlo.

“Nah,” said Dado. “I’ve gone in a few times before when the dadombos were gone. It’s safe.”

It really is quite warm, Tara thought. And the roaring waterfall looked very inviting. She took off her sweater and her skirt. She had no shoes, so she was left in her underpants and undershirt. But not for long. With one decisive spring she dived into the lake.

Then the boys started tearing off their clothes too, and in no time everyone was in the water. Only Dado stood there looking a bit foolish with his pant legs rolled up, wading at the water’s edge.

“Come on, Dado, the water’s cold but you get used to it fast,” Tara shouted, and she swam near the waterfall. The water’s thirty-foot plunge was broken here and there by rocks. She was able to swim under it but it was difficult because the current kept pushing her away.

By this time Dado had stripped to his underpants and entered the water with a graceful dive. He covered the distance between the beach and the waterfall in a most peculiar way: kicking his legs up and down in the water at a calm pace while raising his arms over his head in half-circles, one by one, and dipping them down in the water

to push himself along. He went much faster than the other swimmers. They only kicked with their feet and pushed the water away, more like dogs. It wasn't speedy but at least it kept them from sinking.

Everyone gazed in wonder at the way Dado propelled himself. He dived under the water and pushed himself forward, shrieking loudly when he surfaced. Veder dunked Pert. Johrt dunked Veder. Harlo dunked Johrt. And Tara dunked Dado. They had a great time.

Later on, when they were lying on the edge of the lake drying off, Dado told them about himself. He lived in Pudra, the capital of Tephran. His parents had a three-story house and a big yard that you easily could get lost in. None of them recognized the names of the things that were growing in his yard. It struck them as strange that there were flowers and plants growing there that you couldn't eat. All the bushes, trees, plants and flowers were only to look at.

"Maybe you can eat some of it," Dado said, "but we get our food from the store."

Dado lived in the house with his sister and his parents as well as a maid, a gardener, a cook and a butler. His father also had a private secretary and a chauffeur. The secretary lived somewhere else and the chauffeur lived over the garage. The other household staff lived in the basement. That's where the kitchen was. Dado's father was secretary to the Minister of Order and Law Enforcement of the Central Authority. Because of that he wasn't very popular on Tephran, since even the Wikkadons didn't like the police and the army. His father was always at work. His mother wasn't home often either. She was always out with her friends, at the club or some other place, as long as she didn't have to bother herself with the children or her husband. The children had a nanny, but the nanny really only looked after his sister. He went to school, but sometimes he pretended he was sick so he could work on his map.

As soon as he paused to take a breath so he could tell them more about himself, they began assaulting him with questions. Did they eat meat every day? And desserts every day too? Did everyone in the city wear shoes? Had he ever ridden in a car? What did a nanny look like? What's a butler? What did his father do all day? Had he heard that the Central Authority was looking for people who had crossed over the Fence?

“What did you say?” he said, when Tara asked the last question.

“That the Central Authority is looking for people who crossed over the Fence.”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“They’ve been to my house.”

“Who?”

“Some guy named Rumbleton. And he had a bunch of creeps with him who ransacked the whole place,” said Harlo.

“I think that was a campaign limited to your village. Rumbleton? Doesn’t ring a bell. But I can check it out in my father’s computer, of course.”

“Computer?” said Veder. “Can he use a computer to see into the future?”

“No, not really,” said Dado. “It’s a machine that he uses to remember everything that happens. There’s so much information in it that if you had to keep it all in your head it would drive you crazy.”

“Right, a computer,” said Veder. He was the only one who went to school, after all. The teacher had told them about machines that could remember more than ten people put together. And they could do calculations faster than a thousand boys at once. They could translate languages, and you could store in them all the information that people needed to know.

Veder had asked the teacher if he could get a computer like that. Then he wouldn’t have to go to school to learn everything. But the teacher had said that a computer would cost about as much as his father earned in five years, so he stopped thinking about it. There was enough going on in his head already.

“Don’t you think it’s strange that there’s such a difference between us?” asked Tara.

They had walked together a short distance to pick some fruit from the Seed Tree.

“What kind of difference?” asked Dado.

“Well, that you all have shoes and houses. And that every kid can go to school. And desserts every day, stuff like that.”

“Oh, that,” said Dado.

Tara chuckled.

“You mean, because we’re Wikkadons, right?”

“Yes,” she said, “but what’s the difference? Between you and me, for example.”

“Well, the difference is that I have all those things and you don’t,” Dado said with a laugh.

“You know what I mean.”

“The Wikkadons have everything and they’ve had it for a long time.”

“But they haven’t always had it.”

“No,” said Dado. “The Wikkadons came to Tephraan two hundred years ago. They killed a few thousand people and since then they’ve been boss on the island.”

“Hmm. Crazy, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it really is.”

“You’re just like us. You have arms, legs and a head.”

“But I don’t have as much color as you do,” said Dado.

“No, but if you were to spend more time in the sun you would,” Tara remarked.

“Then I’d be red.”

“Not if you rub aloveer oil on your skin.”

“What’s aloveer? Does it come from a bird?”

“No, from a plant. A green plant with spines.”

“A cactus?”

“Something like that, yes. It looks like this.”

Tara drew the plant in the sand and Dado watched. He looked more at Tara’s graceful gestures and her beautiful hands than at the drawing she made.

“Okay, I’ll give it a try, because I don’t like being different from you, either. If my father were to find out that I had been swimming with you he’d have a fit.”

“My father and mother won’t even let me look at boys, let alone Wikkadon boys.”

“But we don’t give two hoots, right?”

“Don’t give two hoots?”

“Yeah, we don’t care.”

“Absolutely not. I don’t care at all.”

“Friends forever?” asked Dado.

“Friends forever!” said Tara, and they gave each other a high-five.

“Hey!” shouted Harlo suddenly.

Tara and Dado ran to where his shout was coming from. The others also came running to the bushes that Harlo was pulling aside. They had taken them for undergrowth, but the bushes turned out to be loose plants that were concealing the entrance to a cave.

“People have been here,” said Harlo. “There’s an opening in the mountain and they’ve carefully covered it up.”

“How did you notice that?” asked Dado, going down on his knees.

“I was taking a pee,” said Harlo.

Dado, who was kneeling on the damp earth, made a wry face. The others all burst out laughing. Dado tried to ignore it and crept forward, completely disappearing into the cave. Harlo crept after him. Tara and the others looked at one another a bit stupidly, wondering what to do. Then Tara crept after Harlo and Dado. The others stayed behind.

“We’ll stand guard in case anybody shows up,” said Johrt.

“Yeah, we’ll stand guard in case anybody shows up,” said Pert, echoing his brother.

Veder sat down. He hadn’t seen anything unusual, but he did have an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach. Maybe he had eaten too many seed fruits. He burped loudly.

The passageway got wider after several feet and finally opened up onto a larger space. There Dado waited for the others, who finally joined him. With the light coming through the passageway he could see that there was something lying on the ground. It was a box with a crank on it and a club that was a little moist.

Dado turned the crank but nothing happened. He turned the crank again, this time much harder. The box began to buzz a little, but still nothing happened. Now Dado turned the crank so hard that suddenly a flame shot out of the box. They all looked at the flame with surprise until it went out.

“Bring that club over here,” said Dado. “I think it’s a kind of torch. And this is a lighter.”

“A lighter?”

“Yes. In the city some of the people who smoke have them. There’s lighter fluid in them and a spark is made with a flint stone. Then a flame shoots out so you can light a cigarette.”

They had seen cigarette lighters before, but people in the village only had matches, little wooden sticks with sulfur on the tip, which worked fine. Dado was familiar with matches too, but this kind of lighter was new to him. They held the torch up to the box and immediately the whole cave was filled with light.

What they saw stunned them. Lying on the floor of the cave were all kinds of strange-looking tools: three cross-shaped bows and thirty or forty arrows. There were also several dadombo skulls, or animals of that size, all neatly arranged. One skull wasn’t entirely decomposed. Another was from an animal that had been killed recently by an arrow that was still sticking halfway out of its rounded eye.

There were iron objects too. Round tubes on wooden blocks that could easily have been some kind of gun. And knives. Not the shavas they knew about, but smaller ones with notches along the back. All the wooden parts of the bows, the guns and the knives were beautifully worked. There were figures cut into the woodwork that looked like letters. The letters formed the same strange, illegible words that they had seen on the sign hanging on the tree.

Veder came crawling in and looked around in horror. Tara could tell right away from the expression on his face that there was something very wrong about all this.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” said Veder, “or we’ll be too late.”

Dado really didn’t want to leave. He was very excited about the discovery they had made. There were intelligent creatures living beyond the Big Green Fence, and maybe he was the first one to discover them.

Tara tugged at his arm. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

“But why?” asked Dado.

“We haven’t told you this yet, but Veder has certain gifts.”

“Excuse me? What do you mean?”

“He can see danger coming,” said Harlo.

“He can see the future,” said Tara.

“I don’t believe in that kind of stuff,” said Dado.

“But we do,” said Tara, and she tried to pull Dado by the arm.

Harlo and Veder had already left. They quickly crept toward the mouth of the cave. Tara tried one more time.

“Dado, come on. Hurry up, we’ve got to get out of here.”

“Just a minute, Tara. I just want to look a little farther down the passageway.”

“I’m leaving, Dado. Really, I’m going now,” she threatened.

Suddenly they saw a blue light in the passageway. It was an enormous bright flash that made everything blue. It also made the outlines of Dado’s legs and Tara’s arms glow with a blue light. A stone that lay between them began to glow blue as well. Tara’s hand had been resting on the stone, and she quickly pulled it away. They heard sounds coming from the light, but they didn’t wait to see what or who was making them. They began creeping out of the cave as fast as they could and ran like mad to the beach and the lake. Dado’s jacket was still there and so were his shoes. He snatched them up and they both started running. In the distance they could see the others, and when they saw Dado and Tara running they started running too.

Then they heard a strange sound. It was a buzzing noise that first began to build up but then ebbed away. They ran through the woods, across the open field and into the part of the forest where Murai stood. Then farther down to the patch of thorns, where they found the secret gate. They pushed the gate aside and tumbled over one another through the thorn bush. Only Pert stayed behind to seal up the Fence. This he did with calm deliberation using the pot of colored sand, and he didn’t come out of the bushes until his brother pulled him out by the ankles.

It took a while for everyone to catch their breath.

“Geez, what was chasing you?”

“I didn’t see anything. Only a blue light,” said Dado.

“That’s all I saw too,” said Tara. “Blue light. Very scary. And that stone that got all hot and blue.”

Dado looked at his legs with astonishment. “Look,” he said, and pulled up his pant legs.

“Yeah, look,” said Pert, who only repeated things his brother said but now was repeating Dado.

Dado saw a blue glow shining around his legs, as if his skin had become a fluorescent bulb. Not a white or yellow fluorescent bulb but a blue one. Dado rolled his pant legs up and looked at the others. They stared at him with surprise.

“I don’t see anything,” said Veder, who was closest.

“I don’t see anything either,” said Harlo.

“Look,” said Tara. “My arms.” She stuck her arms out. They were just as blue as Dado’s legs.

“Oh, wow. When my father sees this,” was all he could say.

“But what are we supposed to be seeing?” asked Harlo, bewildered.

“The color on my arms. Can’t you see that?”

“No,” said Harlo.

“And you, Dado?”

“I can see it. Can you see it on me?”

“Yes, I can see it too.”

Tara thrust her blue arms under Harlo’s nose. “Here, look at this. Can’t you see it now? There’s a blue glow on my arms. It’s as if they were giving off light.”

“I really can’t see anything.”

They sat there for a while. Tara tried to rub the blue glow off her arms with sand. It worked a little – or perhaps it was the light itself that was disappearing. Then they walked out to the beach. There weren’t many people there because the sea water was too cold for the average Tephranese this early in the season. Tara rinsed her arms with sea water and Dado rinsed his legs. Whether it was due to the passing of time or to the sea water, the blue glow began to fade. They decided to go home and to get together the following evening to discuss what to do next.

5. THE RIDDLE OF THE BLUE LIGHT

Tara woke up in the middle of the night. The blanket she was sleeping under was very thin and she was cold. The heat from the fire in the wood stove that had been lit that evening had slowly died away. She opened her eyes and grabbed some clothes from her shelf, spreading them out over the blanket. That warmed her up a little. Her right hand itched, and when she started scratching it it began to heat up, as if it had been badly burned. She felt her palm with the fingers of her other hand, but the skin seemed whole.

She did see a strange blue glow under the blanket, though, which disappeared when she made a fist and reappeared when she opened her hand. She did this a few times to see if she wasn't just imagining it. Then she pulled her hand out from under the blanket and opened it. There was a small blue ball of light glowing in her hand. This startled her, and she tried to rub it away. But no matter what she did, the little ball stayed put.

Totally confused, Tara crept out of her bed and went up to the mirror. Suddenly she felt all warm inside. Instead of the cold that had awakened her she now felt a glow that made her blush and perspire at the same time. The strange blue ball, which was no bigger than a walnut, lit up the entire room. She held her hand in front of the mirror. The ball wasn't reflected in the mirror but she could see it when she looked at her hand. That was strange. She wondered if her mother would be able to see it. Maybe it would be invisible to her mother just as it was to the Secret Seven. She wondered what the ball was all about. Did something happen to you if you had a little

ball in your hand? Could you use it on other people? Did it give you special powers? Could you see into the future, perhaps, like Veder? She decided not to go back to sleep because she was afraid the ball would disappear, and she wanted to try it out the next day.

What she could do now was to see if she could predict the future. What was going to happen tomorrow, for instance? She already knew that. It was Monday, so the kitchen and the living room had to be scrubbed from top to bottom. And the garden had to be cleaned and weeded. And in the afternoon the laundry had to be done.

In the evening the Secret Seven were going to meet. But she didn't really have a sense that anything special was going to happen. That her mother would get angry or hit her? Probably. That her hands would get bruised while she was weeding? That happened all the time. That Dado might drop in? He had to go to school tomorrow. They'd have to wait and see if he showed up tomorrow evening. He'd have to sneak away from home. For Dado the area beyond the Fence was only one of the places that were off-limits. For young Wikkadons, the rules about going to the villages and slums around Pudra were even stricter (if that was possible) than the rules about the Fence.

But no. She couldn't see anything in the blue ball. She couldn't feel anything either, and nothing popped into her head. She placed her hand on her forehead and pushed the ball in, thinking that maybe she would see something that way. She didn't see anything. She felt something, though. The ball gave off a warm glow that made her feel very awake. She also felt very happy, as if she suddenly knew or understood all sorts of things, although she didn't know exactly what they were. It was just a strange idea, more like a feeling. But she knew for sure that this ball was somehow radiating something.

Tara could hardly wait for morning. She certainly couldn't sleep anymore. She felt thoroughly rested.

Father woke the boys with a shout, as he did every day. His repertoire of abuse seemed inexhaustible.

"Get up, you grubby, grungy, good-for-nothing goof-offs. It's time to go to work. There's no food, so leave the bread and pancakes to your imagination and drink some water or you'll dry out."

“But yesterday you said you were going to buy some flour,” said Peer sleepily.

“Yeah,” said Roskar. “I handed in my weekly wages on Friday, and Peer and Fobol did too. The bread can’t be gone already.”

“Then you shouldn’t have gobbled down so much food yesterday,” said Father.

“You probably bought berries instead of flour so you could make another batch of brown brandy,” said Peer, who, as already noted, had the biggest mouth of them all.

All you needed to make brown brandy were brown elderberries, cane sugar and a big pot. The strongest brown brandy could make you dance on the table after only a few glasses. Father really loved his brown brandy.

Provoking Father wasn’t such a good idea. Peer was still lying on the floor of the bedroom. When Father stormed into the room to give him a beating, all he could do was to pull the blanket up and try to ward off the blows using his arms and legs. Father was beside himself. The boys dashed out of the room to keep from getting accidentally hit or kicked. But Tara went into the room and tried to calm Father down.

“Daddy, calm down, please. Peer can’t help it that he has such a bad mouth.”

But Father didn’t want to calm down. He seemed to be getting angrier and angrier, especially when Peer starting making more cracks from the floor.

“Boy oh boy, is that the best you can do?” he sneered, but with a bit of anxiety in his voice.

Tara looked at her hand. The blue ball had grown and no longer fit in her palm. She turned her hand over and laid it on her father’s shoulder. Then something seemed to happen. A tremor seemed to pass through him. Perhaps it was her imagination, but the blue light seemed to enter Father’s big, strong body, calming him down instantly.

“You stupid, simple-minded squirt, you. I’ll teach you to talk back to me,” he said, but instead of sounding powerful and fierce he

sounded weak and puny. He turned around and looked at Tara.

She shut her hand quickly and Father started growling again.

“What have you got there?” he asked, and his voice still sounded a little weak, as if he wanted to sound angry but no longer could. “Let me see. Open your hand.”

This is the test, thought Tara. She raised her closed hand and held it right under her father’s nose. Then she opened it and the blue ball rocked back and forth in the palm of her hand. It had become a bit smaller.

“Look,” said Tara.

“Nothing,” said her father. “You’re trying to make a fool out of me. I don’t like that.”

“I see something.”

“You’ve got a few screws loose, Tara Wentertee. Go to the kitchen and help make breakfast.”

“What breakfast? There’s no bread.”

“Just get out of here, whippersnapper.” Father walked out of the room, growling as he passed.

Peer sat up. He rubbed his shins and forearms, which is where the blows had landed, and apparently it really hurt. Tara kneeled next to him.

“What happened?” Peer asked. “Why did he stop all of a sudden?”

“I have no idea. He cooled off just like that. I think he realized that if he kept on hitting you he’d turn you into a cripple.”

“As if he cares.”

“I think he does. How would he buy his berries without your wages?”

They both laughed out loud.

Peer rubbed his right wrist. “Gee, it hurts so much it feels broken.”

Tara had an idea. If the blue ball could calm angry people down, maybe it could also drive away pain. She opened her hand and watched as the ball began growing again.

“Come on,” said Tara. “This is my magic hand. Close your eyes and imagine that the pain is going away.”

“Give me a break, Tara. Maybe Bennabi would have believed that a couple of years ago, but I’m not a little kid anymore.”

“It’s real. Feel it.” And while closing Peer’s eyes with one hand she ran the blue light over his arm. She did this only three times.

Then Peer pushed her away. “It’s gone.”

“Told you so.”

“It just wasn’t so bad.”

Tara was elated. She had begun the day in a cheerful mood even though she hadn’t gotten much sleep. All the predictions came true. She started by scrubbing the kitchen and the living room. Then she cleaned up the yard and did some weeding. In the afternoon she went to the river, rolled up her skirt and sleeves and washed her brothers’ pants and shirts. The blue ball stayed with her. It didn’t get any bigger – in fact it shrank a bit. Every time she met someone she held up her open hand with the dancing ball, but no one ever saw it. Gradually she got used to it. The light wasn’t very bright and she didn’t need it while she was scrubbing, weeding and washing. The ball probably only worked when something unpleasant was happening.

That evening they ate cornmeal pudding with vegetables and pieces of fish. All seven of them stood around the high table. Tara had gotten the fish from Kavar in exchange for nuts from their almond tree. Tara hadn’t eaten anything all day. Her plate was clean in a flash, but she was still hungry. She had already rubbed her left hand over her stomach and looked to see if anyone had anything left over. Suddenly she thought that maybe she ought to use her right hand. She rubbed the blue ball over her stomach and kept her hand there for a minute. The hunger was gone! She smiled a huge smile, so huge that everyone at the table noticed it.

“What is this with you and your hand?” Mother asked, who was standing almost right next to her.

“Nothing. I’m full.”

“Well, that would be a first,” her father grumbled.

“I’m hungry,” said Bennabi.

Tara went over to him and put her right hand on his belly.

“Where’s the hunger?” asked Tara, pushing the blue ball several times against Bennabi’s stomach area. “Here or here or here?”

Bennabi looked at her in astonishment. The hunger was gone.

“Hey, I’m not hungry anymore.”

“You see,” said Peer. “That nonsense works with him.”

“What nonsense?” Mother wanted to know.

Father turned away from the table and walked outside. Everyone knew what he was going to do. Outside was the jug of brown brandy, and Father drew off several glasses to drive off the pain and cares of the day.

“Tara has a magical hand,” said Peer. “I had some pain this morning and she put her hand on my arm. All at once the pain was gone!”

Everyone, including Tara, looked at Peer in astonishment. He nodded gravely and raised up his arm. Then all at once he broke into a laugh, and everyone roared with laughter. Tara looked crestfallen and Bennabi was indignant.

“I’m not hungry anymore.”

“A miracle!” shouted Peer now. “Bennabi isn’t hungry anymore!”

Everyone laughed as they scraped every bit of food from their plates.

“Here,” said Roskar. “Then you can have my last bite.”

What he intended to do, of course, was to pop it into his own mouth, right under Bennabi’s nose. But Bennabi turned around and shrugged his shoulders.

“Well,” said Mother, “I’ve had pain here for years. I strained myself carrying so many buckets of water. Every now and then it comes back and it’s very painful.” She looked at Tara with a fake smile.

What I wouldn’t give for a real mother, thought Tara.

“How sad,” Tara said.

“Oh, and you won’t help me with your magical hand?”

“No. May I be excused? I’m going outside.”

“No,” said Mother. “First your magical hand.”

“But you have to believe in it,” said Tara.

“That’s not true,” said Peer. “I didn’t believe in it.” He sounded serious. When he saw that everyone was surprised by what he said, he just started laughing.

Tara went to stand behind her mother, who wasn’t much taller than she was. She opened her hand and saw that the ball had grown huge, as if it had to do its very best to help her. Tara looked at her mother’s shoulders. She knew the spot all too well. Mother always

clutched at it when she wanted Tara to take over the work for her.

Tara pushed the spot with her left index finger. "Is it here?" she asked, pressing her finger hard into Mother's shoulder.

Her mother screamed and pushed Tara way. "Wretched girl. You did that on purpose."

"No, I didn't," said Tara, shocked. "I had to know where the pain is." She felt a little guilty.

Her mother lost interest. "Go away. Get out of my sight."

Tara walked outside and went to the ball field. The rest of the Secret Seven were already there. Dado wasn't among them, and Tara realized that she was very disappointed. Harlo came up to her.

"Hello, Tara," he said. "Everyone is accounted for. We can start the meeting."

"Isn't Dado here?"

"No. I haven't seen him."

"Maybe he can't find it."

"That's pretty unlikely. All you have to do is go to the village of Fasra and ask for directions to the ball field."

"Maybe his father and mother wouldn't let him leave," said Johrt, who had joined in the conversation.

"His father and mother," said Pert, who couldn't manage the whole sentence.

"Who's Dado?" asked Karam, who had just come stumbling up.

"What happened to you?" asked Tara.

"I was trying to improve my personal best jumping record," said Karam, who never liked to talk about the beatings he got from his father. "But suddenly there was this stone under my feet."

"Gee, that's too bad," said Jawalla, who really liked Karam.

"Yeah, too bad," said Johrt.

"Too bad," said Pert.

"Okay, altogether now," joked Karam. "But really, who is Dado? Are there eight of us all of a sudden?"

"Dado is a Wikkadon. He lives in the city. We bumped into him on the other side of the Big Green Fence."