

Sebastian  
and the Hidden Book

by  
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## – Chapter One –

### THE VILLAGE

Once upon a time, far in the future, there was a village. It was no ordinary village; it was built deep inside the earth. There was no entrance to it and no exit. A long time ago, it had been a beautiful cavern.

Inside the village was a whole world. There were people living there. From the vastness of the cavern they had created a settlement – a strange settlement, to be sure. It had no streets, lights or buildings – the people simply lived in little, narrow tunnels they had dug over many years into the cavern.

Families did not have houses or flats; they had holes which they shared. They slept directly on the soil, without beds, without sheets or pillows. These villagers were very small in size; the grown-ups were about the height of a twelve-year-old child. They had been using these dark, narrow tunnels for so long that they had become smaller and smaller as time passed. It was more natural to them to crawl than to walk around. Their eyes were different too. The villagers were able to see in the dark, as they did not have any natural light or electricity.

Naturally, as they did not have factories, the only objects they had were those made with their bare hands from the soil, rocks or

animals that shared their settlement. They also had some very old, rusty tools – few hammers, several digging spades, a couple of axes and some shovels. These were set in a storage area, hung on the wall, available to everyone in case they needed them. No one knew who had put those there or how they had been made and they did not bother to ask. Life was very simple in this little world. It was almost the same as living in prehistoric times, with one big difference: these people never saw the outside world, the Sun, the Moon, or a tree. They lived in the dark.

The strange thing is that no one seemed to mind that. People were happy as they were. They lived their modest lives the best they could and no one complained. There was an explanation even for that: the villagers did not know any better, because nobody talked about the past. They all lived here and now, with no ambitions and views about the future or the past. Grown-ups were not teaching children anything apart from how to survive. School was the place for children to meet and play. For all the people who lived there, the village was the only world they knew.

The villagers were settled around a big lake, which was necessary for their survival for both food and water. The only light they had was provided by several species of fish in the lake, and the wings of certain kinds of insect. Around the lake, people had created stores stocking the necessities for all their needs. These were available to everyone as they all worked together as a team. There was no waste and no greed. Everyone was very considerate and never took more food than needed.

Unfortunately, this little world was not as innocent as it might sound. Very often, the bats, the villagers' only enemies, would attack. These animals were vicious and the villagers were

unable to protect themselves from these attacks; their only chance of survival was to stick together and hide. The bats were very intelligent: they would not usually attack groups; they preferred to attack an easy victim. So whenever they could, the people spent time in groups.

– Chapter Two –

## SEBASTIAN & MONA

Sebastian spent the whole day in school playing with his friends. Then he met up with his best friend Mona and they made their way to a place where they often went to play and have long conversations without disturbance. This became their everyday routine. Mona loved talking with Sebastian, who was much more deep and knowledgeable than any other child she knew. Apart from that, he was always there for her and understood her moods very well. Sebastian had the ability to make her feel better when she was down, and to make her laugh when she was upset.

Today, for some strange reason, Mona was in a really bad mood. She was very quiet and on the few occasions she did say something, she was short and very snappy.

‘Mona, I can’t help noticing you are in a very bad mood today; did anything bad happen to you at school?’ Sebastian asked.

‘No!’ she replied, irritably. She did not know why, but for some strange reason, that day, she was very pessimistic and unhappy.

Realising that Mona was not happy to talk at that moment, Sebastian sat down and waited patiently for her to explain.

‘No one cares for anyone around here!’ she began, suddenly.

‘What do you mean?’ Sebastian asked. He was very confused by this comment.

‘Did anyone come to support you when your parents died? We are all alone in this village.’ She kept raising her voice. ‘People live together only because they have to, not because they want to.’ She then jumped up and ran home, without even saying goodbye.

Sebastian knew Mona was impulsive and emotional so he did not follow her; he would talk to her the next day instead. Sebastian had himself had the same dark thoughts Mona had just expressed many times, so he did not blame her. He knew Mona to be someone who believes in being fair and polite unless there is a good reason to be rude.

On his way home, Sebastian thought about Mona's puzzling outburst. He knew she was right but he did not understand why she had acted like that. Although he felt very emotional as well, he was more realistic and down-to-earth than Mona. The truth is he knew how to suppress his emotions because he had had to deal with the loss of his parents when he was very young.

Sebastian was now an eight-year-old boy with curly black hair and big brown eyes. The bats had killed his parents when he was four and ever since then he had lived alone. He was not really living on his own, although his little room was mainly empty. There was something that was keeping him company and helping him cope with loneliness. A big family secret was hidden in a little hole he had dug in the corner of his room.

At home that night, Sebastian could not sleep. He was staring into the blackness thinking about what Mona said to him that afternoon. He looked around his little room; it was full of

interesting little objects. He would spend his free time making little decorative artistic things, and only Mona knew about it: she was the only one he could trust to keep a secret. Sebastian was very creative. In this society creativity was very unusual, as the people tended to think about or create only things they could use. Everything else, they thought, was just a stupid waste of their precious time. Sebastian, though, was both artistic and scientifically minded. He lived on his own but created the whole world around him. His room was full of hand-made animals, hanging objects, hidden tunnels and toys, all his own ideas, all made by him.

When he finally started falling asleep, he heard a knock on his door. Visits were very unusual in this village, especially this late. People rarely met in their homes, as the holes were very small and uncomfortable, with only just enough space to accommodate a family.

Before Sebastian could even say anything, Mona rushed inside. Her face was streaming with tears. She was shaking all over and could not talk.

‘Mona,’ Sebastian began calmly, ‘I did not realise you were still so upset...’ Before he could even finish his sentence, Mona whispered, ‘No, not that.’ She paused. ‘My parents...’ she wept even louder, covering her eyes with her small hands.

Sebastian froze at these words. He knew exactly what happened and what was Mona going through. His own parents had died when he was very young, but he still clearly remembered the fear, the anger, the emptiness and every single detail of the events of that terrible day. Now, seeing Mona like this, he relived that day once again. He remembered the bats attacking his parents, his father fighting them and hiding him in a little crack in the wall,

which saved his life. He also remembered himself watching helplessly as the vicious animals tore his parents apart, killing them brutally, while he was crying and telling them how much he loved them...

All that he had felt for a long time was just loneliness and emptiness. Very often Sebastian regretted that he was the one who had stayed alive and he wished he had not.

All of a sudden he jumped as he realised how irresponsible it was of him to feel sorry for himself when the only person left whom he cared about needed help.

‘Mona,’ he said excitedly, ‘Come here with me; I would like to show you something.’

Mona looked at him, surprised, and followed him carefully towards the corner of his room and looked curiously at what he was doing. Sebastian knelt down and quickly dug a little hole and pulled out an unusual object. Mona looked at Sebastian in disbelief.

‘What is that?’ she asked.

Before she could even blink, Sebastian was up, asking her to promise not to ever say a word to anyone about this. He had decided to share with Mona a secret kept in his family ever since people moved to make a home underground. It was not irresponsible, he thought to himself, especially as he was the last surviving member of his family. Mona was one person he could trust with anything. She never disappointed him and she had always kept all of their secrets. Mona was different from other people in the village: they only took care of their own and did not bother to help the troubled ones.

Mona did not say a thing, just nodded and waited for Sebastian to explain his strange behaviour.

‘This book,’ Sebastian began, ‘is my family’s long-kept secret. For generations it has been passed from one family member to another. It had to be hidden as the leaders did not want people to remember the past. They did not see the point because they thought there was no way back. Leaders decided it was shameful even to think about what happened, so they had all written information about life above ground destroyed, and they forced everyone to erase all their memories of that life from their minds.’ He paused.

Mona was staring at Sebastian without blinking. She did not have a clue what he was talking about and did not know what to say. Sebastian realised she was not going to ask anything, so he decided to continue.

‘At that time, one of my ancestors was chosen by the governors to burn all the evidence of the world that once existed. Although it was his duty, he was a very good man and felt it was very bad to hide the history. He believed that people should learn from their mistakes and not try to hide them. For that reason, my great-great uncle hid this book, hoping the day would come when others would decide and agree to be better people and save the world.’

Mona curiously listened to every word Sebastian said. She was still in a state of shock but this story took her mind off the horrible experience she had had that day, just as Sebastian had intended.

‘Are you saying people used to live differently from how we live now?’ she finally asked. The truth is, Mona had so many

questions that she did not know where to start. Before she had a chance to continue, Sebastian went on.

‘People used to live completely differently. First of all, they lived above ground.’

‘What do you mean?’ Mona was now becoming even more puzzled.

Sebastian now realised how complicated it was going to be to explain everything, but he was satisfied he had managed to get Mona interested and to take her mind off her parents’ death.

Trying to make it as simple as possible for Mona to understand, Sebastian explained, ‘The planet we live on is called Earth. It used to have all the essentials its inhabitants needed to survive. Nature created a perfect ecosystem...’

‘Eco-what?’ Mona could not stand this any longer; it sounded to her as if Sebastian was speaking a completely different language.

‘The ecosystem is a collection of living organisms, linked together through food chains. They are dependent on the land, water and air for their survival,’ he said, patiently. Then he went quiet, realising that some things were just impossible to explain. Sebastian knew it would be much easier if Mona could read the book herself but she was not literate. This was not unusual. In fact only his family could read. People of the village did not need to read, as there were no books. They used some signs which were necessary and that was enough.

For Sebastian’s family, literacy had remained a necessity in order to pass the long-kept secrets down through the generations.

How could he possibly explain it, he wondered – and then he decided: ‘Mona I’m going to read this book to you; it’s the only way it’s going to be clear to you as it is to me.’

Mona nodded in agreement and sat comfortably in the corner of Sebastian’s room on the chair made out of a turtle shell filled with dried fish scales.

## – Chapter Three –

### THE BOOK

From this day onwards, Mona and Sebastian become inseparable. Mona, who was now afraid to live on her own, moved into Sebastian's home. She could not bear to spend time in her home as everything reminded her of her parents. The two of them went everywhere together and spent nights reading the book. Mona learnt that there had been another world before the one they knew. This book was the history of that world, going back to prehistoric times, back to where it all began. It talked about wars and differences. She learned about the greed, hatred and human ignorance to everyone and everything around them. Mona could hardly imagine that type of evil and destruction.

'Why would someone fight because of different skin colour or something called oil or gold? Why is that so important if someone had different habits or beliefs from ours?' she asked herself.

'We live in these little holes,' said Mona aloud, 'and no one asks for more, even if we can hardly move around. According to this book, above the ground there is an enormous amount of space. Wasn't that enough for everyone? Why were people so angry and full of hatred? If they had problems living together, couldn't they just move away or live next to each other without interference?'

‘I know,’ said Sebastian, ‘I asked my parents and myself the same questions over and over again. There is no answer. I believe even those who created wars never had an explanation or a good reason for them. I do not think hatred was the reason; in my opinion it was the hunger for power. Leaders would use people’s weaknesses to make them kill each other, while they were becoming even more powerful. There was an old saying: “Divide and conquer”. Most of the leaders worked that way.’

‘How disgusting!’ Mona raised her voice. ‘No wonder they tried to burn all the evidence! Maybe your great-great uncle made a mistake: he should have burned everything. I do not think I was missing anything by not knowing about this history!’

‘Hold on, Mona, do not jump to conclusions before you know the whole truth,’ Sebastian suggested. ‘I don’t think my great-great uncle made a mistake. He did not save this book for us to remember the bad things and repeat them. On the contrary, the real reason was this last chapter, which is different from what we have read so far. It is not printed like the rest, but handwritten, and it was obviously added for a reason. After I read it you will see why it was all worth it and you will change your mind, I’m sure. It is the most important part of the book so please focus and listen to this carefully.’

## – Chapter Four –

# PLANET EARTH

Homeland to millions of different species. The source of breathtaking natural wonders. The endless source of energy. The greenest planet of all. Mother Earth. Everything started about 4.6 billion years ago, when a huge mass of dense gases collided with an even bigger rock. The planet Earth was born. It took another two billion years for Earth to shape itself. Heavy elements formed a hard core surrounded with hot liquid magma. Floating on magma, the rest of the elements formed an outer layer mantle. Gases formed the final layer that protects the Earth – the atmosphere. However, there was no sign of any life. The planet Earth was too cold to support life. So Earth decided to warm itself up. It started pushing hot magma to the surface, creating erupting volcanoes, hot water and gas geysers. Soon, a thick layer of smoke and water vapour filled the atmosphere and, like a soft fleece blanket, started warming the Earth. Simultaneously, newly-formed smoke clouds created a so-called global dimming effect which brought darkness to Earth. Asteroids – space-travelling rocks – were visiting Earth often since her birth, bringing essential life pieces. Earth was playing with those pieces trying to solve the life puzzle. One day, the first amoeba was born. Shortly after that, all

sorts of bacteria were roaming the Earth; however, they were not happy – it was so dark. Meanwhile Earth had stopped creating dark clouds, and gradually the layer of smoke was replaced with a layer of pure fresh air known as ozone. The ozone guy was very clever. He knew that not all sun rays were good, so he protected the earth and all other living organisms from bad rays. Just imagine how great it was playing on the beach or in the pool all day long without being sunburned. Planet Earth became the most popular planet to live on. Its perfect temperature, ozone shield, high mountains, deep blue seas, fast green rivers, mysterious lakes, and its vast plains and plateaux all helped nature to master the art of life-making. Every day, new species were enjoying making the Earth a richer and happier planet. Nature taught all beings to coexist with each other in harmony. It all worked well until recently. But in the last several hundred years, human greed and thirst for power has turned the healthy Earth into a wounded planet. Humans have forgotten what nature had taught them. They have been creating ecological disasters, exterminating other species, tainting rivers, lakes and seas, contaminating the air. The ozone layer, the earth's protector, is so damaged it leaves the Earth exposed to bad Sun rays. The temperature on earth has risen, making it impossible for people to live on it. Acid rains, big floods, powerful tornadoes and storms are destroying everything that stands in their way, leaving just plain wasted land. Humankind has betrayed planet Earth and all its inhabitants.

The irony is, it took nature over four billion years to create this wonderful planet; it took Mankind only around two hundred years to destroy it. Instead of enjoying all these gifts, we are now forced to hide in this dark hole, hoping to survive. They are telling us that this is now the only way out and we should forget

everything about our past. But I believe the damage is still repairable. I also believe the day will come when our people will understand the mistakes they have made and decide to change.

The day will come when it will be safe again to walk in our lovely green fields and dive again in our deep, blue seas. Nature will revive itself as there will be no men alive to continue damaging it. It will take a long time and many generations but I know it will happen; we will come out of this cave. When that takes place, we will have to learn to live in harmony with other species and listen to Mother Nature again. We have to be patient yet determined in our quest. Our beautiful planet is worth every effort, every sacrifice for us and future generations to be able to enjoy its magnificence. We owe it to this planet, all other living beings, and to ourselves.

This is the reason I have written these words – for someone in that future to find this world again and make it a better place for everyone.

Sebastian finished reading, closed the book and looked at Mona expectantly. He expected Mona would now have a million questions, comments or some impulsive, strong reaction as usual. Instead, she was quiet. Serene like never before, she was staring in one direction as though she was far, far away. For a very long time they just sat in silence. Sebastian did not want to disturb Mona but he was a bit afraid of what she might be thinking. It just was not normal for her to be silent like this, and he was wondering what would happen next. Suddenly she looked at him with a determined yet cold look in her eyes that frightened him.

‘Do you think now is the time?’ Mona asked.

Sebastian was stunned. This is the reaction he definitely had not expected. ‘What do you mean?’ he replied, completely confused.

‘I mean,’ she started, in a very mature and peaceful voice, ‘do you think this planet has regenerated? Do you think it would now be safe to go out and explore?’

Sebastian went quiet. For the first time ever, he thought that this book could be something more than educational. For generations, his family had talked about the book as no more than a family secret. No one before had ever taken it seriously or thought about doing anything more than passing it on to the younger ones. This was all new to him and he did not know what to say to Mona.

Realising that Sebastian was not going to give her any answer, Mona asked, ‘How many generations have passed so far?’

‘About ten,’ he replied.

‘So, don’t you think we have waited long enough?’ Mona asked.

‘Mona,’ Sebastian began, ‘what if ten generations is not enough? What if we, somehow, find the way out and can never return? I am not afraid, don’t get me wrong, but who is going to continue my family tradition and pass this book down to the next generation for me? If we disappear, this is the only world people around here will ever know.’

‘On the other hand,’ Mona said, ‘if nobody can ever prove what is written in this book, what is the point of this knowledge? How can we, or anyone in the future, convince people to believe in this world above, if we are not convinced ourselves?’

Sebastian looked at Mona, then closed the book and said sadly, ‘I know that you are right. However, I am still not ready to risk destroying something my family has been keeping for generations. Now that you mention it, I will definitely have to do

something, but not before I have children, so that there is someone who will be able to continue this tradition in the event that I don't return. Sorry, Mona, I just don't think now is the right time. Maybe the Earth is ready, but I am not.'

Mona understood; she knew Sebastian would never refuse a challenge or an adventure unless he had a really good reason. Now she realised what she was asking him to do.

'Sorry Sebastian, I was not thinking straight; it was so irresponsible of me to mention such an idea; you are completely right.'

Mona, however, never gave up. She was determined to go outside herself. In her opinion, that was the only solution that made sense. Even if anything happened to her, Sebastian would still be there to pass on the knowledge. However, Mona knew Sebastian would strongly object to her idea as he was always very protective of her. Mona knew he would rather destroy the book than let anything happen to her, so she concluded that she would have to hide her intentions from him.

For the next few days, Mona spent her time planning her escape. Every time Sebastian fell asleep, she would take the book out and try to analyse the map, which was hand-drawn on the book cover. This seemed pretty easy as there were no words, just drawings, recognisable symbols and arrows. 'It seems Mr Wood, Sebastian's great-great uncle, knew people wouldn't be able to read in the future,' she thought to herself. She managed to memorise the roads, pathways and rocks, but after the lake, school and few other settlements it was getting too complicated. She recognised little of that area of the map as she had never been to those places. In fact, no one ever went that way as it was too dangerous and full of sharp rocks. Worst of all, that is where the

bats were coming from. However, that did not stop Mona's attempt to learn the map. The idea had completely taken over her mind. According to the map, there were about twenty villages to pass until she got out to ground level. Finding it too difficult to memorise all the information, she decided to copy the map. She took the little pen she found stuck to the side of the book. Mona had never seen a pen in her life but she knew what it was for as it was the same colour as Mr Wood's writing. She ripped off a blank page from the end of the book and copied the map as best she could.

– Chapter Five –

## ESCAPE

The following day Sebastian noticed Mona seemed very tired and a bit lost.

‘Is everything all right?’ he asked.

‘I am not feeling very well,’ Mona lied, ‘I think I will stay in today and have a little rest.’ Today was the day on which she intended to leave. The most difficult bit was hiding this from Sebastian, but she had to or he would never let her go. At the same time it was the hardest thing ever as she wanted so much to tell him and kiss him goodbye...

‘I will stay with you, in case you need anything,’ Sebastian said.

‘Oh no, please, just you go to school, I will be all right,’ Mona said quickly. ‘I didn’t sleep well last night, that’s all.’

Sebastian wasn’t sure if she was telling the truth. He was worried that she was sick but knowing how stubborn Mona could be, he left.

She waited for a while, just to make sure Sebastian did not come back. When she thought it was finally safe to leave, she took the map and a shovel from the storage and she left. Mona was

walking very slowly. For the first time since she made a decision to leave, she realised what she was doing. She felt so overwhelmed by the idea of finding a wonderful new world for her people, that she forgot how dangerous it might be, and that she might never be able to return home. As Mona started her journey, she passed the hidden passages where she and Sebastian had so often played and explored together. When she came to the lake, she gazed at the place they had visited every day after school. Everything reminded her of her past. The thing that was bothering her most was that she had never even said goodbye to the people she knew – to any of her friends and, most importantly, to her best ever friend, Sebastian. Mona knew she had no choice but she could not forgive herself for the pain she knew this would cause Sebastian. Suddenly, she could not bear these thoughts any more and knelt down and started weeping.

At school, Sebastian could not stop thinking about Mona. While everyone was playing and having fun, he could not concentrate on any of the games.

‘Sebastian!’ he heard someone shouting. He turned around and saw Milo running towards him in a panic. ‘Why is Mona so upset? I just saw her by the lake she was crying her eyes out. When I approached and called her name, she ran away from me.’

‘Where did she go?’ Sebastian asked in horror.

‘She went towards the fish store,’ Milo replied.

‘Why would she run that way?’ Sebastian asked. He was worried because they lived in the opposite direction. Before anyone could stop him, Sebastian was racing to the fish store.

Mona knew Milo would tell Sebastian about her crying, so she ran as fast as she could to avoid being caught. She went to the

fish store and took quite a lot of fish as she did not know how long her journey would last. She followed the map out of the village, through the rocks and dirt, going as quickly and as quietly as she could. She saw bats hanging off cliffs and rocks, and some even above her head, but they were clearly deeply asleep. 'A lucky escape,' she thought to herself. Suddenly, she came to a huge wall. 'This is it!' Mona got very excited. 'I need to find a cross on the map where they marked this covered passageway.' Mona followed the little symbols on the drawing in her hands and quite easily discovered a mark on the wall. She dug with her shovel for a while and just as she got very tired, her shovel fell through to the other side of the wall.

Her eyes lit up in excitement. She was looking at a new side of a cavern. There were no holes, no people or the lake. There was a bubbling spring that was disappearing under the wall through which she had emerged. Mona was relieved to see the water as that was something she really needed and she had not thought to bring water with her. All around her were fascinating tiny hollow stalactites, colourful soda straws. In some places they were linked, creating lines and circles, and as they moved it seemed as if they were dancing. All around were beautiful stalagmites that were rising upward from the floor of the cave and stalactites hung from the cavern ceiling. In many places they joined, forming hundreds of columns, fascinating shapes, arches and passages. Many of these creations were finished with drapery – thin sheets that hung in delicate folds like a curtain. Everything was untouched and beautiful. For the moment she forgot the purpose of her escape. Mona walked around these stunning formations, watching them, touching and listening to everything as if in a trance. The rocks were magnificent too. One of the rocks was shiny, another

colourful; a third was emitting sparkling light; a fourth was hollow and musical. She was astounded.

When Sebastian arrived at the fish store, his unease grew. He was told that a tearful Mona had visited the store and taken quite a lot of food with her. The store assistant had not asked her any questions as he had assumed that she was taking the food for a family. But because Mona had been very upset, many people had noticed her as she passed, so it was quite easy for Sebastian to follow her, asking passers-by for directions. The last trail he found made him shiver. He realised she had gone out of the village into an area known for bats and darkness, where nobody had gone before.

Sebastian was not sure where he was going but he went on, going into the unknown. He walked quietly and carefully; he knew that if he made a single sound, the bats hanging all around would wake up and that would be the end of him.

The last settlement was now at least a couple of hundred metres behind him. However, he still did not hear or see Mona. And now he was at the huge wall at the end of the village. Where could Mona be? He looked around but all there was this endless wall.

Sebastian had just sat down on a small rock to try to think clearly, when he heard a distant scream coming from the wall in front of him. He jumped at once, horrified, as he recognised Mona's voice. He walked along the wall trying to hear or see something, but there was nothing there. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye he noticed a hole in the wall. He rushed through it and stopped for a second as he did not know where to go. To his horror all he could hear now was the familiar sound of many pairs of bats' wings, a sound that had stuck in his mind since he was

four. His whole body was shaking and he panicked because he knew that that was why Mona had screamed.

Sebastian ran towards the sound of his nightmare and stopped in shock. What he saw was simply unbelievable: Mona stood frozen against a rock, her eyes shut, surrounded by bats that were helping themselves to a fish that had fallen out of Mona's bag.

Sebastian walked quietly behind the rock, grabbed Mona's hand and pulled her quickly away. They ran and ran until they could no longer hear those horrible sounds.

'What were you thinking?' He was shouting and shaking, agitated and frightened as never before. 'Why are you here? Where were you going?' Sebastian had millions of questions and couldn't control himself: he felt overwhelmed by everything that had happened that day. But Mona wasn't listening. She did not make a single sound, she just stared at him with her lips stuck together and eyes wide open. Her whole body was shaking and Sebastian didn't know what to do.

'She is in shock,' a tiny voice said, coming from behind him.

Sebastian looked around but could not see anyone.

'I am down here,' the voice said.

Sebastian quickly looked down. To his surprise he saw only a little hamster.

'She won't be able to talk for a while,' the hamster continued, 'the same thing happened to my mother.'

'Who are you?' Sebastian asked, confused.

'Oh, I am sorry,' apologised the hamster, 'I haven't introduced myself. I am Gulliver; I live just around the corner. My

father may be able to help your friend; he helped my mother.'

'I would really appreciate any help,' said Sebastian, relieved. 'Could you please take me to your father?'

'Of course, just follow me,' Gulliver said excitedly.

– Chapter Six –

## FAMILY OF HAMSTERS

Sebastian picked Mona up and followed his new friend. ‘I have seen hamsters before but never realised you could talk,’ Sebastian observed, while walking quickly behind Gulliver.

‘That is because we are very quiet if we do not trust someone. In fact, hamsters talk very little and very quietly even between themselves. My parents always say that I talk too much, ha ha... Well, how else can I make friends?’ explained Gulliver. ‘I love to play with other hamsters, well, with anyone really...’

‘I must admit you are very outgoing and helpful. I have not met many like you, even people,’ said Sebastian.

When they turned the corner, Gulliver pointed at a small hole in the wall and announced, ‘This is where I live.’

Sebastian looked down at the hole, then looked at the hamster questioningly.

‘Oh, I am sorry, it seems that our door is a bit too low for your height.’ He smiled uncomfortably. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll go and get my daddy, I am sure he will be able to help you out here.’ He ran into a hole.

A few seconds later, Gulliver was back with his father.

‘You are joking!’ Gulliver’s father shouted, obviously annoyed about something.

Sebastian felt terrified and asked Gulliver’s father very politely, ‘Are you trying to say that you cannot help us?’

Gulliver’s father ignored the question, as though he had no idea that Sebastian was talking to him. He turned around, looked at Gulliver, and shouted even louder, ‘You little devil, I knew you would get us in trouble with your big mouth! Where did you find these two? Don’t you know who they are?’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Sebastian, surprised by this reaction and worried for their little helper. ‘We are friends, you have confused us with someone else.’

‘No, I haven’t. I have heard of your kind. We could not believe our luck when we got rid of you once and for all!’

‘Why, what have we done to you?’

‘Don’t try to fool me, little boy; you know very well what I am talking about.’

Sebastian was really confused. He had no clue why hamsters might have such a strong hatred of humans. For all he knew, people in his village didn’t like hamsters because they were stealing the food, nothing else. Then he just shook his head and innocently said, ‘I am really not trying to lie to you, but whatever it is I am really sorry you hate us so much.’ He then looked helplessly at Mona in his arms who was still shaking and whose face still looked grim.

‘Put her down here,’ said the father hamster, who still seemed rude but whose voice was a little bit softer this time. Sebastian obeyed without comment.

‘Do you think she will live?’ asked Sebastian, worriedly.

‘Of course she will! She is not dying, she has just had a traumatic experience and could not deal with it. It may take few days. She will need some rest, fresh air afterwards and someone to comfort her.’

‘What do you mean by fresh air?’ asked Sebastian.

‘You really don’t know anything, little boy.’

‘My name is Sebastian,’ he said Sebastian, firmly. He was a bit annoyed by all these accusations.

‘Whatever. You will have to take her out for a walk,’ replied the hamster.

‘Out where?’ Sebastian asked.

‘Outside above ground, of course. You don’t want her to stay in this dark cave when she regains consciousness.’

‘But this is where we live and it could be very dangerous to go outside now,’ protested Sebastian.

‘Why?’ the father hamster looked at him in disbelief. ‘Why do you think it would be dangerous, there is nothing there.’

‘What about the air, I thought it was polluted and poisonous?’

‘Well, it was many years ago, when your kind finally decided to destroy everything. It is safe now; humans have not been there for quite a while. Or at least that's what I thought until I met the two of you. So tell me, how many of you live down here?’

‘Quite a few,’ Sebastian answered, ‘there are about thirty families.’

‘Hasn’t anyone been above the ground recently?’

‘Not for about ten generations, ever since the man-made ecological disaster.’

‘Wow, I am impressed you know about the disaster people caused. So you are not such an ignorant sort after all! I thought your kind was always covering up the truth, but it seems that people down here actually acknowledge and maybe even learn from their mistakes.’

‘Well not really,’ Sebastian began slowly. ‘You are actually correct. Only my family knew about the past. No one else did. We knew thanks to my great-great uncle who hid a book in the hope that humans would change one day. My family kept that secret for generations, waiting for the right moment to come here.’

‘So, you are one of the good guys,’ said father hamster, with a big smile on his face. ‘In that case, please accept my apology, I did not mean to be rude.’

‘No harm done. I am really grateful for your help and, considering what humans did to this planet, it is understandable if all living beings despise us.’

‘My dear Sebastian, you do not have a clue what humans did to us hamsters. What they did to our ancestors is unforgivable. Gulliver, please pass me some water, I need to freshen up her face,’ said father hamster while massaging Mona’s body. Mona was visibly shivering much less then before.

‘Now, where was I? By the way, my name is Ed – nice to meet you, Sebastian. You see, hamsters do not have books; stories have been passed down through the generations to warn us in case humans ever return. Now that I have met you, I realise that that could well be possible. There were various types of torture people used against hamsters. The kindest were the ones who liked us; they were called "pets", keeping us in small cages as decoration in their homes. Just imagine how it felt to be stuck in one place, eating only what others forced us to eat, our whole life in limbo.

It was especially bad for animals like us, who love freedom, space and independence.'

'You are saying that this was done by people who liked you?' Sebastian exclaimed. 'What about humans who didn't like you then?'

'That would be everyone else,' replied Ed. 'You see, we were small and a very easy target. The only harm we could ever do was to eat a plant. As we are vegetarians, no one saw us as a threat. For some strange reason they hated us nevertheless. Some people would have pets like snakes –'

'What are snakes?'

'You are so lucky, you don't even know... They are our enemies; they are poisonous, dangerous and they eat hamsters. People who had snakes in aquariums at home would feed them live hamsters, finding it fun to watch an innocent animal getting eaten alive by another animal.'

'Oh my God, that is horrible!' shouted Sebastian. 'I am relieved Mona is asleep so she cannot hear this.'

'There is much more,' continued Ed. 'In order to find a cure for various illnesses, people would use hamsters for their tests. They would inject their illness into our tiny bodies then try a new drug to see if it would work. Sometimes it would take years and years until they finally found the cure, if they ever did, and meanwhile they would kill thousands of hamsters with the medicine that didn't work. Another thing they used us for is to test new cosmetics.'

'What are cosmetics?' asked Sebastian, even though he didn't really want to know, as he knew it would be something horrible like everything else.

‘Well, cosmetics are things which make humans look more attractive; that was very important to them. The various creams, scents and other preparations would be tested on our ancestors to make sure they are safe for human use. Goes without saying, it took a long time to make these cosmetics safe enough for humans...’

‘Please stop right there,’ said Sebastian. ‘When I read my book there was no mention of anything like that. There is acknowledgement of what people did to each other and generally to this planet, but not in so much detail. I am so sorry,’ said Sebastian, and he broke down in tears. Up to this moment he was strong, but now he felt overwhelmed by this new information about his kind, and couldn't stop thinking about how generations of this little species had suffered for the comfort of his own.

‘Don't cry, Sebastian, it's not your fault. You need to be strong for your friend when she comes back to her senses. I shouldn't have told you all these things,’ said Ed regretfully.

Sebastian wept for a while longer, then looked at Mona. She had now stopped shaking completely and was peacefully asleep. Sebastian wiped away his tears and said, ‘Thank you very much for helping us. I will never forget what you've told me, and I will make sure, if I ever get chance, that humans find out about this and learn never to make the same mistakes again.’

Mother hamster came out of the hole and called Ed for lunch.

‘My friend Sebastian is joining us. Could you please bring the food outside?’

She looked up at Sebastian carefully, approached him and said, ‘My husband's friends are mine too, I am Emily. Please join us for lunch – we will be honoured.’ Emily then took the food out

of the house and put it on a raised, flat rock in front of them.

‘What are these?’ asked Sebastian, pointing at the food that looked like little balls. He had never seen such food in his life.

‘They are nuts,’ replied Ed. ‘They are very good for you, full of nutrition.’

Sebastian took one, observed it, then looked at others who were crunching the shells quickly with their teeth and followed their example. It took him a bit longer to break the shell but when he finally did it he really appreciated a wonderful taste. ‘Mmm yummy, I have never eaten anything as tasty in my life; where did you get these?’

‘You will find them outside. We use our underground tunnels, it could be quite a long way from here,’ said Ed.

‘How can we get outside?’ asked Sebastian, now determined to go out once Mona had recovered.

‘May I...’ begun Gulliver and then looked at his father hoping for approval.

‘Gulliver will take you: he knows all the shortcuts,’ Ed said approvingly, ‘if that is all right with you Gulliver?’

‘Oh wow,’ jumped Gulliver, who could not believe his luck, ‘I will be more than happy to do it! Unfortunately, it will take a bit longer because we cannot use all of my shortcuts; you are too tall for some routes.’

‘We are aware of that,’ confirmed Ed. ‘Your mother and I will pack you enough food and water to take on your journey.’

Sebastian spent the following few days with this interesting family of hamsters, watching Mona as she recovered from her trauma.

Meanwhile, Gulliver was making a plan how to get them out as quickly and safely as possible.

‘Is there anything you would like to avoid on our way?’ Gulliver asked.

‘Bats,’ Sebastian replied at once.

‘Why are you so afraid of bats?’ Gulliver asked curiously.

‘They are vicious and they eat people. Bats are to us what snakes are to you. Look what they did to Mona; she was attacked before we ran into you.’

‘Oh, then you were very lucky to escape. Hamsters attacked by a snake, do not stand a chance. The snakes spray poison which paralyses us, so one even move, let alone run away.’

‘I guess we were lucky.’ Sebastian heaved a deep sigh looking at motionless Mona. ‘We were even luckier to meet your wonderful family.’

‘Thank you,’ blushed Gulliver, ‘but don’t expect all hamsters to be like us. They are also nice but very frightened, especially of humans.’

‘Understandably. I am surprised you were so courageous.’

‘That is because I wasn’t thinking. I saw you were in trouble and wanted to help, otherwise I would have just hidden,’ admitted Gulliver.

‘Where am I?’ They heard Mona’s voice and both jumped at the same time.

‘Mona, you have woken up, finally!’ shouted Sebastian excitedly and hugged her happily. His eyes lit up in excitement and his heart was bumping so loudly he thought it was going to explode.

‘Sebastian, where are we? What happened?’

Sebastian was happy she did not remember anything and just said, ‘Don’t worry, we are with friends; we are safe.’ He turned around, ‘This is Gulliver,’ then he noticed the two who had just come out of the house. ‘These are Gulliver’s parents, Emily and Ed.’

‘Hello,’ greeted Mona, ‘I guess you can understand us as Seb is calling you friends.’

‘Yes we can,’ said Gulliver proudly, ‘I am going to take you out of this cave.’

‘Out where?’ Mona could not remember anything about her escape.

‘Have something to drink,’ said Ed. ‘You need to rest, you are experiencing a slight case of amnesia. Don’t worry, your memory will gradually come back. If you have enough rest and get your strength back before your journey, it will be much easier for you to deal with the situation.’ After he said that, he turned around towards Emily and asked, ‘Could you please bring some food for Mona? She must be starving.’

‘Of course,’ said Emily, and rushed back into a hole.

A couple of days later, Mona felt much better. Almost all of her memory had returned, up to the moment just before she got attacked, so Ed suggested they left before she remembered everything. He knew she would feel much better and take the shock more easily when they were outside, in daylight. Everyone agreed with this suggestion. Mona and Sebastian were eager to find out what it felt like being outside. After they had rested, Mona, Sebastian and Gulliver set off on their journey.

‘I am really sorry, I almost let you down, Seb,’ Mona

whispered, while following Gulliver through narrow tunnels. 'I realise that you did not want to let your family and people of our village down, by risking your life. So I decided to do it all by myself. I am so relieved we have discovered that it is safe out there.'

'Don't apologise; if I were in your place I would do the same,' replied Sebastian. He was very careful not to say anything that might upset Mona and bring her memory of the bats back. He knew she would remember eventually, he was hoping it would happen when they were safe.

'Do you really mean it?'

'Of course,' confirmed Sebastian, 'but you have to promise me that next time you decide to do anything like this, you will tell me, no matter what. Even if you know I won't approve, please let me know.'

'I promise,' she replied without a second thought. She was relieved he had forgiven her for something for which she would not be able to forgive herself.

'Let's stop here,' Gulliver suggested. Mona and Sebastian obeyed without question.

The place Gulliver had chosen was really beautiful. On one side, there was water coming out of the wall, creating an icy-silvery pathway along the edge of the rocky wall. There was a nest of fireflies just next to it, making the water sparkle beautifully as it spread out in different directions all in various colours. On the other side, there were several polished, colourful rocks in the shape of hammocks and filled with moss which seemed more than inviting.

'This is the place I always pick to stop and have a break,' said

Gulliver.

‘I am not at all surprised,’ said Mona, amazed at this wonderful site.

‘This is the most beautiful place I have ever seen in my life,’ added Sebastian while going towards the water spring.

After they had a good look around and refreshed with the water from the spring, they followed Gulliver’s example and jumped onto the softest and most comfortable rocks, enjoying the smoothness of the moss.

‘Let me tell you something about our journey,’ began Gulliver. ‘This was the easy part; from now on we are going to experience some difficulties. If I was on my own, I would never go this way. I have heard scary stories from many hamsters about these pathways.’

‘What stories?’ asked Mona in surprise.

‘Well, for example, some say they have seen a snake.’

‘What is a snake?’ asked Mona even more astonished.

‘They eat hamsters,’ replied Sebastian to prevent Gulliver from repeating the same story Ed had told him. He was worried it might jog Mona’s memory, something he was desperately trying to avoid in this unknown and possibly hostile territory.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Mona naively, ‘we will protect you.’

‘Oh, you are very nice but they are poisonous and they can even harm you. If we come across one, you should run,’ advised Gulliver.

After a short nap they continued their journey. Gulliver was obviously very nervous, looking around, seemingly lost, so Mona and Sebastian kept quiet and just followed him. For a very long

time they went on silently. The passages were very claustrophobic, full of squeezes and crawls; they hardly managed to get through some of them. Finally, they turned around the white rock into yet another tunnel when Gulliver stopped.

‘We are now back in safe territory,’ Gulliver said, relieved. ‘Very soon we will arrive to another rest place where we will have a long sleep before we move on.’ Soon enough, they came to the destination he had chosen to be the next resting-place.

When they woke up, they had a good meal and went on. Gulliver showed them beautiful secrets of the cave, explaining how water created stalagmites and stalactites. He showed them small larvae of the most unusual hidden insects. He took them to see natural creations that were created ages ago, while water was making its way through the soil and rocks. Gulliver was so excited while proudly teaching Mona and Sebastian all these things that he did not even notice when they had entered new territory. Suddenly, he stopped and stood speechless, staring in one direction. Mona and Sebastian saw his frozen face with no expression and turned to follow his gaze. There was a slithery little thing coming towards them.

‘This must be a snake,’ whispered Sebastian and pushed Gulliver quickly to the side. The snake stopped for a second and looked at Sebastian, who dared to hide his lunch. Sebastian then grabbed a handful of small rocks and started hurling them at the snake. One of the pebbles immediately hit the snake hard on the head and it slithered off quickly in the opposite direction. Sebastian then turned around just to find that Gulliver was gone.

‘He went that way!’ Mona pointed to a little hole in the wall. ‘What shall we do now?’ she asked.

‘We will wait here for a while,’ replied Sebastian. He was trying to sound confident, although he had a feeling Gulliver was not going to come back.

‘Wow, I never noticed how deep this hole was,’ said Mona while looking down the abyss a couple of steps away from where they were standing.

‘We were probably at the bottom of it,’ replied Sebastian.

‘We must be close to the exit then,’ suggested Mona.

‘I guess we are,’ said Sebastian with delight in his voice.

‘Let’s have a competition to see who can hit that little white rock on the other side of this abyss while we are waiting for Gulliver,’ suggested Mona happily.

‘Ok,’ said Sebastian, accepting the challenge because he loved playing these games.

– Chapter Seven –

## THE TREE

They spent a long time playing, laughing and eventually shouting down the abyss, enjoying the sound of an echo coming from the deep hole.

‘Mona, stop!’ shouted Sebastian suddenly. She looked at him in horror, hearing what he had just heard. There was the familiar sound of bat wings, coming from the abyss towards them, becoming louder and louder.

Sebastian grabbed Mona’s hand and they both ran the fastest they ever had, not knowing where, just trying to escape from the bats.

‘Turn right!’ shouted Mona, noticing a chink of moonlight at the end of the tunnel. Within seconds they found themselves outside. They both looked behind at the same time, while still running, and bumped into something hard in front of them.

‘Ouch!’ they both yelled. ‘What is this?’ panicked Mona.

In front of them was the biggest thing they have ever seen and it was moving its huge head slowly in all directions.

‘Who are you?’ asked Sebastian trying to seem calm.

‘Just don’t tell me you are back!’ the huge thing howled. ‘Are

there more of you?’

‘We are alone and have not done anything, you must have confused us with someone else,’ said Sebastian.

‘Well, nothing personal, really, you just wiped off all of my family, friends and the whole of our existence!’ the thing shouted even louder and moved creating a wind which threw both Mona and Sebastian at least ten feet away. Mona was now lying in a small hole not even trying to get up. Sebastian, however, was determined to prove this creature wrong.

‘I’m sorry you are so upset and all these horrible things have happened to you, but we honestly haven’t done any of it. We just came out of...’

‘Are you trying to fool me? Do you think that I would forget your kind, creatures who were the cancer of this planet?’

Sebastian now realised where this was going so he just kept quiet, when out of the blue Mona asked – ‘What is a cancer?’

The huge thing stopped moving; it bent towards Mona and touched her gently with one of its huge arms. ‘You seem honest, as though you don’t really know what I am talking about.’

‘That is because I don’t know,’ Mona replied with a bit of relief in her voice. ‘Who are you and why are you accusing us of something so horrible we have not done?’ she asked.

The thing pulled back up, went silent for a minute and took a deep breath. Then it started talking slowly, making long pauses between the words. ‘Look around; what do you see?’

They looked around and saw something they could not have even dreamt about in their wildest dreams. There was a space, an enormous amount of endless open space, all around them.

‘This was worth all the sacrifice,’ whispered Sebastian and knelt down to touch the soil.

‘What are you talking about?’ Sebastian heard a loud, annoyed voice behind them.

‘Oh, I am very sorry, we’ve spent all of our life underground in that cave,’ he pointed at the huge pile of rocks, the place where they came from. ‘This is the first time for generations that someone has come out of there.’

‘I would not like to sound rude but it serves you right... I mean some of you,’ the creature quickly corrected itself.

‘I understand. We read a book about the ecological disaster which humans caused. We agree with you, some of us definitely deserved to be punished for what they did to this beautiful planet.’ He looked around again, trying to keep this mental picture in his head forever. ‘Oh, sorry,’ Sebastian continued, ‘I changed the subject, why did you want us to look around?’

‘Let me introduce myself first. I am a tree that used to be part of a tropical rainforest.’

‘Nice to meet you Mr Tree. I am Sebastian and this is my best friend Mona. Can you please explain to us what does tropical rainforest mean?’

‘I thought I’d have to explain everything to you two as you have never been outside. The tropical rainforest used to be the most diverse eco-system. This means most of all the world’s known species of plants and animals used to live here. There used to be several layers of trees, all working together to create one perfect environment, home for everyone. All the living organisms lived happily, everything had its cycle and for millions of years it all worked perfectly. Then, these horrible creatures decided to

ruin everything. Men began by cutting the forests in order to create farmland and build their homes. They cleared some of the forests to graze the cattle. As they grew richer, they became even more greedy so they cut the trees to make new roads and hydroelectric power, and they did mining and worst of all logging.'

'What does that mean - logging?' Mona asked.

'Logging means, timber is exported to other countries for production of furniture, building materials and various other products that people found useful,' Tree explained. 'What they didn't realise was that by destroying the rainforests, not only were they killing all dependent plants and animals, they were even killing themselves and destroying the planet.'

'It seems that rainforests are quite important for this planet,' said Mona.

'The rainforests are very important for this planet for many reasons,' confirmed the tree. 'One major reason is that plants in the forest turn carbon dioxide into a clear air, necessary for other living organisms to breathe and which help us fight pollution. Rainforests are a very good source of food, medicine and shelter. They contain important plants which can cure the many human diseases. Instead of living with us and using us only for living necessities, humans chose to make money.'

'What is money?' asked Sebastian.

'That used to be the means people used to exchange for goods. They worked to earn the money so they could survive although they could easily live happily without it...'

'It seems that they tried to complicate things, rather than enjoy living,' concluded Mona.

'That is true' continued the tree, 'instead of enjoying what

nature had given them, they decided to destroy it in order to enjoy something artificial that was making them unhappy.'

'What I don't understand', said Sebastian, 'is how they managed to destroy all the trees in this rainforest. Didn't they realise what they were doing to themselves?'

'They did, obviously, but it was already too late. When forests are cut down, the soil erodes quickly and soon only the dry soil remains. On top of that, the remaining trees are too weak to intercept heavy rainfall; so, when they did this, soil was washed away into rivers and areas quickly became infertile. Apart from that, the planet was already damaged enough by human deeds that everything was disturbed. The climate completely changed so that an area that had once been very hot became rainy and cold, and areas that had been windy and rainy became too hot. Needless to say, most of flora and fauna got wiped out completely. Not even that stopped humans from polluting and overusing resources until they managed finally to wipe themselves out. It's a wonder I survived – and even more that you did.'

'What if we are not the only survivors?' asked Mona.

'Yes' continued Sebastian excitedly, 'maybe there are more trees, or even another rainforest, or some other people...'

The tree took a deep breath and said sadly. 'I wish you were right. I know there are few odd trees miles away, next to the lake my friend Laura visits regularly but that is about it. That is all I know.'

'Who is your friend Laura?' asked Mona.

'Laura lives here with me,' replied Tree and pointed at the hole in his body. 'She is an owl, a bird that sleeps during the day and awakens at night. She is at the lake now and she will definitely

be back by the morning. I would suggest that you go back to your cave before the morning. It will be too light and too hot for you, I don't think you will be able to cope with it after living your whole life in the dark.'

'Why does it get too dark and too hot in the morning?' asked Mona.

'Well, the Sun comes out and since there is nowhere for you to hide, and no forest to create shadow, the heat becomes unbearable. I am used to it but you are not. If you don't mind, I am really tired and need some sleep. Can we continue this conversation tomorrow when the sun sets?'

Mona and Sebastian had millions of questions but decided to leave it for now to let the tree sleep.

Mona then looked at Sebastian and asked quietly, 'What do you think we should do?'

'Well, now that we are out, I suggest that we try to explore around a bit.'

Mona agreed especially as she did not want to go back to the cave as she knew the bats were there and still waiting for them at the entrance.

'Where will we hide once this Sun comes out?' wondered Mona. Just as she said that there was a very loud hoot behind them.

'Who are you and what are you doing here?' the bird asked.

'I am Sebastian and this is my friend Mona. We were just wondering around and who are you?'

'My name is Laura and I live here.'

'Oh, you are Laura,' said Sebastian, 'the tree told us. Can you

please tell us where the lake is? We are a bit hungry and thirsty.'

'It's a bit too far to walk there. You won't be able to make it there before the morning but I can take you.'

'Are you sure we are not too heavy for you?' asked Mona.

'I can take you one by one. Don't worry, I'll be all right. You'll just have to hold on tight to my feathers.'

Sebastian was the first one to take off. He wanted to make sure it was safe before Laura brought Mona. As they took off, Sebastian made a loud sound of delight. He was flying! He could not believe his luck! It was the best experience he ever had. The air was rushing through his body like never before. He felt a bit chilly but wonderful.

'What a beautiful view!' he shouted, looking at the enormous space around them, lit with the huge yellow thing above their heads.

'Can we reach that beautiful yellow shiny ball?' asked Sebastian pointing at the Moon.

'Of course not' Laura laughed out loud. 'It's the Moon and although it seems close to us, it is very far away, out in space.'

'It's a shame; it looks so inviting' said Sebastian.

'I know it is' said Laura, 'People used to be able to go up there. A long time ago, they built huge flying objects that took them into space. I heard the story that they even landed on the Moon and went even further to see other stars.'

'So why didn't they concentrate on discovering space rather than the destroying their own planet?' asked Sebastian, confused.

'You are asking me? That was your own kind, you should know better,' said Laura

‘I really do not understand; instead of exploring and enjoying the beauties of nature, they used their brains and power to fight it all,’ said Sebastian, more to himself.

– Chapter Eight –

SAVVANNAH

‘This is it’ said Laura and pointed with her wing to the beautiful lake surrounded by some trees, bushes and grass.

‘Oh my God!’ shouted Sebastian, overwhelmed by all the loveliness.

‘Shhh,’ said Laura ‘we have to be quiet not to wake up the inhabitants, especially the lion family – they hate to be disturbed. I will leave you at the safest place by the lake and make sure you don’t make much noise. You could get into a really big trouble if you do,’ warned Laura.

Sebastian nodded but didn’t take much notice of Laura’s words. He was beguiled, looking at the reflection of the Moon in the lake, enormous space, grass that he saw for the very first time and everything else around.

‘See you later’ said Laura and quickly flew back to collect Mona.

Sebastian looked around, wondering what he should do first. Then he realised how hungry he was and decided to prepare for Mona's arrival. This didn’t take long. As soon as he walked towards the bushes, he noticed nuts – the same ones they had

eaten at Gulliver's place. He found lots of them in different bushes as well as many other colourful things which he assumed were edible. After a short while he had collected a huge pile of new colourful food, which looked delicious. He hardly managed to refrain from eating, especially as he was really hungry. He thought to himself, it will be so much sweeter to eat together with Mona. After all, she is probably hungry too. He decided to go for a swim in the lake. He stood at the shore and noticed something new he hadn't noticed before. The lake was dark: there were no fishes that would usually light the water up from the inside, the only light was coming from the full moon, whose reflection in the lake made it look magical. He jumped into the water and was delighted to find that it was much warmer than in his village. Sebastian loved every moment. He swam and enjoyed it using all his senses. Everything seemed much better and much more inviting than in his village. He loved the endless space and sense of freedom. He also noticed how much he had changed in this short time. He wasn't at all afraid of the unknown, on the contrary, he was puzzled and excited by it all and could not wait to find out more. Even the scariest story the tree had told him about the sun and dangerous animals – it was all just an exciting adventure he had been waiting to have. Sebastian was floating on the lake, overwhelmed with all these new thoughts, when he suddenly realised something was happening. To his big surprise, his skin was getting lighter and everything around him was changing. There were colours and shapes he had never seen before. In the dark everything looks black, but now every single thing had a unique appearance. Then he realised his skin was shrinking – he had spent too long in the water. As he was coming out he looked at his pile of food which now looked even more appetising. Sebastian then decided to

nibble a few bits as he could not resist any longer. As he was crunching on his nuts, he noticed all the stars had disappeared and it was now getting much hotter and lighter. 'Where is Mona, he thought to himself, shouldn't they be here already?' He suddenly got very worried. Sebastian looked around trying to see if Laura was coming but there was no sign of them. Then he saw something, a spot far away, and to his relief a moment later he recognised Laura.

As she was approaching, his smile faded, 'Where is Mona?' he shouted.

'Don't worry, it's all right now. There was room for her in my hole so I left her there.'

'Why?' Sebastian asked. 'Why didn't you bring her here?'

'Well, when I went back to pick her up, she was so excited once we took off that she let go of my feathers and fell down. Thankfully we were not too high so she didn't break any bones, she just got very frightened. But I could not convince her to come with me.'

'So, what are we going to do now?' asked Sebastian disappointedly.

'Well, Mona is safe in the tree but I will have to stay here with you today and tonight we will have to find another way unless Mona recovers from her fear. Now, let's hurry, we do not have any more time to waste. The sun will be coming out soon and before that happens we have to prepare for a long day. The first thing is, we need to get enough water and food for you. Oh, I can see you have prepared the food already,' Laura said, smiling when she saw the huge pile of food behind Sebastian.

'What about you, won't you need any water?' asked Sebastian.

‘No, I am a night bird. During the day I sleep so I am really sorry I won’t be able to keep you company. Jump on, we need to go,’ she said. Sebastian obeyed and within a few minutes they were high in the sky, flying over the lake, they flew for a short while and stopped under a few huge trees.

‘What are these egg shaped things hanging on these trees?’ Sebastian asked.

‘They are coconuts and they will be very useful for you. The juice is very tasty and refreshing and its shell keeps it cool; it will help you to keep fresh through the day.’

Laura left Sebastian on the ground and flew towards the stem with the coconuts. She broke the stem with coconuts and they fell down close to where Sebastian was standing. Sebastian picked up couple of coconuts and was surprised how rigid and heavy they were.

‘Take a few empty shells!’ shouted Laura. He did as she said and they quickly flew back towards the lake. As they approached the place where Sebastian had left the food he had collected, they noticed something was happening.

‘It seems someone is helping themselves to our food,’ whispered Sebastian.

‘Ssshhh, keep quiet,’ said Laura and carefully landed on a rock nearby. ‘Stay here, I am going to check what is happening.’

Sebastian obeyed Laura, and she went carefully towards the place where they had left the food. Seconds later Sebastian heard a horrible squeaking noise. Laura’s cry for help was followed by the scary noises of breaking branches. Sebastian ran to help Laura and found himself facing an animal three times his own size. The animal was a furry brown colour, with dark spots all over its body

with long teardrop-shaped lines on both sides of the nose extending from the corner of the eyes to the mouth. It looked dangerous and it was preparing to eat Laura whose head was tightly squeezed in its paws. Sebastian saw the frightened, frozen look on Laura's face, her eyes helplessly looking in the animal's mouth. Sebastian could not stand that look – it reminded him of Mona's when she had been surrounded by bats. He jumped, and with all his strength punched the animal squarely on the nose. The creature stumbled, fell down, let go of Laura and covered its face with both paws. Laura didn't even look at Sebastian, just flew away as quickly as she could. Just as Sebastian turned around to leave the scene he found himself eye to eye with this horrible animal that now looked so angry, ready to kill for revenge.

'How dare you spoil my lunch you ugly little human – and where do you think you are going now?' the animal shouted, pushing its head against Sebastian's.

'Well,' Sebastian tried to keep calm even though his knees had turned to jelly and his heart was beating faster than ever before. 'I was trying to protect my friend Laura and now she is safe I am leaving.'

'He he he!' laughed the animal sarcastically. 'You think you are leaving? In my opinion, you chose to sacrifice yourself for that stupid little bird, you silly boy – and considering that we cheetahs are the fastest land animals, I don't think you will be going anywhere further than my stomach!'

Before Sebastian could say anything the cheetah grabbed him with its claws and furiously threw him against a rock nearby. 'This is just to make sure you don't try anything. I'm going to eat you slowly, bit by bit, he he he.'

Sebastian felt sharp pain in his leg and arm, as well as pain all over his body. The cheetah had scratched him badly with its claws, but Sebastian did not make a sound, he just kept calm and, with some unusual strength in his voice, calmly said, 'If this is the price I am going to pay for trying to protect a friend of mine, so be it. Go on – enjoy your meal, you nasty thing!'

'Oh, I am deeply touched with your goodness and strength,' said cheetah sarcastically and laughed out loud. 'Now please keep quiet; I prefer to eat in peace, he he.'

Just as the cheetah made its way towards Sebastian a large group of animals arrived, running all over the place, hitting the cheetah with branches and small rocks. Sebastian was still in shock, and after watching the whole scene for few seconds, he lost consciousness.

When he opened his eyes he saw one of the animals that had attacked the cheetah. This one was wearing glasses and had a white coat.

'Who are you and where am I?' Sebastian asked.

'We are baboons and you are in our hospital.'

Sebastian looked around, and saw that this place had been cleverly made out of debris. It was quite dark and cool inside, and he was lying on the most comfortable bed ever, made out of dried ferns, grasses and leaves. It seemed very warm and homey inside. There was slight breeze with a shaft of light coming from a small doorway he was facing. As he turned his head to see more of this beautiful room, he heard a sharp voice:

'I am a doctor and you've broken couple of bones. It will take a while before you will be able to walk again. You were attacked by a cheetah and we saved you.'

‘That is so noble of you, I cannot thank you enough,’ replied Sebastian. ‘But where did you come from? There was no one around apart from Laura and me!’

‘He he,’ smiled the baboon politely. ‘That is what you think, but animals around here know everything, and the news travels fast when you enter our territory and you are new to us. The truth is, we followed you after you stole coconuts from one of our trees.’

‘Whoops, sorry’ said Sebastian, ‘I didn’t know they belonged to anyone, otherwise I would have asked.’

‘You don’t have to apologise’ quickly replied the baboon. ‘The way you spoke out to the cheetah told us immediately that you are a noble man. That is why we raced to save you. You risked your life to protect a friend so we decided to risk our own to protect you. This is how it works around here, one for all and all for one!’

‘Wow, that is so wonderful,’ Sebastian said delightedly. ‘You really watch out for each other.’

‘That is true – and that is how we managed to survive the man-made ecological disaster.’

At these words Sebastian blushed, ‘I see you know about it,’ he said quietly. ‘I am surprised you don’t hate me like everyone else I’ve met so far.’

‘Oh, don’t be silly,’ replied the doctor. ‘Why would we blame you for something your ancestors did such a long time ago? Of course, we do remember, actually we pass the story from one generation to another just to keep the knowledge but we do not keep hating.’

‘It sounds as though baboons have a perfect society,’ mused Sebastian aloud.

The baboon smiled politely again and said, ‘It’s just that we

have found that respect and love are the only way groups can survive living together. Since baboons live in large groups we had to learn that lesson. It's not always easy, of course, as we are all very different individuals, but where there is a will there is a way – it's an old human saying. Now you need to rest. We will talk later; I need to go attend other patients. My assistant, Pat, is going to take care of you while I am away.'

Shortly after, a lady baboon entered the hut.

'Hello madam,' said Sebastian, politely.

'Hello, my dear child,' replied the baboon. 'Please call me Pat. What is your name?'

'My name is Sebastian.'

'Oh, that is a really nice name. Let me bring you some food, Sebastian. You must be hungry!'

She went out and minutes later she was back with a plate full of food.

'Here are some lovely fruits for you; I am sure you are going to enjoy them. Which one would you like first?'

'Sebastian looked at the dish and didn't know what to say: they all looked very appetising and colourful.

'I don't know – maybe the long yellow one?'

'You mean a banana?' asked Pat.

'I guess so,' replied Sebastian.

'Oh, my dear boy, don't tell me you've never had any of these. How is that possible? I thought humans ate fruit?!' Pat was very surprised. She knew Sebastian did not live around their savannah but nevertheless it was very surprising to meet someone who is completely unfamiliar with commonly available fruits.

‘There are no fruits or trees where I come from,’ said Sebastian sadly. ‘Nothing like that grows underground.’

‘Why would you be living underground?’ asked Pat with her eyes wide open, obviously very concerned about this new discovery.

‘It’s a long story; I wouldn’t want to bore you with that,’ Sebastian said, trying not to think about the world he had left.

‘You seem quite disturbed,’ Pat noticed. ‘I have all the time in the world, my little friend.’ she said with motherly warmth in her voice. ‘Please tell me everything; you obviously need to let it all out. There has to be a very good reason for you to be living underground – and an even better one for coming out.’

Sebastian looked at Pat and saw the concerned look on her face. He knew he didn’t have a choice; she would not give up until he told her his story. He took a deep breath and began.

Pat listened very carefully to Sebastian’s story. She just wanted to help this little person who seemed to have had such a rough life. She was astounded to learn about the whole world underground. She was even more concerned when Sebastian talked about Mona. Pat didn’t want to show her feelings but her heart was hurting; she felt for Sebastian as if he were her own son.

When Sebastian finished speaking, Pat didn’t know what to say. She had thought that the worst thing that had happened to Sebastian had been the cheetah, but now she understood what he was really going through.

‘My dear Sebastian,’ she began, ‘try not to worry too much. First you need to recover. Meanwhile, I’ll speak to the others and we will try to find a way to find your little friend. We have many friends in the savannah. I am sure the birds will be able to find

out where Laura lives. The good thing is that you are safe here with us. After living the whole of your life underground, I don't think your body will survive too much sunlight or heat. It will take some time before you get adjusted to it. Now try to relax and get some sleep.'

Sebastian didn't need Pat to tell him that: he was already so tired and overwhelmed with everything that he easily fell asleep. Pat then left.

The baboons took good care of Sebastian. Every evening they would carry him out for a fresh air dinner and every night after dinner there would be a different event organised in Sebastian's honour. Pat had shared Sebastian's story with everyone so they all felt for him and tried to help him overcome his sorrow and misfortune. One night there was a music and a tropical dance, another there was a barbecue around a big fire, but Sebastian's favourite was a comedy night when they prepared funny sketches that became sillier from one moment to another and eventually they all ended up throwing soft fruit and water at each other, laughing and joking until they all fell asleep. They were so exhausted that they almost forgot to take Sebastian back into the hut.

Even though the baboons took very good care of Sebastian, after everyone went to sleep Sebastian couldn't help missing and worrying about Mona. She was more than a friend to him, she was the only family he had. Mona was everything he had and he could not stand losing her. He was determined to go to find Mona as soon as he was able to walk again. Mona was the first thing he would think about in the morning, and the first question he would ask Pat when she entered the room. But, unfortunately, every morning the answer would be the same. Pat was still waiting for

news from neighbouring owls, who were apparently waiting to hear from other birds, and so on. The truth was, Laura never came back to their savannah and no one knew where she was and if she was still alive. Pat she knew Sebastian's feelings for Mona so she kept putting off telling him the truth. Sebastian was getting stronger every day. He was determined to get better as soon as possible so he did all the exercises the doctor asked him to do and worked on them much harder than he had been asked to. At night, when everyone went to sleep, he would spend an extra hour or two exercising.

One morning, all his hard work had finally paid off. He woke up and stood up easily – he did not feel any pain and his leg was back to normal. He was walking around the room, hopping and jumping, making sure he would be able to start his search for Mona. The doctor was delighted to see his progress, and Pat's eyes filled with tears. She had mixed emotions. She was happy he had recovered, but she was sad knowing that he would soon leave them.

‘I hope you are not going to leave us soon,’ she started.

‘Oh, my dear Pat, you’ve been like a mother to me. Thank you for all your help – but you know very well that I must go. Not only do I miss Mona with all my heart, I feel responsible for her. None of this would ever have happened if I hadn’t shared my family secret with her. I should have known Mona better. She has always been a fighter for good causes; she would always put everyone else before her own needs. I should have known that Mona would want to save humanity. Now I have huge responsibilities: one towards Mona and one towards my people. They must share this air, water and enormous space; they have suffered enough.’

Pat didn’t say a word; she just nodded, hugged him and

stood there for a few moments. She then let go of him and, with tears in her eyes, said, 'I understand but I should tell you something: it is going to be a bit harder than we all expected. The truth is, Laura never came back to the lake, and she left the tree where she had lived. One of the birds saw her that night and we only know the direction in which she was headed. Maria, the grey parrot, saw her last.'

'I must speak to Maria,' said Sebastian calmly. He was very worried, but he didn't want Pat to sense it as he knew how emotional she was. Pat was surprised by Sebastian's calmness but that made her feel a bit better – at least it made her worry less.

'I will take you to Maria tonight but don't expect too much – that is all we know.'

– Chapter Nine –

MARIA & CARLA

That evening Sebastian said goodbye to the baboons and thanked them for their help and hospitality and went with Pat to see Maria.

‘Are you sure you don’t want any of the baboons to go with you to look for Mona?’

‘I am sure,’ answered Sebastian quickly. ‘I wouldn’t like to risk any more lives and this is something that I have to do on my own. The baboons have already done so much for me, I owe them my life and I will never forget that; it would be very irresponsible of me if I put any of you through more trouble.’

‘If that is how you feel, I understand, but if you ever change your mind or need our help for anything, you know where to find us. We will always be here for you. You are always welcome. I speak for all of us baboons. We all agree and have accepted you as one of our own.’

‘I am very grateful for that and you’ve been more than a family to me. I promise to come back once I fulfil my duties.’

‘This is where Maria lives,’ Pat said, and knocked at the tree in front of them.

‘You don’t have to knock, I’ve seen you from afar.’ They heard a voice above them.

This was not surprising as Maria was always watching out from her nest; she had to know and see everything first. Everyone knew her as she was the most inquisitive bird around. Maria was very loud and she knew all the gossip.

‘Hello, Sebastian,’ she said.

Surprised, Sebastian asked, ‘How do you know my name?’

‘Well, someone told me,’ she answered very quickly and continued, ‘I suppose you came to ask about your friend?’

‘Yes, you guessed right. Will you please tell me everything you know?’

‘You two had better come up here – this is going to be a long story. I have found out quite a few things – I knew you would come to me.’

Both Sebastian and Pat were surprised and almost reacted in unison. ‘How did you know that?’

‘Oh, please, come up here and stop asking me silly questions.’

Maria was always flattered when someone was stunned by the information she had and she was really looking forward to this visit. That is why she had spread the news around that she had seen Laura and Mona, and why she had done all she could to find out everything possible.

‘We’ll come up,’ Pat said, and told Sebastian to hold on to her shoulders. She then climbed up the tree into Maria’s house in the hole of the tree.

‘Let me make us some tea and I will tell you all that I know.’

Sebastian and Pat sat down around a small table and waited

patiently. Maria came back shortly with a plate of nuts and three cups of tea. She put all that on the table, sat down and started telling the story.

‘When I heard that Sebastian and Laura were attacked by a cheetah, I flew there quickly to see what was happening. After the lucky escape, I saw Laura flying in the direction of the lonely tree. This is what my friend Carla and I call that tree in that deserted area. I could see Laura bleeding and struggling to fly. Then there was the fight between the baboons and a cheetah, and it all ended happily – Sebastian was saved. After it all went quiet, I turned to see where Laura was, and if she needed any help, but she had disappeared. A few days later I heard you were looking for Laura and decided with my friend Carla to go to look for her. That night, we went through the desert in the direction of the lonely tree. Carla was a perfect companion as she can walk pretty fast and I could rest on her back whenever I got tired without her noticing it as she is huge.’

‘How big do you parrots get?’ asked Sebastian curiously.

‘Well, not very tall,’ answered Maria, and smiled. ‘Carla is not a parrot, she is a giraffe. We get on very well as she is very tall so when I stand on top of her head, I can see what is going on in our neighbourhood. Eh,.. I meant to say, we talk about everyone, I mean... everything.’ Maria stopped for a second as she realised that she had just confessed her secret to these two strangers, then she continued as if nothing had happened, hoping that they had not noticed.

The truth is, Sebastian and Pat did notice; however, they could not care less, they just wanted to hear the rest of her story and find out what she knew about Mona and Laura.

‘Now, where was I?’ Maria went on, ‘Yes, even though Carla can walk pretty fast it took us a long time to get to the tree. It was getting lighter and hotter in the desert, Carla was slowing down and by the time we finally saw the lonely tree I could hardly keep my eyes open. When we got there, we were disappointed to find that Laura’s house was empty; the lonely tree told us they were gone.’

‘So you lied that you saw them?’ Sebastian was so disappointed he could not stop himself from saying that.

‘Yes, I did lie about that – sorry – but what the tree told us is much more useful to you than if we saw them leaving. Laura did not make it home that day. She collapsed half way as her wing was hurt and she had lost quite a lot of blood. Fortunately for Laura, a friendly ostrich, Ricky, was passing by just as she hit the ground. He took her to his home and his parents stopped her bleeding. Since they did not know much about medicine and couldn’t heal her, they decided to send Ricky to take her to an old doctor eagle, who lived on the cliff by the sea. This eagle was a famous doctor. He was very good but a little crazy, they had warned Laura. This is how it went when they arrived.

‘Doctor, this is Laura, she needs your help!’ said the young ostrich.

‘What kind of help? Is she hungry?’ asked the doctor.

‘No, she is hurt! She is bleeding – can you help her?’

‘You came to the right place: I can help her – I am a doctor!’

‘We know that,’ answered the ostrich. ‘That is why we are here: you are well-known for your skills.’

‘Oh, I am really flattered – you’ve heard about my dancing. My mum always said I should be working in circus. Watch me.’ So

the doctor began jumping and turning around – but very clumsily – he kept stepping on his own toes, bumping his head against the rock, falling.

Everyone just stood there until Laura could not stand the pain any longer and yelled, ‘Doctor, I am in pain; would you please help me?’

‘Whoops,’ said the doctor, and turned towards the ostrich. ‘I am sorry. I will show you my dancing routine later; I have to help this owl first.’ As he said that, he quickly took a bag from underneath his nest, blew the dust away, opened it and then more quickly than Laura and Ricky had ever seen anyone do before, he started working on Laura’s wounds.

They were both surprised by this because having seen his dancing routine, their expectations were low.

‘Let me introduce myself,’ said the doctor, while working. ‘I am Krunoslav-Lyuboslav Evgeniy Shostakovich but you can call me Dr Dado. What are your names?’

The ostrich smiled at this; he never heard such a strange name before but it really suited the doctor’s personality.

‘Our names are very simple: I am Ricky and this is Laura,’ said the ostrich. ‘Now if you will excuse me, I have to go; my parents will get really worried if I am not home before dark and we are quite far from my home.’ After seeing the way the doctor was working, Ricky felt safe to leave Laura with him. He felt relieved he could go home.

‘Aren’t you ostriches the fastest birds around?’ asked Dado, surprised.

‘Yes, we are, but even if I run as fast as I can now I will hardly make it before dark.’

‘In that case, run,’ said the doctor.

‘Oh, one more thing,’ said Ostrich. ‘Laura is not from around here. Could you please bring her over to our place when she gets better. I will take her from there.’

‘Of course I will, no problem, bye bye.’

‘But, let me tell you how to find us – you don’t know where we live.’

‘Oh yes, please tell me, good job you remembered.’

‘Well, the easiest way to find our place is if you go south. Follow the shore to the blue lagoon. Do you know where it is?’

‘Of course I know boy – don’t patronise me,’ said the doctor, obviously annoyed by this question.

‘I am really sorry,’ said the ostrich quickly. ‘I didn’t mean to insult you. So, when you get to the blue lagoon, turn right and fly for about 10 miles straight to the tallest mango tree. We live just half a mile northeast from there. It will take a bit longer than the way I take but you cannot get lost.’

‘Well, see you in couple of days then,’ said Dado. ‘It all seems pretty straightforward.’

‘Thank you very much, doctor,’ said Ricky, ‘I am looking forward to seeing the rest of your dancing when I see you next time.’

The doctor smiled; he was obviously delighted by these words. ‘Next time I will teach you so that we can dance together, my dear boy.’

Then they shook hands and Ricky left.

It took a couple of days as Dr Dado said, but then Laura was completely healed.

‘I think you are all right now,’ said Dr Dado when Laura woke up. ‘You need to fly as much as possible in order to get back into shape.’

‘Well, I need to find Ricky. He lives quite far away – that should help.’

‘You are right, it should. Find Ricky then.’

‘Aren’t you going to help me, Doctor?’

‘Why, haven’t I just healed you? Is anything else wrong with you?’ asked Doctor.

‘No, I am fine, but didn’t you tell Ricky you would help me find him?’

‘Who is Ricky?’ asked Doctor.

‘The ostrich that brought me here – don’t you remember?’

‘Oh, of course, I remember – I had just forgotten the name,’ the doctor lied.

Apart from being a bit crazy, the doctor had forgotten to mention that he had a really bad memory. They had dinner, and at dusk they left. Laura was surprised to find that they were not following the shore as Ricky had suggested.

‘Aren’t we supposed to follow the shore?’ asked Laura.

‘Why would we be taking that way?’ asked the doctor.

‘Because Ricky said it was easier.’

‘Let me ask you something. Do you know where Ricky lives?’ asked the doctor.

‘No, I do not,’ replied Laura.

‘Then let me take you there. Ricky is my friend.’

Laura didn’t ask any more questions. She was quite sure

Ricky and Dado hardly knew each other. Nevertheless she hoped Dado knew where he was going. After all, she didn't know the area at all and the doctor seemed confident that he knew where he was going.

Before long, the eagle said, 'We are almost there.'

Laura looked at him in disbelief. Her intuition was unfortunately right, it seemed.

'Are you, sure?' she asked. 'I mean, Ricky said it was very far away from your nest and we got here very quickly.'

'Don't worry,' replied the doctor. 'Ricky cannot fly; he is not that fast; it's much faster when you fly... Look, there is Ricky's house – do you recognise it now?'

Laura looked down in the direction where Dado was pointing with his wing and she panicked. It was nothing like the ostrich's nest. Down in the middle of the forest were some strange dwellings she has never seen before. They were all settled on the banks of a fast-flowing river. The settlements were made out of wood and they had proper roofs, big doors, windows and chimneys. It all looked very unusual. What kind of animals lived there, Laura wondered. But she didn't say a word this time, she just silently followed the doctor, hoping someone down there called Ricky – the doctor's friend – would be able to help her find her saviour. The doctor knocked on the window and to Laura's surprise a blond curly-haired boy with big blue eyes appeared and smiled.

'Hello, Mr Shostakovich, I am really glad to see you. You haven't been here for a while.'

'Hi, Ricky, I brought you Laura; she wanted to see you. Now, if you don't mind, I have to get back, I am really tired now. All the

best, Laura and don't forget to exercise with that wing,' the doctor said, and left.

'He, he,' laughed little boy. 'My name is Danny, not Ricky. Dr Shostakovich forgot my name again – isn't he funny?'

'Well,' began Laura, 'in a way it is, if it wasn't so sad I would be laughing!'

'Whoops. I suppose you need to see someone called Ricky then.'

'Yes, an ostrich who helped me and the only one who can show me how to get home from here, unfortunately.'

'Maybe I could help you a bit. Do you remember anything about the place where Ricky lives?'

'Well, not really. I guess I would recognise it if I were there. But I do remember instructions Ricky gave the doctor before he left....'

Danny did help Laura to find the ostrich: he pointed her in the right direction towards the blue lagoon and from there she found Ricky's nest easily.

It was early in the morning when Laura woke Mona and the tree. She was breathing heavily as she was really exhausted by the long "journey". Ricky took her back to the place where he had found her and from there on she flew back home as fast as she could.

'Hi, Mona, are you ok?' Laura asked worriedly.

'I was so worried,' replied Mona. 'I expected you to come back the following night. What happened? Where is Sebastian?'

Laura's eyes filled with tears. She hugged Mona and said, 'He is not coming back, I am really sorry...'

Then she told them about Sebastian's bravery, how he lost his life, trying to protect Laura, the tree said.

Mona cried a lot and hasn't slept well for three days, blaming herself for making Sebastian leave their village underground.

After three days, when Mona came down a bit, Laura prepared a nice meal and while they were eating Laura began talking about her experience, the little friendly ostrich, the crazy doctor and someone called Danny who had helped her find her way back. When she mentioned Danny, Mona's eyes lit up.

'Did you say a little boy? Did you mean human?' Mona asked.

'Yes, human, do you want me to take you there? Maybe it's going to be easier if you are with your own kind' Laura said.

'I need to go there – I owe that to Sebastian,' replied Mona, as though she hadn't heard anything Laura had said.

Laura didn't understand why Mona had said that but she was more than happy to help Mona, after all she felt guilty she had left Sebastian to fight the cheetah all by himself, even though she knew she couldn't have done anything to save him.

'That evening Laura and Mona left. That is all I know,' finished Maria.

'So, Laura never came back home after that?' asked Pat.

'No, the tree said she had never come home but that doesn't mean that she didn't intend to, it was only a few days since she'd gone. Maybe she didn't want to leave Mona straight away,' replied Maria.

'Can you please show me the way to the lonely tree? I need to go there and check whether Laura came back. I have to find Mona and these people; it is very important to me.'

‘Of course we can. In fact, Carla and I would be delighted to see how this story ends. I mean, help you find a friend,’ Maria corrected herself.

‘When can we leave?’ asked Sebastian, anxious to leave as soon as possible.

‘I think we can go straight away. Let me just go and get Carla.’ Maria jumped, all excited.

‘That is great,’ replied Sebastian.

‘I’ll get you some supplies,’ said Pat. ‘It is going to be a long way, and it could take several days... What is your favourite food, my dear?’ she asked Sebastian with the warmth of a mother in her voice.

‘I really loved the nuts you brought me last night,’ answered Sebastian.

When Pat came back she had a bag full of various fruit and nuts. ‘Here you have oranges which will help you keep fresh in case you run out of water,’ she said. ‘Please take care of yourself. Pat’s eyes filled with tears; she could not control her feelings any longer and she hugged Sebastian with all her heart.

Sebastian was also very sad. He had never felt such warmth from anyone since his parents died.

‘You have been like a mother to me. I will always remember you, my dear Pat.’

They kissed goodbye and Sebastian went towards Maria who was impatiently waiting to go. Carla, on the other hand, was very slow and patient. In fact, she was too slow and patient for Sebastian. Carla was in the middle of her meal when they arrived.

‘One thing Carla hates is being disturbed during her meal,’

Maria said impatiently. Sebastian usually wouldn't mind waiting but this time he was anxious to find Mona. He and Maria watched Carla taking her time, eating leaf by leaf from the tree, chewing every bite for a very long time. When she finally turned around, satisfied at last, she looked down towards Sebastian and her mouth turned to smile the biggest yet longest smile Sebastian had ever seen.

'Heelooo Seeebaassttiiiiaaaaan! Good to meet you.' This was the laziest sentence Sebastian had ever heard.

'Hi, Carla, nice to meet you,' he replied.

'Wee goo noww; Mariiiiia saaaaid weee hurrrry.'

Sebastian was glad Carla was cutting sentences short even though they were still the longest and dumbest ever.

'Yes, Maria is right, we should get there before morning. I am still not used to daylight.'

'Then both oof yooouu haad betteer hopppp onnnn,' Carla said, and immediately laid down so that Sebastian and Maria could climb onto her back.

Sebastian thanked her for her help and they went. Fortunately, Carla's pace of walking was much faster than the pace at which she talked and ate.

'So, how is it possible that I haven't seen a single human in the whole of my life yet there are now so many of you all over the place?' asked Maria while Carla was walking her way through the savannah towards the desert.

'Well, to be honest, I didn't know there were any other people apart from the ones in my village, until you told me Laura's story.'

‘Are you telling me that there is another village?’ asked Maria, obviously very surprised.

‘Yes, my village is settled in the cavern next to the lonely tree,’ answered Sebastian.

‘Oh, I didn’t know anyone lived in the cavern. I’ll have to go and find out what is in there,’ Maria replied, more to herself.

‘Well, good luck to you,’ Sebastian answered, not at all surprised by Maria’s nosiness.

‘Good luck, why? Is it dangerous? Are your people going to kill me?’

‘I don’t know about that. First, you will have to get to them. That means travelling through suffocatingly small dark tunnels filled with various animals including angry bats who eat humans. I am not sure what would they do to you. But once you got there – that is, if you didn’t get lost on the way – I am sure they would appreciate your visit, since they think there is no life outside the village. There is, of course, a possibility they might confuse you with a bat, since they have never seen a parrot before...’

‘Oh, I see, well, I will postpone my visit to your village for a while; there is no urgency...’ said Maria, then quickly changed the subject and spent the rest of the way talking about the animals in the savannah.

Sebastian was relieved. He was not in the mood to talk about his people; it was only reminding him and making him feel sad. He especially didn’t feel like talking about personal things to this parrot who wasn’t genuinely interested, just wanted to hear more gossip. Sebastian couldn’t understand how anyone could rush to watch someone being tortured or killed and not even try to help. Laura could have lost her life if it hadn’t been for the friendly

ostrich. But Sebastian didn't think about it much; he was looking forward to meeting Laura again and finding Mona soon – he missed her very much and couldn't wait to show her that he was still alive. Time passed and even Maria went quiet. It was dawn when Sebastian saw the tree in the distance.

'Wow,' he shouted, 'we've finally arrived!' He couldn't hide the delight on his face. He was happily smiling and impatiently looking in the direction of the tree.

'Yees, we are almost theree,' replied Carla, 'I cannooot wait sleeeep, Carla vveeryyyy tiiiireeed.'

'How can you even think about sleeping now? We are going to see Laura and find out what happened to Mona!' Maria said. Sebastian didn't say a word; he just looked happily towards a tree.

'Oh, hi Sebastian!' shouted Tree from afar. 'It's good to see you. When I heard that you are alive, I was so relieved.'

When they got closer, Sebastian's smile faded. He saw the hole in the tree but could not see Laura. He got off Carla, who then promptly fell fast asleep. After exchanging a few friendly words with the tree, Sebastian nervously asked about Laura. Tree went quiet.

'What happened?' asked Sebastian.

'I don't know. They left and never came back.'

'Maybe Laura stayed with Mona and those people,' Sebastian suggested.

'That would be very unusual – Laura always comes home... But, I hope you are right. I miss talking to her...'

'I am sure she will be back, don't worry,' said Sebastian. 'She probably stayed to help Mona and they will be back together.'

‘Does it mean you will stay and wait for them with me?’ asked Tree with a glimpse of hope in its voice.

‘Well, I would prefer to go and look for them and meet those people. There is nothing for me here. I have a duty to people in my village.’

‘I understand that but how are you going to find them?’ asked Tree. ‘We don’t even know where that forest is, or how far....’

‘Veerrrrryy faaarrrr, ooonnee moore night jooourney’ said Carla, sleepily. ‘Pleeeaaassee bee quiiiiieett – Caaaarla waaanntss to sleeeppp noooooowww,’ and she went back to sleep.

‘It seems that our friend Carla knows where the forest is.’ Sebastian spoke quietly but his voice was full of hope.

‘I don’t know about Carla but I am not going,’ Maria said firmly. ‘I don’t like to go too far from my home, especially to areas that could be dangerous.’

Sebastian was relieved. ‘That’s all right – you have helped me enough; I can get there on my own,’ he said.

‘Are you sure?’ asked the tree. ‘You are not very fast and it would take you much longer than Carla to get there....’

‘I’ll gooooo, juuuusst pppleeeaaassee quiiiiieett,’ said Carla, who was not very happy as they had woken her up again.

‘I don’t believe it,’ said Sebastian. ‘I have only just met Carla last night for the first time and she is already ready to do this great favour for me...’

‘I think that Carla should take me back home before she takes you to that forest...’ said Maria in annoyance.

‘Don’t you think it’s a bit too much for that poor animal?’

asked Tree, who just realised what Maria is like. ‘Why don’t you stay here with me and tell me all the gossip from savannah while Carla takes Sebastian there and when she comes back you can go home together.’

‘What a great idea,’ said Maria delightedly. ‘There is so much I have to tell you. What would you like to know?’

‘Why don’t you leave it until a bit later? I am sure you would like to have some rest now – and Sebastian and Carla need to sleep.’ Tree was not really interested in gossip but didn’t trust Maria for one second. Tree was sure that if Carla were to go with her, she wouldn’t return, as Maria would use her for another favour and it would all just create complications for Sebastian. This way, Tree would have someone to talk to, Maria would be able to indulge in gossip, and everyone would be satisfied. After a short while, Sebastian also went to sleep while Maria stayed to think of all the gossip she could tell the tree later. Around dusk the following day, when it got a lot cooler, Sebastian came out of Laura’s home ready to take off. Carla was ready to go, as she had had a very long rest and a good meal earlier on.

‘Lllleeetts gooooo, hhhhaavvee tooo huuurrrryy, foorreesst tooo faaarr, vveerryy faaarr,’ said Carla.

Sebastian said goodbye to Maria and the tree and they left.

‘So, how did you know where this forest was?’ asked Sebastian curiously as they were walking.

‘I llliiiveed there,’ there was a long pause, ‘uuuntil aaa liiiion kiiiilled my paaaaartner,’ said Carla. ‘Caaaaarllaaa waaaaas vveeryy saaaad, leeeeeeft hooooomeeee foor gooooood.’

‘Oh, I am really sorry.’ Sebastian regretted having asked.

‘Looonng tiiiimeee aaago, Caaaarla's alllmmmoost

forgoooootten,' said Carla to make Sebastian feel better. 'Iiiiiis Mooooona yooooour paaaartneecer?'

'No, Mona is like a sister to me; she is my best friend. In our village, we spent every day together. I miss her a lot,' replied Sebastian wistfully. 'I have no other family – she is all I have.'

'I ooonnly haaavee Maaariaaaa.'

This was very sad, Sebastian thought. The poor giraffe only had that horrible bird. But he didn't want to say anything to this lonely animal; he just said, 'Yes, we have so much in common. Maybe you shouldn't have come with me. It can be a very painful experience for you to return home. Why don't you just go back to Maria? I will be all right on my own.'

'Dooonnnn't woorry, Caaarlllaa OK. Laaarry waas aaa veerry goood girafee, hee diiiieeed prooooootecting oouuur frieeend gaazellee buut lion kiilled her toooo. Seeee, life veeeeeeryy unfaaairr.'

Sebastian felt very sad for Carla. She had lost her love and best friend simultaneously.

'Caaaarla crrriied fooor heelp,' she continued. 'Noone caaaame. ..Caaaarla leeeft veery diiiisaaaappooointeeed aand saad...But Caarla foorgaave, Lyoon, daaaangeeeerooous eeeveeeeeryone affraaid. Eeeveerrryoone but Laaarry.'

The rest of the way they kept quiet. Carla was reviving memories of Larry in her head, while Sebastian was looking forward to seeing Mona again. He couldn't wait.

Sebastian suddenly noticed that the desert was slowly giving way to grass and rocks, and there were few odd trees and bushes here and there. It still looked quite empty and endless so Sebastian was slowly falling asleep.

‘Seeeeb, soooooorry to waaake you,’ Carla’s dull voice woke him up. ‘Wooooould yooou liiike soooome waaater?’

Sebastian opened his eyes and, to his amazement, he saw that they were surrounded by beautiful trees, plants, grass and water.

‘Wow, I have never seen in my life anything so beautiful!’ Sebastian shouted.

‘Yees, oaaassiiis, veery niiiiiceeee,’ confirmed Carla. ‘Ii aaam gooing tooo eaaat now.’

‘Since you are so tall, could you please pass me couple of those lovely bananas?’ asked Sebastian politely.

‘Of course,’ replied Carla, and grabbed a huge bunch of bananas for him.

‘Oh, that is too many,’ smiled Sebastian modestly, and happily started eating one of them. When he finished the bananas, he looked around and saw Carla still eating very slowly. Sebastian did not want to disturb her and decided to do a little exploring. This is wonderful, Sebastian thought to himself while looking around. The oasis was surrounded by the most beautiful greenery he had ever seen. There were amazing palm trees as well as many other species, bushes and various types of lovely flowers. Even the smell was very pleasant and different from every other he had experienced before. Even though it was a pitch black night it was alive with frogs croaking as well as birds and insects. It seemed that no one noticed him or the giraffe, or if they had, they clearly didn’t mind. He felt happy, welcome and free. If he were to choose a place to live, this oasis would be his favourite. He noticed that even the water looked different going around trees and bushes creating on its way lovely little islands. He hopped from one to another until he fell in, creating a big splash.

‘Ouch, brrr, excuse me!’ He heard few voices; one said, ‘Do you mind?’ and another said, ‘we were not planning another bath tonight...’

‘I am really sorry,’ Sebastian replied, ‘I didn’t do it on purpose.’

There were four frogs sitting on the leaves, talking.

‘Don’t worry,’ one said, ‘we were just surprised, that’s all.’

Another frog said, ‘Since we are wet now we could join you.’

‘That is, of course, if you don’t mind our company,’ another one added.

‘That’s great – the more the merrier,’ replied Sebastian happily. ‘Please join me.’

The frogs jumped into the water at once, followed by two more and six small ones. Soon, they were all over the place.

They were laughing and shouting without a care in the world. Sebastian didn’t expect this but enjoyed it nevertheless. Soon enough he joined the conversation and laughter and for a second he forgot why he was there and where he was going.

Suddenly, Sebastian heard Carla’s voice calling him.

‘I am over here!’ he said, jumping up and down and waving his arms. Carla came over and he invited her to join them.

‘Nooow, weee shoould gooo, nooo tiimee tooo wastee...’

Sebastian blushed, he felt guilty and ashamed for letting himself enjoy so much that he forgot why he was there.

‘I am really sorry, Carla, these animals around here are so friendly.’

‘Noooo, I soooory, you deeeeseeerve to eeenjoy,’ Carla replied.

‘No, you were right,’ said Sebastian, coming out of the water. He turned around and said, ‘I am leaving. Bye everyone – thanks for your lovely company.’

Some waved, some said goodbye but they all went on as though nothing had happened.

‘The life is so easy around here,’ Sebastian whispered to Carla while he was climbing up her back.

‘Veery relaaxed,’ Carla confirmed, and they left.

After they left the oasis, the way became monotonous again so Sebastian fell asleep.

– Chapter Ten –

## THE FOREST

Sounds of water woke Sebastian from his sleep.

‘Where are we?’ he asked as he saw that they were walking through some water.

‘We are almost there,’ she replied.

He looked up and saw the forest. ‘There are trees everywhere; I have never seen so many in my life,’ he exclaimed.

‘Yees,’ replied Carla, ‘iiiiit iiis becaaaaauuuutiful, Caaaarla aaaaalmost foouoorgoooot.’

‘You do not have to come all the way,’ said Sebastian, tentatively. ‘I can do this by myself.’

‘Caaarla waaants. Caaarla missed hhher hooome, muuuust seeeee.’

‘If that’s the case, all right, just please don’t do it for me,’ Sebastian said.

As they were getting closer, Carla began to talk. ‘You seee thaaat treeee ooover theeere? Laarry and I loooved those leeeceaves. Wee uuused tooo caaall it loooove treeee, thaaat iiiis wheere wee first met. Iiif you loook tooo thee leeeft wheeeere thaaaat woouood stump iiiis, thaaaaaat iiis wheeeere....’ Crush,

boom, there were horrible sounds as Carla fell through the ground into a huge hole. Sebastian fell off and hung onto a branch sticking out of the wall of the hole.

‘Ouch, Caaaarllaa huuuurt, heeeeeeelp, Caaaaarllaaaa stuuuck...’ Carla was shouting.

They heard malicious laughter from above the hole. It was the most chilling laughter Sebastian had ever heard in his life.

‘Who is there?’ Sebastian shouted.

‘Ha ha ha, we are hyenas, he, he, it was so funny the way giraffe flew, he hee, the best ever.’

‘Did you create this trap?’ Sebastian asked angrily.

‘No, this was created ages ago but we use it for fun!’ shouted one of the hyenas.

‘You call this fun?!’ shouted Sebastian. ‘My friend is badly hurt and stuck in this hole and I am hanging off this tiny brunch. We might die in here!’ Sebastian was so angry he could not stop shouting at these stupid animals.

‘Don’t you worry,’ replied the hyena. ‘It won’t be long – animals usually die pretty quickly in there unless a lion comes by, in which case it happens even faster, he, he, he.’ They all laughed again then left.

Sebastian could only hear laughter and sarcastic comments getting weaker and weaker. ‘Have you seen a flying giraffe, he, he, he...’

Sebastian could not believe how heartless and cruel these animals were; he felt so angry and helpless.

‘How are you feeling?’ he asked Carla, but there was just a weak voice repeating ‘heelp, heeelp...’

Sebastian thought for a second, then just joined in as loudly as he could, shouting for help.

As the time passed, light was getting stronger from above, but Sebastian's voice was also getting weaker and he realised that he had not heard Carla at all for a long while, so he was convinced she was dead.

'Heelp,' he shouted with the last strength from his throat as it was now very painful and dry.

'Heellooo,' a big head turned up at the opening above. 'Is anyone in there?' the voice asked slowly yet gently.

'Yes, two of us, can you please help?' Sebastian asked with the final strength of his voice.

The big head looked down first at Sebastian then at Carla who was deep down at the bottom of the hole in the dark.

'Who is that with you? Is that a giraffe?' the voice asked curiously.

'Yes, it is my friend Carla.'

There was a silence for a second, then the head repeated slowly, 'Carla... I am going to get some help...'

Soon enough, there were several heads, looking down at Sebastian.

Down came a thick woody vine. 'Here, grab this,' the voice said. Sebastian grasped it and within seconds he was pulled outside. There he found a giraffe, an elephant and a couple of iguanas.

'Thank you all very much,' he said.

'This was easy,' giraffe said, and gave Sebastian some water. 'The other part is going to be very difficult.'

Then the giraffe turned towards one of iguanas and asked it to ask some more elephants and couple of beavers to come to help. In a very short time everyone was there, including several squirrels, iguanas and three birds who all joined in as they also wanted to give a hand. Sebastian was very surprised at this organisation, how it all worked so well around there, , and it was not even the same group of animals like the baboons.

The beavers were cutting the tree, making parts for a bed vehicle for Carla, which the giraffe said was going to be used later to transport her to an animal hospital. The monkeys were cutting vine ropes and preparing to help pull Carla out of the hole. Sebastian and other animals were going around and helping. A giraffe asked the beavers to go down and make channels underneath Carla so they could thread the vine ropes through them. The iguanas went with them down the hole to help. Once all the vines were spread underneath Carla, the birds flew down to pull the ends back up and to take out the beavers and iguanas. Now the ends of the vines were pulled up and one elephant on each side pulled them simultaneously backward, pulling Carla slowly up. The giraffe who had carefully organised everything had tears in its eyes, and its voice became shaky and insecure. Sebastian thought the giraffe was very emotional.

‘Is she...?’ The giraffe tried to ask something but there was a long pause ‘alive?’ He finished softly. One of the monkeys climbed up where Carla was lying, checked her pulse and after a short while turned towards the giraffe and said, ‘Yes, Larry, she is still alive.’

At this, Sebastian jumped, ‘Larry?!?! Are you... I mean you cannot be Carla’s Larry?!’ Sebastian was shocked.

The giraffe looked at Sebastian with a slight look of relief on

its face and said quietly and slowly, 'Yes, this is my Carla. I thought I had lost her forever and now she is back, I almost lost her once again...'

'Oh my God!' Sebastian rose his voice, 'You cannot imagine how much she loves you; she thought you were killed by a lion...'

'I was badly hurt,' explained Larry, 'but they healed me in the hospital. I looked everywhere for Carla, but no one saw her ever again. She was last seen running into a desert... I looked for her for years and years... Only recently I made my peace with this – I accepted that she was gone... she had died... How could I give up? I should not have!'

'Don't blame yourself,' Sebastian said, 'Many would have given up much earlier; it was the only sensible thing to do. How could you have known she was still alive? You did the right thing. Now you even saved her life...'

At these words, Larry smiled gently and just looked at Carla and said, 'Thank you for those kind words, Sebastian.'

Meanwhile the animals were tying Carla's bed to the elephant and soon they were ready to go.

'Let's hurry,' urged Larry. 'She might have lost a lot of blood, she might have been badly hurt, so we have no time to waste.'

Larry led the group, and everyone looked concerned about Carla's wellbeing.

'I cannot believe Carla is back,' said one of the birds, breaking the silence. 'Larry, you must be over the moon.'

Larry looked at the bird in front of him and just commented, 'Let's hope I do not lose her: I don't think I would be able to cope with it again.'

Suddenly, there was a loud roar in front of them. Sebastian was surprised as all the animals stopped and everything went quiet.

‘How did you guess I was hungry? What is it you’ve got for me in there?’ asked the animal, staring at Carla.

Everyone looked absolutely petrified. Sebastian couldn’t quite understand why, this animal was much smaller than a giraffe. Little did he know that this was a mighty lion. But he sensed that something was wrong as the animal was closing in on Carla and everyone was just standing there, completely motionless. He suddenly got really worried about what was going to happen to Carla as he realised that this was a serious situation.

‘What are you all just standing there for?’ he shouted. ‘Do something!’ At these words they all looked at Sebastian with a confused look in their eyes. Larry jumped first, grabbed the animal’s tail and threw it flying into the air. An elephant caught it with its trunk and threw it into a tree. As it slithered down the tree, all the other animals joined in, kicking it and pushing it away from Carla. Meanwhile, the elephants who were carrying Carla quickly continued towards the animal hospital. Larry and Sebastian joined them.

‘I don’t know how to thank you,’ said Larry.

‘Don’t mention it,’ said Sebastian quickly. ‘It was the only sane thing to do, seeing you all standing there doing nothing.’ he couldn’t understand what got into them.

‘But, the lion is the king of this area, the most dangerous animal, I am surprised anyone took any notice of what you were saying,’ Larry explained. ‘By the way, it seemed as if you were not afraid of him at all; how is that possible?’

‘I guess it’s because I wasn’t aware it was a lion and even if I knew that, we easily outnumbered him, so why be afraid? I recently witnessed a group of baboons getting rid of a cheetah. This here seemed much simpler.’

‘I respect you for your courage. I used to be just like you before the lion almost killed me, but ever since then I have been living like a mouse, afraid of everything,’ said Larry.

‘Well, you didn’t seem afraid while you were organising all those animals, saving Carla and myself, and you were the first one to grab the lion by the tail when I shouted. Maybe you are underestimating yourself. Obviously, you cannot fight the lions by yourself but with your skills as a leader you could make this place safe by organising all those animals. Together you could live in harmony and the lion would not dare attack any of you when he knows what you can do as a group.’

After Sebastian had finished, Larry thought for a while and then said, ‘You are very wise. This sounds like a great idea – I am sure others would agree.’

‘I learnt that from the baboons. They even have a slogan – "all for one and one for all"; it could easily work around here. Maybe eventually the lion will give in and join you,’ joked Sebastian.

‘Well, I am not sure about that,’ smiled Larry. ‘Would you give up your food in order to keep the peace?’

‘I would!’ said Sebastian, decisively. ‘There are many choices, so why risk my life for a bite? Peace is the most important thing, and fear ruins every chance in life. Harmony and respect are the key to every success. I learnt that recently.’

‘That certainly applies to our situation here,’ agreed Larry. ‘Although I almost lost my life by being fearless, I still agree with

you; fear should not stop you from trying, you just need a good plan for dealing with any situation. Anyway, this is it.' Larry pointed with his head into some bushes.

'What is it?' asked Sebastian looking at those bushes.

'Oh, it's a camouflaged hospital,' said Larry. 'Animals around here built it that way in order to trick intruders. If you do not know, you would never guess what is inside.'

As they were approaching, several animals ran outside towards them. Before they even got close enough, a couple of squirrels were on top of Carla working on her neck.

'Wow,' Sebastian was surprised once again. 'This is just perfect – you really look out for one another.'

'Yes, it is,' agreed Larry. 'All we need now is to overcome this fear of Lyon and few other animals and we could live happily in this forest.'

One of the squirrels turned towards a large bird in a white coat and said, 'Dr, O'Dowd, we need a theatre – her neck is badly fractured. How are we going to fit her into the hospital?'

'Don't worry', a bird in white coat replied, 'I have already arranged for that, they are taking equipment outside as we speak. It is not going to be a big problem...'

'What kind of bird is this, doctor?' Sebastian asked Larry, to shift his attention towards something else, as he noticed a worried look in his eyes...

'Who? Oh, sorry,' Larry was confused. 'It's an eagle. Eagles have excellent eyesight and they are very fast. There are a few eagle doctors around...'

'I know,' said Sebastian. 'I've heard of one of them – his name

is Dr Dado...’

‘Well, of course you’ve heard of Dr Dado – he is the best. He is our teacher, everyone knows of him.’ Dr O’Dowd got involved in the conversation.

‘Does anyone know where Dr Dado lives?’ asked Sebastian, now full of hope.

‘Of course, I know.’

‘Will you be able to show me the way?’

‘Not now, if you excuse me, I have to operate’, replied the doctor, who realised that everything was ready and didn’t want to waste any more time on what seemed to him like idle chit-chat.

The doctor and his helper worked really hard and fast but it was still going very slowly, or so it seemed to Larry and Sebastian, who sat there and watching everything closely, very concerned for Carla’s wellbeing. Once they had finished, the doctor turned around towards Larry and gently said:

‘Sorry, Larry, we did everything we could, she seems to be in a coma, and we cannot bring her back from her sleep.’

‘What does it mean?’ asked Larry with tears in his eyes.

‘I am not sure – I have never experienced anything like that,’ replied the doctor, honestly. ‘We mended the broken bones and stopped all the bleeding but for some reason she has not regained consciousness. Her heart is still working as well as her brain, but we can only wait and see...’

At that point Larry couldn’t take it any longer. He hugged Carla strongly and broke down in tears shouting, ‘Please don’t leave me again. Please, I love you, I’ve missed you so much, Caarlalaaaa!’

Larry was weeping so loudly that more and more animals approached, watching the whole scene, concerned about Larry. Suddenly, like magic, Carla opened her eyes and looked down at the top of his head.

‘Laaryyy, iiisss that yooooouuu?’

There was a familiar, dull voice that now seemed to Sebastian the sweetest ever. Larry quickly looked up, then looked around as he wasn’t sure if he was imagining it.

Then he saw the smiles on everyone’s faces, and looked back at Carla and sweetly said, ‘Yes, it is I, Carla my love.’ He hugged her and kissed her on her forehead, then stroked her tenderly.

‘Am I dead?’ Carla asked.

Larry smiled. He realised that Carla was thinking that he was dead too.

‘No, my dear,’ he replied, ‘You are very alive and so am I. The lion didn’t kill me.’

‘Oh, Laaaarry, I dooon’t beelieveee it.’

Carla tried to get up but the doctor jumped in, shouting, ‘nooo, pleeeassee, you haven’t healed properly. Your bones are still very fragile. You must lie down for a while...’

Carla obeyed but didn’t stop looking at Larry for a second; they kept hugging for a very long time. Animals began slowly leaving as they wanted to give them some privacy. Sebastian also turned around to go but didn’t know what to do or where to go. Suddenly it hit him. He remembered the conversation with the doctor and decided to go and ask him for instructions how to find Dr Dado. He entered the hospital and the workers sent him towards the doctor’s office. Sebastian couldn’t help notice how everything seemed very organised and alive inside. Everyone was

busy, and there were beds and all kinds of equipment that he had never seen before. Everything was neat and tidy.

Sebastian knocked at the doctor's door and heard him say, 'Come in,' before he entered the room. The doctor was sitting at his desk having a rest.

'How may I help you dear boy?' he asked, in a friendly manner.

'I wanted to ask you some more about Dr Dado.'

'Oh, that,' the doctor remembered. 'So you are not from around here,' the doctor noticed.

'No, I am not,' replied Sebastian.

'OK, then, let's have a little chit-chat until your friend recovers, or would you prefer to explore the hospital for a while?'

'Doctor, I think you misunderstand. I am not here to kill time, I need to find out where Dr Shostakovich lives. This is very important to me.'

Dr O'Dowd was very confused. 'Why do you need him? You don't seem ill, and I don't know if you've heard, but he is now very old, senile and a bit crazy.'

'I know all that,' confirmed Sebastian, 'but he is still the only one who can help me find my friend.'

'Are you sure?' asked the doctor. 'It wouldn't surprise me if he couldn't remember his own name any longer, never mind help you find your friend.'

'I am aware of that, Doctor, but he could be my last chance, and this is the only lead I have.'

'Oh, my dear boy...' the doctor began compassionately. He now felt really sorry for Sebastian who depended on this crazy

eagle. But the doctor decided not to discourage Sebastian any more.

‘Actually, now I remember that Dr Dado is very helpful. Maybe if you remind him of some details he might remember. I will show you the way; in fact, I will find someone to take you there, otherwise it would take you ages and you might get lost on the way. I know several birds who often go that way, I am sure they will be more than happy to help you.’

‘Thank you very much Doctor,’ said Sebastian, filled with hope once again. ‘Let me take you there now,’ said the doctor, and got up to go. When he got close to Sebastian, he stopped, looked at him, waited a minute and said, ‘My dear boy, what is that on your face, shoulders and legs?’ The doctor was looking all over the very confused Sebastian.

‘What do you mean?’ Sebastian asked and looked down on himself. He realised that there were red patches all over his body.

‘Does this hurt?’ asked the doctor, touching Sebastian’s face. ‘Ouch,’ said Sebastian.

‘What is happening to me?’ asked Sebastian worriedly.

‘It’s sunburn,’ smiled the doctor. ‘I am surprised you have got it – the sun was not very strong this morning and most of the time we were hidden by the trees.’

Sebastian had been so absorbed in the happenings of that morning that he had not even noticed that it was his first time being on the outside on a sunny morning.

‘That is because I have never been out in the sun,’ explained Sebastian.

‘What do you mean? Where were you?’ asked the doctor, confused.

‘I was brought up underground and ever since I came out I have been hiding from the sun as everyone has advised me to do so,’ explained Sebastian.

At this, the doctor was stunned. The poor kid had never seen the sun?!?

‘Now I understand why you got so badly burnt. Don’t worry; we will give you some aloe oil to put on your burns several times a day. That should help heal them within a few days. For a while, try to hide from direct afternoon sun but at the same time, after your burns have healed try to go out as much as possible just before the sunset as you have to get used to the sun and your body needs the sun’s energy and vitamin D which will help your growth and development. Now you had better stay inside and have some rest. I will wake you up at dusk. Meanwhile, I will try to find someone to take you to see Dr Shostakovich tonight, is that ok with you?’ asked the doctor.

‘That sounds like a wonderful idea, especially as I am very tired now.’

‘No problems, let me show you to your bed.’

The doctor took Sebastian to the bed in a far corner, away from everything.

‘It should be peaceful and quiet in here. Here is a coconut bowl of water.’ Help yourself, you need to drink as much as possible.

See you later, if you need anything feel free to ask, we are all here to help.’

After the doctor left Sebastian kept thinking about everything the doctor had said, instead of resting peacefully.

What if Dr Dado really cannot remember where these people

are? If he is so forgetful and crazy he might get him into more trouble; he could get lost in this forest...

When Dr O'Dowd came back, he said, 'You seem very stressed. I could not help but notice you tossing and turning in the bed; is it not comfortable?' he asked.

'The bed is very comfortable,' Sebastian replied quickly. 'I am just worried about Dr Dado. What if you are right? What will I do if he doesn't remember where these people were?'

'What people?' curiously asked the doctor.

'Well, apparently in this forest there is a little village with some people. This is where my friend was going.'

'Why didn't you say that before?' excitedly asked the doctor. 'I know that village, I've been there many times, I can take you there tonight.'

'What about the hospital? How are they going to cope without you?' asked Sebastian.

'Don't worry about that – these animals are very well trained – they know their stuff. Now go to sleep. I will wake you up in time for sunset.'

'I don't know how to thank you, Doctor. First, you saved Carla and now you will help me find my best friend. You cannot imagine how much it means to me.'

'It's a pleasure – don't thank me – it's my job to help. A pain in the heart can be worse then any illness.'

'Now have a rest and see you later,' said the doctor, and left.

Sebastian was happy to obey and this time he fell asleep straight away. He had a wonderful dream. Sebastian dreamt of meeting Mona, laughing and running through the oasis without a

single worry in the world. They were chasing each other between the trees and swimming in the lake with friendly animals. The dream was so good it seemed as though only a second had passed when the doctor came back to wake him up.

Dr O'Dowd was standing there with a plate of lovely food. There was a fish Sebastian had never seen before, with some green vegetables he had also never seen before.

'I can see you feel better,' the doctor noticed, seeing Sebastian's face glowing.

Sebastian smiled happily and told the doctor about his dream.

The doctor smiled politely. 'Your dream could soon become a reality. How long will it take you to get ready to go?' he asked.

'I need to go and say goodbye to Carla and Larry, then I'll be ready,' replied Sebastian excitedly.

'OK then, I will meet you at the entrance of the hospital.' Sebastian finished his food quickly and went outside to see Larry and Carla. It seemed as if they haven't moved. Larry was still stroking Carla's head gently while Carla was staring at him lovingly.

'I just came to thank you for your help and wish you all the best as I am about the leave.'

'Where are you going?' asked Larry.

'I need to go and find my best friend. Dr O'Dowd is going to help me.'

'That doctor is a miracle. He helps everyone with everything. I hope he can find your friend for you,' said Larry.

'Gooooood luuuuuck, Seeeebaaaastiiiiiaaan,' said Carla, 'yooooou weere veerry goooood coompany.'

‘You too, Carla, I don’t know how would I ever have found this forest if it hadn’t been for you.’

‘I dooon’t knooooow hooooow I would have found Laaarrry wiiiithooooout yooou, Seeeebaaasttiiiiaaan. Thaaaank you,’ replied Carla. Sebastian left and the two love birds went back to gazing at one another, seeming to forget the whole world around them.

Just as Sebastian came to the hospital entrance, the doctor came out smiling. ‘It’s going to be good to stretch my wings again. I haven’t flown for a month and it’s been very busy in the hospital,’ he said.

‘I am glad you said that. I couldn’t help feeling guilty taking you away from the hospital,’ said Sebastian.

‘Hold on tightly to my feathers, said the doctor. ‘We are taking off!’ Within seconds they were high in the sky.

This happened just as sun was setting and Sebastian couldn’t help but let out a loud gasp. ‘Wow, I have never seen anything as beautiful as this in my life! How could I have lived my life without the sun?’ he wondered.

‘I wanted to say the same,’ commented the doctor. ‘How and why would you avoid the sunlight?’

‘Because people in my underground village thought we had destroyed life above ground forever.

‘Well, your ancestors did destroy the environment for a while; I have learnt about that – but that was ages ago and they should have come outside from time to time, like these people in the forest here.’

‘It sounds as though you like them,’ observed Sebastian.

‘Oh, yes, they are a friendly and responsible lot, as you will

see. Nothing like those nasty people from the past. There is so much I have learnt from them. They are very friendly with everyone around the forest. Doctor Dado learnt a lot about methods of healing from those humans.'

'I am really glad I am going to meet them; it sounds as though they have a lot of knowledge.'

'Believe me, they have a lot and they share it with everyone,' confirmed Doctor O'Dowd.

'This sounds so much better. So far I have heard only bad stories about humans,' said Sebastian sadly. 'Everyone I have met so far only knows what nasty irresponsible people did to this planet a long time ago. If these people in the forest are so good, I wonder why no one I have met so far has known nothing about them.'

'That is very strange. You obviously haven't met many animals from this forest,' said the doctor. 'Around here your race is quite popular; they saved this forest from destruction caused by ecological disaster.'

Sebastian blushed. For the first time since he had come out of his village, he felt proud to be human. This is something he definitely hadn't expected, given his experience so far.

'It is nice to hear that,' he said to the doctor.

'Even now, they do a lot of good for this forest,' continued the doctor. 'You will learn about it when we see them.'

'I cannot wait!' Sebastian was very excited. Now he understood why Laura had stayed so long and he felt happy for Mona, whom he thought must have been as proud and excited as he was. He was looking at a colourful sky that was getting darker, feeling very happy and warm at heart.

‘Doctor, I am really grateful to you. You make me feel proud to be human for once.’

‘Don’t thank me, thank those wonderful people when you see them,’ replied Dr O’Dowd, ‘I am just telling you how it is. They do a lot of good, so naturally they are well respected and so are you. You belong to the same kind.’

‘Doctor, I am confused. Why should I be respected for something someone else has done? That sounds very strange.’

‘Strange or not, that is how it works in nature. If you do something evil you represent not only yourself but mankind. Put it this way, if the snake bites you once, you would not trust another snake ever again.’

‘I wouldn’t agree with that,’ complained Sebastian ‘all the people I know have very different personalities.’

‘That is not the point; all animals have different characteristics too but as long as they do not harm others, no one is bothered about their characteristics or habits,’ explained the doctor. People used to have various personalities before but they destroyed the planet all together. If the good people do not stop bad people from doing evil things, they are responsible as much as the bad ones.’

‘But, what if you cannot change anything?’ asked Sebastian, thinking of his great-great uncle who was the only one who saved the book.

‘That means that the good ones are a minority and the majority wins and chooses the destiny.’

Sebastian didn’t ask any more questions; he thought about everything the doctor had said and it all made sense. His great-great uncle was the only one who had done something. If it wasn’t

for him and his family, people might never have known, and all knowledge might have died for ever the day they locked themselves deep underground in their inaccessible village.

– Chapter Eleven –

## VILLAGE IN THE FOREST

It was a middle of the night when they arrived. Sebastian was the first one to spot the village. It was as the tree had described it to him.

‘It looks so sweet,’ he said to the eagle. ‘I have never seen such a lovely settlement before.’

‘I am surprised you can see so well in the dark. Your eyesight is much better than mine,’ noticed the doctor.

‘I have lived all my life in the dark, so it’s normal for me,’ Sebastian reminded him.

‘Of course it is, I keep forgetting that. Sorry; it is just very unusual to imagine humans living like hamsters. On the other hand you do look a little bit like them – no offence – but you have much more hair and walk differently from humans I know. You will see when you meet them.’

They landed in front of one of the houses and the doctor said, ‘This is where a human doctor lives. He is always very helpful, probably the best one for you to talk to.’

They knocked at the door for a while but there was no answer.

‘It’s very quiet around here; everyone is probably asleep,’ guessed Sebastian. ‘Shall we wait until the morning?’ he asked. Just as he said that, a light in the house came on, ‘Who is it?’ a voice asked, as the door slowly opened.

‘Hi, Doctor Miles, sorry to wake you, it is me, Dr O’Dowd.’

‘Oh, hello, Dr O’Dowd, is there an emergency?’ he asked, and just at that point the door opened completely so Sebastian could see the whole figure of a man who was a giant – the tallest human he had ever seen, something he couldn’t even imagine. He was almost as tall as the door and he was wearing some strange clothes.

At that point, Sebastian got up from his crawling position and wanted to look taller as he was a bit embarrassed.

‘No, there is no medical emergency,’ replied Dr O’Dowd. He turned around and pointed his big wing at Sebastian. ‘This is Sebastian. He is the reason we are here.’

‘Hello, Sebastian,’ Dr Miles smiled benignly. Why don’t you come inside and tell me what brought you here this late at night. It must be something very important. You will also have to tell me where you come from. I wasn’t aware there were any other people living in our forest.’

Sebastian felt much more confident after Dr Miles’s friendly invitation; at the same time cold sweat covered his body because these last words made him realise that this doctor had not met Mona.

‘Are you saying I am the only new human in your village?’ he asked.

‘If there were any other new person in this village, I would be the first one to know. Trust me, Sebastian,’ the doctor replied.

At these words, Sebastian froze; he sat in the beautifully carved wooden chair beside the round table and went quiet.

‘Are you OK?’ Dr Miles asked. ‘You seem a bit lost.’

Sebastian didn’t reply; he was now so anxious about Mona that he couldn’t talk.

‘He is looking for his friend; she was supposed to be here,’ Dr O’Dowd answered for Sebastian.

‘How old are you, Sebastian?’ Dr Miles asked, trying to make conversation with Sebastian. He wanted to find out as much as possible, as he was worried to see such a young boy on his own so late at night, especially as he could see how worried Sebastian looked.

‘I am eight,’ Sebastian replied, far away in his thoughts. He now felt as though he had lost the last lead he had for Mona’s whereabouts. Sebastian did not know what to think, Mona was lost, that is all he knew.

‘Where are your parents?’ Dr Miles’s voice roused him from his pessimistic thoughts.

‘I don’t have parents – they are dead,’ he answered flatly, without even looking up.

This made Dr Miles even more persistent in his will to find out the whole story.

‘Look, Sebastian,’ he raised his voice, ‘you woke me up in the middle of the night. I don’t know where you come from or who you are or even what you are looking for. If you want me to help you will have to talk too.’

‘I am really sorry,’ replied Sebastian. ‘I don’t think that you can help me anyway but you are right, you deserve to know the

whole story.’ Sebastian didn’t really feel like talking. Nevertheless he told Dr Miles everything about his people, the book, Mona’s and his escape and everything that had happened to them afterwards.

After he finished, Dr Miles thought for a second and then said, ‘I will suggest a few things. First of all, we can spread the word in the forest that we are looking for Mona and Laura: someone must have seen them. It might take days but we will definitely find out something. Meanwhile I will introduce you to our children and they can tell you all about our life here. Once we find Mona and Laura you can go back to your village and tell them all about our life here or stay with us – it is all up to you.’

‘Do you really think we will find them?’ asked Sebastian.

‘If they are in this forest, we will find them,’ Dr Miles replied confidently.

‘In that case, I will listen to your advice and stay here until Mona arrives,’ replied Sebastian, smiling. He couldn’t hide his relief after the doctor’s words. Somehow he trusted this man fully.

‘I am glad you can help Sebastian,’ Dr O’Dowd said. ‘Now, if you don’t mind, I have to go back to my hospital.’

‘It was good to see you again.’ Dr Miles got up to take him to the door.

‘I am also leaving; you need to sleep.’ Sebastian also got up to go.

‘Where are you going?’ asked Dr Miles, confused.

‘I am going to find somewhere to sleep,’ replied Sebastian.

‘No way, you cannot sleep outside,’ Dr Miles said in disbelief. ‘We have a spare room, you can stay with us.’ Dr Miles could not

even imagine allowing this young boy to sleep outside alone. ‘I have a son who is nine, and I could never let him out alone at this time of night, never mind let him sleep outside – it is completely unacceptable!’

The doctor was very firm, but Sebastian didn’t mind; the doctor reminded him of his father. He knew the doctor couldn’t understand how independent he was at his young age.

‘I have been living on my own for four years in my village and it is quite normal, I am not that young...’ Sebastian tried to explain.

‘Maybe in your village it is normal but around here we do take care of our children and even other people’s children. We could never let such a young child be alone; it is very cruel. You came to me to ask for help and I feel responsible for you now.’

Sebastian realised there was nothing he could say that would change the doctor’s mind, so he just obeyed and followed him into a spare room.

Dr O’Dowd explained to Dr Miles about Sebastian’s need to get used to daylight before he left. When Sebastian entered his room he finally began noticing things around him. He had never seen such clever, comfortable arrangements for living in his life. The bed was the softest ever and it even had legs to raise it from the floor, for some reason. The room had its own door and a window, which was transparent so he could see the stars outside yet it didn’t let in the wind or the sounds inside. Next to the bed was a box on top of which was a small object that lit when Dr Miles pressed a button. It was all nice and sophisticated; Sebastian was very keen to learn about everything. He fell asleep thinking of things in the room he wanted to ask about as he was so impressed

with this wonderful dwelling. Sebastian was woken up by a strong light. He couldn't even open his eyes as the sunlight coming from the window was too strong. This made him smile; it was a wonderful feeling. He felt an enormous amount of energy going through his body. He yawned and decided to get up as he could hear laughter and happy voices coming from downstairs.

'Oh, good morning Sebastian,' Dr Miles greeted him as he was coming down the stairs. 'This is my wife Emily.' He pointed to a beautiful dark lady sitting next to him. She smiled nicely and invited him to join them for the breakfast.

'This is our son Dorian and our daughter Mia.' Dorian was a picture of his mother, the same big brown eyes and the same lovely smile. Mia, on the other hand had her father's looks, big green eyes and a black curly hair.

'Come and sit next to me,' Dorian invited Sebastian, 'I'll show you where to hide the food you don't want to eat and my parents insist you have to as it is healthy.' Both Mia and Dorian laughed as they saw the looks on their parents' faces.

'Now, children, don't be naughty,' Mrs Miles warned them gently with a smile on her face.

'So, where do you come from?' Mia asked curiously.

'There is a cave in the dessert, quite away from here, and there is my village,' replied Sebastian.

'Are you saying you lived in a cave?' Mia was very surprised.

'Yes, I am,' Sebastian confirmed.

'Sorry I sound so confused but you don't look anything like a caveman from my history book,' Mia explained.

'He is not a caveman,' Dr Miles joined in the conversation

and smiled at his daughter's comment. 'The reason he and some other people live in a cave is because they were afraid to come outside as they thought the Earth still hadn't recovered from ecological catastrophe.'

'But that was such a long time ago,' Mia protested.

'Yes, but they were deep underground and didn't have courage to come out. Sebastian and his friend Mona were the first ones to do so for many generations.'

'Wow, well done for your courage Sebastian, you must be really something,' said Mia.

Sebastian blushed. 'It was not my idea actually; Mona was the one who suggested it...'

'How old is Mona?' Mia asked.

'She is also eight years old.'

'This is so impressive,' continued Mia, 'two kids my age to be the first ones to come outside...' At these words, Sebastian blushed again. He felt a bit uncomfortable being complimented like this, so he decided to change the subject.

'If you don't mind me asking, Mrs Miles, what is it we are having for breakfast? I have never seen food like this before...'

'You have never seen eggs?' Dorian was shocked by this news.

'So, I guess, we are having eggs,' Sebastian laughed.

'It's called scrambled eggs on toast,' Mrs Miles explained. 'Don't be surprised, Dorian,' she continued. 'Sebastian has spent all his life underground. They don't have chickens or birds down there. There are many things he hasn't seen, eaten or experienced; it would be very nice of you to show him around and explain how things work around here.'

‘That would be my pleasure,’ Dorian accepted happily.

‘I would really appreciate it, there are so many questions I would like to ask about your life in here.’ Sebastian welcomed the idea.

‘Just one more thing, Sebastian shouldn’t go out between 11am and 6pm as he has to get used to the sunlight slowly,’ said Dr Miles.

‘Oh, poor thing, you have never seen the sun before,’ Mia said sympathetically. ‘How can anyone live without our beautiful sun?’

‘Now I realise how much the sun means but while I didn’t know it existed, I never thought I had missed anything,’ said Sebastian.

‘I suppose people underground must be pretty short and fragile, deprived from the goodness of the sun,’ mused Dorian.

‘Compared to your family, we are like hamsters,’ smiled Sebastian. ‘Are all people around here so tall?’

‘We are actually quite average compared to others,’ Dr Miles said.

‘Oh gosh, someone is going to step on me and squash me like a leaf,’ Sebastian joked, and they all laughed. When they finished breakfast, Dorian and Mia took Sebastian outside.

‘We have to be quick, there is not much time left – it’s already 9am.’

‘I wanted to ask you about the light in the house: how do you get that? It’s beautiful,’ said Sebastian.

‘I knew you would want to know about it. We will take you to our windmill first,’ Dorian replied, ‘and explain everything in there.’

‘It is all very well organised here,’ Sebastian noticed. ‘I have never seen settlements like these before.’

‘They are called houses,’ explained Mia. ‘They keep us warm when it’s cold outside and cool us down when it’s hot. The roof protects us from the rain and snow. There is never too much sunlight or wind in the house, just as much as we need. People around here respect each other’s privacy, so our dwellings provide us with that as well. They may seem quite ordinary but these houses are very complex. Families use various natural means to provide buildings with heat, power and ventilation. Sun, wind and water are the main energy sources.’

‘I like the idea of having the grass on the roof,’ Sebastian noticed.

‘That is not for aesthetic reasons,’ said Dorian, joining in the conversation. ‘It is a natural way of keeping a house warm and protected from the weather. Roofs are very cleverly designed; when it rains, grass takes some water and the excess water is collected and used for washing and flushing the toilet. In our village, nothing goes to waste. We recycle everything possible.’

‘I want to ask you something,’ Sebastian interrupted. ‘What is recycling, and why is it so important not to waste? Sorry but I have never heard of that before.’ He felt a bit embarrassed.

‘I am glad you asked,’ said Dorian. Recycling is when something gets reused. For example, if we cannot wear old clothes anymore, we give them to someone who can. On the other hand, if they are badly worn we use them for cleaning or make something else that we can use. If we just threw them away we would create a waste. This is what we avoid whenever possible, especially with things that are important to us, like water for example. We never

leave water taps on for water to just run uncontrollably. Everyone knows the importance of water for our survival so we only use it for necessities.

‘This all sounds very impressive, especially as I read only how careless and irresponsible human behaviour used to be. Is this how your people managed to survive ecological disaster?’ Sebastian asked curiously.

‘That is, of course, what helped us a lot,’ Mia said. ‘A long time ago, before the catastrophe, our country used to be very poor. People in our village were dying of hunger and various illnesses. The rest of the world was too busy thinking of themselves and obsessed with greed and power. They were too ignorant to even notice us here. The rich countries that called themselves civilized, destroyed all of our rainforest and just left us here to die. Slowly our ancestors realised they had to do something for themselves or they would get extinct. Instead of choosing one leader or fighting for power, we decided to all get together and think of a way out of our situation. We concentrated on the easiest way to save ourselves. After a short while, everyone agreed that the only way out was to go back to the nature. As soon as we begun to live like that, everything changed for the better. Nature had a cure for most of our illnesses, it provided us with fresh water, food, shelter and all other goods we needed to survive and live a happy, fulfilled life. We were very grateful for our survival and always felt a need to give something back to nature in return. For example, if we had to cut a tree, we would plant several to replace it. If a tree was sick we would take good care to try and heal it. The same went for other living organisms. Our people made great friends with many animals.’

‘So I’ve heard from Dr O’Dowd,’ Sebastian agreed. ‘Wouldn’t

your ancestors feel the same consequences of ecological disaster as everyone else?’ he wondered.

‘Naturally, they did. The difference was they were prepared. Our ancestors predicted a disaster as they were watching the changes in rain, sun, generally in all weather conditions and nature. They built tunnels underground and lived there when it became impossible to live on the ground. The difference from your cave was that they allowed sunlight in through protected filtered glass. They also made arrangements for water and air. We keep those tunnels as a reminder and a historic monument. There is so much one can learn in there.’

‘I suppose they were checking conditions on the ground on a regular basis,’ Sebastian added thoughtfully.

‘That is correct; as soon as they realised conditions were back to normal, people went back to live the way they lived before – the way we live now.’

‘Here we are,’ Mia said. ‘These are our windmills.’

‘Wow, this looks really impressive and sweet,’ Sebastian approved.

‘Did they have to be here, on top of the hill?’

‘Everything around here has its reason and its place,’ Dorian explained. ‘Mills are set here as they are turned by the wind and we found that this was the windiest spot in the village. Windmills convert wind power into electricity.’

‘What are the four rotating wings for?’ asked Sebastian.

‘Four blades are trapping the wind. The stronger the wind, the faster they turn. The faster they turn; the more electricity is produced inside windmills by special converters. That electricity is then distributed into houses via cables,’ Dorian concluded.

The three of them walked around the windmills for a while until Mia noticed it was time to hurry home as it was getting close to 11am.

When they got home, Sebastian went into his bed and thought about everything he had learnt that morning. He was so happy and kept thinking how blessed he was to be learning about this new life. There was one person to whom he was grateful most of all – one person who made this possible – and he missed her more than ever. Sebastian was daydreaming about the day when he and Mona might go back into the village and tell everyone there about all these experiences. He couldn't wait to thank Mona for being so courageous. There was so much he wanted to share with her, but for now he just had to wait.

He knew there was a long journey in front of him so he decided to be well prepared and this time plan everything ahead. With these peaceful thoughts he fell asleep.