

"Maybe there are Border Patrols this side too." But that's not really it. It's the trees looming up above us and the quiet that's suddenly around us. Like the power outages in the city, when everything turned off and for a while there was silence and you could hear your own heartbeat.

"We need to head west first. Get clear of the city," I say. Etienne's GPS is strung round my neck. The light on the screen is dim when I turn it on, but we have to save the battery and we can't be seen. The drones can search out light. Same with the torches. We'll have to ration their use.

I stare at the GPS, at the turning hourglass. It's the trees, I think, blocking the signal from the satellites. Did we seriously expect it to work? But the device is cleverer than that. Within a few seconds, a green spot lights up on the screen and around it the map comes into view. There, on the south edge of our city, our starting point.

"This way," I say, relieved that I don't have to get out the paper map. It's safe in our bags with the compass, but I'm really not sure of my ability to use it. I've never used a map before. Only ones in stories. Made-up kingdoms. None of that's going to help.

I turn back one last time. I can still see it in the distance, or maybe I'm imagining things. Maybe it's my head, painting it in — that dome of old Victorian glass. Our very own Emerald City.

The forest isn't silent. As we walk into it, it comes alive.

Everything moving, ever so slightly. There's a whisper above us and rustlings in the undergrowth, and a sudden *twit twoo* which is so textbook-owl that Bear squeezes my hand and even in the dark I can see his eyes glow.

"Tawnies," he whispers and bounds forward to look for them. There's a sharp crackle. "Ju!" he cries, panicked. "What's that?"

"It's just leaves."

"Will the guards hear?"

"No."

"What about the wolves, Ju?"

"No, but stop speaking anyway."

It doesn't take long for the glow from the city to sink away. The dark's like a liquid we could drown in.

Bear's breathing is laboured. He was amazing across the Buffer. All that way across, all the stumbles and the horror of the birds, he didn't once complain or cry. The adrenaline of the escape kept us both going, but adrenaline doesn't last forever, not in a six-year-old boy out way past his bedtime with a heavy load on his back. He doesn't say anything, but his pace has slowed, he's lagging behind. His legs are smaller than mine, his stride little.

I tug at him gently. "Come on, Bear. Keep up."

"When can we make our tent, Ju?"

"We have to get further away. From the Buffer. Here, let me carry that." I unhook his bag from his shoulders