

Their guide carefully pushed aside the foliage covering the outside of the door and stood there for a moment moving his head from side to side, scanning the terrain below. Then he moved swiftly out into the sunshine and glided down a lush, green slope towards the bottom of the deep mountain valley. The others followed, moving less graciously. To the left rose white-capped mountains with three distinct peaks. Ahead of them and now also behind them were high, vertical cliffs, their grey and rust-red sides seemingly unscalable. Yet the opposite cliff face seemed to be where they were heading and at some pace too. The four of them struggled to keep up with their guide; Ragga led the way, followed by Kumi with Baronne remaining side by side with Docha at the back. The high-pitched whistle sounded almost immediately and they all dropped to the ground, pulling the mask down over their faces. They lay there, breathing heavily for some minutes before a low hum could be heard in the distance. The sound became louder and a second, more frightening sound began; a loud, oscillating whooshing, as if something were sweeping to and fro across the ground to their right. It grew louder and louder, seeming to pass over them and continue on to their left until suddenly it stopped. The low humming noise then moved away slowly into the distance. Once it had disappeared completely they heard the welcome little beep and they removed the unpleasant, rubbery flap from their faces. Their guide was already on the move again and they jumped up, scurrying after him as best they could. They came to a small stream but the black-clad figure just kept going, barely breaking stride as he moved effortlessly through the thigh-deep water towards the other side. The others leapt in after him, gasping as they hit the stream's icy cold meltwater which was making its way down along the valley from those snow-capped mountains rising into the sky to their left. The guide was hurrying onwards across a meadow of beautiful wild flowers and they struggled after him as quickly as they could, until they came to a small copse, the canopy of trees giving them some shade and cover. They dropped to their knees, exhausted, all of them trying to get their breath back. The shrill whistle sounded again and they all dropped flat to the ground, covering their faces once more, still gasping from the exertion. They lay there without speaking, listening to the frightened, deep breaths of their companions. They could hear nothing else and

began to wonder if they really were in danger again or if their guide had taken pity on them and was simply giving them a much needed rest. Several minutes passed before the small beep gave them the all-clear to move on. Their guide made no allowances for their growing fatigue; the pace did not slow at all. They could at least see where they might be heading now. At the base of the opposite cliff was a rise of scree. Thankfully it did not seem to be particularly difficult to climb. It did not appear too steep and had a covering of earth and a little grass. As they got nearer they began to make out a small, darker area, just at the point where the rough scree joined the smoother, near vertical cliff face. It was a small area of vegetation and an indent in the cliff face was just visible through it. It seemed to be a shallow cave or at least some kind of opening. Kumi was now the only one who seemed able to match the pace of their guide. Ragga was clearly struggling badly, her heavy muscular build not suited to this type of physical demand. Kumi was reluctant to get too far ahead of her though, and was constantly turning around anxiously to urge Ragga onwards. Docha was beginning to despair, looking at Baronne and trying to communicate that she just could not go on at this speed for any longer. They were approaching the scree slope. There was simply no way she would be able to make it up to the base of the cliff without having a break. This time she was almost relieved when she heard that warning shriek and along with the others was able to collapse and try to get her breath back. Her relief was short-lived, however. The low hum of a drone was back to their right and shortly after that, the terrifying whoosh-whoosh as it started to scan across the valley. This time it was louder still and became deafening as it passed directly over them. They desperately willed it to move on but it refused and hung in the air, screaming above them for several minutes. They had no idea what to expect. Would it be a sudden death? Would it snatch them from the ground and whisk them off to some unknown fate? All they could do was lie still and hope. It moved away slightly to the left but the noise increased in intensity again as it seemed to return for another look. The screeching eased slightly then it emitted a deafening, bass roar. Their entire bodies seemed to shake and vibrate. Their survival instinct was urging them to run for their lives. The horrific machine screaming above them would surely kill them any second now. But more

agonising minutes passed and they managed to remain motionless, overcoming that screaming desire to panic and run, until finally the terrifying din subsided and the soothing beep allowed them to sit up. Docha, still breathing heavily, looked up at the sky and caught sight of a bird. It was an eagle, soaring effortlessly around the valley. Was it too looking for prey just as that drone had done? It was so calm, so serene. It seemed to Docha that it was not hunting but just flying for the pure pleasure of flying, without a care in the world. She held her head in her hands and began to sob, wondering what she and her kind had done to deserve such a miserable role in the world. Baronne tried to put his arms around her shoulder but for the first time their guide interacted with them by slapping away his arm and gesturing frantically for them to move up the slope, pointing at the dark area they had all noticed. They started to clamber up the slope, using their hands to help them over the steeper and craggier areas. After a few minutes they could see that the darker area at the bottom of the cliff was indeed some kind of opening. Through the covering of foliage they could make out the outline of another grey, steel door set into what definitely now seemed to be a natural, shallow cave. They were just metres away when the warning shrieked yet again and they fell to the ground and pulled the flap down over their faces once more. This time the humming did not develop into the deafening sweep back and forth across the valley. It was more immediate, louder and lower and stayed in place directly above them. Had they finally been located? They all knew that they were so close to the door; surely it was best just to bolt for it and hope for the best. It was as if the drone already knew exactly what they were and where they were. It was surely all over. They all tried to concentrate on their breathing and forced themselves against all their instinct to remain as still as possible.