

Extract from FACE OF THE DEEP

CHAPTER 6

THE COAL FOREST

Even before she opened her eyes Holly could feel the forest around her swishing and whispering. She could smell the sap and the steam of it, and touch the cool ferns curling from damp earth. Hidden in the silence, she sensed the beating of hearts, the unfurling of wings, the blinking of eyes as myriads of new creatures were learning to crawl, to fly, to feed and reproduce themselves. A strange whirring sound was coming very close, so close that it fanned her cheeks.

Holly opened her eyes and froze. Right next to her were two enormous, complicated eyes that glistened and twinkled like holograms. The bony face was a deep orangey pink, and very calm. The creature was completely still, looking at her, its long body glinting like Christmas tinfoil. Its six delicate legs were clinging to a fern which was almost touching her nose.

When she saw its wings, Holly stopped herself gasping, hardly daring to breathe in case she disturbed the amazing creature. Thin as cellophane and shimmering with colours, the wing span was as wide as the handlebars of a bike.

Holly moved her eyes to look for Liam and he was sitting with his back against a tree, gazing up at the tall palms and tree ferns. He was yawning. Holly wanted to shout: 'A giant dragonfly ! ' but she didn't dare move. She felt the creature was trying to communicate with her, to tell her some magical secret. So when it gently whirred its wings, rose into the air and flew away, Holly jumped up and ran after it through the tall ferns. On and on she ran, following its bobbing flight and ignoring Liam's shouts.

'Holly. Don't be an idiot. You'll get lost,' he yelled after her. 'We mustn't get separated. Holly ! '

The dragonfly led Holly through the green twilight of the forest, deeper and deeper, and soon her feet were squelching through heavy mud. It became difficult, then impossible to go on. She stopped, and had to pull her foot out of the mud with a loud sucking noise.

'A swamp ! ' She thought. 'I'd better go back.'

She turned, and couldn't see the way she had come. The ferns had swung closed over her footsteps and she felt lost and panicky. Liam had the Time Stone. What if they did get separated ? Breathing hard, Holly paused and tried to decide what to do. The forest which had been so silent was suddenly full of crashing and scrabbling sounds, and she could see the ferns quivering as if some animal was moving about underneath. She figured that if she called out to Liam it might attract the unwelcome attention of some predatory creature hidden beneath the ferns.

'Think.' She kept telling herself. 'Think what to do.'