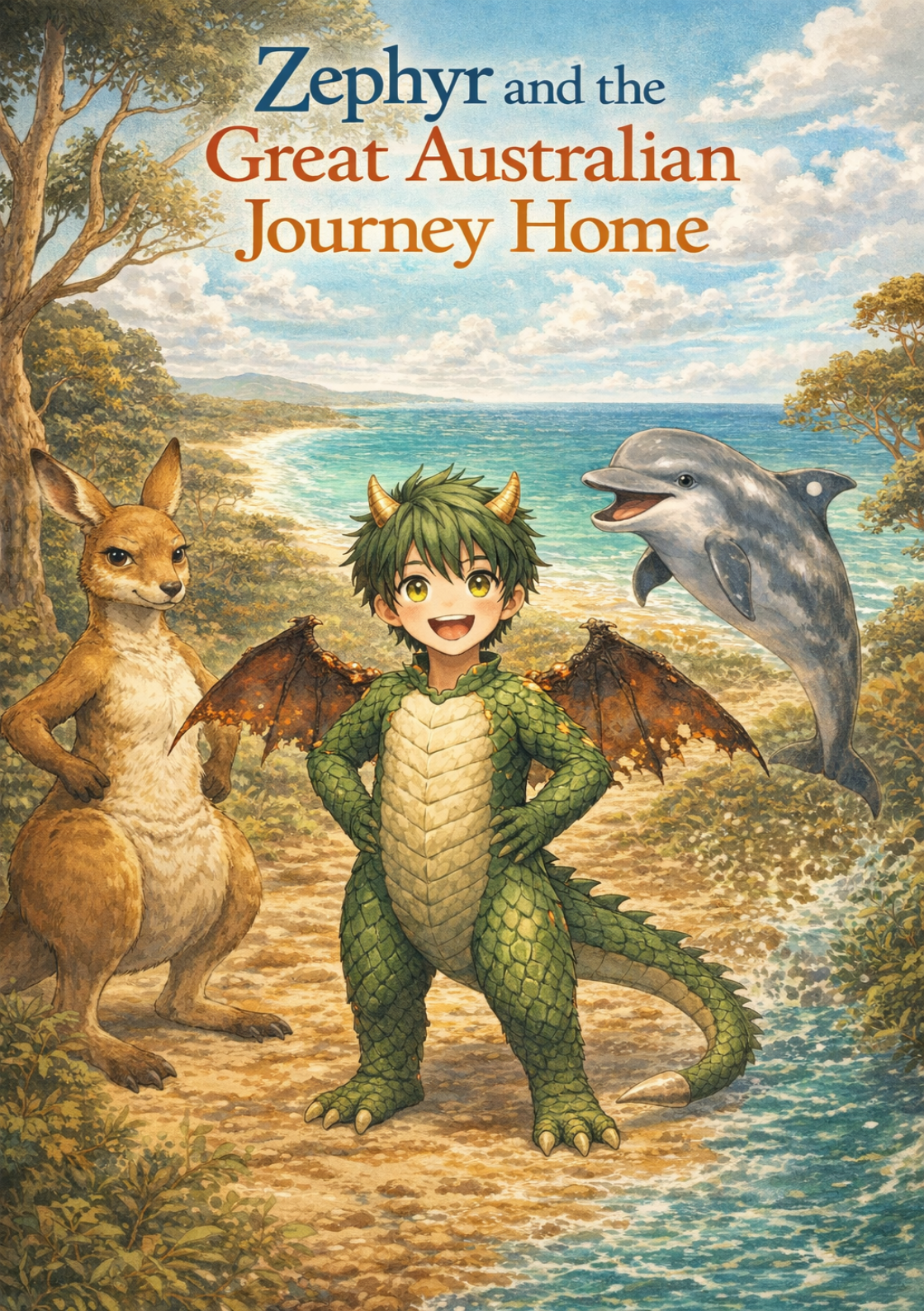


Zephyr and the Great Australian Journey Home



About this book

When Zephyr, a seven-year-old dragon with singed wings and a terrible sense of direction, tumbles out of a storm cloud and lands in Australia, he realises he is very far from home. The bush is full of strange sounds, bouncing shadows and one very curious kangaroo named Matilda, whose sandy-brown fur and bright eyes miss nothing. When Zephyr admits he is lost, Matilda takes him to a dusty lost and found hut beside a country rail stop—but instead of answers, they find an old map with half the route washed away. To get home, Zephyr must cross scorching bushland, winding rivers and the glittering coast before the trail disappears for good.

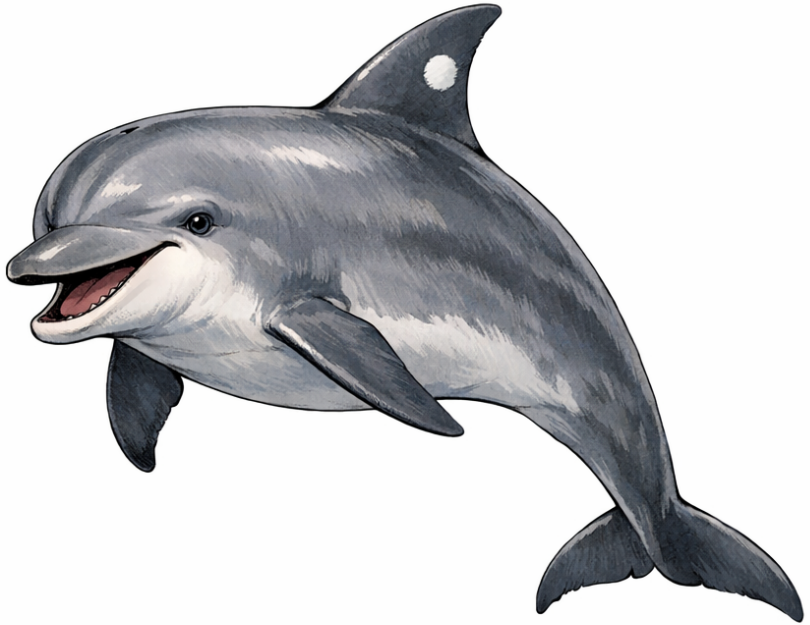
Their journey grows trickier when the map points straight into the sea, where Coral, a playful dolphin with a white spot on her fin, insists she knows the next clue. Zephyr can puff smoke but not fly properly, Matilda can leap over danger but not swim, and Coral can race through waves but cannot follow them onto land, so every step depends on trust and perfect timing. As they dodge a swooping eagle, outsmart a sneaky crocodile and piece together clues hidden in shells and gum trees, Zephyr begins to wonder if being lost has led him to exactly the friends he needed. But when the final marker reveals a secret about how he came to Australia, will Zephyr...



Zephyr



Matilda



Coral

A Dragon in the Dust

The storm that dropped Zephyr over Australia looked less like weather and more like a giant bruise dragged across the sky. One moment he had been dozing on a warm current above cloud tops; the next he was spinning through lightning, blinking soot out of his amber eyes, with his singed wings folded the wrong way and his tail whipping like a snapped kite string.

He landed in a patch of dry grass with a thump that shook red dust into the air and sent a lizard sprinting under a rock. When the dust cleared, Zephyr lifted his head and discovered a country unlike any he knew. Gum trees leaned in pale strips, the earth smelled of warm bark and peppery leaves, and somewhere nearby a bird laughed as if his crash were the funniest thing in the world.

Zephyr pushed himself upright, coughed out a polite puff of smoke, and tried to look as though falling from the sky had been intentional. It was hard to manage dignity with one wing feathered in ash and the other drooping like wet laundry. He flapped twice, rose exactly the height of a biscuit tin, and dropped again. His sense of direction, never his strongest talent, now felt completely melted.

A bouncing shadow crossed the grass. Zephyr spun so quickly he sat on his own tail. Out from the scrub came a young kangaroo with sandy-brown fur, sharp ears, and large bright eyes that missed nothing at all. She stopped just beyond his smoky sneeze range and looked him up and down with the calm expression of someone finding a dragon before breakfast and



deciding it could be dealt with.

'You are not a wallaby,' she said at last. Her voice carried the cheerful certainty of a person announcing that water was wet. Zephyr, still collecting his scattered pride, admitted that he was not. The kangaroo nodded as though this confirmed several private theories. She introduced herself as Matilda and asked why he smelt faintly of thunderstorms and overcooked toast.

No one had ever asked Zephyr that before, and the truth slipped out more easily than he expected. He explained that he was seven, that his name was Zephyr, that he had been on a short practice glide which had become a very long accident, and that he had absolutely no idea which way home might be. Saying it aloud made his chest feel small and hollow.

Matilda's ears tipped back, not in laughter but in thought. She circled once, inspected his singed wings, and decided he was too lost to leave alone and too polite to be dangerous. A little rail stop stood half a mile away, she said, with a dusty lost and found hut beside it. If any place in the country knew about things turning up where they did not belong, it might be that hut.

The walk there taught Zephyr that Australia was full of surprises. Shadows bounced because Matilda bounced, lizards vanished like dropped pebbles, and every shrub seemed to smell either minty, spicy, or secretly determined to scratch him. Matilda moved with spring-loaded ease, while Zephyr trudged behind, tripping over roots and pretending that dragons always preferred walking when they had travelled by storm.

The rail stop appeared out of heat shimmer: one low platform, a rust-flecked sign, and tracks that seemed to lead straight into the empty distance. Beside it stood the hut, leaning slightly as though it had spent years listening to wind. Its faded boards were painted with the words LOST AND FOUND, although the last two letters had peeled away, leaving FOUND to look uncertain about itself.

Inside lay a kingdom of forgotten things. There were one boot, three umbrellas, a cracked billycan, a child's wooden train, a brass button, and a stack of sun-bleached ledgers. Dust danced in the slanted light. On the far wall, pinned beneath a horseshoe and a spoon, hung an old map stained by rain. One whole corner had washed nearly blank, but a trail of marks still crossed bush, river, and coast.

Zephyr climbed onto a crate to read it, while Matilda steadied the wobbling wood with both paws. Across the top, in faded ink, someone had written, Follow the gum shadows when the day turns gold. Near the end of the line, just before the blank washed-away corner, sat a tiny drawing of a dragon. Zephyr's heart thumped harder. The map did not show home yet, but it showed a start.

The Lost and Found Hut

They spent the rest of the afternoon turning the hut upside down in the most respectful way possible. Matilda searched shelves with quick clever paws, while Zephyr climbed crates and sniffed at drawers full of ticket stubs and polished pebbles. The ledgers were stranger than the objects. Alongside lists of scarves and lunch tins, an old caretaker had scribbled notes about storms, unusual winds, and once, very neatly, 'Small flying creature, blue-grey, seen heading east.'

That line gave Zephyr such a jolt he nearly sneezed sparks onto the page. Someone, sometime, had seen a dragon here before. The idea was comforting and alarming all at once. If another dragon had travelled this way, then perhaps the map was real. If another dragon had needed a map, then perhaps getting home was less simple than flying upwards and hoping for the best.

Behind a tin of rusty nails Matilda found a narrow box wrapped in waxed cloth. Inside lay a compass with no needle, a pebble drilled through with a cord, and a folded scrap of paper. The paper was spotted brown with age, yet the message could still be read: When the line is lost, seek the water that moves without a river. Let the evening gum shadows show the road.

Matilda squinted at the rail platform outside, where gum trees cast long stripes over the dust. She planted her paws, studied the shadows as carefully as a mathematician studying sums, and then pointed towards the north-east. Zephyr had never considered that trees might act like arrows if given enough sunshine. It felt wonderfully unfair that a kangaroo could read a



forest better than he could read his own sense of direction.

They decided not to wait for help that might never come.

Matilda produced a small travelling pouch from somewhere so practical it seemed unfair, and filled it with dried fruit, a heel of bread, and a corked bottle of water. Zephyr contributed a scarf from the lost property shelf, mostly because it made him look like a serious explorer and partly because the evenings in strange countries felt colder when one was lost.

Before leaving, he stood in the hut doorway and looked back. Forgotten things had a sad look about them, but the map on the wall did not feel sad. It felt patient. Perhaps it had been waiting for the right dragon to arrive singed, dusty, and willing to ask for help. Zephyr did not yet know if that idea was grand or ridiculous, but he knew he no longer wanted to face the country alone.

They followed the old rail line until sunset poured honey-coloured light across the bush. Everywhere the gum shadows stretched long and straight, and Matilda kept checking that they still matched the note. Zephyr tried to memorise the angle of each shadow, then became distracted by a kookaburra that laughed right above his head and made him trip into a tuft of grass with all the dignity of a rolling teapot.

When night approached, they stopped beside a termite mound tall enough to seem architecturally proud of itself. Matilda scraped a space clear, and Zephyr breathed a cautious curl of flame into a ring of twigs. It was the smallest fire he had ever made on purpose. The two of them sat beside it eating dried

fruit, while the dark bush filled with chirrs, whistles, and rustles that sounded busy rather than lonely.

Under the stars, Zephyr admitted he could not remember exactly what home looked like from below. He knew the colour of his mother's scales in morning light and the smell of cloud rain caught in mountain stone, but distance had turned the rest woolly. Matilda listened without interrupting. When she finally spoke, she said places waited for you, but sometimes you had to become brave enough to reach them.

A cool wind moved over the grass before dawn. Zephyr woke to Matilda nudging his shoulder and pointing ahead with both ears. Far away, above the silver blur of morning heat, a windmill turned in slow steady circles. Water that moved without a river. The note had been right, the map had not lied, and suddenly the first clue no longer felt like a curiosity. It felt like a promise.

Zephyr stamped out the last spark of the fire, tied the explorer's scarf more firmly around his neck, and grinned despite the knot of worry in his stomach. If the country wanted to play riddles, he would play back. Matilda returned the grin, spring-loaded and fearless. Together they set off towards the windmill, with the rails at their side and the washed-away map tucked safe inside the scarf.

The Map Wakes Up

By the time they reached the windmill, the sun was high enough to hammer the metal vanes into brightness. Each slow turn sent a soft creak across the paddock. Beneath it stood a round water tank dark as tea, its surface shivering whenever the windmill pumped. Zephyr leaned over and saw his own smoky reflection wobbling beside Matilda's watchful face. Even the water seemed to know they were close to something.

Matilda spread the old map across the tank lid, weighting the corners with stones. In the hard midday light the washed-away patch still looked hopelessly pale. Then Zephyr remembered the note and held the blank corner above the tank so that the reflected water flickered against it. Faint lines began to rise out of the paper like ghosts waking. He blinked once, then twice, and nearly dropped the map in surprise.

Hidden ink traced a route beyond the rail line towards a dry creek, then curved to a blue ribbon marked only with a shell. Beside it was another line of writing, so faint that Matilda had to sound it out while Zephyr steadied the page against the wind: *Where red stones listen and reeds whisper, find the river that remembers the sea.* Zephyr frowned. Rivers, as far as he knew, were already complicated enough without remembering anything.

The clue sent them away from the tracks and into thicker bush. Grass scratched Zephyr's ankles, and spinifex clumps sat about like determined porcupines. The country rippled with heat. Lizards flashed over stones, and once a mob of kangaroos



bounded past so swiftly that Zephyr bowed to them out of reflex before realising he had just saluted several complete strangers. Matilda laughed so hard she had to stop hopping for a moment.

Travelling with Matilda meant learning that speed was not always about going fast. She knew when to rest in thin shade, when to sip water instead of gulping it, and when to keep silent because the bush was saying something useful. Zephyr, who had always treated journeys as a matter of flapping harder, began to notice details: the cool side of rocks, the direction ants marched, and how gum leaves turned their pale undersides before a change in weather.

In the afternoon a dust devil came dancing out of nowhere, as tall as a house and twice as rude. It snatched at the scarf around Zephyr's neck and tugged the map free. For one dreadful second the page whirled skywards. Matilda launched herself after it with a leap that seemed to ignore gravity altogether, and Zephyr blasted a ring of smoke above her so the spinning paper struck the thicker air and dipped within reach of her paws.

When the dust settled, both of them stood panting and staring at the rescued map. One corner had torn, but not through the route. Zephyr expected Matilda to scold him for holding it badly. Instead she tucked it back under the scarf and said, very simply, that they had saved it together. The words warmed him more than the sun. Until then, he had not realised how much he feared being the sort of problem other people regretted helping.

Near sunset they found the dry creek, a twisting scar through the earth lined with red stones polished smooth by rains long gone. Under the roots of a river gum lay the next marker: a scallop shell hung on string, pale against the bark, impossible and perfect this far inland. Someone had carved an arrow beside it, pointing downstream towards reeds and real water. The map's impossible sea had just stepped onto dry land to greet them.

Zephyr held the shell to his ear because stories insisted that shells carried ocean sounds. He expected nothing, yet inside he heard the soft hush of movement, like distant water breathing. Matilda heard it too and went very still. If the river remembered the sea, perhaps the sea remembered this route. That thought made the adventure feel larger than a lost child's errand. It felt old, prepared, almost waiting.

They made camp among the red stones, where the ground kept the day's warmth long after sunset. Zephyr traced the shell shape in the dust while Matilda dozed with one ear lifted for danger. Above them the first stars appeared, sharp and cold. Zephyr wished he knew their names in this sky. Then he decided it did not matter yet. Tomorrow, if the clue held true, they would follow water, and water always led somewhere.

During the night he woke to a new sound, low and steady, slipping through the reeds beyond the creek bed. It was not wind and not leaves. It was current. Zephyr smiled into the dark before sleep found him again. For the first time since the storm, he was not simply hoping to be rescued. He was on a trail, and the trail was moving.

River Lessons

Morning peeled mist off the river in pale ribbons, and suddenly the red stones around them made sense. Beyond the reeds ran a broad green-brown current, never still, never quiet, carrying leaves, light, and the smell of wet earth. Zephyr had expected a neat ribbon of water like those on storybook maps. This river sprawled and swirled and shouldered past its banks as though it had important business far away.

The shell marker hung from a post beside an old crossing place, but the crossing itself had not survived. Two rotten planks jutted from one bank and nothing answered them on the other side. According to the map, the trail continued east among the paperbarks. Zephyr looked from the missing bridge to his useless wings and wished, with considerable passion, that storms came with return instructions printed underneath.

Matilda paced the bank, measuring distances with her eyes. She could leap astonishingly far, but even she could not clear the whole river. Zephyr could paddle after a fashion, yet his wings dragged in water and his tail made steering unpredictable. For a little while neither of them said anything. The silence was not angry; it was the busy sort, full of trying and failing and trying again.

At last Matilda found a fallen gum branch lodged near the bank, thick enough to float and light enough for the two of them to shove. Zephyr gathered long reeds and twisted them into ropes under her instructions. The plan was not elegant. It involved a makeshift raft, a line tied around Matilda's waist, and Zephyr



promising not to panic if the current behaved like, in Matilda's words, a rude goat. He promised. It was not his most convincing promise.

The river objected immediately. The raft spun, bumped, and nosed sideways before they had travelled ten feet. Matilda landed on it with perfect balance; Zephyr landed with perfect alarm. Water slapped his belly scales and soaked the end of his scarf. He puffed smoke by reflex, creating a gloomy little cloud around them. Matilda, coughing but steady, barked with laughter and told him smoke was not a recognised boating technique.

Halfway across, the current caught the raft broadside. The reed rope snapped against a hidden snag, and Zephyr slid so suddenly that one claw went under. Cold water closed around his wing. Panic rushed up faster than the river. Before he could thrash, Matilda hooked both forepaws around his shoulders and anchored herself against the branch. 'Look at me,' she said, so sharply that even the river seemed to pause. 'Not the water. Me.'

He did. He looked at her bright unblinking eyes, breathed once, and remembered that fear was not the same as drowning. Together they shifted their weight, pointed the branch downstream, and rode the current towards a quieter bend. Zephyr used short controlled puffs of flame behind them, not to boil anything heroic, but to push warm air against the wet scarf like a tiny sail. It was ridiculous. It worked.

They scraped onto the far bank wet, muddy, and triumphant in the most exhausted way possible. Zephyr lay flat on the grass until the sky stopped spinning. Matilda shook river water from her fur and announced that if they were going to continue this expedition, he must learn two things immediately: how not to fall off a raft, and how to accept rescue without looking embarrassed about it. Zephyr promised to practise both skills.

The next marker waited in a paperbark grove where strips of white bark curled from trunks like peeling parchment. Tied to one tree by faded blue thread was a long feather, bronze at the tip and enormous by ordinary bird standards. Beneath it someone had scratched a warning into the bark: When the sky hunts, keep low and trust the bend of the land. Matilda read it twice, then looked upward. So did Zephyr. The sky, annoyingly, looked innocent.

They spent the evening under a leaning melaleuca, drying the map by the fire and listening to frogs thrum along the riverbank. Zephyr found that the frightening part of the crossing had already begun to shrink into a story, the kind friends told later with extra gestures and slightly improved courage. What remained sharp was the memory of Matilda's voice saying, Look at me. Trust, he realised, had a sound as well as a feeling.

In the night a shadow passed over the moon, broad-winged and silent. Zephyr woke just enough to see it sweep away towards the cliffs ahead. He pulled the scarf higher around his neck and watched the dark until sleep returned. Somewhere beyond the river, something in the air was waiting for them, and the old feather on the paperbark had not been left there for decoration.

The Eagle's Shadow

The country beyond the river lifted into broken ridges and low cliffs, all ochre stone and stunted shrubs clinging where soil was thin. Warm air rose off the rock in shivering layers. Zephyr could feel the currents brushing his wings, tempting and mocking at once. This was flying weather for creatures who knew which way they were going. For him it felt like standing beside a door that opened only an inch.

Matilda moved ahead in quick bursts, choosing paths that curled through gullies and under overhangs. The warning on the paperbark had sharpened her usual cheerfulness into focus. Around midday the bush went oddly quiet. Even the insects seemed to hold their breath. Zephyr sensed the shadow before he saw it, a cool passing over the ground, swift enough to make the hairs along his neck rise.

The wedge-tailed eagle dropped from the white sky like a thrown spear. Its wings seemed wider than the hut roof at the rail stop, and its eyes had the hard gold look of polished coins. It screamed once, more anger than sound. Zephyr ducked so fast he bit his own scarf. The eagle swept past, banking hard, then circled back with the offended air of a hunter who had found something strange and intended to examine it with talons.

'Low ground,' Matilda shouted, already bounding for a split in the rocks. Zephyr ran after her, claws skidding on gravel. The eagle stooped again, and the wind from its wings slapped dust into his face. He puffed a frantic blast of smoke straight upward. The cloud billowed so thick that the bird vanished inside it for a



startled second, emerging cross and coughing. It was not a grand defence, but it bought them three precious breaths.

They plunged into a narrow gully that twisted like a crack in dry bread. The eagle could not fit its wings properly between the walls, yet it paced them from above, shadow flashing across the stone whenever the gully widened. Zephyr clutched the map under his chest as they squeezed between rocks. Once the talons snatched down and hooked only the trailing end of his scarf, ripping off a strip of faded red cloth that spun away like a surrender flag.

When at last the gully widened into a hollow, both of them collapsed behind a boulder. Zephyr's heart banged so loudly he was sure the eagle could hear it. Matilda listened to the beat of wings overhead and said, in a deliberately ordinary voice, that at least now they knew the warning had been well meant. Zephyr laughed in one startled bark. Fear shrank a little when shared out loud.

They could not stay hidden forever. The map showed the trail crossing a ridge before turning towards darker ground beyond. Matilda studied the sun, the wind, and the eagle's circling pattern. It rode the strongest thermals, swooping whenever movement flashed in the open. Zephyr, who had spent much of his life being blown about by air rather than using it, suddenly understood something useful: currents had habits. If he watched them, perhaps he could be more than baggage.

They waited until late afternoon, when the air cooled and the hottest updrafts weakened. Then Matilda sprang from cover in a

zigzagging rush across the ridge, kicking pebbles in three directions at once. Zephyr ran two beats behind and gave short sharp puffs of smoke at every bound. The smoke drifted sideways, making two false trails. The eagle dived at the thicker plume, hit nothing but haze, and lost the precious moment it needed.

Near the far side the ground dropped away sooner than Zephyr expected. With no time to stop, he spread his singed wings and jumped. Terror punched through him, followed instantly by astonishment. The sloping wind beneath the ridge held him, not high, not elegantly, but long enough. He skimmed over open space, landed in a tumble beside Matilda, and slid into a patch of saltbush grinning like someone who had accidentally discovered a new limb.

Safe under an overhang, they looked back and saw the eagle wheel once in furious dignity before drifting off towards the cliffs. On the rock wall behind them, protected from weather, someone had painted a small red spiral around three upright stones. The hidden line on the map bent the same way. Tonight's shelter, it seemed, would be among the stones ahead. Zephyr touched the paint with one careful claw. The route was still guiding them.

As evening settled, he kept glancing at his half-scorched wings. They still hurt, and they still refused anything like proper flight. Yet for a breath over that ridge the air had carried him because he had trusted it rather than fought it. Matilda noticed his expression and nudged him with her shoulder. 'See?' she said. 'You are not hopeless. Just dramatic.' Zephyr decided that, for

a first flying compliment, it would do nicely.

The Night of Red Stones

The three upright stones stood on a high shelf of ground above the bush, red in the last light and close enough together to seem like sentries holding a private conference. Dry grass hissed around their bases. When Zephyr and Matilda stepped into the circle, the wind changed tone at once, slipping between the stones with a hollow whistle that sounded almost like speech. Zephyr rubbed one arm. The place felt old in a way that asked for quiet.

Someone had camped there long ago and often. A ring of blackened stones marked an ancient fire pit, and the standing rocks were scratched with symbols weather had not quite erased. There were waves, curved lines like wind, and a little creature with wings spread wide. Zephyr traced the dragon shape with a claw-tip. It was not an exact portrait, but it was close enough to make his throat tighten. His kind had been here. Perhaps many times.

Matilda set about making camp with practical briskness, as if mysterious historical discoveries were best met with supper. Zephyr tried to help by lighting the fire and accidentally singed a patch of spinifex instead. She stamped it out before it could become interesting, then handed him the billycan and suggested he contribute by boiling water rather than inventing new geography. Together they ate bread toasted on sticks and declared it excellent because they were hungry enough to mean it.



After dark the stones gathered the wind and sent it circling overhead. Sparks rose from the fire and drifted towards carvings on the nearest rock. Whenever the light touched the marks, Zephyr noticed details he had missed: a kangaroo shape, a curved tail beneath waves, and three symbols set in a line: one leap, one fin, one flame. The order made no sense yet, but it prickled at his thoughts like a word almost remembered.

He admitted, very softly, that he was afraid the map might lead somewhere important and still not be enough. Even if they found the coast, even if they found a dragon trail, what if he could not use it? His wings ached every time he stretched them. Matilda sat beside him with her paws around her knees and considered the fire. Then she said some roads were not opened by the strongest traveller, but by the one who kept going despite looking impossible.

It was such a Matilda answer, sturdy, slightly bossy, and strangely comforting, that Zephyr laughed into his tea. He told her that dragons at home prized graceful flying above nearly everything else. Matilda replied that this explained a lot about why he kept trying to solve land problems with sky ideas. She then demonstrated, at length and with great seriousness, how superior hopping was as an all-purpose strategy. By the end of her lecture Zephyr was laughing hard enough to sneeze sparks.

Near midnight a colder wind slid over the shelf. The compass without a needle, forgotten in the waxed box, began to hum against the rock where Matilda had set it. Not loudly; more like a bee trapped in a tin cup. Zephyr lifted it and found the drilled pebble tugging east on its cord. When he held the map beside it,

a faint line brightened from the standing stones down into a flat maze of reeds. The next piece of country had found them.

The brightened line ended at a drawing of water rings and narrow eyes. 'That seems unfriendly,' Matilda observed. Neither of them said crocodile immediately, but the idea sat between them all the same. Zephyr stared into the fire and wished routes could occasionally include a sign saying tea shop, pleasant meadow, or kindly neighbour with a cart. Instead, this one seemed committed to testing every skill he did not have.

Sleep came in scraps. The shelf was safe, yet the thought of yellow eyes in dark water kept prowling through Zephyr's dreams. When dawn finally spread grey and pink over the bush, he woke with the odd sensation that the country was not trying to stop them. It was measuring them. Every challenge had also taught something: how to notice wind, how to share fear, how to trust a friend without turning the whole affair into a speech.

Before they left, Zephyr laid the torn strip of scarf on the fire-blackened stones as a thanks to whoever had used the place before them. The cloth curled, smoked, and disappeared. Matilda touched one of the carvings in farewell. Then they climbed down from the shelf into the waking bush, carrying the map, the humming compass, and the uneasy understanding that the path ahead was full of reeds, mud, and teeth.

Below them the country widened into flats silvered with morning haze. Somewhere beyond the reed beds and hidden channels lay the next answer, and beyond that the coast. Zephyr felt tired, wary, and determined all at once. The old carvings had

shown more than symbols. They had shown that others had crossed this path before, and that no good road was ever truly made alone.

Yellow Eyes in the Marsh

The marsh announced itself before they saw it. The air grew heavy and green-smelling, full of damp mud, crushed reeds, and the croaking complaints of unseen frogs. Then the trees opened and the world turned to water and islands of grass. Channels twisted between paperbarks; dragonflies stitched blue sparks above the shallows. After the dry ridges, the place looked soft. It was not soft. It was squelchy, sly, and full of things that watched without blinking.

Matilda tested the first patch of ground and sank up to her ankles. Her expression suggested personal betrayal. Zephyr, trying to help, stepped round her and promptly disappeared to the knee in mud that smelled older than history. Extracting himself made a sound like a giant slurping soup. For a moment they were both too appalled to speak. Then Matilda snorted, Zephyr snorted back, and the marsh lost a little of its menace by forcing them to laugh at it.

The map's bright line picked a narrow route along raised hummocks and fallen logs. They moved slowly, Matilda springing from solid patch to solid patch while Zephyr used his tail as a balance pole and wished every step came with written assurance. Birds exploded from the reeds whenever they got too close. Once a white heron stalked past with such grave elegance that Zephyr automatically apologised for existing in its vicinity.



Around midday they found the first sign that the warning symbols at the stones had been exact. On a muddy bank lay a broad sliding mark, fresh and glistening, with clawed tracks leading into it. Nearby the water looked too still, as if holding its breath. Matilda lowered her voice though no one else seemed to be speaking. Zephyr did the same. In places like this, even silence could feel loud.

The old route had once included timber posts driven through the shallows. Many were gone, but enough remained to suggest a crossing. Matilda leapt to the nearest and turned to coach Zephyr with surprising patience. He spread his wings for balance, hopped after her, and managed three posts before his back foot slipped. A log beside the posts shifted at exactly the wrong moment. Logs, Zephyr discovered, should not have eyelids.

The crocodile surfaced without haste, which was somehow worse than speed. Its eyes were yellow-brown and ancient; its smile looked assembled from knives. It drifted towards the posts with the bored confidence of a creature used to the world bringing lunch to it. Matilda crouched low, every muscle tight. Zephyr's mind filled at once with plans, all bad, and then, hidden among them, one useful memory: smoke had bothered the eagle.

He took the biggest breath his soggy nerves would allow and blasted a thick black cloud across the water right in front of the crocodile's snout. The marsh vanished behind soot and startled hissing. At the same instant Matilda bounded back two posts, seized Zephyr's foreleg in both paws, and hauled him onto the

next stump before the reptile's jaws snapped shut where his tail tip had been. The sound was like a trap door slamming on bad luck.

The crocodile lunged through the smoke and rammed the posts, sending them wobbling. Zephyr dropped the billycan; Matilda kicked it hard. It clanged off a far log and skittered into reeds, drawing the crocodile's head around just enough. That blink of confusion let them make the last three jumps in a mad breathless chain: Matilda springing, Zephyr scrambling, both of them refusing to look back until solid ground hit beneath their feet.

They collapsed in a thicket of reeds on the opposite bank and listened to the water settle. After a long moment Matilda began to laugh, the shaky kind that comes after danger has gone but not quite vanished from your bones. Zephyr joined in. His tail tip stung, his scarf was muddy, and he had nearly become a cautionary story, yet he felt fiercely alive. Apparently being terrified together could also count as progress.

Hidden on a post just beyond the reeds was the next clue: a row of tiny shells pressed into drying clay, curving east like a smile, with a scrap of blue thread tied at the end. Sea again. The route was now plainly leading towards the coast. As if to confirm it, the wind shifted and brought a taste Zephyr had never known before, sharp, clean, and enormous. Salt. Even Matilda, who had never been fond of uncertainty, lifted her head at once.

They left the marsh by a strip of firmer ground lined with tea trees and low flowering shrubs. Behind them the water closed

over every mark they had made. Ahead, the sky seemed wider, brighter, less cluttered by trunks. By late afternoon gulls wheeled overhead instead of cockatoos, and the hush inside Zephyr's chest changed shape. The journey had begun in dust. Now it was running towards glitter.

Salt on the Wind

The coast arrived all at once. They climbed the last dune through wiry grass, and there it was: ocean from one end of the world to the other, blue hammered with silver, rolling under a sky so huge Zephyr forgot to breathe. Waves curled and broke in endless white lines. The air smelled of salt and kelp and distance. Compared with the river, the sea did not seem to be going somewhere. It seemed to be everywhere already.

Matilda stared in equal parts awe and suspicion. 'That is too much water,' she announced, which was not inaccurate. Zephyr padded to the wet sand and squeaked when a thin cold wave rushed over his claws and fled again. The beach glittered with shell fragments and seaweed ribbons. Gulls strutted about as though they owned the place. Somewhere far out, something sleek rose and vanished between the swells.

Hope carried Zephyr straight back to the map. He expected the route to bend around the shoreline and reveal a cave, a jetty, or a kindly dragon ferry. Instead the faded line ran stubbornly through the dunes and then pointed directly into the sea. Matilda checked it upside down in case water behaved differently from that angle. It did not. Zephyr tried squinting. The ocean remained cheerfully unhelpful.

For the first time since the rail stop, they argued. Not badly, and not for long, but with the sharpness that comes from tiredness and fear wearing the same coat. Zephyr insisted the clue had to be out there somewhere. Matilda pointed out that she could leap over creeks, not oceans, and that dragons with broken



flying ought to show proper respect for waves bigger than houses. Neither was wrong, which made the disagreement more annoying than if one had simply behaved foolishly.

They spent the afternoon searching the tideline for a sign the map might have meant in a safer way. Zephyr nosed through heaps of shells. Matilda investigated driftwood piles and once boxed a crab by surprise when it pinched her toe. The crab, being both tiny and fearless, pinched again. By the time she had hopped away in offended dignity, even Zephyr had forgotten to be gloomy.

It was Zephyr who found the first real clue. Half-buried beneath wet sand lay a weathered post carved with a spiral wave and a narrow smiling face. Not a crocodile, not a fish. A dolphin. Around the post someone had wrapped blue cord threaded with a small white shell marked by a single pale spot. Matilda leaned close, then looked out to sea with renewed suspicion, as though the ocean had been keeping secrets on purpose.

As the tide crept in, the next surprise arrived by way of a wave much larger than its predecessors. It surged up the beach and caught Matilda around the ankles before she could retreat. She bounded backwards, spluttering with such astonished offence that Zephyr laughed until he fell over. Matilda glared, then noticed his expression and laughed too, though she informed the sea that such behaviour was unacceptable and very nearly personal.

Evening painted the water violet and copper. They made camp behind the dunes where the sand held the day's warmth. From

there they could hear the surf but not see it, which suited Matilda perfectly. Zephyr lay on his back watching stars appear and confessed something he had not admitted before: he was beginning to dread the end of the map almost as much as he wanted it. Finding home might mean losing the friends who had led him to it.

Matilda answered in the thoughtful way she used when joking would not do. She said journeys changed what counted as far away. Before meeting him, she had never imagined a dragon needing a kangaroo, or herself volunteering to cross marshes for someone she had met in a smoke cloud. If the map truly ended at the sea, then perhaps the sea was where another helper waited. Paths, she seemed to think, collected the right creatures as they went.

A splash sounded beyond the nearest breaker. Then another, closer. Zephyr sat up. Moonlight caught a curved grey back, a grin, and a fin marked by a distinct white spot that flashed like a dropped star. The creature circled once in the shallows, watching them with bright black eyes. Zephyr felt the story tilt. The land had carried them this far. The sea, it seemed, had finally decided to answer.

He went to sleep listening to surf and half-hoping the mysterious watcher would still be there at dawn. The beach no longer felt like the end of the trail. It felt like a threshold. Somewhere beyond the waves waited the next piece of the map, and Zephyr sensed, with a thrill that was almost fear, that the journey was about to become stranger and better than either he or Matilda had planned.

Coral of the White Spot

The dolphin rose on the next wave as neatly as if the moon had pulled her up by a string. She was sleek and silver-blue, with a playful grin and the promised white spot bright on her fin. Instead of behaving with solemn mystery, she blew a puff of spray at Zephyr's nose and said hello so cheerfully that he sneezed seawater onto his own claws. Offshore introductions, he discovered, could be surprisingly splashy.

Matilda planted herself at the edge of the dry sand, ears high and unconvinced. Coral noticed at once and wisely stayed in the shallows where the sea carried her. She introduced herself with the brisk confidence of someone used to waves making room. The white-spotted shell on the carved post, she explained, marked an old meeting place. She had seen it from the water at low tide and wondered why no one had visited in ages.

When Zephyr showed her the map, Coral's grin widened rather than faded. 'Oh, that old trail,' she said, as if they had produced directions to a picnic spot rather than a mysterious route across half a continent. The line through the sea, she explained, did not mean swim forever and hope. It meant follow the coast to a rock arch called Moonshell Gate, where the tide spoke louder on certain mornings and clues were hidden in the stone.

Matilda asked, with admirable directness, how a kangaroo was meant to follow clues hidden in the stone if the stone happened to be surrounded by ocean. Coral tilted sideways in thought. Zephyr waited for awkwardness. Instead Coral said that if land



folk could read gum shadows and dodge eagles, surely sea folk could help with one troublesome bit of water. Her tone made the arrangement sound obvious, and Zephyr felt his worry loosen by a degree.

They spent the next hour inventing a method of travelling together without losing one another. Coral would guide from the waves, surfacing beside landmarks and slapping her tail if danger lurked ahead. Matilda would keep to the dunes or rock shelves, following the shoreline where she could. Zephyr, small enough to scramble between both worlds and foolish enough to attempt it, would carry messages. He accepted the role because objecting would have sounded sensible.

The first trial nearly ended in comedy. Zephyr waded into a rock pool to hear Coral better and discovered that salt water made his singed wings feel both cleaner and more offended. A small wave lifted his hind feet, spun him in a complete circle, and set him down facing the wrong direction. Coral laughed so hard she vanished beneath the foam. Matilda called from shore that if the sea had already stolen his balance, it might as well keep his old one.

Yet once the spluttering stopped, Coral proved as practical as Matilda in her own way. She knew the rhythm of incoming sets, the safe timing between breakers, and which dark patches in the water were only weed and which might hide sharp rock. Under her guidance they moved east along the coast, land and sea keeping pace like two halves of a conversation Zephyr had never known could fit together.

By late morning Moonshell Gate appeared ahead: a pale arch of stone rising from the surf, hollowed through the middle so the tide rushed beneath it with a low singing sound. On the landward side a narrow ledge connected it to the headland, but only when the water pulled back. Coral circled the arch and whistled for attention. Something gleamed inside the stone where waves could not quite reach.

Timing became everything. Coral counted the swell; Matilda watched the ledge; Zephyr crouched ready, claws dug into wet rock. When the water fell, Matilda bounded across the exposed strip and braced herself at the arch. Zephyr scrambled after her, clutching the stone. Coral surged below and shouted when the next wave was building. In the arch's inner wall Zephyr found a small copper disc stamped with a flame, a fin, and a leaping shape.

They barely escaped before the sea reclaimed the ledge. Back on dry rock, Zephyr turned the disc in his claws and read the tiny words etched around the edge: At the cave of turning tides, bring leap, current, and flame. The symbols from the standing stones snapped into sense. This route had never been meant for one traveller alone. Zephyr looked at Matilda, then at Coral in the shallows, and understood that the map had been collecting them on purpose.

Coral flicked water over them in triumph. Matilda pretended to object and secretly did not. As the sun climbed, the three of them moved on together, linked by clue, coastline, and a new sort of trust. Zephyr no longer felt like a lost creature dragging friends into trouble. He felt like the middle of a very odd team,

and to his surprise that felt steadier than any compass.

Moonshell Gate

Travelling with Coral changed the coastline completely. Where Zephyr and Matilda had seen only glitter and nuisance, Coral saw channels, sheltered pools, and warnings written in the colour of water. She led them past jagged points where waves struck hard enough to shake spray into the sky, then around calm coves where tiny fish flashed like tossed coins. Matilda claimed she preferred land, but even she began listening for Coral's whistles as if they were part of the landscape.

By afternoon the headland narrowed into shelves of honey-coloured rock patterned with little round hollows. Each hollow held a tide pool clear enough to reflect cloud. In some floated striped shells arranged so neatly that Zephyr knew at once they had not landed there by accident. The copper disc warmed in his claws when he stepped near. Ahead, set into the cliff face, a dark crack breathed cold air out to sea.

The pools formed a puzzle. Three larger shells lay apart from the rest: one shaped like a curled flame, one long and silver as a fin, and one pale with a notch that suggested a kangaroo's leap. Between them smaller shells made broken lines. Matilda frowned hard enough to wrinkle the whole beach. Coral surfaced beside the outer shelf and said that from the water the arrangement looked like currents swirling towards the crack in the cliff. Zephyr thought of the symbols at the standing stones.

They experimented in the patient, mildly argumentative way of friends solving a problem together. Matilda moved shells with careful claws. Coral nudged others into place with little waves.



Zephyr matched the copper disc to the pattern, rotating it until the shapes lined up. When the final shell clicked into its hollow, seawater drained out of the pools in a single spiralling rush and the dark crack widened into an open cave mouth just above the tide line.

Cold air flowed over them carrying the smell of limestone, kelp, and something older, like rain trapped inside rock for a hundred years. Matilda hesitated at the threshold because caves, unlike marshes, did not politely show where to put one's feet. Coral could go only as far as the first flooded chamber. Zephyr, small and awkwardly suited to both land and air, suddenly became the obvious scout. He wished that fact felt more heroic.

They compromised. Zephyr would go in, but only where he could still hear Matilda and Coral. Matilda would stay on the ledge by the entrance, ready to haul him back if the footing betrayed him. Coral would watch the water inside and call if the tide changed. It was not a grand warrior's arrangement. It was better. Grand warriors tended to forget sensible backups, whereas this plan had three of them.

The first chamber widened around pillars of stone slick with salt. On the walls, soot-dark drawings wound above the high-water mark: dragons riding spirals of wind, a kangaroo outlined in red ochre, a dolphin woven through wave patterns. Zephyr touched the nearest mark and felt the prickling certainty that the cave had been made for stories to last. Someone had known that land, sea, and sky would need one another here.

Deeper in, the floor rose to a dry shelf where a stone bowl rested under a shaft of light from above. Inside lay a cluster of moon-white shells and another scrap of writing, clearer than any clue before: Wait for dawn when the tide turns. Set the compass where the first light falls. Only then will the path remember its shape. Zephyr called the words back to the entrance, and Matilda repeated them to Coral so carefully that the cave itself seemed to listen.

There was nothing to do but wait. They camped in shifts between the cave mouth and a hollow sheltered from wind. Outside, evening clouds thickened over the sea. Coral said the swell was building faster than it should, as though weather far offshore had begun tugging at the coast. Zephyr turned the needleless compass over and over, feeling its faint hum answer the storm in the distance. Whatever happened at dawn, the world was preparing for it too.

Just before sleep, Matilda asked quietly whether Zephyr was frightened. He considered lying and then discovered there was no point. Of course he was frightened. He was frightened of the tide, of failing, of finding a way home he could not use, and, oddly, of a future in which he succeeded and had to wave goodbye on a beach. Coral, listening from the black water, said being brave was often just fear that had decided not to sit down.

The cave breathed around them all night, in and out with the sea. Zephyr slept fitfully beside the stone bowl, the compass under one paw and the copper disc under the other. Somewhere beyond the headland thunder muttered. By dawn,

he suspected, the map would stop being merely directions. It would become an answer, and answers had a way of asking things back.

The Cave of Turning Tides

Dawn entered the cave as a thin blade of silver, slipping through the shaft above the dry shelf and striking the stone bowl exactly at its rim. Zephyr set the humming compass in the light, while Matilda stood braced behind him and Coral waited in the flooded chamber, nose just above the turning water. For one heartbeat nothing happened. Then the compass pebble jerked east, the metal case split open along hidden seams, and light spilled out in a spinning ring.

The ring of light raced across the walls, touching carvings one after another. Ochre glowed, soot lines brightened, and symbols no one had noticed before rose from the stone as pale blue fire. At the back of the shelf a slab shuddered and sank, revealing a round device set into the rock. It looked like a compass larger than a cartwheel, marked not with north or south but with wind swirls, waves, stars, and the same three signs: leap, current, flame.

Zephyr approached as if one loud thought might break it. Around the rim, words had been carved in an old dragon hand, yet he could somehow understand them. Storm roads once crossed from sky kingdoms to far shores, they said, using places where land, sea, and weather agreed to meet. Australia had been one of those places. Travellers did not command the road alone; they opened it by joining gifts, each trusting the others more than the storm.



Matilda listened with her ears angled forward, while Coral bobbed in the rising water and asked the practical question first: if this thing was a road home, why had it not carried Zephyr straight back the moment he stumbled into the country? The answer came in another line, half-faded but legible: The compass wakes only for the lost, and only when the lost are no longer alone. Zephyr read that twice, feeling it settle in him like a stone dropped into deep water.

Another inscription revealed the secret he had been dreading and hoping for. The storm that had taken him from his own sky had not been mere bad luck. The sleeping compass, weakened by years of silence, had flared when Zephyr flew overhead on a distant wind path. It had tugged at him blindly, half-calling and half-breaking, and dragged him across worlds because a dragon was needed to mend the road before it vanished altogether.

Zephyr sat back hard on his tail. Being lost had felt accidental, embarrassing, absurd. Now it was something stranger. He had been pulled here by an old machine and an older promise, not because he was the strongest dragon in the clouds, but perhaps because he was young enough to ask for help. Matilda rested a paw on his shoulder. Coral said, with admirable firmness, that ancient magical devices ought to apologise when they kidnapped children.

At the centre of the great compass was a hollow shaped like a star. Empty. The final instructions were blunt: Set the tide star, face the storm, and open the road at the headland where first light meets spray. The tide star, however, was not in the cave. A

final note explained that the shell-key had been carried by the sea when the last keeper fled the closing passage. Without it, the compass could wake but not turn fully.

As if waiting for that exact moment of disappointment, the sea surged deep into the chamber with a boom that shook spray from the roof. Coral whirled. The tide was rising too fast, driven by the storm offshore. Another wave crashed into the entrance, and suddenly the cave no longer felt ancient and patient. It felt urgent. Matilda seized the copper disc, Zephyr grabbed the opened compass case, and together they scrambled for the mouth while water foamed around their ankles.

Outside, the ocean had changed colour, going from bright blue to dark steel beneath a bank of piled cloud. Coral shouted over the surf that after big squalls the currents sometimes tossed old shells into a reef pool on the far side of the headland. If the tide star still existed, that was the likeliest place. It was also reachable only at low water and not for long. The storm was offering them a narrow, ill-tempered window.

They ran, swam, and splashed east along the rocks, the opened compass humming louder with every flash of distant lightning. Zephyr's mind kept snagging on the same thought: he had not merely wandered into a map. The map had been waiting for him to become part of it. It would have been easier to feel important about that if he had not also been soaked, frightened, and trying not to slip into the sea every third step.

When they rounded the headland, a basin of trapped water flashed below, ringed by black rock and white foam. Something

pale glimmered at its centre each time the wave drew back. The tide star, or another trick. Zephyr tightened his claws on the compass and looked at his friends. Whatever lay in that pool, the journey had stopped asking whether they trusted one another. It was now asking how much.

Broken Compass, Big Storm

The reef pool looked close enough to touch and impossible to reach. Every few breaths a wave poured over the surrounding rock, filling the basin in a rush of white before draining back through narrow cracks. At its centre, snagged between two stones, gleamed a shell shaped like a five-pointed star. It flashed moon-pale beneath the water, then vanished under foam. Coral studied the surge pattern at once. Matilda studied the distance. Zephyr studied his fear.

Because fear often dressed itself as haste, he made the worst possible decision first. Before either friend could stop him, he scrambled down the slick rock towards the basin, convinced that if this was his map and his missing key, he ought to snatch it himself. The next wave slapped him sideways so fast he saw only white water, black stone, and his own astonishing foolishness. A second later Matilda had his scarf in both paws and Coral was shoving against his chest from below, forcing him back up the ledge.

No one shouted immediately. That made Zephyr feel worse. Matilda simply looked at him with the same bright, fierce eyes she had fixed on him in the river and asked whether he was quite finished being a one-dragon disaster. Coral, gentler but no less firm, said currents did not care whose quest it was. Shame stung Zephyr's cheeks hotter than any flame. He apologised so quickly the words tangled, and this time both friends accepted them at once.



Then they built a proper plan. Matilda found a tough length of washed kelp rope tangled in driftwood and tied it around a rock horn, then around Zephyr's middle with a knot she declared insultingly simple. Coral positioned herself in the channel where the returning water hit hardest. Zephyr would go only when Coral signalled the lull, step where Matilda directed, and grab the star shell on the first try because everyone preferred not to repeat the experiment.

The wave withdrew. Coral whistled. Zephyr ran. He jumped into the basin just as the last foam slid away, landed knee-deep between the stones, and seized the star shell with both claws. It came loose at once, but the returning surge struck harder than anything before. The rope snapped taut. Coral rammed the current sideways with all the force of her body, Matilda dug her heels into the rock, and Zephyr slammed against the ledge still clutching the shell like a miser with treasure.

They hauled him up in a coughing, triumphant heap. The tide star was colder than ordinary shell and faintly luminous around its edges. When Zephyr fitted it into the hollow at the centre of the compass case, the humming steadied into a low clear note that seemed to answer the thunder offshore. Yet the metal ring around it bore a jagged crack, probably earned during the scramble from the cave. The road could still be opened, perhaps, but now it would demand even finer timing.

They took shelter for a short while in the lee of the headland, where scrub clung low against the wind. Rain began in slanting needles, then paused as if gathering strength. Zephyr turned the repaired compass over in his lap and admitted the truth

behind his foolish rush. He was angry. Not at Matilda or Coral, not even exactly at the storm, but at being tugged across the world by a broken magic that had never asked permission.

Matilda listened with her paws wrapped around her knees. Coral floated in a rock pool at their feet, her white-spotted fin flicking with each swell. When Zephyr had finished, Matilda said that being brought somewhere against one's will was a rotten beginning, but it did not have to decide the ending. Coral added that the compass might have called him, yet he was the one choosing every step now. Both thoughts sat quietly in Zephyr's chest and made room there.

The final lines on the inner ring became readable only once the tide star was set. At storm's height, they said, the road must be opened on the outermost platform of the headland. One gift would mark the stone, one would carry the key through spray, and one would light the sky path itself. The order mattered: leap, current, flame. Zephyr glanced from Matilda to Coral and realised the old carvings had been describing them all along.

When evening darkened, they climbed towards the platform: a weathered stone spur jutting over the sea, half hidden by coarse grass and bent shrubs. Carved channels ran across its surface towards a central ring, long dry but still visible beneath lichen. This was where keepers had once stood. Below, the ocean battered the cliffs. Above, clouds massed in towering folds shot through with distant lightning. The storm that had started everything was coming back with purpose.

Zephyr tucked the compass under his wing and faced the blackening horizon. He no longer mistook courage for not being afraid. Courage, he was learning, was standing in the wind with two friends beside you and deciding that anger, grief, and longing could all come along so long as they did not take charge. The first cold drop of rain hit his nose. Far out at sea, lightning stitched the clouds together like a door closing.

The Secret of the First Fall

The storm reached the headland in layers: wind first, tugging at grass and fur and fin; then the sea, throwing spray high enough to salt even the cliff top; and finally the cloud itself, piling overhead until the evening darkened to iron. In the centre of the platform the tide star began to glow through the cracked compass. Zephyr set the device into the ring of carved channels, and a shimmer rose from it like heat, though the rain was cold.

Within that shimmer images formed, not solid enough to touch but clear enough to steal his breath. He saw dragons circling this same headland long ago, their scales lit by lightning. On the rocks below stood kangaroos, steady as sentries, while dolphins curved through the surf beneath them. The road had never belonged to dragons alone. It had always been a promise shared between land, sea, and sky. The old route had lasted because different creatures kept it together.

The vision shifted. Zephyr saw himself on the day of the storm, a speck against dazzling cloud, wobbling through his first solo high glide with far more enthusiasm than sense. Beneath the usual winds had moved another current, ancient and injured, calling blindly. The compass had not chosen him for perfection or power. It had chosen him because he was open enough to hear a cry for help and stubborn enough to follow it even when terrified.



Another line of light crawled around the stone ring, translating the final truth as it went: The road returns any traveller who opens it, but it also remembers those who mended it. Once restored, it can be found again by friends under the right sky. Zephyr read the words twice, then once more. Going home would not mean sealing the friendship away like something finished. The path could hold memory as well as passage.

He had not realised until that moment how much he needed that promise. The thought of leaving Matilda and Coral forever had been an ache he kept stepping around because there was no fixing it. Now the ache loosened, though it did not disappear. Matilda read his face with unsettling accuracy and said, rather briskly, that if he planned to start crying in a storm, he ought to stand downwind. Coral laughed and splashed the cliff in agreement.

The compass projected three lines from the centre ring. One ended at a narrow notch overlooking the cliff edge. One ran through a channel that filled whenever a high wave struck below. The last pointed to a blackened stone where old fire marks still clung. Leap, current, flame. The instructions had become positions. Matilda would carry the disc and strike the cliff notch at the exact instant the spray rose. Coral would drive seawater through the carved channel. Zephyr would light the awakened ring.

Thunder rolled so near that the platform trembled. Rain sheeted down, turning the stone slick as glass. Coral shouted from below that the swell was steepening faster than before. Matilda tested the distance to the notch and nodded once, all focus

now. Zephyr, meanwhile, spread his singed wings into the gale and felt them shake. The old fear returned with sharp teeth: what if the flame failed, or flared at the wrong moment, or sent him tumbling through some half-open road between worlds?

He almost said that someone else should do it. The sentence rose to his tongue and stopped there because both friends were already exactly where the map had placed them. Coral was braced against the surging channel. Matilda stood coiled at the edge, fur darkened by rain, the copper disc clamped in her paws. Trust moved between them like a rope stronger than anything they had tied. To step back now would not protect them. It would only break the shape they had made together.

So Zephyr took a breath full of salt and storm. He remembered the river and Matilda telling him to look at her, the marsh and Coral laughing after danger, the eagle ridge where the wind had held him because he had dared to lean into it. Perhaps home was not merely the place one started from. Perhaps it was also the place one became more truly oneself. The idea steadied him better than bravery speeches ever could.

Lightning flashed, turning the sea white for an instant. The tide star answered with a piercing clear note. All three looked towards the centre ring. The moment was arriving. Matilda crouched lower. Coral backed into the dark water for a stronger run. Zephyr bent over the blackened stone, smoke curling from his nostrils. The storm that had once flung him helplessly across the world was now offering him a choice, and this time he was ready to answer.

'Now,' cried Coral. Matilda launched. A wave exploded up the cliff. Zephyr drew breath so deep it hurt. The night seemed to hold itself still around the leap, the spray, and the waiting flame.

Leap, Dive and Flame

Matilda flew farther than Zephyr had ever seen her leap. Rain streamed from her fur as she crossed the platform, the copper disc shining between her paws. At the same instant Coral surged from the dark water below, driving a crest of seawater into the carved channel with a crack like applause. The disc struck the notch. The wave struck the groove. Blue light shot round the stone ring so fast it seemed to draw a circle out of the storm itself.

Zephyr dropped flame into the blackened stone. For one terrible heartbeat nothing caught. Then the old fire marks flared gold, and the ring answered with a column of spinning light that rose straight into the cloud. Thunder slammed back in reply. The headland shook. Above them the storm opened, not like a hole torn in cloth, but like a road being written in lightning, every line bright and impossible and calling to the sky beyond.

Through that blazing path Zephyr glimpsed mountains built of cloud shadow and silver rain: home, or so close to home that his chest hurt with recognition. The wind pouring down the road smelled of cold stone, mist, and dragon fire. He stared too long. The cracked compass gave a sharp metallic shriek, and one arc of light sputtered sideways. The ring wobbled. This was not a doorway that would wait politely while anyone gathered their feelings.

The copper disc jarred loose from the notch and skidded towards the cliff edge. Matilda spun after it, but the wet stone betrayed her. Zephyr moved before he had time to consider



whether his wings approved. He sprang, caught the disc against his chest, and found himself over open air with nothing beneath him except roaring surf and his own very poor history of flying. Fear struck. So did memory. Lean into the wind, not against it.

He opened his singed wings. The storm road above pulled one way, the cliff updraft another. Instead of fighting either, Zephyr angled himself between them, catching the air like a question finally answered. He did not soar beautifully. He wobbled, lurched, and looked ridiculous enough that even in the middle of catastrophe Matilda made a strangled sound suspiciously like laughter. But he stayed aloft. More than that, he turned.

Carrying the disc, he arced back towards the platform where Coral had thrust half her body up the channel to keep water flowing. Lightning strobed around them. Zephyr landed hard beside the notch, nearly on his nose, and rammed the disc back into place. The ring steadied. Light threaded along every carved line, through spray and smoke and rain, until the whole platform blazed with the joined colours of sea-green, fire-gold, and storm-blue.

The road widened. Zephyr could now see it clearly: a spiralling path of wind steps and cloud bridges reaching into a sky he knew down to the shape of its distant peaks. Yet the magic did more than point home. It wrapped around Matilda's leap marks, around Coral's current, around Zephyr's flame, weaving them into the road itself. This was not escape snatched from disaster. It was a bridge built by friendship in real time.

For a moment none of them moved. The storm roared, but inside the ring there was a pocket of almost-stillness where decisions mattered. Zephyr looked from the glowing path to Matilda's soaked fur and bright stubborn eyes, then down to Coral, who floated in the shining channel with her grin gone soft around the edges. Home stood open before him. So did goodbye. It turned out he had room in his heart for joy and sorrow at the exact same moment.

He stepped first to Matilda and pressed his forehead briefly to hers. Then he knelt at the channel edge so Coral could nudge his shoulder with her smooth nose. There was no clever speech equal to the occasion. Zephyr settled for the truth. He told them they had found him when he was smoke, dust, and bad ideas, and made him braver than he knew how to be. Matilda said somebody had to. Coral said obviously.

The road began to narrow at its far end. Zephyr straightened, tucked the compass under one foreleg, and backed into the centre of the ring. 'Under the right sky,' Matilda reminded him, quoting the promise from the vision. 'Under the right sky,' Coral echoed from the foaming channel. Zephyr smiled through rain and salt and everything too large for words. Then, before courage could get complicated, he leapt into the storm road.

Light wrapped around him, bright but not blinding. He felt wind hold his wings exactly where they needed to be, not perfect, not healed all at once, but trusted. Below, for one last instant, he saw the headland, the kangaroo on the stone, the dolphin in the surf, and the ring they had lit together. Then Australia fell away beneath cloud, and Zephyr flew towards home by a path that

now knew his name.

Home by a Different Sky

The storm road ended high above a range of dark mountains veiled in cloud. Zephyr burst out of the light with a startled cry, overshot a bank of mist, and landed in a tumble on a ledge of wet stone he recognised at once. The air smelled of rain and lichen and the cold clean mineral scent he had been carrying in memory for days. Home. Not a dream of it, not a picture, but the solid dripping truth beneath his claws.

Other dragons came wheeling through the mist almost immediately, alarm turning to relief so fast it made the air ring with calls. Zephyr's family found him before he had finished laughing and trying not to cry in the same breath. He was bundled into wings, questions, scoldings, and such fierce affection that even his singed feathers seemed to stand straighter. No one cared that he arrived muddy, salty, and carrying a cracked magical compass. They cared that he had arrived.

When Zephyr could finally speak in complete sentences, he told everything. He told of the bush and the laughing bird, the lost and found hut, the red stones, the marsh, the wedge-tailed eagle, the impossible map, the sea, and the two friends who had turned every impossible bit into something survivable. The older dragons listened with the particular silence adults use when children report events too strange to ignore and too exact to dismiss.



The cracked compass settled the matter. The moment Zephyr set it down, light ran through its ring and painted the cave wall with the shapes of a kangaroo, a dolphin, and a spiralling road over ocean. The elders grew solemn then, for they knew fragments of the old stories about storm roads, though none had seen one opened in living memory. Zephyr, suddenly very tired, felt oddly proud that the proof of his adventure looked like friendship before it looked like magic.

The following days were full of practical comforts. His wings were cleaned and salvaged. He ate enough to satisfy three growing dragons and slept until dreams stopped sounding like surf. Yet whenever evening turned the clouds copper, a tug of longing reached across him. Home had welcomed him with everything he wanted, but some part of his heart still listened for Matilda's dry humour and Coral's laughing splash. Journeys, it seemed, could teach homesickness in more than one direction.

On the seventh dawn after his return, the compass began to hum from its shelf. Zephyr carried it outside onto a high ledge where first light struck the mist. The tide star glowed. Within the cracked ring a small window of shining air opened, not wide enough for travel, but clear enough to show the Australian headland washed pink by morning. On the stone platform stood Matilda, and below her Coral circled in the surf as if they had known exactly where to look.

Zephyr shouted so loudly that three sleepy mountain birds exploded from a nearby tree. Through the shimmering window he saw Matilda laugh and clap both paws to her ears. Coral

leapt clean out of the water, white spot flashing. The magic carried no perfect sound, only fragments, but fragments were enough. He could see them safe. They could see him whole. Sometimes relief did not need full sentences to become enormous.

The elders studied the compass for days and discovered what the vision had promised: once mended, the road could be opened again under calm skies, though only briefly and only by agreement from both ends. It was meant for visits, not kidnappings. Zephyr thought this a considerable improvement. When the next clear meeting of weather came, he asked permission, packed gifts from home, cloud berries, polished sky glass, and a scarf that had never been chewed by an eagle, and set out for Australia once more.

This time the road felt nothing like falling. It felt like being expected. Zephyr glided down to the same headland in broad daylight, his wings not perfect but stronger, the compass steady in his claws. Matilda met him with a leap that nearly knocked him over the cliff in welcome. Coral slapped the water so hard that spray drenched them both. Zephyr laughed until his sides hurt. Returning, he discovered, could be every bit as thrilling as arriving.

They spent the day roaming the coast that had once seemed like the end of the world. Zephyr told stories of mountain mist and dragon ledges. Matilda insisted his version of the eagle attack grew less accurate every time he retold it. Coral guided them to a sheltered cove where the water turned green as bottle glass. By sunset the three of them were arguing companionably

over whether hopping, swimming, or gliding counted as the finest mode of travel. No one won, which suited everyone.

When evening painted the sea gold, Zephyr stood between beach and surf and looked at the sky that had first frightened him. He was no longer the dragon who had crashed into the bush believing being lost meant being alone. Home was his mountain, yes, but it was also a rail hut, a red stone shelf, a marsh survived together, and a headland where leap, current, and flame had made a road. Under the right sky, friends could always find the way again.



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