

### **Caroline Cottonsoft goes to town**

The next morning, Aunt Charlotte took Caroline for a flight over the big city. Caroline was very excited.

"I am going to see humans!" she sang, dancing about at the hand of her aunt.

"Well, I don't know if that is something to be too excited about ", Aunt Charlotte grumbled. "Well, you will see for yourself."

The closer they came to the big city, the quieter Caroline got. The air became warmer and warmer, and somehow it smelled different from what she was used to. Looking down, she saw a maze of streets, and houses, windowless factories, lots of cars and trucks, everything very confusing -

"Look! Look there - !" she stuttered and pulled Aunt Charlotte by her sleeve, "There's a whole lot of these humans in one big bucket! Down there, in that round thing, you see?" She pointed to the stadium directly below them. "What are they doing there?"

"They are loud," Aunt Charlotte replied dryly, "for some reason they always make a lot of noise when they are in these buckets."

"Maybe they are scared of something - look, most of them cling to the rim of that bucket, as if there was something really terrifying going on in the middle - "

"Well, I don't really think they are terrified," Charlotte replied with a smile, "they wouldn't go there if it was so bad, would they?"

Caroline wanted to answer but just when she inhaled there was a strange smell biting her nose and making her cough.

"Dear God, what was this?" she panted, gasping for breath, "what a horrible smell!"

"That's how they smell," said Aunt Charlotte who had held her breath just in time, "they burn the leaves of certain plants and they drink the smoke - don't ask me why they do that! And they sweat, but they don't sweat rain like we do - humans stink, as I've told you. And where there's many of them in one location it stinks a lot."

"Strange people, these humans!" whispered Caroline hoarsely and rushed away from the sweat and nicotine hazes above the stadium. "I'm not sure if I like them too much."

"Well, they have their funny sides, too!" said Charlotte. "Let's fly over there. I want to show you something." She flew ahead in the direction of a small airfield where white gliders were parked in accurate rows. Caroline hurried to stay close to her aunt.

"You see," said Charlotte, "with their ships they sail on the waters, with their automobiles they cruise the land, and those things over there that look like little white crosses - " she pointed to the gliders, "they utilize for flying - or whatever they call it. At least, that's when you can see them from up close and even play with them." She looked around. "Over there, there are some of them in the air. Come on!"

They rushed to a small elevation where three gliders flew their circles.

"Now, watch it!" said Charlotte, "You must take a good gulp of warm air, and then - " she took a deep breath, grasped one of the gliders, took it in and let it whiz up in the warm air channel inside her. Then she spit it out at her top, let it sink rapidly through her outer layers of cold air and shook it well before letting it go.

"That was funny!" she giggled, still out of breath, "it's such a feeling - a little bit like hiccups! And - have you seen how the man inside that thing turned first white, and then green?"

"I don't like hiccups!" grumbled Caroline. "And I don't think it was very funny for the man." She still had that strange smell from the stadium in her nose, her eyes were burning and her head was humming.

"And I'm hot!" she added. "Somehow it is much warmer here than out there over the wide land."

"The reason is," Charlotte was serious again, "that humans do a lot with fire. In their houses they burn oil or gas or wood to keep it warm; and in the factories they have giant ovens burning day and night. Even things they don't need anymore, garbage, filth and old paper, they burn it all. That's why it is so warm here."

"Paper?" asked Caroline, "I don't know what that is."

"Neither do I, not exactly; somehow it doesn't make sense - " said Charlotte slowly, "they cut the trees, entire forests, but not to build something out of the wood, but - " she scratched her forehead - "they grind it, mix it with water and let it dry again, and somehow that results in thin white sheets. They scribble around on these sheets, and when they don't need them anymore, they burn them. But why they do this, and what it is good for - " she lifted her shoulders - "I really have no idea."

"Strange people, these humans!" mumbled Caroline. "Could it be that they don't like us? Everything they do is bad for us: They waste the water, cut down the trees, blow their dirt and filth up in the air - "

"I don't think they do it at purpose," said Charlotte Cottonsoft. "They probably don't even know what they're doing. And it's not only us, the clouds, who suffer from them: The ocean, the rivers, the lakes, the meadows, the animals - everything is utilized by humans. They mess things up and don't clean up behind them. At the bottom line, they don't do themselves a favor, because they have to live in all of the mess they are causing. But they just don't see it. Basically, they care only for themselves. That's what I think"

While she was talking, they had flown around the big city back to the river valley. Caroline had a bad headache from all the smoke, exhaust gases and chemical smells she had inhaled. She had seen enough of humans and their achievements - she just wanted to fly back to the forests, the quiet lakes and the dew on the meadows.

"Let us fly home!" she asked her aunt. "Please let's fly home!"