

**one**

The snake stared at Zoe. Zoe stared at the snake. She had got used to all sorts being washed up on the beaches of Norfolk since the waters had started to recede. But they had brought with them new horrors, new dangers, new misfortune. Zoe looked at the creature with a renewed sense of not caring, until she spoke quietly to herself,

*'Don't give up, people are depending on you, don't give up.'*

She came to realise that the snake was as scared as she was, and in any case it was a harmless grass snake.

But amongst everything she did know now, she wasn't to know that.

In any case it was hard to tell as the creature was a dirty brown colour instead of its usual bright green. Everything was a dirty brown colour now, as the water came and went. Zoe could almost see the disease welling up in the water.

'It's 'nake!' cried William excitedly as the creature slid off.

'Yes, William, a snake, well done!'

*'It want it!'* William yelled, and then, *'it not scared!'*

He had only just started talking, and everything was 'it'. No hes, shes or wes, just its! He was so cute!

She gathered William up quickly in her arms, and wrapped his little body in what remained of her dress. It was the dress Munchkin had bought her from the hospital. Or rather brought her. *'No payment necessary!'* he had said in the heat of that terrible moment. She was never quite sure if he should have done that, but the dress had stayed with her, and it reminded her of him.

In the nearly two years since she and Munchkin had been found, exhausted and half-drowned in the shallows, she had developed an obsession with moving on. Maybe it was due to what had gone before, the multiple journeys, the endless grind of staying alive, but in her head she was crystal-clear – it was time to move on again, to take advantage of whatever lay to the West.

Just like William had sung that day.

She squatted down, balancing the toddler on her knee.

The brownness of everything was overwhelming. She breathed deeply, and then regretted it.

All around, the stench of rotten organics. *'It will become fertiliser,'* she thought, and new plants will emerge. But not yet. The ground was too sodden to produce anything useful. There were no seeds to plant in the soil. The water was poisoned with salt from the sea. They were hungry.

It was time to go.

What did they have to stay for anyway?

The house was half buried, damp to its rafters, and slowly rotting into the mud.

Dad sat miserably in the midst of it all. They both knew that someone had to remain and that they would be parted again. To leave even the most modest of dwellings was to invite any passing traveller, all of whom would be desperate, to take up residence. It was too horrible to think about, so they agreed that he would stay.

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Zoe had started a tiny kitchen garden behind the house, growing anything that would emerge quickly enough to sustain them. Their problem was seed. Nothing would grow without seeds to start it off. Zoe marvelled at the power of the nature around her. After a year under water, the garden could still produce just enough to feed them. No meat – breeding animals would take much longer and there were so few left to breed from – but a few vegetables – potatoes, carrots, onions and turnips. She and Dad usually made a watery soup, using the rainwater they had collected off the top of the house. Dad's friend, long since gone, had helped him construct guttering out of some of the old tins they had discarded, and this provided them with a regular source of the fresh water they desperately needed.

She wrapped a grubby shawl – one her mother used to wear – around her waist, and bundled William into it, so that he was supported on her back like a baby in a rucksack. His little pink legs stuck out each side and wiggled when Zoe walked around the room. He giggled excitedly, but Zoe did not. Those legs, like matchsticks now, had been so plump and so strong.

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'Zoe?' asked Dad. Tears filled his voice and he choked a little.

'Yes Dad,'

*'You know I'm proud, right? But I'm also scared. It is like I know I won't see you again.'*

*'I know Dad. But you know one of us has to do this. I'm doing it for you. And for William. And I'm coming home Dad. Give me a few weeks. I'm coming home.'*

'It coming home!' chirped a little voice from behind Zoe's back.

Dad managed a weak smile and held Zoe's hand very tightly.

*'Go West, Zoe. Look for higher ground. And take care Princess. There are bad people out there.'*

*'There are good people out there too, Dad. You know that. And you know Munchkin. He is out there somewhere. I know it. And I will find him. Or...,'* her voice sounded uncertain, *'he will come back and*

*find me.'*

*'But you won't be here.'*

The reality of her situation hit her. Munchkin had headed west too. And had talked of higher ground. She had to follow. She packed the potatoes, onions and other vegetables into a canvas bag which Dad helped her to fix behind William.

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And during the winter. Was it the winter? Time had passed her by. Slowly, but imperceptibly they had all been getting hungrier and thinner. The winter vegetables had sustained them to a level. Not everyone could survive that.

It had been cold for sure when it happened. The mudflats had frozen, and their only way of keeping warm – ever-smaller branches torn from the rough trees – was dwindling. About the time that Munchkin had left. Dad was struggling.

William had been squirming around on the damp floor, playing with the toys that Dad had retrieved from one of bigger houses. He had just started talking.

They had been gathered in the stinking living room, Mum and Dad on the remaining furniture, Zoe and William on the floor.

*'It not moving!'* William had said, excitement mixed with confusion in his tiny voice.

*'Come, Will, come here.'* Zoe had comforted the infant.

And that was it. Zoe's mother had just given up. In truth she had never properly recovered from the birth. No facilities. Inadequate food. The survival of the fittest.

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And the fittest now, were William and Zoe.

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And so they just left. Zoe and William. Some food. A wave from their father. Into the gloomy dusk of

evening.

Zoe had decided that for the first few miles they would walk in the cool summer darkness. They would find a space to sleep later. Other than that she had planned nothing.

They tramped noiselessly for a few hours along what had been country lanes, knowing nothing of what they might find. Was everyone on the move again? Where were they heading? With no information, with no news, with no-one around, Zoe just didn't know. She felt scared, but at the same time, liberated. A new start. Away from the house, the despair. She smiled a little to herself. Daydreamed a bit.

Shaken out of it by the sight of two small figures in the distance, heading away from them, weighed down by a large sack.

**two**

Zoe did not quite know what to think. She was alone, it was true, apart from William, but she had grown used to being alone, from the very first journey on the boat, from arriving on Eel Island, she had always been alone.

She liked it.

Until she met Munchkin.

She smoothed her dress a little with her hand, and tried to imagine where Munchkin was now.

He had always seemed to have a sixth sense for safety – that is why she had agreed when he proposed leaving. He promised to return but when he had not, after all those months, she had felt it was her turn. Where could he be?

A shiver went through her as she thought of him. She crouched down behind one of the only features in that flat landscape and looked ahead at the two figures in the distance. They had not seen her, but they had also stopped, and looked to to be resting, and perhaps, she thought, eating, in the far distance.

Zoe was caught in two minds. Should she make themselves known to them? Would it be good to have company? Might they be able to help on the journey?

She then realised the fruitlessness of it all. What journey? Where were they heading, and why? She was leaving the safety of Dad and the house and moving west based on a throwaway comment from Munchkin, some five months earlier, and perhaps subconsciously on William's 'Go West' advice back on Eel Island. And perhaps because of her fondness for Munchkin. He had talked of a city on a hill, surrounded by woods and trees. It could have been a dream. But it was good enough for her – cities had people and food, woods were shelter, and hills were out of the water, perhaps dry, perhaps even warm.

Warmth! It had been a long time since she had really felt warm, at least since M had gone.

She reached round and manhandled a now-sleeping William from his perch on her back, laid out the blanket on the ground and wrapped him carefully in it. He gurgled happily in his sleep but didn't wake. She decided to wait it out here amongst the long grass until first light, and snuggled down next to him, wrapping herself in a corner of the blanket. The night was actually warm for once, and the stars were bright in the sky. Zoe gazed at them as if they were people staring down at her, and wondered if they could feel pity or sorrow.

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Zoe had resolved not to sleep that night but had quickly fallen into a deep slumber, engulfed by worries and questions but unable to fight her overwhelming tiredness.

She was woken by William turning and kicking beside her. He let out a little half-burble, half-scream, the sort that toddlers sometimes made in the middle of a dream. He laid back down and was still. She relaxed and smiled to herself at the feel of his warmth, and her pride at keeping him safe.

She woke properly an hour later, as the sun made its weary way over the horizon. No real heat yet, but the prospect of a good day for walking, and a clear indicator of the way she needed to walk. She stood up and stared directly away from the sun, looking west. The ground was shrouded in a light mist, but she could see battered hedgerows and unruly fields far into the distance. Maybe there was even something to eat out there! She unwrapped some of the vegetable mix (really just a basic potato salad) she had prepared the day before. She took some, and then bent down to proffer some to William.

*'William?'*

The child slept on.

William was an active child, and was always hungry. It was not like him to just lie there. Zoe bent down and gently rubbed his shoulder. Nothing. The child did not move.

She shook him, more urgently this time. Nothing.

Zoe started to panic. It had not been that cold. He had stirred several times in the night. What was wrong?

She knelt beside his little body and let out a long, desperate scream.

On his thin hand were two puncture wounds. Perfectly spaced, a centimetre apart. A viper – the only poisonous snake on the island. No grass snake this one. He must have stirred in the night and disturbed the creature. For a terrible moment she thought she had laid him down onto a viper's nest. No matter - she had a half-hour window or she would lose him before they had even started.

She screamed again, more in desperation than in hope. Her wail melted into the saturated air and was gone.

*'Woah Lady! Whassup?'* cried a voice out of the fog.

Strangers would normally have been a threat, a danger, but the two figures emerging out of the half-darkness felt like her only hope. It was the two people she had seen in the darkness the evening before, who had lain down a hundred yards or so from where she had.

They jogged their way through the rough-hewn heavy grass to where William was lying. Zoe clasped her hands to her face in panic and fear, then lowered them, trying to remain calm, trying to stay cool. Despite the state she was in, she was still aware. Jogged? No-one jogged anywhere any more. Everyone just dragged themselves around. Who were these people?

*'Look at his hand!'* she whimpered, *'please help, he's all I have left.'*

The two boys said nothing.

The one with the brown curly hair wrestled with the clasp on the rough sack they had dragged with them to where William lay.

*'Hurry, please hurry!'* she implored.

The taller boy spoke. Zoe could not help but notice the watch on his wrist, which he now turned

towards himself, staring calmly at the little dials.

*'We have twenty minutes to save him,'* he said calmly to his companion, *'maybe twenty-five. He hasn't gone into shock yet, so this only just happened.'*

Zoe panicked again, looking around for the snake.

*'Don't worry, we chased it off,'* said the younger boy, although Zoe didn't feel sure. She wasn't sure about anything at that moment, apart from the need to keep her brother alive.

*'Here, hold this.'* The younger boy, kneeling beside William, produced a plastic container from the sack. It was half-full of a pale opaque liquid.

His voice was high-pitched but firm. She took the container, and started to unscrew the top. She could not make out the accent. It was neither Norfolk burr, nor Essex twang. It was a strange mixture. As he handed her the container, a heavy chain around his neck glinted in the morning sun, which had started to break through the mist. Gold maybe? How had that lasted so long?

The older boy pulled the lifeless William up into a sitting position. The younger one started to pour the liquid into his mouth.

*'Wait, wait, what is it?'* Zoe enquired, her voice pitching upwards in her concern.

*'Don't worry, it worked for us once. It can't do any harm. Let's just try it.'*

The juice ran down William's chin and onto his grubby t-shirt. Some of it seeped down his throat.

*'OK, slower now, keep going,'* the older boy said. His voice was so calm, Zoe momentarily felt reassured. It was all she had.

A few more dribbles of liquid seemed to stay in William's mouth, perhaps making their way down his throat. It was down to gravity now, and the older boy gave William a little slap on the back to jolt the liquid down.

After what seemed like hours, but was perhaps two or three minutes, a little liquid seeped back out of the boy's mouth, he jerked upwards, and vomited the remaining juice over the blanket lying on the ground. He shook his head like a wet puppy, and flung his hands towards his face, trying to wipe away the taste and feel of the juice. Zoe grabbed him and picked him up, rubbing his back as she held him. His little body jerked and squirmed, but he held his sister tight as if she might let him drop, and cried a little, his head resting on her shoulder. His breathing was rapid, but slowing and becoming more normal.

In her confusion, Zoe didn't think to thank the strangers for saving her brother's life. Instead she said,

*'Wh...who...who are you?'*

*'Just travellers like you, heading west. Which way're you's goin'?''*

He sounded like a cowboy riding across the plains in search of gold. He reached into the pocket of his cargo pants and produced a stainless steel object which he held out in front of him. It was a compass.

*‘Over yonder – that’s where we’re going. They say there’s higher ground. There’s woods for shelter. Maybe a town or somethin’. Wanna come?’*

Zoe’s mind raced again. The strangers had saved her journey before it had begun, had saved her brother. They had food and equipment. What did she have to lose?

*‘Sure. Thanks. I’m Zoe. This is William.’* She packed up her rudimentary campsite and fastened her brother to her back.

*‘Hey Zoe. Good to meet you. Let’s go.’*

No introductions. No names. But a friendly greeting, and a plan.

Which was more than she had.

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### three

The four of them set off together in the direction indicated on the compass, even if the rising sun had already set their course.

Zoe realised that the compass was the first almost-modern man-made object she had seen since the incident with her mother's necklace. She wondered briefly where they had found it, but she somehow trusted the two striding figures in front of her.

*'Slow down, please, you're going too fast!'* she called to the boys who were a few yards ahead of her.

*'How far do you think we need to go?'* she asked.

*'Let me take the boy Zoe, he is weighing you down,'* said the taller of the two boys. Zoe started to untie William from behind her, before she caught herself. *'I have no idea who they are, I can't just hand him over.'*

*'It's OK thanks, he's fine with me,'* she corrected herself. *'Where are you guys heading?'*

*'We're going the same way as you.'*

*'How d'you know where I'm going?'*

*'Well this morning you told us you are looking for woodland, a city, shelter, food. That's exactly what we're doing. We have some idea of where it is, but we need help.'*

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They walked on in silence for a while. Time and distance did not mean a lot to Zoe and William. She had no way of measuring either of them. She estimated that they had walked for about three hours, and by the position of the sun it was getting close to midday. She was dying for a break and some shade – the sun was dominant in the sky now and there was nowhere to hide. Her dress was drenched in sweat and she realised she had not drunk anything since that morning.

*'There're some trees up there – let's take a time out,'* announced the shorter boy, his light brown forehead glistening with a sheen of perspiration.

Zoe stared ahead of her and swayed a little on her feet. She could not actually see the shade he was talking about, but she knew that she needed shade and cool more than anything in her life right now. She staggered a little, and began to untie William from behind her waist.

*'You OK Zoe?'* the voice was sympathetic but businesslike, the tone almost 'take it or leave it'.

*'I..I don't really know,'* Zoe replied. William, standing on the ground next to her now, looked up at her.

*'OK, we'll bring William, you take a drink and follow behind.'* The plastic container from out of the sack was pulled out again, and Zoe took a long drag from the proffered bottle.

*'Urgh..'* her reaction was involuntary as the now-warm pale liquid ran down her throat. Although the taste wasn't unpleasant, it was strong and pungent, and left her with an unerasable memory of what she had just drunk.

She felt slightly better, and followed the three boys towards what she could now see was a small stand of densely-packed trees, standing on a rise in the ground. William looked tiny holding the hands of the other two, but she could tell, even from the back, that he was proud to be 'one of the boys'. She had time to think about how he was growing up too quickly.

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Despite her fragility, she couldn't help passing her eyes over her mystery companions. The taller boy, his hair towseled behind his head and drooping down over his strong shoulders, and the smaller one, tight curls neatly bobbing as he walked, his body lithe and slim like a boxer. She also couldn't help noticing their clothes.

Since she had left Norfolk nearly two years before, no-one she had met on her travels had paid any attention to what they looked like. Dress sense went in waves. If someone had just raided a big house, or struck lucky in an abandoned shop, they might look reasonable for a day or two. But a couple more days rowing or walking soon put paid to anything approaching decency. Most people were making do with whatever they could salvage or find, and the cloying mud and eternal dampness saw the end to decent clothes very quickly. She had managed to find a change of clothes of some description and stuff them into her bag, but that was it.

But not for these two.

They were dusty, sure. They had stumbled occasionally, and grazed their knees or stained their trousers when they fell. But compared to her, they were well dressed. Shirts with buttons on them. Jeans in one case, and cargo pants in the other, with pockets. Socks! She hadn't seen those for a while. And shoes – proper trainers, with laces, and chunky soles to help navigate the uneven ground. Funky colours.

They reached the wood and Zoe collapsed onto the floor in a clearing, still shaded, but also dappled with the sun through the canopy. She closed her eyes. William came and sat, half crouching as if protecting her, by her side.

*'What time you got Bruv?'*

*'Woah Zee, I ain't ya brother!'*

*'Hey man, it's a figure of speech, or something like that!'*

The exchange between them was light-hearted, banter even. Unheard of in Zoe's world.

*'What time you got?'*

*'It's about ten after two.'*

*'OK so we need to step on it, he said be at the rendez-vous at six.'*

*'Yeah I know, how far is it?'*

The tall one looked at his watch and consulted the compass again.

*'He needs flat ground and a target but we've no battery to call him in, so let's go for plan B.'*

*'Which was?'*

*'Quit goofin' around bro!' said the younger one, 'You know what I mean. We wait by the lake – about four miles from here in that direction.'*

He pointed slightly west-south-west by his compass. He lowered his voice before he whispered,

*'You seen her lips?'*

*'You bet, in fact I was just daydreaming about kiss...'*

*'Pack it in man, can't you see? They're purple. The classic sign.'*

*'What're you saying? She ain't gonna make it?'*

*'She ain't,'* came the reply, *'unless he gets here early.'*

*'Not going to make what,'* whispered Zoe, surprising even herself with the weakness of her speaking voice, *'What lake?'* She laid her head back down. It had become too heavy to lift.

*'Look Zoe, you're not feeling right, OK? It is better that we get help for you, and bring it back here. We are trying to hook up with a friend of ours. He can help, but we cannot afford to miss the meet.'*

*'Please don't leave me,'* her voice was desperate now, *'and don't leave William. He's all I have.'*

*'Zoe don't you see? Don't you understand?'*

*'What?'*

*'Zoe. How many people have you seen in the last two days?'*

Even through her fever Zoe realised that the three people near her now, and three pairs of eyes staring sympathetically at her, were the only humans she had laid eyes on since she left the house. Despite travelling on well-worn routes, there was no-one.

*'Where has everyone gone?'*

*'They're gone Zoe. Gone.'*

If she had been able to focus, Zoe would have seen the awful reality. She was shaken by curly boy's next comment.

*'Your Mum, your Dad, your Munchkin, all gone.'*

Her strength returned for a moment.

*'Munchkin's not dead!'* she screamed hysterically.

*'You don't seem to realise do you? They are probably dead Zoe. This virus is unstoppable.'*

*'Virus?'* she enquired weakly.

*'Yes. Nobody knows exactly what it is yet, but it is taking everybody. Men, women, even children. You didn't know?'*

*'I didn't know,'* she repeated back to them.

*'Here drink a little more and you can move on with us. The further west we get the better. And he'll be here soon. At this time of year the lake will be dry, but he'll find us...I hope.'*

*'Who is he?'*

*'He's the guy we came to find. And he's the guy you need.'*

*'But I need Munchkin!'*

Both boys smiled knowingly at each other, perhaps more at the name than anything else, or perhaps at the futility of Zoe's longing.

The four of them staggered through to what had been a small pool, fed from underground by a spring. The normally pure water had dried to a trickle and had combined with the familiar mud to create a cloying mess from which a colourful bird was trying to extract a little moisture. In the end they had dragged Zoe and William with them. It had seemed to risky to leave her.

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It happened very slowly and almost imperceptibly. Had she been fully conscious, Zoe would have heard it first, but it was William who called out.

*'It a bird!'* he sang, dancing round the mudbath.

*'Yes gorgeous, it's a bird, a kingfisher'* she replied weakly.

*'It a bird!'* he repeated, this time waving his arms around.

Zoe's two saviours shielded their eyes from the sun, and looked heavenwards.

William aped their movements exactly, his chubby little arm protecting his eyes.

*'It a bird,'* for the third time, this time though his right hand was pointing skywards.

The sun was so strong and her head so weak that Zoe barely saw it. A mere speck in the sky. She could

not properly hear what they heard. A low whistling in the light wind. Something out of this world, heading their way.

The boys waved furiously and Zoe noticed the smaller one trying to glint the sun off his gold chain.

*'Bird coming!'* cried William.

Zoe felt herself drift in and out of consciousness, occasionally glimpsing the approaching object, and sometimes drifting into another place. A better place. Cooler. Shadier. A place where her head didn't hurt.

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When she woke from the next cycle of feverishness and opened her eyes, there were four pairs staring back at her.

A new pair of eyes, the deepest blue she had ever seen, set in a pure chiselled face surrounded by a shaggy blonde mane. A voice so mellow she could drown in it.

*'Don't worry Zoe, I'll have you on your feet in no time.'*

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**four**

*'Hey Doc, let's give you a hand with that,'* shouted the two boys, with a mixture of efficiency and awe at the manner of his arrival.

*'Stand clear, there's another one on the way,'* the doctor replied.

A small package, supported by a fine white parachute, thumped onto the ground a hundred or so yards away from them.

*'Help me with this, we don't have long.'*

They dragged the rucksack-sized black pod towards Zoe and the doctor, and he tussled quickly with the clasps. Inside were rows of fine glass vials, each one containing five millilitres of clear yellow liquid.

*'You've had yours, right guys?'*

*'Yeah man, that's right, we had ours back in Texas.'*

*'OK good, so you're fine. Now bring her over.'*

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They positioned Zoe against a waist-high rock and sat her upright. Her head lolled pathetically to one side as the effects of the virus gripped her.

*'This thing'll take an hour or so to work, and then she will have lasting protection for at least six months. I'm wondering what to do with the boy. Maybe we'll do him too.'*

He reached into his other bag and pulled out a syringe in a sealed packet. Expertly pulling the syringe out, he filled it with the contents of one of the vials. He held it up to the light and squeezed the plunger a little, so that a small droplet formed on the end.'

*'OK, here goes, which arm Zoe?'*

*'Hmmm?'* said Zoe, barely audible.

*'We'll take your left arm and you'll feel a slight scratch.'*

*'Hmmm?'* again.

He slid the arm of her dress up above her left shoulder and drove the needle into the fleshy part above the tricep. She moaned a little but otherwise gave no reaction. He wiped the arm clean and applied a little disinfectant.

With William he was even more businesslike and the job was done in a matter of seconds, with the boy hardly having time to cry out such was the efficiency of the operation. They placed him next to his

sister and the closeness seemed to revive both of them.

*'How long ya been doing this?'* said the taller of the two boys.

*'Well it's not been that long really. I did basic training a few years ago and did virology as a speciality. It runs in the family really – my uncle was quite well-known in the field, and even I had quite some experience dealing with viruses. Anyway enough about me! It's good to meet you at last and we need to move on. Help me get this gear together and I'll switch on the Sat Nav. How's Zoe doing?'*

Although the boys tried to look as cool as they thought they were, it was obvious that despite a tinge of jealousy arising from the fact that all they could bring to the table was a compass and a watch, they were deeply impressed that the doctor had 'gear' with him. This finally felt like a mission that might succeed.

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The change in Zoe over the next hour or so was truly transformative. She shook her thick hair as some colour returned to her cheeks and her head cleared. William sensed his sister's revival, and started dancing around her happily, like a child should. Zoe got unsteadily to her feet.

*'Wow, thank you, whoever you are!'*

*'Everyone calls me Doc – go for it.'*

*'Where have you come from?'*

*'I flew over from the West. It is much better there. There is food, people are growing crops, even shops have re-opened. And the virus has not taken hold like it has in the East. People are hungry, but healthy.'*

*'We've heard about a place, like a city on a hill, surrounded by trees and fresh water.'*

*'Yeah it's a place they call Woodlands,'* Doc replied, *'there's just one problem.'*

*'And?'* said Zoe, almost fully restored to her confident self.

*'You know how you ended up on one of the islands out East, Eel Island, was it?'*

*'That's right.'*

*'Well some of those guys made it out before you, and they're holed up right in our path!'*

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He focused down intently as the little device in front of him beeped into action. All four of them stared at him fascinated at the technology – not unknown but certainly unseen these past three years. William

bounced up and down trying to get a better look at the screen.

Doc crouched down and started to explain everything. The screen was coloured, and the little boy could not take his eyes off it.

*'So look here William,'* he started, perching the boy on his knee and holding the satnav in front of him, *'We are here – do you see the arrow?'*

*'Arrow,'* said William proudly, pointing to the screen. He looked up at Zoe briefly for reassurance.

*'We want to get there.'*

*'Dere,'* said William. He couldn't say his *'th's* yet.

*'Problem is, there's bad people here.'*

*'It bad here! Bad bad bad!'* William shouted, scowling at each one of them in turn. *'You bad! You bad! And you bad!'*

*'No William, the bad people are here,'* said Doc patiently pointing to another dot on the screen, *'the purple dot.'*

*'Purple people!'* cried William, *'purple people bad people!'*

*'Well yes, OK, purple is bad,'* laughed Doc, turning to his new American companions.

*'The problem is, they've built themselves a stronghold, and it will take something a bit special for us to get past it.'*

*'Can't we just take the long way round?'* It was a naïve question from the younger boy, met with typical reassurance from Doc.

*'Don't worry, we have some advantages. They don't know we're coming. There's only four of us so they won't suspect an attack.'*

*'Five!'* chirped a tiny voice. Zoe laughed. What a little man!

Doc continued.

*'So we have the element of surprise for sure, and just here,'* he pointed to a speck on the map, *'my uncle left everything he couldn't use himself. There's bound to be enough for all of us.'*

*'What sort of things did he leave?'*

*'Well, weapons mostly.'*

*'Weapons, cool!'*

*'You know how to fight?'* said Doc, coldly.



*'Had lots of fights in my time,'* replied the tall one.

*'Well this might be a bit different,'* replied the Doc, *'you'll need some training. But you two look like you can handle yourselves. Let's get going.'*

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Zoe felt a little pang of resentment build up in her, but she said nothing. She thought of Munchkin. Something she had not done for a few hours. If she was going to fight, she wanted him close.

*'Can you find people with that thing?'* she asked casually.

*'You're looking for Munchkin aren't you?'*

Was there nothing this guy didn't know?

*'I am, how do you know?'*

*'It's all over the briefing they gave me before I left. That's part of what I'm here for. Better lives. For you, for William. We need to go.'*

Zoe looked up at the handsome features with a mixture of gratitude, and something approaching awe. She gave a little shiver.

*'So the weapons store should be here,'* he said, *'which is about four hours walking. Let's get started.'*

\*\*\*\*\*

They struck camp and shared out the equipment, the medical gear, and what was left of the parachutes, which Zoe wrapped around herself and William for protection.

As they walked, the landscape started to change again. Progressively. From muddy moonscape, through rough meadow and patchwork fields, to a more undulating and green space, pitted with rocky outcrops and strange formations.

Doc looked nervously around him, then back at the device.

*'It's getting late, maybe we should just rest up for the night here, and find the cache in the morning. It's too gloomy now to be sure. This place is good. Bring the gear in.'*

They had stopped next to a shallow cave, which might provide them some protection if the weather turned. The night was warm and summery, but there was a breeze and things could turn quickly.

Zoe settled William onto a little ledge in the rock and wrapped him in the cloth they had salvaged. The excitement had tired him, and as dusk fell, he slipped into a deep and sudden sleep.

Doc settled down nearby and went back to his device to check on progress.

The other two went to explore the back of the cave, which seemed to go on further into the hillside than they had first thought.

*'Take care you two,'* Doc mumbled as he worked.

*'There's a tunnel here,'* said a muffled voice, *'I'm gonna take a look.'*

The taller boy wriggled away from the main chamber, forcing his way through a crack in the muddy rock for a few yards, using the light from his wristwatch. His companion looked on.

*'There's something here,'* he pulled at something just beyond sight in the narrow tunnel.

*'Wait!'* said Doc, more urgently this time. He made his way over to where the boy, his face covered in the grime of the hillside which made him look like something from another age altogether, was pulling a large object out of the channel.

*'Go easy caveman!'* said Doc, laughing at the comical streaks of brown staining his face,

*'You might just have found exactly what we're looking for!'*

## five

At first light the next morning, the three men began unwrapping the packages they had pulled from the mountain and started to lay them out at the cave entrance. Zoe and William, after the day they had recovered from, slept on. The stash that had been left was impressive. A mixed bag for sure, but much of it useful.

Doc carefully laid two spears out in front of him, next to a collection of hatchets and axes, and two springy bows with a selection of arrows with different brightly coloured tips and flights.

*'Ok Bro when you said weapons, I thought you meant guns and ammo and stuff,'* said the younger boy. Doc reached down to his sock and pulled out a small black revolver.

*'I don't want to have to use this, but if I have to, I will. We'll mostly be OK with what you have there.'*

*'OK cool. Got it!'*

*'Incapacitate. Not kill'.*

Doc turned to the satnav and switched on map mode with satellite imagery.

*'So the sat data is saying that most of the defenders have left, perhaps going our way, or perhaps having headed the wrong way altogether. If you look at the heat maps, they are holed up at the top of the castle.'*

*'Our best form of attack is not to attack, but to contain them for long enough just for us to get past and make our escape towards the West. They have apparently been there a long time, since the very first floods, and the intelligence suggests they have not found a proper way to grow food so their health levels are low and they won't fight back. They will mostly be interested in what we have in our bags, especially the cures and the vaccines, but they won't be able to do much. We'll be stronger, quicker and we have the element of surprise.'*

*'Surprise!'* said William, for absolutely no reason at all. He tried to grab the device from Doc's hand, who taunted him with it, making him jump and grab for it, before he seemed to realise that there was a job to be done.'

*'I'm worried about the boy Zoe. I want him kept out of this.'*

*'We can't just leave him.'* Zoe looked alarmed.

*'We won't leave him, but we need to get him past without a fight.'*

*'Can you do that?'* he said, turning to tall boy.

*'I will look after him,'* came the reply.

*'You may have to carry him most of the way, but we can use the rucksack if we shift some of this gear into something else.'*

*'Hey I've carried stuff up mountains before, so I can manage an infant,' he declared confidently, 'but to be honest I'd rather use the parachute silk and bundle him up that way.'*

*'OK good plan, get to work on that. You'll scramble over the rough ground just to the north of the passage, it's mostly rocky, with the odd sandy stretch. A bit of mud. The odd wild vegetable field and some hanging vines and creepers. That's all. Take care with some of the ledges and waterfalls.'*

*'Waterfalls! That's a bonus. Real fresh water!'*

*'Yeah, that's what it looks like from here. Look.'*

They studied the live satellite feed as it came in, and the heat map which depicted the location of the defenders.

*'See there's not so many of them, but you and William can make it round here, so long as we've diverted them for long enough.'* He pointed to the gap they were heading for. Probably a hundred yards wide, with the castle rising uncertainly on the southern slope, and the heavily wooded northern slopes offering little William real hope of escape, on the back of his protector.

*'Can you do it?'*

*'Sure. Looks simple. Just you keep them away from us!'*

\*\*\*\*\*

*'Listen we need to get some practise in here before we move out. Bring the weapons over here.'*

They made their way to a clearing, and started firing arrows and hurling spears at makeshift targets. Doc even let off a round from his revolver. Fitted with a silencer, a victim would literally not know what had hit them.

The younger American proved deadly with a spear. He just didn't miss. Zoe practised her own skills with a bow and arrow, but she kept more than half an eye on him, as he unerringly hit the targets again and again. Each time he hit, he gave her a little fist bump, and she drank in his enigmatic lop-sided smile.

Doc was walking around, a little agitated, which struck Zoe as unusual. He was normally so calm.

*'You OK?'* she asked, as casually and calmy as she could.

*'Yeah I'm fine Zo. Just thinking about today.'* He patted her shoulder reassuringly.

Zoe was not sure whether she liked the familiarity of him calling her by a shortened name. They had only met the day before. OK so he had saved her life, but that was no real excuse. This over-confidence could get a bit annoying, she thought to herself.

*'Just call her by her name, right.'* It was curly boy. Zoe was taken aback. Although she estimated him to be about fourteen, he always looked so small and vulnerable, as if he had been condemned by

something or someone to always appear the underdog.

*'What did you say?'* said the older man.

*'I know we're all in this together, but you shouldn't call her that. Sorry.'*

Doc looked down at him. He was a good foot taller. Zoe shifted back slightly. This didn't look good. There was a little standoff and they stared at each other. The younger boy held his ground.

Doc turned back to his little device, and spoke with his back to the boy.

*'You're right, son.'* Zoe breathed a little sigh of relief. *'I'm sorry Zoe, it's just that...'*

*'Yes?'*

*'Well, you remind me of someone I guess. Someone back home. Hey son, what do they call you?'*

The boy relaxed a little.

*'Well my friends all call me Loco. But that's not my real name. It's just that I used to drink low calorie coke all the time back home, and it just stuck I guess.'*

Doc laughed a little, and it lightened the mood in their tense little group as they prepared to depart.

*'Depends what you drank I guess! It could have been worse they could have called you 'Diet' or 'Cherry' or 'Caffeine-free'.* Doc laughed heartily, although a little nervously, at his own lame joke.

*'Or Zero!'* called his friend.

\*\*\*\*\*

Doc had been right about the journey. As they walked steadily along the ridge, Zoe realised that they were on the highest ground for miles around, and although they were well on their way to the West, much of the lower lying ground was still flooded. Once again she was struck by the lack of people. Up ahead she could see the passage narrowing into a small v-shaped valley. On one side of the valley she could vaguely make out a castle-like structure. The stronghold.

Doc had insisted that they rest a while in the forest, within sight of the castle, and move forward at dusk the next day. From their vantage point they could see people moving slowly about near the castle, but they remained hidden in their hideaway.

All through that night Zoe was restless.

She thought she heard creatures moving, and the little gully in which they had built their rudimentary tent using the parachute fabric offered little protection. Had it rained, they would have been soaked.

Her mind started playing tricks on her in her half-sleeping state, and she reached that point where she did not know whether she was awake or asleep, dreaming or real, dead or alive even. She heard rustling in the undergrowth. It always seemed so close. Twice she had got up to investigate. Nothing. Once she thought she heard a wolf or some alien creature howling.

She didn't get up to investigate that one.

\*\*\*\*\*

They moved forward at sundown, with William riding on the taller boy's back, setting off via the North passage through the valley. The other three took the south side. The stronghold, imposing from a distance, revealed itself as they got closer to be ruined on one side. Like everything else, nature had taken its brutal course over the last months and years and as the water had receded, it had taken parts of buildings with it.

Doc beckoned the three of them forward, motioning silently as they approached the walls and brickwork. Moving like a cat around the lower levels, he reached behind him into the case on his back, bringing out different weapons each time. Smoke bombs. The revolver. A knife. A cable to scale the building. As defender after defender retreated, surrendered or fell dramatically off their guard post on the side of the building, Doc made no sound, simultaneously directing the others with his hand gestures, and carrying out his own deadly mission. At one point he appeared from a distance to be walking up the vertical castle wall, hung there on an invisible wire he had shot out of his hand. When he reached the top, he shinned over and returned one of the last defenders right back to where he, the Doc, had just come from. The groan was audible from a hundred yards away.

\*\*\*\*\*

Loco was busy taking out defenders with his spears. They were a pathetic bunch really, and his topaz tips soon got the better of their battered weapons, most of which had seen better days.

*'D..don't hurt me,'* one had said, raising both hands and covering his face. Loco just kicked him down the rickety stairwell on which they had met, and he slumped miserably into the corner, crying.

*'Billy, don't let them hurt me!'*

*'He's my brother!'* said the brother.

*'So what?'* Loco cried, warming to his task.

*'I want to be with you Danny!,'* the boy cried out to his brother.

*'Go then!'* cried Loco, smiling his smile, warming to his task.

The brother leapt over the railings and flopped on top of his snivelling sibling. Loco burst out laughing.

*'That's cool!'* he cried, *'sweet!'*.

Feet above him, he could see the last defender, whose neck was suddenly snapped back as Doc throttle him with a length of the cable he had used to scale the walls.

*'OK. All clear here. Where's Zoe now?'*

*'She's on the way. I saw her a minute ago, kissing some poor unfortunate cowering in a corner. Lucky guy!'*

*'Yes, well you'd best keep your eyes and hands to yourself. She's taken.'*

*'Munchkin?'*

*'Yeah, Munchkin. He must be pretty special!'*

\*\*\*\*\*

Zoe's approach had been altogether different. Her strength fully restored, she was determined not to represent any form of weakness to the others. With William in safe hands, she had set about her task without a care in the world. Taking out several with well-placed arrows, she caught the last one as he ran away down a long corridor with a fine shot which caught him right in the buttocks.

*'Alright darlin', watch out where you shoot that thing'*, he cried out in his pain and collapsed in the corner. She lined up a final arrow and strung it into her bow.

*'I don't know what you mean, and don't call me darlin'.*

She ran down the corridor and was about to kick the struggling boy, then thought better of it, and instead bent down over him and planted a big wet kiss on his cheek. The boy gagged and coughed.

*'Don't call me darlin' again, right!'*

*'Right!'* replied the boy weakly, unable to move.

\*\*\*\*\*

The final member of the raiding party was also carrying the most precious cargo. To avoid William being exposed to more danger than necessary Doc instructed him to take a different route, while the others contained the attack and made progress down the main channel as a diversion.

The northwest route through the forest was easy going at first. Although the ground was soft, he found he could navigate easily. Just keep the tall trees to your left, Doc had said, and you could not go wrong. That was good advice, until the path became more slippery, and the rush of the river through the valley became more pronounced.

They scrambled up the side of the valley to keep out of sight, the solid little body on his back providing some counterweight to the stooping posture he needed to negotiate the trickier parts of the narrow path.

He made a mental note of self-congratulation that the trainers he wore were both new, satisfyingly expensive, and had heavily ridged soles.

What he had not noticed was how dark it was getting. Doc had said that the darkness would offer more safety from any prying eyes from the castle, but it had got to the point where he was more worried about the footholds, and seeing them through the gloom, than he was about getting noticed. The other three had all of Doc's gadgets, and the flashlight that they had brought with them to guide their way, as well as the flares and lanterns which dotted the castle walls.

Walking slowly on, with William now drifting off to sleep on his back, he watched transfixed as the three shadowy figures in the distance took out defender after defender.

Doc had said the aim was to reduce their health score. To incapacitate not to kill, he had said. Whatever that meant.

\*\*\*\*\*

He continued to pick his way across the rocks, which were slippery now, as the little waterfalls everywhere were becoming more numerous, just as they had observed on the satellite.

*'One last step,'* he thought to himself, as he noticed the path he was targeting. The path to paradise, or at least freedom, laid out below them.

It was one step too many.

He barely had time to say or do anything, just to turn his body round as he fell off the slippery ledge, so that William stood a chance of not being crushed. After several seconds falling through nothingness, they bounced off a grassy outcrop before landing with a thump on the wet forest floor below, William still tied securely. Crying now.

The impact of the fall was like a punch to the gut. Vines from the forest seemed to grasp at him and hold him down. He just had time to feel panic about the defenders, his inability to move, the baby, his life...before he lost consciousness.

\*\*\*\*\*

The little device beeped madly as Doc finished off the last defender and stepped through the main door of the ruined castle to reunite with Zoe and Loco.

*'We're safe and we can take that road now towards our own little promised land.'* He smiled calmly at both of them. *'Good work guys. Hey you can really handle that spear! But something isn't right. The heat map is glowing. Look.'*

They gathered round the little device and Doc switched to a closer up view. In the darkness the light was bright, but the image was blurred up that close. They looked intently at the two motionless body-shaped heat sources lying on the floor of the dense forest. One adult-sized, and one tiny and fragile,



partly attached to the larger one.

Zoe screamed. Loco, who was closest, pulled her close to him. She didn't resist.

*'Don't worry, we will find them.'* The voice was so calm, so reassuring. Smooth as fine silk. The accent midwest, rural, homely, reassuring.

She buried her head in his hair, and grabbed hold of the curls to pull herself close.

*'We need to get over there now,'* said Doc urgently. Zoe couldn't take her eyes off the screen which Doc was studying, turned away behind Loco's back.

*'Wait!'* Zoe spoke first, *'Look!'*

They looked at the blobby images.

*'Good Lord!'* exclaimed Doc. *'They're moving!'*

*'It's not that!'*

*'What is it?'*

*'There's three of them!'*

Sure enough, moving stealthily through the wooded path as it emerged onto the the main road, three blobs of green light, thrown together in some holy or unholy trinity. The big unruly blob stopped briefly, then separated out into three distinct shapes. One tiny, one large, and one now running West - back into the forest. All three moving. And alive.

Zoe had never considered herself a religious person, but found herself thinking, *'If we get out of this one, I'm going to every church, synagogue, mosque and gurdwalla in the country!'*

God really does move in mysterious ways. Or Allah. Or Buddha. Or Jehovah.

Mysterious ways indeed.

\*\*\*\*\*

## six

When the group reached the two figures on the path, the stronghold safely behind them, both Stanley and William were sitting upright. A little dazed but definitely alive.

*'How did we get here?'* said Stanley, dusting off his shoes and giving them a sniff.

*'I don't know,'* replied Alex, *we saw something on the screen, but we couldn't make it out. 'I think you were completely out of it, so I'm not surprised you can't remember.'*

*'But how did I get from the forest floor where we fell to the road? It's not like William carried me!'*

*'Like I said, we don't know, but thank goodness you're alive,'* added Zoe, *'you took quite a tumble there. Thanks for protecting William.'*

*'That's OK. Is he alright? He's been muttering something since we got back to the road.'*

*'Oh yeah, he'll be fine. Looks right as rain to me. Come on, let's get going.'*

*'Stig'* said William.

A shadowy creature ran from left to right across the path a hundred yards or so in front of them. Alex was busy with his device. Stanley was showing Zero his watch. Zoe was staring at Zero.

*'There, there, it's OK, don't worry, darling, you'll be OK.'*

She was worried about him but the fall did not seem to have broken anything or done any lasting damage.

He buried his head against her shoulder.

*'Stig,'* he said, louder this time.

A shadowy figure ran from right to left across the path a hundred and fifty yards or so in front of them. Alex was using his device as a mirror and adjusting his hair. Zero was begging for a lift from Stanley. Zoe was just staring at Zero.

*'You've had a nasty surprise, just relax.'* She said absent-mindedly, her thoughts elsewhere.

*'Stig!'* he cried again.

A shadowy figure ran away down the path in front of them towards the village in the distance. Alex turned around with his device just too late to see it properly. Stanley and Zero were munching on an extra-large onion. Zoe spoke.

*'Oh Shut up, William!'* she said. *'Imaginary friends at the age of two. Whatever next?'*

William looked miserable, started crying, and then wet himself.

*'Oh for goodness sake,'* said Zoe, attending to the mewling infant.

\*\*\*\*\*

*'It should be due West from here,'* said Alex, still looking at his electronics, *'there's something a bit odd, though, although it is showing a path all the way past what was Bath and Bristol, it is only showing a distance of about five miles from here. I must get Smithers to take a look at it when I get back.'*

*'Doesn't that thing ever run out of battery?'* said Zoe.

*'Beep,'* said the device.

*'It just did,'* said Alex, hastily putting the satnav back into his bag, *'What do we do now?'*

*'Go back to my compass, that's what,'* said Stanley, finally feeling a little bit useful. His carrying duties were beginning to get annoying, so he was glad to assume the role of navigator.

\*\*\*\*\*

They plotted a course for the next few days, that took them along the valley of what had formerly been the Thames, and then across a potentially dangerous estuary before heading up into the mountains and to Woodlands itself. None of them knew what lay there, just the promise of a better and healthier life, and perhaps...just perhaps.

*'A total of one hundred and five miles,'* said Alex, *'at current rates of progress and with no more Gutvines, that is going to take us at least five days. We'll have to take turns in backpacking the kid – he can't make it by himself.'*

*'You are beginning to annoy me now. I'm only two but I'm doing OK,'* said William irritably. *'What makes you so special anyway, Mr Alex-poo-poo-Rider?'*

Alex laughed, then looking pretty offended, gave William a slap.

William span round on his left leg, leapt high, and kicked Alex in the face with his right. As the helpless doctor reeled slightly, William flew in with his left foot and kicked him right where it hurts.

*'There Mr so-called Doctor - a bit of your own medicine! Take that!'*

The boy really has grown up, thought Zoe, smiling happily to herself. Quite good to have that doctor taken down a peg or two.

Alex thought wistfully to himself, *'maybe I shouldn't have taught him those moves just yet.'*

\*\*\*\*\*

Zero took control.

*'Come on, there's a long way to go to get to Woodlands. Stop arguing and let's go. I can navigate, but can you carry me for a bit. I'm tired.'*

*'No chance,' replied Stanley irritably. 'You were small when I did that and you weren't wearing gold chains or stuff like that. And anyway, we cured the curse.'*

*'I'll give you some Sploosh...'*

*'OK then, I'll carry you.'*

\*\*\*\*\*

William was wandering about at the front of the line. Zoe was next, followed by Alex, with Stanley and the mounted Zero bringing up the rear. Stanley was slurping from his Sploosh bottle, which seemed to give him an extra spring in his step, despite the burden.

As it turned out, the next sensible stopping point, with the right combination of security (in the form of a good view all round) and protection, was a small clump of trees by some abandoned sports pitches.

It was dusk by the time they got there.

*Yes dusk. I know it's always dusk. You try writing this stuff! It's hard enough to think of what to write, let alone put it in decent English and then you sit there complaining that everything is set at night. Well if it is set in the daytime everything would be obvious wouldn't it? Some bloke comes down on a parachute – well obviously it's Alex Rider, but perhaps if it is a bit gloomy you wouldn't notice. Two teenagers, one with dark skin, the other with curly hair and trainers. Drinking onion juice. I mean really. Obvious. A crazy caveman running across a path carrying two people? Can't have that in the daytime. No-one would believe it! Shall we start again? OK here goes.*

It was dusk by the time they got there.

\*\*\*\*\*

*'Woood!'* exclaimed William suddenly, stopping by the side of a narrow lane.

*'Yes well done William, it's a wood,'* said Zoe impatiently.

*'No... Woood!'* he said again, followed by *'L-A-N-D'*.

*'Oh do shut up you little creep!'* cried Zoe, a little unfairly.

*'ROW-ADD'*, he continued, jumping up and down.

*'Oh wow!'* said Alex, seemingly more impressed than she was, *'this boy is incredible! He's right! It wasn't Woodlands we were looking for. That is at least a hundred miles to the west. We've come west, but we've come far enough. This is Woodlands Road. That explains why the satnav said we were close,*

*despite the target being so far away.'*

He stood up seeming to lose the weight of the rucksack, and raised himself to his full height.

*'We are here. Let's just rest awhile. See that smoke over there in the distance? That is where we need to be. But let's take our time. There are a few hours left.'*

*'Where Stig?'* asked William.

*'We will see him soon, William. Do not worry,'* replied Alex calmly.

*'Oh just shut it, William.'* Said Zoe.

\*\*\*\*\*

They settled down in an ancient layby opposite what had once been a Co-operative supermarket. The doors were wide open and the shelves inside had been picked bare, as if a swarm of locusts had ransacked them.

*'The locals were hungry,'* remarked Zoe, thinking back to Norfolk and the speed with which the shops had emptied as the virus took hold. *'I hope they're friendly.'* In reality she held out little hope that the locals would welcome them with open arms.

In fact, although the village had suffered in the initial flooding, its position on a slightly elevated relief meant that it had had several weeks to recover as the floodwaters had receded.

When they reached the village, it was clear it had seen better days, but was largely intact and virus-free. The people they spotted looked healthy and happy, if a little nervous. They skitted about darting in and out of houses, perhaps worried by the new arrivals, or mindful of what they had suffered.

There was a pall of smoke hanging over the village.

\*\*\*\*\*

The battle for the village had actually been hard-fought and bitter, and was waged on ethical and environmental grounds. Although the surrounding area was fertile and recovered quickly, the local factions had soon found things to quarrel over, especially access to food and housing.

The people with the big houses in Kidmore End had faced a constant onslaught from the neighbouring villages, and a couple of the fanciest houses had succumbed. But most had held out – having barricaded themselves in and lived on their wits.

In Peppard – frontier country – they had formed a ragtag army that had based itself in the Rotherfield area – an armed and hooded gang of former footballers and cricket players. This latter group had made an audacious attack on the Co-op, once their own Peppard Stores could no longer survive.

But they had been repelled. The proud citizens of this once noble village had held out and had set up an encampment on the site of the former village library, establishing bridgeheads on Wood Lane and Grove

Road, before pushing out to Kennylands, Reades Lane and Crowsley.

Proud, brave people.

Their only danger now lay to the south, where the savages of Caversham still posed a threat. Wild of hair, and woolly of brain, these uneducated fools thought that they could lay waste to the villages at any time of their choosing. In fact, whenever they had tried, the local population sprang into action and sent them back. They had never thought to organise, so the odd hairy nonentity posed no real threat and was quickly disposed of.

The only other rebels were the sad little inhabitants of Shiplake Bottom, but they never even ventured out of their houses, worried that everyone would just laugh at the name.

\*\*\*\*\*

*'There's just one more problem,' said Alex*

*'What's that?'*

*'All the intelligence reports mention that the village headman can be a bit difficult. We might need to negotiate.' And there's often security in place.'*

\*\*\*\*\*

In fact their worst fears about arriving in a new town were unfounded. It was almost like the villagers had been waiting for returning heroes. There was a little welcoming party.

*'Oh hi! You must be Alex, we've been expecting you.'*

*'Dr Alex Rider, pleased to meet you.'*

*'I'm Barney, and this is my sister Lou.'* Lou smiled curiously at Alex and shifted her position on her pony.

*'Hi, I'm Lou. And this is Flash.'*

Alex ignored her.

Lou dismounted, and left Flash to nibble on a nearby hedge.

*'And you are...Stanley, and Hec...Zero...and this must be baby William!'*

William scowled at Barney.

Zoe strode through the middle of the group, looking around her expectantly.

*'Ah yes, Zoe, we've been waiting for you most of all! Well done on making it so far. We are all jolly proud of you, aren't we Lou?'*

Lou ignored him as usual.

*'Well, there's no time for pleasantries, actually. You are just in time. We will take you to meet the village headman, and after that it will be just about time for the grand ceremony to start. Follow me.'*

Grand ceremony? Village headman? Smoke from across the rooftops?

A shadowy figure raced across the road and darted down an alleyway, heading towards the source of the smoke. No-one saw him.

What on earth was going on?

\*\*\*\*\*

## seven

They were led in a sort of procession towards the field where a ceremony or ritual was obviously about to take place. The land around the great oak had been cleared, so that a circle of rough ground was marked out, awaiting an audience.

There was music playing as a small crowd of people shuffled slowly forwards across the dry rough grass.

A lone violinist was standing to the side of the pathway, playing some of the most beautiful music Zoe had ever heard. The tune was something she half-remembered her Dad listening to in the days when they had music in the house. Something classical. Beethoven maybe? No, too serious. Perhaps Strauss. Probably not – too jolly. The sounds were building up in ever-increasing crescendos as if to indicate that something momentous was about to happen.

She remembered those happy carefree days with her parents, with a sense of longing and wistfulness.

As the violin played, the emerging crowd grew more agitated, and Zoe noticed something unusual about them. Most of them were between four and five feet tall. A crowd numbering about thirty, all moving slowly and now quietly in the half-light of early evening towards the great tree, everyone of them perfect in their own way, but also tiny and vulnerable.

As they reached the tree, they sat in a large circle around its mighty trunk, its branches reaching out in perfect symmetry and shading the crowd from the late evening sun.

At the foot of the trunk the village headman was installed on a low dais, seated on a kind of throne. The little people all looked up at him – in admiration and obvious respect - from their vantage points sat low on the ground.

Just then, a shadowy figure strolled calmly into the circle. The little ones didn't flinch, but Zoe, Zero, Stanley and even Alex stopped in their tracks. Stared at this strange creature who had infiltrated the scene.

The headman did not seem bothered that in front of him, almost naked, was a dark hairy – you might say shadowy – figure, seated in supplication on the ground.

William ran over towards the figure.

*'No William, stop!'* screamed Zoe in panic.

The headman beckoned William over, and the hairy figure enveloped the boy in a huge woolly hug.

*'Karage William!'* he said, smiling his weird open-mouthed greeting.

*'Karage Stig!'* replied little William.

William retreated back to his sister.



\*\*\*\*\*

The music began to get more insistent, more intense, before it reached a crescendo of noise. As it built, the little people started to speak in turn, as a sort of fever came over them. It could not be described as singing as such. More like random words, repeated over and over as if they could not be heard the first time, building ever louder and more insistent. Almost like children, begging to be heard.

Zoe struggled to make any sense of what she was hearing. Indeed some of it was meaningless, and in itself a little worrying.

Someone seemed to be saying *'Hello!'* constantly, for no reason. *'Can you help me please?'* said another, just repeating the mantra every few seconds. In response, she heard a little voice say, *'Oh, cut the junk!'* followed by someone else mutter, *'It's just a state of mind!'* As the ceremony appeared about to start, another said, *'thankyouverymuch,'* with a similar voice replying, *'Got it!'* Finally, as there was a little lull in the proceedings, someone shouted out, *'I'm bored!'* before the last voice, seemingly thrown out of the deepening gloom in Zoe's direction, cruelly yelled, *'and your mother's dead!'*

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The headman looked somewhat vexed at all the noise, and regally raised his right hand before extending the five fingers of his right hand high into the air, in an act clearly demanding instant respect.

Everyone ignored him.

He raised himself to his full height, his arms outstretched beseechingly and intoned,

*'Have a think about the consequences of your actions!'*

*Use a knife and fork!*

*Orange code!'*

It all seemed a bit random, but the little people seemed to be used to it, and finally settled.

It was clear the ceremony-proper was about to start.

\*\*\*\*\*

The High Priest and Priestess approached each other slowly, either side of the dais where the headman sat, with Stig kneeling respectfully before him.

The High Priest, tall, dark, slim and handsome, walked up to the stage. His beautiful assistant, who fell down on her knees in front of him, handed him a cylindrical silver chalice, which he took from her and held up high in deference to the mighty tree and the solemnity of the occasion. The little ones stared up in admiration at him, and in fascination at what he was carrying.

*'Thank you Robin, your work is done,'* murmured the High Priest, and Robin retreated meekly into the background.

The High Priestess, her flowing golden hair highlighted in the wind, was dressed in a way befitting the more colourful female. The costume, obviously something worn by generations of those whose honour it had been to assume the position, was highlighted by tight fitting leg garments in rare combinations of gold and pink and purple. The object she carried was a cylindrical orb of a deep ruby red colour.

Zero chuckled at the coincidence of his name being written on the side.

Wordlessly, they approached each other. Either side of the headman now, with Stig seated on the ground just in front of them, they each muttered something before pouring a little liquid from each of the two containers in their hands.

As the liquids mixed, a small wisp of orange smoke emerged from the ground, gathering into a cloud so dense that it obscured Stig, the headman and the priests. The crowd of midgets gasped as it cleared slightly.

*'Kaboom!'* cried William from behind the circle.

*'Kaboom!'* echoed Stig excitedly from his position just behind the liquids as they fell.

Stig was gone.

As the smoke cleared, they could see that he was now climbing up the main trunk of the tree towards the upper branches, and towards an ethereal light shining down through the uppermost canopy.

Climbing nimbly up towards the light, Stig could see the passage to his own world open up towards him. As he cleared the lower branches, he stopped, apparently thinking to himself about what to do next. He perched there for several minutes, looking up at the sky, then down at the ground. He started descending.

The Headman looked uneasy as Stig took both of his arms in his and raised them high above his head, as the green vapour rose around them.

*'Karage Headman!'* said Stig seriously, his tone and body language expecting a reply.

*'Er..Karage Stig. Orange code!'* replied the Headman, almost as a knee-jerk reaction to something.

Stig took him roughly by the hand and encouraged him to climb the mighty oak. As they reached the top, where the orange smoke had gathered, obscuring the topmost branches, they were both hidden from view.

When the vapour cleared, and the crowd had stopped singing, they were gone.

The priests waved their cans about a bit more, and then both took long draughts of the dirty brown liquid inside. Both seemed suddenly revived, and they took it in turns to lead the final prayers.

The ceremony drew to a close, and the little ones chattered nervously to each other, uncertain of what they had seen, and then started to disperse.

\*\*\*\*\*

Meanwhile, in the paddock adjoining the ceremony, Flash the pony had gorged himself on the sweet green grass that grew there, despite wondering why it was left so long. Out of the corner of his eye something caught his interest and he trotted over towards it.

'Ow! My ankle!' he thought, as his front left forelock buckled into a rough hole in the ground. All thoughts of that dissipated, however, when he saw what was in front of him.

Standing coyly in the corner of the field, chewing on a large onion, the most beautiful creature Flash had ever seen.

Marylou turned her head a little to the side. The green stem of the vegetable hung attractively out of her mouth and moved seductively as she chewed.

'Neigh!' said Flash.

'Ee-aw!' replied Marylou, in her rather attractive American accent.

Flash nudged up against her and moved her gently into the undergrowth in the search for privacy.

\*\*\*\*\*

Back up the field, by a now deserted oak tree, with remnants of the smoke and the rituals leaving a pall over the dusty plain, Zoe finally caught sight of what she had come for. A little older, a little more battle-weary, but unmistakeable and unmistakeably gorgeous. Just sitting waiting for everyone else to have left. In a corner of the field. Waiting.

Munchkin.

Zoe couldn't move. She stared in wonder at what had driven her for more than two years. What had made life worth living. What had slipped away. What was now sitting right in front of her.

*'I've been waiting for you!'* he smiled, *'It's been five months! I've lived here all alone for five months now.'*

She really could not speak. She was too happy to do anything at all.

He took her hand.

*It's not much, but my place is just over there. It has done alright for me for five months. Let me show you. You might like it.'*

He took Zoe by the hand and set off down the field to where the hedge nearly joined together and

skipped through the long grass the other side, baby William jogging happily alongside them.

*'Get lost William,'* they both said in unison. He sloped off back to the ceremony.

*'It's here,'* Munchkin whispered, his lips close to her ear.

Amongst the undergrowth was a little archway formed of sticks, with a small length of rope across it. Munchkin unhooked the rope.

*'This way Princess.'*

\*\*\*\*\*

She happily crossed the threshold, and he re-affixed the rope, metaphorically drawing the curtains on one pair of lives, and giving birth to another.

