

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!'*

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.