

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.
