

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.'

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.

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!'

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.'

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!'