



after



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"Hello?"

"Give her time, she'll be all right."

"Hello. Hello? Can you hear me?"

Zoe opened her eyes.

Two women were standing over her, peering at her.

"There, see!" said one of them. "You're all right, dear. You're safe now."

Zoe noticed she was in a bed. A proper bed. Not exactly clean, but like nothing on Eels Island. She was in a white room, with a single window that let in fierce bright sunlight. She thought she could hear the sea somewhere not far off.

She sat up.

"Where . . ."

" . . . am I?" The older of the two women laughed gently.

"That's what they all say," the other one said. "You're safe now, dear. I'm Rosie, this is Mary."

Rosie waited for Zoe to say something. She didn't.

"What's your name, dear?" Rosie asked.

"Zoe," Zoe said blankly. She was having trouble remembering everything.

"Don't worry, Zoe. You're all right, now."

"But what happened?"

"Some of our fishermen found you. You were half-drowned. Found you in the shallows three nights ago. You've been very lucky."

Zoe was still confused. She tried to think, to remember, but her thoughts came slowly and then only with a lot of effort. But she was somewhere safe, with kind people looking after her. Bits and pieces started to come back into her mind.

"Is this Golgonooza?" she asked.

Rosie and Mary looked at each other. Zoe saw Rosie raise an eyebrow ever so slightly.

"Never heard of it, love," Mary said brightly. "This is Hope. It's a bit west of what used to be Cambridge."

"But William said . . ." she stopped. The thought of William made her think of someone else.

"Munchkin? Did they find . . . is Munchkin all right?"

"Munchkin?" asked Rosie.

"That boy. You know," said Mary to Rosie. Then turning back to Zoe, "Such a funny name. Yes, he's fine, love. He's been asking after you every five minutes. He is your friend, isn't he?"

Zoe thought for a moment.

"Yes," she said. "He's my friend."

Rosie left to tell the doctor that Zoe was awake. When she returned, she brought the doctor, a huge man with a serious face, but she brought someone else, too.

"Munchkin! Look at you."

He shuffled in behind the huge doctor, looking smaller than ever, but dressed in some new clothes. He looked ridiculous, somehow.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Zoe nodded.

"She's only just all right," interrupted the doctor. "Beats me why she isn't dead. Both of you come to that."

Munchkin shrank back, but sat himself on the end of the bed, quietly.

"Where have you come from?" asked the doctor as he examined Zoe.

"Norwich," said Zoe.

"Norwich!"

He looked amazed.

"You're either very lucky, or very clever. Probably both. We've had no one come in from Norwich since the last rescue ship."

Zoe's heart immediately started at this.

"They must have been on that ship!"

"Who?"

"My parents . . . I'm looking for my parents . . . they came off Norwich on the last ship . . ."

"I think you must be confused, Zoe. That was nearly a year ago."

"No, you don't understand. They were on that boat. They must've been. Black. Rob and Cathy Black. Have you heard of them?"

All three said nothing. The doctor shook his head.

"I'm sorry."

"But you must have!" said Zoe. "My mum was ill. She would have been in here. You must have treated her!"

"Don't upset yourself, dear," said Rosie.

"No listen . . ."

"Zoe," said the doctor, "try to understand. When that last boat came in, things were really bad. We're better organized now. We try and keep a record of everyone passing through. There's lots of people looking for people, you know . . . but it was a bad time. A lot of disease and . . . there was just too much chaos to cope with."

"So they could have been on the boat, then!" said Zoe, her hopes rising again. "Just because you don't remember them doesn't mean they weren't here."

"Yes, but . . . Zoe, you should know. That ship, they had a terrible journey. Lots of them didn't make it. There was a lot of disease. They had to stop at some little island . . . what I'm saying is, don't hope too much."

Zoe ignored him.

"But the people who did make it, where are they? Are they here?"

"No. We were too full here. I'm afraid I don't know where they went."

Zoe had to ask him something.

"Isn't there somewhere called Golgonooza around here? Have you heard of a place called that?"

The doctor gave her the same blank look that Rosie and Mary had. Zoe's heart sank; she had wanted to believe everything William had told her.

"Everyone who came in off that last boat went up to Newhome . . . more houses there, you see," said Rosie, trying to be helpful. "My Billy took them up in his cart. He did ten trips, there and back."

"That's enough for now, Zoe. You need to rest."

"No! I want to go to Newhome . . . I've got to . . ."

"Not now, Zoe."

"Listen to the doctor, dear."

"We'll talk about it tomorrow."

They left, ushering Munchkin out with them.

Zoe stared at the window, too weak to protest any more. She sank back into the soft, soft pillow and went to sleep, dreaming of the sea.

A little while later, Zoe was disturbed by a scratching at her window. It sounded like a rat scrabbling around outside. Then a small hand appeared and pushed the window wide open. It was followed by an arm, and the arm was followed by the rest of Munchkin.

"Munchkin!" laughed Zoe.

"They wouldn't let me in."

He smiled.

"I'm glad you didn't take any notice."

He smiled some more.

"So are we going then?" he asked.

"What? Where?"

"To this Newhome place. To find your parents."

Zoe looked at Munchkin.

"I . . . don't know," she said at last.

"What?"

"The doctor's right. They're probably . . ." she couldn't say it, but Munchkin understood.

"But you don't know that," he said.

"No. But it's like Sarah and Molly said, isn't it?" said Zoe bitterly.

"Don't take any notice of them."

"Well, why else didn't they come and get me?" Zoe yelled at Munchkin.

"Shh! They'll throw me out if . . ."

"It just doesn't make any sense any other way," Zoe said angrily, but she kept her voice down. "They said we were found by fishermen. Fishing means boats, right?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"So if they've got boats here, why didn't they use one to come and find me?"

"Zoe, they've only got two little boats here. I've been asking around. They need them for fishing all the time, or there wouldn't be enough to feed everyone. They don't let anyone use them for anything else."

"They'd have found a way, if they'd been here," she said. Munchkin didn't say anything for a long time. Finally, when he was sure Zoe was ready to hear what he was saying, he spoke.

"Zoe, how can you ever be happy until you know for sure? One way or the other, you must find out. You've come all this way, you can't give up now."

Zoe was silent. Munchkin could see a tear rolling down her face. Then she looked up.

"But I don't even know where Newhome is."

"I do," Munchkin said, grinning. "I've been asking around. It's further up the coast."

Zoe sighed.

"What would I do without you?" she said, her face brightening.

Munchkin shrugged.

"Let's get going," he said. "They won't let you out for days."

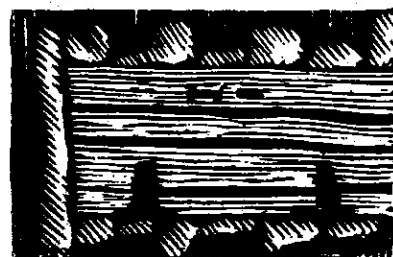
"How do you know?" asked Zoe.

"I've been asking around."

Zoe laughed.

"Listen, Munchkin, you don't have to come," she said.

"I've got nowhere else to go," said Munchkin, "but anyway, I want to."



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Zoe followed Munchkin out of the window. Once outside Munchkin rummaged underneath a nearby bush. He pulled out a sack. He had clearly been busy.

"Food. Clothes," he said.

Zoe frowned at him.

"We'll pay them back when we can," he said. "Come on, quickly, before they notice you've gone."

He held out some clothes to Zoe. She'd found her old clothes at the foot of her bed, but now she quickly stripped them off and slid into the dress Munchkin had got for her. She looked down at herself.

"Couldn't you have found something a bit more practical?" she asked.

"I didn't have much choice," he said. "Anyway, you look nice."

He grinned sheepishly.

"Well, it's a warm day," said Zoe. "Come on, then."

Now they were outside, Zoe could see Hope clearly. The

hospital she'd been in wasn't really a hospital. It was a large old house, its original owner presumably long gone. The rest of Hope was just bits and pieces. A few real houses, but lots of temporary buildings, sheds and shacks.

There, away to their right, was the sea. It was a beautiful sight. The sun was shining and the waters were calm. It looked so perfect, so friendly, Zoe found it hard to believe it had been her enemy for so long. It had nearly killed her.

"This way," said Munchkin. "That track."

He pointed. Zoe saw a rough path heading away up the coast.

"So how far is it to Newhome?"

Munchkin looked a little embarrassed.

"I don't know," he said. "They were getting suspicious," he added, defensively.

"Doesn't really matter, I suppose."

They began to walk, leaving the small shanty town, Hope, behind them.

As they went, Munchkin told Zoe all he'd found out. Things were better than Munchkin had ever dreamed possible.

"It may not exactly be Golgonooza, but it's not bad," he said. "People are trying to make things work, working together. There's no one exactly in charge, but there's no fighting. They just do what needs doing."

"Things must be better here," agreed Zoe, "just having a hospital. Even if it's not a proper one."

"It's the only one around. If your parents had landed anywhere along the coast for forty miles north or south, your mum would've ended up in that hospital, just like you did. There's nowhere else . . ."

Then Munchkin realized what he was saying and stopped. But Zoe hadn't noticed.

"Forty miles?" she asked. "How much is forty miles? That's so big."

"It's unbelievable," Munchkin agreed, "the island was just a speck of mud. The difference! Look at all this land. It goes on for ever."

Zoe looked inland. Munchkin was right. There was lots of lovely dry land as far as the eye could see.

"But not just that," Munchkin went on, "life's better here. People doing things right, you know?"

"We can't even be that far from Eels Island. We weren't at sea for long enough."

Suddenly Munchkin looked worried.

"What's wrong?" Zoe asked.

"Do you think . . . I mean, if it's not that far . . . supposing Dooby survived, supposing he got here . . ."

Before her eyes, Zoe saw Munchkin start to shrink back, become the frightened mouse she had first met.

"He won't. Even if he made it out of that scrap . . . he'd never find us."

But the thought was enough to make them both quiet for a long time.

For the rest of that day they walked along the rough track that followed the coast, always in earshot of the sea. They saw no one.

For Zoe and Munchkin, it was like a different world. To be able to walk in one direction all day without walking into the sea was a new and strange experience. And with every corner they rounded their amazement grew. There was no end to it; just rolling hills stretching to meet the blue sky at the horizon. Zoe started to love the land.

Still they walked and still they saw no one.

"I suppose most people have moved as far inland as they can get," she said.

"That's what I was thinking," said Munchkin. "Why is Hope there at all? It must be dangerous there, and if the sea keeps on rising . . ."

"I know. I suppose there's the fishing, though."

"It's getting dark," said Munchkin. "We'd better find somewhere to sleep."

"I thought we might get there today . . . it didn't sound that far."

The thought of spending a night in the open made Zoe feel nervous, in spite of all she'd been through. But Munchkin didn't seem bothered.

"We'll find somewhere, a bit of shelter, in case it rains. It's not going to be too cold, anyway . . ."

Dusk was falling fast, and by the time they found an old barn to sleep in, night had come. There was enough light from the stars to find their way in, but once inside they could see nothing. They huddled together just inside the doorway, and slept.

Zoe woke before Munchkin. Bad dreams had gnawed at her all night. She wanted to forget them as quickly as possible, but she sat, still propped up next to Munchkin while he kept on sleeping. Gingerly she shifted a leg that had gone numb. She felt blood begin to bring it back to life.

Zoe's thoughts drifted, but her mind was still as numb as her leg had been. She felt neither fear, nor hope. Neither pain, nor love. She felt empty, that was all. But she felt Munchkin's breathing beside her, and she knew she was alive, at least.

Finally Munchkin stirred. Zoe quickly moved away.

"Don't," said Munchkin.

"How long have you been awake?" Zoe demanded. Munchkin grinned.

Zoe turned round, and then she screamed.

"Oh! Munchkin! Look!" she yelled, wildly. She turned back to Munchkin, and pointed behind her to the far side of the barn.

"What's . . . oh God! Is it . . . he . . . dead?"

Zoe didn't say anything. The answer was obvious. The old man's body had clearly been shut away in the forgotten barn for a very long time.

"Come on. Let's go."

They left the barn, and stood for a moment, blinking against the sunshine of another beautiful day.

"He must have died in there, sheltering just like we were . . ."

"I wonder who he was?"

"Just someone else, looking for someone, or something . . . come on, let's go. It's too horrible."

Zoe tried not to make the connection, but she couldn't help thinking about William. Was he still lying on the grass in front of the cathedral where he had fallen? She hoped someone had done something for him.

With surprise she found herself wondering about Dooby, too. Where might he be now? Lying in the mud somewhere? He'd been like a king on the island. What he said was what people did. He was the only law. Zoe wondered how he would have managed here — on the mainland. Would he still have been a leader, or would he have been happy just to be alive and safe? But really, it didn't matter to her now. She hoped she never saw him again, and though she knew she

could never forget him entirely, she could try and put him to the back of her mind.

With William it was different. She would remember him as long as she lived, because she wanted to.

By midday they had finished their food.

"Couldn't you have pinched some more?" asked Zoe.

"I thought we'd be there by now," Munchkin said. "I didn't know there could be so much land. Anyway, I didn't think you approved."

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose I spent all my time on Norwich stealing things. Just because their owners had left them behind didn't make them mine. It seemed worse stealing from the hospital, that's all."

"But that's what they're for."

"What?"

"To look after people."

"I don't think that's what they had in mind."

"There's nothing here to even steal from."

Munchkin was right. They were sitting on a slight rise in the coastline that showed them the countryside around for many miles. There wasn't a building in sight, just miles of fields that had once been carefully tended by farmers, but which now lay overgrown and hidden.

"Why aren't there more people here?" Zoe asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if the country got smaller when the sea rose, then there ought to be more people squashed into what's left."

"I don't know," Munchkin said. He shrugged. "Perhaps they wanted to get well away from the sea."

Zoe nodded. She could understand that, but there was lots

of farming land going to waste here. Maybe there were fewer people than she thought.

"At least on Norwich I could have gone scavenging for some tins."

They walked on and the day moved on with them.

They were beginning to get used to the land now, but only slowly. They had both known nothing but islands all their lives, and it would take a little time before the mainland felt normal to them. For much of the time they walked in silence. Zoe watched Munchkin, deep in his own thoughts. She wanted to know what he would do now, but she didn't dare ask him. Anyway, she barely knew herself what she intended to do. Supposing they got to this place and there was no trace of her parents, what then? At least, they should get away from this part of the coast. Just in case Dooby found them, even though Zoe knew that was very unlikely.

They walked and walked until their legs ached and their feet were sore. There was no sign of Newhome.

"I think William was wrong," she said.

Munchkin stopped walking and looked at her.

"What do you mean?"

"This isn't salvation, it's nothing."

"I know it's taking longer than we thought, but we'll find it."

"I don't just mean Newhome, I mean all of it. What is there for us here?"

"You're wrong," Munchkin said, "it's much better here. There's people organizing things. The nurse at the hospital was telling me all about it. She said the country had been in a real mess, but that things were getting done now. She said in a few years things would be back to normal. William was right. Things are getting better."

Zoe didn't speak.

"Just think about that awful island. I'm glad I'm here. Aren't you?"

Zoe nodded.

"I just wish William was here too."

She walked on, and Munchkin followed.

Then, late that afternoon, a town appeared from nowhere. Coming out of a little gully, they walked up over a ridge and there it was in front of them.

There was a piece of board hammered to a stake by the side of the road. On it someone had carefully handpainted a single word. Newhome.

Munchkin turned to Zoe.

"Well?" he said.

"It's even smaller than the last place," said Zoe after a while. It was the same story again. A handful of proper houses in what had once been a tiny hamlet, but with the same mad assortment of shacks and lean-tos thrown up alongside them.

"Quiet, isn't it?" said Munchkin, then, "look. There's someone we can ask."

He pointed across to the largest of the houses, where a woman had just come out of the door. She was carrying a bucket, and started to hobble across to an old well.

"Come on," said Munchkin, but Zoe hung back. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Zoe didn't reply. She couldn't explain.

"Quick! She'll be gone in a minute."

Munchkin grabbed Zoe's wrist and tugged her after him.

"Hello!" he called.

The woman stopped and waited for them to reach her.

"Yes?" she said.

"Is this where the people from Norwich came?" Munchkin asked.

The woman frowned. Zoe hovered uneasily behind Munchkin. She wished he'd shut up, but she didn't want to stop him.

"That's right," she snapped. "What of it? Anyway, I've got things to do."

She started to walk away.

"No, wait! Please," Munchkin pleaded. "This is my friend Zoe. Zoe Black. She's looking for her parents. We think they might have come here."

The woman stopped, and glared at Zoe.

"Black? Black."

Then she turned to leave, but as she was going she stuck a finger out. It pointed to a small cottage that seemed to cling to the big house for support.

"You'd better go in there," the woman grunted as she hobbled off.

Zoe knocked at the cottage door, after much persuasion from Munchkin. He hung back behind her, and watched as Zoe's knuckles struck the feeble wood. Almost as soon as her last knock had died away, the door swung open. Zoe looked up at the man who had opened it.

It was her dad.

They went inside. Then Zoe just stood. She felt numb. She had tried not to think about what might have happened to her parents. It was too painful. But sometimes, when she needed a little hope, she had allowed herself to imagine finding them. In her mind's eye she had seen this meeting several times. She would rush into their arms, they would all

be crying and laughing. But now Zoe just stood, feeling nothing. Munchkin, who had slipped in behind Zoe, tried to hide himself. He hung back in a corner, but it was a small room and even he couldn't disappear in it.

Zoe stared at her parents. Her dad was standing where she had shoved him when he had tried to hug her. Her mum was sitting in a makeshift bed by the side wall of the cottage.

"Why didn't you come?" Zoe said quietly.

"Zoe, darling, we tried..." her mum began.

Her dad reached for her, but Zoe backed away.

"Why didn't you come?" she said again, louder this time. Anger rose in her.

"Zoe, Mum wasn't well," said her dad.

"I know, but that was ages ago!" Zoe yelled. "Why didn't you come?"

"Zoe..."

"WHY?" Zoe shouted again. She trembled.

"Mum was ill for a long time... we couldn't get a boat... then..."

"Are you still ill now?" Zoe said. She spoke a little more calmly, but she still shook with rage. Her mother didn't look ill. She looked better than Zoe could ever remember.

"Rob, just show her," said her mum anxiously. Her dad looked at her mum with a question in his eyes, and she nodded hard.

"Go on," she said.

Zoe didn't understand what she meant. She watched as her father moved around behind the bed. For the first time Zoe noticed a small cardboard box sitting on a high table. Her father lifted the box down, carefully, so carefully, as though it was made of glass, not cardboard. Zoe stared, struggling to comprehend. Gently, her father put the box down at the foot

of the bed. Zoe looked at her father, who pointed into the box.

There, lying on some of the cleanest, whitest sheets Zoe had ever seen, was a tiny creature. Zoe gazed at its little hands and its tiny fingernails. She stared at its little crop of fluffy black hair, at its minute ears, at its beautiful, calm, sleeping face. She looked up at her parents, but just for a second.

"Oh . . . what . . ." Zoe began, but she couldn't speak. She looked at the baby again.

"He's a him," said her dad, daring a slight smile.

"Your baby brother. Zoe, I'm so sorry, but there was nothing . . ."

"Mum's quite old to have a baby. By the time we knew she was pregnant we couldn't risk coming to get you. She was really ill. Then he came early and we didn't get down to the hospital in Hope. It was touch and go . . ."

But Zoe wasn't listening. Tears were streaming down her face. One of them splashed on to the baby's tiny face, and he moved a hand a fraction, but he kept on sleeping.

"He's so . . ." but she still couldn't find the words. Her mum got out of bed and put her arms around Zoe.

"Do you like him?"

Zoe nodded, biting her lip.

"You don't hate him for stopping us from finding you?"

"Oh no!" she said. "He's lovely!"

"I was so worried about you . . ."

"How did you get here, Zoe?" asked her father.

"I . . . rowed, and I . . . I ended up on an island, and . . ."

Zoe broke off, staring at the baby again. He snuffled slightly, but still kept on sleeping.

"It was terrible," Zoe went on. "You went there. Mum's pendant. That island. I got stuck there and . . ."

"That awful place!" said her dad. "My God! We didn't dare go ashore. The people, they were like animals, we could tell that from the boat."

"Animals . . ." Zoe echoed.

Munchkin shuffled uncomfortably.

"Oh no, I mean," said Zoe, turning to Munchkin. "Not you. The others, they were all like animals, all except you and . . ."

"Well, don't worry, Zoe," her mum said. "Things are better here."

Zoe turned back to her mum to speak, but her dad got there first.

"That's right," he said, "They may have been wild animals on that awful island, but it's different here. At least people have remembered what it means to be human."

Her father's words reminded Zoe of something she had heard someone else say, not very long ago.

"That's what William said," she said.

"William?" asked her mum. "Is that your friend?"

She looked at Munchkin.

"Oh no," Zoe said. "This is Munchkin."

"Munchkin? That's a . . ."

"Yes, Mum," said Zoe, laughing. "He knows it's a funny name."

Munchkin smiled.

"Hello, Munchkin," Zoe's mum said.

He smiled again and mumbled something.

"So who's William?" Zoe's dad asked.

"He helped me. On the island. I wouldn't be here without him. Or Munchkin."

Then suddenly Zoe realized something. She looked at her baby brother.

"What's he called?" she asked.
 "Nothing, yet. He's only a week old."
 "Mum's still getting better."
 "Please," said Zoe, "please, can we call him William?"
 Her mum and dad looked at each other, and nodded.
 Zoe gazed at Munchkin, at her parents, and at baby William. And as she looked at her family, she realized that it had grown. There were five of them now. Yes, she thought, five.

