



## eight

Zoe got up from her bunk. Checking to see that no one was watching her, she went back to the corridor where she'd spoken to Munchkin that morning. It was darker than ever now, and she stumbled around for a long time. At last her eyes got used to the darkness and she could pick out the shape of the walls beside her. But still, she couldn't find what she was looking for.

She tried feeling her way all along the walls, but found nothing. She gave up. Sliding down the wall, she sat on the floor, and decided to stay there for a while; the noises from Dooby's room were almost inaudible here. That was something, at least.

She began to doze. Then, as if it was a dream, a line of light appeared in the darkness opposite her. She wondered if she had gone crazy, as the beam of light grew in front of her eyes. It was only a few paces to the left of where she sat. It hung motionless in the air for a moment like a sword of fire. Then it grew out sideways at the top and bottom, and got fatter. Finally she realized what she was looking at. It was a small door opening in the wall, with a light behind.

She was right. A moment later she saw Munchkin step down from the door halfway up the wall. Zoe was terrified he'd see her, but Munchkin's

eyes had been exposed to the flickering light of his candle, and Zoe was still sitting in a dark corner. She watched as Munchkin carefully closed the door behind him. Zoe saw why she hadn't found it. Even staring straight at it, it was hard to see where the door was, now that it was shut.

As soon as Munchkin was convinced he'd shut it properly, he blew his candle out. Zoe was sure this was something only he knew about, something he wanted to keep that way. He was moving extremely quietly and slowly, and from the care he had taken to make sure the door was invisible again, she knew this was one thing no one else knew about, not even Dooby. Even as she sat there in the darkness, an idea came to her, and her heart started thumping so hard, Zoe thought Munchkin would hear it.

He was so close that Zoe could smell the reek of smoke from the extinguished candle. She held her breath, thinking he was still there, but when she heard his feet shuffle at the end of the corridor, she realized that he had quietly walked away.

Zoe thought for a moment. She felt that there might be a chance of a bargain to be had. If she could find out why Munchkin's hideout was such a secret, she might be able to bargain with him, get him to tell her where *Lyca* was being kept. In return, she wouldn't tell Dooby about Munchkin's hidey-hole.

But she couldn't do anything about it now; she didn't have a light. She'd have to come back when it was light; some time when Munchkin was doing something else.

She put her hand out against the wall, and counted her footsteps to the end of the corridor. She had to know how to find the place again.

The following morning, Dooby called everyone into the centre of the cathedral to make an announcement. He climbed into the pulpit.

"We can expect an attack," he said. "The spy was very helpful. He tells

us that the Cats are planning an attack in a few days time. We must be ready for it when it comes. I will be discussing preparations for our defences with Spat and Munchkin. When I have decided what we need to do they will inform you of your jobs. That's all for now."

Dooby, Munchkin and Spat went off into Dooby's room. Zoe looked around. She saw Sarah and Molly standing nearby. Sarah was talking loudly about Spat, making sure no one would forget he was her boyfriend. As if that were possible. Everyone seemed quite calm about the news, but Zoe's heart was racing. And then it stopped. Zoe had seen something that filled her with fear. She was watching Sarah showing off to the others. Then she saw her pull something on a cord around her neck from inside her dress.

Attached to the cord was a pendant, a very unusual one. The cord it was strung on was normal enough, but the piece of jewellery itself was unmistakable. It was a big silver disc engraved with a pattern of the points of the compass, not just the four main points, or the four more between them. This compass had sixteen big arrows and then another sixteen minor points marked by fine lines. Zoe knew it in detail without needing to see it more closely. Because it had been her mother's.

Sarah stood pretending to clean it, but really it was just part of her showing off. Something broke inside Zoe, and she charged at Sarah.

Zoe practically threw herself at her.

"Where did you get that?" she yelled.

Sarah had been taken by surprise, and for a moment was too stunned to say anything.

"It doesn't belong to you!" Zoe shouted. "Give it to me!"

"Get off me!" Sarah yelled back, pushing Zoe away.

Zoe fought to grab the necklace from Sarah's neck, but she was held back by some of Sarah's friends.

"Get lost, you little creep!" yelled Sarah. "Get your hands off me!"

Zoe wrestled with them.

"Let go of me!" she screamed. "Give me that! It's not yours!"

"Stop her!"

"Someone shut her up!"

"Where did you get it?" Zoe shouted. "Tell me!"

Zoe nearly broke free, but Molly came over and hit her across the face twice.

"Shut up! You're crazy . . ." She hit Zoe again, and Zoe had had enough. She sank into the arms holding her. They let her drop to the floor, where she lay crying.

Sarah came up to her.

"Why do you want to know, anyway? What's got into your crazy little head?"

Zoe shook her head. If she told Sarah it was her mother's they'd never leave her alone. Besides, the fact that Sarah was wearing it was all Zoe needed to know.

As if Sarah knew what she was thinking, she said, "Spat got this for me. It was his present to me, see? And the previous owner no longer has any need for it."

She laughed. The others joined in.

"Come on," she said to them, "let's go. Stinking little rat . . ."

They left Zoe huddled on the floor, muttering insults at her as they went.

Zoe felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up. It was William.

"Zoe, my dear." His voice was kind and calm.

Zoe just shook her head, dumbly.

"What was that all about?" William asked.

Still Zoe only shook her head.

"Don't go looking for trouble, Zoe. Even Dooby won't look after you for ever . . ."

“You don’t understand . . .” Zoe said through her tears. “That pendant. It was my mum’s . . . it is my mum’s. I’m sure of it.”

“Oh Zoe . . .” began William.

“No!” said Zoe firmly, “I know it is!”

“But Zoe, I was going to say . . . That’s good.”

“Good? How can it be good? If Sarah’s got it, and Spat gave it to her, then . . .”

“No. That’s just the point. Spat didn’t give it to her. He wasn’t even here when she got it. She just says he did because she thinks he loves her. I know where she got it. Everyone does. She’s so stupid that one. So vain . . .”

Zoe couldn’t understand what William meant.

“You’re not making sense. Tell me!”

“A ship came by. Last one we saw. Sarah got it from a woman on board.”

“What? When was this?”

“Last year some time. I don’t . . . it’s so hard to keep track, you see. Swimming on the open sea . . .”

Zoe wanted to keep William on the subject.

“Did you see the woman who *gave* it to her?”

“Oh,” he said, “oh. She didn’t give it to her.”

“Then . . . ?”

“She swapped it for some food. That’s why Sarah’s so stupid . . . what use is jewellery here? She gave food for it. Food, the only thing that’s any use.”

William started laughing, and despite herself, Zoe did too.

“That could have been my mum, that’s just like her . . . but did you see her?”

“No. No, it was her husband who did the deal. There was a little boat, see?”

“But they didn’t take anyone with them? Why didn’t you go?”

“I think they’d sized us up pretty quickly. They said they were full, that they’d come back for us. Of course, they never did . . .”

That sounded right to Zoe. The captain hadn’t even turned back for her. When he saw the bunch of savages on Eels Island he must have wanted to keep well away.

“But why did they stop at all?” asked Zoe.

“What?”

“Why did they stop here at all? Why didn’t they just keep clear and head on for the mainland?”

William shrugged.

“They said they needed food. There was none on board and some of them were near to death from it. They didn’t even land. A few of them just rowed close by in a boat. Some of us went down to the shore.”

“Wait. Was this before or after Dooby came?”

“Oh before. He’d never have let anyone swap food for jewellery . . .”

“But why did she?”

“Vain, see? They shouted across to us. Food! We’ll pay you for it! Everyone told them to get lost! Take us with you and we’ll bring some food, they said. Then the men in the boat said they were full, that they’d come back, like I told you. They never did, of course . . .”

“So what about Sarah?”

“Ah. Well, Sarah was different. She waded out to the boat with this great armful of food, and then she came back with that necklace thing . . .”

“But didn’t anyone try and stop her?”

“No,” said William, “like I said, this was before Dooby got here. There was no one with any brains at the beach, see? Those that were, you know . . . ? A bit simple. They just watched her do it. There was a real fight about it later, though. People tried to get it off her, but she kicked and screamed till they left her alone. But she said she made the men in the boat promise

to come back for them all, when they weren't full. Never did, but then you know that, eh?"

Zoe's mind was reeling. This was the first news she heard of her parents in a very long time, but it was good news. They'd been all right when they'd passed the island. They hadn't stopped, but gone on to the mainland.

"They must be all right," Zoe said to herself, but then doubt came into her mind again. If they were okay, why hadn't they come back to look for her? Perhaps it wasn't her dad who'd been in the boat and swapped Mum's jewellery for food. Maybe it was someone else, maybe the only reason they had it to swap was because . . .

"No!" said Zoe aloud. "They're okay. I know it."

She told herself that seeing the pendant was a good thing, she wouldn't believe otherwise. But she had to find her parents, and to do that she had to get off this stinking little island.



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Zoe knew time was running out. She would have to find *Lyca* fast, or she was going to get caught up in a fight she wanted nothing to do with. Her fate would become a matter of chances then.

With Munchkin occupied for a couple of hours at least with Dooby's meeting, Zoe decided to find his hideout. She was convinced she could do a deal with him, just like her parents had with Sarah. They traded food for a useless bit of jewellery. She would trade information for silence. Her boat for not telling Dooby about Munchkin's lair. But to do that she had to find it first.

She had to do it without being seen by anyone, and that was one of the things about the inhabitants of the cathedral, they were always watching. It was even hard to see everyone who *might* be watching her, many of them clung to the dark corners, hidden from sight.

Still, the urge in her to explore was too strong to ignore. As far as she could tell, no one was taking any notice of her. As calmly as she could, she took a burning candle from the side wall of the cathedral and headed for the corridor she'd sat in the night before. In daylight it was surprisingly easy to find the hidden door. She counted the number of steps she'd taken before, and there it was in front of her. Still, if you didn't know where to look, you'd probably never find it.

She gave it a push with her hand, and it sprang back slightly. She put her fingers round the crack and pulled. The stone swung towards her. A

narrow spiral staircase struck out upwards into the huge old stonework of the walls. Shoving the smoky candle in front of her, she climbed into the hole.

There was an iron handle fixed into the back of the stone door. It was smooth and cold. She pulled the door to behind her. Her candle flickered gold on the stone and she began to climb into the roof of the cathedral.

On her way up there were a couple of turnings that she could have taken. A junction here and there with other passages led away into the cramped darkness. But it was obvious which way Munchkin went; even in the gloom of her candle-light Zoe could see where the side passages were thick with dust. As she climbed up the steep stone stairs she could see they had been swept by the regular passage of feet. Munchkin's feet.

Just as she began to wonder when the climbing would stop, the stairs ended abruptly. There was a low tunnel that ran away from her. Its floor curved slightly upwards, and she guessed she was right up in the roof now, in some space at the edge of the vaulting. She walked down the tunnel, choking from the smoke of the candle in the confined space. At the end was a wooden door about three feet high. She pushed it open and found herself looking into Munchkin's lair.

Almost immediately she saw the hole in the floor that she'd spotted from below. She realized she'd have to be as quiet as Munchkin or someone might hear her. She stepped down the slight step into his secret world. At first Zoe thought there was nothing there. There was a mattress, but no other furniture. She held her candle in front of her. There was something on the far wall. With a jolt, Zoe saw it was a map. Eagerly she went to get a closer look, but something moved to her left. She spun and gave a little cry.

There, on a battered wooden box, was a rusty cage. In the cage was a rat, standing on its back legs and sniffing the air. It tilted its head to one side, as if waiting to be fed.

"What are you doing here?" said Munchkin from behind her. His voice was quiet, but Zoe could tell he was angry. She remembered that if he were to shout, he'd be heard from below.

He stepped forward.

"I didn't mean any harm," Zoe whispered.

"You're lying!" said Munchkin, a little too loudly. He shrank at the sound of his own voice.

"No!" said Zoe, but she knew that he was right.

"What are you doing here?" he said again. He moved in and shut the door behind him. Zoe took a step back, still holding her candle firmly. She tried to work out whether he'd risk attacking her up here. Munchkin seemed to be trying to work out what to do, too. For a long time they stood watching each other carefully, like animals about to fight. In the cage the rat dropped to its paws and ran up and down the length of its home. It suddenly gave a loud squeak.

"Shh, Rat!" said Munchkin.

"You must have to be really careful with noise. Up here, I mean," Zoe tried.

"You shouldn't be here," said Munchkin, but Zoe thought he sounded less cross.

"Does he think you've brought some food?" asked Zoe, nodding at the rat.

"What?"

"Your rat. Have you come to feed him?"

"There's never enough food," said Munchkin. "But I give Rat what I can spare, see?"

"He's really . . . nice," said Zoe. Lying again, she thought. She wasn't actually afraid of rats. There were plenty of them around, after all. It was just that this one was in a pretty bad state. It had patchy fur, and it looked as if it had chewed off its own whiskers. It had the sort of mangy looking

tail that only sick rats get.

"I know he's not much to look at," said Munchkin defensively.

"You should let him out sometimes. Do you let him out?" asked Zoe, realizing as she said it that it might not be a tactful question to ask. But it was all right.

"Oh yes," he said, "but sometimes it's such a job to get him back in the cage. He got out of the door the other night and then I was hours chasing him all through."

"Are there lots of these passages, then?" asked Zoe.

"Oh yes," said Munchkin, but then he remembered something. "You shouldn't be up here."

Zoe cursed herself for bringing the conversation back to that.

"Why not?" she said.

Munchkin looked at her.

"This is my place," he said, "and you shouldn't have come up here."

"Look, Munchkin. I'm sorry. I didn't mean any harm. I just want to know where my boat is . . ."

"Well, it's not up here, is it?" He didn't mean to be funny.

Munchkin turned to look at his rat. He started whispering to it quietly, as if he had forgotten Zoe was there.

"All right, Rat? Been a good boy, have you?"

"Look, Munchkin. Please, tell me where my boat is."

"No," he said, without turning round.

"Please tell me. And if you do tell me, then I won't tell Dooby about this place . . ."

Then he did turn round.

"Please don't do that," he said quietly.

"Well, just tell me where my boat is, and . . ."

"I can't," Munchkin said even more quietly. "Please. Don't tell him."

He looked at Zoe, and she saw the fear on his face. She looked away.

She knew she'd never be able to get him into trouble. And she hated herself for even trying to threaten Munchkin. She would be just as bad as everyone else if she started that kind of thing.

"Munchkin," she said, shaking her head, "what are you doing working for Dooby?"

"Mind your own business," he said, but it was without anger.

"Your meeting was over quickly."

"Dooby's got it all under control," he said. Then he added, "Please go."

"Okay," she said. "Listen, I promise I won't tell anyone about this place. Or Rat. Okay?"

He nodded.

As she stepped backwards through the small door, she had to ask one more question.

"Munchkin, where's that a map of?"

He looked at it for a second.

"That's here, that is. Years ago. See? There's no water anywhere. Just a couple of rivers. This brown bit here, that's the island now. And that cross is the cathedral."

"Wow," said Zoe. Her spirit leapt. She could see land, lots of land. Land all the way from the island to Norwich to the sea, miles and miles away. And in the other direction, the map finished before any sea appeared.

"Where did you get it?" she asked.

"It was my mum's."

His words reminded Zoe of her mother's pendant. She wanted to get it back badly, but knew it wasn't worth the fight. She already knew she would have to let it go, no matter how much it hurt.

"Have you got parents?" asked Zoe, stupidly.

"Not any more," said Munchkin. "Have you?"

"Yes," said Zoe. "No. I don't know, really."

There was an end to their talk.

“Please go, now.”

Munchkin seemed to have gone back into his shell.

“Munchkin, I couldn’t come and have a proper look at the map, some time . . .”

“Please go.”

Zoe knew she was taking a risk. If she pushed Munchkin too much, and he got angry, someone might hear them. But she had to get a better look at the map.

“Just quickly, to make a copy or . . .”

“Go!” said Munchkin.

She nodded her head.

“Okay, Munchkin,” she said, giving up. She couldn’t take the risk of someone hearing them. She decided to come back another time.

She ducked backwards through the little door.

“Your boat,” said Munchkin, suddenly. “There’s a shed. On the west side. But it’s locked. Only Dooby has a key.”

“Thanks, Munchkin!”

She rushed back into the room and nearly kissed him. But Munchkin looked so shocked that she backed away again, smiling.

“Thanks,” she said.

She left Munchkin in peace. Hope had started to surface in Zoe’s heart. She knew her parents had got as far as the island, and had got away, too. Her boat was all right. She knew where it was. She had her compass. She just had to break the lock on the shed and she could get away.

“If I can just get a proper look at that map,” she said to herself. But there was hope. She might be able to talk Munchkin round, to let her have a decent look at his map. Talking to Munchkin, she’d felt him warm slightly. It had been almost a normal chat, like one friend to another. Only for a moment, but it gave her hope. It also made her realize how scared she

was of Dooby, and how little she liked his plans for her.