

"That's right," Sarah said to Molly, "that's right. That's not the reason they haven't come to find her . . ."

Molly stared at Sarah, who seemed to be defending Zoe all of a sudden.

"The reason is . . ." Sarah continued, " . . . that they're dead!"

Sarah and Molly collapsed into laughter.

"No!" Zoe shouted. "No! It's not true!"

Tears started to burn her eyes, but the two girls just laughed more.

"Of course it is," they said, "Why else didn't they come to find you?"

They laughed again. Zoe tried to ignore them, but the awful possibility that they might be right was too painful.

Sarah and Molly stayed with Zoe for the rest of the day, until late evening. A horn blew, a strange low sound which echoed around the vast old building.

"Right," said Sarah, to Molly, "come on then."

They got up, and started to leave.

"Wait!" said Zoe. "Where are you going? What's that noise mean?"

"Curfew," said Sarah, without looking back. "Doors closed for the night."

And with that they were gone.



three

Zoe ate some foul food. She slept that night on a narrow wooden pew. She had no sheets, and had to use a mouldy hassock as a pillow, but she slept long and deep. She dreamed a strange mix of dreams. She was in a small boat, far out to sea. Her mother and father were there, too. And Dooby. And Natasha, who suddenly stood up and rocked the boat from side to side. Zoe screamed at her to stop, but the boat tipped and they all fell into the huge, freezing ocean.

She woke feeling a pain in her ribs, as though someone was kicking her. Someone was kicking her.

"Get up," said Spat. "I want to talk to you."

He gave Zoe another prod in the ribs with his boot.

"Stop it!" yelled Zoe, sliding off the pew. "What do you think . . ."

"Listen to me. I know you're a spy. I don't know where you're from. But you haven't fooled me, even if Dooby thinks you're . . ."

"Look, I told you, I don't know anything about Cats or Pigs."

"You know their names all right, don't you?"

"Only because you told them to me!"

Spat was looking like he meant trouble. He stepped up to Zoe's face.

"Don't be smart. You ain't so clever. If you think you can get in his good books then think again. I'm Dooby's eyes and ears round here, so don't get any big ideas."

"Hey, don't worry, I don't want to be anybody's nose-wiper."

Spat hit her hard in the stomach. Zoe hadn't been ready and went down easily. She crawled away, but Spat advanced.

"You little . . ."

Zoe had done her share of looking out for herself in Norwich, but she'd never really been much of a fighter.

Spat went to kick her again, but Zoe swung her legs and knocked Spat's standing foot from under him. He fell. This gave Zoe time to get up, but by the time she had, Spat was already coming at her again. Surprised, Zoe leapt backwards.

"Stop!" she shouted, but Spat was clearly in no mood to stop. He swung a fist and Zoe leant to one side. The blow caught her, but only just. It was enough to send her to the floor again, and then Spat was on her, legs pinning her arms to the hard floor, and his hands tightening around Zoe's throat. She tried to struggle, but she was just too weak from her sea-crossing. At the back of her mind was a desire to give up. It was such a struggle anyway these days . . .

Suddenly Spat flew backwards off Zoe's chest. Zoe tilted her head back to see Dooby looking at her upside down.

Dooby nodded at Zoe and then away, indicating that she should make herself scarce.

Zoe hobbled off, feeling the bruises already rising on her neck. As she went she heard Dooby approach Spat.

"I told you to keep your hands off her."

"Look, I'm sorry Dooby, but I . . . she's a spy . . . I'm sure of it."

He didn't have time to finish his sentence; Zoe looked back to see Spat being hurled across the floor again. Dooby wasn't large by any means, and really he was pretty thin. He clearly knew some hideous ways of fighting.

Zoe saw her chance. She hadn't got any food to take, but she wasn't going to hang around. It was time to find her way back to Lycia and get away. She crept down the length of the nave, trying not to be seen. Into her mind came her dream. She was convinced she was right about Natasha. Her subconscious was telling her so. Rocking the boat, and drowning them. And Dooby, laughing at it all, even as he went under. And her parents had just sat there, silently, and let it happen, while Zoe screamed at Natasha to sit down. They hadn't even tried to help her.

Zoe reached the great front gates of the cathedral. She wasn't sure if the gatekeepers would let her past, but she nodded at them and they made no move to stop her. They seemed not to care that she was there. She passed them and was in the open-ended porch that led away from the gates. It was dark, despite the wall of daylight facing her. Strange carvings were crumbling away on the pillars on either side of her. They disturbed her slightly, and she hurried on.

She was just about to step out of the porch when a voice spoke to her.

"Good morning, Zoe."

It was William, the old man Dooby had pointed out when she'd arrived. He was sitting in the darkness of the porch.

Zoe was unsure what to do.

"How do you know my name?" she asked suspiciously. He laughed.

"They're all talking about you," he said.

"Who?"

He nodded back through the doorway.

"Everyone. No one can understand why you're not dead."

Zoe started to feel the fear coming at her again.

"Dooby seems . . ."

"Well, yes, Dooby," said William.

There was an uneasy silence for a while. Stupidly, Zoe felt embarrassed. She stood thinking of something to say so she could get away. The old man didn't seem as mad as Dooby had said. She'd have to be careful.

"So where are you going, then, Zoe?"

"Nowhere," she said, hurriedly, "I was just going for a walk, and anyway, you know, it smells in . . ."

"No. I mean. Where are you going? Where did you come from? That sort of thing."

"Oh, well, you know, I'm happy to be an Eel. That's fine. If Dooby says so, you know, then . . ." she trailed off. "But I came from Norwich."

"Norwich stands trembling on the brink," said William, as if it made sense.

"Oh. Right," said Zoe.

"Or is that on the blink? I can never remember."

"Pardon?" said Zoe.

"If you do decide to leave . . ." said William. Zoe froze, trying to think of some lie to cover her intentions, but the old man went on.

" . . . then don't try to fly, will you. There was this monk, see, who built a pair of wings. His name was Brother Elmer. This is a thousand years ago, now, I'm talking. He built some wings, like a bird. He thought he could fly. Well, he jumped off the tower, see?"

Stupidly Zoe asked, "What happened?"

"Well, he died, didn't he? Off you go, then."

"What?" asked Zoe.

Dooby was right. The old man was crazy, after all.

"I said, off you go. On your walk."

Zoe hesitated.

"Right. Thanks," she said. "Er . . . bye."

He didn't reply. She crept slowly out of the porch, as she went she heard him start talking to himself.

Zoe got to the corner of the porch, and then she ran till she had a stitch.

It was a cool, misty morning. She thought she knew where she was going, but in running had lost her way. Still, the island was small; it wouldn't take her long to find Lyca.

All around was the smell of wetness, but Zoe was used to that. Even though Norwich was much larger than this place, nowhere escaped the occasional especially high floods. At least they had enough high ground to grow some vegetables there, though. There was nothing here. Just the shells of old houses standing at or in the water's edge, but again, Zoe was well used to that.

Sometimes she wondered what life had been like before the sea came. Perhaps it hadn't seemed stupid to build so close to the sea, because perhaps the sea had been a lot further away. She didn't know, and she had never met anyone who'd been alive when the houses were built, though lots of people could remember when there had been much more land. Her parents had grown up in a different world, but a world that was already in trouble. Even then the sea level was rising. They never liked to talk about it much. Whenever she did manage to get something out of them about the old times,

they went quiet for a while afterwards. Zoe had never known those times, though the really serious flooding only started when she was a little girl.

She checked around to see that no one was coming after her, then started to walk round the island. She noted the white posts rising from the sea. They had those in Norwich too; marking the sea-level, keeping an eye on its latest high tide. She shuddered; she'd been right to leave Norwich. There was limited time left that it could survive; same as this place. She'd just have to take her boat and get away. She knew there was land to the west. Lots of it. It was where most people had headed when the sea came. But that was long ago, and now there were no ships left on Norwich, nor anyone who would have known how to steer them. The stupid, stubborn few who'd stayed had slowly turned into people like those in the cathedral. Scrabbling around for wild food or doing a few hours at the allotments to earn something in return. If you were lucky, you might find an old store of food in tins. The labels were never legible, if they were there at all, but what was inside was usually still good. Except . . . Zoe remembered someone she knew who'd eaten from a tin that had gone bad. It was a risk you had to take.

She knew she probably didn't have much time, someone would come looking for her soon. But her luck was in. After only five minutes, she suddenly recognized where she was. It was the spot where Dooby, Munchkin and Spat had jumped her. She knew her way to her boat easily now.

She found the place. The boat had gone.

Instantly she realized why the gatekeepers hadn't stopped her. She also knew who had her boat. And she realized too why Molly and Sarah hadn't let her out of their sight the day

before. She felt angry, stupid too. The sea was all around her; her boat was gone. There was nowhere to go. She was trapped.

"I wouldn't tell that lot," he said, nodding through the door of the side chapel where they were sitting, "but this place is finished. I keep telling them we'll be all right, but time's nearly up for this place."

"You're right there," said Zoe. "How long have you been here?"

"Me? A few months now, I suppose. Why?"

Zoe shrugged.

"I just wondered . . ."

"How come I'm in charge? Because when I got here I found a bunch of animals, arguing and fighting. But they were all weak. I sorted them out. If they didn't like it, they went for a swim."

He paused. Zoe said nothing.

"You're the first good thing to come this way in a long time," Dooby said after a while, pushing his dark hair back into place.

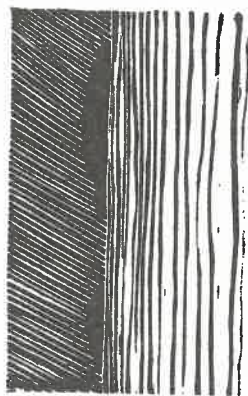
Zoe didn't answer. For some stupid reason, she liked what Dooby had just said. It was the first time anyone had said anything nice to her in a very long time. But she told herself to be careful.

"You've got brains. Anyone with half a mind can see this place is living on borrowed time. This bunch of idiots have their uses, though. You wouldn't believe how many other people there are, other tribes who want this land."

"Pigs, Dogs?"

"That's right. Though the Dogs are no longer a problem . . . But there's others, too. Clinging to little blips in the sea like limpets. So they want my island. And at least this lot can fight. I'll say that for them."

"Didn't you try and make it work? On Norwich, it went well for a long time. We had food growing, rainwater



four

"Where's my boat?"

"Safe," said Dooby, calmly. "In a safe place."

"Where?" Zoe said again. "It's my boat, you had no right . . ."

"Yours is it? Pay for it, did you? Or maybe someone just gave it to you? No! You found it and took it, and now I've done the same."

"All right, I found it. But it didn't belong to anyone. It had been forgotten, and it took a lot of work to do it up. I spent weeks sneaking around the city finding the things I needed to mend it. I found the oars on the wall of a pub. No one else would have thought of that! So if it's anyone's it's mine!"

"Look, Zoe. I'm not taking it from you. Like I said, I want your help. And I want that boat, to get us, you and me, out of here."

"What?" asked Zoe. She was brought up short again. She wondered why she hadn't realized. It was obvious what he was after.

collection. It was all organized for a bit. It really only started going to pieces a little while ago . . ."

"There's nothing here, Zoe. This place, it's no place to live. It's like being on a boat. A big boat, I suppose, but there's nowhere to go but the sea. No one can get off. And I don't let anyone on. Except you."

Zoe's heart started to race. She knew how precarious her life was here.

"Well, if you're going to survive on a ship, you need to have the means of survival. Food. We were talking about this yesterday, weren't we?"

"Yes," said Zoe. She knew Dooby was horrid, had done terrible things, but she couldn't help feeling relief at having someone to talk to.

"If you want to eat chickens, you need two chickens to make more with, see? Two pigs to make more pigs, and so on. At least two of everything, and probably more like seven in case some of them die, or you have to eat them sooner, see?"

"And you haven't got anything here, have you?"

"Not any more," said Dooby. "We've got some stores of food, but there's not much left. I've been rationing things out as best as I can, but that lot don't understand. They think I can keep on giving them food for ever. We had some animals, but they're all gone now. We used to find seagulls' eggs, but even the birds have abandoned us now. I get some of them to fish from the shore, but . . . well, they don't catch much. Not enough anyway. So yes, I've been looking for a way out for some time."

He paused, stroking his hair again.

"I have an engine. An engine for a boat such as yours."

"An outboard motor? So why didn't you . . . you didn't have a boat, did you?"

"Exactly. And now you come along . . . well, it's fate, isn't it?"

Zoe didn't like the way this was going, but she played along.

"So where's my boat?"

"So, Zoe, I couldn't have everyone seeing it, could I? They might start to get ideas. So I had Spat and Munchkin move it to a safe little harbour. They're fixing the motor on to it, right now."

"But it's not big enough!"

"What for?"

"I mean, there wouldn't be enough room for you three, and me. Unless . . ."

"No, that's right. Like I said, the boat is just for the two of us, see? I don't need Spat and Munchkin, not now they've moved the boat for me. But I do need you, because you know how to work the thing. How to steer, how to find land again."

"And now I need you, because you won't tell me where it is."

"I knew you were smart," said Dooby grinning unpleasantly. "Oh and by the way, you won't say anything to anyone about this." He stopped smiling, and Zoe felt cold. He didn't need to say what would happen if she did.

She suddenly hated herself. She had caught herself liking the thought of escaping in a boat with him. She had caught herself liking him. But he had reminded her just in time of his real nature.

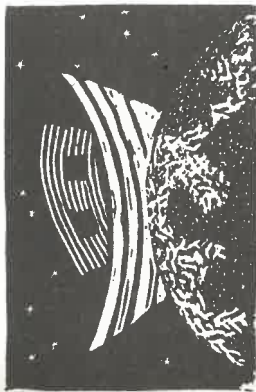
"Well," she said, risking a little edge in her voice, "what about everyone else? You're their leader, you can't just leave them . . ."

"Like you just left Norwich, you mean?"

"That was different."

"Was it?"

Zoe was silent.



five

Later that day, Zoe tried to find where Lyca had been moved to. After her conversation with Dooby, a new determination to escape had grown in her. She walked brazenly out of the gate this time. She felt that she didn't really care what happened to her now, she was just angry at the way Dooby was controlling her.

She searched as much of the shoreline as she could, but it was slow work. There were places where buildings stood at the water's edge, and she had to find a safe way through or round them. She knew from experience how dangerous these ruined buildings could be. Once the water had got under them they could become even more lethal to hang around.

The light was going, and as she got cold, her anger and determination began to slip away from her too.

Finally, she was barely able to see a few paces in front of her. Then she noticed a light flickering behind her. She turned to see Spat, with his usual mocking smile.

"Having fun?" he asked. "Curfew's in five minutes. Time for bed."