

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 Lycia 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.