



then



one

“What are you?” said one of them. “Cats?”

Zoe sat in the wet mud where the three had thrown her. She’d only been out of her boat for a little while before they’d jumped her. Her head rang from a fierce blow, and she felt confused. She was exhausted from rowing for so long.

“Nah, she’s not Cats,” said another. He was tiny, much shorter than Zoe. “Cats are afraid of water, right? Reckon she’s Pigs. She looks good in the mud, anyhow!”

The third of them laughed.

“What are you? Pigs?” said the first one again. He was obviously in charge. He was good looking, short, though not as small as the little mouselike one.

Zoe looked at them dumbly. They weren’t making any sense.

“Let’s just scrag her anyway,” said the third.

Their leader ignored this. He turned to Zoe again.

“Look, we’re Eels, see? Eels. This is our place. So what are you?”

Zoe's head sang with pain, but dimly she understood what they were getting at.

"I'm . . . not from here. I'm from Norwich. Or what's left of it . . ."

They eyed her silently.

"She's lying," said the third. He looked stupid and mean. "Let's scrag her. She's Cats. I'm telling you. Or Pigs. Either way, let's just do her."

"Shut it, Spat," shouted the leader.

"Sorry, Dooby." Spat looked suddenly timid.

Dooby turned to Zoe.

"You're from over the water?" He said it slowly, suspiciously.

At last, Zoe fully understood something they were saying.

"Yes. I'm from Norwich But it's terrible there. There's hardly anyone left. They all went years ago. Some of us stayed and tried to make it work. But it's all over now."

Dooby seemed to ignore most of this. But he said, "You've got a boat then?"

"Yes, it's down . . . yes. I have." Something stopped Zoe from telling them where she'd hidden it. Not for the first time she wondered if leaving Norwich was the right thing to do. But then, she'd had no choice in the end.

"A boat!" said the mouselike one.

"Yeah. I heard, Munchkin," said Dooby. He turned back to Zoe. "Show us your boat, then."

Zoe hesitated.

"Or we'll scrag you properly," said Spat.

Zoe looked at Dooby. He seemed to be the boss.

"Spat's right," he said.

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They stood looking at Zoe's tiny rowing boat.

She'd been lucky. She'd headed straight towards the island, and had found a good place to land. She wouldn't have been able to go any further, anyway. Then she'd dragged the boat up as far as she could, tucking it out of sight beneath a huge old tree that had its feet in the water. It was dying, but it had enough leaves left on it to hide her boat a little. It was as good as she could do. She'd decided to walk along the shore and find an easy way up to the cathedral.

And then coming around the corner of a ruined building her luck ran out. She walked slap into Dooby, Spat and Munchkin.

"You came from Norwich in that?" said Dooby, looking at the boat and shaking his head.

"Uh-huh," Zoe mumbled.

"What does it say on the side?"

"Lyca," said Zoe. "It's her name."

"Norwich is east, right? The big old city?"

"Yes, so?" asked Zoe, wanting some answers. She wanted to know where she was, and she was very hungry.

"You don't understand, do you? What's your name?"

"Zoe. Where am I? I just headed for that . . ."

"This is the Island of Eels. And we're the Eels, see? This is our island, and we're in charge. Now, Zoe, what we're wondering, is whether you're telling the truth. Whether you've really come across Udan-Adan. In that." He pointed at Zoe's little boat. "Norwich, you say? I didn't think there was anything left to the east. On the other hand you might be Cats, or Pigs. Or some other tribe. In which case you've come to try something on. Steal some food maybe, knock a few of us off, too, maybe? So which is it? Cats, Pigs? Horses? Or is this story of yours for real?"

Zoe wondered how she could convince them, and what would happen if she failed.

"Look, I've never heard of Pigs or Eels or anything. Norwich is lost now. I found this old boat and did it up. I just started to row. I ran out of food. Don't know when. Then I saw that thing sticking out of the water."

Zoe pointed over their heads, where behind them the huge old cathedral towered into the watery sky. Even though she stood on the land where it did, it still looked as if it was floating on the water that was all around them.

"I just kept rowing. It never seemed to get any closer. But I got here."

"So you're not Cats, then?" said Munchkin.

"We don't know that," said Spat.

"No," said Dooby, "but I believe her. So you don't belong to any of the tribes?"

"No," said Zoe.

"Well you do now," said Dooby. "As of now, you're an Eel. We could do with someone as smart as you."

"Smart?" said Spat.

"Yes, Spat. Smart. Smarter than you, anyway. Get all this way in that thing. She's got brains. Which are in short supply round here."

"So what?" said Spat. He stared straight at Zoe. "No one else has joined us before, have they? You always said it was dangerous. Why don't we just do like we did with everyone else who's come snooping. You said . . ."

"Don't tell me what I said, Spat."

Zoe saw Munchkin take a couple of steps away from the other two, automatically.

"Yeah, but Dooby, we always do 'em. Don't we? You said so . . ."

"I said, Shut It!" Dooby snapped at Spat. There was an uneasy silence for a while. Spat seemed to realize he'd pushed it a bit, and shrugged his shoulders. Zoe saw the anger slip off Dooby's face.

"Thank you, Spat. Anyway. You're not afraid of a girl, are you?"

Munchkin sniggered. Obviously pleased with himself, Dooby turned back to Zoe.

"So you're an Eel now, Zoe."

"But I don't . . ."

"I said, you're an Eel. No arguments. Unless you'd like to give the water a try without your boat."

Zoe shook her head, slowly. She was too tired and hungry to argue, anyway. She didn't even have the energy to wonder what sort of weird set-up she had walked into.

"Let's go back to base, then, lads."

They walked up the soggy hill to where the ruins of old stone walls appeared from the sea and led to the cathedral gates. Rising out of the water beside one of these old walls was a row of white posts.

They made their way in and around bits of fallen masonry, and then not long after, the main door to the cathedral was in front of them. It looked out across a large patch of muddy grass, in one corner of which stood an ancient cannon.

Two boys stood guarding the gateway. Past them was a long porch which led to the doors themselves. These had been reinforced with bands of metal and beams of wood. The two gatekeepers nodded at Dooby, meekly, though they were much bigger than him.

"All right, Dooby," said one. The other nodded. Neither smiled.



One of them shoved hard, and the door to the cathedral swung open.

"Well, Zoe," said Dooby, "welcome to hell."

Zoe had seen some unpleasant sights before, but nothing in Norwich was like this. Once more she began to wonder if she'd done the right thing in leaving at all. Huddled in small groups round smoking fires were the scraps of people. Their clothes were hardly more than rags, and were obviously the result of some fairly primitive sewing skills. Dooby and his two thugs were dressed like kings compared with the others in the cathedral. Zoe looked at her own clothes. She'd mended and patched them countless times, but they seemed almost new, now.

Once inside, Dooby turned to Spat and Munchkin.

"You've got things to do," he said, and they both went off into the gloom.

Zoe and Dooby walked up the aisle in the centre of the cathedral. Zoe couldn't help staring. She stared at the building that had once been magnificent. The floor was thick with dirt and heaps of rubbish. There were broken windows and broken furniture. It was a mess. Then Zoe stared at the people who were living in it. They were in just as bad a state as the building. So far she had only seen children, many of them younger than herself.

"Aren't there any grown-ups here?" Zoe asked. She felt it was the right thing to ask, though she didn't know why, it had been a long time since she'd had any adult help.

Dooby didn't answer.

Some of the people eyed Zoe suspiciously as Dooby walked her up the aisle, but most just ignored her. They looked underfed and wild. The smoke from all their fires drifted way up above in the vaults of the ceiling. Dooby was right. There

was something infernal about the place. And it stank. The worst thing about it was the smell of rotten fish.

"Where do you grow your food?" Zoe asked, turning to Dooby.

Dooby laughed.

"Grow? We don't grow food."

"But what do you eat? On Norwich we had a few animals to breed from, and there were the allotments . . ."

"There's nowhere to grow food. And there's no food to feed animals, even if we had any. This island is only a mile long and half as wide. There's no space. It's all buildings and ruins of buildings. There's no room for animals, and anyway, you need two of things to breed, right? Two of every sort of thing. Well, we never have two of anything here. There's not enough to go round as it is, without looking after animals, too."

Then, as if he'd been saying things he shouldn't, Dooby added loudly: "But this is the best and biggest bit of land left in Udan-Adan, and we're going to keep it!"

He nodded at one or two people who might have heard him.

"What's Udan . . . ?" began Zoe.

"Udan-Adan. The sea. I thought you were supposed to be clever. If you're not then I don't . . ."

"Oh no," said Zoe quickly, "it's just we called it something different in Norwich. I meant, why do you call it that?"

Dooby stopped, as if puzzled. Then he pointed to a dim corner of the nave. Sitting on his own in the dark was a thin, wrinkled figure. He was talking to himself.

"See that man? He's called William. He's older than anyone else here. He says the sea is called Udan-Adan, see?"

William was the first adult Zoe had seen.

"Is he in charge?"

Dooby swore loudly.

"William?" he laughed. "William . . . in charge?"

Then he stopped laughing and grabbed Zoe's arm roughly.

"Listen to me, Zoe. I'm in charge here. Got it?"

He stared at Zoe, peering at her dark hair and eyes, her long oval face. He was obviously trying to scare her, and Zoe was scared.

But she said, "You're hurting my arm." She glared back at him, trying not to show her fear, but she felt her mouth quiver.

Dooby waited a moment longer, then let her go.

Zoe rubbed her arm.

"Aren't there any grown-ups here at all? Apart from William?"

"None that can tie their own shoelaces without worrying about it first," Dooby said chuckling. "Weak in the head, see? But even if there were some with a bit more brains, I'd still be in charge."

Zoe didn't doubt this. There was something about Dooby that made you do what he said. Something more than just his use of violence.

Zoe nodded at William, the old man in the corner.

"Does he know why this is happening?"

"Why what is happening?"

"Why the sea keeps on rising year after year. Where it comes from. If it will stop before there's nothing left."

"No one knows that," said Dooby. "William will tell you he does. But don't believe everything he says. He's mad."

Dooby laughed.

They walked on through the cathedral, until they reached the choir stalls. They were alone now.

"In Norwich, some of them said it wasn't the sea rising, but the land sinking."

"Doesn't make much difference, does it? All I know is that for longer than I can remember there's been the sea, coming to get us, and it's left us like this. Like rats on a sinking ship. But I'm not going to let it happen to me. Get some rest. Munchkin's getting some food for you. Find yourself somewhere to sleep later on. Because I want your help."