

"That was different."

"Was it?"

Zoe was silent.



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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."

Defeated, Zoe went meekly back with Spat to the cathedral. They were just closing the doors when the horn sounded the curfew again.

That evening, food was served out to all the Eels. It was the most contact Zoe had seen between them. But even at this gathering they sat in huddles of two or three. Molly and Sarah and some older women stared at her as she sat down to eat.

"What's that smell?" said Molly.

"It's the stinky rat again," said Sarah.

"What've you been doing, stinky rat? Swimming in the slime?"

"Just look at her hair!"

They laughed.

Zoe's hair was no worse than theirs, but she tried to ignore them.

"Come and sit with me," said a voice.

She turned to see William, the old man, smiling at her. Gratefully, she sat beside him.

"Aren't you eating?" she said.

"I don't need any. More for someone else."

"But aren't you hungry?"

"All the time! Take no notice of them," he added, whispering so loud that everyone could hear. He nodded at the women who'd stared at her. They turned away.

"They don't trust you, that's all."

"I don't mean anyone any harm."

"But they don't know that. Where are you from? Why are you here? How can you do what none of us can?"

"What do you mean?"

"You came across Udan-Adan, didn't you? Even Dooby can't do that."

For the second time, Zoe changed her mind about William. He seemed totally normal to her now. He wasn't as old as she'd thought at first, either. Maybe fifty, maybe older. It was hard to tell. It had been dark in the porch when he spoke to her before. It was just that he was so much older than anyone else she'd seen in a long time.

"It's quite easy," said Zoe. "With a boat."

"A boat! Shall I tell you a story about a boat?"

"I'd rather ask you something else," said Zoe, but William wasn't listening.

"Well, there was a man called . . . called . . . oh I can't remember, but anyway, he built a boat, see?"

Zoe nodded.

"And then it began to rain, a lot. So, all the animals were getting wet, too, and he put them all aboard the boat, too. And it sank."

"That's a story?" asked Zoe. William was confusing, but even so his story reminded Zoe of something. A story her mother had once told her, perhaps. She tried to bring it out from the back of her mind, but she couldn't remember. William was still talking to her.

"That's just what happened. Here's another one. There was a doctor, and his name was . . . was . . . oh look, I can't remember! I'll tell you later. Anyway, he went somewhere, and there was a big puddle of water, and he stepped in it. So he never went there again. But that's nothing to what happened to . . ."

William went on, and Zoe smiled uneasily when he looked at her. Perhaps they were right after all; he was normal one minute, and mad the next. Some others had gathered around him now. They obviously enjoyed listening to his crazy stories.

"... But when the dove came back with dry feet, they knew it was going to be all right. And that's how Utnapishtim, King of Shurruk, became immortal."

They laughed at him as he finished his story.

When he paused, Zoe took her chance.

"William? Why is there so much water? Where is it coming from?"

He stopped short, and seemed to click back again. He spoke more slowly, which Zoe thought he seemed to do when he wasn't talking nonsense. There were about thirty people gathered around him now. He looked at them all carefully, and then spoke.

"You want to know? Then I shall tell you. It was too hot. It was too hot in the whole world, because people had too many fires. Always burning things. And the world got hotter and hotter and hotter."

Someone started giggling. William didn't seem to notice.

"This'll be a good one!"

"Shh!" said Zoe.

"Now the world, as everyone knows, is shaped like an egg. A big one."

More laughter.

"What's an egg, anyway?" someone joked.

"Shh!"

"And at each end of the egg, there were two huge lumps of ice. One at each end. Well, when it got hot, the ice started to melt. But that wasn't the real problem. You see, once the ice melted, the sea got warmer. Without all that ice, there was nothing to keep it cool, right? The world was getting warmer and so the sea got warmer too."

People were laughing, madly.

"And what happens when things get warmer?" William

asked, without looking at anyone in particular. He waited for an answer.

"I don't know, what does happen?" someone prompted.

"They get bigger."

There were huge hoots at this.

"The sea got warmer, and so it got bigger, which means it takes up more space, and that's why there's so much of it. That is why we are drowning."

He stopped. Zoe said nothing. Everyone else was still laughing hard.

"That's his best yet. Where does he get these loopy ideas from?"

"The sea warm? It's freezing!"

William smiled at Zoe. As he did so, she realized who she'd like to put in her boat when she made her escape.

No one was listening to William any more, except Zoe. His face was blank, his voice was grave and low.

"It's going to keep on coming. It hasn't finished yet. The whole world will go under before it's done, and wash the face of the earth clean."

He closed his eyes.

Zoe fought tears back.

"Unless," said William, thoughtfully. "You could build a really big boat . . ."