

ZO AND
THE
FOREST
OF SECRETS

ALAKE PILGRIM



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ZO AND THE FOREST OF SECRETS

ALAKE PILGRIM

More Caribbean
islands

CARIBBEAN
SEA



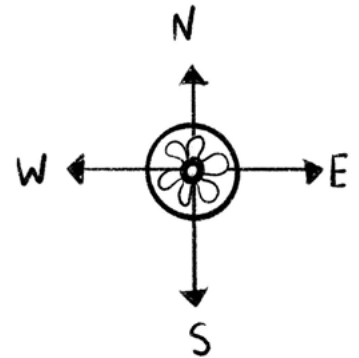
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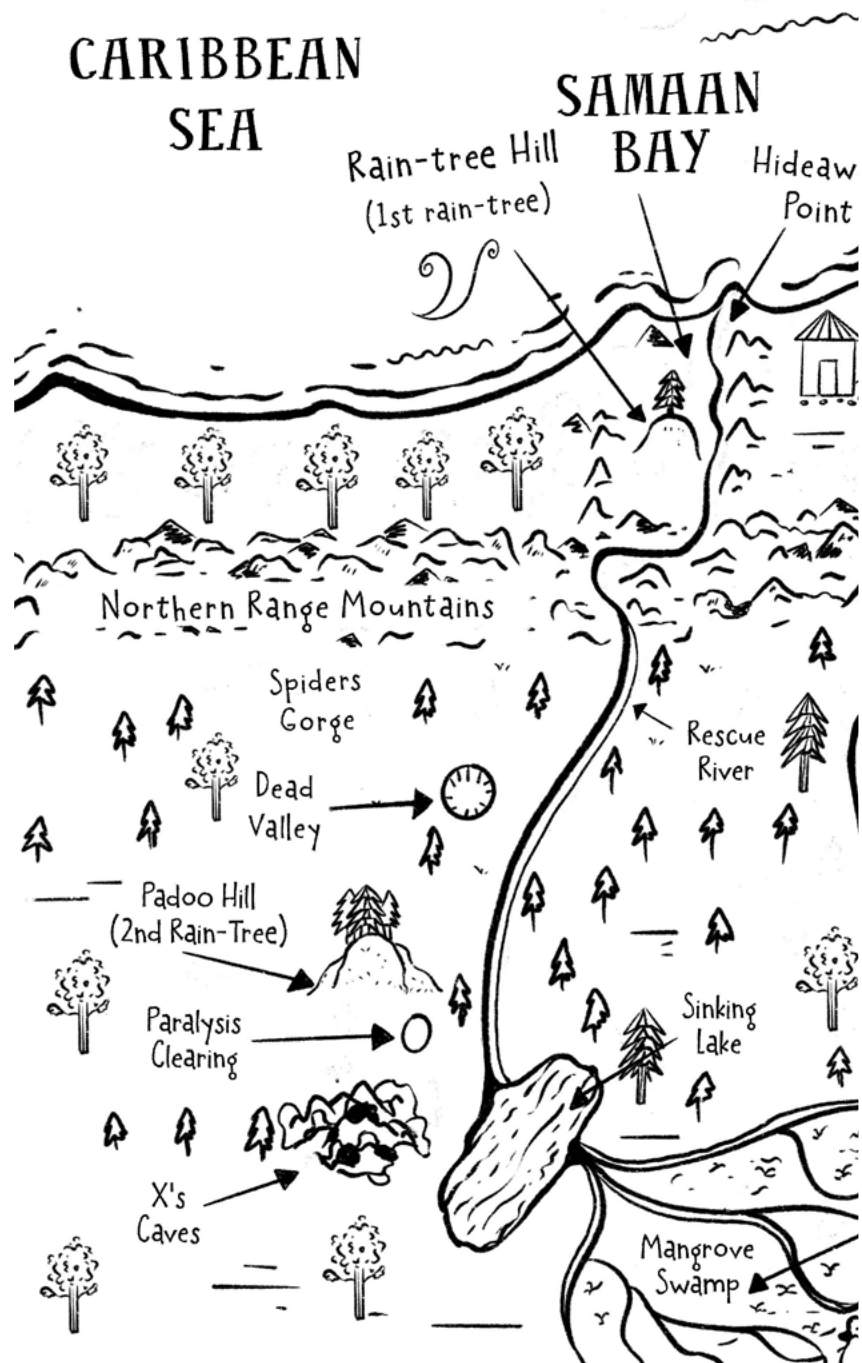
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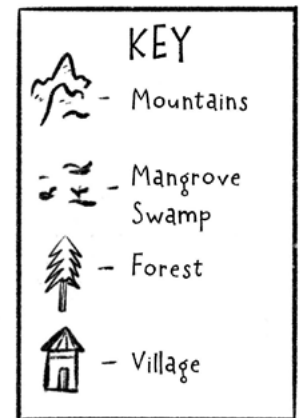
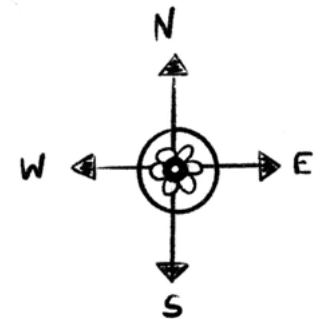
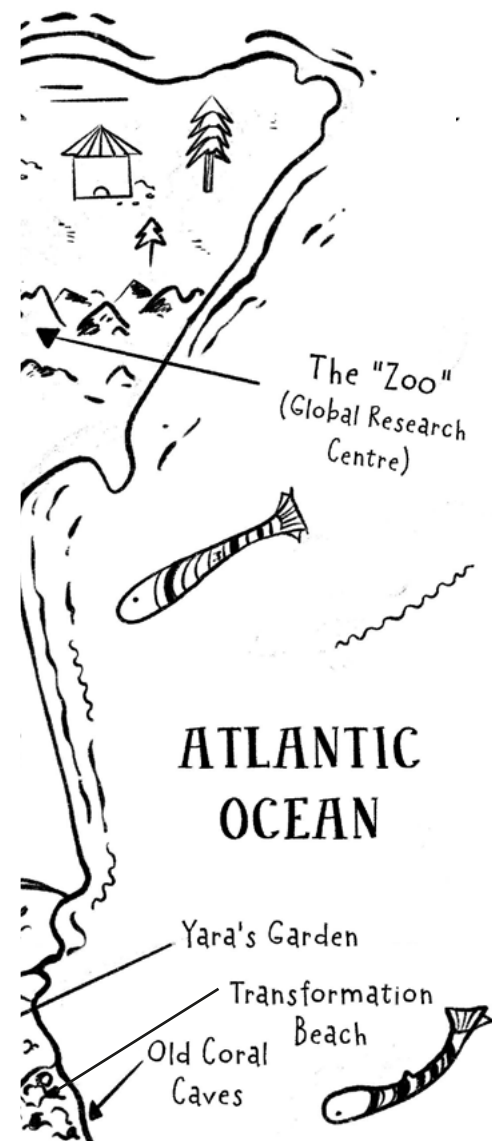
N.E.
COAST



ATLANTIC
OCEAN



ay



*To my little one, for inspiring me to write this.
And to my family and friends, for sticking with me
while I did.*

Chapter One

WARNING

Was the old man standing next to me crazy, or cool? I didn't have much time to decide.

Even in our heavy island heat, he was decked out in a three-piece multicoloured suit, with a floor-length coat made of scraps of fabric from every corner of the globe. To top it all off, he wore a straw fedora pulled low over his eyes, with a blue chicken feather dancing on one side.

"You better watch your back with that one," he muttered, interrupting my thoughts in a wheezy, almost laughing, voice.

"What?"

I inched away from him, nearly tripping over a speckled goat that, for some reason, was wandering the Samaan Bay market like a stray.

“Maaa!” it protested, rolling its eyes at me through wild tufts of hair.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

Great. Now I was talking to goats.

“You will be sorry, if you don’t get away from her.”

Who was this guy talking about – the goat? Thankfully, it was already strolling away, not even bothering to look back at me. Meanwhile, the nearest vendor was at the other end of her stall, selling rough-skin lemons. She didn’t have many customers. The rest of the market was loud and swarming with people, but this dusty corner was almost deserted. What crime did you have to commit to get stuck at a stall way out here?

Among the bones of old tents, shredded tarps and broken tables, the old man was strangely mesmerizing. He was lean, with a face full of dark angles and shadows. He wasn’t looking at me. Maybe he wasn’t talking to me at all. He seemed to be thoroughly inspecting a heap of bright orange mandarins, overripe in the sun, taking over the air with the smell of citrus and day-old roses.

I glanced around. Was no one else seeing this? Despite his get-up, nobody seemed to pay the old man any mind. I definitely didn’t want to be the one

staring with my mouth open, “catching flies” as Ms. Kofi would say.

Where was she anyway?

Ms. K, the woman in charge of my life here in Samaan Bay, was nowhere to be seen. She was probably still on the other side of the market haggling over the price of yams. She’d told me to get a bag of limes and come back to her quick sharp. But this was my first Friday market, and the most excitement I’d seen since moving to Samaan Bay the week before.

It was barely dawn, but the crowd in the rest of the market was as thick as ants on a pile of sweets. People had come from the surrounding villages to buy and sell their goods. For once, the half-dead village was pulsing and alive. In the crescent-shaped market, calypso, soca, chutney, reggae, dancehall, jazz, pop, afrobeats, filmi and gospel music blasted from the open stalls. Vendors sheltered under pink, green and blue tarps, chatting loudly over the noise, catching up on news, and selling everything from gru gru bef to underwear, saltfish to yard fowl, car parts, coconuts and “Cold-in-the-ice!” drinks.

Sweat stuck my t-shirt to my back. Somehow, I’d wandered out here, away from all the action.

A drink of water sounded great right now. I turned to go.

“Girl, listen quick, I don’t have much time,” the old man’s voice froze me in my tracks.

“Mr. Yancy,” a melodious voice cut in, “why you don’t leave this child alone?”

The lemon vendor had just finished her sale and was staring at us suspiciously.

“You’re Zo, right?” she asked, raising purple, pencilled-in eyebrows.

Apparently someone had sent my name out on the village hotline: look out for Zo Joseph, new to Samaan Bay.

“Why you don’t mind your business, Miss Lady?” the old man snapped at her.

She puffed up like dough tossed in hot oil. “Who you calling Miss Lady?”

I backed away slowly. Why was I here at all? I should be with my dad in New York, instead of in Samaan Bay watching two strangers argue.

Da... I swallowed the lump that grew like a plum seed in my throat whenever I thought of him. Right now, he felt like a world away.

As the vendor and Mr. Yancy went back and forth, something caught my eye. My mouth dropped open

in slow motion. Was this for real? The old man’s coat seemed to change shape every time he moved. The patterns and colours shifted as if the coat had a life of its own. I looked closer. It was almost like it was rustling, moving, taking the shape of...my face.

I jumped back, choking.

“L-l...” My lips wouldn’t move.

I shook my head and the coat stopped moving. It was still a crazy clash of cut-out materials, but that was all. I swung around wildly. No one near me seemed to notice anything strange. The old man and the vendor were still bickering, and she hadn’t missed a beat. Clearly the heat was messing with my eyes.

“Listen, you!” the old man hissed at me suddenly, making me jump. “Do you see her?”

Under the hat, his eyes were golden-brown, glowing with a strange light.

“Wha-a-t?” I stammered.

The vendor quarreled about “mad people” coming to upset her day. The old man snorted at me. What on earth was he talking about? I could see the vendor-lady just fine. She was busy explaining to him, in no uncertain terms, that her name was Mrs. Boukan, not Toucan, and that she didn’t appreciate

his brand of nonsense at this hour in the morning. She was a powerful woman, with a stubborn smile and a bright blue headdress tied high above her forehead like a bird in flight. He'd be better off leaving her alone.

As for me, limes or no limes, I needed to get away from here and back to Ms. K.

Too late. There was Ms. Kofi, pushing her walking stick through the crowd on the other side of the field and limping hard in my direction. Now I was in real trouble. Time to go.

The old man spotted Ms. K too. He turned back to me, and for a second his face stopped me cold. Somehow, he seemed more scared than I was. He looked wild and... hunted.

"You don't see her?" he asked again desperately. "I know you can. You better wake up and use it before they do!"

What was 'it'? Who were 'they'?

Before I could move, he lunged forward and tapped me once with his index finger on the crown of my head.

"Hey!" I protested, ducking away.

"Wake up!" he hissed.

"Ay!" the vendor shouted. "Leave that child alone!"

She batted at him across the table, scattering her fruit.

He ignored her, pinning me in place with an acid stare.

Suddenly, a cloud of red dust swirled around me. I sneezed, seeing stars.

When I opened my eyes, the vendor was re-stacking mandarins, sucking her teeth and muttering. "Utter foolishness..."

Ms. K was headed for me with a face like rain.

And the old man was off in the distance, speeding away, with his coat flapping behind him.