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Zo and the Invisible Island

ALAKE PILGRIM

KO
KNIGHTS OF

To my grandmothers, Doris and Eileen,
who prayed and paved the way.

Chapter One

SPY

I nearly fell out of the giant tree. Snorting with laughter, I tried to keep my balance. Adri was perched on a wide branch of the samaan, cracking jokes despite everything.

"Shh," I warned him, looking around at the listening hill.

He laughed, long legs dangling in the air. The island sky was full of colours melting into gold. I had never seen him this happy. It was almost as if he'd forgotten that we were on the run in the forest from some dinosaur-like creature, smart-mouthed spiders, and who knows what else.

Truth was, he almost made me forget.

He stopped mid-joke. "You good?"

"Yeah," I said, glancing away.

His spiky hair had started growing back. He'd shaved it off with his parents, to celebrate his mum's recovery and their trip back home to Trinidad.

His parents . . .

My heart sank. Where were they now and how did we find them?

A shadow crossed Adri's face. I could tell that he was thinking the same thing.

"Hold on," I called, "you have something by your ear."

He was too far away for me to reach the silver thread stuck to the side of his head. He raised one hand to wipe it off. Then, I realised what it was.

"Wait!" I shouted.

Too late. Spiderwebs snaked down around us, strangely beautiful in the dying light.

I scrambled toward Adri. He stared at me wildly, terror snapping off him like lightning.

"Run, Zo!" he screamed. "Now!"

I spun around, looking for anything to fight with, but instead found myself rolling out of bed, tumbling with a hard "Thump!" to the floor.

"Oww . . ."

***

That was one way to wake up.

I lay face-down on the smooth wooden planks, trying to get my bearings. I was drenched with sweat and my legs were tangled in bedsheets.

My mind felt just as jumbled. Somehow, it was always the same dream . . . And I still had no clue where Adri and his family were being kept.

Over a year ago, in Samaan Bay, on the other side of the country, he and I had survived being lost in the forest for days. We'd been chased by weird creatures: the giant centipede-like X, talking spiders, and a swampy monster I'd called the Flesh-skinner until I learned what it really was.

Come to find out, they'd been working for some strange Council that experimented on animals, and kids like us.

Yet none of this was in the dream that haunted me month after month, ever since Adri had chosen to go back to the Council and their tests, for the sake of his captured parents.

No. My nightmare was always about him: the boy who, through all kinds of crazy, had become my best friend. The boy who was stuck in a trap, warning

me to escape.

I took a deep breath and pried my legs from the bedsheets as quietly as I could.

Please let Ms. Kofi be down in the backyard, picking pomeracs from the bat-infested tree. Anyone who could face down a colony of bats was not someone to be messed with . . . And the bats were right to be scared. I'd learned back in Samaan Bay that the short, limping old-woman I knew as Ms. K, was really an Anansi – part woman, part spider, part trickster.

Yes. Ms. K, aka Boss of the Anansi crew, was one of the head Watchers for the Council, keeping an eye on children like me, while working secretly on her own plans to take the Council down.

She was here with me on Monos, one of a string of small islands off the northwest coast of Trinidad. We'd moved to this house miles away from Samaan Bay, for my stepdad Jake's company 'Lee's Green Energy' to build a solar plant on the island.

Now I was stuck here, on the floor of my bedroom, listening for Ms. K's heavy tread on the stairs.

Whew. Nothing. Maybe she really was in the backyard chasing bats. I could breathe again . . . for now.

As I turned, something caught my eye. A floorboard under the bed was bent to one side. It had probably come loose when I slammed onto the floor. I'd better fix it before Ms. K fixed me.

I crawled under the bed to push the board back into place. Something glinted. Wait. Was that gold? I scooted in more, heart racing like a pirate finding treasure.

Under the floorboard was a rectangular space. Inside the space was a long brassy tube. I picked it up and crawled out from under the bed, sneezing out a cobweb or two. Then I sat up and turned the tube from side to side. One end clicked open to reveal a small pane of glass. My heart jumped. This wasn't a tube.

Gently, I pulled it out to its full length. It was a spyglass – and a beautiful one at that, covered with carvings that looked like dragons. It was old, a relic, coated with dust from being in a hole under the floor for so long. I wiped it clean with the sheet and squinted into one side, holding it a little away from my eye, in case it wasn't as harmless as it looked.

It seemed to work exactly as a spyglass should, magnifying things in the room, making everything

look larger and closer.

I checked out the carvings on its side. The dragons were twisted into shapes that looked like letters, but I couldn't make them out. Suspicion tapped on the back of my neck. This could be a trap set by Ms. K – one of the tests the Council ran on "gifted" children like me and Adri. Ms. K was supposed to have wiped my memory after Samaan Bay, but she hadn't.

At the time, I thought she was doing me a favour, but maybe she'd had other plans for me all along.

The sweat on my skin felt cold. To my right, white curtains billowed like sails in the breeze. The entire house was like living inside of an ancient ship and my room was no different. There was a pitched roof over the wooden walls and floor, held up by thick wooden beams. The spiced smell of cedar filled the morning air: sharp as a warning.

"Why?" Mum had asked again and again, when I insisted on staying here while she, Jake and Tayo – a toddler now – went to Barbados for her new art exhibition. Her expression toggled between confusion and hurt.

"We just moved here!" I'd said, pretending to be frustrated. "I'm tired of packing and unpacking.

Ms. K's here too! I'll be fine. Don't you trust me?"

"Of course," Mum protested. "But are you sure?"

She was still asking the morning they left, with Tayo crying in her arms. The ferryman untied his boat from the dock, getting ready to take them over to the mainland. Jake put the last bags in the boat.

"You ready Marie?" he asked my mum, looking at me with a furrowed face.

All he said was, "You know you can still change your mind . . . Your mum would love to have you there." He added kindly, "We all would."

I kissed the air near Tayo's sweet round face.

"Doh-doh!" he begged.

I sure felt like one.

"Thanks, next time, okay?" I blurted out to Jake before rushing away, so he couldn't see the tears in my eyes.

Mum had tried to hug me before she left, but I cringed away as always. She knew that, for some reason, in the last year, I no longer did hugs or kisses. What she didn't know was that I couldn't hug or kiss her, because I had no idea when my power of falling into other people's memories by touch would kick into gear.

The most unwanted gift ever.

Most of all, Mum didn't know that the same morning she'd announced the Easter trip to Barbados, I'd found a note under my pillow that said, "Stay with me." Signed, "K."

Even as I'd ripped the note to shreds and flushed it, I knew what I was going to do.

Ms. K was the only link I still had to Adri and his family. To have any chance of finding them, I needed to go along with whatever she had planned.

I thought about telling my family what had *really* happened a year ago in Samaan Bay; what was happening right now. Maybe I could call Da. But he was deep in some part of rural Guinea in West Africa on a job for his company – on the other side of the world. He still found a way to call me every time he went into town for supplies, always asking in his low but warm Jamaican voice, "Boonoonoonus, you a'right?"

I wanted to say, "No, I'm not."

But how did I explain what had happened? It sounded totally mad.

No. Following Ms. K's instructions was my only chance to see Adri again. And it was the only way

to keep my family from ending up in some 'freak accident' designed by the Council, the way his parents had, a year ago.

So, I did it. I told my Mum I didn't want to travel with them to her exhibition. I didn't even hug her goodbye.

Now, here I was, trapped in our new house on Monos, Monkey Island, even though there were no monkeys left. It was a place that at any other time would have been stunningly beautiful, with green hills and sheltered bays on one side and wild open sea on the other. But I couldn't enjoy it. I knew that this was just one more place the Council could reach me: the beginning of another crazy test.

I jumped up and went to the window, trying to see the carvings on the spyglass more clearly. I choked. As sunlight hit the dragon-letters, they morphed into fiery words: LOOK INTO THE DRAGON'S MOUTH.

Then they disappeared like smoke.

I nearly dropped the spyglass. The Dragon's Mouth? What did that mean? It sounded dangerous, but strangely familiar.

I turned the tube around in my hands, trying to

remember. Ah! Of course. It was something Ms. K had said. One morning while supposedly dusting my room, she had pointed out an island even further out than this one – barely visible from my bedroom window. She'd been close enough that I could see the sharp grey hairs on her chin and smell her earthy perfume.

"Dragon Mouth Island they call it, invisible to most," she'd said her deep, hoarse voice, "in the Bocas del Dragón . . . Merciless currents that can take any boat under. Strange winds too. Took down submarines in World War II; even planes."

She looked at me with sharp black eyes. "Nothing that flies or sails there ever comes back. So, people stopped trying a long time ago."

Now, alone at the window, I took a deep breath.

LOOK INTO THE DRAGON'S MOUTH, the spyglass had said.

My heart pounded in my ears. It sounded simple, but nothing was ever that easy . . . Still, this might be my ticket to see Adri again. It might be the chance to free my friend.

I lifted the spyglass and zoned in on Dragon Mouth Island as fast as I could. With my bare eyes it was

nothing more than a speck on the horizon, and most people couldn't even see it, but this spyglass was the most powerful I had ever used. I bit my lip in surprise. I could see the distant island as if it were right there.

In the center of the island, on top of a green hill, was an old colonial mansion. My heart pounded in my ears. What was this? Despite Ms. K's story about no boats or planes making it over, there were people living on Dragon Mouth Island!

Children, they looked like, hurrying in and out of the building and rushing in groups across the wide grounds.

I leaned forward on the windowsill, adjusting the spyglass, trying to see more. But the lens got blurry, swirling like a whirlpool. I felt dizzy. Time to put this thing down.

But I couldn't. It was stuck to me, sucking me in. With a loud rush, everything tilted . . . a kaleidoscope of shifting colours and shapes.

Then, with a snap, I was gone.