

THE  
QUEST  
FOR  
AVALON



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NIKKI BENNETT

# THE QUEST FOR AVALON

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Printed in the United States of America

This book is dedicated to my fam. All of you.  
Even the ones not related by blood--you  
know who you are!



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# THE SHADOWS

I KILL HIM IN the morning, after breakfast.

We eat mushy beans. A piece of jerky. Tepid mint tea. I soaked the tea leaves in the last of the fresh aqua and poured the liquid into cracked mugs. Now we sip in silence. When we're done, we leave the bunker and trudge up a sandy path leading to the graveyard.

Visiting the graves every morning is his ritual, not mine. I follow out of habit. He carries a handful of seashells he'd collected on the beach, leaning precariously on his cane as we climb to the cliff's top. Below us the sea pounds, dark and frothing, against the rocks. He drops his shells on the individual graves crowded around a massive marble tombstone, and I wait until he straightens, his shaky hand gripping his cane, legs trembling beneath his gaunt torso.

He turns toward me, his mouth open, as if to ask a question. In a single, quick motion I raise the knife and slit his throat. He falls, neat and soundless, a glimpse of surprise in his eyes, body plunking face-down onto the sand.

It had taken no time at all. He hadn't expected it. And I feel nothing but relief, now it's done.

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I retrace my steps to the shelter and grab a shovel, the hammer, and a chisel. I return to the graveyard and begin to dig. I don't stop digging until the sun rises high enough to blind me. I shield my eyes with a steady hand and gaze at that red orb dangling in a cloudless sky over a turbid sea. Blood-red, exactly the color of the liquid now seeping into the sand near my bare feet. What was it the sailors used to say? *Red sky at morning, sailors take warning?*

When the grave seems deep enough. I roll the corpse into the hole. I thrust my shovel into the sandy pile and fling the soil over and around the bony body until it disappears under the sand. I give the loose soil a pat with the shovel but don't bother to tamp it down. Besides the occasional seagull, this island is destitute of any sort of creature except myself. Nothing will dig up this shallow grave. He'll lie here forever, like the others.

I scan the graves clustered around the tombstone. Six altogether. If I die, it'll be seven, but nobody is left to dig my grave. I lean against the cold tombstone and pull my tangled hair away from my face as I read the names chiseled in big block letters. The first is professionally engraved. Below it, the other names are carved in a much cruder hand.

I pull out the hammer and chisel. The sun is high overhead by the time I've scratched that final name into the stone. When I'm done, I walk to the edge of the cliff where, far below, the waves pound against the rocks. I close my eyes, tired of these sounds. I take a deep breath and chuck the chisel off the cliff, a sacrifice to the hungry sea churning below.

I open my eyes and walk away, determined never to look upon those graves and that tombstone again.

# CASCADIA

“Beyond the Wild Wood comes the Wild World,” said the Rat. “And that’s something that doesn’t matter, either to you or to me. I’ve never been there, and I’m never going, nor you either, if you’ve got any sense at all.”

*Kenneth Graham - The Wind in the Willows*

## 1

SOMETIMES I WONDER, why am I most content when I’m alone? Is that how most folks are, or am I some mondo oddity? It’s like everyone else craves human company, but I sit on this hard rock, string from my fishing pole dancing in a cold mountain stream, pine trees rising above me, no noise ’cept the rushing stream and wind blowing overhead, and I’m happy. Content. Free. No stone walls, no orders to obey, no wondering where my knife is and how quick I can grab it.

But I reckon the longer I rest here trying to cage this perfect bliss, the longer my trailer sits unguarded. Not much food left in it, but right now as I try to fish, someone might be stealing

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my last sack of taters. My half bag of rice. My precious cans of beans. They seem nice – the group living at the campsite – but they're desperate too. I can tell by their hungry smiles. They need food, and at what point are they gonna gang up on the lone female to get it?

So, I sit, teetering between staying in this spot forever or heading back and protecting my meager possessions like a mama bear guarding her cubs, when suddenly the wind picks up to a screaming, whirling frenzy. The trees surrounding me start to bend and crack. I drop the rod and dive behind my rock and lay flat on the stony ground, praying I don't get sucked into the stormy sky. A nado lives up there, hissing and swirling, and I wonder if I'm some sort of nado goddess and these natural monsters that terrify me more than anything else are actually worshipping me and pursuing me like fanatics trailing a prophet. Must be so, 'cause this is the third nado I've seen in less than two weeks.

The angry black funnel twirls and touches down somewhere close, then pulls up and scampers off somewhere else. The wind dies as quick as it sprang to life. I search for the fishing rod but can't find it. My thoughts sprint to the trailer, so I fight my way over downed trees and tangled branches to get back to it.

When I reach the trailhead leading to the campground, I spot the boy, Jack. There's a frenzy in his sunken eyes. His long hair is all frizzled, like someone set an electric jolt to it, and he runs to me on bare white feet.

"Nado!" he yells.

"Yeah, I know." What comes out of my mouth next surprises me 'cause instead of asking about my trailer, I say, "Is everyone OK?"

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Jack coughs into his sleeve, which gives me a panicky, queasy feeling. Makes me wonder if Pan4 is lurking around the campground and has snared poor Jack. Maybe I brought the virus here, from that dank prison, although the prison doc swore I didn't have it. Jack's face is smooth like a baby's — no pox marks on his hollow, hungry cheeks yet. Maybe he'll be OK.

"Nobody's hurt," he says. "But, Miriam, yer trailer..." He grabs my hand and tugs me to the campsite. Pitiful little strength exists in his thin arms. His hand is dry but warm and comforting somehow. Was I ever sweet, trusting, and hopeful like this starving, sick boy? Maybe. Don't really remember anymore.

We reach the campsite, and a groan escapes my lips before I can stop it. My tiny trailer is wrapped around the downed tree next to it. They look like two lovers tangled in an embarrassing position they want desperately to get out of but can't. I drop Jack's hand as an intense rage boils up in my tum and burns right into my cheeks. I clench my fists in tight balls and exhale like the prison doc once taught me, pushing the rage out in a huge, harmless puff of air. I won't flip out, not in front of Jack.

I try to sound cheerful. "Well, that's that."

With those words, the wrath drains right out and the more normal but depressing acceptance trickles back in. Anger might let me *feel* like I'll come out ahead, at least while it's coursing through my veins, but it always pushes me deeper into the mire I'm already stuck in, so I guess acceptance is better. Even if it feels like a defeat.

Anyway, no point in wasting my precious energy on anger. I'm used to it. One minute I'm happy, or at least kinda content, and the next minute Mother Nature trips me up with a nado. Or quake. Or rampaging disease. Or *something*. No point in

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fuming and cussing. Only thing to do is weather through it, slap a bandage on the latest cut, and try to regain some balance.

“Yer grub’s gone,” Jack says.

“Well, most of it.” I gaze at the unsalvageable food littering the ground. Cornmeal covers the gravel like yellow snow, mixing with the rain now pelting down from the dark sky and trickling away in a river of yellow clumps. The wind has flung the contents of the rice sack in a ten-yard radius. Coffee beans — precious, precious coffee beans — lie under ferns and on mossy rocks. All wet, they look like little brown turds. I wipe the rain from my eyes and wonder if collecting ’em is worth the effort.

I decide, nope.

Jack’s parents are busy righting their trailer that toppled against a tree but looks OK. The other campsites are untouched, like the nado happily bounded over ’em so it could land with both feet on my spot and squash my brief happiness. Reminds me of when I was a kid and my mom took me for one stunno day at the beach. I built a sandcastle, and a big, fat, bullying boy took a flying leap and landed smack on my most perfect turret. I punched that kid ’til he ran away crying. I woulda chased and pummeled him some more, but Mom hurried me away before someone could call the authorities.

Punching my mangled trailer won’t solve nothing either, but I march up and kick it anyway, then wrench open the busted door leading to the storage compartment. The flimsy thing breaks right off its last hinge, so I chuck it into the bushes. I search the compartment for any food that hasn’t tried to make a run for it, finding only some dented cans of kidney beans and a half-sack of taters. That’s it.

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Jack coughs and peers into the dark compartment. "You don't have much left."

No, not much at all. Another quick burst of rage flares, then dwindles. I rest my hand on Jack's drenched shoulder, again feeling a sense of comfort from the sympathetic boy's presence. "Take the taters, Jack."

His hungry eyes light in excitement, then fill with concern. "What'll you eat?"

I'm wondering the same thing. The trailer's no good anymore, so I'll have to abandon it. My truck's solar lies broken in a bed of ferns. Hopefully its dying battery'll have enough juice to power the truck to Bellingham, but then it's toast and I'll have to abandon the vehicle. No way it'll run without the solar, not unless I can find another one. If I can't, I'll have to hoof it the rest of the way, and I can't carry a whole sack of taters. I stuff a couple in my backpack and hand Jack the rest. He hugs the sack against his skinny chest as if fearing it'll disappear if he loosens his hold. I glance at his fam. They hardly have any food left. They could use the taters. Already, Jack's mom has dropped to her hands and knees and now scrounges through the ferns, gathering any of my errant coffee beans her gnarled hands can grasp and shoving 'em into her pockets.

"Thanks, Miriam." Jack is crying now, great globs of precious moisture oozing from his big eyes. "I wish you didn't hafta go."

Me neither. I don't much like hanging 'round other folks, but I like Jack. I liked his fam too, but now I see competition in their movements, their friendliness having died with the nado and now they're back to fighting for survival. Up 'til the nado, I'd felt safe here, nestled in this tiny little haven of tall green trees

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clinging to an otherwise scorched mountain. It was ridiculous, even maybe fatal, to reckon safety would last.

Nope, I'd best hit the road while I still can. I'm too close to my intended destination to hesitate any longer.

I hug Jack, wondering how long he'll last before disease, hunger, or the relentless force of nature does him in. I hope he makes it.

Then I turn away and detach the trailer, fix the broken solar onto the truck, and climb into the driver's seat. Jack waves, but I don't. I can't look at him anymore. I wipe my eyes and roll away from the campground, following the nado's path west.

THE TRUCK DIES a few miles shy of the Bellingham turnoff. Figures. I coax it to the potholed shoulder of Highway 5 and abandon it among the tangle of rusted cars littering the crumbled asphalt. Creeping blackberry vines entomb the older vehicles, and I wonder how long it'll take before they eat up my poor truck. I scrounge the dead cars, searching for a working solar, but they've all been stripped clean. Only choice now is to hoof it.

I stuff a change of clothes into my backpack, make sure my knife is secure in its scabbard on my belt, fling a canteen full of aqua over one shoulder, and start what feels like my final death march down the nearest weed-ridden exit ramp and then along a deserted patch of road that probably hasn't felt the tread of car tires in weeks. I figure I'll walk west till I hit the Puget Sound. Must be a road up the coast to Bellingham at some point.

Somewhere I smell fire, just a whiff, far away. Somewhere folks are scrambling to get out of its way as that fire rolls along blind to the misery it's causing. Did a time ever exist when



life wasn't a constant scramble for food and shelter and a never-ending race away from raging fires and swirling nados? Must've been, though I can hardly remember it. I kinda wish for my prison cell again. It was safe from nados, anyway. Plus, they fed us in prison. But it wasn't a safe haven from Pan4. They let us loose when that monster crept between the cell bars and snuffed out half the inmates. I walked outta my cell, asymptomatic and free but kinda wishing I'd been one of the lucky ones now safely snuggled in the damp, dark earth. Would've been easier in the long run.

That was two weeks ago. The days between then and now have been a hungry, scrabbling blur. I stole the truck and trailer, drove through the Rockies, and ended up at the Cascades campground. Not sure why I chose to stop there instead of heading straight to Bellingham. I'd have made it, maybe, if I hadn't stopped. The time there was wasted. A hopeful dream that hadn't panned out. Not real.

What is real: this crumbling road. My worn-out prison boots stepping one foot a time down the cracked asphalt. The sun moving high overhead, then dipping down as I trudge. The sweat forming on my shoulders where the backpack rubs. I'm tired, but I'm not gonna stop till I glimpse the Puget Sound. I figure I've only got a couple miles to go.

The road enters a forest, and I decide I'd better at least eat something before continuing my trek. I move off to the side to take a break, not getting too far because of thick tangles of blackberry brambles near the edge of the asphalt. I sit cross-legged in the weedy ditch beside the road and pull out a can of beans. I mangle the lid open with the knife. I hate to dull it—it took me a long time to scrape all the rust off the blade

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and whet it 'til it was sharp enough to slice through practically anything.

“Sorry, knife,” I whisper before wiping it clean on the grass and sliding it back in the scabbard. I tilt the can and let the cold beans trickle into my mouth. They're tasteless but at least they're food.

Behind me, I hear a sputtering sound. A rusty truck nears, its bed full of logs and its solar bouncing precariously on the cab's roof. I scramble to my feet, chuck the empty can into the bushes, and reach for the knife in its scabbard. The truck slows, inching past, engine growling like a predatory cat, gravel crunching under its tires. A skinny man with a scraggly brown beard grips the wheel and ogles me as the truck creeps past. He's thinking about stopping, I can tell. I yank out the knife, hoping he'll notice it. He does and drives on. Good. He might be friendly, but that's not my experience, not in this despairing world. Any charity he'd be willing to give, he'd expect payment for, and I'm not desperate enough yet to give it. Sometimes giving in is smarter than fighting, but right now I've got food in my backpack and aqua to drink. Not so hopeless yet.

I trudge on, but faster now. The landscape opens after the woods. I pass an old church on my right, half gutted, gray with age, but maybe it was white once. Maybe with a sparkling cross on the roof. I pass the graveyard next to it, so weedy and brambly you can hardly see the stones. On the road's left side, thorny blackberry vines slowly devour a run-down farmhouse. It was white once too. You can tell by the bits of paint clinging to it. The upstairs windows are smashed and full of cobwebs. An old rope tied to the branch of a big fir tree sways in the breeze. Makes me wonder who lived here, if they had kids, and if any

of those kids looked like Jack. Maybe they had a tire tied to the rope and used to swing on it. It looks like a good tire-swinging tree. But nobody lives there now.

I keep walking. Past the old house, the road wanders into a grove of apple trees where the blackberry vines haven't invaded yet. The branches drip with fruit – real, fresh, stunningly red fruit. I scramble toward the nearest tree.

Up the road, there's a dust cloud. The pickup's unmistakable outline bursts through, its bed now free of logs. The man with the scraggly beard must've dumped his load and decided a possible clash with my knife was a worthwhile risk. I dive behind a gnarled apple tree. Maybe he hasn't spotted me yet.

I listen for the sound of wheels crunching over loose rocks as I flatten my body against the ground, praying the tangled undergrowth and my dirty backpack'll camouflage me. The sound gets closer, then stops. A rusty door creaks open but don't creak shut.

My heart pounds against the ground, and I wonder if it's sending any seismic tremors the boots now clomping closer can sense. I grind my face into the sweet-smelling dirt.

Wait a minute...

God, what a stupid thing I've done. I've actually assumed the position. Face down, arms useless, I can't even get in a good kick from this angle. All this guy has to do is fall on top of me, and he's good to go. I'll be completely helpless.

A flicker of rage replaces a bit of my terror. I roll over and jump up to face him before he can reach me, my heart thumping and my knife out and ready. A second later and it's been too late. He's close, just steps away. If he had moved quicker...

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He stops now, though, eyes fixed on my knife. He smiles, a dirty, toothless grimace, and reaches to his side and pulls out a much bigger knife. Practically a machete.

A part of my brain begins to reason. Is it worth fighting this? The other half (the more insistent side) is ramping up its rage. Hell, yes.

“Hey!”

The man glances behind him.

My eyes follow.

A huge black dog bounds through the orchard, heading straight for us. A man runs behind it, carrying an axe. I’m pretty sure axe will trump knife, but the sight of that man don’t slow my hammering heart.

The skinny man stands his ground, though. “Call yer dog off, Rogers!” His voice is high, crackly, like he’s sucked in years of forest fire smoke.

“I’ll call him off once you get away from her,” the man yells back. His voice is nicer – deep and pleasant even though he sounds mad.

The skinny man snarls but backs up a step. “You don’t own this orchard, Rogers. And you owe me, don’t forget it.”

“That has nothin’ to do with this girl, though, does it?”

The skinny man turns to face my unexpected knight in shining armor.

Big mistake. I raise my knife and jump.

But the Rogers guy sees me and yells, “No...wait!”, which gives the skinny man enough time to dart sideways. My knife slides past him. He growls but, as the man with the axe advances and the big black dog snarls, realizes he’s outnumbered and does the only sensible thing. He leaps for his truck and veers

it down the potholed road. The dog hurtles toward me, and I back against the nearest tree, swishing my knife in a wild arc I hope that monster won't dare cross. My frantic heart beats more wildly in fear of this dog than it did for the skinny man.

"Hey!" the man called Rogers says. "It's OK. Laddie won't hurt ya. He's friendly." He's replaced the fierceness in his voice with something softer and kinder, but I've been fooled by voices like that before. He whistles for the dog, who stops and bounds back to him.

I take a deep breath, willing my knife-wielding arm to stop shaking. The last dogs I met, big and black like this one, patrolled the prison perimeter with the guards. Those beasts definitely didn't wanna be friends.

I squeak out, "D-don't like dogs."

The man nods. "OK. I won't let him near ya. Anyway, that guy's gone now. It's a good thing we were walkin' this way, huh, Laddie?"

The dog gives the man's hand a slobbery lick. "Please don't be scared of Laddie. He's gotta big bark, but he loves people. 'Specially women. He don't like Jimmy. Jimmy tried to kick him once."

Yeah, just 'cause he says this monster is safe don't mean I'm gonna believe it. I don't trust dogs. I don't trust this guy either, no matter how nice he's pretending to be. He looks to be in his thirties. His blondish hair is thinning and laugh lines crinkle around two disarmingly vivid and innocent-looking blue eyes, but I'm not fooled. No man is innocent. He's acting way too friendly, and friendly men don't stay that way, not once they sneak up close. I back up a step, keeping my knife's deadly point aimed at him and the dog.

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“It’s all right,” he says again. Dropping the axe, he holds up his hands. “We aren’t like that guy. We won’t hurt ya. Are you hungry? Go ahead and have an apple, if you want.”

I pause, my mind whirring and my heart thumping faster than a rabbit running from a fox. I have two choices here – make a break for it and run like hell or trust this guy. My experiences with dogs have taught me I can’t outrun ‘em. At this point, my safest option is trust.

I lower the knife slightly. “Listen, I don’t mean to steal or nothin’. I’m gettin’ down to nothin’ in the backpack, and those apples looked stunno. Couldn’t help myself.”

The man says, “I know. But it’s OK. You aren’t stealin’. The Millers – they lived in the farmhouse down the road – they owned this orchard, but they’re gone now. So, the apples are here for whoever wants ‘em. My fam owns the land over there.” With the hand not gripping Laddie’s collar, he points to some empty fields with a line of trees behind ‘em.

A chimney top pokes above the apple trees, smoke spiraling from it and winding into the sky. The house must be attached to it somewhere, but I can’t see it.

I take a deep breath and sheathe the knife before reaching for a ripe red apple dangling over my head.

The man grins. He’s got white teeth. “Where ya headed?”

I bite into the apple before I answer. Rude, I guess, but boy, is this apple stunno. I haven’t had fresh fruit for ages. The cool, sweet juice slides down my throat. “Bellingham, I hope.”

The man lets Laddie go, which almost unnerves me, but the dog, losing interest in the newness of me, snuffles over to another tree and lies under it, panting.

I pluck more apples and stuff 'em into my backpack.

"Not much left of Bellingham," the man says. "Fires have gutted most of it. Some folks still live on the outskirts. You have fam there?"

My heart sinks. "My uncle. Talked to him a while ago on the vid. He was still in Bellingham, then."

I don't mention that "a while ago" was before I got hauled to prison and I haven't heard from Uncle Pete since I got out, no matter how many desperate messages I send him. Before I landed in prison, I'd been slowly winding my way west in the admittedly ridiculous hope of actually finding a relative still surviving in this charred wasteland.

"It's a long way to walk," the man says. "You'll hafta go all the way to the Sound and take the road goin' up the coast. Ten miles or so." He smiles, a nice, contented, lazy smile.

It's weird to see a grown man smile like that. He reminds me more of a carefree kid than an adult — like the boy Jack, back in the mountains. I liked Jack 'cause amid all the fear and hunger and danger, he stayed cheerful and smiling. Innocent. Kinda like this guy. For the first time since the campground in the mountains, I relax a little.

"So," I say, just to make some sorta conversation. "Must be nice to have all these apples to eat whenever you want."

"Yep. But we're done pickin' the apples now."

I scan the orchard. "Seems like you have scads left to pick."

"Yeah, but we don't have much *time* left. We're leavin' Cascadia. Pearl...she's my sis...says we'll leave the apples for the Morlocks."

I pick another apple and stuff it into my now bulging backpack. "The what?"

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“The folks livin’ in the abandoned houses out in the woods. They’re all over the place, and they’re always hungry.”

“And you call ‘em ...Morlocks?”

He laughs. “Well, that’s Pearl’s name for ‘em. She’s always namin’ stuff after things from her fave books. Morlocks was the name of some evil race in some old story she read, and she don’t like the folks out in the woods, so that’s what she dubbed ‘em.”

“Was that guy...the one who attacked me...was he a...Morlock?”

“Yeah, but they’re not all bad. Just some of ‘em. Rest are desperate, I suppose. Hungry. They’re always hangin’ ‘round the orchard. Pearl hates ‘em so close to our place, but it’s not like we own the orchard or nothin’.”

I inch farther away from the road, deeper into the orchard. “No, you can’t blame ‘em. But that guy...”

“Jimmy,” the man says.

“Yeah, he *was* bad.”

“Well, he’s got some good points, but not many, I’ll agree.”

“What did he mean when he said you owed him?”

He shrugs. “Did a business deal once, and he reckons I stiffed him. He’ll get over it. What’s your name?”

“Oh. Sorry. It’s Miriam.”

“That’s a nice name. Mine’s Steven.”

I shove the last sweet bite of apple into my mouth, throw away the core, and hold out my hand. “Glad to meet ya, Steven. Thanks for savin’ me from that guy.”

“Well,” he says, taking my hand and shaking it, “Laddie saved you more than me. I don’t reckon you’ll be safe though, tryin’ to walk to Bellingham. He’ll be out lookin’ for you.” He



frowns, then his face brightens. "Come to our house with me. You'll be safe there. We have lots of room. You can at least spend the night."

He moves off in the chimney's direction, the obedient dog trailing his steps. "Come with us," he calls. "I'll show ya the house. You can meet the fam."

I glance back at the rutted road. Spend the night, huh? I don't trust the innocence of that statement one iota, no matter how nice this guy seems. On the other hand, what are the odds of finding an unknown uncle who don't answer his vid? And I do have my knife, if this Steven guy tries anything funny. True, he's got an axe, but...

I swivel my gaze away from the road, toward a sprawling roof, now a little more visible, poking over the trees. A change is about to happen here, and it depends upon the next decision I make.

A slew of images flash through my mind, sudden and intense.

I picture a long trudge up a never-ending, pot-holed road and finally crumpling to the ground in exhaustion or being taken captive by the skinny Morlock in the beat-up truck.

I see Steven's house and a big dining room inside and a table heaped with food.

I glimpse the smoking ruins of Bellingham, vicious gangs rioting through its streets, my uncle dead in a ditch.

Finally, my mind fills with images of a nice feather bed and a servant carrying in my breakfast on a tray.

Probably none of these images are anywhere near reality, but they help me choose. I glance once more toward the road, then shrug my backpack into a more comfy position.

"Let's go," I say.

## 2

I'M NOT BIG on fate, but I wonder if maybe fate drove me and Laddie to trek on over to the apple orchard right in time to save Miriam, although she probably could've saved herself. I mean, why else would I have gone there? I always hated harvestin' time – days and days of nothin' but pickin' apples and pullin' up pumpkins and beans and then havin' to plow everythin' before winter. Pearl says there's nothin' more satisfyin' than stockin' the larder before winter sets in, but I don't think so. It's imperative but tedious.

I watch her now, Miriam, as we push past the orchard's gropin', gnarled branches and reach the top of the ridge and head down again. Below us lies my house, a huge, ramblin' brick buildin'. It was beautiful once – a palace in olden times – but now sags like a king past his mighty youth who waits for some young usurper to finish him off and take the throne. Brambles grow thick along the brick walls, and sluffed-off roof tiles lie in piles on the ground. A couple cracked solars swing over the gutters, useless now but no point in fixin' 'em. A high, ugly chain-link fence choked with blackberry vines and crowned with loops of rusted barbed wire surrounds the house and our old, gray barn. Miriam stops and stares at it all, frownin' at the barbed wire like it reminds her of some place unpleasant.

I say, "Welcome to Toad Hall," as I touch my thumb to a pad next to the gate and the gate skitters open.

Miriam laughs as she squeezes in, gazin' at the mansion in front of us. "What kinda name is Toad Hall?"

I laugh too, and lead her up the brick steps to the long patio with high white columns. The patio'd be more majestic if junk didn't cover it: cobwebs and dust cling to an ancient washer board, tons of empty garden pots, and an old airplane propeller, and I feel kinda ashamed showin' her this mess, but I don't guess she cares. I say, "Pearl again. Her fave book when she was a kid was *The Wind in the Willows*. Ever read it?"

"Can't say I have."

"It's all 'bout a mole and a rat and a toad and their adventures, and the toad lives in this big house called Toad Hall. Anyway, way back when she was a kid, she started callin' the house Toad Hall, and the name kinda stuck."

I open the huge wooden door and move over to let her in. We step into the main foyer, so vast the tread of our boots echoes through it.

"Wow." Miriam's eyes sweep 'round the foyer, takin' in the dusty marble floor, the grand staircase spiralin' outta sight, and the large paintin' hangin' on one wall. It's almost human-sized and shows a tall man with wispy gray hair and a bright smile standin' on a pink beach.

Miriam says, "Who's that?"

I can't help but brag a bit. "I painted it. That's the Pater."

"The who?"

"The guy who owned this place. He died way before I was born. Pearl and Grant and Mike, they call him Dad. But Kira and me, we came here way after he died, so Pearl said we should call him the *pater familias*, which is too long so we shortened it to the Pater."

She looks totally lost with this explanation – too many names, I guess. She says, "Oh."

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I go on. "Anyway, I painted it from an old photo."

"It's stunno. It's like I could almost step into that paintin' and feel the pink sand slidin' between my toes. Where's the beach?"

"That's the Mermaid's Lagoon. It's one of my fave places."

She frowns. "The Mermaid's Lagoon?"

"Mhm. A long way from here. Near the 'quator." I gaze up at the Pater, feelin' a little sad 'cause I might not ever see this paintin' again. It's way too big to take with us. But mostly, I'm excited. I can't wait to leave this place. No more farmin'. No more workin' in the fields all day just tryin' to survive. After years of bein' stuck here, I'll finally be off on an adventure again.

I turn to look at the girl standin' next to me, wonderin' where she came from and what'll happen to her. Where she'll go, what she'll do. If she'll even survive. She looks like a fighter, but even good fighters lose eventually.

She grips her backpack straps tighter and says, "Well, he looks like a nice guy."

I smile. "C'mon."

We move through the foyer, Laddie trottin' at our heels. We pass under a chandelier drippin' with crystals that sparkle in the weak sunlight floodin' through a dusty window. We enter Toad Hall's vast kitchen.

Miriam stops and stares. "This place is stunno," she whispers again.

I scan the room. Kinda sad knowin' I won't sit at that table to eat breakfast maybe ever again, once we leave. Pearl won't bake bread in the ovens, Kira won't stand over at that counter, grindin' beans and wheat groats into flour. "It is stunno. But we're leavin' it."

"Why? This place is so incredible. I could live here forever."

NIKKI BENNETT

“Not if you had to always be farmin’ it. You’d always stuck here and can’t go anywhere. And every year, the farmin’ gets worse. Either too much rain or not enough of it. Plus, Mike – my brother, he’s a doctor – he says Pan4 is headin’ this way. And it’s bad, this virus. So, we have another place we can go. Some place far away from here where we’ll be safe.”

I fall silent. She ponders me with clear, green eyes, but she don’t ask any more questions. I bet she understands wantin’ to run from Pan4. The whole world wants to run from it.

Her eyes lock onto the long kitchen counter loaded with our treasure trove of food – containers of beans and rice, sacks of taters, a crateful of apples, three humongous wheels of cheese. “Where’d you get all this?”

I laugh. “We do live on a farm, you know. The crop wasn’t great this year, but we still managed to eke out somethin’. We’ve got even more stashed away in the cellar. We still have some packin’ to do before we’re ready to leave.”

“You’re takin’ all this with you when you go?”

“Well, we sure aren’t gonna leave it. There’s no food where we’re headin’. Gotta bring our own.”

She stares at the food with hungry eyes. Then, she cocks her head. “What’s that?”

Musical notes float through the kitchen, driftin’ from a room farther in. The tune is upliftin’ and sad at the same time. It’s Kira, playin’ her violin. I motion Miriam away from the mouthwaterin’ temptations. Better get this over with. Pearl isn’t gonna like it. We leave the kitchen, pass through the dinin’ room, and enter the library.

And here they are. My fam. They’re all sprawled about. Pearl’s sittin’ on the floor, stackin’ her fave books in a pile on

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the dusty carpet. Kira lounges in an armchair, movin' her bow slowly across the violin strings. Mike sprawls across the love seat in the corner; he's starin' at his vid. And Grant sits ramrod straight in a highbacked chair, starin' at absolutely nothin'.

They don't notice us at first, not 'til Miriam gasps. Her wide green eyes take in the high ceilin', then the rows and rows of shelves filled with all the books that Pearl hasn't pulled down yet. The library is the most impressive room in Toad Hall, I guess, 'specially the big bay windows with the red velvet curtains that look out over the apple orchard.

When Miriam lets out that gasp, everyone's eyes swivel our way. They stare at us in silence for a moment, then Pearl—her pudgy face lookin' furious, drops the book she's holdin', pushes her long, grayin' hair outta her face, points at Miriam and says, "Who the hell are you?"

Oh, here we go. My tum knots a bit as I say, "This is Miriam. I saved her from the Morlocks. Miriam, this is my fam." I point to Pearl, the closest thing to a mother I've got, although she's always told me she's not really my mother so I should call her Pearl, never Mom. "This is Pearl. She owns Toad Hall."

Pearl frowns at me and picks up the abandoned book. "That's right, Steven, and you should remember that."

I try to laugh, although it sounds nervous and false. I move my finger toward Mike, loungin' on the love seat. He's a few years older than Pearl, in his early sixties. He studies Miriam, his saggin' jowls droopin' even further as he frowns, and he scratches a crown of white hair circlin' a splotchy bald spot with slightly shakin' fingers. "This is Dr. Michael Rogers."

Mike forces his frown into a hesitant smile and says in his soft, comfortin' voice, "You can call me Mike."

Kira, who just turned sixteen a couple months ago, blinks at Miriam with brown eyes half-hidden behind thick black bangs. The violin rests under her chin, and she half-heartedly draws the bow across the strings. She manages to look contemplative, bored, and angry all at the same time. That's my little sis for you, although she isn't really my sis. She says, before I can, "I'm Kira."

Miriam says, "Hi."

Lastly, I point to the highbacked chair and the grizzled old man sittin' in it. "And that's Grant."

Miriam says, "Hi," to Grant too, but Grant stares into nothin', not acknowledgin' her at all. It don't surprise me, but it does surprise her. She scrutinizes him, takin' in his thin gray hair tied in a long braid, eyes so sunken under wrinkly folds you can barely see 'em. Speckles and spots cover the olive color of his face, neck, hands. Unlike the others, who gape at Miriam with a mixture of curiosity, fear, and anger, Grant stares zombie-like at a point somewhere over her shoulder.

After an uncomfortable silence, Pearl says with a decided snap to her voice, "Again, Steven, what's she doing here?"

How do I explain this? Pearl hates guests. 'Specially if she thinks they might be a Morlock, and I can tell by the way she's glarin' holes into Miriam's face that she's formin' this opinion right quick. "She was hungry and didn't have a place to stay."

"Half the country is hungry and don't have a place to stay. You gonna invite 'em all in? What do you reckon we put up a fence for? What if she's diseased?"

Mike yawns. "She looks OK. Don't jump to any conclusions."

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Pearl smacks the book she's holdin' onto the top of the stack, which totters under it. "You can't tell simply by looking, Mike."

He gives her a thin-lipped smile. "I am a doctor, Pearl."

"Pan4 can be asymptomatic, you said so yourself. Even if she is healthy, what if she's...one of them?"

Kira lowers her violin and scans Miriam's face. "She isn't."

Pearl turns to her, eyes narrowin'. "How the hell would you know, Kira?"

Kira's eyes drop to the violin. "Wild guess."

Miriam clears her throat. "I'm new here. My truck died a few miles back. I'm on my way to Bellingham."

Pearl snaps, "Then I suggest you keep moving that way."

God, Pearl can sometimes be such a callous bitch, although I'd never say that directly to her face. Miriam clenches her fist and lets out a slow breath, lookin' like she's really tryin' to keep her temper in.

Pearl isn't done. Turnin' to me, she says, "Why do you always do this? Bring in...strays?"

Now, that's not fair. It's not like Miriam is some kinda abandoned puppy. I glance at her. Her fists clench so tight, her nails must be diggin' right into her palms.

I say, "I just wanted to say goodbye to the apple orchard. And I found her there." I don't go on to explain what was about to happen when I found her, which Miriam looks thankful for. I bet she wants to forget that as quick as I do.

Pearl is gettin' super worked up. She's almost screamin' and cryin' at the same time, and my tum begins to clench. I hate it when she goes maniac. "Dammit, you've had months to say goodbye, Steven. Do you believe leaving here is easy for any of



us? No! But do you reckon we're gonna jeopardize everything by, at the last damn second, letting vagrants in?"

Miriam's face is turnin' red in her effort not to yell back. I don't like arguin' with Pearl, but it's only fair I stand up for Miriam, since I invited her into Toad Hall. "Pearl, nobody wants to be homeless. How's any of this her fault? Can't you show some charity? She's nice, and she needs a place to sleep."

Pearl frowns, takes a deep, steadyin' breath, then says, "Mike, check her. Make sure she's OK."

Mike turns to Miriam. "You got a chip?"

Miriam's hand instinctively raises and grips her left shoulder. "Course I do."

"Mind if I check it?"

"Why?" The question comes out harsh. She's hidin' somethin'. Must be somethin' on her chip she don't want us to know about, and I wonder what it is.

Mike says, "Relax. Pearl wants to make sure...you know... that you weren't exposed to Pan4. Have you been tested at any point?"

Miriam nods. "They checked me in...well, in the last town I lived in, when folks started comin' down with it. I must've been OK, otherwise..." She frowns, and falls silent.

Mike moves slowly toward her, like he's approachin' a startled deer who might bolt any second. "Well, I have a med vid. I can scan your chip with it, see your medical records. Do I have your permission?"

She takes a deep breath. "You're only gonna look at my medical data, right?"

Pearl's eyes narrow. Mike says, "Of course."

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“OK.” She moves toward him, steppin’ cautiously around Pearl’s stack of books. They meet somewhere in the middle of the room, and he passes the vid over her left shoulder. His eyes study the vid’s screen. “She tested negative, Pearl.”

“How long ago?”

“A month.” Mike turns to Miriam. “Had much contact with others since then?”

“No. I’ve kept mostly to myself.”

I give Pearl my best pleadin’ look. “She’s OK, Pearl. And it’s a big house. She can stay at least for tonight, can’t she?”

I didn’t realize how nervous I was ‘bout Pearl kickin’ this girl out, but now my tum twists in knots as Pearl’s fiery eyes bore into Miriam, a frown coverin’ half her face. Laddie bumps into me and whines, and I steady myself by grabbin’ his collar.

Mike nods toward Laddie. “That’s another thing we haven’t made a decision on yet. What about the dog? You can’t expect us to bring him.”

My hand grips Laddie’s collar. “We can’t leave him. Laddie is part of the fam.”

Pearl turns those fiery eyes onto me. “You’ve had him for less than a year. He’s not coming.”

I crouch next to the dog and encircle his neck with my arms. Laddie whines and licks my face with a slobbery pink tongue. “How come you’re so harsh, Pearl? Throw Miriam out to the wolves, abandon Laddie. Why?”

Pearl’s blazin’ gaze suddenly goes all soft and sad, and tears well up in ‘em. Before she can respond, Grant – who’s stared into space all this time – jerks to his feet and fixes his eyes on Laddie.

“The dog comes with us,” he says.

Totally surprises me, his voice. We hardly hear it at all anymore, he never talks. And that depth and strength comin' outta such a feeble-lookin' sack of old bones. Reminds me of the old days, before he got all zombie, when he was the best person to talk to, to teach you things, to confide secrets to. His eyes leave the dog and fix on Miriam. Those eyes...mere seconds ago they were dull and unseein'. Now they penetrate into her.

"She comes too." Grant sits down, and his eyes zombie out again.

Kira lowers her bow and says, "Why?"

But the old man don't say a thing. He slumps back into his chair, eyes contemplatin' the flickerin' candle and ignorin' everythin' else.

Kira turns to Mike. "How the hell does he do that? Total clarity right when it's the most convenient? Is that a normal zombie symptom, Mike?"

"It can be," Mike says. "It'll get rarer as he progresses."

Miriam ventures a question. "He's got the Pan4 zombie?"

Mike says, "No, no...we're all free of that. Not many cases around here yet, although it's creeping closer. Grant got sick during the second pandemic though, way back, maybe fifty years ago. We believe this – zombie state – is a long-term effect of that."

Kira glances at Miriam, then turns to Pearl. "Are we actually gonna do what Grant says just 'cause he says it?"

Pearl frowns, starin' at the old man's dead eyes. "No, course not. But I guess she can stay the night, at least."

That's not good enough, not anymore. I turn to Miriam, who is still starin' at Grant. "He said she should come with us. Laddie too. And why not? We got room."

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“No,” Pearl says. “We don’t. It’s a small ship, Steven. And we still need to finish packing.”

I shoot Pearl a mutinous glare. For once, I’m angry with her, not scared of her moods. “You don’t always get to pick, Pearl. This might be your house, but it’s my ship. And my dog. Laddie’s comin’. And Miriam can come too, if I say so.”

Up ‘til then, I hadn’t thought ‘bout Miriam comin’ with us at all. Did I say it just to piss off Pearl? Or — and I stare at the girl with her chopped red hair and thin, tough body and green eyes, half-scared and half-defiant — is it ‘cause I wanna protect her? I started it in the apple orchard when I confronted Jimmy, now it feels like I should keep it up. Help her out. Make sure she’s safe.

Pearl turns toward me, her face red and puffy with anger, like a giant tomato that’s about to explode. Miriam’s got a look like she don’t wanna get involved with this. She cuts in before Pearl can say anythin’. “Listen, I’ve already been on a long trip. I traveled all the way here from the east coast...”

Kira almost drops her violin. “East?”

Mike says, “For the last time, we’re not going to head east, Kira. We’re heading west.”

Miriam ignores this exchange and turns to me. “Where the hell are you figurin’ on goin’, anyway?”

I take a few steps across the library, toward her. She’s standin’ in a pool of light floodin’ in through the tall windows. “If you’re comin’ with us, you oughtta know.”

“I didn’t say I’d —”

Pearl, at this point, stands and stomps out of the room, cursin’ under her breath. She stomps so hard that her carefully stacked pile of books totters, then falls. Mike sighs and heads after her. “I’d better go calm her down.”

“Listen,” I say, almost whisperin’, as Mike tromps off after Pearl, “our fam owns an island down south. We’ve had it for... well, forever, since back when Grant was a little kid, when the fam had money for that sort of thing.”

Miriam studies me for a minute, then says, “The island with the Mermaid’s Lagoon? In the paintin’ you did?”

“Yes.”

Kira says, “It’s secluded, so we won’t get Pan4 there, that’s for sure. But I say we should –”

Ugh, not this argument again. I raise my hand. “We know what you think, Kira, but we’ve voted on it. We’re not travelin’ east. Pan4 is that way. We’d be headin’ right into the thick of it, which don’t make any sense. And we aren’t gonna try and ride it out here, not when we can sail west, to our island – to Avalon.” I turn to Miriam. “It’s got a bunker we can stay in, and we’ve scrounged enough supplies to hold out for a few months.”

Miriam says, “And then?”

This is the weaker part of the plan. We’re still arguin’ ‘bout it. “Then we’ll head back home, I guess. Hopefully Pan4 will have run its course by then.”

Kira stands. “We should head east, where high civ is. Pan4 is probably finished there now.” She turns to Miriam. “You came from the east. It’s better there, right?”

Miriam shakes her head. “I don’t wanna go back east. I left there a couple years ago, right when Pan4 creeped in and folks were startin’ to panic. Not sure what it’s like now, but when I left, it was bad enough.”

I say, “Avalon is the safest place. We’ll wait ‘til Pan4 runs its course, and after that, we’ll decide what to do from there. Once we finish packin’ the boat, we’ll be ready to go.”

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Miriam shuffles over to Mike's vacated love seat and sits, tryin' to take all this in. "Steven, I've never set foot on a boat in my life. And you wanna go hole up on an island?" She turns to Grant, with his zombie eyes starin' at nothin'. "So how long's he been like this?"

"Over a year now."

She ponders this for a minute. "You reckon he knew what he was sayin' when he said I could go?"

I shrug. "What does it matter? It's my boat, and I say you can go."

Kira says, "Pearl isn't gonna like it. You know how she gets 'bout strangers."

I sit in a chair opposite Miriam. "I'll talk to her. Listen, Miriam, Grant don't talk much, but when he does, he usually has somethin' important to say. Anyway, this house won't be safe once we leave. We're plannin' to sneak out, but it won't take long before the Morlocks get wise and try breakin' in."

Kira picks her violin back up and plucks at the strings with one finger. "Maybe they won't. Why would they want a crumblin' big house?"

Miriam chews on her lower lip for a minute, then says, "When are you plannin' to leave?"

She's gonna say yes. I'm surprised by the flood of relief that washes over me. "We still have to load the boat with the remainin' food and a few other supplies. We could probably get it all done in a couple days if we work at it. Then we'll be ready to go."

Miriam scans our faces one more time. I wonder what she's thinkin'. I mean, she don't know us from nobody. Why the hell would she even think 'bout joinin' us? Our whole plan

is kinda nuts, from a stranger's point of view anyway. From mine, I can't wait to get to Avalon. I'm sure it's the safest place.

Miriam closes her eyes for a second, then she opens 'em and says, "OK. I'm in."

### 3

WE SPEND MOST of the afternoon loading food onto the *Argo*, 'til it gets too dark. Pearl, thankfully, stays away. She claims her sciatica is flaring up and she needs to rest, but I think she is mostly pissed that I'm here and wants to avoid me. The others don't seem too upset about me joining their group. They're a bit leery, I guess, but after we're done for the day, they give me a really good meal and a four-poster bed to sleep in, like a princess in the fairy tales Mom used to read me when I was a kid. I crawl into it, feeling fairly safe for a change. A bit scared about what I signed up for, but still like a princess in a high turret, protected from the world.

It isn't as pleasant as I expected, though. Dust covers the bedspread and pillows, and I keep waking up, sneezing. I'm used to sleeping in rough places — backseats of cars, stony ground, concrete floors — but I can't get comfy on the bed's lumpy mattress. Like the princess and the pea. I finally give up and focus on the dark canopy dangling over my head, still dumbfounded as to why I said yes to this. I'll be cooped up on a boat with these strangers, plus a dog, possibly for weeks. What am I doing?

I should've said no. Seems to me, bobbing on an angry ocean is no safer than dodging nados on land. Even more dangerous, 'cause you can't take shelter on the sea. Sounds like absolute suicide.

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But when the old man fixed his eyes on me, it was like he reached into my mind. The others might've only heard his deep voice, but in my head, a calm, soft voice had whispered, "This is it. This is the way." Did his mind connect with mine somehow? I've never bought into mystical stuff before. Plenty of people out there pretend they're prophets, pretend to offer salvation if you only'll believe in 'em, but most are trying to con you outta something, and the ones who believe they're telling the truth only believe it 'cause they're truly loopy in the head.

But it felt so right when Grant said, "She comes too." Maybe I was happy somebody wanted me, was willing to let me join their fam. And although I'm not sure how to deal with this—it's all happening so fast—it came down to two options. Stay here and keep searching for an uncle I've never met and don't know how to find, or take my chances with these people, who I don't know either but at least I've found 'em, or maybe they've found me.

I roll over, trying to get comfy, but a nervous knot tightens in my tum, like a noose. I sneeze again and cough as something raspy invades my lungs. Something harsh. Burny...

I bolt up in the bed and stare out the dusty window. An eerie light, red and shimmery, creeps into the room.

Fire.

Dammit, not now. Not when I've finally felt the tiniest ping of security. I roll off the bed, grab my backpack, and fling it over my shoulders. Laddie, who for some reason had insisted on staying in my room, yawns and raises his head before his sleepy eyes suddenly clear and get all alert. He sniffs the air and whines.



*Stupid dog, I smelt it before you did.* I push past him, into the long, dark hallway. "Move it, Laddie!"

Laddie lumbers behind me, his heavy claws scratching against the wooden floor. The rest of the house is silent as a tomb.

I turn to the dog. "Where are they? Where do they sleep?"

He whines again and lopes down the hall, stopping at a heavy wooden door and scratching it.

I push past him and yank on the doorknob. The door is locked. Why the hell would someone lock their door in a house all wrapped in high fences and barbed wire? I pound on the wood. "Wake up! Fire!"

Seconds later, Pearl hobbles into the hall. She has to wrestle with a frantic Laddie, who flings himself against her legs, yelping. "Damn dog," she growls. "Get away from me! What did you say?"

"Fire—looks like it's close. We've gotta get outta here."

Pearl stares at me for a split second, like she's wondering whether to believe me or not. She sniffs, hobbles to a window, gazes at the glowing sky. "Shit." She turns to me. "Go get Steven and Mike. They're down that corridor. I'll need their help with Grant."

I run, banging on their doors, and in a few minutes we're all crammed into Grant's room where we find him sitting, fully dressed, on the edge of his bed, as if he'd been waiting for us, zombie eyes staring at nothing.

Mike grabs his gnarled hand. "Let's go, Grant," he whispers, the terror in his eyes refusing to affect his calm voice.

I'm the first to run outside. The blaze is close. Half the apple orchard is crackling, the fresh fruit popping in the inferno. A wave of heat sweeps over me, almost knocking me backward with its strength.

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Steven slams his thumb onto the security pad and yanks open the gate. "Head to the pier. Go! I'll help the others."

I glance at the house. Behind it, the orchard is lit up all red and orange. The panicky part of my brain tells me there's no way I can run fast enough—the fire inches closer by the second—but the saner part senses that the wind is blowing south not west and we might outpace the ravenous monster if we're quick. I take a deep breath and half choke on a lungful of smoke.

The pier isn't far. After making several trips to it last evening, I know it's only about a quarter mile. I run, glancing behind me when I'm about halfway there. Kira huffs close on my heels, her violin case swinging wildly in one hand, followed in the distance by a much slower Mike guiding a shuffling Grant and Steven helping a hobbling Pearl. I find myself stopping, teetering on whether I should keep booking toward the pier or go back and help.

"You guys OK back there?" I yell as Kira jets past me.

Pearl's got a look of complete terror on her face, but she also looks torn, like she wants to escape the fire but at the same time is itching to run back and protect her house. Mike has a frightened but determined look, and Grant stares all zombie at nothing.

Only Steven remains calm. "We're fine," he calls. "Don't worry 'bout us. We'll get there. Keep movin'."

I turn back to the path. Kira is already almost out of sight, and I take off after her. I finally glimpse the sound in the moonlight. We clamber down the steep metal steps that wind down the rocky cliff, and sprint to the rickety pier's end where the dinghy bobs. The actual ship is moored farther out, away from the waves sloshing against the cliff.

Now Kira jumps into the dinghy, stuffing her violin case under her bench. I climb in and glance back at the others. Pearl hobbles across the pier, leaning on a cane. Steven and Mike help Grant down the steep steps, each holding onto one of Grant's thin arms. I raise my gaze higher, to where the flames now lick the treetops.

"Kira, look," I whisper.

Pinpricks of light shine above the cliffs. Not the dull red from the roaring fire but small, sharp dots of yellow. Flashlights. Frantic screams follow the beams of light.

Kira says, "It's the Morlocks."

Steven glances back and sees 'em too, then says something to Mike. I watch, my tum clenching, as they practically shove Grant off the stairs and drag him down the pier. The crowd behind them hurtles down the stairs so fast I'm amazed the rusting, rickety structure don't collapse under the weight.

Pearl reaches the dinghy and falls in, gasping. "Fucking Morlocks. Kira, get out there and untie us."

"The others aren't here yet," Kira says, shrinking to the farthest spot in the boat and staring at the crowd heading down the stairs.

I jump out of the boat. "I'll do it."

After yesterday's work of lugging supplies to the ship, I know what to do. I pull the rope from the cleat and glance behind me. Steven and Mike have Grant halfway down the pier, but the screaming, panicky crowd behind them are fast catching up.

A sudden sadness for those people washes over me. Desperation is etched into their faces. Flames lick the air behind 'em, gobbling up the woods. The only path open is the one leading 'em straight to our tiny boat. I half-hope they make it.

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Then, my eyes lock with their leader's – the skinny man who tried to attack me – and my sympathy melts, replaced by the ever-familiar instinct to survive. It's them or us. This dinghy won't hold another soul, 'cept for the ones already destined to float away on it.

I drop the rope and, in a weird, angry haze, run as I pull my knife from its sheath. My eyes lock onto the skinny man with the stringy beard. A raging inferno fills my head, hotter than the fire eating its way toward the poor people trying to escape it. I push past Steven and the others.

"Where ya goin'?" he yells.

"Get yer fam on the boat!" I scream. "I'll hold 'em off."

This is nuts. I should turn 'round and help Steven get Grant to the boat. It'd be the safest plan. My logical brain screams this, but pounding rage overwhelms it, eats it up. I barrel toward the skinny man, followed by a furiously barking Laddie. Some of the Morlocks hesitate, but not the skinny man. He charges down the pier, but he's looking at something past me.

A growl bursts from his throat. "Damn you, Rogers!" he roars. "That boat is ours!"

"Like hell it is!" Steven yells.

Behind the crowd, the raging fire licks the trees lining the cliff. The last of the Morlocks crowd the stairs, scrambling to reach the rickety pier's uncertain safety. I wonder for an instant if Toad Hall still stands or if fire is right now devouring it, turning Steven's beautiful painting to ash, eating up my fairy-tale four-poster bed and its dusty, fluttering canopy, consuming all those books in that huge, beautiful library.

I glance behind me. Mike has the rope in his hand and has pulled the dinghy back against the pier. He's helping Grant

onto the dinghy. Steven is running my way. All we gotta do now is race back to the others and hop in the boat, and we could be off before the crowd reaches us.

Pearl yells, "Get back here, you idiots!"

But the skinny man rushes toward us much too fast, and the crazed look on his face heightens my rage. Every horrible scenario from my past crowds in on me, and I focus all my anger and vengeance on this one man. I leap as he reaches me and plunge the knife into his shoulder. He screams and twists away. I hold onto the knife and yank it free.

And just like that, the wild, crazy rage that had goaded me to attack morphs to wild, crazy fear as I watch the skinny man fall. The other Morlocks have hesitated again, but now a desperate anger causes 'em to yell and bolt toward the wounded man lying on the pier.

I stuff the knife in its scabbard and grab Steven's arm. "Let's go!"

We run, hard, and fall into the boat. Laddie leaps in after us. Mike jumps in and pushes us away as the crowd reaches the pier's edge. One screaming man chucks his flashlight after us, but it misses and sinks. Another man screams, "Wait!", dives off the pier, and splashes toward the dinghy. Steven flips a switch and the engine roars to life. We leave the screaming crowd clinging to the pier, and chug into the sound.

I pull out my blade, reach over the side, and wash it in the cold aqua as we speed away from the cliffs. I dry it on my shirt. Only then do I glance up.

Five pairs of eyes stare at me.

Steven 's eyes shine with gratitude. "Thanks for tryin' to protect us, Miriam."

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Grant's eyes are blank, unfocused. But the other three pairs of eyes are wide and full of fear. Fear of me. Fear of my knife.

I stare back, unblinking. Not sorry, I slide the knife into its sheath. Steven might reckon I was protecting him – maybe I was – but I was protecting myself more.

I *always* protect myself.

# THE ARGO

“Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing - absolutely nothing - half so much worth doing as simply messing around in boats.”

*Kenneth Graham - The Wind in the Willows*

## 1

HEY, JOEY, IT'S Kira here. I'm talkin' into this vid even if you refuse to listen. Figure I'll send this so you'll at least know what happened to us. Reception's not great, though. Don't reckon the vid'll work when we get too far out to sea, but we aren't outta the sound yet, so hopefully you'll see this. If you're still alive.

Sorry I'm talkin' in whispers, but the *Argo* is a small ship and there's hardly any place I can be alone. Right now, I'm at the bow listenin' to the cluckin' chickens. The coop was the last thing we loaded before we called it a night and went to bed yesterday, figurin' we'd have plenty of time to finish loadin' the *Argo* in the mornin'. Boy, were we wrong 'bout that. The chickens are flutterin' 'round with nerves in their

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cage, all stressed out with the boat's constant bobbin' and the wind hittin' the sails.

You weren't there at the pier. I saw lots of your clan but not your fam. So, I guess you're gone. Headin' east like you'd planned. Like *we'd* planned 'til... Well, we're goin' the opposite way from you now. West. We're halfway through the sound, headin' to the Pacific.

So, I guess this is it. You and me are done and maybe we won't see each other ever again. You might not know it 'cause you left before it happened, but there was a fire, a big one. I'm not even sure if Toad Hall is still standin' or if the fire got it, but we ran to the pier and most of your clan headed that way too, but we beat 'em. They were headin' for our boat, but I don't get why. They've got plenty of other boats they coulda used. Maybe they wanted ours 'cause it was the biggest.

I'm pretty sure I saw pox marks on a couple of the folks at the pier. Maybe I was just imaginin' it, but now I'm scared. Now I'm wonderin' if you were infected with Pan4 last time we met. It was only a week ago, 'member? When you told me your fam was leavin' and you tried to convince me to come with you? And I was scared and said no. And we had that fight. You were coughin', I 'member. So was your mom.

Mike warned us Pan4 was creepin' close, but I didn't think anythin' much of your cough 'cause you cough all the time. But those folks with pox marks on the pier...they must have Pan4. And last time we talked – well, fought – we left each other feelin' so angry and now you might be dyin' and I won't even know it unless you send a message back to me. I'm scared for you, Joey. So many people die from Pan4, 'specially if they get the pox. That's one of the final stages, right? You get the pox,



then you go all zombie and waste away. After all the time Pearl and Mike tried to keep us safe, locked up in Toad Hall, tellin' us not to associate with anyone 'cause we might catch it, and now it'll be my fault for disobeyin' 'em and sneakin' out to meet you. We're leavin' so we can *escape* Pan4, ya know. It'd be so awful if after all their plannin', I come down with it and get 'em all sick.

I hope you survive it, Joey, if you are sick. Please let me know. I don't guess we can take back what we said, and I'm still kinda angry with ya, but I don't want you to die. I cried for you all mornin', though I told everyone I was sad 'cause we were leavin' Toad Hall behind. It's the only home I've ever known. I can't tell 'em 'bout us. 'Specially not Pearl. She was upset enough after we left Toad Hall. She got to the dinghy fine but then started goin' to pieces when we pushed away from the pier and Steven made the stupid mistake of sayin' that Toad Hall and Pearl's precious library with all the books she loves were probably burnin' and she could never go back to it. She got so maniac, screamin' that we had to go back and save it, and she almost tried to jump over the side and swim back. Mike had to give her a sedative to keep her quiet 'til we reached the *Argo*.

You might not wanna hear this. You might delete this before you even get to this part, but I wanna let you know I'm OK.

Can ya hear the wind, Joey? It sings, don't it? It's like some wild song—sometimes harsh and sometimes soft but always beautiful. Like a siren's song, callin' us to sail farther and farther away. It's stunno. I'm finally on an adventure and leavin' everythin' behind, like we always dreamed, Joey, 'cept I'm goin' in a different direction than the way you planned. Course, I know

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sailin' out into an unknown sea to a deserted island might not be the smartest idea. Probably a lot crazier than goin' east. But it *is* an adventure. Only bad thing is you aren't here to share it.

We're already past Port Townsend, what's left of it. If you look real hard you can see it from here. I'll try to zoom for ya. Not much left, just a bunch of crumbled buildings. We've got the sails up 'cause Steven loves sailin' even though we don't have to, the solars run the motor fine. But in this wind, we can sail almost as fast, and Steven says it's more adventurous.

I'm gonna yammer now, Joey. 'Member you always called it that, when I'd go on explainin' 'bout things and you'd get bored and say I should stop yammerin'? But I wanna tell you 'bout the *Argo*. It was called *Good Times* before, if you 'member, but Pearl wanted it renamed *Argo*, after some old Greek myth. So, Steven blocked out the old name and painted *Argo* on the stern, even though Mike said it was bad luck to change a ship's name.

Anyway, Steven's over there at the wheel, see him? He's captain. He can sail by the stars and always knows where he is. Grant taught him how to navigate to Avalon—that's the island we're headin' to—by usin' old charts, same as the Pater taught Grant. Steven's tried to teach me the charts, but I don't understand 'em at all.

Sittin' next to Steven in the cockpit is Mike, the one with the bald head. And there's Grant, who knows how to fix everythin' on the *Argo* and has sailed to Avalon the most, 'cept he went all zombie last year. Mike says it has to do with a delayed reaction to Pan2, which Grant had like fifty years ago, but he's just gettin' the zombie now. So now all he does is sit. The rest of us know the basic things, like how to steer and set up the solars to run

the engine, but only Grant knows how to fix the solars if they break. But since he's zombie, now he can't.

You actually met Grant, Joey. You 'member that night when we were fourteen and he caught us on the old sailboat we used to have before the *Argo*? Member how he found us makin' out in the cockpit—or tryin' to, anyway? We didn't know what we were doin' then, did we? 'Member? He got really mad and yelled at us, and we had to jump off the side and swim back to shore, only half-dressed and the aqua was freezin'. I was so pissed at him for yellin' at us and then scared 'cause I figured he'd tell Pearl 'bout us and blow our secret. But that was the night he sailed off and didn't come back for a year. He was gone so long we thought he was dead, and when he did finally come back, he was all zombie. Mike says he was probably startin' to go zombie before he left, which is probably why he yelled at us that night. The normal Grant wouldn't have gotten mad at us just for bein' on his boat. He used to be so patient and kind, not like Pearl who gets pissed if ya don't understand right away somethin' she's tryin' to explain. But now Grant's not nice or angry or anythin'. He just sits, starin' into nothin' with those zombie eyes.

Over there you can see Pearl writin' in her vid. She's calmed down a bit, although Mike says that's 'cause she's still got some sedatives in her system and she very well could get all maniac again once it totally wears off. Pearl says she's gonna keep a journal 'bout our journey, figurin' she can turn it into some grand epic novel one day. She's a writer, ya know. She wrote a super popular book once called *Return to Avalon*. It's all 'bout this old English king called Arthur and his knights and lady, only Pearl plopped 'em all down in modern times.

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She made a bit of money from that book, 'cept that was long before I was born.

Pearl has proclaimed herself Ship Storyteller — a totally Pearl-made-up title. She's always read to Steven and me at night, ever since I can remember. Not sure if I ever told you that. Kinda embarrassin', me sixteen and Pearl still readin' me bed-time stories. But she's so good at it. Even books we've heard a hundred times sound excitin' when she reads 'em. Course, the ship storyteller bit won't last once Pearl starts gettin' seasick, which she will, but so far, she's OK. Earlier, when she was sorta groggy, she was tryin' to read out loud from *Macbeth* and when she got to the part where Macbeth stabs King Duncan, she glanced over at Miriam, as if she was worried that Miriam might take it as some sort of signal.

I haven't told you 'bout Miriam yet, have I? There she is, sittin' next to Steven. She's pretty badass. She actually stabbed Jimmy on the pier when we were tryin' to escape. Don't worry. I don't reckon she killed him. But if it wasn't for her, I guess we might not have escaped the fire. Anyway, she showed up the night before we left like she knew we were gonna leave, but I don't believe she really did. She said she came from the east. Where you're headin' now, ain't that ironic? Steven wanted her to come with us, but Pearl didn't, and they've been fightin' 'bout it, but it's too late now, Steven says. She's with us and that's that. She's starin' right at me now, see? Probably wonderin' what I'm talkin' 'bout and why I'm aimin' my vid her way. She's your type, with that red hair, which I know ya like, but you can see it's all short and chopped, like she cut it with a knife, which she probably did. Anyway, you can't see from here, but she has green eyes, like a cat.

NIKKI BENNETT

Sittin' next to her is Laddie, you know him. I brought him with me once when I snuck out to meet ya. Pearl didn't want him comin' either, but it is Steven's boat, so he had the final say-so. Miriam told me she don't like dogs, but Laddie don't seem to know that. He follows her everywhere. Behind him you can see the chicken coop. Steven lashed it to the main. We brought eight chickens total. We'll see how long *they* last on the trip.

OK, gonna turn toward the bow now so nobody'll ask me why I'm recordin' 'em. I told Pearl I was usin' the vid to journal our trip, but I don't want her askin' too many questions.

Anyway, Miriam's never sailed in her life, so right now she's not good for much. I guess if we get attacked by another ship and need someone to defend us, she'll be the one to do it. She sure didn't hesitate to knife Jimmy when she had the chance. I hope he's OK. He was nice to me the one time we met. I guess she's had to take care of herself before she joined up with us though, so she had to become tough, but it sure makes me wonder how mad would she hafta get with any of us to whip out that knife and use it?

Mike had to tell me 'bout what Miriam did on the pier 'cause I wasn't payin' attention. Some guy was runnin' down the pier right then, and he looked like you, so I was watchin' him, figurin' maybe you'd come back. And then, when Miriam and Steven jumped in the dinghy and we started off, I saw him jump into the freezin' aqua and try to swim after us, and for a few wild minutes, I thought it *must* be you. Thought you changed your mind and realized you couldn't live without me and were frantic to say you were sorry. You even yelled at us to stop. But then I realized it wasn't you at all. Didn't even have your hair

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color—his was brown and curly instead of blond. And even if it was you, my fam wouldn't have stopped the boat. They woulda kept goin' 'cause I never told 'em 'bout you... 'bout us. I wish I'd told 'em now, like you always wanted me to. I wish I hadn't kept you a secret.

WELL, IT'S TOO late now. We're headin' west and you're somewhere with your fam headin' east, and we never said we were sorry after we had that fight, and I guess now I'll never see ya again. But you might see this vid. And if you do, and you forgive me at all, please send a vid back. 'Cause I still love you, Joey. I totally realize it now.

Hey, Joey. We're cruisin' past old Victoria now. I'm zoomin' in so you can see it. Not much left. The Big One got it good, way back when that happened, and not many people moved back.

I was 'memberin' back to the first time we met. 'Member? We were both twelve, and I was helpin' Steven and Mr. Miller pick apples. That was when the Millers still lived nearby. You popped your head from what I swear was inside an apple tree, that big fat gnarled one with the hole in it, like you were livin' in it like a squirrel. But you'd just been stealin' apples and were hidin' *behind* the tree, not *in* it. Steven and Mr. Miller didn't see you 'cause they were pickin' a few trees down. I was scared at first 'cause Pearl had always warned me against the Morlocks—the people livin' in the woods. When I was real little, she told me they'd eat me if they caught me. But you looked so nice and friendly, and you smiled and I smiled too, and then we hid behind a tree and ate apples and threw the cores at the birds, tryin' to hit 'em, 'member? Then Steven and Mr. Miller came back and you slunk off before they could see ya, but you

came to the orchard every day after that, and I'd sneak you cake and cookies from the house when Pearl'd make 'em, and we discovered we both liked swimmin', and you taught me how to play War with a deck of cards.

I've been 'memberin' all that. It was so innocent when we first met and were just friends. I 'member figurin' I couldn't tell Pearl or even Steven that we knew each other 'cause Pearl hates the Morlocks – sorry, I know you don't like that word – and I'd figured she'd 'bout kill me if she knew we were friends. Plus, it was fun to have a secret friend nobody knew 'bout but me. It's the only rebellious thing I've ever done, I reckon. I guess our whole friendship was like that, wasn't it? Always hidin', at least from my fam. Your fam didn't care.

Sorry I'm whisperin' a bit. They can't hear me. Everyone else is below decks right now, even Steven, but I'm scared to talk too loud. What if they suddenly pop outta the hold and ask me who the hell I'm talkin' to? What'll I say? Really though, why should I even care? What's Pearl gonna do, throw me overboard if I tell her I'm in love with a Morlock boy? I'm almost as big as her, so I guess I could fight her if I needed to. Course, Pearl can also make you feel two inches tall if she glowers at you just right, so maybe I won't say anythin'.

Joey, maybe it's 'cause I'm out here all by myself, but I can't stop 'memberin' 'bout us way back when we were carefree and havin' fun. Back before everythin' got complicated and we started fightin' 'bout things. Those were the good years, weren't they? When we were kids playin' and not worried 'bout disease or findin' somewhere safer to live. We didn't care when we were little. When I 'member that, I'm happy.

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But then I see the ocean in front of me, and even though I'm scared, I'm so excited too. I feel guilty, Joey. How could I be happy without you? I shouldn't be happy. But besides sneakin' out to meet ya and tryin' not to get caught by Pearl all those years, this is the most excitin' thing to ever happen to me. I keep ping-pongin' between happiness and sadness.

OK, gotta go. Steven's yellin' at me 'bout somethin'. Talk to ya later.

## 2

I HATE THIS. I hate everything about it. The wind, the rain, the bobbing of the waves. I'd give anything to be back at Toad Hall, safe within its walls. Kira and Steven and Mike might believe that the fire burned it down, but I don't. I can't. I'd go permanently maniac if I believed such a thing.

Toad Hall is mine. Dad could've left it to Grant, his eldest, or Mike, but he left it to me. I was only a kid when he died, so maybe he thought it would bring me security. And it did. Still does. And I want that security back. I miss all of it with a heartache I can barely endure: the kitchen and my bedroom and the barn and fields.

But what I miss most about Toad Hall is my library, that huge room with the high ceiling and rows of old books on shelves and tall windows overlooking the apple orchard. Throughout my entire life, even before Dad died, that library belonged to me. My sanctuary. My domain. Grant might wander in occasionally to grab an engineering journal. Mike, once he moved back for good when Pan4 hit, browsed the catalog once or twice but preferred to be out working with Steven in the fields or



orchards, or fishing out on the sound. Steven was never interested in the library at all, 'cept when he found Grant's small stash of old comics stuffed on a bottom shelf. Kira liked the acoustics in the library, so she played her violin, there a lot. I never minded that, although once she got bored with practicing, she'd start gabbing at me, and you don't talk to me when I'm in the middle of a good read. You don't talk in a library at all. That room is as holy as a church, its bookshelves rising in the air like the arched aisleways of some great cathedral, the crisp turn of a page echoing to the high, vaulted ceiling.

The day before we sailed away from Toad Hall, I'd stuffed three books into my berth on the *Argo*: the huge compilation of Shakespeare's plays, the old family Bible with all our names written on the first page, and *The Wind in the Willows*, my absolute favorite childhood book. The pages are falling apart from use and the old leather binding is practically threadbare, and you can barely make out the faded inscription on the front page — *To my precious little Pearl, Love Mom* — but I wasn't about to leave it behind. The *Argo* had plenty of room for other books, and I meant to bring more, but that damned fire drove us out before I could pack 'em.

Now I think about all those beautiful rows of books, and my heart aches. I try to focus on my baking — it's Steven's birthday today and I'm making him a strawberry cake with some of the preserves. I love baking, and I've baked him a cake like this every year since I found him, abandoned in the woods, when he was three, but I can't find much joy in it today.

God, I wish it would at least stop raining. I'm beginning to hate rain. Especially out here on the ocean. It's making the waves all choppy, and my stomach is starting to churn. And

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it makes me so mad – why couldn't the sky have dumped like this when we were still at Toad Hall, when it could've done some good? Put out that fire before it sneaked up on us?

No. Toad Hall is still OK. It's made of brick; it can withstand anything. I'm sure the fire bypassed it. I have to believe that, otherwise I'll go permanently maniac.

I want to go back so badly, just to make sure Toad Hall still stands, that everything is OK, but there's no way Steven will turn this boat around now. Earlier, we passed Cape Flattery. That's the westernmost point of land there is. Now we're at least fifty nautical miles out, and the thought of days of rolling over waves makes me want to puke over the boat's side. I don't mention it to Steven, though. He won't listen. He's been insanely stubborn about seeing this voyage through, and I blame Miriam.

Miriam. Ooh, I hate her too. Until she showed up, Steven never fought with me. He always did what I asked of him. This sudden forcefulness of his – it has to be because of her. I've given up arguing with him about it: he'll just say that if it wasn't for Miriam, we might all be burned to a crisp by now. If it wasn't for Miriam those Morlocks on the pier might've killed us all and stolen our boat. But I don't believe it. We would've smelled the smoke, eventually. And we were all in the boat before the Morlocks reached it – there'd been no need for Miriam to jump out and play the hero. It hadn't been necessary.

I tell myself I won't argue with Steven about turning this boat around, at least not until after his birthday party. I chew on a ginger pill Mike gave me from his medical stash and turn to Kira. "Take the cake up to the deck, would you? My sciatica is acting up a bit."

Kira nods. Her dark skin looks almost yellow, and her hands are a little shaky as she takes the plate.

I reach out and feel her head. "You OK?"

She nods. "Just a little queasy, Pearl. I really didn't think I'd get seasick this fast."

"Well, we've been out bobbing around for a couple of days now. I'm sure starting to feel it." I search around in my pants pocket and find a ginger pill. "Here, take this."

We climb the steep steps to the upper deck. Steven stands behind the wheel looking happy and content. He's always loved to sail. I glance at the sky – there's a sliver of light on the horizon. The rain has mostly let up, it spatters harmlessly on the tarp sheltering the poop deck. "Happy thirty-fifth, Steven," I say as Kira plunks the cake down on the wobbling table.

Steven laughs. "Ugh, that makes me sound so old, Pearl. Is that strawberry cake?"

"Course it is. You always have strawberry cake on your birthday. No need to change that tradition now."

Kira sits on a bench. "Enjoy it, it might be your last. Who knows when we'll find strawberries again, and we won't have much flour left to survive on if Pearl keeps usin' it to bake cakes."

This is true. We don't have much flour 'cause we didn't have time to pack it all. Most of what we've got in the hold is wheat groats, which Kira will get stuck grinding once we run out of the regular flour. The daily grind – that's where the saying came from. Kira likes grinding, though. The solar juice can do the grinding work, but weirdly, she's always enjoyed hand grinding. She says you can think about other things while you're doing it. I'm glad she likes grinding, because I always hated it.

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But baking with the flour she grinds makes me happy, and it distracts me from my seasickness. And we oughtta keep up traditions as long as we can. I light the candles. "You'd better blow 'em out, Steven, before this stupid wind does."

"OK, but somebody's gotta take the wheel. Miriam?"

Ugh. Miriam. Every time I almost begin to feel normal, like it's just me and the fam, up pops Miriam. She takes the wheel from Steven, and he clamps his hands on the table and tries to blow out the couple of candles I could find to decorate the cake with. He misses and almost falls head-first into the cake as a wave rolls the boat. Even as seasick and annoyed as I am, I can't help laughing.

Kira laughs too, so does Mike. Grant, of course, just sways there, staring out to sea, saying nothing.

Even Miriam laughs. She's barely smiled since this journey started, so it's surprising to hear her laugh. It comes out like a dog's bark, like she isn't sure *how* to laugh.

Kira and Steven both insist that Miriam's OK. But how do we know she won't bust out with the pox or take out her knife and start hacking away at everyone with it? We don't know where she came from or who she might've met, and she could be contaminated and make us all sick even though Mike tested her and said she was negative. Or maybe she's some lunatic from an asylum and even though she's acting all nice and normal now, she might suddenly go maniac and kill us all. I worried about Steven putting her in the same bunk with Kira; I was all for making her sleep up in the cockpit. I mean, what if she was some kinda sicko who would try to molest Kira in her sleep? But Kira says she didn't try anything like that. She slept as far as she could from Kira and didn't talk much.

Kira at least found out how old she is. She's nineteen. Or twenty. She's not sure which. She told Kira her birthday was on Christmas Day. Kira asked her if she has any fam, and she said her mom was dead and she don't know of any other relatives 'cept an uncle in Bellingham, which was why she was trying to get there, but she reckons he must be dead 'cause he never responded to the messages she sent on her vid.

Steven hands Miriam a piece of cake and we finish eating as the sun's rays pierce through the diminishing clouds and flood the boat with light. Kira pulls out her violin and begins to play a jig.

Steven laughs and stands. "C'mon, Miriam!" he says, grabbing her hand and trying to dance on the itty bit of space that isn't crowded with ropes or anchors or sails or people.

Miriam holds onto the wheel with one hand, looking terrified, and tries to yank her other hand out of Steven's grip. "What're you, nuts?"

"Maybe," Steven says, grinning. He lets go of her though, realizing she isn't gonna participate, and grabs me instead. "C'mon, Pearl!"

I'm actually with Miriam on this one. "Steven, the sugar in that cake has gone to your head. I can barely hobble as it is."

Steven isn't too upset. "Fine. I'm gonna go down in the hold and get some cider. Let's celebrate my birthday in style."

He scoots down the stairs and comes back up holding a jug. He pours the hard cider into the mugs and passes them around. Mike raises his glass and says, "Kiss the book everyone."

"Kiss the book," we all murmur, 'cept Miriam who gives us a puzzled look.

"It's what we say when we drink," Mike explains. "Pearl lingo."

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“Shakespeare lingo,” I correct.

“Ah,” Miriam says, raising her cup to her lips. “Well, kiss the book, then.”

We drink and listen to Kira playing softly now on her violin. The cider relaxes me a bit. I sigh and reach for another piece of cake.

Miriam cradles her cup and watches Kira pull the bow across the strings. “I wish I knew how to play a musical instrument,” she murmurs.

Kira stops and hands her the violin. “Give it a try.”

Miriam puts down her cup and laughs, but she takes the violin and props it under her chin. “What do I do?”

“Just let the bow glide across the strings,” Kira says, grinning. Miriam tries, but all she gets is a horrible squeak. Even I can’t help laughing. Maybe drinking some hard cider is what I needed to relax. When she smiles like that, Miriam don’t seem too bad.

She hands the violin back to Kira. “You play it. I’ll stick to hummin’. What song were you playin’, anyway? Is it one you made up?”

Kira snorts. “No, I don’t write music.”

“Why not?”

Kira ponders this. “Maybe I should. Kinda like how Pearl’s writin’ a story ’bout our trip, right Pearl?”

I nod. “You could compose a piece ’bout this voyage.”

Kira’s eyes, which had been so despondent for most of this trip, suddenly acquire an excited spark. “Yeah. Like when we left Toad Hall, that movement would be full of tenseness and fear, and I could use sharp, staccato notes for our escape. And the howlin’ wind and rain could be gusty gales of sound. Then

the movement now would be cheerful, happy, maybe almost like a jig. It is a happy day today, after all, isn't it? Bein' Steven's birthday and the sun is back out and the sea is calmin' down a bit."

I take another sip of cider. A happy day. Maybe, as far as sea days go, this one isn't turning out too bad. There's a bit of hope on the horizon, shining through the clouds. My stomach is settling. The kids seem happy. I should be happy too.

But I'm still not quite convinced. I'd turn this boat around in a heartbeat, if I could. God, I miss Toad Hall so much.

### 3

HEY, JOEY. IT'S evenin' now. I couldn't even try to make a vid earlier 'cause I was so sick after Steven's birthday party. Pukin' like I was tryin' to expel all my guts. It's been horrible. And I don't quite get it. I mean, the voyage so far hasn't been too bad. Pearl will try to tell you that the waves are as big as tsunamis, but really the ocean is wobbly at best. Don't seem to matter though. I kept pukin' over the side, and I didn't even drink any of the hard cider like the rest of 'em did.

Everyone took shifts steerin' 'cept me today. Even Miriam took a stab at it. She hasn't been sick at all. Neither has Mike, although he's an old sea hand and probably never gets seasick. Not even Pearl has gotten totally sick yet, and she's usually the first to start blarfin'. Steven's gotten close to gettin' sick, but only 'cause he hates the sound of pukin' and watchin' me heave all over the place has made him wanna heave too. Or so he says. He has to leave the tiller and run below decks every time I stumble over to the railin' so he won't hear me.

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At first, I was scared stiff it might be Pan4, but pukin' isn't a normal symptom, Mike says. So, I hafta admit maybe I'm a horrible sailor, even worse than Pearl. I mean, I've only sailed around the Puget Sound, and Steven says you can't gauge how badly you might react to ocean waves in the sound 'cause the motion there is totally different from ocean motion. But that means I'm in for days and days of blarfin'. This voyage is gettin' less fun. I wish I was back on dry land.

I'm all right now, though actually. The blarfiness has died down. Pearl is makin' chicken soup for dinner. One of the chickens croaked, so we're cookin' it. She says it'll go easy on my tum. Mike gave me some more ginger pills too, which must be helpin' a bit.

Besides all that, Steven's birthday party was fun. 'Member *my* sixteenth birthday back in June? That's not my actual birthday. I don't have any idea what day I was born, but that's the day Pearl found me and took me in, so that became my birthday. Anyway, I snuck outta the house after my party and met you at the pier, and we finally did it for the first time on the *Argo*, 'member? In the same bunk I'm sleepin' in now. I know you must 'member *that*. It woulda been a perfect night if we coulda stayed there forever. If we coulda run away right then, gone east like you tried to convince me to do and leave everyone behind. But we didn't. I was too scared and went back home. And now I'm travelin' farther and farther away from you.

Right now, Joey, we're travelin' due south. I'm not sure how far we've come. We could go faster if we were usin' the solars and motor, but Steven likes usin' the sails if there's enough wind. He says it's not like we have a deadline or anythin', so who cares if we bob along? I used to agree, but



now I say the faster we get to Avalon the better. I'm sick and tired of pukin'.

HEY, JOEY. WE might've passed close enough to dry land today to send messages. We're headin' down the coast and my vid beeped earlier while it was rechargin', so I checked it, and I actually had a signal. No message from you, but I tried sendin' off my last couple and believe it worked. We must be near some sort of high civ if we can get a signal this far out. Anyway, hope you see the messages, although I guess you won't hear this one I'm recordin' now 'til I'm in range again. Send a message back, OK? Please? I'm startin' to really worry. Either you're dead or sick or still flamin' mad, and how can you stay mad? I'm super sorry, and I can't keep sayin' how much.

I have somethin' important you need to hear. I got sick this mornin', Joey. I've been sick a couple times now and I'm wonderin' if maybe it isn't seasickness like I was originally thinkin'. 'Member the first time we did it? On the *Argo*? It was 'bout four months ago, in June, my birthday night. That's enough time to maybe...I dunno...to get... Dammit, I don't wanna say it out loud! Not even whisper it, but if it was seasickness, you wouldn't reckon it'd come and go, right? I've been sick the past three mornings. Mike gave me more ginger pills, but he looked at me funny, and though he didn't ask me any questions, I reckon he's got some suspicions, him bein' a doc and all.

I don't understand how this coulda happened. I mean, I understand, but still. The sick feelin' is always worse in the mornin', then it gets better. Pretty suspicious, right? Now I really hope I don't get Pan4. Mike says if it don't kill ya, it can sure mess up your repro, 'specially if you're female. I mean, it

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kills a lotta people straight out too. But the people who recover from it, lots can't make babies. How'll humans survive if they can't make babies? What might happen to mine, if I am...preg... and caught Pan4 from you?

I should tell 'em. At least warn 'em I could be preg. But how? Pearl'll kill me if I tell her 'bout you. She'll throw me right over the side of the ship. She's so freaked out 'bout leavin' Toad Hall, she'll totally fall to pieces if I dump this on her now. I keep tellin' myself maybe it's seasickness after all. But I don't believe it.

Anyway, I'm not gonna worry 'bout that anymore. Pearl always says I jump the gun and worry 'bout things before I even know if they're true. Gonna take the Scarlett O'Hara approach and worry 'bout it tomorrow. And I'm feelin' OK now.

Maybe this is my fault for pickin' my fam over you, Joey. You kept sayin' the east was better. Not as many fires or droughts. Out east they still get shipments from Europe and Africa, like coffee and chocolate and stuff I've only tasted half a dozen times in my entire life, and they get more rain and all the crops grow. But maybe that's all changed now 'cause of Pan4. Maybe Mike is right and you're headin' into the storm. I still wish I was with you, though. I don't reckon my fam's plan is much better, headin' to a deserted island. How garbo is that? And your fam said I could go and you pleaded with me, and what did I do? Picked my fam. Picked sailin' off into nowhere when I coulda been with you and we coulda raised this baby – if it is a baby – someplace nice, where maybe there's food and other kids and jobs and all the other stuff you get when you go somewhere that's high civ.

I loved you, Joey, and I know you were hurt that I picked my fam over yours, but I got scared. I didn't wanna leave Pearl.

She's the only mom I know even if she isn't my real mom, and she'd have been so upset.

Last night, I talked to Miriam. She's from the east coast, originally. Maybe I was hopin' she'd tell me the east isn't so great. And you know what she said? She said yeah, some of what you thought is true – or was. The east coast had more of a normal society. They didn't get hit as hard by as many bad things, like the droughts and fires and The Big One happenin' all those years ago on the west coast so lots of our towns were wiped out. But she's heard that Pan4 hit the east coast hard. I asked her if that was why she came west instead of stayin' put in the east. She said no, it was mostly 'cause she was lonely and wanted to find anyone remainin' of her fam. She didn't find 'em though. She found us. She coulda kept goin' up to Bellingham to find her uncle, but she chose us instead. I guess she figured she didn't have much chance of findin' him alive there and her survival odds were better sailin' to Avalon.

Avalon is where my fam used to go on vacation, Joey, way back when the Pater was still alive and the fam was rich and high civ still existed everywhere and you could do things like that. That was before I was born. I've never visited Avalon. But this isn't a vacation. We're goin' to a hot, rocky island where there's nobody else 'cept me and my fam. Well, and now Miriam.

Listen to that wind. It's been gettin' worse all mornin'. It's gettin' hotter and stickier out too, and a couple hours ago, Grant actually opened his mouth and outta the blue said, "Storm's comin'." Then he shut up again. Grant never says anythin' unless it's important, Joey. You might wonder if he's zombie, how can he tell? But I can tell too. The air is thick, like it wants

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to suffocate us. And look at those clouds, dark and angry, stackin' up on the horizon, waitin' for us to sail into 'em. And we're startin' to roll in earnest. Boy, this is gonna do nothin' for my pukin'.

JOEY,

This is gonna be short. Sorry I'm whisperin' again. Everyone is crammed below decks, includin' me, so I can't talk too long.

Grant was right 'bout the storm. Ship started rockin' right after I stopped talkin' to ya. Full gale by the evenin'. Miriam had night watch and didn't know what to do, but she knew enough to yell for help. So, we battened down everythin', and now everyone is crammed below, waitin' the storm out and prayin'. It's scary, us all smushed down here and no one up there steerin'. Like we're leavin' everythin' up to chance. Swells are huge out there, you can tell by how the boat rocks. Pearl's gone all maniac again, screamin' on and on 'bout how we never should've left Toad Hall and blubberin' 'bout leavin' all her precious books behind. I agree with her 'bout wantin' to go home, but you don't hear me screamin'. Probably 'cause if I do, I'll blarf all over the place and I'm tryin' not to. All for now.

MORNIN' NOW, JOEY. Swells still, and wind, and drivin' rain. Not quite as bad though, I'm lashed in on the deck with Steven 'cause I can't take it below deck. Everythin' is covered in puke down there. Only ones not sick are Grant and Miriam. Grant is still all zombie but somehow manages to balance perfectly on the sofa. He hasn't fallen over once. Miriam's stunno. Eight days in and she's already a better sailor than me. Got a tum

of steel. She keeps cleanin' up after everybody with a heck of a lotta patience.

Uh oh. Gonna blarf. Talk to ya later.

THIS AFTERNOON THE sea is calm, gently rollin', and it's the first time I haven't felt puky, so now I can talk.

Steven guesses we're now totally pushed off course. He's pretty sure he can find Avalon, but not sure how long it'll take to get there.

Joey, those hours in the storm when every second we had to hold our breath and pray that the next swell wouldn't be the one that smashes the *Argo* into matchsticks, all I could think 'bout was what a mistake I'd made. How, durin' that time when we were so close to an aqua-filled grave, I coulda been with you, holdin' you, if only we hadn't started this garbo voyage. If only I'd had the guts to ditch my fam and stick with you. So what if Pan4 is ravagin' the east coast? I'd rather take my chances with that. I'm tired of sailin'. I'm tired of bein' sick. I wish I was back on dry land.

What's happened to you? Did you get over the Cascades? Are you almost to the east now? Or did Pan4 eat you up? It's drivin' me nuts not knowin'. Even if you have sent me a vid, I'm so totally outta range I can't see it. When I finally get to somewhere with reception, you're gonna get bombarded with all these vids I'm makin'. I sure hope I'll get some from you too.

Gotta assume you're alive. I'll go crazy if I imagine anythin' else. Everythin' else I loved, 'cept what's on this ship, is gone for good. Toad Hall. The apple orchard. The old, abandoned church down the street, the one with the creepy cemetery out back. 'Member the day we snuck in there? The church was

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always so empty 'cept for the mice and things. I bet it's gone now. I bet the Millers' house is gone too. And even if you survived the trip east and the disease, how long will it be before you're gone for good too?

I wish I could turn this boat 'round and go back. How could I have left you? I must be the most horrible person on the planet. If I knew I was preg then, I would've acted differently. But I didn't know. I'm sure of it now, though. I don't wanna tell anyone else, not yet. They're under enough stress. I'll tell 'em when we get to Avalon.

*If we ever get there, that is.*

I'VE FIGURED SOMETHIN' out here, Joey. What we're doin' is we're sailin' away to die. I'm realizin' this now. Grant must know it too. He's always wanted to be buried on Avalon and he's old as the hills and has Pan2 zombie, so chances are he isn't gonna last much longer. And Mike, I reckon he's given up too. Otherwise, he'd still be followin' the sick and needy 'round the country like he used to rather than stickin' with us. He's usin' the excuse that Zombie Grant needs his help, but that's not totally true. He's got a look about him, like he's done with the world and all its problems.

And Pearl, she's past fifty now. She gets sciatica so bad sometimes she can barely walk. So, I bet she's givin' up too. She might still insist that Toad Hall is still there and we're wrong 'bout the fire gettin' to it, but she's gotta know, deep down, that it isn't true.

And Steven, he's a good sailor and a good farmer, even if he'd rather be paintin' — sometimes his mind is in a whole different world full of swirly colors. Sometimes he talks with Mike 'bout

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crops they'll plant when we return to Toad Hall, like he expects it might happen. But deep down, even with all his dreamin', I don't guess he believes we'll return to Cascadia. He knows it's over too and Avalon is our final grasp at survival.

And Miriam. Maybe she didn't realize at first what joinin' our little expedition would truly mean. But I bet she'd rather live and die in isolation with us than go back to high civ only to hafta fight and defend her little slice of it. She told me as much last night, before we fell asleep. All she wants is a place where folks'll leave her alone.

But geez, I'm not ready for this, Joey. I don't wanna isolate myself on a tiny island, where the only people I have are my fam, Miriam, and the dog. Even if we get to Avalon, we've barely got enough supplies to last us a few months at best, since we had to run from the fire and leave half our supplies behind. And what happens after that? We all sit on that hunk of rock and starve to death?

I don't wanna spend my life hidin' from the world. I'm young, Joey, I got a long uphill climb before it's time for me to slide down toward death. I don't wanna raise my baby isolated, with no chance of ever meetin' her daddy. I want her to grow up with other kids. I want her to contribute to whatever society is left. I could contribute too. I could be somebody worthwhile in this burnin', dyin' world.

But I'll be nothin' on Avalon. I'll be just another person waitin' to die.

HEY, JOEY, IT'S me again. I listened to what I recorded earlier and almost erased it. I was kinda depressed when I said those things 'cause everyone was in a bad mood this mornin' and it

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put me in a bad mood too. I suppose it was due. I mean, we're all under mondo stress.

It started after the storm was over, when Pearl opened the compartment where we stored the canned fruits and veg and found half of the jars smashed. So were a couple of cider bottles. The hold was a disgustin', sticky mess. Pearl got all upset and started cryin', and Steven got mad at her and said if she was gonna pack things in glass, she shoulda packed 'em more carefully. So then Pearl started yellin' back 'bout how was she supposed to know we'd be in a freaky storm, and Steven got mad and called her an idiot. I can't believe *Steven* said that. Then Mike tried to break 'em up, but they were super mad and into it, and then Pearl said, what did it matter anyway, we'll all be dead before this is over, and got all screamy and sobby. That's when I crawled into my bunk and recorded that first message. You probably can hear her wailin' away in the background on that vid, if you ever hear it.

It was really everybody's fault, Joey. We all helped packed the jars. None of us, not even Steven, thought they'd break when we packed 'em. But it was somethin' to fight about, I guess.

While they were fightin', Miriam started cleanin' all the goop up and Mike went to help her, so I put away the vid and helped too. We had to throw away everythin' 'cause it wasn't safe to even try and eat. Too much glass mixed in. What a waste. Pearl was more upset losin' the jars, I reckon, than the stuff inside 'em, 'cause where will we ever find jars like those again? Pearl had used 'em for years and years and was always real careful not to break 'em, and now half of 'em are gone. We wrapped the unbroken jars in towels so they won't break if we have another crazy storm.



Anyway, Pearl and Steven wouldn't talk to each other for hours. It's the first big meltdown anyone's had since Pearl went to pieces when we left the pier. I guess the first few days were too excitin' and adventurous, and durin' the storm everyone was too miserable to fight, but now tempers are startin' to come out.

But now outside it's blue and not boilin' hot. The ocean is flat as a pancake. Almost no wind, so we stopped the boat and went swimmin', although it was kinda risky. I mean, who knows if sharks were swimmin' 'round out there, but we did it anyway. It sure was fun. Grant didn't go in, of course. But the rest of us did, even Pearl. Laddie had a blast. Miriam splashed about with him and laughed like a kid. When she laughs, her whole face changes. She even *looks* like a kid. She's not too old, but when she's wearin' her normal half-frown, she looks like she's older, like in her thirties.

Anyway, maybe I was bein' too gloomy earlier. Maybe nobody really wants to die. They wanna be happy. Maybe spendin' some time on Avalon won't be so bad. We can sail east when we start to get low on supplies. I bet I can convince 'em of that, and then maybe you and me'll find each other. And it's not like we're stuck on Avalon with no escape. We have the Argo. The solars are workin' great, so we've got electro to power the motor and charge the stove and our vids, the desal is chuggin' along so we have fresh aqua to drink. The storm didn't damage any of those things. Steven pulled the solars down before the big winds hit, so they're all OK. But anyway, I guess I was just gloom and doomin' this whole adventure, as Pearl would say.

## 4

THE WORK OF a doctor is never done.

I thought, when I retired to Toad Hall after Pan4 started ravaging the east coast, that I'd be through with doctoring people. But of course, that isn't the case. Grant needs looking after in his weird zombie state. And now, so does Pearl.

She's in a cruddy, screamy mood today. Her sciatica is acting up, and the waves are getting bigger so she's seasick.

She retches into a bowl I'm holding for her, then lays down on her berth. "Mike, give me some medicine, please. I know you've got something in there for this stupid seasickness."

"Just the ginger pills, Pearl. It's all I could scrounge up."

"What about the sciatica? Please, Mike."

I shake my head. "Pearl, all I have are some sedatives, and I've already given you two when you went through that bout of maniac after we left Toad Hall, and we can't afford to use them on your sciatica too."

"Goddamn it, Mike," she hisses. "It fucking *hurts*."

"I know, but it'll ease up, you know it will. It always does."

"Not this time. God, this is *it*, Mike. I'm in so much pain I can't walk at all and what the hell's the point in even bringing drugs if you aren't gonna use 'em for intense pain like what I've got?"

I sigh. "Look, I'll help you stretch to relieve the sciatica and give you a massage, but we've gotta save the medicine for emergencies, Pearl."

She grips my arm. "Dammit, Mike, this *is* an emergency."

“No,” I say patiently, “It’s not.”

She begins cussing in earnest, so I slide her berth door shut and head up to the cockpit. Pearl sometimes can suffer through her sciatica and not complain. But when she’s beginning to crumble into that maniac state, she has no control over her temper. She can’t bully me into doing what she wants like she can with Kira and Steven, though. Her scream fests don’t work on me. I feel sorry for the kids; they’re afraid of her when she’s maniac, but I’m used to patients getting all nutty. I know how to be firm. I’ve had years of practice.

Kira and Steven are sitting at the table playing backgammon. I watch them, wondering if I should join them and break out my puzzle. We don’t have enough storage space for too many extra things, but before we had to scramble to the pier and sail away, I managed to stuff a pack of cards and poker chips, the backgammon set, and my favorite 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle under my bunk. I was the only one with enough sense to bring some games, although I wonder how long it’ll be before I get sick of putting the same puzzle together. It’s incredibly old, from before the first pandemic even. It belonged to Dad way back when he was a little kid. The fact that all 1,000 pieces of that puzzle are still in the box is pretty amazing, if you think about it.

I head back to my berth to get it. Pearl has ceased cussing and is now snoring gently. Hopefully the ginger pills will keep her stomach quiet for a while. I decide to use the downstairs table to do my puzzle so I can keep an eye on her, in case she needs me.

Miriam exits the galley as I’m spreading the puzzle pieces out. “Lunch’ll be ready soon.”

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I look up. "You're stuck with the cooking again?"

She shrugs. "I don't mind. Kira says she hates cookin', and Pearl sounds too sick to try." She moves over to the table and stares at the jigsaw pieces now cluttering the table. "What are you doin'?"

"Putting together a puzzle."

"A what?"

I don't guess puzzles are too popular nowadays. I still love 'em, though. They're mindless – you don't have to think about anything else when you're putting 'em together.

Miriam stares at the faded picture on the puzzle box. "Where's this?"

"It's a place called Venice, in Europe, where they had aqua for streets and everyone sailed everywhere on little boats."

She snorts. "You're jokin'."

"Nope. It was a real place, once."

"Well," she says, heading back to the galley, "if that box didn't have a picture of the city and the boats, I'd never believe it. Still don't think I do."

She goes back to her cooking. Miriam doesn't cook as well as Pearl, by any means. Pearl tries to make "gourmet" stuff even though she usually doesn't have much to work with, but she always manages to make dull food incredibly tasty. Even when she was a little kid, she could do it. Miriam, on the other hand, just fixes stuff we can gulp down and survive on. She can soak and boil beans but forgets to put spices in. Since we're using aqua pulled from the sea to cook, the food at least has salt in it, but otherwise it's super bland. I have to admit, we've all been spoiled rotten with Pearl's cooking, but I guess since nobody else is willing to do kitchen duty, we can't complain about

Miriam's culinary attempts. Anyway, she says she'd rather be cooking than sitting around doing nothing. I have to hand it to her. She's becoming a pretty adept sailor and does most of the cleaning and now the cooking. I swear, at this point she sure doesn't need any of us to teach her things.

Frankly, I keep wondering when she'll get sick of Pearl's bouts of maniac, and Grant sitting there taking up space, and having to share a bunk with Kira, and just chuck us all overboard and sail off by herself. She'll probably keep Laddie. They're getting to be pretty tight. Course, she won't know how to get to Avalon without Steven or me – we're the only ones who have sailed to it. Besides Grant, of course, but he's no good for navigating anywhere now. She'll pick Steven over me, though. I reckon they like each other – well, Steven likes her at any rate. She's still pretty stand-offish, but I think she might fancy him a bit. She'll probably let him live, even if she gets fed up with the rest of us.

I smile at these thoughts as I spread out the puzzle pieces and start flipping them over so I can see the colors. From inside her berth, Pearl lets out a cough.

"Mike!" she groans. "I think I'm gonna be sick again!"

I sigh and stand, leaving the puzzle pieces scattered across the table. A doctor's work, dammit, is never done.

DAMN, DAMN, DAMN, damn, *damn*.

Today, Pearl woke up coughing and had a high fever. No wonder she's been acting extra miserable. I thought it was a combo of sciatica and seasickness and leaving Toad Hall that was making her all morose and cranky, but that was only part of it.

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I can't use my med vid to assess her symptoms, we're too far away from a receptor for that to work. But I've been through this enough. I know the signs. I scan the others as Miriam slops oatmeal into our bowls. They all look healthy enough.

"I don't want to alarm anyone," I say, "but I'm thinking this might be Pan4."

"*What?*" Pearl croaks from her bed.

"It might not be, Pearl. Maybe it's just a flu, or a bug, or something. But it has the signs of Pan4, I'm afraid."

Pearl sits up, shoves her screen aside, and glares out at us. She points a finger at Miriam. "This is her fault then."

I have to admit, it does seem likely. I mean, nobody else has been near anyone from the outside for weeks. We've been holed up, harvesting veggies and preserving apples and stockpiling pumpkins and making jerky out of poor old Bessie and Molly, our last two cows. Steven and me went out once to trade beef for wheat grouts and beans, but that was three weeks before we sailed. We swapped the goods at a crossroads and didn't actually get near anyone, just to be safe.

So, the only possible carrier is Miriam, even though the data on her chip said she was negative. She could've easily caught it since that test though, even though she shows no sign of it. She could be asymptomatic but contagious.

I turn to Miriam, who has put down her ladle and sunk onto a bench. "Miriam?"

She gulps, her face white as a sail. She stares hard at the table top. "Listen. When I was exposed to Pan4, I was in prison."

Pearl practically falls out of her berth. "You were *what?*"

The dread that had been filling my insides now swallows the rest of me. Oh, God.

Miriam goes on. "They were droppin' like flies in there, but I never caught it. I swear. They let all the ones who either recovered or were asymptomatic out to run free, and they... they shot the ones who were positive or startin' to go zombie."

The dread freezes into a sick, cold ball in my chest. "Did you say 'shot'?"

She nods. "Yes. They killed 'em all. Then they closed the prison."

Kira, who is gripping her breakfast bowl so hard I'm afraid she might shatter it, says, "What were you in prison for?"

Miriam looks up. Her eyes are dead, cold. "Murder."

Steven whispers, "What?"

She turns to him, her eyes now desperate, pleading. "It wasn't really murder, I swear. It was in self-defense. Please don't ask me anythin' else 'bout it. Please."

Pearl is coughing, but she gasps out, "I don't see why the hell we shouldn't. We should throw you over the side, damn you to hell."

A tear — an actual tear — wells in one of Miriam's eyes. I find myself reaching over and squeezing her hand. "It doesn't matter now, Miriam, whether you brought it or not. Pan4 might be aboard the *Argo*, and we just have to deal with it."

Kira is now blubbering. She jumps up and scrambles up the stairs. Miriam stands to go after her, but Pearl yells, "Leave her alone, Miriam. You've already done enough."

I turn to Pearl. "Calm down, Pearl, please."

"Calm down? I could die, Mike, and it's her fault, and you're telling me to calm —" She erupts into a violent round of coughing. Miriam takes this opportunity to escape to the upper deck. Laddie bounds after her.

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Steven turns to me. "What do we do, Mike?"

I take a deep breath. "I've got some medicine. It's experimental and frankly I stole it from Dr. Lister's office last time I was in Seattle, and I'm not sure what dosage I should give everyone or even if it'll work, but we should all take it and hopefully it'll get us through so we won't all go zombie."

"Don't give any to Miriam," Pearl snarls from her bunk. "She don't deserve it. Why should we give her any of our medicine, especially since this is all her fault?"

Steven frowns, like he wants to start fighting with Pearl over this, but he doesn't. He gets up instead and follows the others to the top deck, leaving me alone with Pearl.

She's probably been sick with this for a couple days, though we didn't realize it 'til now. I can't tell conclusively if she has Pan4, not unless she breaks out with pox marks. Then we'll really know. The pox is the scary thing, cause you either go zombie and die or you get better, fifty-fifty. I have no idea if the experimental medicine will work if Pearl gets to the pox state. I also don't know what the side effects will be for the rest of us. All I can do is trust that the medicine will help us.

Grant stands suddenly too, and I wonder if he's going to follow the others up to the decks, but instead he shuffles over to Pearl's bunk and takes her hand. He sits, perched on the edge of the bunk, and stares at her. She sighs, her face relaxes, losing the anger and fear, and she closes her eyes.

## 5

KIRA STANDS AT the bow, staring at the sea, tears running down her face. I feel so bad about this, but how was I to know



I'd get 'em all sick? I feel fine, myself. I reach out, put a hand on her shoulder, expecting her to push it away. She must be so upset with me about this.

But she don't do that. Instead, she whispers, "Oh Miriam, this is all my fault."

Steven, who has tromped up behind us, says, "How could it be your fault, Kira?"

And I turn to him, expecting to see the anger I could hear in Pearl's voice, but his face is kind, like always, when he looks at me. He don't blame me. Neither does Kira. Why?

Kira snuffles and wipes her eyes with a shaking hand. "I...I've been sneakin' out. There's this boy. Miriam, I told you..."

Ah. Joey. Now it makes sense, and as much as I feel for her, I also feel weak with relief. Maybe this isn't my fault.

Steven whispers, "A boy, Kira?"

She stares at him with bloodshot eyes. "I snuck out to see him a week before we left, Steven. And...he was coughin' a lot, which means he might've been sick with it, right? And I might've caught it from him. I m-might be the one who's carryin' Pan4, even though I don't feel anythin'. Pearl gettin' sick m-might be a-all my f-fault."

"Mike says he has some medicine," Steven says. "If we take it now, we might all get through it OK."

"And Pearl?" Kira whispers.

"Pearl too, he hopes. We all need to go and take it."

"I won't," I say.

He stares at me. "Why not?"

"It could still be me. And if it is, I've had it for a while and am asymptomatic. So you shouldn't waste any medicine on me."

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Kira grabs my shoulder. “Miriam, in a way, I’d like to blame ya. I truly would. But what if it *is* me? What if, after all Mike’s careful plannin’ and all his attempts to isolate us, I’ve doomed everyone? Maybe *I* shouldn’t take the pills. Maybe it wouldn’t be good for —”

She glances at Steven and don’t finish the sentence, but I can guess what she was gonna say. *For the baby.*

“Well,” I say, “I guess the only way to find out is to see if you get sick too. If you do, then it means I brought it. If you don’t, then it maybe is you that’s carryin’ it, and you caught it when you saw that boy that last time.”

Steven says, “Look. We can argue about this all day, but the thing to do is for all of us — even you, Miriam — to go take Mike’s pills. C’mon.”

He moves back along the deck. Laddie trails him. I begin to follow, but Kira puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Miriam,” she whispers. “What ’bout the baby? God, I’ve heard Mike tell horror stories ’bout what Pan4 does to babies. Spontaneous abortions, or the baby goes full term but comes out all deformed and dead. And that’s if the mother don’t die first. I’m scared, Miriam. I’m really scared.”

I grab her hand and squeeze it. “It’ll be OK, Kira. I’m sure it’ll all be OK.”

Lame words, I know, but what else can I possibly say?

## 6

I MUST BE DYING.

I’m wandering into a place full of bright reds and oranges and shifting shadows that sometimes have faces, sometimes

don't, but when they do, the faces are grotesque, smiling with sharp teeth or frowning with bright, burning eyes.

I wake, sweaty and squirmy, and can't move my hand. Something clasps it tight, and when I finally focus, I see Grant's knobby fingers entwined with mine, his eyes staring right into my eyes. They aren't unfocused like they usually are, they're strong and comforting. I guess I must still be alive if I can see Grant's eyes.

"Hello, Grant." I don't say this out loud. I *think* it. And Grant thinks back.

*"Pearl. You're still here."*

*"What were those shadows? They had faces. Terrifying faces."*

And in my head I hear him whisper, *"The shadows...they visit me all the time."*

*"Are they good or bad?"*

*"They're just there, Pearl. Sometimes more, sometimes less, but always there."*

He drops my hand, and I watch his eyes dull, and my mind skitters back to the first time he communicated with me this way, soon after the Pan4 symptoms started. He'd taken my hand, and I'd held it and willed, with my eyes shut and my heart praying, for him to speak to me. And he had. Not using his mouth, not speaking words, but he'd talked to me just the same.

And the first thing I asked him was, *"The time you left us, Grant – the time you were gone for so long and came back all zombie – where did you go?"*

And I saw, emerging from the dark, a ship tossing about on the sea and an island rising up behind it. And then the ship and the island drifted back into the shadows. Lots of shadows,

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writhing and fighting like a nest of angry snakes. I'd let go of his hand and opened my eyes. The shell of Grant had stared at the wall, not even blinking.

### 7

HI JOEY. DAY two of The Plague on the *Argo*. Not sure if the experimental medicine is workin' 'cause Pearl's got the pox. Ugly little purple bumps all over her face and arms. Some have already morphed into bigger welts, but she only has a slight fever now. Mike says Pan4 works fast when it gets to the pox stage. You're either gonna die right off or pull through, but then you might go zombie a few weeks later, or you don't and you get better, so a low fever now might be a good sign. Might mean the pills are doin' somethin'.

There's no point in isolatin' anyone since we're all crammed on this little boat, so Miriam and me still share a bunk. Pearl's been absolutely horrible to her, and I so want to yell at Pearl, even as sick as she is, and say it's all my fault not Miriam's, but I just can't get myself to do it. Anyway, Miriam said she's used to takin' the blame for things even if it isn't her fault, and she don't mind so much if she's made out to be the bad guy, even if she isn't. That's life, she says. I said it isn't fair for everyone to blame her if it isn't her fault, but she said that don't matter. She's the newbie and she isn't fam so it's better Pearl hates her than me. Plus, she says, maybe Pearl will finally come to realize at some point that she wouldn't have infected us on purpose. She knew she was exposed in the prison, but that was three weeks before she met us and odds are she shouldn't have been contagious.

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Then she told me 'bout some people she had camped with up in the mountains and how she worried that even though she didn't figure she was contagious by the time she met us, she mighta been when she camped with 'em, even if her test said she was OK. She talked 'bout this little boy, Jack, and how maybe she exposed him and his fam to Pan4 from that jail, and how, if he hadn't starved to death yet, he might be sick and dyin' and it might be her fault. She was so sad, she almost cried, Joey. I know you haven't met her, but up 'til now she's acted so...I dunno, stoic, I guess. Hasn't let us see much emotion. But I guess she must care for people and worry too, 'cause she sure sounded torn up 'bout that little boy.

Not much else to say 'cept the medicine has made everyone pretty sleepy and unfocused. I'm due for my next dose, and I don't really want it. I feel fine. But Mike says we all need to keep takin' it. Miriam still refuses to take any and says she can do the steerin' since she is more clearheaded than the rest of us. But only Steven knows how to get to Avalon, so he's tryin' to stay awake too.

Mike's still OK. He said he caught Pan3 way back and maybe that's given him some immunity. Grant is the one we worry 'bout most, but so far he hasn't gotten it either. Maybe Pan2 helped *his* immunity, although he's so old and zombie, maybe it don't even matter. Steven's got a little fever but he don't have a cough or any pox marks. But I'm still fine. Just sleepy. Maybe that'll help me get through this voyage. Maybe I'll sleep through the whole crummy thing.

NOT SURE WHAT day it is now, Joey. Slept a lot. Puked a lot too. We went through a crazy squall at some point, and the

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ship took a good batterin'. The mast came crashin' down, and we had to disengage it and let it go. It crushed two solars, but we have a couple backups. No more sailin' from here on out. We'll have to use the motor. It'll be faster anyway.

The remainin' preserves are OK, though. Ha crashing! Wrap-pin' 'em in towels worked.

Steven's fever broke. No pox for him so far. Pearl's fever broke too, although she's still got the horrible pox marks all over her face and arms. Mike's hopin' she's gotten through the worst of it, though. He says the pills must've helped.

Mike's so worn out from lookin' after everybody, he's now laid up in his bunk and swears he's gonna sleep for a week. He gave Miriam the medicine and told her what doses everyone should get. She's the only one the drug hasn't gotten all addled in the head since she refuses to take any, so it's up to her to make sure everyone gets their dose, at least for another two days, Mike says. Then all the medicine'll be gone. He didn't expect he'd need so much when he stole it. He said he was hopin' he wouldn't hafta use it at all.

We're somewhere near Avalon, Steven reckons. But now that we're close, I can see he's nervous. He's afraid he'll forget how to get there. It's just a small island in a big ocean, after all.

## 8

I CAN'T STAND THE sight of vomit.

There's a lot of things that make me squeamy. Like bits of crumbs stuck in a beard or toothpaste dribblin' down a person's chin or baby drool or snot oozin' out of a nose. I've been squeamy that way, ever since I was a little kid. Pearl's not that

way, or Kira, or Grant, and Mike is totally stoic when it comes to gross stuff since he's a doctor. But seein' that kinda stuff makes me downright queasy.

But I 'specially can't stand the sight of vomit. Even the *sound* of pukin' makes me wanna puke too. Stuff on peoples' faces makes me gag and I have to look away 'til the person fixes it, but you can't fix pukin'. When it happens, it happens. I haven't actually been seasick so far on this voyage, not a bit, though everyone thought I was 'cause I threw up a lot, 'specially durin' that last storm. But that was only 'cause I saw everyone else doin' it. I puked in disgusted sympathy.

Somethin' else I'm gonna have to add to my hate list—pox marks.

Pearl's pox marks are big and blistery and look like massive mosquito bites. Every time I look at her face I wanna reach over with a pin and pop each ugly purple blob, although Mike says they have to burst or go down on their own. Pearl's face makes me both blarfy and itchy. Her pox reminds me of that time I got poison ivy when I was a kid, big yellow bubbles of it all over my arm and hand, and I couldn't help but pop the bubbles, they itched so horrible and looked so gross, even though Pearl said they could get infected. Now whenever I glance at Pearl's face, I wanna grab Miriam's knife and stab each pox, which scares me 'cause it sounds like somethin' an insane murderer would do.

I'm glad Pearl's feelin' better, glad that after bein' sick and havin' to go through another bout of rough seas, she's up and movin' and even fixin' us meals again—she has a burst of energy she says, and she feels like she's gotta be doin' somethin'. I'm definitely glad of that. But, ugh. The pox.

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I can't wait now to get to Avalon, 'cause at least there we can spread out a bit, not always be right in each other's faces. The other day, Miriam asked me what was so special 'bout Avalon and why did my fam wanna go there? I told her that it was really only me and Mike who thought Avalon was a good idea, and that's 'cause we've always enjoyed goin' there. Pearl chose comin' out of desperation, but she don't care much for Avalon. The one time she went, when she was a little kid, she was seasick the whole way. And she isn't the type who likes roughin' it anyway. She didn't like the bunker or the beach, even. The whole time, she said, she just wanted to be back home. The only thing she did when she was there was name all the different parts of it, like she called the bunker "Camelot" and dubbed the lagoon "Mermaid's Lagoon."

So I told Miriam that the island is a good choice 'cause it has a bunker with beds built into the wall and enough storage for five years' worth of food and supplies, 'cept we ended up not bringin' near that much. And there's the pink beach and Mermaid's Lagoon, surrounded by palm trees. And there's a couple of beach huts built over the lagoon, and a little waterfall that comes out of a spring. And on the island's southern tip, you can find tidal pools below the cliffs, and the north side has a nice spot for growin' things and a few years ago Mike planted rosemary and St. John's wort and a bunch of medicinal plants there. Last time I visited Avalon, the plants were doin' fine and growin' big and spreadin'.

But this mornin', Grant says somethin' eerie. I mean, he hardly ever talks, ever since he came back from that long trip he took, the one where he went all zombie. When we found him, he was wanderin' up the road and we had to lead him inside



the house 'cause he didn't even seem to know where he was. And he's never much talked again after that day, 'cept on rare occasions. That was why Mike left his doctorin' and moved back to Toad Hall, so he could look after Grant.

So this mornin', while we're havin' breakfast, and I'm tryin' to avoid lookin' at Pearl's globby face while I'm eatin' my oatmeal, I say, "I hope we're not off course."

Miriam puts down her spoon and frowns at me. "You think we might be?"

"I dunno. Everythin's been so crazy the last couple of days I haven't been able to pay much attention to our course. God, I can't wait 'til we get there. We'll have so much more room. We can spread out—stay in the bunker or in the huts—"

Mike says, "The bunker is the safest."

"Yeah, durin' a storm or somethin', but durin' the nice days, the huts'll be fantastic to stay in. Right over the lagoon, Miriam, it's so beautiful."

Mike says, "If they're still there."

"They were last time I visited. I mean, it's been a few years, and they were a little run down, but they were still standin'."

Grant, who up 'til then sat slouched on a bench, straightens up and says, clear as a bell, "Huts are gone."

Pearl whips her head around and stares at him. "What did you say?"

But Grant has already shut up and gone all limp again.

We stare at each other. Even Pearl's pox marks don't bother me right now, 'cause I'm worried. If the huts are gone, we'll all have to cram in Camelot and live crowded in somethin' just as small, if not smaller, than the *Argo*.

And now I'm wonderin' if, on that night two years ago when

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Grant took the boat and sailed away, did he sail all the way to Avalon on his own? I mean, he was gone for almost a year, so he had plenty of time to make the trip. And how else would he know the beach huts are gone? That is, if they really are gone, which we won't know 'til we get there, I guess. Maybe he sailed all the way to the island and then somehow wrecked his boat on the way back. Maybe that's why we found him wanderin' up the road instead of sailin' in, right when we thought he was gone for good. But why'd he sail all the way to Avalon without lettin' anybody know? And at what point durin' that trip did he start losin' his mind and goin' zombie? When you think 'bout it, it's a miracle he found his way back to Toad Hall at all.

Course, maybe he's talkin' nonsense and the huts still exist. But I dunno. When Grant *does* say somethin', he's usually right.

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“This is the place of my song-dream, the place the music played to me,” whispered the Rat, as if in a trance. “Here, in this holy place, here if anywhere, surely.”

*Kenneth Graham - The Wind in the Willows*

## 1

I CAN'T BELIEVE WE'RE on dry land.

No, we aren't at Avalon yet, but this morning we spotted another island, not much of an island, just a glorified rock rising outta the ocean. Steven recognized it, said it's in the same island chain as Avalon.

“Why don't we stop there?” he suggested. “Stretch our legs for a bit.”

Kira was all excited about this, and I guess I am too. It's weird – as much as it's hard being cooped up on a small ship with these people, I've decided that I love the sea. I love the emptiness of it, the hugeness. The happiest I've been, despite the storms and what Kira has dubbed The Plague, has been

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this trip to Avalon on the *Argo*. No sign of life anywhere 'cept us, the chickens, Laddie. When you're out here with no land anywhere in sight, you can pick any point to sail toward, any point at all, and it will take you somewhere new, somewhere unexpected. The choices are almost endless.

But now we're on land, at least for the afternoon. The island is all cliffy, but Steven knew a spot on the eastern side with a bit of beach, so we dropped anchor and took the dinghy in. You can raise the dinghy's motor and land it like a canoe, so that's what we did, right onto this little sliver of beach.

This island is even smaller than Avalon, Steven says. It's an atoll like Avalon—that's an island made from a volcano where the lagoon is the remnants of the volcano cone. Makes me wonder if they're actual dead volcanos or if they might explode on us someday when we aren't expecting it. Mike stayed on the ship with Grant, but Steven, Kira, and me opted to get off the boat for a bit, and even though Pearl is still a bit weak, she insisted on coming too. I guess she needs the exercise, but it'd have been nicer without her, although now she's mostly recovered, she's laid off abusing me, a bit.

It's a barren island, not even any trees on it, but it's pretty in a weird, wild way. The ocean must be fairly shallow 'round this island 'cause it's a beautiful turquoise, and that can only happen if the sky reflects off the sandy bottom.

We tromp off with Laddie to explore, although you can almost see the whole island from the beach. We leave Pearl on the beach, fixing a picnic.

"It'll be the same stuff we've been eatin' on the *Argo* though, nothin' special," Kira says. "Flatbread and some hard cheese to make sandwiches with."

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"I'll sure miss the cheese when it's all gone," Steven says.

"How'd you get the cheese, anyway?" I ask. That's a luxury, back east. I hardly ever got to eat cheese.

"Well, we milked the hell outta Bessie and Molly before I slaughtered 'em to make jerky and trade steaks for all the beans," Steven says. "Most of the milk we made into cheese. The milk would've just gone bad."

"I felt so bad for those cows," Kira says.

"They were gettin' old anyway and we needed all the food supplies we could get, and if we didn't kill 'em, someone else would," Steven says.

Kira sighs. "Well, it's nice to be on dry land, even for a bit. My legs are wobbly though. Like the whole island is shiftin' under my feet, like an earthquake. Makes me kinda sick to my tum, although that might be —"

She glances at Steven, who still don't know about the baby yet.

I say, quickly, "So, I got a question 'bout your fam. I mean, you all are so different, you're not really all related, right?"

"Well, somewhat," Steven says.

"No, you gotta tell it right, Steven," Kira says. "Like how Pearl always tells it." She turns to me, grinning. "See, Miriam, Grant was erupted outta Mount Rainier; Mike was plucked from an apple tree; Pearl was found in an oyster shell, of course; and Steven sailed in on a boat made from a Van Gogh paintin' all folded up like you'd fold a paper boat."

"I always picture it as a paintin' of 'Starry Night'," Steven says. "Like the copy I painted that hangs in the library, I showed you that, Miriam, 'member?"

"Yes," I say. "I liked that paintin'."

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Kira goes on. "And me last, I floated to Toad Hall ridin' on a musical wind. When I was a kid, I actually believed all this and asked Pearl what song the wind was playin', but she didn't know. She said someday I'd hear that song and recognize it instantly as mine. I've listened to lots of music, but nothin' ever felt quite right to me, so maybe that's what I'm composin' now. The song of my life."

"That's of course not what really happened, though," Steven says.

I laugh. "No, I didn't guess it was."

He says, "Grant's and Pearl's dad is the Pater. He was a successful businessman and inventor. I don't know much 'bout Grant's mom 'cept she was from a tribe up north, near Vancouver somewhere. She was the Pater's first wife. She died when Pan2 hit, back when Grant was a kid, and he got it too but survived."

Kira nods. "The Pater brought Mike home sometime after the second pandemic, when he was a baby. Mike's parents worked for the Pater but Pan2 killed 'em both."

"And then," Steven says, "When Mike was a little older, Pater hired a tutor for him. Her name was Opal, and the Pater ended up fallin' in love any marryin' her. When Mike was almost eleven and Grant had gone to college, Opal had Pearl."

I ponder this. "So Grant and Pearl are half brother and sister, but Mike was adopted."

"Right," Steven says. "Opal died though, when Pearl was six. By then, Grant was workin' for the Pater's company as an engineer. You know the solars everyone uses? They used to have super big solar panels, but the Pater invented the small kind we use now, the kind that can power trucks and ships

and all sorts of things. That's how our fam became rich, but then later the Pater started to get sick and Grant took over the company, 'cept Grant didn't understand squat 'bout runnin' a business, just how to tinker with things. So, next thing you know, the company started losin' money. If the Pater coulda mentored Grant in the business, Grant might've done OK, but Pater died back when Pearl was ten and Grant was almost thirty and Mike was startin' med school back east."

We reach the topmost point on the island, which isn't that high, but you can see a nice panorama. We stop and find a rock to sit on.

"Anyway," Kira says, "the business started to fail, and that's when Pan3 hit and Mike went off to try and heal people. When that third pandemic happened was also 'bout the time when Pearl, who was still a teenager, found Steven abandoned in the old church. Like the Pater, she had this soft spot for orphans, so she took him in. Later, she found me and took me in, too."

"So, like Steven and Mike, you're an orphan," I say.

She nods. "Yup. I don't have the slightest idea who my parents were. Nobody could tell Pearl who I belonged to, although I was probably a Morlock baby, I guess. Somebody left me, just a tiny baby, next to the ugly barbed wire fence surroundin' Toad Hall. I grew up behind that wire and only ever saw Pearl and Steven and the Millers who had a daughter named Maggie, but she was Steven's age, not mine, and Grant, and sometimes Mike when he'd visit. They were all I knew 'cept my tutors on the vid, until the day...well, the day I met Joey."

Steven frowns. "How long had that been goin' on? You were awfully sneaky, I sure never caught on."

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"I swear that was the day I started to feel like a real, livin' person," Kira says. "'Til then I didn't know nothin' 'bout livin', 'bout how other people lived. He did that for me."

She falls silent. A tear drips down her cheek. She stands and walks away, sniffing.

"Boy, is she mopey," Steven says.

"She was in love with him," I say. "But she left him behind."

"You think he died in that fire?"

"No, sounds like he left before that. She had a chance to leave with him, but she didn't. That was when they met for the last time, when he might've given her the pox."

He sighs. "Poor kid. I know what it's like to lose someone like that."

I want to ask him who he lost, but Pearl's voice floats over the island, calling us. Lunch must be ready. We get off the rock and amble back to the beach.

## 2

WELL, JOEY, WE'RE on our last big push across the sea, headin' finally to Avalon, and wouldn't ya know it, we got stuck in the middle of another damn storm. I don't know where the storm came from, but it came outta nowhere, almost when we were in sight of Avalon. All of a sudden, the waves got mondo huge and it was thunderin' and lightnin', and, God, wouldn't it figure we'd be so close and that would happen. It was so blue and beautiful yesterday when we were on that other island, but everythin' changed so sudden. Steven was worried 'bout the ship since the last storm. The main did some damage when it fell. He's scared of leaks and things. Plus,



without the main, we don't have any sails to use as backup if the solars go kaput.

But now the storm's over. It was super intense but super short, and we lost two more solars. Didn't have time to take 'em down before the storm hit. It was that quick, Joey. We have spares, and we're usin' 'em to engine the rest of the way to Avalon. I can see it now, can ya believe it? The storm ended, and Steven said, "There it is!" And there it was, risin' up in front of us like we'd never been lost at all. Steven says the storm coulda blown us right past it and we'd have never known it. Pearl said maybe it was a magical storm, like in Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, where this magician conjures up a storm to shipwreck a boat, sailed by his enemies, onto his island so he could get his vengeance on 'em. Mike, of course, laughed and said it was coincidence, and Pearl said how would he know? Maybe the Pater's spirit conjured up the storm to bring us to Avalon. Then of course Mike said, "Well, we aren't shipwrecked, although the *Argo* did get battered 'round a bit, and why would Dad want us to wreck the boat?"

Anyway, I'll zoom in on the island for ya. See? It's bigger than the last island by a long shot, but still soooo small, a pebble in a big ocean. It depresses me. That's where we're gonna end up. Sittin' on that rock. For how long? I dunno.

Steven says the fishin' is good offshore. Or was last time he visited. Grant and the Pater planted palm trees years ago, and the huts might, or might not, still be standin'. And we'll have the bunker. Camelot. Pearl says she called it that 'cause it was so gray and depressin' and she wanted to make it sound more invitin'. But anythin' is better at this point than the cramped conditions we've been livin' in.

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It's definitely warmer here. You can tell we're close to the 'quator, it's so humid and hot. I wonder how long it'll take before our clothes wear out and we hafta start wearin' palm fronds and coconut husks like they do in old movies. I bet our clothes'll last longer than the food supply, though.

If I sound a bit depressed, Joey, not as happy as I should be at finally spottin' land, it's nerves maybe. Yesterday, when we were eatin' lunch on the other island, I was happy, but I've gotten moodier and moodier since. Is it 'cause we're nearin' the voyage's end and livin' on Avalon, cut off from all civ, is now finally a reality when before it was a vague dream? In a way I thought maybe we'd never actually find Avalon. We'd keep sailin', maybe east to find you, or even to another civ, one with no disease and lots of food and happy people who all get along. But now all I see is a prison loomin' closer and closer.

I don't feel so good. Not blarfy, like I've felt so far, just... weird. Like somethin' isn't right. Like somethin' super bad is waitin' for us on that island, hidin' behind a palm tree 'til we land, then it's gonna jump out and eat us whole. I don't wanna land. I wanna keep sailin' forever and ever.

It's hot, Joey. I feel so sticky. Guess I'd better lie down for a bit. God, my tum hurts. Like someone's stickin' a needle in it. Shit...Joey, I love ya...want you to know that. If you ever see these vids, remember...I'm sorry we left each other angry. It was the stupidest thing I've ever done. Ow...God it hurts! Joey!

### 3

ON THE ROLLING sea, close enough to Avalon so we can almost swim to it, Steven brings the limping *Argo* to a stop and anchors

her while I do what I can for Kira. She's stopped screaming and now lies in a pool of blood, almost lifeless. I hold the twisted fetus in my palm, wrapped in a towel. Nobody needs to see this. I can barely look at it, and I'm a doctor.

Kira's whisper is so faint I almost don't catch it. "Is it a girl?"  
"Yes," I whisper back.

She shudders and closes her eyes. Her head lolls to one side.

Next to me, Pearl's breathing erupts in sobbing gasps. The pox marks that'll always scar her once smooth face stand out as a grotesque reminder of what caused this abortion. Pan4. I don't dare hand her the bloody bundle. I pass it to Miriam, instead.

"How?" Pearl stutters between racking sobs. "Mike, how c-could this b-be p-p-possible?"

Kira's eyes are closed. Drowsy from the sedative I've given her, she isn't gonna answer. All I know is that Pan4 did this too. I turn to Pearl. "Has she ever told you about anyone? About a boy?"

Pearl chokes down a sob and wipes her eyes. "What? No, of course not. She's always so good. She'd never associate with anyone outside the fam. Was it—" She sucks in her breath, as if it pains her to even ask. "Was it one of you?"

Steven is working his way down the stairs and almost misses the last step. He's holding a small, fetus-sized box in his hands. "Pearl! How could ya even think that?"

I touch Pearl's shaking shoulder. "Calm down, Pearl. It wasn't me. And I'm sure it wasn't Grant or Steven. She never acted traumatized, and she would've been if one of us had done this to her. She was happy, right up 'til the time we made the decision to leave for Avalon. That's when she started to get all distraught. I suppose it was 'cause she was leaving somebody behind. She must've known one of 'em before, one of the Morlocks."

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"She did," Steven says. "She told us."

"Oh, God," Pearl sobs. "Mike, p-please tell me she'll be OK."

"I hope so," I say, but the terrified spasms knotting my guts right now tell me different.

Pearl's fear suddenly morphs to rage and she turns to Miriam, who is still cradling the baby bundle. "She picked up the disease from *you*. Damn you, M-M-Miriam. All those years protecting Kira from harm, and for what?"

Miriam's eyes get stony, and she opens her mouth to spurt out a retort, but what we don't need right now is an argument.

I touch Kira's clammy forehead. "Pearl, Miriam didn't make Kira pregnant. And we can't know if she brought Pan4 with her. Kira could have been a Pan4 carrier before we even set sail. Chances are, it's who she knew that transmitted the disease to her, then to us. Not Miriam."

"It *was* the damn Morlocks, then, you're saying." Pearl slumps onto the edge of Kira's bunk. "They did this to us."

I sigh. "Maybe so."

Steven stares at the bloody towel clenched in Miriam's hands. "Was the baby all...deformed? Like what ya told us happens sometimes?"

I put a hand on his shoulder and steer him and Pearl away from Kira's bed even though she's out cold and can't hear him. "It's all gray. Bloated. Yes, deformed. Best to bury it, as soon as we get to the island. Kira can't see this."

"Will she be OK?" Pearl's voice comes out pleading, like a small child who's had a traumatic nightmare and wants reassurance.

I let go of Steven's shoulder and put a tired arm around her. "I hope so, Pearl."

I feel so inadequate, repeating this pitiful attempt at assurance. Sometimes the mother survives the abortion, but the chances of septic shock are always high. Much higher than I want Pearl to know.

I take the sad little bundle from Miriam and lay it gently in the box Steven has found. I cover the box, place it on the table. “Nothing we can do now. Let’s let her sleep. I want to go up on deck and take a look at the island.”

We leave Pearl to watch over Kira and climb onto the deck. We’re anchored right outside Avalon’s lagoon. But even from the *Argo’s* bobbing deck, nothing looks like it did the last time I visited. I’d dreamed of this island while I sweated in an east coast ER or bumped along dusty roads, heading for the next mobile hospital, trying to bring relief to the dying masses. I’d fantasized about it, the perfect place to escape all the suffering and misery in the world. But the island that always used to welcome me now glares at me from across the lagoon, like it’s weathered its own pandemic and lies before us broken and battered.

Only a sliver remains of the pink crescent beach. The lagoon isn’t even technically a lagoon anymore, either. Rising sea levels and smashing storms have ripped away at the coral and drowned the palm trees that once lined the now gutted beach. Almost all the trees are dead, their stumps standing like thin, bent statues in the lapping aqua. The big basalt rock near shore – Pearl named it Mermaid’s Rock – pokes its head above the surface, but barely.

Steven lowers the binoculars from his eyes. “Grant was right. The huts are gone.”

Miriam squints at the rocky land rising above the lagoon. “I don’t see this Camelot you all keep talkin’ ’bout.”

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"Course not," I say. "It's behind that ridge of red rock, but you can't see it. Grant and Dad designed it so it wasn't visible from any point at sea. We won't know whether it's still standing until we hike up to it. I bet it's there, though. It'd take a tsunami to take Camelot down."

Miriam shields her eyes with one hand. "That's a pretty steep hike."

"It's not as bad as it looks," Steven says.

She strokes Laddie's head with her free hand. "Well, I can't wait to get up there and check it out."

Steven laughs. "Yeah, but don't let the name fool ya. Camelot ain't no palace, that's for sure. Pearl named it that when she was a kid and big into Arthurian legend, but it's just a cinderblock bunker."

I nod. "She was the one who named the island too, Avalon. On the charts it's called something boring like Isla de la Roca, but we never call it that."

"She named every part of the island after stories she liked when she was a kid," Steven says. "So, Mike, should we go ashore?"

"You're the captain. But Kira can't. She's too weak to be moved yet. Pearl'll want to stay with her. I'll stay too, though I can't do much for her right now." I wipe my brow with a slick palm, my fingers shaking a bit.

"You OK?" Steven says. "You look like you're gonna faint."

"Feel like it too."

"You definitely better stay put then. Miriam and me'll go. We'll take the dinghy."

"Laddie'll go with us too," Miriam says, scratching the panting dog around his ears.

“Sure,” I say. “Why don’t you take the chickens? You can let ‘em loose on the island.”

Four chickens survived the trip. The others died en route and we cooked ‘em into stews. Pearl named the surviving ones – Bil-lina is the matriarch, a big red hen, then there’s Henny Penny, Chicken Little (the scrawniest), and the rooster, Sir Galahad.

Miriam unties the coop while Steven checks the anchor. He nods to Miriam, and they both grab a coop end and swing it into the dinghy. Steven has the excited little boy look he always got when we’d first reach the island. Once upon a time, the sight of Avalon could send me into the same animated state. Now, I gaze at the lagoon’s foamy remains and the bleak, torn-up shore and wonder if our choice to come here was the smartest. Better to wither and die at Toad Hall, where at least I had a soft mattress and an apple orchard and cows to milk. But if we hadn’t left when we did, we’d all be charred to a crisp by now, and that would be a crappy way to go too.

Steven, Miriam, and the dog board the lowered dinghy. I loosen its ropes with a now uncontrollably vibrating hand before waving them off. Then I scoot down to my bunk and pull out my medical satchel. In it lies a bottle with five little blue pills. I pick one up, gulp it down my dry throat, and take a steadying breath. I pour the satchel’s other contents onto my bunk and study the only stash of medical supplies I could scrounge.

Ginger pills. Almost gone, but I meant ‘em for seasickness, and the voyage is now over. I didn’t pack enough for a possible return trip. I’m hoping the ginger I planted years ago on the island has thrived and multiplied.

Two vials of morphine and some clean syringes.

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A small surgical kit for emergencies. Mixed sutures, cutting needles, surgical threads, etc.

A bottle of sedatives, three now sacrificed to Pearl's hysterics and one to Kira.

Two empty bottles, where the Pan4 medicine was but now only pill dust rolls around their insides. Oh, the trouble I went through to get *that* medicine.

Two big bottles of aspirin.

An assortment of bandages.

My stethoscope.

A blood pressure ball and cuff.

My vid. I can take temperature, oxygen levels, and other vitals with it, plus I can use it like a normal vid and send messages or read books or watch movies or play games, but I don't do any of those things much anymore.

That's all a doctor of thirty-plus years could scrounge up. I repack the equipment in my satchel and bring it to where Kira now lies on fresh sheets, still out cold. The little blue pill is working. My hands are steady.

Pearl has wadded the soiled sheets up and stuffed them into a corner. "I'll wash 'em when we're on the island," she says.

Kira's breathing is rapid. I take her temperature. It's high—103.5 F. Pulse: 110. Oxygen level: 89. Blood pressure: 95 over 59. None of this soothes my worries.

"Is she OK?" Pearl says. She sits on the bunk's edge, one hand smoothing Kira's curly black hair away from her eyes. Pearl's eyes are clouded with tears. Strands of gray hair have broken free from her long braid and brush gently across Kira's waxy cheeks.

Kira stirs. "Joey," she moans.



Pearl sucks in her breath. "Joey." The word comes out cold and hard.

"The father?" I whisper.

Pearl rubs her forehead and groans. "How? I swear to God, Mike, how could they have possibly met?"

"Kids have ways, Pearl. I remember sneaking out of Toad Hall and wandering through the woods when I was a kid."

"That was way before Grant put up the fence, though. And years before everything went completely to pot and all the vagabonds started camping in the woods."

I can't help chuckling. "That fence Grant insisted on was meant to keep strangers out, Pearl, not necessarily to keep us in. Kira's thumbprint could unlock the gate. She could get out any time she wanted."

"But she never would've gone out, on her own," Pearl whispers. "After all the warnings I gave her on how dangerous it was..."

"Warnings to adolescents are more tempting than candy, Pearl. Obviously, she went out, and often, I'll bet." I lay my hand against Kira's forehead. "Poor thing."

"Do you reckon she has Pan4?"

"The baby sure did. She must too."

"But she didn't have any symptoms."

"No, not the more advanced ones. Not the pox marks. But she has the standard clinical ones. High fever, rapid heartbeat, low blood pressure, low oxygen."

"Pan4," Pearl says.

Or sepsis. But I can't get myself to tell Pearl that. Kira might live through Pan4. She's got at least a fifty-fifty chance, hopefully a much stronger set of odds with the Pan4 medicine cours-

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ing through her. But sepsis scares the hell out of me. Even in good hospital conditions, it's a pot-shot whether patients make it. And I'm no obstetrician. I take advantage of Kira's unconsciousness to probe her gently, making sure her body has discharged all the placenta. She moans and twists but doesn't wake. That makes me nervous too.

IT'S CLOSE TO dinner time as I watch Steven and Miriam maneuvering the dinghy back to the *Argo*. Kira is sleeping, fitful but not waking. Pearl was so teary-eyed and anxious that I finally broke down and gave her another sedative. Now she's sprawled out in her berth, dead out to the world. Grant sits with me above decks in the cockpit.

"What do you think?" I say, staring at the deeply wrinkled face surrounded by unkempt gray hair. Pearl usually braids it, but she's been too anxious today, so the hair spreads around Grant's face and over his shoulders like a silvery waterfall. He stares somewhere over my shoulder with his unfocused eyes. Dark age spots cover his sallow skin. Half are lost in the deep folds, and some scatter across his nose like stars in the sky. His thin lips are wrinkled too, forced into a permanent pucker.

"Do you believe in dreams, Grant? Maybe not. You were always the scientific type. If you couldn't prove it, it didn't exist. But I had a dream last night—the Puzzle Dream. I've told you about my puzzle dreams before. You used to tease me about 'em."

I pause and wait for a response, but Grant doesn't give one. So, I go on.

"It's weird, I guess I've always thought of my life as a kind of jigsaw puzzle. Like a big jumble of disconnected pieces that'll

somehow fit together and make a complete picture before I die. The first puzzle dream I ever had was when I was nine, right during my first trip to Avalon. In that dream I was sitting at the table in Camelot – although we didn't call it Camelot back then – and staring at a pile of puzzle pieces, all flipped over so I could only see the brown backsides. Then, the dream ended."

Grant's glassy eyes focus on a point about where the bunker is, except you can't see the bunker from the sea.

"Anyway, I've dreamt of the same puzzle ever since. Each dream picks up where the last left off. The dreams always take place in Camelot, at the big table. In the dreams I had when I was a kid, I sorted the pieces into piles – a pile for the edges and a big, heaping pile for the middle pieces – but I never flipped any of 'em to see their colors and I never got around to putting any together. Then on my thirteenth birthday, I remember waking up all excited because I'd finally put the first two edge pieces together and flipped 'em. They were blue, like the sky."

Grant's eyes flick closer to me, now focused on the stump where the mast used to be.

"So, all through my teen years, I dreamed of gradually flipping over the edge pieces and linking 'em together. Took until my early twenties to get 'em all connected, and ever since then, I've been filling in the middle, which, as you know, are the hardest pieces to fit and so have taken the longest to piece together."

Grant's eyes drop to his gnarled hands.

"So here I am now, in my sixties, and I can clearly see the picture when I dream it. It's Avalon, laid out like a map. Most of the island is visible, but there are a few pieces I haven't fitted into the puzzle yet. They're still face down and I have no idea what they look like. I mean, I can see where they must fit.

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There's a big spot missing near Dad's gravestone on the cliff, and there's one little hole, probably only one piece'll fit into it, off to the right in the sea." I take a deep breath. "Anyway, here's what's always kinda scared me about these dreams. I believe that when the puzzle is all complete, it'll show me how I'm gonna die."

Grant's eyes move to my knobby knees sticking out from under my baggy shorts.

"I'm crazy, right? I mean, when I was a kid and all positive about things, I thought the puzzle might reveal my purpose in life or something. But the older I got, the more I thought, my life is passing me by and it doesn't seem like I'll get this puzzle done until the end of it. So, it must be a portent of my death, right? And I gotta tell you, I'm absolutely dreading the night when I turn the last piece over and find out where it fits."

His gaze crawls to my shoulder.

"Last night during that crazy storm, when I finally fell asleep, I had one of those damn puzzle dreams. It's the first one I've had in a long time. I was here, at Avalon, and I was nine again. You remember. It was that first trip here with you and Dad, and Noah came too."

Noah was Grant's friend from high school. Absolutely the opposite of Grant—I never got why they were friends. Grant was quiet and intent on building things while Noah's favorite pastime was arguing about everything. He especially argued with Grant, constantly. He drove me nuts. He didn't like me much either, was always calling me "brat" or "tagalong," and would roll his eyes and sigh when I asked if I could join him and Grant fishing or swimming. I'd hoped to spend some quality time with my big brother that first trip, but Grant and

Noah spent almost all the vacation shunning Dad and me. I remember Dad saying, “They’re at that age, Mike. They don’t want to have much to do with a young kid like you or an old parent like me.” But I still figure it was mostly Noah who did the shunning. If he hadn’t been there, I’m sure Grant and me would’ve hung out, done more brotherly things.

Now I turn to face him. “In the dream, I was hiking on the path down to Mirkwood, only suddenly it was all snowy – isn’t that weird, snow on Avalon? – and I was dressed up like the old Swiss Alp yodeler figurine in Toad Hall’s library. I even had a wooden hiking stick in my hand. I rounded a bend in the trail and came across a body half-buried in snow, lying right in my path. I jabbed it with my hiking stick like a kid would poke roadkill on the street, and decided to flip him over. Part of my brain was screaming, *Don’t do this. You don’t want to see his face*, but I thrust the hiking stick under him anyway and pushed. And the body flipped over, but before I could discover *who* it was, it turned into a flipping jigsaw puzzle piece and spun high in the air. The whole snowy scenery blinked out of existence, and there I was, sitting at Camelot’s table and the puzzle was spread across its top. The new puzzle piece fell into its proper spot, and I could see half a person in it.” I laugh. “Shocked the hell outta me, Grant, ’cause up until that point, for the last fifty-odd years or so, the picture had only shown sea, sky, and the island. No people.”

He’s looking me full in the face now, but his black eyes are dead like a shark’s and I can’t tell if they’re focused on me or staring straight through me to something only he can see.

I take a deep breath. “So, here’s the other weird thing. The puzzle shows the whole island, and a human form would be

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way too miniscule to show up on it, if everything were to scale. But in this dream, it was like I zoomed into that particular part of the island – up on Pook’s Hill, next to Dad’s tombstone – and I could clearly see the person. I couldn’t make out who it was. I could only see bare feet and faded jeans. The person’s top was missing. Logically, I’m figuring it’ll show up on the adjoining piece, which is also missing. Who do you reckon it is?”

Of course, he doesn’t answer.

I plow on. “Grant, I’m getting scared. You might call me stupid, but the dream puzzle is gonna be finished soon. And I’m terrified that once it is, I’m gonna die.”

No reaction. His dead eyes don’t register a damn thing I’m saying.

I can’t stop talking, though. I’ve wanted to talk about this to *somebody*. “I mean, I expect to die anyway.” I raise my hands. They aren’t shaking now, but that’s only until the little blue pill’s effects wear off. “Remnants of Pan3. I’ve had it for a couple years now. It’s a zombie state, kinda like yours, ’cept Pan3 zombie gives you muscle spasms too. I should probably be dead already, but it’s controllable if you start on the pills soon enough. With pills I bet I could go on for a long time. But I only have four pills left now, from the only batch I could find before we left Cascadia. Anyway, once I realized I had the Pan3 zombie, I figured I might not have much time left and maybe I should spend it with my fam. And take care of you. So, I came home.”

I stop my rambling. None of those reasons were what forced me away from the hospitals and back to Toad Hall, if I’m being honest. The real reason is way too horrific for me to mention out loud. Even to Grant.

His eyes move away from me now, fixing on a seagull gliding across the lagoon. He's lost interest in the conversation. The puzzle dream must've appealed to him, because he rarely looks anyone right in the face. Now, he doesn't even glance my way.

"Anyway, I've only got the four pills. Four more days of semi-normalcy." I pause, suddenly intent on the rapid beating of my heart. It pounds there, Old Reliable, something that could surely never stop beating. I take a deep breath and will it to slow to a more normal rhythm.

"I'm scared, Grant. I have no idea how long I'm gonna last after those pills are gone. Could be months, could be weeks. It won't be long, though. Pan3 zombie works fast, if you don't have drugs to keep it in check."

Not as fast as Pan4 zombie, though. The drugs don't even work for that. I stare at the bleak, rocky island in front of us. If I'm doomed to die, Avalon isn't a bad place to do it. At least I can get buried alongside Dad.

I lower my gaze to the lagoon. The dinghy putters slowly toward us, in no hurry. Miriam and Steven wave. I can see their faces, relaxed and smiling. They must've had a good time exploring. I sit in silence with Grant until the dinghy glides up alongside the *Argo*. I pat Grant's shoulder and shuffle to the control panel so I can lower the diving platform. The dinghy coasts to a stop, and Steven throws me a line.

"How was it?" I ask, holding the line taut while Steven and Miriam clamber aboard the *Argo*.

"Camelot is still there," Steven says. "Solid as ever. And you won't believe it, but it's half stocked with supplies. Dried beans, jars of honey, all sorts of stuff." He glances over at Grant, sitting rigid in the cockpit. "They weren't here last time I sailed to

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Avalon, though that was a few years ago. This proves it. Grant must've come here the year he went missin'."

"Well, *someone* was here at any rate," I say.

We manhandle the dinghy onto the davits.

"How's Kira?" Miriam says.

"Sleeping when I left her."

"Reckon she'll make it?"

"I believe so. Her fever has broken, and her breathing has slowed. But she's still wiped. We'll spend one more night on the boat. She should have enough strength to move to dry land tomorrow."

Steven heads toward the hatch, glancing back at me. "Miriam and me are gonna spend the night in Camelot, if that's OK."

I give him a grin, and he blushes, then descends the stairs to below decks.

Miriam says quickly, "More room for Kira in the bunk, if she needs it."

"I see," I say, hoping I don't sound too sarcastic. I turn to Grant and take his wrinkled but steady hand in my now slightly shaking one. He stands on cue and follows me toward the stairs. "What do you make of that turn of events?" I whisper, but of course he doesn't answer.

AFTER SETTLING KIRA and Grant in for the night, I fell asleep listening to Pearl complain about how much she hated the Morlocks, the *Argo*, this journey, and whoever Joey was. The dream I fall into shows me another flipped-over puzzle piece. It starts at the old Johns Hopkins campus back east. There I am, sitting in a classroom with that crank, Dr. Pinchott, lecturing away, and I'm on my flat pad (this was before vids) pretending



to take notes when in actuality I'm exchanging virtual smooches with my girlfriend, Pam, who is working on her undergraduate in chemistry (mine is neuroscience).

All of a sudden Dr. Pinchott yells, "Mr. Rogers!"

Which, of course, is me and my stomach does its now normal mega-clench that happens every time Dr. Pinchott yells my name, and I look up.

Only his angry, blotchy, hairy face isn't there anymore. My bedroom window at Toad Hall replaces it, the window that looks over the Millers' apple orchard. And when I look down, it isn't the school desk or my flat pad I see but the old table in Camelot and the puzzle with the new piece.

The piece is of Dad's tombstone perched on top of the cliff.

I zoom in and read, JAMES ROGERS, which is to be expected. But somewhere below Dad's name MICHAEL is etched cleanly into the stone. Above and below MICHAEL are other names, but they're too fuzzy to read. I've no doubt who MICHAEL refers to, and it doesn't surprise me. Rather, it confirms my premonition.

I'm gonna die on this island.

This is the first concrete evidence my brain has given me to believe that this puzzle shows my death. There it is, etched in stone. I try not to obsess about who the undecipherable names belong to. Or what the other unflipped pieces of my dream puzzle might now signify.

I ponder this as we all climb into the dinghy and leave the *Argo*. The sun is still hidden behind the island, and the sky is still colored red and orange. We glide across the lagoon in silence. Kira, wrapped in a blanket, stares blankly into the lagoon's depths. Pearl stares at the rock island with a loathing.

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She absently scratches a pox mark and causes it to ooze. This place must feel like a prison to her, like one of those leper colonies of old, flung on a faraway island so nobody else might catch the disease. Grant sits zombie like usual. Miriam, who has had at least a day to acclimate herself to this place, watches the shore approach in a resigned sort of way. Only Steven is happy to be here.

I'm happy too. I'm glad the journey has ended and we've all made it—all except the little baby. But now we're here, I wonder how much time I will have to enjoy it. I help settle Kira, Grant, and Pearl into the bunker, but then I head out, on my own, toward Avalon's north side, using Grant's cane in case I stumble.

I used to spend a lot of time alone in this part of the island when I'd come out with Dad and Grant as a kid. There's something quiet and peaceful about the place. Pearl dubbed it Mirkwood the one time she visited Avalon. With jungly-type plants and grasses covering this area, Pearl always said she expected a huge spider to skitter from under the tangled growth and bite her, although I've never seen a spider big enough for that. I've only seen little buzzing insects and tiny, twittering birds. Avalon is too sparse to support much life.

The waves rumble in on the island's east and south sides, but here in the marshy area, the sounds are muffled. The remnants of waves might roll into the marsh, but they're dissipated by the plants and mud. As I near it, the world gets quieter and my mind clears, and I wonder if I really want to spend my last precious days of perfect clarity and function alone, secluded in Mirkwood. And somewhere in my contemplative walk, I decide I don't. I want to spend it with my fam. Because I don't know

my fam, but I *want* to know 'em. Even through this last year, living at Toad Hall, I've kept mostly secluded, reading in my study or checking on a taciturn Grant, or helping Steven with the farming in compatible silence. But it seems my interactions with my fam are mostly superficial: dinner and cards usually, but never a good, honest talk.

And now, as I approach my happy spot, I realize something else. It isn't a happy spot anymore. In fact, it's unrecognizable. Mirkwood was where I once planted the medicinal herbs. It had the best soil, and is also the lowest spot on the island, excepting the lagoon that lies on Avalon's west side. The island's east and south ends are more cliffy but dry and void of plants except for scraggly brush and some windswept pines. Mirkwood, on the other hand, feels more tropical, like in a few yards you can go from dry and arid to humid and almost lush. Maybe the trickling spring and waterfall had something to do with that.

I planted those herbs years ago, and some managed to flourish. I figured they'd come in handy someday. But now the rising tides have reclaimed this part of Avalon. The sea has gobbled up the rosemary, mint, lemon basil, ginger, and turmeric plants the same way it chewed up the palms Dad and Grant planted way back. The sea, angry at these invasive species, bashed the island around until it sacrificed them in appeasement.

So, I stand here, staring at what used to be my fave spot, once full of life but now a pool of rising and ebbing sea where no sound exists except ripples lapping over one more dead part of the planet. Somehow, the loss of this place is more disheartening than anything that's happened so far.

"Hey!"

Startled, I turn around.

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Here comes Miriam, stomping through the brambles. Her jeans are the faded color of the flat sky. Of the piece in my puzzle.

I should be mad at this intrusion, but I'm almost relieved to see her. "Hey, Miriam. What are you doing here?"

"Figured I'd explore the island some more," she says.

I begin the trudge back to Camelot. "Well, there's nothing to see down here anymore."

She follows. "Steven said there was a waterfall here once."

"A small one, yes. It came from a spring and ran through Mirkwood, down to the sea. It was the only fresh source on this rock. But the sea's drowned it."

"So...no fresh aqua then?"

"Nope. And it can go for weeks without rain here in the wintertime, so if there's no aqua in the cistern, we'll have to rely one hundred percent on the desals. Someone'll have to lug aqua from the lagoon up to Camelot where the permanent desal is."

"Well," Miriam says, "that'll make sure we get a workout every day."

I push the brambles aside as we trudge out of what little remains of my Mirkwood and head toward Camelot. The ground soon becomes rocky and sandy. Clumps of sharp, stubborn grasses grow where they can, but otherwise the area surrounding Camelot, that great, gray cinderblock monstrosity Grant and Dad laboriously built all those years ago, is void of vegetation. Pearl calls this spot The Doldrums. She has a prosaic name for every part of this island, and although she only visited Avalon once as a kid, all her names have stuck. The rest of us, too unimaginative to bother labeling anything, went along with it. She named The Doldrums after a depressing

place in a children's book called *The Phantom Tollbooth*. Nothing grows in The Doldrums except the wiry grass. A couple of largish rocks, good for sitting, are scattered about, but that's it. We tried to plant vegetables here one summer, on the first trip Steven captained back when he was a teenager. On that trip we lugged in potting soil and peat and vermiculite from the mainland and tried massaging the soil into something attractive for growing plants. But the next time Steven came out, heavy rains had washed the soil away and reverted The Doldrums to its barren state, a perfect match for Camelot with its thick, windowless, cinderblock walls.

"So, this is it," Miriam says, staring at the bunker. "Our new home."

"Yup. It isn't so bad, as far as shelters go. It's over fifty years old, but we've made some small improvements to it over the last few decades. Dad worked the logistics, getting all the cinderblocks and cement out here. Grant designed it when he was only eleven, and he and Dad would fly down every summer and work on it."

Miriam frowns. "Fly down?"

"Yeah, that was way back when Toad Hall was pretty new and Dad's company was making money. He had his own plane."

Miriam laughs. "How the hell would he land a plane on this island? There's not a spot long enough."

"Well, he didn't fly *here*. He'd fly to the mainland, then we'd sail over. We're only a hundred miles off the coast, you know."

She stares at me. "Serious? We're that close?"

"Sure. There used to be a town almost due east of here called Puerto de Luz, the Port of Light. That's where Dad would land the plane and hire sailboats and crew to take us out here. But

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after a while, Dad got too sick to fly and then the business began going downhill, and the third pandemic hit, and everything kinda went to pieces. Then the only way we could get here was to sail from Cascadia and back. It became a much longer trek. So, we came less and less.”

We reach the bunker’s heavy door. It’s open, letting the sun and wind stream in.

Miriam peers in. “But you decided to come here now.”

“It was the one place we thought we’d be safe. Maybe it was a stupid thing to believe. I mean, we’ve pretty much marooned ourselves on a deserted island, and the town on the mainland is all in shambles and half-deserted, according to Steven. And from what I understand, Pan4 started near here – came creeping outta the jungle somewhere in this part of the world. So who knows if anyone is even left in Puerto de Luz? Anyway, even with Mirkwood’s spring gone and the huts destroyed and the palm trees drowned, it does feel like we’ve come home in a comforting way. I spent so many summers here with Dad and Grant when I was a kid.”

“You must be close to Grant,” she says.

I catch a glimpse of Grant sitting on his cot. “You’d figure. But no. We were never exactly close. Not that we hated each other or anything, but Grant was always working on something – a project, an invention – so he didn’t have time for me.”

“What did he invent?”

“Nothing of importance, which was always his frustration. Dad – the Pater – – had invented something that changed the world. Grant always tried to match him and was always so frustrated because he never came up with anything near as brilliant, nothing to rebuild our fortunes or help humanity. I mean,

he's great at fixing things, he knows the solars inside- out, but he wanted so desperately to invent something that mattered."

"But he didn't." Miriam takes a step over the threshold.

I follow her. "Nope. He could never match Dad's solars. They cost practically nothing to produce and buy, and they're even biodegradable when their lifespan is done. Dad hoped they'd save the world."

"They sure *changed* the world," she says. "We use solars for practically everythin'."

"Yeah. But it wasn't enough to save the world, was it?"

AFTER LUNCH, WE form a solemn procession and head up Pook's Hill, the highest part of Avalon, where Dad's grave perches on the cliff running along the island's east side. Steven strides ahead, followed by a sniffing Kira. Pearl clutches Grant's arm and they shuffle together. I follow, carrying the little box. Miriam comes too, but she drags far behind. I'm sure she must feel like an intruder for this solemn ritual we're about to perform.

It's weird being up here, especially after the dream I had. I gaze at the marble gravestone and the myriad of seashells scattered around it. Some were dropped by seagulls, but most are ones we've brought up on our various trips and placed on Dad's grave, kinda like how you'd put flowers on a grave in a regular cemetery. Grant started that tradition.

Steven pushes a few shells aside as he scrapes out a shallow grave with the shovel. I place the baby's remains in the hole, and Steven covers the box with the sandy soil and pats the earth down.

Kira is wrapped in a blanket even though it's pretty hot out. She says, "Please, can we put the baby's name on the gravestone? There's plenty of room."

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Pearl shrugs. "What name would you like?"

"Susan," Kira says.

"We'll need a hammer and chisel," Steven says.

"I'll g-get 'em," I say.

I suddenly want to escape the depressing atmosphere hanging over Pook's Hill, and, as I hear myself stutter, I realize I haven't taken my daily pill yet. I trot down the hill to Camelot, where I pop the pill, then search for the chisel and hammer in the toolbox. I find 'em, and amble much more slowly back to the tombstone.

I hold out the tools. "Anybody know *how* to chisel into marble?"

Grant stands and shuffles over to me, takes the chisel and hammer, and scratches and taps the marble. We all watch in silence, too dumbfounded to stop him. It takes quite a while, but when he's done, SUSAN is visible in even block letters, perfectly centered under Dad's name.

A chill crawls up my spine, like a creeping spider. Those letters are written in the same hand that had written MICHAEL in my dream.

Grant moves to a big rock and sits. Kira sinks down next to him, facing away from the tombstone and out to sea. She drops her blanket, revealing the violin she's been gripping. She begins to play a beautiful, haunting melody. It must be something she's created—part of her Voyage symphony. The notes wobble in the air at first (Kira is crying) but then grow stronger and straighter and float away, escaping over the sea.

And as the last note drifts away, the rain begins. Like the little baby's tears are falling on us, mixing with her mother's.

"We should get inside," Pearl murmurs.



But we don't. Kira hides the violin under her blanket, and we all sit on the rock next to her and let the warm rain soak us right through, like some sort of baptism, a cleansing of our souls.

Long after the others head back to the bunker and the rain sputters to a stop, I still sit on the rock on top of Pook's Hill. The cliff here plunges to frothing waves at least a hundred feet below. The big marble slab we hauled over from the mainland the year Dad died sits on the highest point. Dad's urn is buried in the sandy soil directly beneath it, and Susan's shallow grave now lies to its right.

"Well, Dad," I say, "we're all here now. You always said you wanted this island to be a place we could escape to and hunker down if the world goes... What'd you call it? Topsy turvy? I guess it's all topsy turvy now, all right." I reach out and touch the smooth marble. "You know, Dad, I was always kinda scared of you toward the end. When the cancer took over. The way you slowly dissolved right before my eyes into something gross, not human, something that p-petrified me." I lean against the marble, pressing my forehead against its warm smoothness. "I'm sorry, Dad. Sorry I avoided you when you were super sick. Funny I ended up becoming a doctor, huh? I wonder if I did that because I felt guilty...the way I treated you."

Overhead, a seagull cries, and below, a rumbling wave smashes against the cliff. I'm not spiritual or religious in any way, but I find myself staring up into the blue sky where the seagull circles, and I smile. "I'm gonna take that as a 'I forgive you, Mike', if you don't mind."

I rise, and leave the graveyard, walking slowly along the cliff's edge. From here it's an easy stroll down to the southern tip of the island. There's no trail, really, but the going is

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flat and sandy until you hit the crumbling basalt formations on the southern promontory. It's lonely and dry here, unlike the swampy feel of Mirkwood, with its buzzing insects and twittering birds.

I remember, as I walk, the second time I flew with Dad down south. I was ten. Grant had finished his second year of college on the east coast. He was home for the summer, and Dad had the little Cessna ready to go. Noah, Grant's friend, came again, so I didn't see much at all of Grant. Whenever I'd try to include myself in their conversations, Noah would say, "Run off, brat. We're talkin' big boy stuff here." And Grant would give me an embarrassed shrug and wave me off too.

One day Grant took me on a hike around the island — just me and him — to show me all the spots. It was a day when Noah, who was allergic to everything, it seemed, refused to leave Camelot because he felt stuffy. He tried to convince Grant to stay with him, but finally Dad stepped in and said, "Grant, take your brother for a hike."

And Grant did. I wanted so bad to ask him why he let Noah bully me that way, why he wouldn't stick up for me, his own brother. But I didn't. I wasn't sure how. I guess Grant wasn't sure how either, so we just talked about fishing and sailing, things that mattered but didn't. He took me to Mirkwood, and the only time he brought up Noah was to say, "Noah hates coming down here. Says it makes him sneeze."

That's when I decided I liked Mirkwood best, even though it wasn't called Mirkwood until Pearl named it years later.

Pearl also named The Enchanted Place. It isn't actually enchanted, of course, but it has a beautiful view so Pearl named it after a place in a *Winnie the Pooh* book. It's a quarter

mile walk from Pook's Hill – the entire island is only about a mile long – and this whole part of Avalon is a wonderland of crumbled red basalt, like a moonscape in a way. At its edge, a set of steps naturally carved into the cliffside winds down to the foamy sea. At low tide, you once could use the steps to venture down to the tide pools in the shallows. They teemed with living things then, and I remember spending hours down there as a kid, searching for sea urchins and starfish. The going was fairly treacherous – one wrong step and a twisted ankle could send you splashing among the jagged rocks – but Dad always let me trek down to the tide pools to watch microcosms of sea life breed, eat, fight, and die in their wet little universes.

It's a bit different now. The rising ocean has drowned out the pools. They're permanently five feet under the sea, even at low tide. You can still clamber down the basalt steps to the frothing waves and contemplate the deep blue sea, though, and I find Miriam sitting on one, staring at the light shimmering on the waves. I make my way down and sit next to her. Laddie, curled up on another step, looks up at me and yawns.

"Hope I'm not interrupting you," I say.

She raises one eyebrow, and I realize I *am* interrupting her.

"Where's Steven?" I ask.

She hesitates, then says, "Helpin' Pearl put supplies away. Figured I'd come down here to get away for a bit."

I begin to rise. "I'm sorry if I'm intruding."

"No, it's OK," she says. "Sit. In fact, I have a question for ya."

I plop onto the rock and let my legs dangle over its side, swinging, like I used to do when I was a kid. The waves lap at the cliff's base, some twenty feet below us. "Fire away."

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“How long do you actually reckon we can hold out here? I mean, with the food supply we’ve got?”

I watch the waves caressing the rocks. “Grant and Dad built the bunker with enough storage space for five years’ worth of food, but even with the extra supplies already stashed here, I doubt we have enough to last us more’n six months, and that’s pushing it. And I have no idea how we’re gonna feed the dog. He isn’t too happy with the bean diet, I don’t reckon. He’s looking a little worn down.”

“What ’bout the dried jerky?”

“That was meant for us. Honestly, we didn’t figure on the dog. We were planning to leave him behind.”

“Sure seems awful heartless.”

“The world is heartless. He’s a friendly dog though, so the Morlocks might’ve taken him in. But a dog here is an unsupportable luxury.”

She stares at the sea, frowning, then switches tack. “What’ll we do once we start runnin’ low on supplies? Where’ll we go from here?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was nuts to come to Avalon. I guess we were all pining for our past, when we used to come here for vacation and relax, away from the rest of the world. Maybe we figured we’d get one more good vacation before we’re forced to meet our miserable fate.”

She snorts. “Vacation? Is that what you reckon this is?”

I shift my seat on the rock. “No. Well, maybe...in a way. Maybe it’s a ridiculous fantasy, but in this world you have to grab any chance at happiness with both hands. And all of us have always had it in our heads that this would be our last haven. Well, ’cept Pearl ’cause she never liked Avalon much,

and Kira 'cause she's never sailed here. But Grant and Steven and me, we figured we could hole up here in a crisis. Dad thought that too. We figured we'd head back to Toad Hall when we started to run low on supplies. Now I'm pretty sure the fire has claimed it, so we don't have anything to go back to anymore."

"Tell Pearl that," Miriam says.

"She might stubbornly refuse to believe it now, but sooner or later she'll realize it."

"So, if you can't go back, what will you do?"

Even though she's thrown her lot in with us, she uses the word "you" not "we." And it makes sense. She has no reason to stay with us if she finds a better opportunity. I hope she stays with us, though. She's proven her worth in the last few weeks. She's learned how to sail, cooked and cleaned when the rest of us were seasick or fighting Pan4, been (I believe) a comfort to Kira, someone to talk to about things. And you can tell by looking at his face that Steven is head over heels in love with her. Maybe it's because women are scarce around Toad Hall and he hasn't had much of a chance to associate with 'em lately, but maybe it's because Miriam exudes a strength and at the same time an honest vulnerability. Even Pearl is starting to warm up to her, in her own cautiously suspicious way.

"I don't know what we'll do," I say, truly pondering our future for the first time. "I don't know where in the world we can go after this."

Up until now, our sole intent was to get to Avalon. But we can't live here permanently. Aside from our food supply, the solars won't last forever, and, since the spring has disappeared, we'll need solars to run the desal units. We can't survive with-

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out fresh aqua. And besides catching fish from the sea, nothing on this island can sustain us once we get low on food. We can hunker here a couple of months, but then we'll have to pack up the remaining food and go. Where to is a mystery, and one I can't even begin to contemplate. The mainland, as we told Miriam, is only a hundred miles to the east, but with Pan4 raging through the world, who knows if they'll be friendly to foreigners or hostile? No, we can't depend on Puerto de Luz as a safe haven.

When I say "we," of course, I mean it in a figurative sense. I don't expect to last a few months. I don't ever intend to leave Avalon. And as I watch the waves rumble over the rocks, a strange peace settles over me. When it comes to figuring out where to go next, I won't have to worry.

"Tell me something," I say. "Are you sorry you came with us?"

She turns to me, her green eyes studying me quietly. "No," she finally says. "I don't believe in much. I mean, I'm not spiritual or anythin', but I do believe in choices. You ever heard of 'Play the Game'?"

"Nope."

"It was an interactive on the vid. Worked best if you had a holo so you could actually be in the story, but if you didn't have a holo, you could still play it. Like in one game you're a pirate and have to choose between firin' on a ship or callin' a truce. You'd pick one choice, and the vid'd show ya if your choice ended up with you findin' a chest full of gold and livin' in luxury or gettin' stranded on a deserted island with no food or aqua and dyin' horribly." She pauses, an ironic smile playing on her lips. "That's how I see life, like 'Play the Game.' Life offered me a couple choices: go with Steven to Toad Hall

or keep on trudgin' down that road to Bellingham. I picked Steven, and once I was in your house, I picked comin' with you on the boat, and my choice led me to the deserted island option." She laughs. "See? It's like forks in a road. Once you pick a path, you're on a course that can't be changed until ya run into another fork and make another choice."

"You could always backtrack," I say. "If you made the wrong choice, I mean."

She smiles, and it's a genuine one, makes her already pretty features almost beautiful. "In my experience, goin' back is always worse than movin' forward. Anyway, *we* can't go back. Not the way we came. Not to Cascadia. So, there's no point regrettin' the decision. I'm not gonna spend my time wonderin' what woulda happened if I hadn't gotten on the *Argo*. What's the point? A different choice might've been better. But it could've been worse. If I'd gone to Bellingham, I might be burned to a crisp, lyin' in a ditch somewhere. So, this was the right choice. For now."

"What if this is it, though? What if this is like the pirate story, and you've picked the fatal choice?"

"Well," she says, "you never know which is actually the wrong choice until you pick it. Which happens to everyone, eventually. But I'm not plannin' to go down just yet. Are you?"

The answer is yes, I am planning to go down. But I can't say it out loud. I don't have the courage to admit it to anyone but myself, not yet.

IT'S THE FIRST night we all will spend inside Camelot, so we have a cookout, of sorts, to celebrate. Whoever stocked the store-room had also pulled the remaining wood from the destroyed

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huts up to Camelot and stacked 'em against the most sheltered side, so they're nice and dry and burnable. And even though it probably isn't smart (we might need the wood later), we build a small fire with some of it. Steven rolls out the old fire ring stored in the supply room.

Pearl laughs. "I remember that from when I was a kid. It hasn't rusted after all these years?"

"We've always taken good care of it," I say.

Dad made the fire ring my third trip to Avalon. He punched the holes in it to allow the fire to breath. He made different shapes for each of us. A fish for him, a sailboat for Grant. Even back then, when we'd fly down to Puerto de Luz, Grant loved sailing. Dad had asked what shape I wanted. I was thirteen then, that weird age where I didn't know what I liked or wanted, so Dad punched the outline of a truck into the ring. I remember getting mad, saying I'd stopped playing with toy trucks years ago, and Dad, frustrated, told me that if I couldn't make up my mind what I wanted, I was stuck with what he decided. That whole trip was a trial for my dad, putting up with me.

Anyway, the rough shape of a truck is still there, and it saddens me to see it. I wish I could go back to that trip and enjoy every precious minute I had with Dad. I'd been mad with him about everything. He'd just married Opal and had Pearl, and I was jealous of that. I felt my father – who wasn't my true father, and that bugged me too – was abandoning me. At the same time, I wanted to pull away, to be on my own, a grown-up. It was my last trip to Avalon with a living Dad. After that he began to suffer from the cancer that would eventually kill him. The next time I returned to Avalon, he accompanied us in an urn.



We get the fire going, sit around the ring, and stare up at the stars through the smoke.

"This is what I remember most," Steven says. "Comin' to Avalon and cookin' out. I would've brought the cooking grate down too, but I didn't figure we had anything to actually grill over the fire." He watches Pearl as she dishes out beans and chickpea flatbread she prepared on Camelot's stove.

I pour hard cider into everyone's cup. "I remember grilling hot dogs," I say. "Way back, when you could buy such things."

"We could be grillin' sausages at least, if we'd packed 'em on the *Argo* before that fire ran us outta Toad Hall," Kira says.

"We could've had a lot of things if that hadn't happened," Pearl says. "But it did. And I don't suppose the sausage'll be any good by the time we get back."

A silence descends for a minute. Nobody wants to contradict Pearl and get her all maniac about Toad Hall again by insisting it had burned. Not now, when the evening is so pleasant. Let her wallow in her happy fantasy if it's what she wants.

Steven says, "We used to grill fish a lot too, when we could catch it. I'll go fishin' tomorrow."

"What did you use for firewood, way back?" Miriam asks. "I don't see enough trees 'round here for that."

"You could always find sticks in Mirkwood," I say. "And in the little grove of scraggly pines near the Enchanted Place. But we'd haul firewood over on the boat too. 'Specially if we were here for the whole summer. Dad had invented his solars way before then, but we preferred the campfires."

Steven takes a sip from his cup. "Yeah, it's still fun to sit 'round a campfire."

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"It's kinda stunno to realize there was a time when you had no other choice 'cept to use wood for fuel," Miriam says.

I dig into my beans. "Yeah, well, burning wood and coal and gasoline is what caused a lot of the world's problems. That and all the diseases and natural disasters. Change came a little too late to do any good."

Steven lays back and leans his head against a board. "You don't know that, Mike."

I laugh and grab a piece of flatbread. "No, I guess not. Maybe all these pandemics and natural disasters are the Earth's way of returning to a good balance. Maybe the human race won't get totally wiped out."

"I certainly don't believe so," Pearl says. "There are too many of us. It'll calm down, eventually. Look at history if you don't believe me. The plagues back in medieval times wiped out half the population, but we bounced back. We used to annihilate each other in wars, but right after, we bred like rabbits and restocked the human race. We're like cockroaches. It'd take something a lot worse than a couple of pandemics and a few forest fires to wipe us all out."

"Unless the pandemics get smart and make you go all zombie quick, like Pan4 does," Kira whispers.

"Well, yes, there's that." Pearl sighs and picks up her cup with suddenly shaking fingers. "Anyway, kiss the book everyone."

"Kiss the book," we all murmur.

The conversation dies as we munch our dinner, listen to the little waves lapping onto the shore, drink the cool cider, and watch the stars twinkling in the inky black sky.

Pearl pulls out a small book and says, "How 'bout a bedtime story?"

We lay back on our towels and listen as Pearl's melodious, comforting voice floats over our heads and out across the lagoon.

"The Mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring cleaning his little home..."

"MIKE! WAKE UP!"

Pearl shakes me awake right after I glimpsed the puzzle piece.

I've never had the jigsaw puzzle dream three nights in a row, and for it to happen now is super disconcerting. Last night I dreamt I was at Toad Hall and Pam was there.

Pam. The girl I'd met in college. We were totally ill suited to each other, but I was madly in love with her. She was beautiful but also loud and brash and a drinker. We didn't last long. No need to go into detail, but in my dream, I'm back at Toad Hall, still in my twenties, and Pam is yelling. She's mad because I've decided to head down to Mexico to help out with the Pan3 outbreak there. I tell her they need my help desperately, which they did, but if I'm being honest, my ulterior motive was to break free of Pam. Anyway, she has her suitcase flung open on the bed and is throwing stuff into it, threatening to beat me to the door. This all actually happened, it's like I was replaying a real scene in my dream, but then it all changes and Pam is suddenly an octopus – a big, purple octopus – and she's flinging clothes with all eight tentacles, and the clothes fill up my vision and start spinning like they're in a washer, and then they fly away, and here's Camelot's red table with the puzzle lying on it. And a new piece flips into place right next to Dad's tombstone. It shows a small lump of sand with a scallop shell lying on top.

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"Mike," Pearl hisses. "Grant went outside."

"So?" I mumble.

"I don't want him wandering off. What if something happens to him?"

I pull the pillow over my head. "Pearl, I have every confidence in the world that if Grant got up on his own and walked out the door, he knows perfectly well what he's doing."

"Dammit, Mike, I don't believe you. When he's in this sort of restless state, someone should watch him."

"So go watch him," I shut my eyes, trying desperately to get back to my dream.

"I can't. My leg is killing me."

"Send Steven."

"Steven went fishing."

I groan, chuck my pillow off the cot, and sit up. "Fine, I'll go."

Miriam perches on the end of her cot, yawning. "I can go, if you want." She reaches for her boots.

I'm awake now, so I groan again, more for emphasis than anything else. "No, I'll do it."

"I'll come with you anyway," she says.

It doesn't take long to catch up with Grant, who shuffles slowly but steadily toward Mermaid's Lagoon.

"Should we stop him?" Miriam whispers.

I make a quick decision. "No, let's follow him. Grant doesn't usually move much when he's deep into his zombie state, so he must be pulling out of it a bit. When he's a little clearer in the head, he always moves with some sort of purpose. He's going down to the lagoon for a reason, and I'm curious to know what it is."

We follow a respectful distance behind.

“Isn’t it weird?” Miriam whispers. “I mean, how Grant’s zombie state didn’t show up for years and years? But Pan4 zombie can eat you up so quick?”

I nod. “Pearl says Grant started acting a little weird before he went and sailed away, and when he came back a year later, he could barely talk or focus on anything.”

“It’s nothin’ like Pan4 zombie,” Miriam says, watching Grant’s long legs move down the path. “I’ve seen that.”

“S-so h-have I. Way, way t-too much of it.”

“They get all paranoid and start rantin’, like they’re talkin’ to folks who aren’t even there. Then, after a while, they go all lumpy. Can’t sit, can’t eat, can’t do nothin’. They just sag in their chairs ‘til...”

We walk on in silence for a bit, following Grant as he moves slow but steady toward the lagoon.

“So, what’s wrong with you, then?” Miriam says suddenly. “Your hands keep shakin’. I noticed it the first day we met, at Toad Hall, and right now you stuttered.”

“I forgot to take my pill that day,” I say. “The day we met. The tremors usually don’t get so bad.”

“Is it Parkinson’s?”

I watch Grant half-stumble but catch himself. “No. It’s the Pan3 zombie. Haven’t told anyone yet. Well, anyone who can actually respond to me, anyway.”

She stops dead in the path. “Oh.” She looks like she wants to say something comforting, but instead says, “How fast does it work?”

“It’s not long and slow, like Grant’s zombie. Not fast like Pan4 zombie, either. It’s somewhere in between, I reckon. I have pills to keep it in check. But they can’t cure it. And I’m almost out of ‘em. After I take today’s pill, I’ll only have two left.”

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“Then what?”

My stomach twists a bit at this question. “Then I go downhill. Probably pretty fast, I’m guessing.”

Grant has reached the shore now and wades right into the lagoon. What the hell is he doing? I move a little faster down the path.

“Can you string the pills out a bit?” Miriam says. “Take one every other day or somethin’?”

“I tried that, earlier on, but the only way the drug works correctly is to take it every day. Besides, what’s the point in trying to lengthen my time? I was hoping at least I’d get here before I started to really go zombie.”

“And the pills won’t work for Grant’s zombie?”

“No. They tested the pills on Pan4 zombie patients, but they don’t work for Pan4 symptoms either. The viruses are similar but not fully related.”

“Why haven’t you told anyone ’bout this?”

“I guess I didn’t want to worry ’em. Stupid, huh? They’ll find out soon enough. Grant! What the hell are you up to?”

Grant crouches in the shallows, hunched, his knees bent, one gnarled hand clutching his cane and the other swishing through the aqua. He finally pulls the hand up, his dripping fist clenching something. He turns and plods toward us, then reaches us, passes right by, and heads back the way he came.

“What’s he doin’?” Miriam says.

“Dunno. Well, we’re at least getting a little exercise today.” I glance up at the sky. Last night every star was out. Now, ominous gray clouds hang low on the horizon. We’re in for some rain, that’s for sure.

We turn and follow Grant. He heads past Camelot and shuffles up the path to Pook’s Hill. When he reaches the top, he stops

by Susan's shallow grave, leans down, and places something on it. Then he turns and passes us again, heading back to the bunker.

Miriam sprints to the spot Grant just left. "How sweet," she says.

I reach the grave. A perfect scallop shell rests on Susan's grave. I suck in a shallow breath. My hands start to shake. "P-pink."

"'Cause she was a girl, I reckon," Miriam says. "Or it was the only shell he could find."

I don't say anything. I can't, I'm afraid my words will come out in one long stutter. Was my dream some sort of premonition? There's the grave and there's the shell, exactly like I saw it.

*No, Mike. Don't be stupid. We've always brought shells up to the graves. You've just forgotten. Grant hasn't. There are more pink scallops in the lagoon than any other type of shell, and this is all just coincidence.*

I take a deep, calming breath and follow Grant, who heads straight back to his cot in Camelot. We step inside and shut the heavy door right as the rain begins to pelt from the sky. From what I remember about Avalon rain events, they're quick but violent. No such thing as a soft shower here.

"Someone needs to get the solars down from the roof," Pearl says. "And has anyone seen Steven?"

"I'll get 'em," Miriam, who helped place the solars when we first got here and knows how to take 'em down, heads for the door.

I follow her. "I'll hold the ladder for you."

"What about Steven?" Pearl yells after us. "Where'd he go to fish?"

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“No clue, Pearl, but he’d be an idiot if he didn’t see those storm clouds and not head back. He’ll be OK.”

I get the ladder from the storeroom, and we step back outside. It takes about five seconds for the hard rain to completely drench us. I place the ladder against Camelot’s sides and hold it steady as Miriam shimmies to the roof. Detaching the solars takes but a minute and then she’s climbing back down before the first good wind gust hits, although by the time we slide back into the shelter we’re both soaked.

“Will the *Argo* be OK?” Miriam asks.

I nod. “It’s anchored well. This isn’t a typhoon or a gale, just a typical storm. We’ve weathered plenty of these, and the boats are always fine.”

“I sure hope Steven is OK,” Pearl says.

“He’s an old sea hand, Pearl. He knows to get out of this weather.” I take the solars from Miriam and put ‘em on their shelf. “Are the batteries fully charged?”

Pearl checks the monitor. “Yup. I’ve got oatmeal ready and a crock pot going with stew for lunch, and that won’t suck down much juice. We should have enough power for a couple of days. Enough to last this out. Kira, can you help me ladle out breakfast?”

Kira rolls over on her cot and mumbles, “I’m not hungry.”

“Everyone else is, though, and you need to snap out of your doldrums. Up.”

Kira grumbles, but gets up and ladles out the oatmeal while Miriam and I attempt to dry off before taking our places at the table. We eat the steaming porridge. As warming as it is, I sure wish the chickens were laying. I’d rather have eggs. I’m getting tired of having no meat. I hope Steven *is* out fishing and brings back something.



After breakfast, we play cards (except Grant who sits and contemplates the wall) and listen to the rain pelting down. Camelot's walls are so thick it's barely audible, a faraway drone. Steven and Laddie finally bust in dripping wet. Laddie promptly shakes droplets all over the cots before Steven can throw a towel over him.

"Where the hell were you?" Pearl says. "Your oatmeal is cold."

Steven is flushed, shivering, and looks exhausted. He strips off his clothes and hurriedly pulls on a dry pair of pants. "I tried fishin' in the dinghy, but then the rain started, so I figured maybe Laddie and I could shelter in the Rabbit Hole until the rain was done. But we couldn't find it." He slumps onto a chair.

Miriam hands him a bowl of oatmeal. "What's the Rabbit Hole?"

Steven holds the warm bowl in his hands and stares into it. "A cave below the cliffs. I used to go there a lot to paint. Pearl named it, of course."

"It's probably submerged for good, like most of Mirkwood and the tidal pools," I say.

"I guess so," Steven says. "It's too bad. I loved that cave." He sighs. "Anyway, we had to chug back around the island to the lagoon in the pouring rain."

"How are the waves?"

"Pfft," Steven said. "It's just a little storm, nothing big."

Kira, who had been moodily quiet most of the morning, says. "Seems pretty big to me."

"That's 'cause we d-don't get rain like this in Cascadia," I say. "When it does rain, it mostly sp-sputters. It doesn't come down in torrents."

"It does on the east coast," Miriam says. "I miss the sounds of a hard rain. It's nice to hear it now."

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Pearl sits across the table from me. "You OK, Mike? You're stuttering."

I glance at Miriam. Now that she knows my secret, it's stupid to hide it from everyone else. Why could I tell her but not let my own fam know? Is it because I feel like I'm letting 'em down? I'm supposed to be the doctor, the one who takes care of everyone if they get sick, not the other way around.

Miriam holds my gaze and smiles. There's something comforting in that smile, like it's saying, *It's OK, Mike, I can handle it all if you can't hold up your end of things*. Like how she sailed the ship when everyone else was too sick to help. Or how she already knows how to take down the solars if Steven isn't here to do it. Or how she can cook (although not well) for Pearl in a pinch.

So, I finally say it. "I'm getting the Pan3 zombie effects."

Pearl lets out a little yelp. "Pan3 has the zombie too?"

"Fraid so."

She leans forward. "You'll end up like Grant?"

"Well, that's just it. Grant's zombie is long, drawn-out. Pan3 zombie isn't like that."

"So...it's like Pan4?" Her whole body is shaking now. "You go down fast?"

"Not exactly. I've actually had the symptoms for a while. They started a few months before I came back to live at Toad Hall."

"But you seem so normal," Pearl whispers.

"That's the drugs talking." I take a deep breath. "You ever heard of The Sopona?"

Pearl shakes her head, but Miriam says, "Yeah. It's a place on the east coast. Super top secret. They were studyin' Pan3 there, weren't they?"

I nod. "Yes, and when Pan4 started, they jumped on that too."

Pearl turns to Miriam. "If it's super top secret, how do you know about it?"

Miriam shrugs. "You always hear rumors."

"It wasn't a rumor," I say. "It was a real place. They tried to keep the location secret, but yes, it was on the east coast. I was there for a while. Top secret, like you said. I've never even talked about it with anyone else until now."

They're all crowding around the table now, even Kira.

Steven gulps down his last spoonful of oatmeal. "I thought you were out east treatin' people for Pan4."

"I was. But I started experiencing the first tremors of Pan3 zombie. I'd heard of it, knew they were doing research on it. A colleague got me into The Sozona. They used me as one of their test subjects. The pills worked. Kept the zombie state in check. They let me out with a good supply. Unfortunately, my supplies are almost gone."

Kira has this rapt look plastered on her face. "Can you go there? Get more?"

"No. The facility closed down. All of a sudden. I heard of the closure about the time I moved back to Toad Hall. I couldn't get back in touch with any of my old points of contact. The whole operation moved, was the rumor. But no one knows where."

"And the pills?" Steven says.

"They're out there, but in such limited supply, hardly any on the west coast. A friend of mine, a doc in Seattle gave me some last time I took Pearl down there. Dr. Lister, you remember, Pearl? He treated you for your sciatica? Didn't want to give me many because he was starting to feel the Pan3 zombie too. Anyway, once I finish the ones I've got, that's it."

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“And how many do you have left?” Steven asks.

“Two. Then, it’ll be a quick decline. At least, I hope it’s quick.”

Pearl is crying. Again. “How long?” she says. “H-how long is quick?”

I shrug. “Days. Weeks. Possibly months, but selfishly I hope it’s fast. Starts with tremors and slurred speech, but I’ll be both comatose and spasming soon and probably in lots of pain. That’s what scares me the most, Pearl. The pain. I haven’t experienced that yet, just slight twitches.”

Pearl’s face is white. “Does Pan4 zombie have a lot of pain too?”

“Pan4 is fast, Pearl,” I say. “It might linger, but it doesn’t seem to be painful, not like how mine’ll be.”

She puts her arms around me and hugs me tight. We aren’t huggers, my fam. Or maybe I’m not a hugger and the others have always respected that and left me alone. It’s comforting to be held by Pearl now. She’s younger than me by a decade, but it’s a mother’s hug—a comforting hug.

I relax my head onto her shoulder. “You’ll be OK, Pearl,” I whisper. “You’re strong. It won’t get you.”

She hugs me so tight my hand starts to spasm, but I don’t tell her to stop. She says, “Yeah, well, I don’t feel strong at all.”

## 4

AFTER MIKE’S CONFESSION, Miriam and me reattach the solars to Camelot’s roof. One powers the microwave, one the stove, one the electric outlets and incineration toilet. While we’re on the roof, we clean out the gutters. They’re clogged with crusty old bird shit and shells.

Miriam scoops the shells out with her hand. "How the hell did these get up here?"

"Seagulls drop 'em on the roof, hopin' they'll crack open," I say.

We finish cleanin', descend from the roof, and enter the bunker's main room. Camelot's insides are stark and gray – gray concrete floor, gray shelves, gray cots that fold into the walls. The only color comes from the red table sittin' square in the room's center and its matchin' chairs. On the far wall are three doors – one leads into the storeroom, one into the tiny bathroom with the incineratin' toilet, one into the kitchen.

Mike comes out of the bathroom and moves over to where Kira lies on a cot, starin' eerily at nothin' like Grant. "How you feeling, Kira?"

"OK," she says but dully, not in her normal sing-song tone.

He touches her head. "Warm but not hot. Depression, that's all you're dealing with now, kiddo."

"Your hands are shakin'," she whispers.

Mike says, "Still exhausted, I guess, that's all."

"So," Pearl says, hobblin' over and lowerin' herself slowly to the edge of Kira's cot. "Tell us about Joey."

Kira whispers, "He was my soulmate."

Pearl frowns. "You're too young for a soulmate."

Kira glares at her. "No, I'm not. We were secret best friends since we were twelve. Then we were secret lovers. And he's the father of my dead baby, and for all I know, he's dead too."

Mike asks gently, "Was he sick?"

She pushes her hands angrily against her eyes, and tears ooze between her fingertips. "He was c-coughin' last I saw him, 'bout a week before we left...and we got into such a b-bad

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fight. He wanted me to go with 'em...his fam. They headed east right before the fire."

Pearl's stony face softens. "And you didn't go."

Kira wipes her eyes. "Well, obviously I didn't, but I should've, Pearl. If I'd a gone, you'd never have gotten s-sick."

Pearl sighs. "Kira, don't beat yourself up. What's done is done."

Kira sniffles, tears drippin' from her eyes. "How can you say that? What if you come down with the zombie, Pearl? What if you die? It's all my fault."

Mike reaches out and squeezes her shoulder. "You didn't know, Kira. And Pearl's got a good chance. Might've been a fifty-fifty chance without the medicine, but she got through all the symptoms, even the pox, faster than normal. Good chance she's safe from the zombie too."

Kira whispers, "Not a hundred percent chance though."

Pearl reaches over and hugs her. "Nothing in life is a hundred percent, honey." She can be awfully kind and motherly, Pearl can, when she's in the mood.

Kira buries her face against Pearl's shoulder, still cryin'. "I sent him all sorts of vids before we got outta range. But he hasn't a-answered any of 'em."

"Maybe he's lost his vid," Pearl says soothingly.

"He had it with him last I saw. I'm scared he might be..."

She don't say it, but we all know. If he did have Pan4 – well, folks on the move like that, 'specially folks down on their luck and scroungin' to get by, their chances are less than fifty-fifty. Kira knows this too.

She disentangles herself from Pearl's hug and flops on her cot, wipin' her snifflin' nose. "You know, Pearl, for years I worried

you'd find out. All this time spent worryin' 'bout gettin' yelled at—how stupid was that? I coulda said somethin' and gotten the yellin' over with. I've lost him 'cause I was too chicken to tell ya. I've lost her now too." She buries her face into her pillow.

Pearl, who can't stand anyone cryin' without doin' somethin' 'bout it—well, unless Pearl is the cause of the cryin'—strokes Kira's hair and coos softly like a pigeon. "Oh, Kira, I'm so sorry. I was trying to protect you."

"I know," comes Kira's muffled answer. "But I should've gone with him. If I had, I wouldn't have made you all sick. It was my fault. I should've stayed behind."

"I'm glad you didn't, Kira. Maybe it's selfish of me to say it. But..." And now Pearl's cryin' too. "But even if Pan4 didn't get him, where would they go? Seriously?"

"East," Kira says, like east of the Cascades is some wonderful fairyland where nobody gets sick or hungry and everyone lives in eternal happiness. She raises her head and turns to Mike. "Mike, do you reckon he survived?"

Mike says, "There's always a chance."

And like an idiot, I say, "Yeah, Kira, look at us. We got through Pan4, all of us." *'Cept the little baby*, I think, givin' myself a mental slap across the face. And, as much as I try to sound optimistic, I'm guessin' Pearl isn't in the clear yet, either.

Kira says, "I wanna go back. I don't wanna be here. I gotta find him."

Pearl says, "Take a deep breath, now honey. You aren't going anywhere. None of us are, not yet, as much as we might want to. It took a long time to get here, and it'll take much longer to get back. If he's alive, he's alive."

Tears flow down Kira's cheeks. "And if he's not?"

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“Then, honestly, what good will going back now do any of us?”

Kira rolls over and buries her face back in the pillow. One foot kicks out, like a kid 'bout to throw a tantrum. She don't though. The foot twitches, then goes still.

Pearl touches her shoulder. “Kira?”

No reaction.

She sighs. “You rest up, honey. I'm gonna make soup for dinner.”

Kira don't answer that either, too drawn into herself like a miniature version of Grant. We leave her alone. Pearl moves into the little kitchen to make soup, Mike goes over to check on Grant, Miriam and me head back to the lagoon to lug the last load of supplies off the *Argo*, Laddie lollopin' behind us.

Miriam says, “Poor Kira. I can't imagine losin' a baby like that.”

I glance at her, wonderin' if she's ever even thought of havin' a baby. Or maybe she has had one. Maybe it died. Maybe she was married once too, who knows? There's so much I don't know 'bout her — a whole life she's led up 'til now that has nothin' to do with us. I wonder what she was like as a kid. Was she ever happy and wild, playin' with other kids, havin' fun? Or was she always sad and wary and ready to fight?

I think back on my childhood. There were days of play, but on farms mostly there's a lot of work. But every once in a while, Grant or Mike would sail to Avalon, and I'd get to go too. And those trips were glorious.

This trip might not be as fun. It's no vacation, that's for sure. But I'm glad we're here. This place is more home to me than Toad Hall ever was. If we had to end up anywhere in this world, this is where I'd rather be.



## 5

TALKING WITH THE fam about his condition must mentally wipe Mike out because he crashes on his cot for a good portion of the afternoon until Kira approaches him. I'm sitting at the table trying to read Pearl's *Return to Avalon* story on Steven's vid. I'm not sure why; I don't really like reading, but maybe she'll like me a little more if she sees me reading her book. On one hand, I shouldn't give a rat's tuckus if Pearl likes me or not, but a tiny island charged with animosity isn't good either. I don't like her much, but I'm stuck with her, and I'm hoping she'll at least come to the same conclusion. I can hear her now, in the kitchen, banging dishes around. Grant sits at the table staring at the deck of cards. Steven is out somewhere painting; he says colors are most vivid after a rainstorm.

"Mike?"

I turn my head toward the sound of Kira's voice. She perches cautiously on Mike's bunk's edge. Mike yawns then says, "What is it, kiddo?"

She gives him an almost shy look, like little kids give when they first meet you and are unsure of who you are, if you're safe. "I wanted to thank you. For saving my life. I'm sure I wouldn't have made it if you hadn't taken care of me."

Mike pats her knee. "I actually didn't do much, you know. You're a fighter. You would've pulled through."

She takes a deep breath. "I don't know. I still feel like I wanna crawl into that grave with Susan and the Pater. Got anythin' in your bag for depression?"

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“Just the sedatives, but those’ll put you in a worse funk. Best remedy I know is for you to go outside and do something you enjoy.”

She laughs. “Here? On this rock? There’s nothin’ to do.”

I lower the vid. “Have you even explored the island yet?”

She turns to me. “No, I’ve been sittin’ in this bunker doin’ nothin’. Only time I’ve been out is to bury the baby. Will you come with me?”

Anything beats reading. “Sure.”

Mike struggles up on his cot. “I’ll come too, if that’s OK. A walk’ll do me good.”

We head down to Mermaid’s Lagoon, Laddie trotting behind us.

Mike stares across the lagoon. “You know, once, the pink beach ran out for at least fifty feet before it met aqua. The bungalows we erected were only over the lagoon at high tide and at low tide they hovered over dry sand. Now, those pilings seem far out to sea, don’t they?”

I nod. Although it isn’t quite high tide yet, little waves lap at the rocks that line the beach’s far edge. The aqua is clear, though. We wade out in it.

Kira searches for seashells and then picks one up, a tiny half-cracked conch. “What was it like here, back when you were young?” she asks Mike.

Mike smiles. “Both blissful and lonely, I guess.”

We wade out a little farther.

“Tell me about Joey,” Mike says.

She lifts her eyes to the *Argo* bobbing behind the remnants of the coral reef. “He was my best friend. For the longest time that’s all we were. But then...” She turns to Mike. “He wanted

me to go east with him, Mike. I wanted to go too. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't leave Pearl. I thought she might go nuts if I wasn't there. Mike, why didn't we go east? Joey said the east had food and towns and cities and life was more normal."

Mike reaches out and squeezes her shoulder. "Nothing's normal anymore, Kira. Back when I was a kid going to school, there wasn't as much difference between east and west, but the more the problems sprang up on the west coast, the more people began abandoning it and heading east, for the same reasons you're giving."

"Cause it's better there," she insists. "Right, Miriam?"

I pick up a shell and throw it, hoping to hit Mermaid's Rock, but it misses. Laddie jumps after it, excited. I want to laugh at his goofiness, but Kira's question has forced me to look back in my past, and that's not something I like to do. "No place is better, I don't guess. I mean, it was greener there. More rain. More food, I reckon. More nados, too. And more people willin' to lie and cheat and let other people live like animals so they could live well. That's what I remember. Then, I left. Right 'bout the time Pan4 started. So I don't know what it's like now."

"I do," Mike says. "A couple of years ago, when Pan4 started to ramp up, I travelled with a mobile hospital to Atlanta. The breakouts were bad. Pan4 killed — is *still* killing — people in droves there. It's finally hit the west coast in earnest, but it took a longer time to get to Cascadia simply because the population is so spread out and remote on the west coast now."

Kira kicks a foot, splashing droplets over the lagoon's surface. The motion excites Laddie even more. He bounds after the splash, drenching himself and our legs in the process. Kira laughs. "So, what's your point?"

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“No point, except the east coast isn’t the Promised Land. No place is. Right, Miriam?”

I nod. “Right.”

Kira gives Mike a searching look. “You might find more meds for your condition there.”

Mike scratches Laddie’s wet head. “I’ve thought of that. When the supplies from my contacts dried up and I couldn’t get any more pills, I thought maybe I should head east to try and find some more. But something stopped me.”

“What?”

“Weirdly, you. Grant. Steven. Pearl. I dunno...I didn’t want to be alone anymore. Away from my fam. I’ve lived alone most of my life, except for my ill-fated stab at marriage way back. I’m used to being alone. I surrounded myself with the sick and dying to feel like I was doing something with my life, and it *was* worthwhile, don’t get me wrong. But after a while, Kira, it seemed so hopeless. Like no matter what I do, people are gonna die anyway. And I didn’t want to fight for everyone anymore. Not even for myself, really. I just want to rest.”

Fam. Is that why I’m here too? I don’t have any fam left ‘cept this hodgepodge bunch that calls itself a fam. Only two of ‘em are fully related. The others – Mike, Kira, and Steven – were adopted in. Do I fit into this fam too? I gaze up at the sky. A large cloud floats in front of the sun.

“Anyway,” Mike says, “I don’t know if you remember, but it was me who suggested holing up on Avalon for a while, to wait until Pan4 did its worst before returning to Cascadia. Maybe instead of that, though, when it is time to leave, you might head to the east coast. Maybe Pan4 will be done there, by then.”

Kira replies, "But you won't go, will you? You came here for a different reason."

Mike gives a noncommittal grunt, turns, and splashes back to shore. We follow.

Mike says, "You know, when I was a kid, this place felt lonely, so far away from high civ, but the couple times I came out as an adult, I enjoyed the solitude. And when we buried Dad here, I thought, this is where I want to be buried too. Now, I can."

"But those pills...they keep ya goin', right?" Kira says. "We could sail the *Argo* 'round through Panama, get to the east coast that way. It wouldn't take too long, would it? I mean, you might last years and years if you can find that secret lab and get drugs."

"Maybe. But it's not just my body that's tired, Kira. My brain is tired too. I don't want to deal with people anymore. My part is done. I want to stay here and relax as much as I can before my time comes. Anyway, do you want to go see the Enchanted Place?"

She shrugs. "Sure."

We climb away from The Mermaid's Lagoon and head across the island.

"You know," Kira says as we walk, "what makes me super restless here, besides not knowin' what's happened to Joey, is that I feel the exact opposite of you, Mike. You say you've done your part for humanity and you're tired of high civ, but I haven't experienced *anythin'* yet. And I know our stay is temporary here, that the plan is to wait out Pan4 before we head back, but now what'll we be headin' back to? What if high civ has left even the east coast after this?"

I say, "What 'bout Joey?"

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“Everyone’s right ‘bout Joey, Miriam,” she admits. “He’s either made it and headed east or hasn’t made it and is buried in the ground somewhere.” Her voice catches. “He didn’t wait for me. He left. And I abandoned him. I chose the safety of my fam over headin’ east with him. Even though it seems stupid now...” She gazes around the bleak landscape. “Utterly garbo to come here. What can I do here? All I can do is sit. I can’t help anybody sittin’ here. I can’t *do* anythin’.”

Mike laughs, not unkindly. “Ah, the impatience of youth. It won’t do me any good to tell you that you’ve got years left, will it? That your time here on Avalon will pass before you know it, that for you this isn’t the end-of-the-line but simply a rest stop on the road of life.”

Kira breaks out into a reluctant smile. “Unless you can guarantee me that, no, Mike. It won’t do you any good at all.”

“You can do one thing,” I say. “You can finish composin’ your magnum opus.”

She laughs. “My what?”

“The musical piece you’re writin’. When you return to the real world, you can share it.”

“Music won’t help anyone live, though, Miriam. It won’t cure Pan4. I wouldn’t be helpin’ humanity like Mike did.”

Mike frowns. “I agree with Miriam. Sure, I cared for the physical. But music is salve for the soul. You can argue that in times like these we shouldn’t be concerned with such things, should focus on survival. But you can go as far back as you like in time, even to caveman days, and there was always some kind of music, Kira. Music cures too.”

She stares across the ocean for a bit, the wind ruffling her hair. Finally, she turns. “I don’t see what’s so ‘Enchanted’

'bout this place, Mike. Let's go to the graveyard. I want to visit Susan."

"Sure," Mike says.

I catch a glimpse of Steven sketching the little grove of pine trees clustered next to the cliff. "I'll stay here, if that's OK. Wouldn't mind sittin' on the rocks a bit."

They head off, and I retreat to my fave rock, perched halfway down the cliff where there's a perfect view of the waves foaming over the old tidal pools. There's a rainbow out there too, clinging to the last bits of moisture in the air. Behind it, blue sky. I wonder if that's what Steven's trying to paint.

I curl my legs under me, let the breeze caress my skin, open Steven's vid, and get back to slogging through Pearl's book.

## 6

KIRA AND I meet Pearl halfway up the hill, huffing along, leaning on Grant's cane. Thankfully, Avalon is pretty easy to scoot around, even if you're hobbling like Pearl.

"Decided walking might actually help the sciatica some," she says. "And it's so nice out now, not too hot, not too wet. Breezy."

I gaze out over the cliffs at the long bank of clouds stacking up again on the horizon. "Looks like we might get another dose of wet before this day is over though."

"Not at least for an hour or so, I'll bet," Pearl says optimistically. She glances at me. "You OK, Mike?"

"Don't start getting all motherly and concerned with me yet, Pearl," I say. "I have at least two good days left where you don't have to baby me. Let me enjoy 'em."

## THE QUEST FOR AVALON

"All right. But you'd better prepare me. Let me know what your symptoms will be, so I'll know how to handle it."

"I will." I study her pox-marked face. "How 'bout *you*? You OK?"

"Better. More energy. I reckon I've kicked the Pan4 problem, if that's what you're worried about. And you, Kira? How you feeling?"

"I'm OK, Pearl," Kira says, then strides on ahead, leaving Pearl and me to shuffle on behind her.

We reach the plateau on top of the cliffs. The only vegetation growing here is tall, waving grass. Dad's tombstone stands like a sentinel near the cliff edge. Kira stares at the shell on Susan's grave, then turns away. She moves to the big rock and sits cross-legged on it, staring out to sea. The increasing wind whips her dark, curly hair behind her.

She glances at us. "Can I have a few moments by myself?"

"Of course, honey," Pearl says.

We move away, but not before I hear, "Hey, Joey," floating on the wind.

As we move down the path, I notice Pearl's walking slower than usual and ask again, "You OK?"

She laughs. "I'm fine. I was just looking around. You know, you've tried to grow plants down at Mirkwood and Steven's tried near the Doldrums, but did you ever try planting a garden up here?" She points into the wavering grass. "See that empty patch?" She moves off the path and pushes through the grass, using Grant's cane to part her way, like it's some sort of jungle machete. She stops at the barren spot. "It's been dug up."

I follow her. "Yeah, I tried planting in that spot way back, when I decided to plant herbs. Nothing took, so I switched to



Mirkwood. It's shady and damp there and more sheltered from the wind. The plants liked it better."

"Sure looks like someone dug it up more recent than a few years ago," Pearl muses.

"Maybe Steven or Grant tried planting here too."

"Maybe so." She turns her head and gestures toward Kira still sitting on the rock and whispering into her vid. "You reckon she's gonna be OK?"

"She's restless. Confused. Sorry she came, but at some point or other we'll all be sorry about that."

She sighs. "Kira gets into depressive funks but always pops outta 'em eventually. It used to worry me though. Still does. She'd mope around for days, then suddenly get all chipper and see the bright side of everything. I hope she's heading toward one of those brighter spots now, and I hope it lasts." She kneels and runs her fingers across the dirt. "You know, I question whether it was the right thing to come here too, Mike. And we'll have to figure out when to return to Toad Hall. We can't stay here forever." She stops, blinks, and begins to cry as she looks up at me.

I know what she's thinking. Some of us will be staying here forever. Most definitely, not all of us will be leaving this rock for new adventures. This one will be the last one.

I reach over and squeeze her shoulder. Part of me wants to tell her we're never going back to Toad Hall — none of us — but I don't say it. If believing Toad Hall still exists gives her hope, who am I to spoil it for her?

We make our way back to Camelot. The rain begins as a tiny trickle, but by the time we reach the bunker, it's pouring and we're soaked to the bone.

7

HEY, JOEY. I'M not sure why I'm still talkin' to ya, I know you aren't listenin'. And now we're here on this rock with no reception, I guess I'm just mostly talkin' to hear myself talk.

I'm sittin' right next to little Susie's grave. She's the only link I've got to you now, I guess. It kills me to know maybe, if things had been different, someday we might've been raisin' her, the both of us together, and she'd be happy. But I guess that's just dreamin', huh? I guess you might not be in any place better, accordin' to Mike and Miriam. But I hope you are. I hope you've found someplace safe from all the horrible things in the world.

It's sad though, Joey. Susie was maybe my – our – one chance to help the world. All these people dyin', and then Pan4 went and did this to me, and Mike says I might not be able to have any more kids. Pan4 can mess up your repro, he says. And I look at my fam and think how weird it is that none of us have kids. Grant never had a girlfriend, Mike tried the marriage thing but it didn't work out, Steven's had girlfriends but never settled down with any of em'. And Pearl – well, she's never bothered to leave Toad Hall so how could she ever find someone unless she met 'em on her vid, and you sure can't get preg *that way*.

Sometimes I wonder if maybe nature don't *want* humans to populate any more. But that can't be right either. I don't know who my parents are, Joey, and I know I'm just an adopted part of this fam, but it is a fam, and I don't want it to die out into nothin'. Susie would've kept it alive.

Anyway, I don't have much else to say. I stopped composin' my concerto, but I'm thinkin' maybe I'll get back to doin' that someday. I don't have much of an audience here 'cept the fam, but I guess they like to hear me play. Maybe it comforts 'em to hear somethin' pretty every once in a while. That's 'bout it. This whole convo with you seems kinda pointless, don't it? Guess it's just a habit, wantin' to talk to you. Maybe it isn't even a good one. Maybe I should stop pretendin' like someday I might see you again. But I can't help it, Joey. There's not much hope left, but thinkin' that someday we'll meet up again – that gives me somethin' to shoot for, at least.

Guess I'd better go. It's startin' to rain again. Bye, Susie. Mommy will talk to you again, real soon.

8

*“ONE DAY, I stopped hearing the outside.”*

That's what he said, the day after we got to the island.

*“I don't understand,”* I said.

*“Some days my mind is full of quiet, like treading in a peaceful sea. Outside voices are far away, echoing from a distant shore, but I can hear you some days, faintly, enough to know you're still there. Those days I can step back into the world, but it's hard. Tiring.”*

*“And on other days?”*

*“On those days, some murky, scary thing slithers into my brain and hides in the corners. And every day that goes by, it gets stronger, more solid. Bigger. Like it's filling all the empty spots and soon it'll consume my inner space so thoroughly that I'll be pushed out of it.”*

*“Can't you fight it?”*

## THE QUEST FOR AVALON

*"I try. But I have to keep an eye on it. If I stay out in the real world too long, it will take over all of me. Until nothing of me remains. I can only keep it in check if I stay inside me and fight it. Whenever someone tries to prod me back into reality, I resist, a little harder each time. Someday, I won't come back at all."*

I've been wondering, since he told me this, what is the thing Grant sees? Is it death, or something else? And does he truly believe he can't break out of his own mind because he'll lose it if he does? It don't quite make sense, even to me. None of the others, even Mike, would understand this if I tried to explain it. They'd figure I was nuts. Imagining things. Dreaming that Grant said all that. Lying about it, even.

I think of this as I listen to the drumming of rain and Camelot's door opening and closing. Miriam comes in, dripping all over the floor, dammit, but I guess she has an excuse. She's guiding a hobbling Grant with Laddie padding along behind, panting, also wet.

She grabs a towel and throws it over her shoulders. "It's almost cold out there."

"Geez, get that dog dry too, before he shakes on everything, willya?" I mumble.

Steven puts down the cards he'd been shuffling, gets up from the table, grabs a towel, and throws it around the panting dog. "Sorry, Pearl. What were ya doin' out this early, Miriam?"

Miriam rubs her towel across Grant's dripping shoulders. "Grant's idea. I saw him head out, figured he was off to find another seashell."

I yawn and struggle to a sitting position. "Was he?"

"Yup. Had to follow him all the way to the graves and back. Anyway, I needed the cardio. Looks like it's gonna rain all day again. Pearl, you want me to make breakfast?"

Well, that's nice of her to volunteer, I suppose. She's trying to butter me up — all this reading of *Return to Avalon* she's suddenly attempting, even though I'm pretty sure she's just staring blankly at the pages, and now this. On the other hand, suits me fine, I don't feel like getting out of bed. "Oatmeal should be ready. I put it in the crock pot last night before bed."

Miriam moves into the kitchen. "What should I make to go with it?"

I roll over again and groan as my leg whines in a spasmodic protest. "Damn leg. It was pinging all night. Couldn't get comfy. Didn't sleep much with that and you lot snoring away. We really need two bedrooms in this place. Whose idea was it to cram six bunks into one big room?"

From his cot, Mike laughs. "Grant's fault. His design."

"He should've had more foresight. Miriam, we've got sugar and dried apples to top off the oatmeal. And we have dried mint for tea, if you can boil up some aqua."

"No coffee?" Miriam says.

What the hell does she think this place is, some fancy hotel? I take a deep breath. *Pearl, you will not get all maniac today.* "We scrounged up some before we left, but it's probably sitting on the counter back at Toad Hall."

Mike and Kira slowly emerge from their cot cocoons, and I hobble out of mine, and we all crowd around the breakfast table. We eat the oatmeal and drink the refreshing tea, then sit around the table and stare at each other.

"What do we do now?" Kira says.

"We could do a jigsaw puzzle," I suggest. "How 'bout it, Mike?"

Mike shudders. "No, thanks."

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Now, that's a new one. "Seriously? You love jigsaw puzzles. You even brought that old one of Dad's with you."

"Well, I don't wanna put it together now. I've had too many puzzle dreams lately."

Steven sips his last bit of tea. "You still have those dreams? Is the puzzle almost done?"

We all (besides Miriam) know about Mike's dreams. "I've had puzzle dreams every night since we got here," he says.

"What was last night's 'bout?" Kira asks.

Miriam sips her tea, contemplating Mike over her cup's edge with interest. She's never heard him talk about the dream before and doesn't know what to make of it. The rest of us, though, have always treated the puzzle dream like a mystery that must be solved.

Mike says, "I was in the Sopona — that place I told you about — being treated for the Pan3 zombie. In real life, they came on slow, the symptoms. I found myself shaking and stuttering a bit and thought maybe I was coming down with Parkinson's or something. But that's when a friend tested me and realized what it was and recommended me to the Sopona. Anyway, I'm in my room — a boring, stark white room — and the doc comes in and gives me my first pill. And in real life, it did what it was supposed to, stopped my shaking and stuttering. But in the dream, I take it and the white room goes all psychedelic with pulsing, undulating colors that finally solidify into puzzle pieces spinning in the air, and then of course I end up at this table" — he glances at it now, his hand resting on its red top — "and one of the last pieces is hovering over the puzzle. When I reach my hand toward it, the piece drops into its spot. And then — this happened in my last couple of dreams — the

whole scene zooms into the part of the island where that piece is located. But unlike the last few dreams, *I* drop into the puzzle too. I fall onto a real Avalon, and it's the graveyard, and there's half a person there, 'cause the top of the person is still missing. I told you about that piece, right?"

"No," Steven says.

"Well, there's a half person next to Dad's tombstone with jeans and bare feet. And the piece that fell into place next to it last night shows Grant's cane lying on the ground."

Miriam leans halfway across the table, raptly listening.

"Why do you figure Grant's cane ends up in the puzzle?" Steven says.

"Maybe it's an omen," Kira says. "Maybe it means Grant is gonna wake up."

"Maybe the half person with the bare feet *is* Grant," I suggest.

Mike shakes his head. "Maybe, although the feet look more like they belong to a woman."

"Well, that's easy to figure out, then," Kira says. "What do the feet look like? If they're dark, they're mine. If they're light, they're Miriam's. If they're all old and knobbly, they're Pearl's."

I can't help laughing at this. "Hey! Although I suppose it's an accurate description."

Mike frowns. "Funny, but they're all blurry now. I can't remember *what* they look like, 'cept it looks like the person is walking in the direction of Dad's tombstone."

"How many unturned pieces are left?" Steven asks.

"Only two. The mysterious person's top half and one other piece, out to sea."

"This is freaky," Miriam says.

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“What ‘bout the person, though?” Steven says. “The top half? What’s that all ‘bout? What does it mean?”

Mike sighs. “No idea. Maybe the person has something to do with my death. Maybe it’s the person who buries me.”

Kira’s eyes begin to sparkle. “Or the person who kills ya.”

“Good lord, Kira,” I say. “Don’t say such a thing. Mike, you can’t believe anyone here would kill you.”

Mike laughs. “No, course not. In all honesty, Pearl, I don’t know what the person is supposed to be doing. Probably sprinkling flowers on my grave, or something happy like that. Or putting a seashell on it, like Grant would do.”

We all laugh too, but the laughter is forced, unnatural, and the conversation ends. Kira pulls out the backgammon set and begins a game with Steven. Miriam goes into the kitchen to clean up the breakfast dishes. Grant sits in his chair, staring at the backgammon board but not seeing it. Mike heads to the bathroom. He’ll be in there a while, I can tell from the way he firmly shuts the door behind him.

I return to my cot, listen to the rain plunk on the roof, and begin typing into my vid. For once, I notice, I refrain from writing anything ugly about Miriam in my journal. I’m just not gonna allow negative thoughts to rule me today, no matter what.

## 9

I LIKE HOLING MYSELF up in the bathroom, and not because I have to use it. It’s the only spot inside the bunker where I can isolate myself for a bit and contemplate things without being disturbed. When I finally break out of my moroseness and rejoin the others, they’re playing cards.



Steven glances at me. "Wanna join, Mike?"

"No, but while you guys are playing, I'm gonna update your chips, if that's OK."

Steven shrugs. "Sure."

Miriam puts down her cards. "Update them with what?"

"The Pan4 info. What we all experienced on the ship."

She frowns. "Does it really matter if you update our chips or not? I mean, who's gonna check here?"

"If we stay here forever, no, it doesn't matter. But if we travel anywhere else, say to an actual entry port on the mainland, someone will see Pearl's pox marks and freak out, but if they read her chip, they'll realize she had the disease weeks before entering the country and is no longer contagious."

"She could still go zombie though," Kira says. "Couldn't she?"

Pearl frowns at this and stares at her cards.

"She could," I say. "Also, some places might refuse us simply because we aren't citizens. I don't know how other countries handle things nowadays."

Maybe no established, recognized countries are even left in this part of the world. I've heard rumors that some of these equatorial countries have devolved into a series of little camps and no longer have structured governments. But even so, they still might want to read our chips.

Inserting chips into people started as a way to track people when the population began a massive shift after Pan2 happened fifty years ago. Masses of people died or moved, and many people lost old-fashioned paper records due to fires or floods. It was hard to keep track of anyone's records when they were forced to move around so much, sometimes fleeing for their lives from the natural disasters that were occurring more often

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than in the past. In North America, folk began trickling toward the east around then, abandoning the dry and fiery west.

Each person's chip contains all sorts of personal info. Practically anything can be recorded on it, but reading the chip is selective. For example, because I'm a doctor, my vid can read medical information, but no other personal statistics, like if the subject has a criminal record. It can also transmit medical information to the chip. So, updating our statuses isn't a bad idea. Pearl has had Pan4 but gotten through it, although she still could have zombie symptoms. Kira must have had it, since her fetus had all the classic signs of a Pan4-style miscarriage. Steven had it, but only the fever part. Grant, Miriam, and I were exposed but asymptomatic.

I start with Miriam.

She watches my vid glide over her shoulder. "How can you scan anythin' in if we don't have reception?"

"Same way you can still read on your vid. Just needs juice for short-wave transmission." I move to Pearl.

"Does your chip have all your Pan3 info on it?" Miriam asks as she watches me update Pearl's chip.

"Mhm. I had a friend do it for me."

"So, if you ever find a pharmacist who has a stash of pills, he can prescribe 'em to you by readin' your chip?"

"They're in short supply, but yes." I stop and take a sip of tea before moving to Steven. "Unlike the Pan4 pills, which are still in the testing phase. You can't get those anywhere yet."

Steven turns his shoulder toward me. "But you did."

"I stole 'em, though. I knew Dr. Lister had 'em because he bragged about it to me."

"How'd *he* get 'em?" Pearl says.

“I don’t know. Maybe he got to visit the Sopona, wherever it is now, and he swiped a few.”

Pearl frowns. “I thought you said that place closed down.”

I move to Kira. “Well, the spot on the east coast is closed. They moved it to a more secure location, at least that was always the rumor floating around. Rumor was also that they were hard at work trying to come up with a Pan4 vaccine and moved where they couldn’t be harassed or interrupted. If a new Sopona exists, the location is a guarded secret.”

Kira says, “It must exist somewhere if they developed the pills you stole.”

Pearl nods. “They sure helped us to all get through.”

“They might’ve been placebos too, for all we know,” I say. “Maybe we were all just lucky. Anyway, as far as my Pan3 pills go, I only have one left. Say we leave here and try to get through the Panama Canal – on the off chance it’s still functioning – and sail up to the east coast that way. Say we actually find more pills, or we even find the Sopona. It’d still take a month, at least, if not longer, to go east, and by then, I might be too far gone for the p-pills to do any good. No, I’ve made peace with this.” I study a twitching finger. “I’m scared, but I’m ready.”

Pearl reaches out and lays her hand on my shoulder. “We’ll help you through it, Mike. You’ll have to tell us what to do.”

“Not much *to do*,” I say. “I’ll be like Grant but more helpless. Grant still has all his functions, can get up and walk, can eat and chew, but at some point, I won’t be able to do any of that. When it gets really bad, I won’t be able to even swallow.”

Pearl’s face has gone ashen. “We have no medical equipment to help with that. You’ll starve.”

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I've thought of that, over and over, and I still haven't settled on how to handle it. I've thought about killing myself somehow, to put a quick end to things before they got too painful for me and too onerous for the others. But part of me wants to live, wants to see how long it'll take to go the distance, wants to hope that maybe I can get through it, at least for a while longer.

But what to do when I get to be too much of a burden? How do I end it quick at that point, after I'm already so incapacitated?

I hope the jigsaw puzzle will tell me. I hope the last two pieces will give me my answer.

I finish the updates and put the vid away.

"So, should we deal you in?" Steven asks.

I shake my head. "I'm gonna go take a walk. Sounds like the rain has stopped."

"Great," Kira says. "I'm bored with cards already. And I'm all sticky. I wanna go for a swim in the lagoon."

We all decide to go, and by the time we reach the small sliver of beach, the sun is out and blazing. Kira, Miriam, Steven, and Laddie splash into the lagoon. Pearl situates Grant on a blanket and unpacks a picnic lunch, groaning as she lowers herself to the ground. I sit next to her, enjoying the hot sunrays warming my back. For the first time since we started this journey, I feel like I'm on a wonderful, relaxing vacation, which is what I was hoping for when we made the decision to sail here. It's a false sense of security, but if my last two normal days can be spent happily here, maybe I won't mind the rest of it.

Pearl reclines on the blanket, and we watch the kids in the lagoon. Kids. I suppose the only true kid left is Kira, and even she's not an innocent child anymore.

"I wish I knew 'em better," I say.

“Who? Steven and Kira?”

“Mhm.”

“Well, you were always gone, saving the world. At least, that’s what I always used to tell ‘em when they’d ask about you.”

“I didn’t succeed though, did I? The world is still a crazy mess.”

“Maybe. But don’t believe you wasted your life in vain ‘cause of that.”

My eyes wander out over the lagoon. God, I wish I could believe her. But I don’t.

Pearl glances up at the skittering clouds. “We’d better eat this picnic quick. I’m guessing we’re gonna get another soaking soon.”

## 10

WE MANAGE TO beat Round Two of the rain back to Camelot, where Kira, Miriam, and Mike start a game of poker while Pearl heads to the kitchen. I pick up Mike’s med vid. “Mind if I use this?”

Mike pulls his eyes away from his cards. “For what?”

“I just wanna see how it works. I’ve never used a med vid before.”

He shrugs. “Why not? My vid isn’t much use anyway since we don’t have any sort of reception, so go ahead and play with it.”

I turn it on. “It isn’t workin’.”

He sighs and puts down his cards. “Give it here, Steven. I can only activate my med vid by scanning my eye for recognition.”

I say, “Does that mean once you...die, it won’t work anymore?”

Damn, I shouldn’t have said somethin’ like that. ‘Specially with the problems he’s havin’ now.

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He don't seem to mind, though. "That's right, although it can still be used as a normal vid, but no one will be able to access any medical records with it."

He swipes the vid over one eye, then hands it to me. I take it and tiptoe into the kitchen, where I run the vid over Pearl's unsuspectin' shoulder and study the word that pops up on the screen.

I yell, "Hey Mike, what does 'radiculopathy' mean?"

Mike yells, "Sciatica."

"Huh. Why don't they just call it sciatica then?"

"Doctors have to have an undistinguishable language no one else can decipher. Makes us feel important."

Pearl says, "It's mostly Latin. Stop hovering over my shoulder, Steven. It's getting annoying."

I say, "What are you makin'?"

"You know damn well what I'm making. It's a sourdough starter so I can start baking bread again. We've got fifty pounds of flour. Won't last us too long, but at the same time, flour don't keep too well so we might as well eat all the bread and pasta we can stuff in our gobs until we use it up."

"Mmmm, bread."

"Yes, but not for a while. It'll take about a week before the starter is ready for actual bread. But we can have sourdough pancakes in the morning."

She finishes up and we move back into the main room. Miriam lounges on her cot, readin' *Return to Avalon*. She glances away from the vid and smiles at Pearl. "You know, I've eaten better on this island than I ever have in my life."

I wait for Pearl to frown at her, but she don't. Instead, she smiles – a little forced, but not bad for Pearl – and says,

“Thank you, Miriam. Glad to know someone appreciates my work.”

I shut off the vid. None of the stupid Latin words make much sense to me anyway. I say, “It won’t last. Not how Pearl’s goin’ through the supplies.”

Pearl’s arm thwacks against my back. “Go away and leave me alone, won’t you? And stop staring at my damn pox marks.”

I say, “Can’t help it, they’re drivin’ me nuts, Pearl. All big and squishy, I just wanna pop ‘em.”

“Stay away from me, then,” she says, laughin’.

Mike laughs too. “Steven, you’d make a horrible doctor.”

I say, “Never wanted to be a doctor. All I wanna do is paint.”

Pearl says, “And farm, right, Steven?”

“God, no. I’m so glad to be away from all that.”

Pearl says, “Well, the chickens do need feeding, though, if you don’t mind. And at some point you’re gonna take the dinghy out and actually catch us some fish too, right?”

“If I find the right spot. The fish aren’t bitin’.”

Mike says, “I remember a couple of good spots. There’s a spot about a mile south of the island that the fish tend to like.”

“Well, I’ll feed the chickens and go do that, then.” I turn to Miriam. “Wanna come?”

Miriam lowers her vid and smiles at me. “Sounds fun.”

“Take Grant with you too,” Pearl says. “You can use him as ballast, and I won’t have to watch him for a while.”

“Sure thing.”

We spread out some corn in the Doldrums for the chickens, then I lead Grant down to the lagoon. I’d pulled the dinghy up onto shore earlier and tied it to a palm stump.

Miriam follows with the tackle kit. “What kinda fish are out

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here, anyway?" she asks.

"All sorts. But if Mike's right, we'll have to chug out a good ways before we find anythin'."

We push the dinghy into the lagoon, get Grant situated, and climb in. Laddie jumps in after us. Miriam adjusts the solar and starts the motor. I let her take the rudder, and we putter out of Mermaid's Lagoon and pass by the *Argo* bobbin' forlornly in the calm sea. Miriam opens up the throttle, and we begin our zoom down the island's south side. We pass its tip and head south.

We stop at a point where we can still see Avalon glued to the horizon but the aqua is deep and navy blue. Miriam scoots away from the tiller and shoulders up next to Grant, who sags a bit.

She asks, "Why'd we take him with us again?"

"He needs the exercise."

"But he's just sittin' here."

"Not really. Mike says his core muscles have to work to make sure he sits up against the bobbin' of the boat. He had to walk down to the boat, and he'll have to walk back. All exercise. He sits way too much, needs all the stimulation we can give him."

I rummage through the tackle box and get the poles ready. "Ever fished before?"

Miriam stares out at the sea, a contemplative smile playin' on her lips. "Last time I went fishin', a nado sucked the pole right outta my hand."

I hand her a pole, and we fish in companiable silence. I don't expect to catch much. I'm out here more for the peacefulness of it than anythin'. After 'bout a half hour, I put down my pole and pull out my sketchbook. Seems a better use of my time, if the fish are gonna refuse to bite.



I sketch Miriam. She's got a determined look 'bout her face that's interestin' to draw. Like she's so intent on catchin' something, like her life is dependent on it – if she don't, she'll starve and die. Before I can capture it all though, her expression morphs into one of excitement as her rod suddenly bends forward.

"Hey, hey!" she hollers. "I reckon I've got somethin'."

She fights it for a few, then reels it in. Snapper. Good eatin'. We throw it into the boat and watch it flap around. We manage to catch another one (well, Miriam catches it) within a few minutes.

I say, "Looks like we've found our fishin' spot. Good job."

Her face is flushed, and her smile is wide. She's missin' a back molar, but the rest of her teeth are straight. She looks carefree right now, like nothin' bad has ever happened to her. "Reckon this'll do, for dinner at least?"

"It'll make a positive feast." I turn to Grant. "Ready to head back?"

He stares at the fish still flappin' on the floor of the boat.

Miriam starts the engine, and we head toward Avalon. "Steven," she says over the engine's hum, "the first day we were all on the island, Mike said somethin' to me. 'Bout how this was sort of a vacation, even though it wasn't really."

I smile. "Did he?"

"Yeah. And I gotta say, he might be right. This is the first time in a long time I've felt happy. Not worryin' 'bout what might happen next...just happy. That's what a vacation's like, right?"

I lean back against the dinghy's hard side and watch her, glowin' in the afternoon sun. "Yup. Sounds 'bout right."

11

STEVEN AND MIRIAM lug the fish into the bunker right in time for supper. “Excellent,” Pearl says. “Fresh protein. We’ll have a decent dinner, for once.”

“I’ll help you gut ’em,” Miriam offers, following Pearl into the kitchen.

Steven heads to the bathroom, and Kira sets the table. I lie on my cot, playing with my vid, and notice something.

The med vid has many applications, most of which I can’t access, but one cool function it has if you have reception is to show where the population is. Where are the big clusters, where are the small clumps of people. You can zoom in on a certain area and get pretty specific. Even zooming in on a desert, like the Sahara, will show where the population clusters are. They don’t show who the person is, although at some high level I bet that data is available, and if you want to know where Joe Schmo is located and have his ID, you can zoom right into where he is. Which is disconcerting if some higher-up is after you, but as far as our little group is concerned, I doubt anyone is going to care we’ve left Cascadia and are now here on Avalon.

As I sit tinkering with the vid, the feature activates, and suddenly there we are—a cluster of dots crowded on Avalon.

“Pearl!” I yell.

“What?” she yells back from the kitchen.

“I’ve got reception on this thing. Actual reception!”

Kira springs away from the table and skids over to my cot. “What did you say?”

“Reception. You know what this means?”

Her eyes sparkle with excitement. “I can send my messages to Joey!”

“Well, yes, but it means a town still exists on the mainland. They must have some pretty decent equipment; otherwise, we wouldn’t be getting reception this far out.”

Miriam pokes her head out from the kitchen. “Also means anyone there with a special vid like yours will know someone’s on this island.”

A twinge of fear replaces my excitement. I hadn’t thought of that.

Pearl hobbles to the table, carrying a bowl of stewed turnips. “So? Why would anyone care if we’re here?”

I get off my cot and move to a chair. “They might get curious and come out to investigate.”

“Again, so? I’m just glad to know humanity’s in semi-close proximity.”

Miriam says, “D’you reckon anyone from the mainland might come this way, Mike?”

“Seems highly unlikely, but who knows? I suppose we’ll have to wait and see.”

“Or,” Kira suggests as Pearl brings out the fish and we sit down and prepare to eat, “we go there first. Check it out. They might welcome us. They always used to, didn’t they?”

I reach for a spoon. “Way back when it was a functioning town, they did. But the town was practically abandoned last time we visited. And we have no idea who has moved in and lives there now. The people might not be friendly toward us at all.”

“Or they might,” Kira says, and the gleam in her eyes belies her obvious intent.

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Pearl ladles stewed turnips into everyone's bowl. "We aren't going that way, Kira. Not yet, anyway. Why don't you see if your vid can send its messages to your Joey? If Mike can get reception, you probably can too."

"My vid is a lot more powerful than hers, but you never know," I say. "And truth be told, I shouldn't even have this vid. Should've turned it in when I left service, but I didn't. Not sure how much I want it connected to the grid."

"Oh yeah, 'cause I'm sure an 'official' will be so worried 'bout you usin' it, he'll track you across hundreds of miles of open ocean to retrieve it," Kira says.

I laugh. "Yeah, you're right. Nobody'll probably care."

"'Cept snoopers from the mainland," Miriam says.

"Makes you wonder why you couldn't see the dots before, Mike," Pearl says. "Why do you reckon they're suddenly showing up now?"

"They must have put up a new tower, or fixed the old one that was there," Steven says.

"So they're pretty high civ at least," Kira murmurs.

Miriam frowns at her turnips. "Maybe *too* high civ."

We stop talking and eat the delectable fish in an uncomfortable silence.

I WAKE FROM THE dream, a cold, clammy sweat covering my body. I clamp my shaking hands together to keep 'em steady. Then, hearing at a scraping noise, I jerk around, terrified.

But it's just Grant's cane dragging along the ground as he heads for the door. Must be morning. Everyone else is dead out. I'm not falling asleep again, not anytime soon, not after that last puzzle dream, so I get up and slide into my sandals.

I don't bother with pants. Who the hell cares if I'm wearing pants or not?

I follow Grant out into the warm sunshine. He makes his now routine shuffle down to the lagoon, finds a shell, then plods up the path to Pook's Hill and places the shell gently on little Susan's grave. Then, he hobbles over to the big stone and sits, staring out at the churning sea.

I sit next to him. A soft, salty breeze warms my clammy skin.

"Do you reckon anyone from the mainland'll bug us, if they know we're here?" I ask, not expecting an answer. "I mean, it's not like we have much supplies. Nobody'd want that. And it don't look like anyone has been in Camelot since" — I glance at him — "since maybe you were here last. If it was you. Those supplies, their labels were all in English, so I don't guess some native from the mainland is stockpiling stuff here. Frankly, I'll bet everyone we used to know from the mainland is now dead and gone and nobody even realizes Camelot exists. If anyone sails out this way, all they'll see is an unhospitable, barren, volcanic island with no aqua, barely any vegetation, no nothing. You can't even see Dad's tombstone unless you're really looking for it."

Grant remains quiet.

I turn to him. "*Did* you come out here, when you left Toad Hall that day? Did you restock Camelot in anticipation of us maybe coming out like we did? Kira told me that the day when you took the boat, she and Joey were on it and you were in some kind of weird rage and kicked 'em off. What made you so mad? I've seen you exasperated, I've seen you impatient, but I don't believe in all my sixty years I've ever heard you scream or yell. Then you came back a year later in this zombie state

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and refuse to talk. I know you usually can't, but sometimes you're clear as a bell." I take a deep breath. "Why can't you tell us, when you're in that clear state, what happened?"

Grant's face is like chiseled stone. He barely blinks as his eyes fix on the horizon.

I let out an exasperated sigh, and at some point, when I've expelled about half the air in my lungs, the exasperation turns to anger. White-hot. Absolute rage. I clench my fists, my fingers for once sure and steady. I try to suck my sigh back in, try to calm the boiling ire that fills me and heats up my insides. The doctor in me stands back, appalled, as I scream at my brother.

"Dammit, it isn't fair! In two, three, maybe a few fucking days or weeks I won't be able to talk. Or walk. Or do anything on my own ever again, and you...y-y-you still h-have everything. I don't know what's going on in your b-brain, but soon I won't be able to help you anymore, or help anyone else, and I'm g-gonna be the one Pearl and Steven and the others are g-gonna have to look after, and I can't d-do anything about it and it isn't f-fair!"

And I turn to my brother and smack him. Hard. So hard, he falls off the rock. Then bitterness replaces the anger, all the bitterness I felt when I was a kid on those trips to Avalon, watching Grant and Noah hanging out together, knowing I could never be close to my brother because he'd always gravitate to Noah first and leave me out of everything if Noah told him to. Would allow Noah to call me names and not stand up for me. He tried to make up for it in later years and I'd forgiven him, but that doesn't matter right now as I glare down at my brother splayed out on the sandy ground, propping his hand against Dad's tombstone. I'm so enraged I don't help him up.

I don't apologize. Instead, I grab his cane even though I don't need it and stomp away, down the path toward Mirkwood. I keep listening for a sound, for a call for help or a grunt of an apology, but like always, there's only silence.

Down in my swamp, gnats are buzzing. It's the only spot on the island with gnats, and they envelope me with a buzz of excitement. How often do they get visitors down here except now the chickens? I ignore 'em and plunge into the mucky, bracken aqua lapping through the bushes. I wade out for quite a bit, then the muck below my feet sucks a sandal off, and I have to sit down and search for it.

Crouched in the cool, muddy wetlands, I finally calm down. Even with the gnats, even with the encroaching sea, this place — Mirkwood — can still soothe me. I lie on my back in the shallow aqua, letting it run over my half-clad body as I gaze up at the pink sky and the last traces of the sunrise. Another fantastic thing about Avalon's northern tip is that you get both the sunset and the sunrise, and it is all so calming. I close my eyes. Somewhere, hiding in the shrubs, a chicken cackles.

*Why the hell did I blow up at Grant? What was that?*

The doctor part of me is mortified. How could I have struck out with anger at a patient, because that's how I pretty much view Grant most of the time, as a chronic patient who needs constant care? But that small act of violence also felt therapeutic. Powerful. My one act of lashing out against my miserable fate before I haven't the strength to fight it anymore. Grant just happened to be there when the uncontrollable urge blindsided me.

The sudden spurt of intense anger I'd leveled at him, I realize as I lie here, came from fear. Knowing that soon I'll be like him. But unlike him, once I've reached the uncomprehending state,

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I won't have the occasional luxury of snapping out of it. I'll have no periods of clarity, not once the last blue pill's effects wear off and I start to march down the fatal path to oblivion and death. Today is the last real day for me. Maybe tomorrow morning. Or, maybe I'm blowing all this completely out of proportion. Maybe it'll take a long time before I get to the point where others have to help me, where I can't do anything for myself, but by tomorrow I will never stop the shaking again. Or the stuttering. There won't be any turning back then.

Hot tears burn my cheeks. At the same time, I laugh. What a pity party. I've survived doctoring people through two pandemics. I've never suffered with back issues like Pearl. I've mostly led a healthy life. I've beaten the odds when millions of other people have perished, and now all my good luck has finally run out and I'm a useless, whining idiot. And what good will whining do anyway? I can't reverse this disease. I can't do anything but live with it for as long as it takes to do me in. That's the only option I've got.

I stand, dripping, and slog out of the mire onto dry land.

It's a slow walk back to Camelot. The rage has long passed, but shame has replaced it. And while I know Grant probably didn't even register anything that happened on Pook's Hill, do I apologize anyway? Do I admit what I've done to my fam or keep it silent?

No, I don't want to keep it silent. You should never keep secrets from your fam.

I open the door and enter the bunker. Pearl is frying up sourdough pancakes. I hear the sizzle and smell the sweetness. Kira sits at the table, flipping cards as she sets up a game of solitaire. Grant sits next to her, staring blankly at the cards.



I close the door gently behind me. "Where's Miriam and Steven?"

Kira glances up. "They took the dinghy out to see if they could catch some more fish. What the hell happened to you? You're soakin' wet."

I grab a towel off the shelf. "Feels good, though. It's gonna be hot out there today." I glance at Grant. I have no idea if he hears me or not at this point, but I place his cane next to him and lay a shaking hand on his shoulder. "S-sorry, Grant."

"Why're you apologizin' to Grant?" Kira says.

I move my fingers to Grant's chin and tilt his passive face toward me. His right cheek, the one I smacked, is pink but otherwise OK. "I attacked him this morning. Walloped him right off the rock he was sitting on."

"You did what?!" Pearl calls from the kitchen.

"I totally lost it with him. Just...I dunno, Pearl."

Pearl hobbles into the main room, her mouth open in a stunned "O" and her eyes wide. "You? Doctor Mike? Lost patience with a patient?"

"He wasn't my patient right then, Pearl. Maybe I was his."

Pearl casts a quick glance at the kitchen door. "Look, I gotta get the pancakes off the griddle..."

"I'll get 'em," Kira says, jumping up.

Pearl sits down at the table and motions me into a chair.

I sink into it, suddenly exhausted.

"What's going on, Mike?" she says.

"I dunno, Pearl. I guess I'm scared."

She takes my hand. Her eyes are all wet. I expect, with the way my emotions have been rollicking all over the place, to start crying too, but I don't. She says, "You and me both, brother."

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And that steels me. Because as much as I've assured her she's probably safe from Pan4 zombie, we both know it isn't totally true. She could come down with it any day. And yet, she hasn't broken down and gone completely maniac over that terrifying thought, not yet. She's stayed amazingly stoic, for Pearl.

She gives my hand a squeeze, then lets it go, stands, and heads back into the kitchen. I follow her. Kira has just flipped the last steaming pancake onto the heaped plate.

"Let me carry that, Kira," I say, taking the plate from her. "My hands aren't shaking too bad yet. I'll make sure I'm as much of use as I can until I can't anymore."

"I don't believe you'll slide downhill as quickly as you believe," Pearl says. "You might be the one with medicinal background, but you always have taken the most pessimistic view of things, Mike. Especially when it comes to yourself. We'll take every day as it comes. In the meantime, breakfast. And there's more for us since Steven and Miriam have ditched us."

"Shouldn't we save 'em some?" Kira says, setting down the jar of honey and taking her seat.

"They took some grub to eat on the boat," Pearl says. "And I can always make 'em more if they want it. Dig in."

We eat in silence. I cut up Grant's pancakes into tiny squares, put the fork in Grant's hand, and guide the hand toward his plate. Sometimes this is all he needs to get going and he'll eat by himself—silent and steady, like a mechanical man, until the food all disappears. Sometimes you have to spoon the food into his mouth like he's a six-month-old. He'll always chew and swallow and open his mouth when the fork gets close to it.

Today, he feeds himself. I smear honey onto my pancakes and cut 'em up into tiny squares too.

Kira watches me. "That how you always eat your pancakes?"  
"Mhm. You eat yours differently?"

"I stack 'em and cut big chunks as I eat."

I swallow and reach for another square. "I've had to do a lot of food prep for patients. Easiest way is to cut small bites, all beforehand, and I've gotten in the habit of doing it for myself too."

She takes another mouthful, chews, gulps it down. "Do you miss it?"

"Miss what? Feeding people?"

"All of it. Helpin' people, in general."

I don't need to even ponder this question anymore. "No, I'm done." It comes out harsher than I intended. Almost angry.

She pokes at her half-finished plate. "I haven't done nothin'. Nothin' at all. 'Cept sit in a house most of my life and dream garbo dreams."

"Dreams are never garbo, Kira," Pearl says.

"I dream 'bout becomin' a famous violinist. That's pretty damn garbo, Pearl."

Pearl says, "Art is always needed, Kira. Even if the whole world is going to hell in a handbasket."

Kira stands, leaving the rest of her pancakes untouched. "It's not enough, Pearl. I never got the chance to help others. Not like Mike did."

"Did you ever want the chance?" I say.

"I dunno. I mean, I never thought 'bout helpin' people before I left, Mike, that's true. Too selfish and worried 'bout myself, I guess. But I *shoulda* thought 'bout it. I realize that now. I should be more like you. Willin' to go out there and face death and help people anyway. I've wasted my life." She jumps up and yanks her chair back and stomps out the door.

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"Kira!" Pearl calls.

"Let her go," I say, remembering my angry hike this morning. "She's too cooped up. A stomp around the island might do her some good. Cool her down."

Pearl pushes Kira's unfinished plate of pancakes toward Grant, who has completely cleaned up his own plate. "I hope so," she says.

Grant doesn't say anything, but his fork digs into Kira's pancakes without a break in stride.

Miriam and Steven saunter in, fresh-faced and windswept and laughing. The change in Miriam is almost stunning, normally she has a serious, contemplative look, but today she's smiling and her eyes sparkle. "More fresh fish!" she says.

"Miriam's a good-luck charm," Steven says, smiling at her. "I've never caught so many fish." He stops at the table and stares at our empty plates. "Any pancakes left?"

"Put the fish in the cooler, and I'll make you some," Pearl says.

"And we need to get started on the cistern," Miriam says. "We were plannin' to clean it out today."

The above-ground cistern still holds a bunch of aqua from past rain events, but it's pretty mucky. Since we haven't cleaned it yet, we've had to continue lugging aqua up from the lagoon to run through the desals for our drinking supply.

"I'll help you," I say. "Then we can use the cistern aqua for both drinking and household chores."

I take my last blue pill. If this is the final day of my full strength, I'm planning on helping out as much as possible. It ends up being an all-afternoon job. We drain the usable liquid into a bucket, detach the tank from its couplings, and flip the heavy tank to drain out all the goop that's collected in the bottom over the years.

“How’re we gonna clean the inside?” Steven says. “We don’t have a power washer and none of us can get into the openings to do it by hand. They’re too small.”

“If Grant wasn’t so zombie, he could figure out a way,” I say. “But you’re right. The best we can do is keep filling it, try swishing the bottom with a broom, and keep draining it until the aqua runs clean.”

This requires a lot of huffing back and forth from the lagoon with full, heavy buckets. We use the salty aqua to scrub until the tank is as clean as we can get it, then we do a final rinse with fresh aqua drained from the desals.

Steven wipes his brow. “That’s as good as we’re gonna get it.”

I relax on a rock. The sun beats on my face and arms and I’m hungry as hell, but there’s nothing like hard physical work to feel alive. And useful. “When we were younger, we’d bring iodine pills to treat the cistern when we wanted to use it for drinking. But I couldn’t scrounge up anything before this trip, I’m afraid.”

“Well, as long as we don’t get a lotta bird poop up on the roof, we should be OK,” Miriam says. “We’ll have to make sure to clean the shingles every once in a while.”

Pearl exits Camelot carrying a plate of sourdough crumpets smeared with blackberry jam instead of the promised pancakes. “This’ll hold you over until dinner.” Her eyes scan The Doldrums. “Where’s Kira?”

I take a crumpet. “I haven’t seen her since she stomped off this morning.”

“She was up at Pook’s Hill earlier,” Steven says. “Sittin’ on the rock, playin’ her violin.”

“Angry music too,” Miriam says. “Then sad. She’s workin’ out some stuff, I guess.”

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“That was late morning, though,” Steven says. “And you could hear her violin—just barely—down here at Camelot. Now I don’t hear nothin’.”

Miriam nods. “I haven’t heard anythin’ for a while either, ‘cept the wind and sea.”

I stuff the last bite of crumpet into my mouth and haul my aching body off the rock. “I’ll go check on her.”

After all the work today, my muscles are killing me, but my hands are still steady. I push up the path to the graveyard and round Dad’s tombstone, but Kira isn’t there.

I backtrack and meet Miriam running full-tilt up the path with Laddie trotting behind her. She looks distraught. “Mike! The dinghy’s gone!”

“What?”

She skids to a stop and grabs my arm. “Steven went down to the lagoon to see if maybe Kira went there. We’d pulled the dinghy up the beach after we went fishin’, but now it’s gone.”

“You reckon she rowed out to the *Argo* for something?”

Miriam shakes her head. “I don’t see it anywhere near the *Argo*. I don’t see it anywhere at all.”

“But the dinghy was there when you went to get aqua from the lagoon to wash the cistern, wasn’t it?”

“Maybe, but we’d pulled it up behind that rock where we usually store it, and I wasn’t payin’ much attention. She could’ve taken it, I guess, and we just didn’t notice.”

Steven runs toward us with a pair of binoculars. “Up Pook’s Hill!” he yells, so we sprint up to the clifftop.

You can see a three-sixty panorama from up there—the ocean lying flat out to the east and spanning around the north side (parts blocked by tips of Mirkwood’s shrubby growth), across

the lagoon to the sparkling blue beyond, and down the tip of the Enchanted Place. Oddly enough, the only thing not visible from up here is Camelot, which huddles behind its mound of red basalt.

Steven raises the binoculars and scans them over Mirkwood and the sea, past Mermaid's Lagoon. "I don't see anythin' out that way." He pivots toward the Enchanted Place. "She's not at the fishin' spot, either."

"East, Steven," I say. "If she's gonna head in any direction, it'll be east. Toward the mainland."

Steven swivels and aims the binoculars over the cliff. We wait, trying to stay patient. My right hand quivers.

"There!" he says, pointing. "I can barely make it out, but it's gotta be the dinghy."

"What the hell does she reckon she's doin'?" Miriam whispers.

"She's heading to civilization," I say. "That's what she wants. High civ. We're all ready to hide from it, but Kira isn't done with it. Not yet."

"If there's any civ out in the jungle, it isn't high," Miriam says.

My hands shake in earnest now. I remember the dream I'd had that morning, the one that had woken me up in a cold sweat. It started with a trip to Avalon — the trip where I'd planted the medicinal herbs. Grant was at Toad Hall with Pearl and Kira, and Steven had said since it wasn't farming season, he'd go with me. We only stayed on the island a couple of weeks. The pink beach still existed then, so did the huts, and it should've been idyllic, but it wasn't. Both of us, once we reached Avalon, were hell bent to get off it, though neither one of us could explain why. Maybe it was too lonely with just the two of us. But I believe my zombie state was maybe skittering around in the

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shadows then, waiting for a chance to nab me. I felt not quite right the whole trip, like everything in the world I'd enjoyed before — the saltiness of the sea, the rise and fall of the waves, the sound of wind hitting the sails, the quietness of Mirkwood — all of it bugged me. Annoyed me. Enraged me, even.

In my dream I was planting my herbs and patting down the squishy soil when the little waterfall that used to trickle through the vegetation suddenly burred into a geyser and washed me and the plants right into the boggy part of Mirkwood where the sea's edges rolled and rippled into the ferns, and I began to sink. And as much as I tried fighting against the mud, it sucked me down until my head went under, everything went black, and I thought I must surely suffocate.

But I didn't. Instead, I opened my eyes. The blackness was gone, and light streaming from Camelot's open door shone onto the puzzle lying on the table, where the second to last puzzle piece, the one out to sea, was now in its proper spot.

It showed a boat sailing away, leaving Avalon behind.

## 12

I LOWER THE BINOCULARS and stare at Miriam and Mike. Damn my little sister. I mean, she's always been moody and prone to do stupid things, but this is a new low. Takin' our dinghy and putterin' out into a rollin' sea — what the hell is she thinkin'? Don't we have enough to deal with already? Three sick oldies that we've gotta worry 'bout, and now this?

I mean, it took enough convincin' just to get everyone to agree to this journey. It was Mike's idea to escape to Avalon in the hopes we'd avoid Pan4, but it was Pearl who got scared



and goaded us to leave early, to not wait around anymore. She was the one it took the most convincin' to wanna leave when Mike brought up the idea months before, but then she got scared of the disease and wanted us to hurry up. But then when we did leave, she totally went to pieces.

It's weird that outta all of us, Pearl was the one who ended up gettin' the pox. I'm scared silly for her 'cause I can't imagine life with her gone, but Mike says you can never tell. She could pull through fine or she could go all zombie. We have to wait and see. And if I'm scared, Pearl must be terrified. But she hasn't gotten all maniac lately. She was the one most afraid of Pan4, now it's like she's calm 'bout it. Maybe she used up all her fear in the years leadin' up to this and now she has no more fear left.

I'm scared to lose her. It's hard enough when a dog dies or a cow keels over unexpected or a coyote gets into the chicken coop and goes on a massacre spree, but I can't wrap my head 'round losin' one of my fam. The thought terrifies me, yet I know it could happen eventually, with Grant all zombie and Mike gettin' shaky and Pearl with her pox and Kira losin' the baby. Now I've gotta add Miriam to the mix. Ever since Jimmy tried to attack her in the apple orchard and I saved her, I've thought of her as fam. Part of a handful of people I'm scared silly to lose. First time I realized this was on the pier when Miriam went after Jimmy. The Morlocks were truly desperate then and woulda tried to take the boat from us, maybe tried to kill us all. They wouldn't have cared that I'd traded with 'em before, and once Jimmy and me shared a sandwich and talked 'bout fishin'. It wouldn't have mattered. The fire and hunger and fear of dyin' had wiped their memories of me, I reckon. I

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was scared I'd lose Miriam then, and I'd only known her a day. But we'd been through so much together already by then, it felt like I'd known her forever. And now, with all we've gone through on this journey, I can't imagine life without her.

Watchin' Kira struggle for life on the *Argo*, when we were almost at Avalon but not quite, was terrifyin' too. She's so young and the one person besides Pearl, who I've been 'round the most in my life, and I'd have wanted to die too if she hadn't made it.

But now I'm more mad than scared. I can't believe, after all we've been through, Kira'd steal the dinghy and take off in it.

"We need to stop her," Mike says.

I start runnin' back down the path, toward Mermaid's Lagoon. "We'll have to follow her on the *Argo*."

Since we don't have the dinghy, the only way to get to the *Argo* is to swim all the way across the lagoon. I'm a good swimmer, but the *Argo* is anchored out past the coral reef, so it's gonna be a long swim. I reach the beach, still holdin' onto the binoculars, dive into the lagoon, begin swimmin'.

"Hey!" Mike yells from somewhere up the path. "G-get back here, Steven!"

I'm not slowin' down to wait for Mike. We've gotta be quick if we're gonna get the *Argo* goin' and herd Kira back to Avalon. She can make it all the way to the mainland with the dinghy – it'll go forever as long as the sun charges the solars. She can't miss the mainland as long as she heads east, but it's a hundred miles and will take her hours to get there.

I hear a splash, two splashes and turn my head. Miriam and Laddie are swimmin' after me. I'm sure Laddie can swim the distance. He's a dog. Not sure how strong a swimmer Miriam

is, but I'm glad she's comin'.

It's funny 'bout distances. They always look close 'til you try to cross 'em. Like when you're sailin' and you swear you're close to a point, maybe a spit of land or a rock, but then it takes forever to get there. Swimmin' to the *Argo* is like that. It's tough too, 'cause we'd already worked all day and only had the little crummet to eat, and now I realize there's no food on the *Argo* unless we missed some when we unpacked, and we could get super hungry if it takes hours to catch up with Kira.

The *Argo* don't seem to get any closer no matter how hard I pump my arms. I swim and swim, and finally pass over the crumblin' coral reef that used to protect the lagoon from the sea. I keep swimmin' and my arm cramps, then my belly, and I wonder if I might throw up. But I keep goin'. I'm closer to the *Argo* than to the island now, so I only have only one way to swim. Laddie pants and paddles behind me. I don't hear Miriam, but my own gasps are so loud and my arms make a lot of splash when they hit the lagoon, though maybe not as much as they did before 'cause I'm tired now. I suck in a mouthful of air mixed with aqua and cough.

But now I'm touchin' the *Argo's* smooth sides, and I grab the anchor line and rest. The divin' platform is up so we can't get on board that way, but I've clambered onto the deck before with no problem, though that was when I wasn't so tired. Laddie paddles up to me. He can't grab onto the anchor line like I can, and he whines with exhaustion. I brace as best as I can against the line and grab my dog with the other. "You're OK, boy," I whisper, holdin' his strugglin' body close. He whines again and licks my ear.

Behind him comes Miriam. She *can* grab the line and she

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does, gaspin', "That was way too long a swim. How do we get on board?"

I rest for a minute, then say, "Hold onto Laddie for a sec," and I swim to the *Argo's* other side where (yay!) the rope ladder we forgot to pull up dangles. I climb it and lower the divin' platform so Miriam and Laddie can get on board more easily.

Miriam climbs up to the cockpit while I pull up the anchor. "How far ahead do you reckon she is?"

"Probably an hour. The dinghy's engine isn't as powerful as the *Argo's*, so we should overtake her."

We get the engines goin' and head out, and it's excitin', like a pirate chasin' down a galleon chock full of treasure, only the galleon is really a tiny boat with my dumb little sister in it. She's the treasure, I guess. Laddie barks, excited to be out on a chase too.

Miriam says, "What do we do when we do catch up with her?"

"We convince her to come back. Board the dinghy and force her back, if she don't come quiet. Kira didn't wanna come on this voyage anyway, you've heard her complain 'bout it. I guess she figured as long as she leaves us the *Argo*, she isn't strandin' us. Course, we could never get Pearl or Mike or Grant all the way out to the *Argo* if they had to swim to it. Pearl used to be a good swimmer, 'cept she's totally outta shape now, and the strain would probably kill Grant."

"What 'bout Mike?"

"Couple of times I've been to Avalon with him, he hardly ever got in the lagoon. Only time I ever saw him swim was the day we stopped the *Argo* and all paddled 'round in the ocean."

We didn't venture out too far when we did that, and we all held lines tied to the ship in case a weird current tried to drag

us off. Mike swam with long backstrokes that day, but I doubt he could paddle out to the *Argo* now. He's too shaky now for that sorta thing.

The *Argo* is faster than the little dinghy, plus I know how to steer to get the best of the currents and Kira don't. Miriam, every once in a while, runs up to the bow and stares through the binoculars, then dances back along the deck like a robin hoppin' through a meadow.

She says, "We're gainin'. Kira must guess we're followin' by now."

I nod. "We're close enough for her to see us, I bet."

Miriam sits on a bench and watches me steer. I like it when she watches me, like I'm a teacher and she's a student who looks up to me, though I bet she's probably smarter than me in every way 'cept knowin' how to sail and maybe 'bout farmin'. But if you gave her enough time, she'd probably overtake me in those skills too.

She says in her upset voice, "You know, when they let us outta prison, they didn't give us any help. No money, no vids, no nothin'. They opened the doors and flung us out like they were dumpin' out the trash. I hiked along for a while, then I stole a truck and trailer. I stole it before I could see the faces of the people who owned it 'cause I knew if saw 'em, I'd never be able to steal it. If I didn't see 'em, I could pretend like it was some abandoned piece of junk that nobody else was countin' on for survival. I might've stolen someone's home, the only possession they had. I was desperate, see. But I don't guess I coulda done it if I'd seen their faces."

I stay silent 'cause I can tell she isn't done and I don't need to prod her. Her voice gets harder and angrier as she speaks.

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When she's happy, it sounds like pretty bells, but when she's upset, it sounds more like tires crunchin' over gravel.

"So, I don't get how your own sis could steal the dinghy, which we all need, and take off like this. She's put the rest of us in danger on purpose. How could she do it? It's not like you're all faceless people she don't know. You're the people who raised her and loved her and kept her safe. Her fam."

I reply, "Maybe she figures since she's left us the *Argo*, she's not puttin' us out much."

She turns to me, and I see fire in her eyes. It's scary and beautiful at the same time.

"Nobody 'cept you or me or Laddie could swim out to the ship. She didn't even reckon that when she left. You know, when we were sailin' here, she told me 'bout Joey and how they planned to head east. This was before she let you know. And I told her the east wasn't some magical land in a fairytale. It has its problems too. Loads of 'em. But she's so set on it, you can't change her mind with reason."

I say, "She's in love, I guess."

"So? Does that mean everyone else can go to hell?"

"Well, there's no way she can get the dinghy all the way east, or even back to Cascadia, that's for sure. She won't have enough food and she didn't take a desal. Best she can do is make it to the mainland."

She says, "Yeah, and then what? She's so sheltered. She has no idea how brutal the world is. At least in Cascadia we were in our own country. Down here she won't make it farther than the first outpost she comes across. She's young and pretty. They'll use her up before they let her go."

A cold chill fills my veins, and I will the ship to go faster

though I know it can't 'cause the throttle is open and that's that. I had thought 'bout Kira capsizin' or starvin' in the jungle or gettin' sick, but not *that*.

I say, "You know what? I reckon she got into one of her weird funks and stole the dinghy spur-of-the-moment like. Not thinkin' it through. By the time we catch up to her, she'll be ready to come home."

She frowns. "I hope so. She might've taken off on impulse. But it won't make any difference if she gets somewhere and meets up with somebody who don't care 'bout that, will it? It'll be too late then."

I don't wanna think 'bout that, so I turn my attention back to steerin'. The creamy white foam on the waves breaks against the bow as we roll through 'em. Each rise and fall of the *Argo's* hull brings us closer to the little boat bobbin' ahead of us, and I wonder what Kira is feelin' now. Is she panickin' and tryin' to go faster? Or is she relieved we're followin' and it'll all be over soon? Or is she angry like Miriam, all flashin' red eyes as she watches the *Argo* bearin' down on her like an orca movin' in for the kill and she's a seal rollin' desperately through the waves with no chance of escape?

Miriam flits gracefully to the bow again, her red hair cropped against her head but longer than it was when we started. It still makes her look like a little boy from behind. She told me that in prison they always shaved everyone's head and it'll be a while before her hair is long enough to put in a ponytail or bun, but even short it's beautiful — red, the color I like best, but more carrotty in shade. She wears jeans even in this sun. They were wet after our swim but are dry already in this wind and heat, and she's barefoot. A couple of days ago she chucked

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the prison boots into the storage room and swore she'd never use 'em again.

She yells, "Looks like Kira's stopped her boat."

That makes it easier to catch up, though it still takes a while. The sunset's pinks and purples have creeped onto the horizon by the time we reach her. She sits in the bobbin' boat, all dejected and defeated like an abandoned puppy, her arms wrapped 'round knees drawn up to her chest. Tracks of dried tears run down her salt-encrusted cheeks. I drop the divin' platform, and she mechanically steers the boat to it.

She says, "Well, you caught up. Figured ya would."

Miriam's anger has died down now we've reached the dinghy and she knows Kira isn't gonna put up a fight, which makes me a little sad. Not for Miriam but for Kira, 'cause I don't like to see Kira look this whipped. Her normally rich brown face is almost yellow it's so wan and tired and miserable.

I say, "I don't get it, Kira. Why'd ya go off like that?"

She throws a rope to us. "I didn't mean to. At first, I thought, well, I'll take the dinghy out a bit 'til I cool down, not be so upset. And then I thought, maybe I'll go a little farther, and then I thought, if I get a little closer to the mainland, I might be able to use my vid and send Joey all my messages and hopefully he's left a message for me."

I say, "Did it work?"

"Yeah. I sent off all my messages. But he hasn't sent me anythin'. Oh, I can't stand it...just the not knowin'." She begins to cry.

Miriam says, "Is that why you kept goin', then?"

Kira says between sobs, "Y-yes."

I say, "Kira, it's OK. But we're too far away from high civ



for you to make it on your own, you know. We need to all stick together. It won't be long, I promise."

"W-why can't we j-just go b-back?"

Miriam replies, "Go back to *what*?"

And Kira can't answer 'cause she knows there's nothin' to go back to. Even Joey has to be a dream to her by now, not real.

I say, "If we go anywhere, it has to be somewhere new. Somewhere we can all start over. But we have to go together, Kira. None of us can make it on our own."

Kira gives one last snuffle, wipes her eyes, looks up at Miriam, and says, "*She* can."

Miriam smiles. "Maybe I could, for a while. But not forever. I chose to be here with your fam. I didn't even know none of ya, but it was a better choice than bein' alone. Trust me."

She reaches out her hand and so does Kira, and they grasp each other's fingers. Kira is cryin' again, but she climbs on board and helps us lash the dinghy to the davits and we turn the *Argo* and putter back to Avalon as the light from the vanishin' sun turns the sky and the sea into a mass of reds and purples and orange and gold, with Avalon risin' up like a big black blot in the middle of it all.

PEARL WANTS SO bad to lay into Kira when we get back, I can tell, but weirdly she don't. Instead, she says, "Supper's hot in the crockpot," in a strange, floaty voice, and we sit around the table and stuff our mouths with bean chili and cornbread.

Kira picks up a piece of bread, then crawls onto her cot and sits cross-legged on it and nibbles on her cornbread but hardly swallows any. The crumbs dribble out her mouth and roll onto her sheets, and she is gonna be so itchy tonight. At

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least, I would be. I hate crumbly sheets.

Mike and Grant are playin' backgammon. Well, Mike is playin' and Grant is sittin' across from him starin' at the pieces. Mike rolls the dice and moves Grant's pieces for him.

I stumble over to my cot and pull my sketch book out from under it. It's my special Avalon book. I've drawn in it since I was a kid, so the book is filled with colored pencil drawings of every visit to the island I've ever taken. I flip to the first page, a sketch of the *Raven*, Grant's old boat, the one he lost when he sailed home from Avalon but went zombie somewhere on the trip back.

When I was ten and Grant took me to Avalon for the first time — just me, him, and our old dog Ben — I thought the *Raven* was the most magical ship ever and Avalon the most magical place. It was my first time away from Pearl and Toad Hall, and I felt so grown up. In my drawin', the *Raven* bobs beyond the coral reef and palm trees line the pink beach. I gaze at it for a minute, then say, "We need to do somethin' 'bout the *Argo*."

Mike says, "W-what do y-you mean?"

I flip to a clean page and start sketchin' outlines in quick swishes, the cliff and the Pater's gravestone and Susan's little mound and the seashells scattered over it. Not sure why I picked this scenery to sketch, but my fingers kinda move the pencil in that way. "I'm not comfy anchorin' it out in the open sea. Too many storms happenin' lately. We've had two since we've been here, and it pulled her a bit out, even with the anchor, and I don't trust that at some point a good gale'll either topple her completely or yank the anchor right out from under her, then we won't have a boat at all."

Mike rolls the backgammon dice and says, "C-could we

anchor her in the lagoon?"

"We never could before. It was always too shallow. But I'm wonderin' 'bout that now. The seas have sure risen in the last few years 'round here. Maybe she won't ground out if we bring her in. I reckon it's safer to try, anyway. Before, you couldn't get a ship like the *Argo* over the reef, but that's mostly blasted away now. Anyway, the lagoon has better shelter, so we either leave her out there to get whacked by storms or try to get her into the lagoon where she might ground out but would be better protected. I'd choose the lagoon."

Mike says, "So w-would I. You c-could m-m-med moor it."

"That's what I'm figurin' too."

Lyin' on her cot readin' *Return to Avalon* on Pearl's vid, Miriam looks up, interested. "What's med moor mean?"

I say, "If we bring the *Argo* into the lagoon's deepest part and back down on the anchor, then tie off to somethin' close to shore—Mermaid's Rock maybe—then we probably won't ground the keel 'cause it don't get too shallow there. The *Argo* will be better protected than out in deep aqua. I'll try that. When we swam out to the *Argo* earlier, I crossed a point in the reef that the sea had pretty well dug out. If we steer her right through that, we should clear the reef OK."

Kira, who was curled up on her cot, straightens up and says, "Before you do that, Steven, I think we should take a vote."

Mike looks up from the backgammon board and says, "A v-v-vote on what, exactly?"

Kira says, "On stayin' here."

Pearl looks like she's gonna bust. You can always tell when she's 'bout to lose her temper 'cause her eyes start rolling, like a shark's does before it bites into its prey, and her right index

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finger taps on whatever is handy (right now it's her vid) and her voice gets all clipped like she's afraid if she speaks in full sentences she'll erupt like a volcano and melt everyone in spewin' lava. She says, "We're staying."

Kira stands, eyes flashin'. "Why? Why the hell did we come out here when we coulda gone anywhere? We coulda gone east, Pearl, where we'd find high civ. Miriam and Mike both said the east coast has high civ. They aren't like how we are on the west coast. They still have nice things and symphonies and food and..."

Mike says, "Rampant d-disease," but Kira ignores him.

"...and if we had gone that way 'stead of the way we did, we'd be better off. But we still can, Pearl. We can take the *Argo* and get through the Panama Canal maybe, and sail east where life isn't so bad, and..."

Pearl jumps up so fast she could be a grasshopper or a frog, and spews (like a volcano), "Enough!" so loudly Mike drops his backgammon piece, Miriam jumps up and reaches for the knife still strapped to her side, and Grant actually wobbles in his seat. My pencil slides right through my drawin' and slashes the gravestone in two.

"Kira, we've got food here, we've got aqua, we've got shelter, and we're staying like we decided —"

Kira says, "You decided."

"We all decided, dammit, and we all knew it wouldn't be forever, just for a few months, and we have *no better choice*, Kira."

She's losin' it, I can tell, not just by the raised voice but by her eyes. They get all jumpy when she gets maniac, like the pupils can't stay in one spot.

Kira knows this is one of Pearl's tells too, but she still says,

“We made the decision when we had a Toad Hall to go back to.”

Pearl gets so upset at this that she swells up like a puffer fish. You can't tell her Toad Hall is gone — she don't believe it.

Before she can totally blow, Mike says in a tone to almost match Pearl's in volume, “Enough, Kira!” which shuts Kira up 'cause Mike never yells, but he's angry now. “Miriam,” he says, and his voice is loud but firm and don't even have a stutter, “could you and Kira step outside for a minute, please?”

Kira wants to say “Why?” I can tell, but Mike's stern gaze stops her, and Miriam takes Kira's hand and leads her out the door. Mike turns to Pearl.

“It's OK, Pearl. Maybe you should lie down for a bit.”

And Pearl, after takin' a couple of deep, steadyin' breaths, does what he says, which is mondo weird. It's like the puffer fish has instantaneously deflated.

Mike whispers, “S-she's drugged. S-s-he went nuts when s-she realized Kira t-t-took the dinghy.”

I say, “Another sedative? No wonder she was so weirdly calm when we came in.”

Mike nods.

Pearl's eatin' up those drugs like they're candy. I glance over at her. She's got her eyes shut, but I'm pretty sure she's not asleep.

Mike says, “It's almost w-w-orn off, but I don't wanna get her all r-r-riled up again. Maybe I'll give her another sedative.”

After a bit, the only sounds I hear from Pearl's cot are snores, so I open the door. Kira and Miriam sit on a Doldrum rock, talkin'. They come in when I beckon.

Miriam says, “What's goin' on?”

And I motion to Pearl. “She was gettin' too worked up

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again. Kira, haven't you already stressed Pearl out enough for one day?"

Kira frowns. "She's gotta realize at some point that Toad Hall is gone."

Mike says, "W- why? If s-she's happy believing it, how does it h-hurt?"

Kira touches Mike's arm. "Mike, out of all of us, 'cept maybe Miriam, you've had the most experience out in the world. Wouldn't it be better if we were back in high civ?"

Mike closes his eyes and stays silent.

Kira turns to Miriam next. "What 'bout you? Is everyone so bad out there that we should stay away, forever and ever? Isn't there any good left in the world?"

Miriam stares into nothin', kinda like how Grant does, 'cept unlike Grant, she answers. "Course there's good. But there's lots of desperation too, and people do crazy things when they're desperate. *I've* done crazy things, and when I'm warm and full of food and safe, I can't believe I actually did 'em. Like someone else was doin' 'em, not really me. So, if it ever does come to a vote, I say we stay right here where we're safe."

"And what happens when we run outta food and get 'desperate'? What will you do then?"

Miriam looks straight at her and says, "I dunno. But I know I'll do anythin' to survive, Kira."

"Even if it means someone else might die?"

Miriam don't answer. She's got that dead look in her eyes she gets when she don't wanna answer or don't know what the answer is. She lowers her eyes to *Return to Avalon* and pretends to read, but I don't reckon she is.

Kira turns to me. "How 'bout you, Steven?"

Oh God, why is she draggin' me into this convo? Sailin' to Avalon sounded good to me 'cause I love it here. As long as we've got some stocked food and the solars and desals work and I have my paints, I could stay here forever if the food would never run out. Kira's never been here, so all she sees is a vast ocean surroundin' a barren rock where she has to stay cramped in a dark hole with five other people. She's used to a big house with plenty of space, and I wonder if some of this desire to get away isn't so much to find her Joey or help out humanity, but to get some solitary distance from us.

I lower my pencil and say, "I don't wanna go anywhere else. I wanna stay here."

Mike says, "With the extra supplies that w-were here already, we have enough to last five months — maybe six if w-we're careful. So, maybe after the New Year, we'll have to start figuring out w-what to do next. That's only a few weeks away. Meanwhile, w-w-e stay put."

Kira's face shows she don't like this idea one bit. A few weeks isn't long, not at all, and if we were at Toad Hall and Pearl said we all had to stay put for a few weeks (like she did when Pan4 started creepin' toward us), Kira wouldn't care so much. Although, I guess she didn't totally stay put if she kept sneakin' out to meet Joey. Anyway, she cares here. A few weeks sounds like a few years to her.

She says, "Why don't we start now?"

She don't understand. We're all older, 'cept for Miriam, who's gone through ten times more in life than Kira, which makes her a lot older too, in experience if not years. We all want security. Not more adventure. We wanna be safe, even if only for a little while.

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When nobody answers her, she sighs, picks up her violin, and begins playin' softly. I return to my drawin'. Mike lies on his cot. Miriam gets back to readin', and when I'm not concentratin' on my pencil strokes, I watch her. She looks like she's into the story. I've tried to read *Return to Avalon* a dozen times, but can't get into it. It only sounds good if Pearl reads it to me.

I don't like readin' much, but when I was 'bout twelve, I was browsin' through all the books in the library and came across a kid's picture book called *The Magic Paintbrush*. Pearl told me it was a book her mother gave her when she was small. And even though I was almost a teenager, I read it. Frankly, picture books were more appealin' to me than books with tons of words in 'em.

It was all 'bout this orphan kid, Ma liang, who wanted to learn to paint so badly but was too poor to own a nice paintbrush. It didn't stop him. He practiced with anythin' he could find and got so good that his paintings were almost lifelike, and 'cause he was so diligent 'bout practicin', one day he was rewarded with a magic paintbrush. Whenever he used it, whatever he painted became real. He got famous, of course, and a wicked rich man imprisoned him and ordered Ma liang to paint him a hill of gold coins. Instead, Ma liang painted a ladder and escaped. Everyone, though, was after him 'cause they wanted to be rich, even the emperor, who you'd guess would be happy with his vast riches already. But no, he wanted more too. He made Ma liang paint him a money tree. But Ma liang was smart. He painted the tree on an island and surrounded the island with a big blue sea with a boat on it, and when the greedy emperor got in the boat and sailed toward the island, Ma liang painted a storm in the sky and the emperor drowned when the waves



devoured his boat.

Even at the grand old age of twelve, I fantasized 'bout what it would be like to have a paintbrush like Ma liang's. If you look at the sketches from my next trip to Avalon, when I was thirteen, my style looks super Chinese. Pook's Hill in those sketches is much taller and skinnier, like one of the Chinese mountains in *The Magic Paintbrush*.

My Chinese phase lasted 'til I got into paintin' portraits, which wasn't too long after we returned from Avalon. One day, I was hangin' out in the library, annoyin' Pearl while she was readin', and she finally said, "Why don't you go paint something?"

And I said, "I dunno what to paint," and she grabbed the Pater's photo and said, "Paint him." So, I did. And even though I was too old to actually believe it, I dreamed if I painted the Pater's portrait from this picture, the father Pearl and Mike and Grant knew and loved might magically come to life. Like one of Ma liang's paintings. I never truly had anybody who was like a dad to me. Mike was gone before I was born and Grant was never the dad type. Mr. Miller, who lived down the road, was more like a dad than anyone to me. Anyway, I painted lots of versions before I got it right — the one that maybe still hangs in Toad Hall if it didn't burn down.

But my paintin' of the Pater never came to life. And even though I knew it couldn't really happen, I was mondo disappointed anyway. That's when I realized Grant and Mr. Miller were as close to a dad as I'd ever get and stopped believin' in magic and stuff. It isn't true at all.

But there are real things in this world that seem magical

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to me. Like how plants can grow from little seeds and burst into somethin' glorious that'll feed you when you're hungry. Or how you can capture an image on paper with just a pencil or some paint, and the image lives for eternity. Unless, like my paintin', a fire comes and eats it up.

This place is real too. Solid. I'm happy with my fam and Miriam and Laddie. We're all safe here. We're all still alive. We're gettin' into a nice routine too. I wish Kira could see the magic in that and be happy too.

### 13

IT'S BEEN A week since Kira tried to escape in the dinghy, which means we've been here twelve days, and we've pretty much settled into a boring but oddly comforting routine.

Grant gets up every morning and finds a seashell to put on Susan's grave. I usually follow him to make sure he gets there and back OK. There's twelve shells on the grave now.

Mike shakes and stutters more and more but hasn't forgotten anybody's name yet and can still eat and chew fine and hasn't gotten any painful spasms, though he says they're bound to whallop him sooner or later.

Pearl's sciatica got better and then got worse again, and now she says it hurts so bad she has to use Grant's cane to get anywhere. She lies with her feet propped up and grumbles when we ask what's for breakfast, says why can't we make it ourselves, it's not like we're six-years old and can't use a frying pan. So, I make most of the breakfasts, and yesterday she even thanked me for it. She reads. A lot. Always the old books she lugged over here, never anything on her vid. Mostly she

re-reads *The Wind in the Willows*. She also writes a lot — she does use the vid for writing — her version of our escape to Avalon, kinda like how Kira’s composing a musical piece ’bout it. When Pearl’s in the mood, she’ll read bits and pieces out loud to us, to get our opinion on it.

Kira lies on her cot and sulks half the day and spends the other half playing her violin up at Susan’s grave.

Laddie sniffs around but looks more tired each day, like something isn’t right. That worries me. It worries Steven, too.

Steven and me clean, lug up aqua for the desals ’cause we haven’t gotten any rain yet to fill the cistern, feed Grant when he won’t do it himself, massage Pearl’s back and leg. When we can get away, we go fishing, but then we have to clean the fish when we get back, which is even more work.

I don’t mind any of this. I feel like I’m somehow earning my keep, maybe even my place in this fam. I don’t feel as bad ’bout eating part of the supplies now I’m doing practically all the cooking. But sometimes being around other people every second of the day is exhausting. Sometimes I have to sneak away to be alone. And thank God Steven understands this; he leaves me be on those days ’cause he gets that I need a bit of solitude. Kira has her secluded spot, up on Pook’s Hill by the graves, and Steven will sometimes take the dinghy out to the *Argo* to be alone or find some quiet place to work on a watercolor. If Pearl’s sciatica don’t hurt too bad, she’ll hobble out to her fave sitting rock in The Doldrums and read ’til the hard rock annoys her leg and she cusses at it and goes back to lying on the cot. Mike, when he wants to be alone, heads to Mirkwood.

I prefer the windblown seclusion of the Enchanted Place. It’s so wild and peaceful: the rocks are all red and purple and the

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sea is so blue. I like it for another reason though: it's a good lookout. The top of Pook's Hill is better, but Kira's always hogging that spot. I usually take the binoculars when I head out to The Enchanted Place. Right now, I have 'em looped 'round my neck. I stop to let Steven know where I'm heading; he's pouring aqua into the desal unit. "Goin' out for a bit."

Steven shakes the last drops from the bucket. "Takin' the binoculars again? What're ya lookin' for?"

"It's so I can scan the horizon, make sure nobody's comin' to snoop on us."

"That won't happen. Why are you so worried 'bout it?"

I hate it when people do this to me, but I answer with a question, "How would we defend ourselves if someone tried to attack us? You didn't bring any weapons 'cept that little hatchet in the storage room that, by the looks of it, can barely chop a stick of butter in two, and Pearl's knife set she uses to cook, and maybe the hammer and chisel. You could hit someone on the head and jab somebody in the eye with 'em, I guess. But you didn't bring any *good* weapons. What were ya thinkin'?"

He shrugs. "We ran outta Toad Hall before we could grab the guns. Anyway, we weren't worried 'bout war when we left home, just survival."

"Survival *is* war, Steven."

He says, "Miriam, why are you so concerned 'bout this all of a sudden?"

What's he talking about? I've always been concerned. But now... "Listen, when you guys said we were goin' to an island, I reckoned it'd be far away from civ. Then I find out we're so close to the mainland you could spit and reach it. And Kira

was willin' to steal a dinghy to get to the mainland, 'cause she could do it, it's that close. And yesterday, I saw a boat."

"What kinda boat?"

"A big boat. A ship. Headin' toward the mainland."

Steven watches the aqua start to trickle through the desal. "To Puerto de Luz, you reckon?"

"How should I know? Maybe."

"Well, unless you stand on top the cliff and wave a red flag, they aren't gonna see ya, so why would you reckon they'd stop here? There's no trace of us. You can't even see the Pater's gravestone from the sea, even though it sits way high up on the cliff. You can't see Camelot. You could sail all 'round the island and not see it. It's hidden just right. So as far as anyone's concerned, it's just another deserted island." He turns away from the desal and heads inside.

I follow him. "If we build a fire, they could see the smoke."

"We've only had a cookout once, and the solars don't give out any smoke. We're practically invisible here, Miriam. Even when the people on the mainland knew 'bout this place, back when Grant and the Pater would charter boats to sail out here, nobody cared."

"That's when people weren't desperate and everyone had a better place to stay. Maybe now they don't."

Steven picks up his paint box and the sketchbook and says, "Or maybe they do."

We leave the bunker together. I head south, and he follows me. He says, somewhat sarcastic, "Where's *your* weapon?"

The calmness I usually feel heading out to the Enchanted Place has left, thanks to his stupid questions, and I yank my knife out of its scabbard and wave it in his face. "Right here. I don't go anywhere without it."

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He takes a step back, looking a bit scared, but says, "That won't do much against a gun."

I cram the knife back in the scabbard. "Yeah, well, if I coulda found a gun, I'd have one. I'm a good shot. My mom taught me. But I don't have a gun. I only have this."

I begin clomping down the trail again, but from behind me, he asks, "How'd your mom die, anyway? Was it Pan4?"

Jesus, what the hell is with him today? Why can't he leave me alone? Don't he get that I want some time to myself? I spin 'round so fast he almost crashes into me. "Why would you ask that?"

He stops, looking like a little puppy does when you scold it. "I dunno. I was just curious."

I resume my stomp up the trail. "Well, it wasn't Pan4. She was murdered."

"Did they catch the guy?"

"I don't wanna talk 'bout it, Steven. It was the worst day of my life."

Now's the point where any sensible person would shut up, but he can't seem to do it. "So you've been on your own since then?"

"Yeah, and one thing I've found is that more people don't mean more security or happiness. Less people, no strangers, to be left alone, that's what I want. So, for me Avalon is perfect. I don't mind doin' all the work as long as I can stay right here, away from everybody."

He says, "'Cept us."

"None of you are gonna rape me or murder me in my sleep. You gonna follow me all the way to the rocks or what?"

And good sense finally kicks in, and he says, "Nope."

He heads off, and I finish my walk to The Enchanted Place. I sit on my fave perch and stare through the binoculars, scanning the horizon. All I see is blue.

Behind me, even though she's pretty far away, the sound of Kira's violin floats in the air. I love hearing the music, but sometimes it angers me, too. Don't anyone in this fam have anything better to do than play music or read or do jigsaw puzzles or paint pictures? They're just as useless as Grant, who spends his days staring into nothing. They all reckon nobody'll anchor here and accost us, but what happens if they do? Everybody's out for themselves in this world, everybody's desperate. If anybody lands here, they're gonna take what we've managed to hoard and leave us with nothing, if they don't kill us in the process. But that won't happen if we're on our guard. If we're ready to fight. Even here, on an island miles away from anywhere. You let that guard down for a second, someone else is gonna survive. Not you.

## 14

THERE ISN'T REALLY much work to do on the island We all have our chores: Miriam and me lug aqua up from the lagoon to use in the desals; Mike checks everyone to make sure we're healthy and feeds the chickens; Kira grinds beans into flour; Pearl, when she's up and movin', spends a lot of her day cookin' 'cause it's somethin' she can concentrate on and control. So, when she wants to cook, she don't want anybody buggin' her and gettin' in her way, but when she don't wanna cook, she whines that nobody ever wants to help.

Cookin' is easy. The solars provide plenty of electro for the oven and stove and crockpot. Pearl bakes bread every day,

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which tastes great, though we only have enough flour for another few weeks, then we'll have to grind wheat groats if we want bread. We eat sourdough pancakes most mornings for breakfast, topped with dried apples. We eat lots of beans 'cause they got lots of protein, and we grill fish when we can catch it. So, Pearl stays pretty busy.

We do laundry on breezy days. We don't have a machine, so we use a bucket and plunger and then hang up the clothes to dry in the wind and sun.

But we don't have to tend crops or take care of animals 'cept the chickens, so there's lots of spare time. I sketch, Pearl writes and reads, Mike plays cards and board games with himself, and Kira plays her violin. Miriam is tryin' to read, but she ends up takin' lots of walks 'round the island 'cause readin' bores her a bit, I'm guessin'. Plus, she's so paranoid 'bout someone attackin' us here. She checks the *Argo* every day with me. We putter out with the dinghy in the mornin' and sometimes at night. Sometimes, just to get away, I'll sleep on the boat since it's now anchored in the sheltered lagoon. Laddie comes with me those nights, and sometimes Miriam comes too. She sleeps in the bunk she and Kira shared on our way over. She won't sleep with me, like she did that first night we landed, when we spent the night in Camelot. I've asked her why not. I've even told her I love her.

She says, "Yeah, but I don't love you that way, Steven. Not yet."

"But when we were in Camelot..."

And she sighs and says, "That was different."

I wonder what she means. How was it different? And what about the "not yet" part—does it mean she's thinkin' 'bout it



but isn't sure yet or is she tryin' to put me off? I'd rather have a straight yes or no so I don't have to worry 'bout it, but that's not what she gives me.

I say, "Don't you ever get lonely? Ya know, for another person?"

"I guess maybe I was lonely, that night in Camelot, but not usually. Too many...bad memories there."

"What kinda memories?"

But she turns away and says "night" and crawls into Kira's bunk, and I sit at the table and sketch or paint 'cause there's nothin' else I can do.

It's still nice to know she's there though, just a few feet away. That's a comfort somehow. And when we're alone on the *Argo*, with no noise 'cept the creakin' of the ship and the lappin' of little waves, I pretend we're the only ones on Avalon, just us and Laddie, and I dream Avalon's a truly enchanted island. Maybe the island with the money tree that Ma liang painted for the emperor.

I've always wondered what happened to that island. Did somebody get to it eventually? If I could magically paint an island, I wouldn't put a money tree on it. People kill each other over money. I'd paint an island with picnic baskets hangin' from the trees instead, like in one of the Oz books Pearl read to me when I was little, always full of your fave food and a stream that gurgles out your fave drink, a place always sunny and warm where Miriam and I love each other and have happy kids who play in the pink lagoon and aren't ever afraid 'bout anythin' and never get sick.

But we've both had Pan4, at least I've had the fever part, and Mike says Miriam's probably had it even though she didn't have any symptoms. He says sometimes Pan4 messes up your

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repro. Even if Miriam and me got together, we might not ever have those happy kids.

What's super garbo is that Mike says some animals can get Pan4 too. Dogs 'specially, maybe 'cause they hang 'round people more than other animals 'cept maybe cats. It's why Laddie is movin' slower and slower, like all he wants to do is sleep, and why he don't bound 'round us and go on sniffin' sprees like he used to. Now he follows us all quiet-like and lies down and waits patiently 'til we finish whatever we're doin', and sometimes he looks up like he's a bit interested and he pants and wags his tail and perks his ears, but mostly he puts his head on the ground and gazes at us with mournful brown eyes and then shuts 'em and whines in his sleep. Mike says we shouldn't have brought him. This island is no place for a dog, and we don't have the type of food he needs, though we feed him fish when we can catch it and sometimes I sneak him a piece of jerky, though I know I shouldn't. That stuff was meant for us.

When Ma liang wanted to get rid of a bad guy on a boat, he painted a big storm with lots of waves and that person drowned. I wish I could do that for Pan4. Just paint a big storm that would blow it all away. The trouble with paintin' a storm like that here, though, is it could swamp the island and blow us away too.

I think of this at breakfast back at Camelot, while Mike takes Laddie's temperature with his med vid. He sighs. "H-high for a dog. I'm not s-sure w-what we can do f-f-for him, 'cept keep him c-comfortable."

I stroke Laddie's damp fur and say, "Is your vid still gettin' reception, Mike? Are there still dots on the mainland?"

Mike pushes a button on the vid and studies it. "Yes. They're s-still there."

Miriam says, "You see any dots out to sea? Like on a boat or somethin'?"

Mike shakes his head. "N-nope."

Pearl's hands, now pox-free, reach out and start cuttin' the loaf of bread. "Well, that's easier than using the binoculars, huh Miriam?"

Miriam gives me a worried look. "I guess."

She still don't like the idea of civ so close. She's still worried folks might head our way. But why would they? They might see us on their vids and wanna know what we're doin' out here, but on the other hand, why would they care? I've gotta figure they've got better things to worry 'bout.

Pearl says, "I'm surprised anyone's left there at all, after the Big One happened."

Later, when Miriam and me head down to the Enchanted Place, she scans the horizon with her binoculars and I work on a watercolor, tryin' to capture the cragginess of this part of the island. She don't seem as annoyed at havin' me hang out with her like she did the last time I followed her down here.

She asks, "What's the Big One Pearl was talkin' 'bout?"

I lower my paintbrush. "The big earthquake and tsunami. It wiped out half the west coast. You don't 'member that?"

She says, "Oh. Yeah, kinda, I was still on the east coast when that happened. Didn't know it was called 'The Big One' is all."

"Well, I 'member it well. It happened when I was out at sea, with Mags."

She raises her eyebrows. "Mags?"

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My face gets hot, probably looks as red as the paint I've smudged onto the paper. "Yeah, Maggie Miller, my girlfriend back then. She was daughter of the folks who owned the apple orchard."

Me and Maggie'd sailed to Avalon, just the two of us, 'cept I don't wanna tell Miriam all 'bout that. We sailed all the way out ourselves and spent the whole summer alone. We fished, we swam, we painted (she was an artist too), and made love whenever we wanted, and we could talk to people back in Cascadia whenever we wanted too, 'cause the vids worked fine then since people still lived in Puerto de Luz and had a nice, strong tower. It was the last perfect summer I can 'member. While Miriam scans the horizon again, I peek in my sketchbook to a paintin' I did on that trip. Mags stands on the cliff and stares out to sea, her long hair spinnin' over one shoulder.

I say, "It happened on our way home from Avalon. We saw this huge hump of aqua comin' toward us. First I thought it was one of them weird rogue waves sailors sometimes talk 'bout, one that comes outta nowhere and smashes down and rolls away, only it wasn't a rogue wave. It was a tsunami."

Miriam stares at me, a look of both horror and intense excitement on her face. "And ya survived it?"

"Yeah. We rolled over it and kept going, then rolled over three more like it but smaller each time, and then we didn't ponder much more 'bout it. We didn't quite realize those were tsunamis, see. We weren't sure what they were 'cause we'd never seen one before. So, it wasn't 'til we started sailin' up the Cascadia coast a couple days later that we realized somethin' was wrong. We were headin' for the Puget Sound, but none of the markers looked right, the coast was stripped clean, like

a huge nado had touched down and picked everythin' up and carried it all away."

Miriam whispers, "Wow."

"Yeah, it was the most scared I'd ever been. When we sailed into the sound, it was the same thing, like somethin' huge and hungry had cruised through before us, gobblin' up the trees and the rocks and the towns and houses."

"But it didn't get Toad Hall."

I pick up my brush again, dab some purple on it, swipe it on the paper. "No. The quake that caused the tsunamis was far enough out to sea, so it didn't rattle the house too bad, and our part of the sound is buffered by Whidbey and Camas and Lummi Islands, so the tsunami didn't do our pier any damage at all. Pearl and Maggie's mom were so relieved to see us that they cried for a week. They'd figured we'd gotten eaten by the tsunami too. We couldn't get any reception while we sailed up the coast, so we couldn't let 'em know we were OK."

"So what happened to Maggie? How come you aren't still with her?"

I say quick 'cause I don't like thinkin' 'bout it, "She died. Got sick and was too far away to get to a doctor and it turned into pneumonia. Her parents left a couple years after they buried her, went to live with relatives back east. Anyway, it was a while ago."

She says, "I'm sorry," then we stop talkin'.

She goes back to starin' at the sea with her binoculars, and I dab more color on my paintin', but I don't wanna paint anymore, 'memberin' Mags. She wasn't my first girlfriend, but I loved her the most.

I lower my paintbrush again and study Miriam as she contemplates the sea. She's so different than Mags. Mags had

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blonde hair and was a bit chubby and laughed a lot and told me all her dreams. Miriam's got red hair and is skinny and has hard, bony angles and hardly laughs at all, and besides tellin' me 'bout wantin' to be somewhere safe and away from high civ, I don't know 'bout her dreams at all.

PEARL SAYS I snore the loudest and could I please sleep on the *Argo* tonight so she can get a decent sleep, and I say yes 'cause I'd rather sleep on the *Argo* anyway. I like the gentle rockin' that sends me to dreamland, and to be honest, the mattress in my bunk is comfier than the one on the Camelot cot. Plus, sleepin' on the *Argo* means Miriam might come and sleep there too, which she does tonight.

We take some fresh bread with us for a snack, and Laddie comes too, but slowly. He drags behind us as we walk to Mermaid's Lagoon and lays his head in Miriam's lap after she helps him into the dinghy since he's too weak to jump in like he used to.

She says, "Poor thing. It's so unfair that dogs can get this stupid disease too."

I say, "I wish we had some more pills we could give him."

She stroke's Laddie's head. "I don't reckon those pills would do dogs much good anyway."

There was a time when Miriam didn't like dogs and she still don't really, she says, 'cept for Laddie who is the best dog. Sometimes I wish I'd left him back in Cascadia though, like Mike said I should, and maybe now he wouldn't be dyin'. But Miriam says he might've died in the fire anyway or gotten Pan4 from the Morlocks where the disease must be runnin' rampant now, if anyone survived the fire. Who knows?

Miriam says, “You can’t worry ‘bout the choice you didn’t make. You can’t sit there and reckon ‘what if we’d left Laddie in Cascadia?’. What good does that do? You already picked your path. You need to focus on what’s ahead, not what ya left behind.”

Pearl says some people can see things the way Miriam sees ‘em ‘cause they’re “forward thinkers” and are always plannin’ for the future, but some people (like me and Kira) always look backwards and ‘member times in our past, so for us to not worry ‘bout the choices we’ve made is as impossible as for someone like Miriam to live totally for the present and not worry a lick ‘bout the future. You can’t do it. Some of us (Pearl says) work out our problems by lookin’ back into our past, and some of us deal with life best by lookin’ way far ahead and plannin’ on how to get there.

So, on the *Argo*, while Laddie lies half on Miriam’s lap and she strokes his head with one hand and reads on her vid (she’s still workin’ her way through *Return to Avalon*), I sit across from her and say, “Do you ever think ‘bout your past?”

She says, “I try not to.”

I realize maybe I shouldn’t prod, but I ask anyway. The worst she can say is that she won’t talk ‘bout it. “Why not?”

She raises her eyes from the vid. They’ve got a hard look in ‘em, like she’s tryin’ to cut off any emotion from her voice, but she does talk. “I’ve told ya I lost my mom when I was sixteen, right?”

“Mhm.”

“She was killed by her... Well, by the man payin’ her way. She was a...” Miriam frowns, but I know what she wants to say and can’t.

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“Prostitute?”

“I’d rather say mistress. Prostitute is such a horrible word. Mom was beautiful, see. She didn’t sell herself on a street corner like some women. She had men over the years, different men. They took care of her ’til they didn’t want her anymore, then she had to move on.” She scratches Laddie behind one ear. “She never had an education. Her parents died early, and she lived on the streets. She was tough but kind. Anyway, she met a man and fell in love, but he was married. He set her up in a house and that’s where I was born. Cancer got the guy, and we had to leave.”

“How old were you then?”

“Four, I reckon.”

“Was that man your father?”

“Mom would never say. Anyway, she found someone after that, and someone after that, but each one was a little poorer and a little meaner than the one before him, and so life got harder. The last guy, Ed, was a hard drinker and had a bad temper, and he didn’t just want Mom, he wanted me too. She fought him off, so did I, but sometimes it didn’t always work...”

She hesitates, scratches Laddie so hard he yelps. “Sorry, boy. Anyway, one night, he got mad ’bout somethin’, super mad, and killed her. I don’t reckon he meant to, but he threw her against the wall. Then he turned to me, and I grabbed a knife... Well, that’s what got me thrown in jail. Eventually. Pan4 was startin’ then too, and it was scary. I thought maybe if I headed west, I’d escape it all. Got as far as Iowa before the law caught up with me.”

“How’d they finally catch you?”

She laughs. “The chip, of course. They can track me anywhere, I guess, ’cept for a while everyone was too worried



'bout dealin' with the first bouts of Pan4 to follow up on a murder of some bum. Eventually someone must've decided it was important to investigate the murder, but they didn't know who did it at first. I'd buried the murder weapon and my mom and Ed, only I couldn't drag 'em too far so the cops finally found their bodies buried in the garden. They got my DNA off the knife I buried with 'em. That's how they tracked me down and I ended up in the slammer."

"How long were you in jail?"

"'Bout six months. Then Pan4 hit Iowa and they let us go. I found...stole...the truck, and that got me close to Toad Hall. You know the story from there.

"I guess the choice to sail away with us *was* your best one then, huh? Even if they could track you to here, it'd be awfully hard to come get you."

She shrugs. "Yeah, although once they let us go, I don't reckon they can arrest us again. It was a pardon, in a way. And now" — she gives me a pointed look — "I'm done talkin' 'bout myself. Tell me 'bout you, instead."

So, instead of askin' her how she survived all the time when she was on the run before she ended up in prison, I tell her 'bout Toad Hall and farmin' and how I, like Kira, had a lot more dealings with the Morlocks than Pearl ever realized, and how they weren't all bad like Pearl thought.

Miriam says, "How'd you get the *Argo*?"

Now, I've avoided that question with my fam, mainly 'cause I didn't want Pearl to know. But since Kira's admitted to a romance with a boy from the woods, there's no point in me keepin' my secrets anymore. What's Pearl gonna do at this point? And why are we so scared of what she'll do anyway? I

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guess we don't want her to get all maniac, that's why we feel like we gotta keep our dealings with the Morlocks secret. Plus, like Kira told me after we finally talked 'bout it, it *is* kinda fun to have secrets from Pearl. Makes life more exciting.

So, I say, "I traded the Morlocks for it. It belonged to Jimmy, the guy who tried to attack ya."

Miriam looks up, surprised. "Why would he trade the ship? *They* coulda escaped on it."

I shake my head. "He wasn't reckonin' that way. I mean, the Morlocks aren't as low civ as Pearl figures. Maybe they were at the beginnin', when Bellingham caught on fire and they lost all their homes and were desperate, livin' in the woods that first winter. But now, they have a community. Might not be the greatest community, but it still is one. Anyway, I don't know how Jimmy originally got the boat, but he didn't use it much. It isn't a true fishin' boat. It's more of a pleasure boat, not too practical unless you wanna sail. And why would you fiddle with sails when you can run a motor off solars?"

"We used the sails."

"Yeah, but only 'cause I love sailin'. It's how Grant taught me and how the Pater taught Grant. The Morlocks don't got much use for a sailboat, even with a motor. They owned a couple smaller boats they kept closer to their settlement and used those for fishin', and so the *Argo*, with all her sails and stuff, was kinda unnecessary. So, Jimmy traded it to me."

"So the day we escaped, why do you reckon they all came to the pier where the *Argo* was instead of where their other boats were?"

"Dunno. Maybe the fire'd cut off the route to where they kept their other boats. I 'member Pearl was scared silly the couple

of weeks we were stockin' the *Argo*, before we left, 'cause she thought the Morlocks would raid it. But I knew they wouldn't since they were the ones who traded the boat to me in the first place. But when the fire happened, the *Argo* was probably the closest and biggest boat they could find. You can't blame 'em."

Miriam says, "No, I'd a done the same thing. What did you trade for the boat?"

"Farm supplies. A solar tractor that'd gone wonky but Jimmy said he could fix. Grant coulda fixed it in a jiffy, but he was too zombie, so I told Jimmy the tractor did us no good, it was an extra. And I traded him some chickens and a pig. That was 'bout eight months ago, when Mike first came up with the idea to go to Avalon. Then we had to convince Pearl."

Miriam leans back in her chair. "And how'd you do that? She didn't seem at all happy to leave."

I laugh and say, "Mike told her Pan4 horror stories 'til she finally agreed. First, she said we could lock ourselves in Toad Hall and ride it out. But he told her how quick the zombie stage was, and that finally did it. It took a hell of a scare to get her to agree 'cause she hated the thought of leavin' Toad Hall."

Miriam nods. "She's lived there all her life."

"So have I, so has Kira. But we were both ready to get the hell outta Cascadia. Go somewhere different."

"Kira had another idea in mind, though."

"Yeah, to go east. Now we know why she wanted that. Anyway, we also figured if we could make the arrangements ahead of time, like findin' a good ship, then Pearl wouldn't have as much to argue against. We finally convinced her, but only after we had the ship."

"How'd you explain suddenly ownin' a ship to her?"

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“I told her I found it abandoned. Not sure if she believed me or not, but I reckon she *wanted* to believe it. She’s never questioned me on it, which is weird for Pearl, who usually grills you on everythin’.”

Miriam says, “I don’t get why all of you are so scared of her.”

I give this some thought before I answer. I suppose we are scared of Pearl. Scared of her moods, maybe. Scared of disappointin’ her by doin’ somethin’ she don’t approve of. But I say, “We’re not scared of her. I reckon *she’s* scared of a lot. That’s when she tends to go maniac, when she’s stressed ‘bout somethin’. So, we try to protect her from that.”

Miriam frowns. “You’re wastin’ a lotta time and energy *protectin’* each other from reality. You’ve all been so sheltered in that house, ‘cept maybe Mike, and you’ve made up your own skewed reality and are more afraid of messin’ up the fake reality than dealin’ with the real one.”

That rankles me a bit. “It was Mike’s idea to come here, and he’s seen more of the world than anybody.”

“Yeah, but Mike is like me. He wants to escape it all. He’s had enough of other people. The rest of you though, you’ve never had any real dealings with other people, not really, not holed up in that fortress you lived in. Pearl’s made up her own reality of what the world is like, and she’s decided the whole world outside Toad Hall is all bad. And you all buy into that idea ‘cause it’s easier.”

I say, “No. Both me and Kira have done stuff with the Morlocks, haven’t we? Anyway, we all chose to come here, in the end, even Kira. She coulda gone off with Joey’s fam, but she didn’t. So, I don’t see why it matters if we chose this ‘cause of real experiences or made-up ones.”

She shrugs. "You're right. Whatever everyone's reasons were, we're all here now. Now we gotta decide what to do next. When the time comes."

## 15

IT'S A BOAT night. There's a full moon out. Steven and me sit in the cockpit, and he points out constellations as we lie on the cockpit benches. Laddie lies on the deck between us, whining softly in his sleep.

I ask Steven if he had any girlfriends after Maggie.

He stares into the sky, a soft smile playing on his lips. "Just one, June. She was a Morlock I met a few years after Maggie died."

"How'd you meet her?"

"It was on my first foray into the woods to make contact with 'em. They'd taken over an old subdivision of abandoned houses. Some were black with fire damage and some were totally burned to the ground, but a few only had mold and weeds creepin' in after bein' un-lived in for so long and the Morlocks cleaned those houses up. It almost looked like a normal little village, 'cept everyone stopped and stared like I was Bigfoot when I walked in. Anyway, the first person to come up to me was June, and she asked me if I was from 'The Big House', and I said, 'Toad Hall?' which made her laugh, and I had to explain it to her, 'cause she'd never heard of Wind in the Willows. She could read, she said, but never had time for it."

"Not many people do nowadays, I guess," I say. "People are more concerned with livin', not readin'."

"Well, anyway, June was the sister of Jimmy, and their fam had escaped from a house close to Bellingham when it'd gone

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up in flames one summer. They only meant to stay in the abandoned subdivision a couple days before movin' on. But they kept trekkin' back to their old house, hopin' to salvage things, and next thing you know, winter hit and they huddled down in the woods and somehow lasted through the cold. Even though they meant to start their trek east, they never did. They just kept scroungin' by. They'd lived there 'bout a year when I met 'em. June and me started seein' each other. She had a temper and yelled a lot, and I never was in love with her like I was with Maggie, but I didn't let her know that 'cause after a while it seemed the best thing to do was to keep seein' her so I'd have an excuse to trade things with the Morlocks, unknown to Pearl."

"What kinda stuff did you trade?"

"They wanted food mostly, 'specially that first year. They scrounged for parts and fixed things, like tractors and solars and stuff. Jimmy'd fix our truck when it needed it, and I'd give him some chickens or apple cider or taters. I hired a couple of 'em to help out with the farm once or twice. You know, pickin' apples and plowin' and stuff."

"Pearl never caught on?"

"She must've seen 'em but never said anythin'. Maybe she was pretendin' then too."

"Pretendin'?"

"Like ya said before, 'bout how we were all livin' in a fantasy world. Maybe Pearl saw the workers and pretended she didn't. She knew we needed to get the harvest in, and sometimes only me and Kira could do it, sometimes Mike if he was visitin', and Pearl only when she wasn't laid up with her sciatica. Grant helped before he went all zombie. But we still needed workers. So, she pretended she didn't see the Morlocks. Pretended they weren't there."

Boy, I still don't get why Pearl thinks the way she does. "So the Morlocks are some evil race from an old book Pearl read, right? Why can't she call 'em Wood People or somethin'? Why does she hate 'em so much to name 'em Morlocks?"

"Dunno. Pearl made up her mind everyone livin' in the woods was evil and schemin' and up to no good. But I don't know *why* she decided that. I never thought they were so bad. I felt sorry for 'em, when we had to leave 'em on the pier."

Not me. "You shouldn't feel sorry. It was either us or them. Anyway, that Jimmy...he'd a done bad things to me, if he coulda."

Steven reaches down and scratches Laddie's ears. "I never said he was the greatest guy. He knew how to fix a truck, though. I do hope they all made it through, even Jimmy."

I sigh. "I guess humankind needs all the players it can get."

And I don't know what makes me do it, but I take Steven's hand and squeeze it, and we sit for a long time, staring at the stars and holding hands.

## 16

IT'S RAINING HARD out there this evening, so instead of sneaking off to the *Argo*, Steven and Miriam are with us in Camelot, and Pearl, Miriam and I are playing poker. Grant's asleep, snoring lightly. Kira's in the supply room with the door shut, talking in her vid to Joey.

I say as I deal out the cards, "You know w-what w-we need here? A w-w-well."

Pearl picks up her hand. "Good luck digging it." She makes a funny grimace at her cards. She doesn't have a good poker face.

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I listen to the rain clatter on the roof. At least it's filling up the cistern. "I m-mean, there w-was a s-s-spring here at one point, r-right? So, there m-must b-b-be an aquifer d-down below, w-with f-f-fresh aqua. We just need to t-tap into it."

Steven says, "With what? This island is all rock. That's why we never bothered in the past. It'd take way too much effort when it only takes a few minutes to haul aqua from the spring."

"Yeah, b-b-but now we d-d-don't have the s-spring."

Steven studies his cards. "We couldn't have predicted that."

I inwardly cringe as I stare at my horrible hand (king, jack, five, four, deuce). "We s-s-should've. R-rising oceans isn't a n-n-n-new thing. It's been g-going on for d-d-decades, and s-s-springs d-dry up all the t-time. Anyway, if w-we had a well close t-to Camelot, w-we could p-p-pipe in f-fresh aqua."

Pearl says, "Well, we don't."

Miriam puts down three cards. "Isn't the cistern piped to the sink?"

I deal her three more. "Yes, b-but the c-c-cistern d-doesn't g-g-give us a c-continuous s-s-upply of aqua. And w-w-hen it's dry, it d-doesn't s-s-s-s-apply any at all."

Miriam picks the cards up and studies them, her face still as stone.

Steven says, "Two for me." His steady fingers reach across the table to take the cards I throw toward him with my spasming ones. Steven picks up his card, and his eyes widen. Another person with a horrible poker face.

Pearl glances at me over her cards. "How you feeling, Mike? Your fingers look like they're shaking a lot more."

"They're b-b-beg-g-ginning to ache a bit t-t-oo. Not t-t-oo b-b-b-bad though, n-not yet."



“Your stutter is worse,” Miriam says.

I throw down three cards, keep the king and jack, and deal myself three more. A queen (yes!), a ten (good), and a six (ugh). Keeping my voice as neutral as possible though I already know I’m going to fold, I say, “It’s g-g-getting h-harder, y-yes.” I’m uncomfortable with this whole conversation, so I say, “G-g-going back to t-t-he original t-t-t-opic, if G-grant had a w-w-w-orking b-b-brain right now, he could r-rrig up a w-w-w-ell, I bet. T-t-t-oo b-b-bad the s-sspring is g-g-gone.”

Miriam looks up from her cards. “Is it really? I mean, sure *that* spring is gone, but don’t aqua usually find the path of least resistance? Couldn’t the spring pop up somewhere else if the sea is pressin’ down on the spot where it used to be?”

I smile. “You’re r-r-right, M-miriam.”

“We should search in the bushes,” Steven says. “We might find another spring back in the brambles, somewhere in the brush.”

Pearl says, “Well, it’d be nice if we didn’t have to always use the desals. Steven, it’s your go.”

Steven throws a few chips into the pot. “Fifteen.”

I say, “High r-r-roller,” and fold.

Pearl raises, Steven calls, but Miriam wins with a flush. Damn good poker face.

I shuffle the cards. A couple of them break free from my spasming hands. I corral them back into the deck and try again.

Miriam says, “Had any more puzzle dreams lately, Mike?”

“N-n-o. T-t-there’s one p-p-p-piece left and it w-w-w-won’t f-flip.”

Steven fiddles with his poker chips, stacking them in piles. “The top half of the person?”

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“Mhm.”

Miriam says, “I bet it’s me. I’m the only one wearin’ jeans in this hothouse.”

I deal out the cards. “It’s g-getting cooler, though. W-w-we m-might all be p-p-pulling on jeans by T-t-thangsg-giving.” I pick up my hand and ponder it. Two aces, two kings, a three. Finally, something decent.

Pearl says, “Speaking of Thanksgiving, it’s only a couple days away. What should we do for it?”

“We could eat a chicken,” Miriam suggests.

Pearl frowns. “I’d rather have the eggs.”

Miriam throws a couple cards down. “They aren’t even producin’ eggs though, are they?”

“Not yet, but they will, once they’ve settled in. You gotta give ’em time to acclimate.”

I study my hand. “W-w-w-here are the ch-chickens now, anyw-w-way?”

“They’ve migrated down to Mirkwood, mostly,” Steven says. “More bugs down near the swamp. They come back up for corn, though. I’ll take three cards, Mike.”

Miriam stares stonily at her cards. “Don’t seem much point wastin’ corn on chickens that don’t produce eggs. I vote we eat one for Thanksgivin’.”

I throw Steven his cards. He frowns at them and says, “They’ll start producin’, and we’ll be thankful for the eggs ’fore long. The bags of corn we brought aren’t meant for humans to eat anyway. They’re chicken feed. They’ll last a few more months, if the chickens can supplement their diet by eatin’ bugs.”

Pearl says, “They’re still looking fat. The heat seems to agree with ’em.”

I throw only one card down and pick up another. “W-w-we can have fish for Thanksgivin’.”

Steven sighs. “Fine. I’ll go fishin’ again tomorrow.”

Kira walks outta the supply room in time to hear this last part of the conversation and groans. “I’m sick of fish.”

I say, “At l-least they’re out t-t-t-here to catch. W-we should be th-h-h-hankful for that.”

We fall into silence. I win the hand with a full house. Finally, something going right in my life.

## 17

IT’S THANKSGIVIN’ TODAY, accordin’ to Pearl’s calendar, so she’s makin’ somethin’ special. Well, special fish since nobody’s takin’ Miriam’s advice on killin’ a chicken. She’s cuttin’ up a pumpkin for pumpkin pie too. We’re down to one small jar of cinnamon, though—no other spices—so it’ll taste mostly like sugary squash.

It’s quiet now, early mornin’, and I can hear Mike snorin’, but I can’t sleep anymore ‘cause Miriam is shakin’ me awake.

She whispers, “Laddie’s gone.”

I mutter into my pillow, “Maybe he’s with Grant.” Laddie usually shuffles out with Grant when he does his mornin’ climb up to Pook’s Hill with his seashell for Susan’s grave.

Shakin’ me harder, Miriam says, “No, Grant’s back already and Laddie isn’t.”

So, I get up and pull on my shoes and follow her outside, into the sunshine. The ground’s wet with rain, and we follow Laddie’s muddy tracks north, on the path toward Mirkwood.

I say, “Wonder why he went this way.”

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Miriam says, "I don't like it, Steven."

I don't either 'cause I know animals like to go off by themselves when they're ready to die. My tum turns to ice, my throat gets all clogged, and tears try to squeeze outta my eyes, so I walk faster and try not to let Miriam see.

Laddie's trail disappears when we're halfway through Mirkwood, and we backtrack a bit and find where he's left the path and dragged himself into the undergrowth. It's hot and muggy here and swarms of little flies spin 'round our heads like they're tryin' to figure out what we are. We shoo 'em away and plunge off the path, pushin' through the brambles and muck, but we don't have to go too far. Laddie lies in a pool of burblin' aqua, fur matted with mud, eyes closed, tongue hangin' out like he's tryin' to take a final drink. Near him, in the thicket, lies a chicken carcass, half-eaten, buzzin' with gnats.

Miriam lets out a strangled sob. I got my eyes glued to my dog as I lean down to pick him up, but I can hear her gulp and sniffle behind me.

She says, "He s-shoulda d-died peaceful, where it was dry and he had people 'round him who l-loved him. Not out here all by himself."

I can't speak. My throat has closed completely. I hold my dog and rub his drippin' fur. The drops fall into the burblin' trickle below him.

*Burblin'.*

I almost drop Laddie before I get hold of myself and lay him carefully on a drier spot, then turn back to the pool.

Miriam says, "What're you doin'?"

I don't answer right away. My heart, which had cried in misery a minute ago, now laughs. I cup my hand and reach

out to a little above where Laddie's body lay, fillin' my palm with aqua and bringin' it to my lips. Then I turn to Miriam who stares at me like I've gone completely mad. "Sweet."

Miriam says, "What?"

"Not salty. Fresh, Miriam. It's the spring. You were right, it *did* pop up somewhere else. Laddie found the spring."

Miriam says, "So did the chickens."

I turn to look at the half-eaten carcass lyin' close to the spring. It's a few days dead by the looks of it. Before he got too weak, Laddie'd managed to catch at least one and have a feast. Looks like the remains of Sir Galahad. Well, at least one of us got a good chicken dinner.

We walk back to Camelot in silence. I hold Laddie against my heart; Miriam follows. I can hear her snufflin' as we walk. Somethin' 'bout her cryin' lessens my own sorrow, like she's cryin' for the both of us. I almost feel like I'd be intrudin', if I cried too. I don't think Miriam cries over anythin', if she can help it. She's too hardened by the world. So, to hear her breakin' down over Laddie—a dog she was scared of when she first met him—seems kinda holy. Precious. Somethin' I don't wanna interrupt.

The others are sad but not distraught, not like me and Miriam. Kira gets off her cot and gives Miriam a hug. Mike sighs sadly, but he knew it was comin'. Pearl looks relieved, like now she has one less thing to worry 'bout. Grant don't have any reaction at all.

We bring Laddie's body up to Pook's Hill in a procession. I carry him. Miriam hoists the spade over her shoulder like a soldier carryin' a gun and tromps behind me. Kira follows, playin' her violin softly, and Mike, Pearl, and Grant shuffle

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in the rear. We make our way to the Pater's tombstone. Grant has already placed his daily seashell on Susan's grave, addin' to the mound of shells there now.

Miriam says, "Where should I dig?"

Pearl says, "Why don't we bury him in the patch that's already dug up?"

I say, "But it isn't near the other graves."

"It's close enough. And it'll be easier to dig there."

So, Miriam lugs the shovel to the cleared spot and shoves it into the soil. Kinda feel like I should do the diggin', Laddie was my dog after all, but somehow he's become more Miriam's, and she seems set on doin' it. I've decided, even though it sounds kinda morbid, to capture the scene in my Avalon sketchbook instead. Kira is the musician for the funeral, so she leaves us and sits on her rock and begins to play. It is nice, havin' music fill the air. Grant perches on the rock next to Kira, and I could swear he sways a bit to the music as she pulls her bow across the strings.

The scene is a perfect one for sketchin'. Lots of color in the sky and clouds. Blues and purples and grays, Miriam bendin' over the sandy yellow dirt, a glimpse of blue waves out to sea behind the waverin' yellow grass. I sketch the scene and start to fill in the colors, listenin' to the violin and murmurin' from Pearl and Mike who talk in low voices as they watch Miriam dig.

She suddenly stops diggin' and says, "What the hell?" She drops the shovel, sinks to her knees, and starts to scoop the dirt with her hands.

Pearl says, "What's up, Miriam?"

Miriam jerks her hand back, a sick look on her face. Mike sidles over and stares at what Miriam's found.

He says, "Holy s-shit, S-S-Steven, it's an arm."

I drop my pencil and scoot over to see, and it *is* an arm, mostly bone. A chunky ruby ring dangles off a half-decomposed finger.

Pearl whispers, "Fuck."

I shift my gaze to Grant who sits next to Kira still swayin' softly to the music she's no longer playin', his eyes focused toward us but not seein' us. He's fixed on some point beyond us, somewhere up in the sky. Maybe somethin' not even in our world, somethin' so far away in space and time that we could never see it even if we had eyes like an eagle. Or maybe he's starin' at the rain clouds movin' our way.

Miriam says, "He's gotta know somethin' 'bout this."

Mike has dropped next to Miriam and digs with his hands too. "Here's the h-head."

I can't help but look. The combined sight of that arm and wisps of gray hair clingin' to a skull (the flesh is there in bits too) is enough to make me drop my paintbrush, stumble into the tall grass, and heave up my breakfast. I take a deep breath and force myself to rejoin the party.

Miriam glances at me. "You got puke on your chin."

"Sorry." I wipe it off, but between that image and the fresh bits of face Mike has dug up outta the dirt, it's enough of a gag-inducer for me to turn right 'round again and stomp away a few feet, where I can listen but not see.

Mike says, "Careful around t-t-the f-f-face. Ow."

Pearl says, "You OK?"

"Yeah, just a s-s-pasm, but it's not too bad yet. W-wish I could keep my hands steady enough to d-d-d-dig without disturbing the b-b-bones." He talks cold, clinical, like a doctor. Stammerin', but still a doctor.

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Guess that's one way to handle the ickiness of this. I force myself to turn 'round, enough so I can at least glimpse everyone but keep my eyes averted from the corpse. It's weird. I can gut a chicken and skin a cow but can't stand the sight of that...thing.

Miriam says, "I don't reckon we can tell what killed him."

Mike says, "I m-might if I can get a g-g-good look at him."

Kira, who has left the rock, wanders past me to gawk at the grisly remains. "But why is he buried *here*?"

Pearl says, "Grant must know. He was here last."

Kira says, "We *reckon* he was here last. Don't mean he was."

Mike says, "Unless you can g-g-get him to talk, w-we'll never know for s-s-sure." He's silent for a minute, then, "L-look at t-t-this."

I can't stand it, I gotta look. I take a couple strides toward the group who are now pretty much blockin' the corpse with their bodies. "What is it?"

"His s-s-skull. It's g-got a b-b-b-bullet hole going t-through it. Or s-somethin' s-s-harp d-dug into it. S-s-see?"

I force myself to look and can see a big hole, which could've been made by anything, but then Miriam, who's diggin' to the left of Mike says, "Definitely a bullet," and pulls a rusted shotgun outta the dirt.

I recognize it. Grant always kept that shotgun on his boat. I glance at Grant. He sits on his rock like nothin' is happenin' down here. There's no way I can believe soft-spoken, kind-hearted Grant could ever have shot anyone, but...

I say, "Any bullets in it?"

Miriam checks. "Nope."

Kira says, "So who killed him? Or her?"

Mike says, "H-him, I b-believe."



Pearl says, "It can't be Grant. Just can't be."

Miriam frowns. "Could someone else have done it? From the mainland, say? Killed him and buried him here?"

We all look at each other. Pearl sucks in her breath. Kira stares at her fingernails, now crusted with dirt. Mike raises a shakin' hand to his forehead and wipes a trickle of sweat off his brow. Me, I'm cold inside, like someone gutted me and packed my hollow shell with ice. The idea of a stranger pokin' 'round Avalon is terrifyin'.

Pearl says, "I vote we take the Scarlett O'Hara approach to this."

We all nod in agreement, 'cept Miriam who says, "The what?"

Pearl laughs. "C'mon, you can't tell me you've never seen *Gone with the Wind* on your vid or something. No? Well, Scarlett's approach to everything was to worry about it tomorrow. That's what we oughtta do now. We've got bigger things to worry about. Like burying Laddie proper, for one. And worrying about how this person got here later."

We meet her suggestion with uneasy silence, but Miriam stands and begins to dig a grave near the corpse.

I say, "No."

She stops. "What?"

"We aren't buryin' Laddie here, not near this stranger. We'll bury him where he belongs, near the Pater and Kira's baby. It'd be too creepy to leave him here."

So, Miriam carefully covers the dead body with dirt and we all move to the top of Pook's Hill where the ground is stonier and harder to dig but friendlier, surrounded by fam. When she's done, I pick up Laddie, who we can't see anymore 'cause he's wrapped in a bedsheet (Pearl didn't wanna "waste" one

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buryin' a dog, but we made her let us have it), and place him gently into the hole. Miriam covers him up.

Then Grant stands and walks to the Pater's tombstone and taps on it with the chisel.

Pearl says, kinda sharp, "Who brought the chisel and hammer?"

I shrug.

Miriam gives her a blank look.

Mike says, "G-guess G-grant must've g-g-gotten 'em outta the toolbox b-before we came up h-h-ere."

Pearl looks mad, like puttin' the name of a dog on the Pater's tombstone is sacrilegious or somethin'. But why not? Laddie was part of our fam, and he died here so he deserves it. Makes me wonder though, what if we all end up dyin' here? Who'd carve the last person's name? And what 'bout the person we just reburied? Maybe his name should be on here too, whoever he is.

We wait 'til Grant is done. Perfect, block letters spell LADDIE. There's an awful lot of heat behind my eyelids. Tears slide down my face, or is it rain? I blink hard and watch the drips fallin' from the sky and say, 'cause I can't come up with any other eulogy, "He was a good dog."

Miriam whispers, "The best dog."

IT'S A BOAT night.

Thanksgivin' was a bust after all that drama. I mean, what are we thankful for? Laddie dyin'? Us stranded on this rock, down to only three chickens – Billina, Chicken Little, and Henny Penny are now safely caged in a coop I cobbled together with the boards stacked next to the bunker – and not knowin' what's gonna happen to us once we get low on supplies and

have to leave? Thanksgivin' is an old holiday, and I'm all for ditchin' it after this year. 'Specially if we're stuck eatin' fish again since now the remainin' chickens are too precious to eat. The only good thing to come of Laddie's death is that we found the spring, although it's too shallow to be good for much. You can't collect aqua from it, but I reckon if the desals conk and we're all dyin' of thirst, we can lie there and lap it up like Laddie and the chickens did.

I kinda wanna be alone tonight, to remember Laddie and not have to talk to anyone, but Miriam comes with me. Ridin' out in the dinghy without Laddie lyin' at Miriam's feet, his head restin' on her lap, don't seem right. Miriam's face looks drawn and dry, and she hunches over in the dinghy's stern.

She says, "It sucks, gettin' attached to somethin', then it leaves ya."

"Have you ever had a pet, or was Laddie your first?"

She shakes her head. "No pet of my own. Mom's boyfriends had dogs and cats sometimes, but they were never mine. Guess Laddie wasn't really mine either."

I say, "Well, you were definitely his," which maybe isn't the right thing to say 'cause a tear slides down her cheek.

She bites her lip and brushes it off.

It don't take long to get to the *Argo* now she's moored in the lagoon. When we pull up beside her, Miriam reads the letterin' I painted on the side and says, "Why'd you name it the *Argo* anyway?"

"Pearl's idea. First, she wanted to call it *Pequod*...not sure if you've ever read *Moby Dick*..."

"Nope."

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“Me neither, but that’s the name of the ship in the book, but then Pearl decided against that idea ‘cause the *Pequod* gets ripped apart by a giant whale, which was askin’ for trouble. Then she thought of the *Nautilus*, but that’s more of a submarine name, so then she went back to ancient Greek times and decided on the *Argo*. That boat apparently makes it through all its adventures and becomes sacred and the gods turn it into a constellation. So, Pearl figured it’d be a safe bet.”

Miriam says, “She’s mondo superstitions, isn’t she?”

I ponder this while I jump onto the *Argo*’s deck. “Not sure if superstitious is the right word, but she sure has her own ideas ‘bout how things are supposed to go.”

Miriam passes me the dinghy’s rope. “She lives in a fantasy world.”

“I guess. But we all do, kinda.”

“Not as much as she does. Why else do you reckon she names everythin’ after stuff that don’t exist? All the parts of Avalon, even its name, are called after make-believe places. Do you believe in God?”

I have to ponder again, since she switched the topic so fast. “I guess. It’s nice to believe that somethin’ created all the pretty stuff in the world.”

She says, “What ‘bout the ugly?”

I don’t know what to say, so I shrug.

She says, “Mom told me once that God and religion are only worthwhile if they help ya get through the things you struggle with. So, people always skew how religion works to fit their own issues. That’s why nobody can ever agree on anythin’.”

“Do you believe in a god?”

She shrugs. "I wanna believe somethin' out there is lookin' after me, but I don't really believe it. We're on our own. And I don't believe in religion. Too many bad people take advantage of your beliefs to make me wanna trust in it. Better to make up whatever works best for ya and leave it at that."

I say, "Like Pearl's done?"

She smiles. "Yeah, maybe so."

We tie the dinghy to the *Argo*. I turn 'round, expectin' to grab Laddie and lower him down the stairs before I 'member he isn't there. I head to my bunk instead and climb in.

Miriam follows me. "Can I stay with you?" she says.

I try to figure out what "stay" actually means. Does she want me to just hold her, or somethin' more? Then I scoot over 'cause who cares what it means as long as she wants to actually sleep with me?

She climbs into the bunk, puts her arms 'round me, and buries her head into my chest. "Promise you won't leave me like Laddie did."

I say, "I promise," 'cause I know it's what she wants to hear, even if someday it might not be true. Who knows whether any of us'll live or die, or who'll go first? But she don't wanna hear any of that right now, so I don't say it. Instead, I say, "I love you."

Even though she don't answer, she hugs me tighter, and that's good enough for now.

## 18

THE FIRST AND only time I visited Avalon was when Dad died. I was ten. Mike was in college on the east coast and Grant was

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trying and failing to run Dad's company in Seattle. It was right about the time Pan3 crawled out of the jungle where it had hidden, a couple years away from hitting North America but creeping into some towns farther south. Some borders were closed, so Grant decided to sail Dad's body from Toad Hall to Avalon instead of attempting to fly. Dad's old Cessna was pretty kaput anyway. It was more a backfield decoration than something you'd actually try to fly. I kept Dad's urn under my bunk during the voyage to Avalon and would talk to him at night and read him stories.

Grant and Noah dropped Mike and me off at Avalon before sailing to Puerto de Luz to pick up the tombstone Grant had ordered from this old stonecutter he knew. It ended up taking all three of 'em—Grant, Noah, and Mike—to manhandle that heavy thing up to the top of Pook's Hill. Nobody called it Pook's Hill then, of course, except me. I'd explored the island with Mike and named all the parts. I'd just read *Puck of Pook's Hill* by Rudyard Kipling, which was the first book that kicked off my fascination with mystical stories of knights and fairies and King Arthur's court. As soon as I got back to Toad Hall, I pulled down the big leather-bound book of Shakespeare and began reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which Kipling's story was loosely based on. Then I moved on to *Idylls of the King* and *Le Morte d' Arthur* and *The Fairie Queen*—any book about King Arthur I could find and devour in the library.

But on that day, Pook's Hill sounded cute to me. Mike thought it was corny.

"You know, kid, Dad picked that spot to be buried in for eternity. Couldn't you name it something a little more dignified than Pook's Hill? What does that mean anyway?"

“It’s part of the fairy world,” I said. “It’s magical. Dad’ll be part of that now.”

I was a little too old to believe in fairies, but part of me wanted so bad for this spot — this whole island, actually — to truly be a magical place. And those first couple of days on Avalon, when I was so relieved to be off the damn boat, it did seem like a bit of paradise. After a while though, I longed to return to Toad Hall. But the first time I climbed to the top of Pook’s Hill and saw that stunning view, with the waves crashing on the rocks and the sunlight sparkling on the blue sea, I truly thought this island might be the long-lost Avalon of myth and legend. For a few glorious moments, I believed it. And burying Dad on that hill was like putting King Arthur to rest in a holy spot. Like this place was where we were all destined to spend eternity, hidden and protected from the evils of this dark and cynical world.

But somebody else — someone not a part of our fam — has beaten the rest of us to it. And only one person can tell us who the dead man in that grave is, and that’s Grant.

I haven’t told anyone about my ability to talk to Grant. Sure, once in a while he spouts out nuggets of wisdom the others can hear, but he talks to me in a different way. All I have to do is hold his hand. The others already figure I’m a bit psycho, especially when I get into my maniac state that, as far back as I can remember, I’ve never successfully controlled, so I’m not telling them about this. Plus, now I’ve gotta worry about the whole possible zombie thing. I keep waiting for something to happen, some bodily change that’ll alert me to it, but all I feel is tired, which Mike says is natural after the pox. I get itchy — the pox marks have started to dry and scab — and I still have

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to deal with all the sciatica crap, but nothing has happened to make me believe I might actually go zombie. Except for maybe this sudden, inexplicable ability to understand what Grant is thinking.

When I grip his hand, or when he voluntarily reaches out and grabs mine, I swear we communicate. Not in physical words, but I can hear him plain as day. Sometimes after we let go, I wonder, is my own subconscious making this stuff up? Is the first stage of Pan4 zombie a crazy, psychological connection with other zombies? Sometimes, when I clench Grant's bony fingers, I hear nothing 'cept my own breathing, but other times, his voice floats through my mind with such clarity. It's been like this ever since I came down with Pan4. He's let me into his thoughts and told me things. Things you'd reckon he couldn't possibly know.

That day when we found the body, Thanksgiving Day, after Steven and Miriam scooted off to the *Argo* and Kira dropped off to sleep still clutching her vid, and I heard Mike start to snore, I sat next to Grant, who was propped in a chair at the table, staring at its wooden top. I took his hand in mine and shut my eyes. Then, my mind filled with swirling shadows, all black and gray, and somewhere hidden in those shadows I found Grant. The Grant I grew up with, the Grant I remembered, the one who talked me through all my problems when I was a kid, who listened when I complained about all my childhood woes. The older brother who guided me through the most trying time in my life. His normally limp hand warmed, his knobby fingers squeezed mine – softly at first, then tighter – and suddenly he moved away from the shadows, though he was still a shadow himself but white, stark against the writhing black shapes.



*"Pearl."*

*"Grant. Tell me what happened. Who is in that grave?"*

He didn't reply in words, but a shape popped out of the shadows – blurry but somewhat recognizable, a hunched shadow with a pointed nose. Then it swirled back with the others. Grant's hand loosened its grip and fell dead in mine, and the shadows flitted away. I opened my eyes and let go. He was done communicating, and it was pointless now to ask for more. I watched my brother's face. His eyes were closed as if the effort of connecting with me had worn him out. A soft snore escaped his lips.

I stood, clenched his flaccid hand, and whispered, "C'mon, Grant. Time for bed."

He stood and shuffled with me, eyes closed, and lay on his cot. I draped his blanket across his bony frame and moved away.

Ever since then, I've thought about the shadowy figure with the pointed nose, then I remember the ruby ring we found on the corpse's finger, and it's finally clicked. I know who the dead guy is.

And if Mike is right and that guy was shot to death, did Grant do it? Could my gentle brother have possibly done such a terrible thing?

I wish I could grab Grant's hand and force him to tell me, but that isn't how it works. Patience. I hope eventually he'll tell me everything. Until then, I have to wait.

But while we're in the Doldrums – Miriam and me – washing clothes with a bucket and plunger because the one major appliance someone should've installed in this fortress but didn't was a good washing machine, I say, "I know who's in that grave."

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Miriam forces the plunger up and down in the bucket. "Who do you reckon it is, then?"

"Noah Brody. Grant's old lover."

Miriam stops plunging. "Grant's gay?"

I twist a pair of Steven's underwear, watching the liquid stream out of it. "Yeah. He'd been with Noah for years, went to high school with him. They were the two most opposite people you'd ever meet. Grant was always an introvert, would rather work quietly on his projects, and Noah was talkative as hell. Argumentative too. Always wanted everything done his way, and Grant always gave into him. I don't know what Grant saw in Noah 'cept maybe Noah had all the extroverted virtues Grant desperately wanted but just didn't have. Anyway, you never saw one without the other until... Well, they broke up when I was a teenager and I haven't seen him since."

I suddenly want to cry. A huge lump sticks in my throat, blocking the rest of my story from escaping my mouth. I take a deep breath. "Anyway, when Grant took our old boat and came to Avalon, he must've taken Noah with him too."

"And then shot him," Miriam muses.

I shake out the underwear and pin it to the clothesline we strung up along Camelot's eaves. "I can't believe he'd do that."

"Somebody did."

Mike shuffles out of the bunker, leaning on Grant's cane. He's still moving, thank God, and it's well over a month since he's had a pill.

"You doin' OK, Mike?" Miriam says.

"C-c-c-ramps in the l-leg. Ugh, P-p-p-pearl, n-n-now I know w-w-w-what you'v-v-v-e been going t-t-through."

I help him to a Doldrum rock. “The stupid thing we did before we left, among a lot of other stupid things, was not to stock the *Argo* with extra canes. I had one at Toad Hall I was gonna bring, but when the fire happened and I couldn’t find it right away, I panicked and left it.”

“I r-r-reckon there’s a l-l-l-l-lot of t-th-hings we’ll f-f-f-ind w-we f-f-f-orgot. Or c-c-could’ve brought but d-d-d-d-idn’t.”

I sigh. “Like more books.”

Miriam laughs at this. “Why do you need books? You can read all that stuff on your vid, can’t ya?”

“It isn’t the same.” I don’t expound further. Her question doesn’t bug me half as much as it would’ve a month ago—I’m getting used to her now. But how can you explain to a young person, especially one who isn’t much interested in reading, what it’s like to hold something so heavy and comforting as a real book, to get a whiff of the pages, the ink, the mustiness? It isn’t so much about reading as it is living it. You can almost *feel* the story you’re reading when you smell the leather and hear the crisp turn of the page. You can’t with a vid. Trouble is, they hardly make books the old-fashioned way anymore. Libraries like we have at Toad Hall are getting rarer and rarer.

“Pearl says she knows who the guy in the grave is,” Miriam tells Mike.

“W-w-w-ho?”

I perch on the rock next to him. “Noah.”

I watch Mike’s eyes widen. He gives me a searching look. “I r-r-r-remember he l-liked w-w-w-earing f-flashy r-r-r-rings. L-like t-the r-r-r-uby on the d-d-dead man’s f-f-inger. I’d n-n-never h-h-have r-r-r-r-ecognized that corpse, t-t-hough.”

“Me neither,” I say. “There wasn’t much recognizable left.”

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“So how do you know you’re right?” Miriam says.

Well, I’m not gonna tell her I took Grant’s hand and saw a vision. She’ll laugh, and I’ll get all annoyed with her again. So, I say, “I remember the ring.”

A ruby ring. Oh, I remember that ring now, all right. I can’t believe I didn’t recognize it when it was clinging to the corpse’s skinless, bony finger. Denial, maybe.

Mike stares thoughtfully at me, then moves his gaze to the sky. I look up too. It’s a nice day out, not too hot, a bit breezy. Some threatening clouds poke their heads over the horizon, but they aren’t anywhere near here yet. I hope they stay away. The last few weeks since Thanksgiving have been rainy as hell.

Miriam dumps the last batch of clean but sopping wet clothes on a rock. “Almost done, once we wring these out.”

I’m glad for a change in subject. “Why, oh, why didn’t I bring that old fashioned clothes wringer, Mike? You remember, the one Steven found stuffed way back in the hayloft when he was a kid? We kept it on the porch ‘cause it looked so cool and vintage. Now I’d give anything for it.”

Miriam laughs. “At least you brought a lot of clothes to wear. I don’t have nothin’ ‘cept one change.”

I reach out and give her shoulder a comforting squeeze with a sopping wet hand, and she flinches. Still not used to compassion, or maybe she isn’t happy about me drenching her shirt. I drop my hand and turn to Mike. “What about you? Anything you wish you brought?”

He laughs feebly. “M-m-more blue p-p-pills.”

“You’re not degenerating as fast as you thought, though. You’re still up and moving. Still talking and making sense.”

“S-s-tut-t-t-er’s a l-l-l-ot w-w-orse.”

“Well, it’s to be expected, I guess.” I try to sound upbeat even though he can probably read through my fake cheerfulness in an instant. Doctors *invented* false optimism. “Anyway, my back’s felt fine the last few days, so you can use the cane all you want.”

“W-w-w-ish I d-d-dddd...” He trails off, tears of frustration oozing out his eyes.

“Didn’t have to, I know. Well, as long as one of us needs it at a time, we’ll be all right.”

Miriam grabs a pair of shorts and squeezes the fabric between her strong hands. “What ‘bout Grant? Isn’t it his cane?”

“He don’t need it,” I say. “Grant could probably jog around the entire island if he wanted to.”

“So, what do you reckon happened to his lover? You figure Grant shot him?”

“I can’t quite believe it, but I guess you never know.”

“Kinda hard for him to tell us though, if he never talks,” Miriam says.

I don’t respond. What can I say? Grant could tell me, but he hasn’t. I switch topics. “Gonna be Christmas soon.”

“W-What s-s-s-should we d-do for it?” Mike says.

I pick up another article of clothing and twist it around my hands, the warm aqua clinging to my arms and dripping off my fingertips. “Well, let’s see. We don’t have any presents, but we can make a decent Christmas dinner. Then in the afternoon we usually read *A Christmas Carol*— Damn! We don’t have the Dickens.”

The contented cheerfulness I’d felt suddenly vanishes, and a dark gloom seeps in, like the gray clouds sweeping in across the horizon, beginning to blot out the sun. That heavy leather

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tome with its ancient smell always made Christmas feel like Christmas, and now we don't have it. Now it's sitting neglected on a shelf with all those other glorious books I couldn't bring.

"Do you have it saved to your vid? We can read it that way," Miriam suggests.

I shake my head. Why would I have *A Christmas Carol* on the vid when I had the most perfect version of it in that book?

Mike puts a shaky hand on my shoulder. "W-w-w-e c-can s-still m-make g-g-ingerb-b-b-bread m-men. D-don't f-f-f-orget that."

"Well, OK, we can still make cookies," I say. "We'll cut those out and bake 'em Christmas Eve."

Miriam frowns. "How're you gonna make gingerbread men if we don't have any ginger?"

"W-we do," Mike says. "W-we've g-got s-some g-g-g-inger p-p-p-pills left."

Now it's my turn to frown. "Can we use those? Will they work?"

"T-they s-s-s-hould. T-t-they're j-just s-s-solid-d-ified g-g-g-inger."

Miriam smiles, though she looks as skeptical as I feel about this idea. "Sounds stunno, then. I 'member havin' somethin' like that when I was a kid."

Mike puts down the shirt he's wringing and rubs his hands. "It'll t-t-ake up all t-the g-g-inger and white f-f-f-lour, t-t-t-hough."

I ponder this for a minute, then wonder if at this point it matters. I decide it don't. "So what? We don't have enough ginger pills left to use for a trip back, and we still have a couple bags of wheat grouts, so we might as well make the last of the white flour into something fun."

Miriam says, "Or...should we really waste all our flour on some old holiday that don't mean nothin' anymore?"

"It *used* to mean something."

"What, 'zactly?"

I sigh. "I guess it gave us something to hope for."

"We'll be hopin' for more flour before too long. Among other things."

We finish hanging the clothes in silence as the dark clouds creep in and cover the sky. The rain begins to drip down as we hang the last piece.

"Damn," I say. "I'm so sick of rain. I'd be happy if I never saw rain again."

"Well, the clothes'll be rain-fresh anyway," Miriam says. "C'mon, Mike. Let me help you inside."

## 19

WE'RE ALL CRAMMED in the kitchen working on Christmas dinner – me, Kira, and Pearl – when Pearl suddenly slams the bread she's kneading onto the table and yells, "Damn!"

She says it with such vehemence that I automatically reach for my knife in its scabbard.

Kira stops rolling out gingerbread dough, a fearful, wary look in her eyes. "What?"

Pearl shakes her head and lets out a rueful laugh. "Sorry. But I'm still so pissed I didn't pack the Dickens. Can't believe we don't have *A Christmas Carol*." She goes back to kneading the bread. "It won't feel like Christmas now."

"Well, don't scare me like that, Pearl. It isn't gonna feel like Christmas anyway, with it bein' ninety degrees outside," Kira

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says. "Anyway, I have *A Christmas Carol* on my vid, in case you can lower yourself to readin' it from that."

I move my hand away from the knife, understanding Kira's sudden fear. I feel it around Pearl now too, that nervous dread, waiting for one of her maniac bouts to suddenly take hold. I reach for the cookie cutter with a shaky hand. They've left me the fun of cutting out gingerbread men since I've never done it before. We made the dough with almost the last of the white flour, almost the last of the molasses, all the ginger pills, and no eggs from our egg-boycotting chickens.

Pearl is frowning at Kira's vid suggestion, but she don't look maniac. "Reading Dickens on the vid isn't the same as reading a leather-bound book. It won't smell right."

Kira laughs and shakes her head.

"What's *A Christmas Carol* exactly, anyway?" I ask.

Pearl stops kneading and shifts her weight off her cramping leg. "It's the best Christmas story ever written, by the greatest novelists of all time. We always read our fave parts at Christmas. It's a tradition."

"Well, I've never heard of it, but then again, we didn't have any Christmas traditions. Didn't really celebrate it. My birthday's the same day, so Mom made sure we celebrated that instead."

"We should've baked you a birthday cake with the flour instead of the gingerbread men," Kira says.

I smile. "No, these are cute. Besides, I'm not much on tradition. Never had any to miss, I guess. It's nice to get to share yours."

Pearl gives me an almost tearful, mothery kind of look. It's taken her a while, but I think she's getting used to me now.



She almost looks like she wants to reach over the table and hug me, but is afraid I might use the cookie cutter as a defensive weapon. And it would be weird to get a hug from Pearl. But not totally repugnant, I don't guess.

"How'd we end up bringin' these, of all things, anyway?" Kira says, staring at the cookie cutter in her hand.

"These are family heirlooms," Pearl says.

Kira frowns. "They're rustin'. Out of all the things we needed, Pearl, and didn't have time to pack, and you packed these. Somethin' we'll only ever use once a year."

"You'll be happy when we have a stack of scrumptious gingerbread men. Anyway, I couldn't leave 'em. Dad used 'em when he was a kid, and Grandma Rogers way before any of us were born, and I've used 'em every Christmas since my mom taught me how to bake. No way I was gonna spend Christmas without 'em."

"We won't be able to use 'em next year if we have no flour," Kira murmurs. "Where do you reckon we'll be by then?"

Pearl gives the dough an extra hard knead, then plops it into the Dutch oven for its final rise. "Let's not focus on that now. Let's try and have a happy Christmas."

"I still reckon we should eat a chicken," I say. "It'd be much tastier than fish."

"Chicken was the Christmas Day tradition at Toad Hall," Pearl says. "Way back, we used to eat turkey at Christmas. Somewhere along the line we switched."

I find myself smiling and feeling sad at the same time. "Mom used to always make my fave food on my birthday. Mashed taters with lots of butter and choco cake."

"Not together, I hope," Pearl says.

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Well, whod've believed that? Pearl actually making a joke. My smile turns into a laugh.

"Well, you did have a tradition, then," Kira says. "Not a Christmas tradition, but a birthday one."

I take a sip of aqua to stop the laughing. "I guess so."

"Well, we don't have any taters left," Pearl says. "The crop was bad this year. But we do have one more acorn squash we need to use before it goes bad. I can mash it up."

"We don't have any butter, though," Kira says.

"No, but we've got sugar."

Kira laughs. "You're turnin' Miriam's mashed taters and butter into a pie, Pearl."

I can't help it—the laughter bubbles up again and explodes out of my throat before I can contain it. I spurt aqua all over the place. Kira starts screaming with laughter, then so does Pearl, and it morphs into one of those snorting, side-aching affairs where you can't stop laughing until you start hiccupping (which is even funnier) and you're doubled over with cramps in your tum. I'm laughing so hard, for some uncontrollable reason, that I finally have to hold my hands over my ears to shut out the sounds of the other two because my sides are now killing me.

Steven bursts into the kitchen. "What the hell is so funny, and why'm I not involved?"

His interruption breaks the curse and calms us, because as much as he wants to join in, you can't force yourself into an uncontrollable laughter session. You have to be involved in it from the beginning. God, that felt good. I can't remember the last time I laughed like that. I reach for him and give him a hug and kiss on the cheek.

“We were talking about traditions, Steven,” Pearl says between hiccups. She turns to me. “Sorry we can’t keep up with yours. No chocolate to be had, I’m afraid.”

I take a deep, steadying breath. “That’s OK, Pearl. My traditions ended a long time ago. Haven’t thought ’bout my birthday since Mom died. Maybe from this point on, we can make some totally new traditions.”

“Well,” Kira says, “at least you had your mother for a good long time. I didn’t know mine at all.”

Pearl gives her a hurt look. “You’ve always had me, you know.”  
“Sorry, Pearl. But you know what I mean.”

I lay the last gingerbread man down and slide the pan into the oven. “What ’bout you, Pearl?”

Pearl takes off her apron and puts on the tea kettle. “My mom died when I was six. She lived at Toad Hall originally ’cause she was Mike’s tutor, but later she married Dad. Then one day, she disappeared.”

I frown. “I thought you said she died.”

“She did, but I had a hard time wrapping my head around that concept even though Dad and Grant both tried to explain it to me. You have to understand, I never saw her body. They thought I was too young and didn’t take me to the funeral. So, I figured maybe she went out on an adventure, like in all the stories she used to read me. At least three times a day I’d go out on the front porch and wait, hoping I’d see her trudging up the road.”

“But you never did,” Kira, who must’ve heard this story a million times, says.

Pearl sighs. “You know, I haven’t thought about my mother for a long time. She died when I was so young.” She wipes

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her brow, looking like all those feelings of loss and frustration and sorrow were suddenly crashing over her in one big wave. “Finally, Dad took me to the church to see her grave. That’s when I realized she wasn’t coming back.”

“They should’ve let you go to the funeral,” Kira says.

“Grant said Dad thought it’d upset me too much. Anyway, all I have of my mom are early memories, but they’re very distinct. I remember she laughed a lot. She had soft brown eyes and skin that shined like burnt copper when the light hit it right.”

“How poetic,” Kira says.

“What was her name?” I ask.

“Jade, like the green stone. Once I asked her why she was called Jade, and she told me that in China, where our ancestors come from, jade represents truth and loyalty and intelligence. Oh—” and suddenly tears ooze out of her eyes, “—I remember her, still young and alive then, and I was five years-old, I think, leaning against her, breathing in her calmness, her goodness, her sweet scent, and I asked her, ‘Why am I named Pearl?’ And I remember, clear as day, she laughed and touched a string of pearls around her neck and said, ‘I named you after these.’”

Oh damn, why am I crying now? I can feel the teardrops forcing their way between my eyelids. I don’t want any of them to see me like this. I especially don’t want Steven, who stares at me now, studying my reaction, to see my tears. But I can’t help it. I’m remembering my mother, too.

Pearl wipes her eyes and says, more steadily now, “I remember reaching my little fingers up to touch the shimmering pearls. Five hung on the necklace. The end pearls were white, the pearls next to them were pink, but the large one in the middle was a shimmering blackish-gray, and that was the one I touched.

And Mom said, 'Is that one your favorite?', and I said yes, and she told me it was a good choice. White pearls were symbols of happiness and pink pearls were symbols of love. But a black pearl represented wisdom. And that, my mother told me, was the rarest gift of all."

"Was it wise to come here though, do you think?" Steven murmurs.

Pearl rubs her eyes again and laughs. "Time will tell on that one, I guess."

"What happened to your mom's pearls?" I ask. "Do you still have them?"

"No," Pearl says. "They buried her with them still around her neck. The only thing I have to remind me of my mom is *The Wind in the Willows*. I guess it's why, out of all the books I could've grabbed before we left, I went for that one."

## 20

I FIRST READ *THE Wind in the Willows* when I was five. I'm sure I must have learned to read the normal way, with short, kid-friendly, one syllable word books, but I don't remember those. What I remember is a story set in a faraway country, long ago, told from the perspectives of a rat, a mole, and a toad.

Most five-year-olds would still be looking at picture books and mouthing out their A-B-Cs, but I began my letters when I was only two, or so Mike says, and I was reading anything I could grab with my grubby little hands by the time I turned three or four. Dad had stocked a whole library shelf with kid's books when Grant and Mike were young, so I had plenty to choose from. By the time I was nine and Dad was slowly fading

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away, I'd read *Black Beauty*, *Old Yeller* — which completely traumatized me, as did *My Friend Flicka* — and scores of other books. I oddly chose animal books as my main reading materials, although I don't remember ever being incredibly interested in animals, only the fictitious kind. We had plenty of real animals on the farm, cows and goats and pigs and a dog or two running around, but I never was much of either an outdoorsy or an animal person. The grunting, grumpy pigs frightened me. The mooing cows, which I sometimes helped milk, intimidated me with their size. One kicked me once, and I've never forgiven the entire species for that humiliation. The goats annoyed me with their baaing and climbing on top of anything that moved or didn't. The only animals I even remotely could stand were my pet cat, Moppet and the chickens, maybe because I enjoyed hunting in the hay for their eggs.

Our Avalon chickens, however, stubbornly refuse to lay us one egg. We're down to two chickens because Chicken Little somehow disappeared. We have no idea what happened to her or how she wriggled free from the coop. Steven brought up the horrible idea that the other chickens might've eaten her, but I don't believe it. I see no bones or feathers, and as much as Steven and Miriam have searched the island, they haven't found a trace of her.

The other two are too big to escape, so at least we can keep an eye on 'em. I'm beginning to reckon Miriam is right though, and we should kill one for Christmas dinner. But I hold out some hope that the diminished flock — can you call two a flock? — might someday provide us with little balls of nourishment.

No such luck today, though. Our traditional Christmas breakfast is always French toast, but we can't make French

toast without eggs. We also always draped greenery along the walls of Toad Hall. I made the mistake of mentioning we should have something green to make Camelot feel more festive, and Steven and Miriam promptly tromped down to the lagoon and brought back strands of slimy, stinky seaweed, which they draped over everything.

I survey their work. "Not exactly holly and mistletoe."

They both giggle like school kids, finding the smelly seaweed funny.

Steven says, "This is island Christmas decoration, Pearl. New tradition."

"It is too bad we don't have a tree, though," Kira says.

"Don't give 'em any more ideas, please," I say, laughing. "They'll chop down one of the pines near the Enchanted Place and lug it in here, if you say that too loud."

Steven laughs too. "OK, I promise we won't get that crazy, Pearl. Besides, we don't have presents to put under a tree, or nothin' to decorate it with, so what's the point?"

He's happy and has been happy for a while, and the reason is obvious. Miriam and him are a couple, at least that's what it seems like from what I'm observing. She's shy about being too demonstrative with him in front of us, but he isn't. If she'd let him, he'd hug and kiss her in front of us all the time. He's got *his* Christmas present. I try not to let it worry me. It's natural he wants to be with someone and Miriam is the only someone around, but I can see this ending in heart-break someday. I've tried asking Grant what he thinks, but the subject must not interest him because he's never given me any opinion on whether he believes their hooking up is a good or bad idea.

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I'm also guessing that Kira's not too happy about their blooming romance. She's lost her love, but Steven's found his, and in her mopey, teenage way, she don't reckon it's fair. She's trying to be grown-up about it, but right now, watching him surreptitiously give Miriam a hug and Miriam trying to squirm out of it, her face tinged pink with embarrassment, Kira's pout deepens, making her look like she's six again and has realized she's not gonna get the Christmas puppy she wanted.

She turns away, a disgusted frown on her face. "What do we have to make it at least *feel* a bit like a normal Christmas?" she says.

"We have sourdough crepes for breakfast," I say.

Kira groans. "Totally untraditional. Where's the French toast?"

"We have no eggs for French toast. These crepes have extra cinnamon and some dried apples and brown sugar. They even smell Christmasy."

Kira rolls her eyes but sits at the table as Miriam brings out the crepes.

"Well, Merry Christmas everyone," I say, though nobody looks excited about it. Frankly, neither am I. Nothing we're doing makes this day much different than the last two months.

"Oh, and h-h-happy b-birthday, M-M-M-Miriam," Mike says.

"Hey, that's right!" Steven says, finding this a good excuse to give Miriam another hug. "Happy birthday!"

Miriam's embarrassment visibly deepens. She almost looks ready to slap Steven and crawl under the table. "Thanks. But it's no big deal." She slides a few crepes onto Kira's plate.

Both elbows propped on the table, Kira pokes at her crepes with a fork while resting her head on her other hand. She emits a hopeless sigh.



I sigh too, but more of an exasperated one. "Dammit, Kira, I order you to act festive."

"No," she says.

Ooh. I realize she's a moody kid, but come on. It's Christmas. It might be our last one, for all we know. Yes, maybe we're all forcing this, but at least we're all trying to put a good spin on the day. "Can't you at least pretend to be pleasant? For the rest of us?"

Kira answers by throwing down her fork. She stands and, with a big, fat tear oozing out of one eye, marches out, slamming the heavy door behind her.

"P-p-poor k-kid," Mike says.

I stand and head for the door. I'm not mad at Kira. I understand what she's gone through. "I'll go talk to her."

"Finish your breakfast," Steven says. "She can't go far unless she tries to steal the dinghy again, but Miriam and I pulled it way up the beach. No way she can drag it into the lagoon by herself."

I grab Grant's cane. "No. She needs someone now."

I hobble out the door and head up the path to Pook's Hill. Ten to one, that's where she's gone, to brood on her rock at Susan's grave. The muscle in my calf whines, but the pain eases as I climb. The leg likes going uphill. Downhill is where it starts screaming.

Pook's Hill depresses me, especially when I spy the seashells Grant meticulously places on the graves. A nice little pile covers the baby's grave now and a handful cling to Laddie's. Some shells are beautiful and whole, some are fragments, but each piece represents each day since the inhabitants of those graves took ownership. If you counted 'em, you'd tally

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twenty-eight pieces on Laddie's grave. Almost twice that many on Susan's.

And none on Noah's grave. Not one.

Kira sits on her rock, one leg tucked under her, curly hair spinning around her face in the breeze. She stares at the shells mounded over Susan's grave. I hobble up to the rock and perch on its edge.

"I don't want you here," she says.

"I know you don't, but I also know what you're going through. And I'm sorry, truly I am."

She turns to face me. I expect anger flashing in her eyes, but all I see is a dull resignation. "You can't know. You've never had a baby. Never had to bury it."

I take a deep breath, reach out, and clasp one of her limp hands. "That's where you're wrong, dear. I did have a baby. I had to bury it. And..." I gaze at Dad's tombstone, sparkling in the sunshine. "I had to bury it knowing I was the one who killed it."

Her eyes are unblinking, unbelieving.

"I guess you never had much reason to go to the old church," I say. "The one up the road from Toad Hall."

She gives a short laugh. "How could I? You never let me out."

"Yeah, but you went out anyway, didn't you? Out in the back of the church is an old cemetery. Long abandoned, grown over mostly by weeds, and the tombstones are pretty old, but there's one stone that... Well, I guess it's pretty old now too. It's near my mother's grave. It has the name I gave my baby on it. Ruby."

Kira's face turns ashy and she stares back at me in silence for a moment, then says, "I have seen that grave. With Joey.

I 'member wonderin' whether she was related since her last name was Rogers. But I didn't see a date on it, so I wouldn't have known. What happened?"

I turn and focus on Dad's tombstone. "I was young...younger even than you. Fourteen."

Kira's eyes widen. "Fourteen? Who was the father?"

I turn my gaze to the open sea. "Noah."

Kira shakes her head, looking puzzled. "But he was with Grant, right? Wasn't he gay?"

"Noah was a lot of things," I say.

Kira has a frown on her face now. "Did he...force you?"

I turn to her. "I don't know, Kira. I reckon I knew what he wanted. I thought it would make me grown up. He was living with us then, him and Grant. Dad had died and someone had to stay with me, and Grant and Noah were it. Mike was off, of course, fighting the latest pandemic. Anyway, Noah convinced me I should get rid of it. Didn't have to convince me that hard. I was scared silly when I told him I thought I was pregnant. Was scared Grant would find out. Pretty sure Noah was scared of that too, 'cause as quiet and kind as Grant is, he could let Noah have it when it mattered. Noah was a typical bully, if you ask me. Picked on people as much as he could but was terrified of getting put in his place."

"So, what happened?"

"Noah...he gave me something to...expunge it, I guess. Made me incredibly sick, almost killed me. I shouldn't have trusted him, shouldn't have taken it, but...well, I was scared, you understand. That little baby wasn't even real, not in my mind."

I stop talking. I have no tears for this anymore, it's a story to me now, a memory, but way back then, the guilt I felt after

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I made the decision to drink that concoction of Noah's — the guilt took forever to finally leave. I atoned for what I'd done by raising Steven and Kira, by devoting myself to their care. Grant felt so bad about the whole thing when it came to light that he found the stone for Ruby and taught himself how to chisel names into marble.

Kira squeezes my hand. I'd forgotten she was holding it. "So...is that why Grant and Noah broke up?"

I take a deep breath. "Oh, yes. Grant kicked him out, and that was the last time they talked 'til..."

Kira says, "'Til they sailed off to Avalon and Grant came back all zombie."

"Yes, until then." I still don't understand why Grant would've willingly met back up with Noah, would've taken that horrible man all the way to our sacred spot. "Anyway, that's all in the past. We buried the baby in the church graveyard. It was already abandoned, the church, but we buried her there anyway."

"Did you ever visit her grave?"

"When I was younger, yeah, I'd visit a lot. But I stopped after a while. Hadn't visited her at all since the Morlocks moved into the woods."

She pulls her hand away from my grip, picks at her fingernails for a minute, then says, "Why'd you never tell me 'bout it?"

"Dunno, Kira. I'd like to say because it was too painful, but by the time you came along, it wasn't. It was almost forgotten. Not..." I bite my lip, trying to put it so it don't sound so damn flippant. "I still think about her, what she'd be like if she'd lived, but what I miss most, if I'm being honest, isn't her. She wasn't even fully formed, she wasn't ever alive...but me not having her to mother. That's what I was mostly sad about. But

then Steven came and later on we found you, and I guess it fulfilled the empty part in me enough so I put the idea of her to rest. Or maybe it was 'cause she was mine, my own secret, and that was precious. I didn't want to share it with anyone."

Kira turns toward Susan's grave. "All I could think today is this woulda been her first Christmas if she'd been born alive and healthy."

I nod. "I remember my first Christmas after. I thought the same thing. How I should hang a stocking for her too, have some presents under the tree."

"Is this why..." She turns to me. "You know, after what happened, after you found out 'bout me and Joey, I kept expectin' you to ream in on me, chew me out, give me a lecture, but you never did."

I squeeze her hand. "No point in lecturing you after the fact."

"They weren't all bad," she says. "The Morlocks. They were just tryin' to survive, like us."

"They were desperate, though. You can never trust people who are desperate."

She kicks at the sandy soil. "We're all desperate, aren't we? Even at Toad Hall, we didn't live normal. How normal is chainin' up the place so nobody can get in?"

She's trying to blame me for that, although I wasn't the one who put up the fence. Grant did. "Kira, if you want to sit here and cry, that's OK. I understand. But it won't change things." I give her a hug, then stand. "I'm gonna head back and finish my Christmas crepes."

She gives me a weak smile. "Save mine. I'll be there in a bit."

I move off, heading down the slope to Camelot. As I approach the bunker, I pass the chicken coop where Billina and Henny

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Penny huddle in one corner, both clucking and staring in fascination at something, almost like they're afraid of it. I bend down and peer in.

Lying in the far corner, right under a ray of light piercing between the slats, is a perfect brown egg. A tiny, wonderful, Christmas miracle.

"Well done," I say to Billina, knowing she lays the browns and Henny produces speckled eggs. "Well done, and Merry Christmas to you both."

## 21

HEY, SUSIE. WELL, I guess this would be your first Christmas, if you were here with us. I wouldn't have had many presents to give ya, but I guess you wouldn't care, bein' a little baby and all. It's weird—I miss you. But you weren't really even a person yet, were ya? I keep thinkin' 'bout what Miriam says—'bout how Pearl makes up fantasy stuff and pretends like it's real 'cause it's more comfortin' to go through life in a fantasy than in reality.

In my mind, Susie, you've got blond hair in ringlets like your daddy. And you're laughin' and runnin' through the fields behind Toad Hall, maybe with a dog like Laddie barkin' and runnin' after ya. And that's fake, right? 'Cause none of it could happen. You wouldn't be blond, you'd be dark skinned and black haired, probably, like me. You wouldn't ever run through the fields at Toad Hall 'cause they're burned to a crisp now, I'm sure. So, it's all just a dream. But when I think of you like that, happy and playin' like a normal little kid, I'm comforted. I wonder if Pearl feels that way too, when she thinks of Toad Hall still standin' and perfect, like she does.

And what must she have dreamed 'bout, all these years, when she thought of her little Ruby? Ruby'd be an adult now, probably right around Steven's age, if she'd lived. Does Pearl wonder what Ruby'd be doin' now? Probably sailin' with us, I guess, if she never left Toad Hall, like how Steven and I never left. It's weird thinkin' that Pearl was young enough once to have a baby, even one she was scared to have. Makes me wonder if she ever wanted somethin' different than livin' at Toad Hall. In all my sixteen years, she's never wanted to travel anywhere. Maybe because it would've taken her away from the graveyard where her baby is buried. Or maybe all the fantasies she made up were kinda like travelin' – she could go to other worlds but never had to leave Toad Hall.

Anyway, Merry Christmas. I guess I'd better go back and join the others before Steven eats all the gingerbread men. I'll talk to you later, my sweet Susie.

## 22

I'M NOT A sailor. Grant was, Mike is, Steven definitely is, even Kira likes it. Miriam's become ridiculously competent. But me, I always avoided boats as much as possible, especially after that first miserable voyage to Avalon. I never made the trip again because I absolutely hated the boat ride there and back – days and days of rolling seas and crappy food and puking over the sides. And when we arrived, my dreams of palm trees and beautiful sandy beaches and days of exploring the island, maybe even hunting wild pigs like in *Lord of the Flies* (which I had recently read) vanished. The island was puny – a dot in a vast ocean. If you stood on the high cliff, you could see all

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of it. The pink lagoon was nice, as were the pretty palm trees lining it, but Noah and Grant were too busy talking and fighting that trip, and Mike was all morose about Dad dying and spent most of his time moping in Mirkwood. They wouldn't allow me to fool around in the lagoon by myself even though I'd had swimming lessons since before I could walk and couldn't ever drown in the placid lagoon. They wouldn't let me explore the trails down the cliff or out into the swamp or to the tidal pools for the same reason—I might get hurt and with no adult present, what if I stumbled and fell into the pounding sea and couldn't call for help?

They did say I could hang out in the island's flat part, where they built Camelot, but I found nothing interesting in the flat part, which I promptly dubbed The Doldrums, because it was so damn boring. Most of that trip I ended up lying on a blanket or perched on a Doldrums rock, reading.

I'd never wanted to sail back to Avalon after that trip. Not once, not in over forty years, did I have the desire to return to this pile of rocks.

Now it almost feels like home.

The tide has gone out enough for a sliver of beach to appear, and we sit on blankets and munch on gingerbread men. And while it don't feel quite Christmasy, eating gingerbread men in the bright sunshine while Kira and Miriam splash in the sparkling lagoon lulls me into a happy stupor.

"What are we gonna do with our one egg?" Steven says. He watches the girls—Kira's somehow coerced a reluctant Miriam to participate in a splash fight—and he's smiling a bit sadly, probably missing Laddie and his love of frolicking in the lagoon.



I'm brushing Grant's hair. It used to be silky and smooth, but I've neglected it and it's all gnarled and sticky with salt. He sits stock still, not even wincing when I wrestle the comb through a particularly stubborn tangle. I glance at Steven. "Maybe we should wait, see if they lay anything else. Why aren't you swimming with the other young uns?"

Steven laughs. "I'm not nearly so young as they are. Plus, I already swam out to the *Argo* and back this mornin'. Reckon I'll head over to Mirkwood and clear some more area 'round the spring. Make a better path."

"It's Christmas. You're supposed to relax, not work."

"All the days are the same, Pearl. We're just eatin' different food today. Nothin' else is different." He laughs again. "'Cept maybe our seaweed decorations."

I grin. "Fine. Off with you."

Steven turns to Mike who's propped against a tree stump, half asleep. "Wake up, Mike."

Mike opens groggy eyes. "W-w-what?"

"Go for a walk with me? It'll do ya good."

Mike's lips twitch into a frown. "S-s-sorry, don't f-f-f-f-f..." He stops, mid stutter and groans.

I scootch over to him. "Where does it hurt?"

"Ca-ca-ca-ca..." He stops again. A tear of frustration rolls down one cheek.

"Can't talk," Steven whispers. "It's gettin' harder for him, haven't ya noticed? Yesterday he hardly said anything."

"He was fine a week ago," I whisper back. "Well, not fine, but he could at least get out sentences."

"C-c-can h-h-hear you," Mike blurts, but his face drains as he gets the words out and his breath comes out in a harsh rasp.

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"I'm sorry, Mike." I rub his trembling fingers. "I guess it's starting now in seriousness, huh?"

He nods, leans back against the stump, and closes his eyes.

I pat his hand and reach for Kira's vid. "Tell you what, I'll read some of *A Christmas Carol* to you."

Mike keeps silent, but Steven says, "What 'bout the rest of us? That's tradition. We're all supposed to read it together."

"You've heard it a million times, and you'd rather go work, so go. Every time we do read *A Christmas Carol*, you're the one who gets all squirmy and rolls his eyes first anyway, just waiting for it to be over with."

He shrugs. "I can't help it. It takes all day to get through that thing, even when you skip parts."

"Well, off with you. I'm gonna at least read some choice passages to Mike. Super condense it."

Steven frowns, but he don't have the heart to buck tradition. He sits on a towel and helps himself to a gingerbread man. Miriam and Kira amble up the beach, dripping and glowing, and sit too. And as the lagoon's little waves lap on the shore and a gull somewhere high up circles and screams, and a warm, salty breeze caresses my cheeks, I read.

"Marley was dead, to begin with..."

Miriam bites the head off her gingerbread man and says, "Oo is Ma'ley?"

I lower the vid. "Good lord, Miriam, at least let me get a few pages in before you pepper me with questions. Just listen."

"Sorry," Miriam says, chewing on her cookie and grinning.

I take up the story again. We eat gingerbread men and relax in the sun and even Mike, after a while, smiles in contentment, forgetting his pain as we follow Scrooge on his journey to redemption.

That night I dream of ghosts. I usually do after reading *A Christmas Carol*, but they normally take on the shape of the ghosts in the story – Jacob Marley in chains, clomping through the foyer of Toad Hall; the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come brooding and full of malice, skulking around the chain link fence; the Ghost of Christmas Past floating in through the library window. These new ghosts don't look like that. They look like the shadows in Grant's head. Swirling and ominous. Even though they have no faces, I have no doubt they're evil. Malignant.

I wake drenched with sweat, shaking. It's hot as hell in here anyway, so the sweat could be from that, but it's a cold, shivery sweat. My left calf twinges violently.

"Damn you," I whisper at the leg.

Spasms are the worst. The dull, charley horse ache I get is far more tolerable. That goes away if I lie down, but I can't relieve the spasmic jolts. All I can do is wait until they decide to stop. Across the room, Mike snores in spurts and fits. Darkness shrouds Kira, but I'll bet she's sleeping dead like usual. Only a foghorn blast directly in her ear will wake her up when she's seriously zonked. Grant sits, ghostly still, on his cot. He's got his head turned my way, and I can see his eyes sparkle in the darkness.

"What're you doing up?" I whisper. "Is it morning?"

You can never really tell when morning hits until light seeps under the door. Grant designed Camelot to withstand hurricanes and Lord knows what else, so he deliberately left out windows that would require glass.

He stands and slinks to my cot, creaks to a sitting position on the cold, hard floor, and slips his hand into mine.

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I sink into my pillow, close my eyes, and forget about the spasming leg as the shadows wash over me. They whirl in a flickering red and yellow fog, and I think, *“Grant, where is this?”*

Then the red and yellow congeal and I can tell it’s a fire but not raging and devouring like the fire that tore through the apple orchard and chased us to the pier. Instead, it hovers in one spot and the shadows swirl around it, and somewhere in the distance I see a tall mountain looming into the night and realize that the bright, dancing, red and yellow colors are a campfire.

Sitting around the campfire are shapes, but I can’t make out who they are. Somehow, I reckon they might be us, but not all of us, and some might not be us at all.

*“Who are those people? Where are they?”*

But the scene swirls away and the shadows fill my head, and Grant’s hand goes limp in mine. I blink and turn to face him.

His head lolls against my cot, the long gray braid swinging gently against the draping blanket. He snores, now fast asleep.

I can’t help but wonder, was that something that happened in the past or something that’s yet to occur?

NOAH MOVED INTO Toad Hall when I was thirteen, three years after my one and only trip to Avalon. That was when Pan3 roared through Cascadia like a fire rushing through a dry forest. It burned through quick and clean. Grant and Noah put up the fence, and we barricaded ourselves in our little kingdom and came out unscathed. Grant and Noah worked from Toad Hall. When they weren’t busy working on their projects, they turned their attention to the farm. It had suffered from neglect since Dad died, so they spent time fixing it back up into a functional

working farm. Grant figured it was the only way to make sure we had a good supply of food if the pandemic didn't end quick.

The only folks we had any contact with were the Millers. We helped 'em harvest their apples, and they toiled with Grant and Noah in our fields. Mrs. Miller taught me how to can fruit and make jam and cook, stuff Dad and Grant could've never shown me. We had a housekeeper until right before Dad died, but then she left for the east coast. She'd hated kids anyway so I always avoided her. I spent more time with the Millers than I did at Toad Hall sometimes, and it was nice to be among females, both Mrs. Miller, who was the closest replacement to my mother I'd ever have, and little Maggie, who crawled around and got in everyone's way.

When I wasn't hanging with the Millers, I was ensconced in our library, reading. This was about the time I tackled *The Faerie Queen*. This extraordinarily long poem consisting of seventy-two cantos was difficult for anyone to get through, let alone a thirteen-year-old, even one who liked to read. But I was determined to finish it. The poem was all about knights fighting bad guys. Even King Arthur was in it, combating foes and rescuing damsels in distress. Each knight had a virtue, like temperance or holiness or friendship, and they battled against some great villains – the evil sorcerer, Archimago, the beautiful but false Duessa – plus a myriad of giants, dragons, ogres, and that sort of stuff.

All this, I decided, made for a great modern-day adaptation, so I began one, fitting my favorite characters into the modern world. The leader, of course, was Arthur, but instead of the normal Round Table knights, Arthur had the knights from *The Faerie Queen* as his sidekicks and I stuck 'em smack in the middle of Cascadia.

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In my story, Arthur and his knights fought against the diabolical Archimago, whose evil corporation ruled over the crumbling remains of Seattle and made the everyday plebe's life a miserable hell while Archimago hulked in his great castle. All the frustrations of a pent-up and deprived pubescent girl made it into that manuscript, including my description of the brave and chivalric Arthur, who amazingly resembled Noah in looks, with his longish, wavy blond hair, piercing blue eyes, lithe body, and hooky nose. Truth be told, since he was the only non-brother male around at the time, I had a hell of a crush on him even though his and Grant's arguing drove me nuts.

In my tale, Arthur (Noah), after defeating Archimago, rescues the beautiful Guinevere (me) from her crumbling tower and whisks her far away to Avalon. And they marry and live happily ever after. You know the story.

I never intended to show this to anyone, especially not Noah. But he persuaded me, and I let him read it. I don't know if he caught on to the fact that Arthur was him, but that might be why what happened, happened. Never mind he was in his thirties and (at that point) I'd just turned fourteen. Never mind he was mixed up with Grant, although to be honest I didn't understand their relationship at the time 'cept that they fought a lot. All that truly mattered was that I was holed up alone and lonely in a cavernous house with no one but Grant to check up on me since Dad had died and Mike was off somewhere dealing with Pan3. The only other constant person I saw every day was Noah.

And so, one day, when Noah and Grant had had an awful fight and Grant had gone stomping off to Seattle on business, it happened.

Did I believe it was wrong? At first, no. I relished the way Noah suddenly gazed at me like I was the most beautiful girl to grace the earth. Like I was his Guinevere. I never thought to stop his advances. I wanted something from him, even though I didn't quite know what that something was. I only knew I wanted to feel like how women felt in the romantic novels I'd started reading.

But when suddenly the innocent kisses and excited groping went to a place I thought I was ready for but wasn't, it was too late.

I hid it from Grant when he got home. I thought he might kill me if he knew. It wasn't until later, when Noah gave me the potion (again, when Grant went off to Seattle—luckily he came back in time), that the whole sordid thing came out and Grant went after Noah with a shotgun—the same shotgun we found in Noah's grave, come to think of it—and Noah made a run for it. I didn't see any of that because I was pretty much comatose by that point, but Grant told me about it later, and I never saw Noah again.

I should never have trusted him and taken that potion. But I did, I drank it, and lost my one shot at being a mother forever. To this day I don't know what was in it, but that drink tore me up. If Mike hadn't come home, hadn't nursed me through it, hadn't loaded the incident onto my chip, Noah might've gotten away with the whole thing. But he paid. He went to jail for giving me that concoction. I'm not sure how long he stayed there before they let him go, but however long it was, it wasn't long enough. My bouts of maniac started around then too, another effect of the concoction, or the emotional trauma, or maybe both.

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One good thing came out of it, though. The story I'd written became the rough draft of *Return to Avalon*. After many revisions, it turned into the one shot at fame and a teeny bit of fortune I'd get in my life. My one stab at immortality.

Now Miriam lowers my vid and yawns. "Done," she says. "I finally finished reading the whole thing."

I laugh. "Well, you don't have to make it sound like such a chore."

She puts away the vid and moves over to the table where I'm shuffling the cards, getting ready for our annual New Year's Eve poker game. "No, I liked it, Pearl. You're a great writer."

"Mm, thanks."

"Seriously. I mean, I'm not all stunno on fantasy stuff 'cept for some fairy tales Mom used to read me, and I don't know much 'bout King Arthur, but I get the places you were describin'. Toad Hall at first, but in the end, you were writin' 'bout Avalon."

"Well, not this island, exactly, but the Avalon King Arthur is supposed to live on."

"No," she says, sitting down. "That place in your book was this island. You put everythin' in. The bay they sail into when they reach Avalon, that's the Mermaid's Lagoon. You even made the beach pink. The spot where Arthur proposes to Guinevere, that's the Enchanted Place. The tangled forest with the magical well, that's Mirkwood and the spring. The cave where he fights the sea serpent, that's, I'm guessin', Steven's Rabbit Hole, though I've never seen it. And the tomb where they bury the Redcrosse Knight after he loses the fight with the dragon, that's on top of Pook's Hill."

I can't help smiling. "Well, you definitely read it if you remember all that."



“You must’ve really loved Avalon to write ‘bout it so much.”

I frown at that. “No. I hated it.”

“Don’t seem like it. How come you didn’t put Camelot in? I mean, an actual Camelot?”

“I did. Camelot was Toad Hall, in Cascadia, where the book starts. Anyway, you forgot about The Doldrums. That’s in the book too. That’s the spot where, whenever anyone enters it, they get all depressed and start second-guessing themselves.”

She leans back in her chair. “Do you feel like that sometimes? Like you made the wrong decision?”

I stare around. “All the time. Like, was it a smart idea to come here?”

“Maybe not, but it’s as good a place as any. You never know what spot’ll make ya happy and what’ll kick you in the butt.”

I give the cards another shuffle. “How about you? Are you happy you came?”

“Yes,” she says. “Wouldn’t have met all of you if I hadn’t. Wouldn’t have met Steven.”

She touches her belly for a brief second when she says this, and a spasm of dread clenches my stomach. They’ve only been together for a month or so. She couldn’t possibly be...no. Plus, Miriam’s been exposed to Pan4. So has Steven. The chances of having a baby to term aren’t the greatest.

But why was *fear* my reaction to Miriam’s hand motion? Why not happiness?

I know why. Ever since I woke this morning, I’ve felt off, nervy, on edge. When I was younger, my time of the month would cause it—a huge burst of uncontrollable misery and crying, where I saw everything through a weird, red fog. Now I don’t have a period to blame, but menopause does it, I guess,

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with sudden drops where you're nice and content one moment and wildly unhappy the next, like a sinkhole opens up where solid ground existed only seconds before, something that swallows you in a terrifyingly cold darkness where you scream to be heard but nobody comes to your rescue.

But this sensation is more intense than that, like the pent-up wrath of a caged lion. More maniac. If I let the lion out, it'll slash and destroy everything. I take a deep breath and the weirdness dissipates a bit.

Kira comes in, holding her violin. "Gettin' kinda dark out there," she says, placing the violin carefully on a shelf. "Clouds on the horizon. Big, black, swirly ones."

Miriam frowns. "Don't say 'swirly clouds' to me. Sounds too much like a nado."

Kira sits across from me. "Nados don't happen out at sea, do they Pearl?"

"I don't know," I say. "But it could be a hurricane, and that's just as bad."

Kira yawns. "Would a hurricane hit this time of year?"

"Stranger things have happened. What did the sea look like?"

"Gettin' choppy. Good thing we have the *Argo* in the lagoon."

Miriam stands and heads toward the door. "Steven's down there now. I'm gonna see if he reckons we should pull up the dinghy. And maybe we should take the solars down from the roof. We got enough juice, Pearl?"

"No," I say. "We're only about half charged. Don't take 'em down yet, not until we need to."

"OK," Miriam says.

Kira sighs. "I hope whatever it is blows through quick. Storms out here are always so violent. I miss pitter-patter rain

like we used to get in Cascadia. Here, it's always either a huge torrent of peltin' aqua or bright sunshine. No in between."

Miriam opens the door. A whistling and howling fill my ears.

"Find out where Mike is too, wontcha?" I call after her. "He's been gone all afternoon. Makes me nervous. Plus, he's got the cane and I could use it."

Miriam scoots out the door and shuts it behind her. The room quiets.

Kira yawns. "I'm so tired of this place."

"Me too," I say. "I miss my library."

She stretches like a cat. "I miss other people, Pearl. I miss Joey mostly."

I put down the cards. "What were they like? The Morlocks? I'm guessing it wasn't just Joey you knew."

Kira picks up a card. "He had a nice fam. His mom was a teacher and she taught most of the kids who lived in the woods how to read and write and stuff. He had two sisters. His dad died last year though."

"Pan4?"

"No, but 'member how hard last winter was? How mondo cold it got? He got real sick, and it turned into pneumonia. Not much they could do, I don't guess."

"Mike could've helped him," I whisper.

"Maybe, 'cept I didn't know he had the pneumonia 'til it was too late to ask for help. Anyway, after he died, Joey's mom made the decision to leave, to head east. Joey said it was what they originally were plannin' after Bellingham burned and they lost their house there, but his dad didn't wanna go. He figured they had a better shot makin' it in a place they were used to than tryin' for some place new. Maybe he was right." She takes

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a deep breath. "Pearl, I reckon Joey's dead." She says it flatly, like she's telling me what the weather will be like.

"And you've come to this conclusion...how?" I ask.

"We fought before he left, but he wouldn't have held a grudge this long, I don't reckon. You know, sometimes I believe maybe we purposefully fought before they left 'cause it was the only way to make a clean break of it." She puts down the card and stares me full in the face. "I shoulda gone, Pearl."

Is she shooting me an accusing look? She don't mean she stayed here because she wanted to, I realize. She stayed because she thought she *had* to. "You could've gone," I say, and I can hear the anger in my voice begin to rise. Oh, no...

Kira frowns. "You'd never have forgiven me for it."

God, here it comes. A white-hot spark of fury ignites somewhere deep within me. I can feel it, a spark that'll leap into a raging fire before I can douse it. Kira sees it. She knows when I'm close to veering off the edge. The sane part of my brain says, *Don't do this, Pearl. Don't go off now. Kira's trying to be honest here.* But the irrational part, which, when it wants to be heard, screams even louder, says, *Ungrateful bitch!* Those words roll right up my esophagus, and I don't want to say 'em. I truly don't. But the caged lion does. He's free now, and rampant, and he roars the words, along with lots of other curses I can barely hear above the noise. My brain's calm rational part keeps whispering, *Stop yelling, be reasonable,* but the lion has control over my lungs and mouth and is on a rampage, drowning the rational part right out.

My vision starts to blur. I see Kira, all faded and foggy, rise and run for the door before the next tirade can burst from my lips. She's gone. And I'm alone in this horrible prison, 'cept

Grant who sits motionless on his cot. All I can do is turn my frustration on him. But I don't want to do that. I just want all this pain and misery to stop.

My gaze wanders to Mike's empty cot. Under it, I know, is his medical bag. I stand and hobble to it, rubbing my hip and cursing as I walk. I glance over at Grant. His eyes are trained on me, but they're blank, and I shiver. When the blank eyes focus on me, I always wonder who is watching me. Is it my brother, or one of those evil shadows creeping through his mind?

I sit on Mike's cot and reach under it, my hands shaking like Mike's hands now permanently do. I try to steady 'em but can't. Fear of Mike's reaction and a selfish, rebellious streak fight it out as I grab the kit.

*Mike'll kill you. It's taboo to touch his stuff.*

*Who the fuck cares? I want a sedative.*

Rebellion wins. I pull out the kit and rummage through it with shaking fingers. He isn't gonna notice one sedative missing, and I need it. I need it bad. I pull out the vial, unscrew the top, and plop a pill onto my palm. No, two pills...why not? Rescrew the top and place the vial neatly back into the bag. Zip the bag. Scoot the bag under the cot. Pop the pills into my dry mouth. Swallow. Done.

And instantly, even though I know the sedative don't work this fast, I close my eyes and the rage floats away. The anticipation — that beautiful, drifty sensation I know those pills'll give me — is enough to quiet the lion, turn it into a kitten.

I hear a whistle, like a faraway train. Camelot's walls vibrate, like something's hit 'em with a huge mallet. I open my eyes and yelp in fright. Grant had silently moved across the room and now crouches near my cot. His eyes grip mine, but they

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aren't Grant's eyes. They're black and dead, intent but soulless. He slides his dry palm across my sweaty hand, interlaces his bony fingers with my chubby ones, and squeezes. The interior of Camelot disappears, and a fiery red fills my head. Red bordered by wispy, swirling shadows.

*"Grant? Are you there?"*

Instead of his comforting voice, I hear harsh whispers, murmurs, and something says in a scraping voice, *"This is how it begins."*

*"How what begins?"*

*"Your journey."*

Far in the distance, Camelot shakes again and wind screams against its cinderblock sides, but none of that matters because I can only focus on the swirling, twisting shadows growing thicker, drowning out the flickering reds with a writhing sea of black.

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IT COMES ON so quick, so violent and wrathful, that I wonder how I missed the signs.

*You're in your own world, now, Mike, that's why, I reprimand myself as I fight to stay upright in the driving wind. You weren't looking up. How could you not notice the sky was darkening? Couldn't you feel the sudden stillness and the way the air kinda hung hot and damp, draping over you like a steamy towel? They always say an eerie calm precedes a storm, but you didn't notice.*

I'd been poking the aqua in Mirkwood's swamp, watching the sandy mud swirl around Grant's cane. The swirling sand reminded me of how Mirkwood's gnats usually swarm

around my face when I tromp down this path, but then I realized I hadn't seen a single gnat today. They knew something was coming. Should've been enough of a warning, but it wasn't.

The first gust of wind almost hurtles me into the swamp, then it spins and pushes me the other way and I sink to my knees, my vibrating fingers dropping the cane. I crawl to it and try to grasp it but can't. I make one attempt at standing but can't do that either. I curl into a ball and throw my spasming hands over my head as the wind buffets every side of me.

"Mike!" Hands grasp under my armpits and heave me to a sitting position.

I open my clenched eyes.

Miriam stands over me, red hair spinning around her face, her voice barely audible as the wind whips it away. She grabs me under the armpits and heaves, and I stand on wobbly legs, grasping her as best I can, praying I won't topple and take her down with me.

"Here!" She thrusts the cane into my hand. "Don't trust it though, hold on to me. We've gotta get to Camelot."

The wind dies for a precious second, and I try to speak. "W-w-w-here d-d-d..."

Always seeming to know what I'm going to say before I say it, Miriam replies, "Where'd the wind come from? Hurricane, Steven says. He and Kira are movin' the dinghy up where it'll be safe. Figured I'd better find you."

Hurricane. In the middle of winter. If the first tentative gusts are any indication, it's a strong one. Probably way overdue for this region. Judging by the condition of Camelot when we got here, and by the nice, neat way the boards were stacked against

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it, I'd say a serious hurricane hasn't hit here for a while. Now we're in for it, though.

We move as fast as I can go, which is a stumbling, shuffling snail's pace, and I berate myself for trudging off to Mirkwood on my own. I couldn't resist it though. Today the cramps in my joints hadn't felt so overwhelming, so I snuck off. Stupid. I must reconcile myself to the idea that my sneaking off days are over. Solitude isn't in the cards for me anymore. Someone needs to watch me, to take care of me. I'm past the point of taking care of myself.

Miriam leads me now, taking advantage of the lull in the wind and pushing me as fast as I can shuffle. We catch up with Kira and Steven, who have laboriously tugged the dinghy up the path from the lagoon and wedged it in a small, sheltered spot. You could almost call it a cave except it doesn't have much of a roof.

Kira runs to me and takes my other arm. "Help Steven with the dinghy, Miriam. You're stronger than me. I'll get Mike to the bunker."

Miriam drops my arm and heads to assist Steven, and I almost fall, not realizing how much her strong grip supported me until it was gone. Kira's hold is light, almost nonexistent. I clutch the cane and try to keep up with her strong, young pace. She can't, or won't, walk slow enough to match my shuffle.

When we reach Camelot's sturdy door, Kira drops my arm so she can open it and I crumple against the bunker's side. The wind screams over Camelot's roof, but it doesn't hit us too hard on the lee side. Kira grabs my arm, steadier this time, and helps me inside.

You can still hear the wind in here, but the walls and roof



muffle it. Pearl lies on her cot, eyes shut, peaceful and asleep even with the frightful sounds of the increasing wind. Grant sits on the edge of his cot, zombie.

The zombie state has a clinical term, of course, same as all these viruses that have plagued us for most of this century have clinical names, but 'zombie' has always summed up the symptoms that make up the latter stage of these viruses, so it's what's stuck in the vernacular. Even most doctors refer to it as zombie. I'm becoming zombie too, I realize, even though the thoughts in my head are just as crisp, unclouded except by pain. Pearl right now is also zombie, but I can tell by the way she's draped across the cot that it's drug induced.

Damn. She's gotten into my medicine bag. But really, does it matter at this point? We have only a couple of sedatives left and one shot of morphine. And the aspirin. Might as well let Pearl knock herself out as much as she wants while she can, because that option won't last much longer.

The door flies open as a huge gust of screaming wind pushes Miriam and Steven in. Steven wrestles the door shut, gasping, "Holy shit!"

"Steven, what 'bout the solars?" Miriam says.

"Fuck," he says, turning around. "I didn't see 'em up there, did you?"

"Wasn't really lookin', but we'd better go check."

I scream, "Be careful!" but they don't hear it. Not a sound escapes my mouth except "B-b-b-b-b", which fades away before I can even get the vowel part out. They're back inside within a couple of minutes though.

"Gone," Miriam says. "Totally smashed, both of 'em."

"Shit," Kira whispers. "Do we have any spares?"

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“Should be two in the supply room,” Steven says. “And a couple on the *Argo*. I managed to get ‘em put away before I swam back.”

“Do ya reckon the dingy’ll be safe where it is?” Miriam says.

Steven frowns. “I hope so. To be honest, I’m more worried ‘bout the *Argo*. Waves were pretty damn big in the lagoon when I left it. I hope it don’t get beached.”

They all look worried, but I can’t share in their fears anymore. Selfishly, I’m not planning to leave this island, so who cares what happens to the *Argo*? Maybe we’re all doomed to die here. I lie on my cot and close my eyes, wondering if I should join Pearl in a sedative session.

Not for this kind of cramping pain, I decide, as every muscle from my back to my toes suddenly and painfully clenches. Fuck it. I wait ‘til it subsides, roll over, and reach a shaking hand for the bag. When it slides comfortably into my grip, I manage to manhandle it to the mattress. Morphine. That’s what I want now. If Pearl gets to abuse the situation and steal some blissful peace, I should get to also.

Filling up my vision again, like she morphed from one end of the room to another, is Miriam’s face. “Can I help you, Mike? Your hands are too shaky to give yourself a shot.”

She’s right, but at this moment I can’t respond.

She takes the syringe I’ve managed to pull from the case. “It’s the last dose left, you know,” she whispers. “Sure you wanna take it now?”

I’m not sure if my head nods or not, but she seems to understand my urgency. She removes the protection from the needle and fills the syringe. She knows what she’s doing. A couple of weeks ago, when I was more coherent but shaky enough

so I was nervous about administering anything to myself or anybody else, I'd shown her. I couldn't show Steven. He's too squeamy when it comes to needles. Kira shook her head in a panicky sort of way when I'd asked her if she wanted to learn how to give a shot. Miriam, as usual, took on the challenge. She's only done it once, but she did it correctly, and this time, as the needle punctures my skin and the fluid squirts into my muscle, I know she's done it correctly again.

No more morphine left. Now the last dose is gone, I foresee an escalating war with Pearl for the remaining sedatives. And after that? I sink deep into the cot and close my eyes.

After that, I suppose the true suffering will begin.

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WHY THE HELL didn't I take down the solars when I had the chance?

We shoulda known something bad was coming after Kira said there were black clouds on the horizon and the wind began to pick up. We shouldn't have waited. We should have been prepared. Unlike when a nado forms in the sky, sometimes so quick you can't even guess it's coming. But hurricanes always give you some warning. You wouldn't leave a solar out if the sky got all dark and swirly and you knew a big storm was coming. So why did I hesitate? Why'd I listen to Pearl when she said to leave the solars up? She's not used to hurricanes. Cascadia may have nados now, and crazy storms, but it's still free from this type of monster. I've lived through hurricanes on the east coast. I shoulda known better.

But even I didn't expect the wind to hit that fast. The clouds

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looked so far away when I'd headed down to Mermaid's Lagoon. Steven was out on the *Argo* and I was figuring on swimming out there to meet him when the first real gust hit, even though the clouds still seemed so far away. Then the lagoon got all choppy and the *Argo* began to tilt and sway, and Steven ran around its deck pulling down things as fast as he could. He couldn't bring anything with him when he swam back to shore, fighting against the waves. He hadn't taken the dinghy out to the ship. We'd gotten in the habit of swimming out to the *Argo* for exercise. And 'cause of that decision, the *Argo's* solars are still on the ship. And who knows if the ship is still even in one piece, with the way the wind is knocking Camelot about.

As soon as Steven reached shore, he yelled at me and Kira to secure the dinghy and we started pulling it up the beach, away from the greedy waves and angry wind. That's when I remembered Mike was missing and ran off, leaving Steven and Kira to deal with the dinghy.

Now we huddle around the table 'cause there's nothing else we can do. It's just the three of us, Mike and Pearl are out cold and Grant mimicked 'em and sprawled on his cot, but he's staring at the ceiling, so I know he's not sleeping. I keep glancing up too, praying the roof holds.

Steven follows my gaze. "That's the weakest part of Camelot. It's pretty tight, but I'm not sure how we can fix it if we lose it."

"How many solars are on the *Argo*?"

"Two."

"And do we have any in the storage room?"

"Again, two, 'cept they're pretty old."

"How 'bout desals?"

“Just one on the ship and one here, but the desal here is stored inside, so it should be OK.”

“It won’t work if we don’t have power from the solars, though,” Kira says. She’s staring at the table hard enough to drill holes into it, too terrified to look up at the ceiling, like it might fly away if she does.

The wind whistles and howls outside. Sounds so much like a nado, I wanna crawl under my cot, not that the cot would do much good as a shelter if we lose the roof. We try to talk normally, but the noise outside is so loud we give up.

“At least Pearl and Mike are sleepin’ through this,” Steven yells.

I raise my voice too. “They’re both drugged. Must be nice.”

Steven frowns. “Pearl too?”

“That’s what Mike told me when I gave him his shot. Well, not in words, but he pointed to the sedative bottle and nodded to Pearl, so I know that’s why she’s conked out. Plus, no un-drugged person could possibly sleep through this racket.”

“Well, I’m glad she’s out,” Kira says. “She threw a nightmare tantrum earlier.”

Steven picks up a poker chip and flips it between his fingers. “What’d you say to piss her off?”

“I didn’t say anythin’. I coulda said ‘Happy Birthday’ and she’d have gone off. It don’t matter what you say when she starts to go maniac. But usually, you can tell when her tantrums are gonna happen. This one, I had no idea it was comin’ ’til it did. Anyway, that’s why I left and followed you down to the lagoon.”

A violent gust slams into the bunker. The roof creaks loudly in protest.

My heart thumps so hard I almost hear it above the din out-

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side. I gotta do something to keep my mind off this. I glance at the table, at the cards strewn across it in heaps, and I pull 'em all together in a neat deck and shuffle 'em. "It's New Year's Eve, right?"

"That's what the calendar says," Kira says. "If we've read it right and haven't missed a day by mistake."

"And your tradition is to play poker on New Year's Eve, right?"

"Yup," Steven says.

"Then, let's play."

It's hard concentrating on something that's supposed to be fun when something so opposite is happening outside, but what else can we do? An hour in, the bunker is still rocking and Pearl and Mike haven't woken up, Steven has won almost all the poker chips, and you can hear waves smashing against the cliffs. They must be huge for us to hear 'em over the wind and through the cinderblock walls. The roof is still holding, though.

Kira throws down her cards. "I can't take this anymore! When is it gonna stop?"

"I'm hungry," Steven says.

I put down my cards, stand, and head for the kitchen, glad for an excuse to do something more useful than playing poker. I check inside the cooler. It's still running and stuff in it is cold, but all I see are some leftover beans from last night's dinner and the last of the fish we caught yesterday. We can eat the beans cold, but the fish need cooking. I check the energy gauge. The batteries collecting the solar juice are only a quarter charged. Just a couple hours ago, Pearl said they were at half. How could she read the gauge so wrong?

I stick my head into the main room. "I'm turnin' off the

cooler. It's suckin' up juice. I am gonna use some juice to fry the fish, though. And I'm gonna turn on the crockpot and make another pot of beans."

I fry up the fish and nuke the cold beans and get the new pot of beans going. We eat the fish and leftover beans in silence, listening to the rain drumming against the roof. The wind has died down a bit.

"You reckon it's almost over?" Kira whispers.

"We're headin' into the eye, at least," Steven says.

Finally, the rain stops too, and we step outside. We're in a weird, calm world, but dark clouds still blanket the horizon.

"God," Kira moans. "I'm sick of this."

Steven stares at the roof. "It don't look too stable. Like one more gust'll take it away."

"Please don't say that," Kira says.

Steven turns to me. "Reckon we got time to get up there and stabilize it?"

"With what?"

He sighs. "You're right. Let's at least see if we can find all the pieces to the solars."

We hunt through The Doldrums. Both solars are smashed, their pieces spread all over the place.

I pick up a piece and peruse it. "We couldn't fix these even if we knew how."

"Grant could do it," Steven says.

Kira snorts. "Not in his state."

"Maybe he'll snap to, if we give him a good project to do. Kinda like how he got all unzombified and carved the names in the tombstone."

We put all the pieces we can find into a bucket and lug it

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inside, right as the wind picks up again.

“Round two,” Steven says.

We crouch around the table as the wind picks up and finish the beans and fish. I nod toward the three oldies snoozing on their cots. Even Grant took the opportunity during the storm’s lull to fall asleep. “They’re gonna be hungry when they wake up.”

“They’ll have to wait ‘til the beans are done,” Kira says.

I stand. “I’ll see if I can find somethin’ in the storage room for ‘em to eat.”

It gives me something to do. Steven and Kira go back to playing cards, but I scoot from the main room into the supply room. I flip on the light and scan the shelves. Most are stacked with bins of dried beans, all of which need to be cooked for hours or ground down into flour before they’re edible. There’s oatmeal. A bag of rice. Dried fruit and honey. Wheat groats. A few strings of jerky. The chicken feed. We’ve gone through everything else. Might be we should reckon on leaving once this hurricane is done.

A whistling roar passes over Camelot, and the roof above me vibrates — hard. I suck in my breath and watch in a weird state of both terror and fascination as a portion of it moves, struggling against its restraints, and a shaft of light stabs through a gap that wasn’t there a second ago, and then, like it’s suddenly grown wings, the whole section of roof rises and floats away. If there’s a sound as it rips free, I don’t hear it. It spins toward the clouds.

Then I hear a roar, feel a searing pain in the back of my head, and see the floor rushing up to meet me.



## 25

WHEN I HEAR the noise and scramble for the storage room and see that roof go and Miriam fall, I lunge for her and pull her outta the storage room. She's half-covered in broken glass and sticky honey, has a big lump on her head, and is awfully woozy.

Pearl is woozy too, sayin', "What's going on, Steven? What's all the noise?"

And me, with my heart poundin' like it might crash on the floor with the shattered glass and spilled beans and strewn wheat groats scattered everywhere from the wind, sayin' in a voice that sounded calm as anythin' although I wasn't, "Lie back down, Pearl. It's a hurricane."

Now she lies there and stares at the ceilin', which still exists over her, although it don't exist anymore in the supply room and wash room and half the kitchen. Miriam groans on her cot but is gonna be OK. We try to wake Mike so he can make sure she don't have a concussion or anythin', but he's not movin'. Neither is Grant.

Kira and me pull all the roof material outta the way and sweep up the beans. They're wet but they'll dry. The wheat groats are half stuck in spilled honey and the oatmeal is a mushy mess, but we salvage as much as we can 'cause we've gotta save whatever's left.

I gaze at the blue sky hoverin' over the supply room and say, "I'm gonna go check on the *Argo*."

Kira says, "I'll finish up here. Do ya reckon it's totally over?"

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I nod and head outside, givin' Miriam a quick kiss as she lies on her cot. She's got her eyes closed and moans, swattin' at me like I'm a swarm of gnats.

Outside it's windy but more of a happy breeze than an angry gale, and a bird sings somewhere. The waves pound the cliffs but aren't as loud now, and the sky is so clear and the sea so beautiful with every color glintin' off it that even though I'm scared to death to find out what's happened to the *Argo*, I stop for a minute and watch the clouds as they scurry off to someplace else. They were so gray and angry when they hung over us before, but now they're all purple and pink and orange and light surrounds 'em, and I want so bad to grab my watercolors and capture those clouds in my sketchbook before they skitter away. But I have no time for that.

I hurry through The Doldrums and down the path to Mermaid's Lagoon. Halfway down, where we stored the dinghy, I get my first glimpse of the lagoon. The sea here froths and spins, all gray and murky, and where the *Argo* was, there's nothin' but churnin' aqua.

My tum clenches so hard I figure I might puke. Where the hell did our ship go?

I race forward, eyes scannin', searchin'.

There. Geez, halfway up the beach and in a zillion pieces, parts twisted 'round a palm stump, parts floatin' in the merciless lagoon, parts litterin' the beach. The hull is skewered onto Mermaid's Rock, a big, gashin' hole in its side. If I hadn't been onboard just hours ago, I'd swear what I'm lookin' at is some ancient shipwreck that's been there for ages, it's that thoroughly smashed.

My eyes flit over to where we stored the dinghy. The wind has bashed it against the rocks surroundin' it, but it's still there.

I run to it and check the solar we'd stowed in its seat compartment. It's still intact but the attachment point on the dinghy is busted. Pretty sure I can fix it, though.

But the *Argo*? Even if we had a dozen people who all knew how to build boats, we'd never fix it. I sit on a rock near the dinghy and stare into the frothin' lagoon, then out to the ocean where the waves roll in, big and terrible and beautiful, over the dead coral reef like it isn't even there anymore, which maybe it isn't, and I decide there's no point goin' down there now and tryin' to salvage what I can from the beach. The waves would smash me against the rocks and finish me off, like they finished the *Argo*.

I don't wanna go back to Camelot, though. Not without seein' what other damage the hurricane has done to Avalon. I walk along the path that leads to Mirkwood, but I barely get to the old tree line before I'm met by rollin' aqua. The tide's eaten up the entire path. Hopefully it'll recede and we can find the spring again.

I turn 'round, tromp through The Doldrums and past Camelot, and head up the slippery trail to Pook's Hill. Durin' the hurricane, we could hear huge waves poundin' against the cliffs, even through Camelot's thick walls. They still smash against the rocks so hard the spray almost reaches the Pater's tombstone, which, defiant throughout the carnage, has refused to topple. Behind it, the place where Miriam had reburied Noah's body is completely washed out. Noah's corpse, what's left of it, lies a good twenty yards from his original restin' place.

I turn away from the sight. Someone else'll have to deal with that. My eyes focus on Susan's and Laddie's graves, which are new too, but the Pater's tombstone has protected 'em from

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the washout. They're OK, thank God. The seashells Grant had stacked on 'em are scattered. I brush 'em back onto the graves, but there's no way to put the right number back on each grave.

I move down the path to The Enchanted Place where the hungry waves and ferocious winds have had better luck than on the hard cliffs at Pook's Hill. The winds have toppled the little stand of trees, and the waves have washed away the path down to the tide pools, or at least buried it under chunks of rock. I keep away from the edge, not sure how stable it is now. One wrong step could send half the cliff tumblin' into the sea, for all I know.

I head back to Camelot. The whole way back, I wonder at the calmness flowin' through me. I should be scared or angry or somethin'. But right now, I feel nothin'. I guess it's shock, and I'm thankful for it.

Kira says when I enter, "How's the *Argo*?"

"It's gone."

Miriam sits up. "What?"

I plunk into a chair.

Kira has cleared the table of cards and poker chips and has all the salvaged supplies stacked in any container she could find. She's sortin' the beans, and the beans she's holdin' trickle outta her hand, ping off the table, and skitter to the floor. She whispers, "Whaddya mean, Steven?"

"I mean, it's gone. The dinghy's OK. But the *Argo* is in pieces. We can't repair it."

Miriam groans, rubs her head, and swivels to a sittin' position. Then her eyes get real wide and she gasps, "Steven!"

I say, "What?" in a real scared tone 'cause I'm figurin' she might be in pain.

“My knife. It was on the *Argo*. Last night. I took it off when...”  
Her face gets real red.

She don’t have to finish the sentence. Miriam always has the knife tucked into its scabbard and only ever takes the scabbard off when she’s goin’ to bed or when we’re makin’ love.

She says, “I can’t believe I forgot to put it back on. I can’t believe I didn’t realize I didn’t have it.”

I put my hand on her arm to try and soothe her. “I’ll look for it. I promise.”

Kira pulls us back to the bigger problem. “But the *Argo*, Steven, are you sayin’ we can’t leave here now?”

I turn to her. “We could all fit in the dinghy. But we couldn’t get far in that. We sure couldn’t chug all the way back to Cascadia in it. One good storm would send us to the bottom of the ocean. Plus, we couldn’t stock enough food on that small boat to last us more’n a couple days. The mainland due east is as far as we can get. We’ll hafta head to Puerto de Luz, if it still exists after this storm.”

A depressin’ silence settles over what’s left of Camelot as we all ponder our options.

Pearl finally mumbles, “We might as well just die here, then.”

She’s still groggy so I don’t take her seriously.

Kira says, “What’re we gonna do?”

I shrug. “Fix the roof, for starters. Get everythin’ workin’ again. Take stock of how much food we’ve got left. Then we’ll figure out what to do next.”

From her cot Pearl mutters, “What happened to the chickens?”

Miriam and I look at each other. In all the craziness, nobody remembered the chickens.

# PUERTO DE LUZ

But Mole stood still a moment, held in thought. As one wakened suddenly from a beautiful dream, who struggles to recall it, but can recapture nothing but a dim sense of the beauty in it, the beauty! Till that, too, fades away in its turn, and the dreamer bitterly accepts the hard, cold waking and all its penalties.

*Kenneth Graham - The Wind in the Willows*

## 1

HEY, SUSIE, IT'S your mommy. I'm glad you're OK and all the rain didn't wash you away. That sounds gross, don't it? The rain wasn't as nice to poor ol' Noah who tumbled halfway down Pook's Hill. But we've dug him a new spot, nearer to you and the Pater and Laddie. It's safer here. Funny that Grant didn't come up for the reburial. He's never put any shells on Noah's grave, but he hasn't missed one day for you, my little Susie. Not even the day after the hurricane.

We're in pretty bad shape now, though. We can't use the supply room anymore 'cause we don't have enough extra material to fix the roof. So, we have all the supplies piled in the main room while Miriam and Steven try to at least fix the roof over the kitchen with whatever scraps they can find. Their patch job ain't pretty though, and it leaks in places. Steven can't figure out how to attach the spare solars to the roof, so he rigged 'em up on the ground against the bunker, and sometimes they work and sometimes they don't, but even when they do, they don't put out much juice. We're usin' 'em mostly now to desal as much aqua as we can in case they go out completely. Luckily the cistern was pretty full already 'cause of all the rain.

Anyway, you don't wanna hear all this, but I don't have anyone else to talk to. The scary thing, Susie, is that we're runnin' outta choices. If we'd left when I wanted, we could be somewhere with high civ by now, but we waited, and now look at us. There's no food here, 'cept what we could salvage. We had chickens, but the last two are dead. We found 'em in their smashed-up cage that the hurricane threw against one of Pearl's sittin' rocks. So, we plucked 'em and made 'em into stew along with the last pumpkin, but that's all gone now. Steven was able to fix the dinghy's solar, and he tried to take the dinghy out to go fishin', but he didn't catch anythin'. It's like the hurricane blew all the fish away, although Steven says they were gettin' scarce anyway. Probably was their natural time to migrate to their next spot, he says.

You know, Susie, ever since the hurricane – and that ended two whole days ago – your Uncle Mike lies spasmin' on his cot and Uncle Grant just sits all zombie 'cept when he comes up here to put shells on your grave, and Pearl moves 'round

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a bit, but she's in a super bad funk. She mostly sits and cries. She wouldn't even help pluck the chickens. Just seein' 'em all dead and twisted on the table made her start to wail. She keeps sayin' she wants to go home, back to her library at Toad Hall.

And that'd be nice, Susie, but it's impossible, isn't it? Even if Toad Hall is still standin', we can't get home now. Not all the way to Cascadia. Not with the dinghy – it's too small. And we can't repair the *Argo*. We can't even salvage it for firewood 'cause it was mostly fiberglass, and we might need firewood soon since the solars aren't kickin' out enough juice to run both the desals and the stove.

It makes me wonder how Grant did it, when he came back from Avalon, after he and Noah sailed out here and he came home all zombie. You know, I get now why he was so mad when he saw your daddy and me on the ship that night and kicked us off and made us swim through that cold aqua. I reckon he got mad 'cause he felt ashamed that he was gonna sail off with Noah, 'specially after what Noah did to Pearl all those years ago. Poor Grant. All those years after he kicked Noah out, why didn't he find somebody new? Somebody to make him happy? Instead, he crawled to Toad Hall and locked the gates and never was really happy again.

Yesterday me and Miriam and Steven talked 'bout what we're gonna do. We figure we got enough food to last a month, and that's if we stretch it out and eat only what we need to survive. That's not enough, so Miriam reckons we should make a foray to the mainland. Not all of us – Mike and Grant'd have to stay here, and probably Pearl the way she is, but we could see if we can find supplies there, then come back. But I mean, if anyone still lives in Puerto de Luz,



why would they give us any of what they've got? We don't got nothin' to barter with.

So, you know what we did? We got Mike to check his vid. He can't even hold it now, he's so shaky, but he looked into it so we could turn it on, and you know what? You can't see anybody on the mainland. Not one little red blip. You can't see us either. It don't mean people don't live there, but it does mean Puerto de Luz probably lost its tower, which is why we can't get reception on Mike's vid anymore. Anyway, the mainland's the only place we can get to, and Miriam reckons we should go, find supplies and come back, and figure out what to do next.

But we can't stay here forever, Susan, that's the thing. This island is not the kinda island you can live on forever, even if there *were* lots of fish in the sea. It ain't all magical like the Avalon in Pearl's story. The spot where Laddie found the spring is now all mucky with salt and mud, and the spring might come back, but it might not. And food don't grow here—Mike and Steven have tried and failed at that.

Plus, it's so salty here, and I'm sick of it. Aren't you? I guess you can't feel it, but the stuff covers everythin'. Salt, Susie, is one of the most important things your body needs to survive, but take too much and it'll kill you. And I'm tellin' ya, the same goes for external use of the stuff. My hair's stiff with it, the violin is gettin' all warpy 'cause of it, and I feel as old as Grant, all shriveled like a dried grape. Even the soles of my feet are startin' to crack, and, boy, does that hurt. We have nothin' to put on 'em 'cept oil, and we need to cook with what we have left, not use it to soften our skin. But sometimes I can't stand it and sneak some and rub it into my feet and hands.

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Anyway, no way we can live here much longer. And now, no way we can get east to high civ, or go back to Toad Hall, even if it's still standin' like Pearl reckons. All we can do is check out the mainland and see what that holds, but the scary thing is that we'll have to leave the oldies here. It's too dangerous to take 'em, especially Mike, who can't do much now 'cept spasm on his cot. And who's gonna take care of him and Grant if Pearl don't snap outta her funk? Steven says maybe she can't. Maybe she's goin' zombie. It took Grant years and years to go zombie from Pan2, and a few years for Mike to start gettin' side effects of Pan3, but Pan4 zombie works fast. No years of waitin' like the other viruses. Just bam! A couple weeks of feelin' OK, then it slams back into ya.

Miriam says we should draw straws and one of us should stay with the oldies to make sure they eat and get to the toilet and stuff, but we all wanna go. Steven definitely has to go. He's been to the town before and knows how to get to it. Miriam's the best fighter so she should go. If I'm truthful, Susan, I'll be pretty useless, but I wanna get off this rock so bad, even if it's only for a couple of days on a scoutin' mission.

So, we decided all of us would go. We haven't told Pearl yet. She's gonna flip. Or, she might start lookin' at us all zombie like Grant does and not care at all what we do. If that happens, I guess I'll hafta stay with the oldies. But I hope it don't. And I swear I'll come back to you, Susie. We're gonna scoot off for a couple days, and if it's too dangerous, we'll come right back.

I promise you'll see me again. I'll never leave you forever without sayin' a final goodbye, my little Susie. Never.

## 2

*"IT WAS SUNNY when I sailed to Victoria and picked up Noah like he'd asked me to. He didn't ask me by talking, you understand, because he couldn't talk at all by then. He managed to write and send it to me on my vid. We had a pact that went way back to when we were kids, and even though I hadn't seen him for years and everything happened the way it happened, I was bound to it, in the end."*

*"Why?"*

*"Because I could feel myself beginning to change. And I thought, well, this is how we'll both end things, together, like we'd planned way back before we broke up."*

*"But that wasn't what happened, was it?"*

*"No. We went to Avalon and he died, but I came back to Toad Hall. I was supposed to die there on Avalon with him. After he took his life with the shotgun, there was one more bullet for me. I knew by then I was gonna go the same way. I could feel it, a fogging of the mind, days so unfocused, days when I forgot things. But I got scared and shot the last bullet over the cliff and buried him with the gun and somehow found my way back to Toad Hall, although I couldn't remember how I got there."*

*"Why didn't you carve Noah's name on the tombstone?"*

*"Does he deserve it?"*

No. He didn't deserve for Grant to sail him out to Avalon, either. But maybe some bonds run so deep you can't break 'em even if the bastard you made the bond with defiled your little sister.

He don't deserve to be included on the family tombstone. But I don't guess he deserves to be buried anonymously off to the side either.

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And at this point, I drop Grant's hand, stand, go to the toolbox, and get the hammer and chisel. My head feels clearer than it has since the hurricane, and the leg don't hurt much, and a little spark suddenly ignites in me, prodding me to do something, maybe something even a bit noble. I move past Miriam sleeping quiet, Steven snoring, Kira lying face-down on her pillow, which used to scare me when she was little. I always figured she'd smother herself, but she never has. Mike moans in a fitful sleep. I open the door without a creak and head up Pook's Hill to Dad's looming tombstone.

Grant follows me out the door but not up the hill. Instead, he heads down to the lagoon. When he returns, I've almost chipped out a wobbly N below Laddie's name. Grant puts a shell on Susan's grave, another on Laddie's, and one on Dad's. Nothing on Noah's, but I now understand why. He sits on Kira's rock and stares out to sea as I chip away at the marble.

If anyone else – Steven, Miriam, or Kira – came up here right now, would I talk to 'em? Or would I be silent like Grant? It seems like Grant and I are the only ones in crisp focus, in bright, blazing color. If anyone else wandered up this way, they'd be wispy and dull and covered in shadows.

I finally step back, observing my horrible chisel job. Noah's name is not neat or in line with the others or even straight. It zig-zags all over the place just like the real Noah, but I'm still proud it's at least a bit legible. I turn to Grant. He sits, eyes vacant, tears dripping down his face.

No. Not tears. Rain. It's raining, a cold, steady cascade from the heavens, and I wonder when it started or if it's been pouring on us this whole time and I didn't even notice. I take Grant's hand and we move slow and careful, but both shivering now,

back toward Camelot. How on earth did it get so cold so fast? This feels like Cascadia rain, not rain in the subtropics.

I try to listen for him as we walk hand-in-hand.

*"They're gonna leave us. I can hear 'em making plans."* I think-say to Grant.

It hasn't upset me like I thought it would, listening to 'em whisper, not realizing I can hear 'em. But it don't scare me. In a way, they've already left us. Steven, Miriam, and Kira might physically be here, but their heads are someplace far away. But we're here, Grant, Mike, and me. We're home, where we should be.

### 3

LAST NIGHT I dreamed I was alone on the island and everyone else had died or left. And I was set, for a while anyway, 'cause I had at least a five-month's supply of food left for myself since I didn't have to share it. And I was real excited 'bout it—in my dream—having all that food for myself, not having to share it.

But then I woke up and felt disgusted with myself, even if it was just a dream. I remember the boy Jack, and how, before the nado hit, I'd made friends with his fam and kinda started feeling like they were my fam too, but then after the nado, I became wary, like it was either them or me. Like it'd only be a matter of time before we turned on each other, so I'd better get out while I could.

But would they truly have turned on me, those folks in the mountains? Or is it simply me, figuring the only way to save myself is to run from everyone? These people on Avalon, they're

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more like fam now than anyone I've ever known, 'cept Mom. Mom would — *did* — die to protect me. Would anyone here?

Yes. Steven would. He'd never turn on me. I can tell by his patience, by his kindness, by how, when I need to be alone, he lets me go and don't complain and how he looks at me from across the cold concrete of Camelot like I'm a princess and this is my castle and he's my knight.

Do I need a knight?

Not to survive, I don't. I can survive on my own. Even if I don't have my knife anymore. But to be happy? To rise above simply surviving? I reckon I need him for that. I need 'em all. Even the ones I know aren't gonna make it off this island alive.

Part of me says, *Kill the zombies. Grant and Mike. Like they did in the prison. You're wasting food on 'em. They're doomed to die anyway.* But the other part says, *We're all doomed to die at some point. Who am I to decide when that is?*

I don't want it to come down to them or me. I want it to be *us* for as long as it can be us, even if it uses up all the food.

"You reckon the old town on the coast — Puerto de Luz — might have stores of supplies?" I whisper to Steven as we towel Pearl and Grant dry. They've both stumbled into Camelot shivering, but neither of 'em will give an explanation as to what they were doing out in this cold rain. I expect it of Grant, but not Pearl.

"Might be people there too," Kira says.

Steven says, "Not accordin' to Mike's vid."

"That don't prove anythin'," Kira says. "His vid isn't showin' us either now, and we know we're here."

Kira's statement worries me. As much as we need supplies, I don't wanna meet up with any people. If we can sneak into the

town, scuttle around in the shadows, and sniff out some food like rats do, then scuttle away again without anyone seeing us, I'd be more up for it. I don't wanna bargain with anyone. We have nothing to bargain with 'cept ourselves, and I'm not gonna sell myself for survival, not yet. I wait until we finish putting Pearl and Grant into their respective cots, then move with the other two into the kitchen where we can talk more private.

I say, "Can we get close to the town without anybody spottin' us? I mean, we don't have any weapons now at all. We can't risk gettin' caught."

Steven rubs his chin. "Maybe we can avoid people if we glide in at night. The dinghy's engine don't make much noise. I suppose we'll find out pretty quick whether anyone still lives in the town or not."

Kira's eyes glint in the semi-darkness. We haven't turned on the lights, but the rain sputters through a chink in the roof. "And if folks still live there?"

Steven glances at me, so I answer, "Then we regroup. I don't wanna approach anyone, not yet."

"Seems a long way to go just to turn 'round," Kira says. "What if we don't find anybody?"

"Then we go in, see if they've left anything," Steven says.

Kira frowns. "And then come back here. Then what?"

"Then...we figure out what to do next."

"Just seems like a long way to go to end up back here."

"Yeah, but where else can we go?" Steven says. "You wanna abandon Pearl and Grant and Mike? We can't do that."

Kira turns to me. "What 'bout you? You fixin' to hightail it once we reach the mainland?"

"Hell, no. It's safer here."

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“‘Til we run outta food.” She watches the rain dripping onto the concrete floor. “So, when are we gonna do this?”

Steven frowns. “Not ‘til the weather’s right. If we can’t get anyone’s vid to show us what the weather might be like, we’ll have to wait for a sunny day with calm seas and hope it stays that way.”

But the days remain damp and dark and chilly, and the seas stay fitful, and the solars keep the batteries charged barely enough to heat stuff in the crockpot. We drink aqua straight from the cistern and hope it don’t have bird crap polluting it, since running the desals takes up a lot of juice. But the rains also keep the birds away and the cistern full, and nobody gets sick.

Pearl moves about now, totally energetic. She says her leg don’t hurt and her pox don’t itch anymore – they’re now little scabs all over her face – and she comes up with interesting ways to make tasty meals outta the food we have left. Steven says he’s never seen her so cheery. I guess she’s healing and maybe we don’t have to worry so much about leaving her and Mike and Grant alone for a couple of days. Seems like she could possibly handle it, although we haven’t told her about the trip yet.

Mike definitely needs looking after now. He’s pretty much stopped talking. He probably can talk, only it’s too much of a chore to try to get his thoughts heard through all the stuttering. Sometimes he writes down what he wants to say to us, but only when he’s desperate, like when he’s really hurting and wants one of us to rub his spasming limbs. He don’t ask for drugs much. We don’t have much left to give him. He’s taken two of the remaining sedatives, and I’ve hidden the rest so Pearl won’t gulp ‘em down, although she don’t seem to want ‘em now.



Grant acts like he normally does. Every morning he heads out the door, only he's doing it a little later now, usually after breakfast, and Pearl's taken to following him closely to make sure he don't slip on the wet path, she says, even though it means she'll get as drenched as he gets. Nobody even thought to pack an umbrella on the *Argo*, and the rain now is cold and unpleasant.

"You should leave him to it," Kira murmurs as Pearl gets ready to follow Grant out the door. "No sense in both of you gettin' wet."

"What if he slips and hurts himself?"

"Then you'll know in a couple of hours when he don't come back. It isn't like this island is the size of Alaska."

"Well, it's a thought, Kira, and I don't care much for getting wet, but I don't wanna have to take care of an old man with a broken leg either," Pearl says.

"What if we don't let Grant go outside?" Steven suggests. "Tell him it's rainin' and he can't leave the bunker?"

Pearl snorts at this. She's already opened the door for Grant, who's halfway out. "It isn't acid, he's not gonna dissolve. Besides, he *has* to go. It's important to him."

Steven frowns. "How would you know?"

Instead of answering, Pearl fires a question at him that throws us all for a loop. "When are you heading to the mainland?"

Steven, Kira, and I shoot glances at each other. Then Kira turns to Pearl and says, "How'd you know we were plannin' that?"

But Pearl's already skipped (actually skipped) out the door like she's a little kid going out to play in the rain, and the door's shutting behind her.

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Kira says, "Well, I guess she knows."

I glance at Mike. He has his eyes closed, but I bet he's awake. His arms jerk with spasms, and they don't do that near as much when he's sleeping. "Did you know too, Mike?"

He gulps and nods but don't open his eyes.

"She seems almost happy 'bout it," Kira says.

"I don't like it," Steven says. "I mean, I guess we should be thankful she isn't gettin' all maniac 'bout it, but this isn't Pearl. Our Pearl'd be worried sick and would wanna talk us outta goin'."

"S-s-s-s-he w-w-w-w-w-want-t-t-s y-y-you g-g-g-on-n-ne," Mike whispers from his cot.

Steven says, "Why would she want that?"

Mike don't answer him.

Steven's right, it don't make any sense. Why would someone like Pearl, who spent her entire life mothering two orphans, suddenly wanna get rid of 'em? How could she so cheerfully change her mind about 'em just like that?

## 4

WHENEVER IT ISN'T rainin' too hard, I try to salvage what I can from the *Argo*. The lines are still usable, so I detach 'em all and roll 'em up. I stock the dinghy with some of it, 'cause you never know when rope'll come in handy, and I store the rest in the half-patched storeroom that isn't good for storin' food anymore but is OK for ropes and stuff.

If the waves and wind had simply pushed the *Argo* up the beach but left her intact, it'd have been one thing, but that damned rock punched a hole into her side and she's mostly

submerged now, half-tilted over, the stub of her mast stickin' pitifully outta the lagoon like a periscope. Anythin' not on her decks, includin' Miriam's knife, is pretty much at the bottom of the lagoon, so I can't salvage much. Miriam's scoured the beach and shallows, but she can't find the knife or its scabbard.

At least the dinghy is all stocked and ready. The plan is only to be gone a couple of days, but just in case, I've stored a good bit of jerky, some dried fruit, a few gallons of aqua, and the one jug of hard cider that didn't bust to pieces in the hurricane. It's the last of the cider, and I figure it might be good for tradin' if we run into anyone. Or we might drink it. I dunno.

Kira's ground the remainin' wheat groats and a pile of chick-peas into flour, and Pearl's busy fryin' 'em up into flatbread. Pearl's awfully enthusiastic 'bout our plan, standin' over the stove and hummin' while she flips the bread and stacks the finished ones to cool.

I tell her, "I don't get it, Pearl. Why're you so happy to see us go?"

She says, "I'm not happy, per se, but it has to be done, Steven. I get it."

"Do you want one of us to stay? Kira could."

She laughs. "Kira'll fight you on that one. She's bound and determined to go."

That might be true, but what's truer is that Pearl is *more* bound and determined that we go. But why? I ask, "You sure you'll be OK without us? What if your sciatica acts up again?"

She pours more batter on the sizzlin' pan and says, "We'll be OK, Steven. Kira's ground enough beans to last us a while, and once the sun comes out, the solars'll pump out more juice, and all this rain has filled the cistern to overflowing."

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“What ‘bout Mike? He’s hurtin’ pretty bad now.”

She scratches a pox mark. They aren’t so bad now they’ve gotten all scabby, and although it makes me kinda itchy to look at ‘em, they aren’t all swollen and pus-filled anymore and don’t make me all queasy like they used to. “Not much you can do for Mike even if you stay. ‘Cept...”

My brain finishes the sentence for her. ...*to dig his grave*, is what I bet she was gonna say. I lower my voice although I doubt Mike can hear me all the way in the other room. “How long do you reckon he’s got?”

“Dunno, Steven. But he isn’t gonna get better, that’s for sure.” She flips the bread. “I’ve gotten used to the idea now. Frankly, at this point, I hope he dies before he suffers too much longer.”

He’s sufferin’ enough already, I figure, but she’s right. Nothin’ we can do for him ‘cept wait. Even if we found a hospital in Puerto de Luz, he’s beyond help now. I put my hand on Pearl’s shoulder. “What ‘bout you, Pearl?”

She gives me a cheerful smile. “I’m doing OK, Steven. Better than I have in a long time. Don’t worry about me too much. I’m pretty sure I’m past the worry of getting Pan4 zombie.”

I don’t know much ‘bout Pan4 zombie ‘cept what Mike’s told us. There’s a period of wellness before the zombie starts, but the period of wellness don’t last long. It’s a week after New Year’s now, so we’ve been on this island a little over two months. Seems like if the zombie hasn’t taken her over yet, it probably won’t.

I give her shoulder a squeeze, then say, “The sea is calmer. Soon as the rain breaks, we’ll be off.”

She’s turned away from me now, but nods as she flips the last piece of flatbread onto the stack. She’s ready for us to go,

almost impatient even. Maybe she's worried 'bout our remainin' supplies and that worry has eclipsed her worry 'bout our safety.

But I'm beginnin' to agree with what Mike said. For some crazy, inexplicable reason, she truly wants us gone.

IT'S EARLY MORNIN' and I follow Grant and Pearl up to the cliffs, under a cloudless sky. Grant leads, seashells clutched in his fist. Pearl strides behind him, not hobblin' with the cane like she was only a few days ago. We reach the Pater's tombstone. Kira already sits on her rock, playin' a sweet but melancholy song on her violin. She turns to us and smiles, but it's a sad smile. Behind her the sunrise has painted the sky all sorts of soft yellows and pinks, and I wish I had my sketchbook and colored pencils with me, but they're already packed in the dinghy.

Kira says, "I'm sayin' goodbye to Susie. We're gonna head out today, right, Steven?"

I watch Grant place a seashell on Susan's grave. "Yep. We'll shove off after breakfast. If the sun stays out, the solars'll keep the dinghy's motor goin'. We should have plenty of juice to get to the mainland."

Kira glances at Susan's little grave. "It's harder than I thought to leave her."

"You could stay here with Pearl and Grant and Mike."

Pearl snaps, "No, it's all planned. Kira needs to go too."

Kira turns to Pearl. "Why do you want us gone so bad, Pearl?"

Pearl takes her hand and squeezes it. "I don't want you gone, Kira."

Only she does. It's obvious to all of us.

Pearl goes on. "I'll feel better if you all stick together. You can help each other. And I do expect all of you to come back.

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With food. Or news. Or something.” She turns away from us, waits until Grant drops his other shells, then leads him back down the hill toward Camelot.

I glance at Kira. She’s got a torn look on her face, like she don’t wanna leave her little buried baby but, at the same time, wants to get as far away from Avalon as she can.

I say, “C’mon, Kira. Everythin’s ready. We’ll eat breakfast, then shove off.”

We follow the older folks down to the bunker. As urgent as it seems Pearl wants us to go, it’s not half as urgent as what I’m feelin’. I’m excited but scared. The last few days, cooped up in Camelot and knowin’ we could’ve already gotten to the mainland and back if the weather hadn’t been so cruddy has driven me kinda nuts. It’s puttin’ Miriam on edge too. And that worries me ‘cause ever since we lost the *Argo* and have had to spend our nights crammed in the bunker with the others, we haven’t made love once. It’s too rainy out to sneak off somewhere private, even if Miriam wanted to. I tried to convince her we could hide in the dinghy and have some fun, but she frowned and said, “That don’t sound too comfy, smushed in there,” and changed the subject.

I kinda wish Kira weren’t comin’. Then it’d just be me and Miriam, alone on a boat in the vast sea. We could talk and make love and make plans for the future together, kinda like how me and Maggie Miller did on our way to and from Avalon that one summer. Miriam and me can’t do any of that if Kira’s in the dinghy too. But Miriam don’t seem to have much urge to be alone with me anyway. She swats me away whenever I try to get romantic, like I’m a pesky gnat from Mirkwood.

So, the only thing that scares me 'bout takin' off to the mainland is this. What if, when we get there, Miriam ditches us? Heads off without us to find somethin' better? She keeps goin' on 'bout how we're her fam now and how much she cares 'bout us, but she sure isn't actin' like it lately. At least, not toward me.

5

SUSIE, I'M THINKIN' this to ya. I can't talk 'cause we're on this small dinghy and there's no privacy, just enough space for us not to smack each other if we sit real still. This dinghy is so tiny and every little wave feels like a tsunami. I can't blame you anymore for my seasickness, so I'm hopin' it don't happen.

Anyway, you can hear me, right? I don't need a vid or to talk out loud. I can think to you 'cause you're a ghost now, floatin' 'round out there. Maybe you'll be our angel and watch over us, 'cause even though when we left the sea was pretty flat, now it's all roly and we've only been out here a couple hours. Steven says if we chug dead east, we'll get to the mainland in maybe five hours or so. Luckily, it's sunny out. Sunny but cold.

You'd reckon, way down here near the 'quator, it wouldn't be cold. Steven says it really isn't, but we've gotten used to the warm, humid weather. He figures it's 'bout sixty degrees. We wouldn't reckon that was cold at all back in Cascadia. It's enough so you want a jacket to shelter yourself from the wind here, though. Luckily, we had warm jackets when we sailed outta Cascadia.

Anyway, Susie, I'm not sure what we're hopin' for on this quest. If we're tryin' to find more supplies or if we're tryin' to make contact with a friendly civ that might take us in. Puerto

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de Luz *was* high civ enough to have service for Mike's vid to work, that is 'til the hurricane hit. At one point, Susie, Mike saw a bunch of dots all congregated in the town, but that was a while back. Who knows if anyone's there now, or what to expect. I hope when we get a little closer, my vid'll work. It don't have the same capability as Mike's — we won't see us as little dots on it — but if we do get reception, then we know some kinda civ has gotta be out there. At least, that's what I hope.

But what if we find nothin' in the town? Or, what if people live there but they're low civ, the kind so much like animals that they'll eat you up rather than help you out? Or what if they're like Pearl was with the Morlocks? All spiteful and locked away behind fences so we can't even ask 'em for help? You know, it's funny, I guess we're the Morlocks now.

Your daddy was a Morlock, Susie, accordin' to Pearl, but don't you believe that means he was bad. It isn't fair to pin people with such a bad name 'cause they don't have a home to go to and have to scrounge like rats to survive. You know, Susie, if we'd just opened our doors to 'em, if we'd torn down the fence surroundin' Toad Hall, maybe we coulda had a nice society with everybody helpin' everybody else. That's what high civ's supposed to be like, right? That's what I always pictured the east like, but Miriam says it isn't like that. She says mostly some people have all the money and land and everyone else is strugglin'. So, I guess if we'd left Toad Hall and headed east, we'd be a few more of the strugglin' bunch. Like we are now.

I don't know what we'd do without Miriam, Susie. All the time on the island, she's been so calm, so steady. She's helped everyone through things. But if you tell her this, if you tell her



what a good person she is, she don't wanna hear it. She says she's got too much anger in her. I've never seen it, 'cept that time on the pier. She says it's 'cause she's happy with us. She feels safe. But if you look at her now, Susie—just peek, don't stare—you can see she's nervous. She wanted to be part of this expedition, but she isn't happy 'bout meetin' strangers, that's for sure. She'd rather be back with Pearl and Grant and Mike and you and Laddie and the Pater. I don't like it when I see her get nervous. I figure if she's nervous, I should be nervous too.

The person who isn't nervous is Steven, maybe 'cause he's the only one who knows where we're goin'. He's been there before, even though it's probably all different now. I guess both Miriam and me are gonna have to rely on him to get us through this. I sure hope he knows what he's doin'. I know I don't.

## 6

I WISH I HADN'T used up all the flour in such a rash way, making all that bread and those gingerbread men. I should've parceled it out more carefully. Was I purposefully using up our supplies quick? Trying to shorten our time here so we'd return to Toad Hall faster?

That was my longing. Even though I saw the apple orchard on fire, saw the flames licking the cliffs when we ran from the Morlocks across the pier, I convinced myself that the rusting fence surrounding Toad Hall was made out of some precious, flame-retardant material—adamant maybe, like in the old fairy tales, so impenetrable fire couldn't possibly overcome it. And behind it our glorious castle still stood, defiant against the world. Maybe the adamant fence made Toad Hall invisible to

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the Morlocks or anyone else who wandered by too, keeping its insides – the library, Steven’s paintings, my four-poster bed – pristine, waiting for our return.

Now I peruse the remaining supplies and wish for more. Wish I’d been more careful. Wish the others had tried to stop me from insisting on making sourdough pancakes every morning. Were the others hoping, same as I was, that the faster we used up the supplies, the faster we’d head back to Toad Hall?

I guess we were unrealistically optimistic. Miriam mentioned it once, how she thought we lived in a weird fantasy. She couldn’t understand how we assumed everything would work out for the best. So why didn’t she try to curb us from using up our supplies needlessly? Maybe she didn’t reckon it was her place. Or maybe she was figuring along the same lines as the rest of us, once we used down the supplies, we’d be forced to decide what to do next instead of wallowing around this barren island in a weird state of false contentment.

Now we’re at the point where we must decide. The kids have taken the first step, heading off to scout out Puerto de Luz. Obviously, we couldn’t all go, not with the *Argo* out of commission. They’ll have to find a new ship before we can all leave Avalon.

But is leaving Avalon even my wish anymore?

No. It isn’t. Because I realize now that Toad Hall no longer exists. The image of a shining castle emerging from the ashes is simply a fantasy. I saw its smoldering wreckage in my dreams last night, charred pages from all those precious old books whisked away on a smoky wind. And when I woke, I knew the truth. I could see it, smell it, like I was a book myself, lying in the ruins, waiting to break apart and flutter away.

My thoughts wander to the old church. Once, I pictured the church burnt to the ground and all the gravestones charred and smoldering, 'cept Ruby's, which shone in a patch of green grass like a beacon, untouched. But my dream last night revealed a different scene. The gravestone lay toppled, black and flat on the ground, the name Grant so patiently chiseled into the stone pushed into the burnt earth. Nobody will ever read her name again.

She was my real child, Ruby. I'd clung to Steven and Kira like they could somehow fill the void I created when I naively trusted Noah's guidance and drank that potion and exhumed that precious little spark of life from my body. But Steven and Kira aren't mine. They had to leave eventually. They said they'd come back, but I hope they don't.

No, that's not true either. I want to know they're safe. I want to see them again, of course I do.

I turn to Grant who sits unblinking on his cot. Near him, Mike moans and jerks. I sit next to Grant and hold his hand. It's warm, but barely. The life is slowly leaving it.

*"What do we do about Mike? I hate to see him like this."*

*"What can we do?"* Grant's voice sounds far away, muffled, like the shadows twirling through his mind – my mind, because I see them too – block the sound from my ears. Like they have him trapped behind a thick curtain.

Mike's gonna die. There's no way around it. I wonder if he's thought of ending it. Escaping the pain. But maybe he's too weak now to even do that.

I try to speak again to Grant. I take his bony hand in mine, squeeze his fingers. *"You there, Grant?"*

I hear nothing but silence. I keep hold of his hand, my eyes shut, watching the shadows writhe and twist around each

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other like a den of vipers. They don't scare me anymore, those shadows. They appear most vividly when I hold Grant's hand, but sometimes when I'm lying on my cot on the brink of sleep, ghostly wisps flutter through my own head, circling, searching for a way to get in. They were floating among the ruins of Toad Hall in my dream last night. And when I woke up, I thought, *Is this the start of Pan4 zombie? Is this what people see when it begins? The shadows?*

But now I'm clear, alert, full of energy. We dream about all sorts of crazy things, even if we're completely normal. The shadows belong to Grant. Not to me.

## 7

IT SHOULD FEEL great to be back on the open sea again, with no land in sight. I loved it so much on our trip from Cascadia to Avalon, but now it don't feel right. *I don't feel right.* I never got seasick once on that trip, even when everyone else – even Steven – was puking. But now my tum rumbles and I don't feel so great. I feel all nervy, and I'd blame that on this trip, but I've been feeling nervy for days.

We're steering the old-fashioned way, by our position relative to the sun, 'cause all the old charts on the *Argo* dissolved into pieces in the turbulent lagoon and our vids still aren't working. Steven reckons we'll hit Puerto de Luz if we sail due east. When he was young, he sailed up and down the coast a lot, so he figures even if we miss the town, he'll know whether to sail north or south to find it. We haven't missed though. It's misty and getting dark, but I can see tiny pinpricks of light grouped on the horizon. Behind us the sun is setting. It's gonna

be pitch black before we reach those lights, but that don't matter now. They're like beacons, like in "Play the Game," where X marks the spot and if you reach it, you'll find where the pirate treasure is buried.

"There it is," Steven says.

Kira lies across the starboard bench, snoring lightly and mumbling some word that sounds like "yammerin'" in her sleep. She snorts and her eyes open and she sits up, shrinking against the dinghy's side and pulling her feet up onto the bench. She stares at the lights blinking on the horizon. "Is that Puerto de Luz?" she whispers.

Steven nods. "It's in the right place anyway. See the mountain behind it? That's the Lobo Triste, the Mournful Wolf. See, it looks like it's howlin' at the moon."

He points, and although the sky is turning black, I can see it, and it does kinda look like a wolf with its nose pointing into the air. There's even a little gap where a mouth would be.

"When will we land?" Kira says.

"Couple hours. The town has a deep harbor. It's small, but we can glide right in, even in the dark."

Kira mulls this over for a minute, then says, "Then what'll we do?"

"I don't know," Steven says. "I haven't thought that far ahead."

Kira is silent. I wonder what she's thinking, but then I realize she's studying her vid. She pokes a finger at it. "I've got reception."

I peer at the horizon. High up on the Lobo Triste, a tiny red light flashes, almost where the wolf's nose would be if it were a real wolf. It wasn't flashing earlier, but the light must come from a sporadically working tower. My right hand slides down

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to my hip, expecting to feel the comforting presence of my knife, and I remember with a sickening jolt that it isn't there. I suddenly wish Steven would turn the boat around. This is too close to high civ for me. Maybe it isn't actual high civ – maybe the vids might work but everyone in that town is starving or enslaved or dead. Who knows? But I don't wanna go there. Not even to search for food.

What are we gonna do when we get there? My thought was always to find food – steal it if we have to – then head back to the island. Maybe even scout for a good boat to steal, one that'll hold Pearl and Grant and Mike. I reckon Steven is pondering this too.

But Kira's motive, I'm pretty sure, is different. If this were simply a food scouting mission, she coulda easily stayed on Avalon with the oldies and waited for us to return. Kira isn't really the adventurous type, not in that sense. But she's dying for civ, something she's never experienced living locked up in Toad Hall all her life with only her vid to show her the rest of the world. She's dreamed about it, and she's got some Pearlesque fantasy in her head about how it's gonna be, and she wants it. She isn't gonna find it here, though, not on some half-wrecked town on the edge of an equatorial jungle. But she reckons she might, and that scares me. What if we stop paying attention to her, even for a couple of minutes, and she goes wandering off in the hopes of finding somebody?

It's pitch dark when we steal into the harbor. My tum has calmed a bit, but I'm still nervous. A fog has settled over the town and the lights try to push through it, but it does its best to muffle their brightness. It covers the harbor too, but Steven glides the dinghy through. We search for other

vessels and can barely make out one or two little fishing boats tied to a half-smashed pier. The boats aren't much bigger than the dinghy. Definitely not worth stealing. But at least they're floating. The hurricane must not have hit here as hard as we thought.

Steven peers through the fog. "This is all wrong. It must be Puerto de Luz, but look at those buildings."

I follow his gaze and concentrate on what I'm seeing. The fog clings to huge, blocky structures up the hill, a bit of a ways from the harbor. "Warehouses?"

"Maybe, I dunno. They weren't here last time I visited. Over there" — he points to his left where a cinderblock building sits — "was the old hotel. Only it had a tiled roof and columns in the front and palm trees lining it. And over that way" — he points to his right — "were some houses, but seems like they're gone too. Nothin' here but these big ugly buildings."

"When did you say you were here last?" Kira says.

"Right before the Big One. The tsunami could've wiped out some of the town, but not all of it. I mean, it wasn't a big enough wave to reach Camelot, right? So how could the pretty old town I remember just vanish? How'd these ugly things replace it so fast?"

Something about the cold, dead buildings makes me shudder. "I don't reckon anyone lives here, Steven. These look like warehouses or bunkers or somethin'."

"People could live in 'em," Kira says. "Communally, you know, like how we're livin' in Camelot. Maybe instead of individual houses they're all crammed into these bunker things."

"Or maybe they're for storage," Steven says. "Maybe this is where they're stockin' food."

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"They sure look sturdy anyway," Kira says. "The hurricane didn't do much damage here, that's for sure."

"Pier don't seem in such great shape, though," I murmur.

We creep up to it anyway, tie off a good distance from the other boats, and clamber onto it.

"Do you reckon the buildings are guarded?" Kira whispers.

Well, there's only one way to find out. First thing to do is to figure out what these big buildings are holding, if we can get into 'em. A part of me thinks, *Wouldn't it be nice if they were packed full of food?* Another part of me thinks, *Yeah, but if we take it, someone else is gonna suffer.*

I hope we don't meet anybody. It's much easier to steal stuff if we don't know who we're stealing it from.

We creep up the swaying pier, into the fog, moving as stealthily as we can, but our footsteps echo off the wood no matter how softly we tread. We walk until we hit a chain link fence with barbed wire topping it. Reminds me of the fence surrounding Toad Hall, or the razor wire wrapped around the Iowa prison.

The fence's gate isn't locked. It squeaks something dreadful when we push on it, though. Kira sucks in her breath, and I wait for someone to shine a light in our eyes and yell, "Who goes there?"

But nobody does. The place is silent like a cemetery, ghostly quiet.

We tiptoe around the first building, its gray cinderblocks rising above us and disappearing into the clinging fog. We find a heavy metal door that's locked tight.

"No way we're gettin' into that," Steven says.

We move to the next building. Same. Locked. Each building is dead, quiet, bolted tight. The fence wraps around all of 'em,



and we finally find a gate leading out, up into the hills, but it's locked too. Behind it lies fragments of the old town, huddled under the mountain – half fallen down houses, some still standing with lights shining out their windows. People live in 'em. Not many, maybe, but definitely people. Enough to fix the vid signals on top of that mountain, anyway. I can't help shuddering. I don't care if they're high civ or not, I don't want to meet those people.

"What do we do now?" Kira whispers.

"I vote we go back to the dinghy and regroup," Steven says. "Get somethin' to eat. The houses are all outside this fence, so we could sneak 'round it from the pier side, see what's up."

"Let's not," I say.

He turns to me. "Why not?"

I don't answer, just shudder again.

"I sure would like to know what's in all these bunkers," Kira says.

As we move back to the unlocked gate, the fog clears and the stars begin to twinkle. A soft breeze blows. I glance back at the buildings. Their tops are now visible, the lights fixed on their roofs illuminate the area around us. Lights, and something else.

"Shit," I whisper. "There's vids up there."

Steven stops and gazes to where I'm pointing. "How can you tell?"

I direct my finger to the little blinking blue lights. We couldn't see 'em through the fog, but they're sharp and clear now. "Like the vids on the prison roof. They're scannin' the area. If anyone's watchin', they can see us."

"Let's go then," Steven says, swiveling toward the gate and speeding up his steps.

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Kira and me have to almost run to keep up with him, but blocking the gate, standing there waiting for us, are three men — big, muscled, guns raised to their shoulders, eyes hard and cold.

My hand slides to the knife that should be hanging on my side but isn't. Even if it were there, it'd do no good, not now.

Guns always trump knife. I reach for the comforting hand of Steven instead.

### 8

IT'S THE DREAM more than the puzzle piece that matters in the end.

In this dream, I'm in a room filled with ghosts. They take up every bit of space, smushing into the corners and crowding in on each other. And they aren't wispy shadows but real people, although I can tell they're dead. They have recognizable faces. Old women, little boys, men in their prime, girls with long hair on the brink of starting their life in earnest — but somebody's stolen it from them. Little babies who never even had a chance. They mill around, then they see me and stop and they all turn my way. I recognize 'em. The little girl whose parents died in the pox stage, but she managed to weather through it only to succumb to the zombie. The man who'd just retired — we'd had long talks at his bedside until the morning he stared at me with dull, vacant eyes and whispered, "Dr. Rogers, I hope it'll be quick."

And it *was* quick, once I'd injected him. Amazingly quick.

I'd injected 'em all — every ghost I see now in this room — and my thoughts swivel to Miriam. Her voice echoes through this crowded den of misery from when she told us what they did with the sick prisoners in that jail she was in.

*"They shot the ones that went zombie."*

She said it like she couldn't believe it, like how could anyone act so brutally, and Kira gasped with horror at the words. But what is more horrific, watching patients die slowly or putting 'em outta their misery quick? There was nothing we could do, and we needed the hospital beds for others who might pull through, who had a chance of being saved. We had no room left for the ones who wouldn't make it, but we couldn't turn 'em out to wander aimlessly until they dropped dead in the gutter from cold or heat or starvation or thirst. The ones who had gone zombie weren't ever going to survive. None ever do.

So, we shot 'em. With drugs, not bullets, but it amounts to the same thing.

And here I am, zombie but alive and thinking clearly even though I can't move a muscle without intense pain, and I wonder, how many of the dead people in this dream saw me come at them with my needle and couldn't defend themselves. Couldn't speak, couldn't move to get away. They knew the end was coming and probably tried to avoid my approaching hand but couldn't. And now, are all these eyes staring at me with hatred? With pity? With thankfulness that I provided a quick, painless end?

I can't tell. But they're coming to claim me now. To welcome or damn me permanently into their world.

And suddenly, they all rise, right off the ground, and spin and swirl and vanish, and the room is empty except for Camelot's red table now sitting smack in the middle of it, and here's the puzzle on the table, and here's the last piece, spinning up in the air and settling into its spot. I gaze upon the face I can now plainly see hovering over the blue jeans and the bare

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feet, standing next to Grant's cane lying on the ground. It's a nameless face, both blank and full of life.

It's the face of every person who went zombie and I killed.

I open my eyes and stare into darkness. Back when the roof was intact, you could never tell it was morning until you opened the door, but now a sliver of light shoots through a chink in the kitchen roof. My eyes swivel to Grant sitting on his cot, his eyes fixed on me.

"G-g-g-r-r-an-t-t?" I whisper.

He stands and moves to my cot. Snores blare from Pearl's cot. Grant stares at me, eyes blank and yet weirdly intense at the same time. I understand the meaning in his eyes. "*Don't wake Pearl.*" He holds out his cane.

I reach out and take it. Far away, in some other world, my legs twitch with pain and my fingers clench in spasms, but now it's like I'm still residing in that dream where pain doesn't exist. My legs shake under me as I stand and move alongside Grant, but they don't buckle. I grip the cane and push the door open. We walk up Pook's Hill, toward the cliffs.

It should be agony. It shouldn't even be possible. When was the last time I could crawl off this cot on my own? When was the last time someone didn't have to half-carry me to the toilet and hold me on the toilet while I did my business, every squeeze to push out a hard pellet or force a stream of urine out causing my whole body to clench in agonizing spasms? When was the last time I could grasp anything in my hand, let alone a cane, and still have the strength to keep it clenched between my twitching fingers? And how — how on earth — am I climbing Pook's Hill? One agonizing step at a time, except I don't feel the agony. I sense it. It must be happening, but something greater

wills me forward, forces my bare feet to push along this sandy path, deadens the expected pain. Maybe it's the sheer will of Grant who walks slowly beside me, encouraging me forward although he doesn't say a thing. Our final walk across Avalon together as brothers.

It's like we're gliding through my dreams, Grant and me, through the jigsaw puzzle, up to Dad's tombstone, and I half-expect to see the body with the bare feet and the blue jeans and the ever-changing faces hovering above it. But it isn't there.

I drop Grant's cane and walk unaided past the tombstone. Mist covers the ground here. Not dreamy mist but real fog, thicker where the cliff ends and the sea and air begin. It's so solid I bet I can walk on it. I bet it can hold my weight, no problem.

I pass Susan's grave. I step over Laddie's. There's another grave here too. Must be Noah's. Nobody else has died. Or have they? Maybe Grant and me are the only ones left in the world.

I stand on the cliff's edge and can hear Grant breathing near me. I reach out, take his hand. Squeeze it. His normally limp fingers squeeze back.

*"It's OK."*

A bank of fog lies ahead. The urge to step out onto that fog, to see if it will truly hold me up, consumes me. I raise my leg and let go of Grant's hand.

And as I do, every ache and spasm slams back into me, all at once, and I crumple into a haze of pain. Into the fog, cold and bitter and absolutely insubstantial.

As the air whistles around me, the pain leaves. The buffeting wind takes it all away.

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And I see them below me now, all those faces, floating in the foamy waves crashing on the rocks. They welcome me with smiles and open arms.

### 9

I WAKE UP, SCREAMING. The sciatica, which had gone dormant for days now, suddenly throws the door open without any warning and yells “Surprise!” at the top of its lungs. Every muscle, from the tips of my toes to the deep muscles in my butt, clenches so fiercely I can hardly breathe.

My sciatica is caused by a spinal cyst pressing against the sciatic nerve. It’ll never go away, that cyst. When good doctors were still available to perform an operation, you could get it fixed, but by the time my sciatica reared its ugly head, getting an operation only happened if you were about to keel over and die—surgeons were that scarce. So, I’m stuck with it forever. I can cope with the pain, but sometimes, when it’s too intense, I fall into a deep black hole and contemplate if hobbling up to the top of Pook’s Hill and throwing myself off as a sacrifice to Poseidon, onto the sharp rocks below, would be for the best. And when I come out of the funk, the realization that I’ve even thought this way terrifies me. Mike says chronic pain can wear anyone down. But I don’t want to go that way, I truly don’t.

Now, as I clench my teeth and pray for the cramp to subside, Pook’s Hill pushes into my thoughts and there’s me tripping off the cliff’s edge. It’s so vivid it’s like I’ve actually done it. I expect to feel the cold slap of aqua, the sharp crack of bone breaking against rock.

“Grant!” I gasp. I try to roll over but can’t, the pain is too intense. I lie on my back, grab my knee, and pull the leg up to my chest. The pain eases a bit. “Grant!”

He stands over me now, his eyes seeing right through me, maybe to the floor beneath my cot. But he knew to come when I called. He heard that. Or maybe it’s time for his morning trek up to the graves.

I reach for his hand and grasp it. *“Help me sit up. Where’s the cane?”*

Grant isn’t much use as leverage, but by holding onto him I manage to throw my legs over the cot’s side. Even sitting is agony. I release his hand, try to stand, but can’t—the leg buckles. God, and I have to pee. How the hell am I gonna make it to the toilet? Where the hell is the cane?

Shit...where’s Mike?

Grant opens the door now and shuffles out into a gray mist. He has the cane in his hand, I see now. He’s leaving me. Heading down to Mermaid’s Lagoon to find his damned seashell, I suppose. Never mind that Kira had brought up a whole bucketful before she left, placed next to the door where you almost trip on it if you aren’t careful, so Grant would see it. But he don’t see things like that. He sees his routine. Go to the lagoon. Find a shell. Head to the graves on Pook’s Hill.

He wouldn’t have done me any good anyway if he’d stayed. He’s too feeble to be used as a crutch. The muscles in my leg clench tighter. All I can do is lie back down, praying my bladder will hold, hoping Grant returns soon.

*But Mike? What happened to Mike?*

I pull my leg back to my chest and close my eyes. *Breathe. In slowly. Out even slower.* Miriam taught me this. Controlling your

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breathing is the first step to controlling your emotions. But it don't help. Hot, frustrated tears ooze between my eyelids. I'm alone. Everyone's deserted me. The kids have been gone a full day and night now. Grant has wandered off. God knows what happened to Mike, but it can't be good.

Once, long ago, I had a pet cat. I begged for a kitten after reading *The Tale of Tom Kitten* by Beatrix Potter. I had some weird idea that I could teach a kitten to walk on its hind legs like they do in the story and dress it up in clothes. Anyway, the cute kitten I called Moppet grew into Moppet the tom cat, who sprayed everything with his horrible stink and sharpened his claws on Dad's favorite chair, so he eventually got delegated to the barns. He'd remember me though, and when I went to gather chicken eggs, he'd wander up and give my leg an affectionate rub with his head, and I was always glad to see him. He was the only pet I'd ever felt any attachment to. Years later he came down with feline leukemia, and when he disappeared one day (right about the time I lost Ruby), Grant had said, "Animals do that when they're sick. They wander off so they can die alone."

The image of a mewling Moppet is what I see now when I close my eyes and wonder where Mike got to. And Grant's voice, clear and strong as it was years ago when Moppet died, echoes in my ears.

*"They wander off to die alone."*

Grant comes back in with a fistful of seashells. He hasn't trekked up to Pook's Hill yet. Why'd he come back here? He shuffles to his cot, sits, and stares into nothing. It hurts like hell, but I roll off my mattress and stumble to him. I take his hand, but I don't see his shadows or hear his voice. It don't matter. I know what I saw in my dream. What my shadows showed me.



It wasn't me falling off that cliff. It was Mike.

Grant slips his hand out of mine and shuffles to the supply room. He comes out with the hammer and chisel and heads for the door.

I will myself to ignore the pain and crawl across the hard floor to where Grant had propped his cane. I clutch it and get to my feet. I lean against the wall, waiting for the clenching cramp to pass. I step out the door, into the clammy mist.

A few steps and the spasm returns. I wait, balancing on the cane and my good leg. The cramp passes. I start the slow march up to Pook's Hill. The leg always relaxes when I push upwards, maybe because I have to lean forward a bit and leaning forward takes pressure off the nerve.

By the time I reach the top and crumple onto Kira's rock, Grant has already chiseled an M and the I under Noah's name. I face him and keep my back to the cliff, to the spot where Mike must have plunged to his doom. The view that way is always beautiful, the sunrises are glorious, but I don't want to ever see a sunrise hanging over that cliff again. Somewhere down there my brother's corpse churns in the surf or hangs skewed on a rock, bent and crumpled.

The leg clenches and the pain engulfs me. I close my eyes, the shadows swirling so close and becoming so thick I barely hear the chisel patiently chipping away or feel the rain beginning to drip from the steely sky.

## 10

I'VE NEVER HAD to worry much 'bout anythin' that didn't fall into a ten-mile radius of Toad Hall. My whole world up 'til

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now stretched from Bellingham, maybe down to Seattle, out to the Puget Sound. A small, sparse area in this big, scary world. But mostly, my life revolved around Toad Hall, the Millers' house, the apple orchard, the barn and the fields where we grew hay for the cattle, and the garden and greenhouse and the path leadin' through the woods to the pier. And sometimes, I'd go on "vacation" — a trip to Avalon, which'd take months so the trips happened less and less the older I got and the more important it was to stay home and make sure the crops were tended and the apples were harvested and the cows were milked and the barterin' for stuff we couldn't grow was done. That was survival mode, but accordin' to Miriam, it was still better than most people had.

So, a whole world existed that didn't concern me, that I ignored. You could listen to news or read 'bout it on the vid, but I didn't have time for those things, or maybe I didn't wanna know. What I cared 'bout were the folks I could see and touch and hear, Pearl and Kira and Grant, and Mike when he was home. Maggie and June. Laddie. They mattered, nobody else did. And as long as I could protect my little world from the rest of it, as long as the vegetables grew and the cows were fed and Toad Hall still stood, what happened anywhere else in the world didn't concern me.

It does now, though, 'cause now I'm at the mercy of it and I don't know what to do. All I can do is look at Miriam, whose face is all stony as she sits on the hard bench across the table from me. Kira sits next to her, eyes dulled with fright and exhaustion, but Miriam sits calm and still, and I can't see one expression on her face to let me know she isn't some statue or a rag doll or somethin' that has no feelings at all.

There's just us in the room. Me, Kira, Miriam, this table and these hard benches and the cinderblock walls. They put us in here hours ago and shut the door tight. No aqua, no food, no blankets to sleep with, no toilet. Kira got so desperate a couple hours ago, she went and peed in the corner. Miriam, who's been in jail before, holds it in. I feel like I'm gonna explode, and I wonder if I should follow Kira's example and get the corner completely soakin' wet when the door creaks open and a man walks in.

He's small and old, but wiry. I can see Miriam sizin' him up, but she don't have her knife, and even if we overpowered this guy, there's probably a few burly guards outside waitin' for us to try somethin' stupid. On the pier, when we met 'em, they didn't even talk to us. They didn't seem surprised to see us, or angry, or nothin'. They held their guns steady and motioned for us to put up our hands. They frisked us, quick and efficient, then nodded for us to follow. So, we did. They tromped us over to the first big buildin', the door opened like magic, and they herded us down a dark hall and put us in here. None of 'em ever said a word. But one of 'em, the youngest one, looked a little familiar, like I'd met him before, on a previous trip to Puerto de Luz. He must've been a kid then, but whoever he is, he's grownup and muscly now.

After they left us in this room, Kira said, "They must've spotted us on the vids," then we didn't talk much more 'cause we had no idea if they were listenin' to us or watchin' us, or what. We slept some on those hard benches, but not much.

The old man has on a white lab jacket like they wear in hospitals. He blinks and sniffs the acrid urine stench and says, "Oh, dear. I do apologize. They shouldn't have kept you in

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here all night." He sounds mild and friendly, kinda like Mike.

Kira gets brave enough to ask, "What are you gonna do to us?"

Miriam, who is more practical, says, "We're thirsty and we need a toilet."

The man says, "Of course you do. Follow me." He opens the door.

If we weren't so thirsty and needed to pee so bad, now'd be the time to make a rush for it, but instead we crowd into the bathroom and use the toilets and drink from the cold fountain in the hallway.

Miriam says, "Where are we?"

The old man, who has patiently waited for us, says, "You're in The Sopona."

The name don't register with me right away, but it does with Kira 'cause she blinks and says, "Sopona? The research place?"

The old man looks surprised now. "You've heard about us?"

"Yes." She turns to me. "Mike told us 'bout it, 'member? He was there for a bit."

The man says, "Was he? What was his name?"

Kira says, "Mike Rogers."

He shakes his head. "No, that name doesn't sound familiar."

"He was a patient. When The Sopona was on the east coast. He was comin' down with Pan3 zombie, so they took him in."

"Well," the man says, "I was on the team focused more on Pan4. We moved here to research the original strain. Pan4 came from the jungle surrounding Lobo Trieste, you understand. This is Ground Zero, where Pan4 all started. It stormed in here about three years ago and wiped this town almost off the map. Hardly anyone was left when we arrived, just a few starving souls."

Kira stares at him, rapt. “Weren’t you scared? You know, ‘bout catchin’ it yourself?”

He smiles. “Of course. We practically lived in bio suits those first few months, and we isolated ourselves from the townspeople until we could get a bunker built, although Pan4 had burned through and moved on by then. The folks still alive weren’t contagious anymore. Anyway, when it got too crazy back east, they super-stocked us with supplies, built more bunkers, and moved the whole operation here.”

He motions for us to follow and leads us into a much nicer room—an office—and now we get to sit in comfy armchairs instead of hard benches. He turns to Kira. “So, you know about us. Did you come here on purpose, then?”

Kira looks flustered with how to answer this, so Miriam says, “No. We were tryin’ to find food supplies. Thought we might find some in the old town.”

The man don’t believe her, I can tell. He’s starin’ at her the same way Pearl would stare at a Morlock on the rare times she met up with ‘em—eyes all hard and unblinkin’.

“Most of the old town is gone, except the houses farther inland. We live in the ones that are still habitable, along with a few natives who survived the disease and remained. But we do have plenty of supplies, that is true. The government provided for us well, although they’ve been a lot more sporadic with their supplies lately.”

Kira says, “Well, I’m Kira, and this is my brother Steven and our friend Miriam.”

He laughs. “Seems like I must apologize for not introducing myself. My name is Dr. Phillip Brown. I am director here. We are a very secure facility. Well, we’re *supposed* to be. You should

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never have been able to access the grounds, except damn Raoul left the pier gate open again." He sighs. "I've yelled at him, but it is hard for anyone to get serious about security when we hardly ever get visitors. You took 'em by surprise. Sorry they chucked you in that room overnight. We had better accommodations to offer. Anyway, nothing we can do about that now." He pulls out a vid. "Have you been exposed?"

Miriam says, "Yes, all of us. A couple of months ago."

The doctor leans forward, interested. "And you all made it through?"

Miriam glances at me, and I wonder if she's thinkin' what I'm thinkin'. This man looks nice enough. I mean, he hasn't treated us roughly at all. But how much 'bout us do we want him to know? Do we wanna tell him three more of us are out on an island off the coast? He hasn't asked us where we came from yet, but I suppose he will eventually, and what'll we say?

Before either of us can answer, though, Kira blurts out, "We took the pills."

Dr. Brown's eyes really widen at this. "There are no pills for Pan4." Yeah, that's what his voice says, but his eyes say somethin' different. He knows there *are* pills.

Kira babbles on, fast and loose now, like she does when she gets nervous. "Our brother, Mike, who was at the old Sopona, he's a doctor. He gave 'em to us when we started gettin' sick."

Somethin' 'bout Dr. Brown's gaze isn't as friendly now. It's still friendly on the outside, but fake-friendly, like he's gonna stay nice 'til we tell him more 'bout how we got the pills, then the friendliness is gonna be over. What did Mike say 'bout those pills? He stole 'em, I 'member that. He wasn't supposed to have 'em.

Dr. Brown says, “If you’ve taken those pills, I’ll need you to stay so we can conduct some tests. Those pills were never supposed to leave here, not until we approved ’em. A few months back, there was a breach in security, though, and some pills were stolen. Inside job, unfortunately. But they weren’t quite ready. We’re still experimenting, testing their effects.”

Kira is squirmin’ now. “What kinda tests do you wanna conduct on *us*?”

Dr. Brown’s voice gets all light and friendly again. “Just blood tests, some questions...that sort of thing. We’ve mostly tested the pills on monkeys and dogs since they can also develop Pan4. We have just reached the point of clinical trials on humans, but we don’t have a population here for that, so that’ll be conducted back—”

Kira says, “On the east coast?”

Dr. Brown frowns. “Mmm, yes. Although, with the rapid spread of Pan4, once the pills leave this facility, they’ll probably just be distributed as wide as possible. We’re well past worrying about conducting trials by the book, I imagine. Anyway, although you’ve all already passed through the contagious phase, we could learn something from subjects who have survived Pan4 using the pills, even if they were using an older version. Did you say there were others?”

Miriam and me exchange another glance, but Kira once again speaks up. “Yeah, but we left ’em. We came to find food to take back to...” She catches Miriam’s eye then, and finally shuts up.

Dr. Brown don’t ask us where the others are. Not yet.

Instead, he says, “You must be hungry. I’ll call for something.” He clicks on his vid. Then he says, “You’ll help us, won’t you? Agree to the tests?”

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Oh, I want so bad to say no to this. I hate needles. I hate questions. But I guess he could call those goons to pitch us into that cold, dark room again. How much choice do we actually have here?

Miriam says, "Yes, but we want some supplies in exchange, when we leave here. Food, mostly."

Dr. Brown's fake-friendly gaze flits over all of us, then he says, "Agreed. Welcome to The Sopona."

# 11

I DON'T KNOW HOW the solars work. You'd think I'd know. My own father invented the damned things. And I've watched Grant tinker with solars all my life. But I always had him to fix 'em, and now I contemplate the contraption Steven's cobbled together near the bunker and don't know what's wrong with it or how to fix the problem.

Grant knows. At least, the old Grant knew. But this Grant—the one who can find a seashell every morning and carve people's names into stone—won't even focus his eyes on the dilapidated equipment when I drag him to it. Part of one solar has fallen off and its wires wave about in the breeze. I force his face toward it so he can't help but see it, but he stands there and watches a bug crawling on the ground instead.

"Damn it, we need electro," I say. "How am I supposed to cook the beans? You could fix it in your sleep, for God's sake, Grant. We can't wait for Steven to fix it. They've been gone almost two days now. What if something happens and they don't come back? What're we gonna eat? Practically everything we've got needs cooking."



I took stock after we returned from Pook's Hill and my sciatica decided to ease up a notch. The kids took almost all the flatbread I'd prepared, leaving us only enough for today. We've got a half container of dried apples, one small bag of tea, and some jerky, but that's mostly gone too. We have oatmeal that we can soak in aqua and eat when it softens, but even that's running low. We've got rice. The unused bags of chicken feed. And beans. Lots and lots of dried beans, and you can't soften beans or rice or corn kernels enough to chew 'em without cooking 'em first.

"We need to get a fire going," I tell Grant. "If you can't fix the solars, then we'll have to burn the chicken coop. It's the only wood we've got handy. And we'll have to stop taking showers 'cause we can't desal without the solars, so we'll need to save all the aqua in the cistern for drinking until it rains again. And I'm not sure what to do about the incinerator toilet. It needs the solars to work too. Everything runs on the solars, dammit. Why can't you fix 'em?"

He won't. If I'm being fair, he probably can't. Finding a sea-shell every morning is mundane, rote. He can do that for some crazy reason because some part of his brain remembers doing it for Dad, when Grant was sane and would come out here and visit. Somehow, he can also focus enough to carve names onto the tombstone. I wonder if it's some remaining internal guilt he struggles with over Noah and the death of my little Ruby.

But remembering how to rewire a solar, something he's done all his damn life, is apparently beyond his brain capacity now. And it certainly was never part of mine. I tried reattaching and fiddling with the wires earlier, but I made things worse.

I take his hand. It's cold and dead—I can't feel or see or hear anything when I hold it. I don't even see the shadows, so I drop it.

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“Can you help me find some firewood? We can start by burning the chicken coop, I guess. Lord knows we don’t need it now.”

I find a hatchet in the storage room and try to get Grant to chop the wood with it, but he holds it in one limp hand and does nothing, so I finally take it and whack the chicken coop until it’s a jumble of broken boards lying in a pile. I roll out the fire ring and grill that Steven had stacked in the supply room, and load the boards into it. Then I search for matches, but even after finding the box and using ten of the damn things, I can’t get the wood to catch fire. I’m terrible at lighting fires with matches.

“We need something to burn so the wood’ll catch fire,” I say. “We need paper.”

But what paper do we have? We have my books, but I won’t burn those. We have Steven’s sketchbook. All his beautiful drawings, but they *will* burn. They’ll start this fire. I shuffle into Camelot and scan the shelf but can’t find the sketchbook.

*Damn it, he took it with him.*

My eyes wander to the three books standing on the shelf, the only ones I could rescue from Toad Hall.

No. I can’t burn ’em. Not even if I’m dying of hunger or freezing to death.

So, we eat dry oatmeal softened with aqua, with a few slices of dried apple floating in it, and I have to spoon the stuff into Grant’s mouth because he’s decided he can’t feed himself anymore.

## 12

HEY, SUSIE, WHEREVER you are.

Seems like we’ve been in this place forever, ’cept it’s only our second full day. Yesterday was spent mostly with a lot

of stabbin' needles and endless questions. When Dr. Brown said he was gonna run some tests, I thought he'd take some blood and it'd all be done, but that's not what's happened. They did take blood, but mostly what they did was pepper us with all these questions. They asked me a lot 'bout you and how you died. These questions — they're all so personal and I hate answerin' 'em, and they ask 'bout your daddy and what kinda symptoms he had, and how long it was before I got sick, and I tell 'em I never did get sick. I was all asymptomatic. But they think that's interestin', 'cause now they know 'bout one person — me — who was asymptomatic but took the pills and then aborted, and two people — Mike and Grant — who took the pills and avoided gettin' sick, or maybe got it but were totally asymptomatic, and one person — Steven — who got a little sick but got better pretty quick. Then you have Miriam, who never took the pills at all. And then there's Pearl, who got sick all the way to the pox stage but came out of it OK.

I didn't mean to tell 'em 'bout Pearl and Grant — Steven said not to — but it slipped, and now they wanna know where they are, but we haven't told 'em yet. I'm figurin' we should, Susie, 'cause I'm worried 'bout the oldies all alone on Avalon. They'd be safer here, where doctors can watch over 'em, don't ya reckon? Grant and Mike are already zombie, but Pearl could still possibly go zombie from Pan4, and they're super curious 'bout whether that'll happen since she took the pills. If they're tryin' to figure out how to stop the zombie here, then if Pearl does get it, maybe they can help her. And they haven't treated us too bad. I mean, they haven't let us leave yet, but they feed us good at least. We aren't stuck eatin' beans and fish and oatmeal like on Avalon. This mornin'

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they even gave me hot cocoa. Hot cocoa, Susie! I haven't had that in forever.

So, I figure if Pearl does go zombie, they can help her. Or even prevent it. They don't quite trust us, though. The Sopona is supposed to be top secret, and they keep grillin' us on what Mike told us 'bout the place. I don't mind givin' 'em blood, and I don't mind most of their questions, the ones 'bout how we feel and what our symptoms were, but I start to cry when I have to answer questions 'bout you and I get all mad and frustrated when they keep askin' me how we knew where to find The Sopona. We keep tellin' 'em it was coincidence, but they don't believe us since we admitted to takin' those top-secret pills. They reckon we're here to steal secrets or somethin', and I especially get frustrated when they keep askin' us where Mike and Grant and Pearl are.

Wanna know why they call this place The Sopona? Sopona was some African deity who cursed everyone with smallpox. And even though Pan4 isn't the same thing as smallpox, Dr. Brown says it's distantly related, which is why some people get the pox marks. Anyway, the name "Sopona" reminds me of Pearl. You know she likes to come up with names for everythin'. I miss her. I hope she's doin' OK. She was in a happy mood when we left, but those moods don't last long.

I wish I could get back to you, Susie. But in another way, I don't wanna ever go back to Avalon. And I feel real bad 'bout it, 'cause what I've liked most since leavin' Avalon is the freedom. Does that sound bad? I don't feel like I'm chained to your grave, to that rock next to the Pater's tombstone. And for the first time in my life, Pearl's not hoverin' over me, makin' all my life decisions. You know, when your daddy asked me to

go east with him, I wanted more'n anythin' to 'cause it meant I'd finally be on my own. But I couldn't leave her. And I hated that, Susie. Pearl's the only mom I've ever known 'cept maybe Mrs. Miller when I was little, but how come I love her and hate her both at the same time? I guess it's 'cause I wanna break free so bad and now it kinda feels like I've done that.

But I'm figurin' now that Pearl should come here too. I'm figurin' I shouldn't be so selfish. I've done it. I've sailed away, so I know I can do it again. And Pearl seemed OK when we left, but OK never lasts long with her. She'll go back down again, I know it. They can help her here. They can help Grant and Mike too, right? I mean, it's been nice for this little while without 'em, but why leave the oldies on Avalon when they could come here too?

## 13

LAST NIGHT, SHADOWS overran my dreams. They crept around the edges for a while, trying to find the best way in, but I couldn't resist 'em and they filled the spaces in my mind like Grant's shadows do in his. They didn't want to leave. When I woke up, I managed to shoo 'em away, like how I'd shoo the chickens out of the henhouse back at Toad Hall when I wanted to gather eggs. I'm scared the shadows will creep back in, though, like the hens would, but right now they're gone. At least, I can't see 'em. But I can hear 'em, whispering from the dark corners where they're hiding.

I try not to think of 'em. Instead, I wonder what might've happened to the kids. They've been gone three days now, and it only should've taken a day to get to the mainland and a day

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to get back, so what happened? The sea is calm, there's only been a smattering of rain, they shouldn't have had any trouble sailing back. Are they dead? Have they forgotten us?

I wonder if the sea has finally gobbled up Mike's poor body or if sharks have torn it to pieces.

I wonder when it'll rain again. The cistern level is dropping so quick. I'm not sure why, we haven't used it for anything 'cept drinking and maybe a bit to wash the dishes. But its levels are plunging anyway.

I wonder what to do with Grant. He's gone from me now. I hold his hand and my shadows block me from him—I can't hear him, not even a whisper.

I mostly wonder what we're gonna eat.

"If I could get a fire going," I say, but not to Grant. I've stopped talking to him because he no longer answers. Not sure who I'm talking to now. Maybe the shadows.

And they whisper, "*You've got plenty of kindling for a fire on the shelf.*"

I stare at the three leather-lined books propped next to Kira's violin case. I run a finger along their spines. How could I possibly part with any of 'em?

But I can't stand another day of tepid oatmeal or mushy chickpea sludge I have to lace with honey to get the bitterness out.

The Bible. I'll burn that. I never read it anyway.

I pull it off the shelf and open it, staring at the names of my ancestors written over the years on the first page. Names that go all the way back to my great-great-great grandmother. That's the only page worth keeping.

I flip to the back. The New Testament. I'll burn that first.

I struggle with the pages. They're old but tough, don't want to leave their binding. I finally take a kitchen knife and hack at 'em, and they reluctantly fall into my hands.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, and immediately wonder who the hell I'm apologizing to. The book? God? Toad Hall? Myself?

It works, though. I manage to get a weak fire going with the Bible pages and the busted chicken coop. I fry up as many pieces of flatbread as I can with the last of Kira's flour. They'll keep us fed at least until tomorrow. I'll have to grind up more beans then. I boil up some oatmeal too, then head back inside where Grant sits staring at the table top

Damn Grant. If he'd fix the solars, we wouldn't be in this mess. I flop on my cot and shut my eyes and listen for the shadows.

The shadows remind me of how, long ago, I lost the baby Ruby. *"Why did the baby die, Pearl?"* they whisper. *"Was it because you didn't know any better and so you listened to Noah because your big brother Grant wasn't there to protect you? He was off in Seattle. He left you all alone. And why did he do that, Pearl? Grant understood what Noah was like. And yet he still left you in his care."*

*"He didn't mean for it to happen. He broke up with Noah, right after."*

*"After it was too late."*

But how could he have known all that would happen? The shadows are wrong. I never blamed Grant. I trusted him.

*"But what did he do in the end? After all Noah did, Grant still brought him to Avalon and buried him in your father's hallowed ground. How can you trust a person who would do that?"*

I shake my head and shut my mind to these thoughts. Grant's my only true brother. He's more fam than the rest of them—than Mike or Kira or Steven. I roll off the cot and hobble into the

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kitchen. I wish for rain but instead get sunlight pouring through the holes in the roof. The aqua in the cistern is stale and murky, and we're at the halfway mark. Yesterday afternoon I toted buckets all the way down to the lagoon and hauled up cloudy aqua for washing so we didn't use up our drinking supply. I hacked to pieces two hard boards Steven had restacked against Camelot's back wall after the hurricane, and now I rip more pages from the Bible and get a fire going and boil some beans on what's left of the smoldering boards from my previous fire, but the beans are only half-softened by the time the boards turn to ash and the fire dies out.

Grant is no help at all. He has enough strength to find his shells and put them on the graves, but the rest of the day he sits and stares at nothing while I chop and cook and burn the precious family Bible and cry while I'm doing it, and wish Mike were still alive, and wonder where the kids have got to and if they're ever coming back for us.

Grant could get the solars to work. I've tried and tried but can't wire 'em right, and he could do it in an instant if he'd focus, I know he could. And I wonder if the shadows are right. If maybe he's doing this on purpose. He came here to die, and he's willing to let me die with him. He must know we're almost out of burnable wood, that we've eaten the remaining dried fruit and are down to our last little bag of jerky, that the fresh aqua is somehow leaking from the cistern. He could fix all our problems with one quick tug at those solar wires. Then we could cook on the stove and desal from the lagoon. But he won't.

I wonder if what he told me was real. About how Noah died. Did Noah truly pull the trigger on himself? Or did Grant lie when he told me that? Maybe he really murdered Noah instead.



Or maybe Grant didn't actually tell me anything at all. Maybe he's never talked to me. Maybe it was all in my head. Maybe I made it all up because that's what I wanted Grant to say, because it's what my storyteller brain concocted – something plausible, something good, something that made Grant a hero instead of a villain. Something make-believe. A fantasy. A story of a shining knight instead of an evil sorcerer.

But how did I know the body in that grave was Noah?

*Because he had that ruby ring, you dummy, and your brain must've finally remembered and put two and two together.*

And the whole story about Noah taking his own life and Grant burying the gun next to him – my head could've made that up too, just to make Grant look good in my eyes. But is Grant really good? He left when I needed him most. I lost my baby because he wasn't there to stop Noah from giving me that potion. He was just as responsible for killing Ruby as Noah was. As I was. And if he was implicit in that, he's also responsible for me almost dying from that potion.

When I was sick with that potion, when I almost died, Grant didn't help me at all. He couldn't. It was Mike the doctor who saved me. Mike, who when Grant called him all frantic, told Grant to get me to Dr. Lister or I'd die. Mike, who raced back to Toad Hall to nurse me back to health. Mike. The good brother who's dead now.

I miss him. I never gave him any kind of eulogy up there on the cliff. How can you have a eulogy when you don't have a body to bury?

But Mike wouldn't want a eulogy on Pook's Hill. His happy place was down in Mirkwood, amid the gnats and buzzing insects, where the gnarled branches reach for you and tug at

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your hair if you aren't careful where you're walking, where the ground gets spongy and the aqua is murky. Mirkwood is where I should mourn my poor dead brother.

I leave the beans simmering in the pot on the grate, sucking up any remaining heat from the ashes, and march down into Mirkwood. I leave the cane with Grant because I don't need it. After my horrible cramping session a couple days ago, the sciatica has died down again.

Here in Mirkwood the air is warmer, more humid. Here, twittering birds sing from the stunted trees, and I wonder if they guard nests crammed with eggs, not that I could climb up a tree and steal 'em. Here, a soft clucking echoes from the underbrush.

I fall to my knees and peer under a thorny bush. Two flitting black eyes peer back at me.

"Chicken Little. There you are."

The eyes disappear. The chicken has scuttled farther into the brush. When Miriam and Steven found Laddie dead and sprawled in that spring, they also found a dead chicken near it. The spring must be down here somewhere if Chicken Little is alive and kicking.

Fresh aqua. I need to find it.

I don't try to follow the chicken, though, not now. I stand and continue my wandering, down to the murky, lapping marsh where the sea flows in.

And here, lying half-in, half-out of the swamp, is the bloated corpse of my brother, Mike.

He's face-down in the muck, his pasty white skin void of any color, a few strands of gray hair clinging to his bald head. I don't want to see his face. I picture his eyes wide and staring in

horror, or worse, eaten away by fish. The tide must've pushed him around the island and washed him up here. How did it know to take him to his happy place?

And how did *I* know to come down here and find him? Did he call me somehow? Did the shadows tell me? I've only ventured down to Mirkwood once, when I was a little girl. I've never liked it here. But this was Mike's special place, so it can't be all that bad.

I stare at the corpse's pasty bald head and ragged clothes and wonder if I should bury him here. Here is where he'd be the happiest, I reckon.

But Mike is with us now because after years of traveling and helping out the sick and needy, he chose to be with his fam. And his fam is buried on Pook's Hill.

I retrace my steps to Camelot. Steven had stored the ropes he salvaged off the *Argo* in the supply room. I take a long coil and the sheet off Mike's cot, head back to Mirkwood, and somehow manhandle Mike onto the sheet without seeing his face. I devise some sort of harness with the rope and drag my morbid package along the trail. A few branches try to grab the sheets and wrestle Mike away from me, as if they're desperate for him to stay. But I get him untangled and move him up the trail, a few precious feet at a time.

It takes all morning. By the time I reach Camelot, my arms are killing me and I'm sick from thirst and my leg pings just enough to let me know it isn't happy. I gulp down some precious mouthfuls of aqua and scoop some beans from the pot and shove 'em, all hot and scalding, into my mouth. Grant sits on my reading rock, out in The Doldrums. I swear he's watching me, but he don't follow me when I leave the bunker and

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I don't ask him to come. This is my burden, my task. I don't want Grant with me while I accomplish it.

The trek up Pook's Hill is taxing now I'm already exhausted. When I finally reach Dad's tombstone, I realize I need a shovel, so I drop the rope, leave Mike waiting there, and head back to Camelot. I trudge back up the hill, dragging the shovel behind me. I dig Mike's shallow grave, then roll him into it and cover it with the sandy soil.

I drag my exhausted body back to Camelot and fall onto my cot. I'm too tired to eat or even drink, but I feel great. Fulfilled. Like I've done something superhuman. Something way above and beyond my capabilities, but I persevered and did it anyway. Without any help from Grant.

And as my head hits the pillow and I tumble into an exhausted sleep, I don't see the shadows. Not one. The memory of my savior, my brother Mike, keeps the shadows at bay.

## 14

"YOU'RE PREGNANT," DR. BROWN SAYS.

My first question, after a few seconds of stunned silence, is, "How the hell do you figure that?"

Dr. Brown let us move from the ugly cinderblock building after our preliminary tests were done, into an old house that survived the tsunami, up the hill a ways, in a cluster of houses where the researchers and lab assistants and guards live. We're sitting in the living room of the first proper house I've been in since way before I was thrown into the jail in Iowa, and I like it. It's comforting, having four walls not made of cinderblock surround me like a protective hug. The walls are painted yellow,

and some old paintings hang on 'em. Not as nice as Steven's paintings, but they'll do.

Right now, Steven is out working in the communal garden. One of the guards turned out to be a kid he took sailing once, way back when he used to visit the old town. That kid—his name is Raoul—lost his whole family during Pan4, like a lot of other families here. Most all of 'em who stayed now work for the Sopona.

Kira is busy shadowing a lab tech, learning about what they do here. She's becoming excited about it. Now she feels like she's getting to do some good for the world, like Mike did. He'd be fascinated with this place if he were here. And I reckon, once we *return to Avalon*, which we have to do soon so we can bring the oldies here, she's gonna wanna stay and not go back.

Me, I'd been dry heaving all morning so I was still in bed when Dr. Brown knocked on the door. His announcement is a shock, but it sure explains why I've felt so cranky and tired lately.

He says, "When we were running the blood tests, we discovered your condition. You're a little over two months, I'm guessing. Interesting."

I frown. "Whaddya mean, interestin'?"

"Well, the fact that you had Pan4 but managed to get pregnant. Lots of people can't."

A cold chill spreads through my intestines as I remember Kira lying on her bunk in the *Argo*, blood staining her sheets. She was pregnant too, and look what happened to her baby. I turn to Dr. Brown. "I never took the pills. I never had any symptoms." I don't even wanna ask, but I finally say, "Do you reckon that's why I'm sick now? My body's rejectin' the baby?"

"Maybe, but that's what morning sickness is. Your body fight-

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ing something new. You seem healthy otherwise. It might not mean anything, Miriam."

"But it could. The baby won't be — you know — deformed, will it? Will I lose it?"

Dr. Brown puts a steadying hand on my shoulder, and I try not to squirm away. "No way to tell for certain, but we can monitor you here, if you'll stay."

The chill warms a bit and a fluttery sensation begins, something between fear and happiness. *Pregnant. Me. I'll have to tell Steven.* But this thought brings up a whole flurry of conflicting emotions that wallop me all at once. This baby will be a glue between me and him — permanent. Steven's a good man, and he'll be a loving, caring father. But will I be a good mother? And where will we live? How will we survive?

Dr. Brown still gazes at me, mulling me over.

I say, "What happens after?"

"Come again?"

"After the baby's born. You'll let us stay so you can monitor me, but after it's born, then what?"

He scratches his long nose, then answers me with a question. I hate that. "Where do you come from? Originally."

I glare at him. "You already know. You've got all that info off my chip."

He smiles. "You're right. Born in Baltimore, correct?"

"That's right."

He shifts in his seat, still studying me. "When was the last time you were back east?"

"Two years, maybe a little longer, I guess."

"Well, in those two years, Pan4 has absolutely ravaged the east coast. I suppose you were there for the beginning of it, but

it's the zombie stage that's managed to wipe out a good chunk of the population. It's hit Europe and Asia pretty hard too, from the scant news we've received. We were already working down here when Pan4 spread that way. The government – our government – funded this place. The whole purpose was to study Pan4, especially the zombie state, and develop something to combat it."

I nod. "The pills."

"Yes, but it's a stubborn virus. The pills were an accident, but we found they worked on some subjects – monkeys and dogs mostly, you understand, because they seem to get approximately the same symptoms. The pills don't stop animals from catching Pan4 when exposed like a vaccine might, but they alleviate the symptoms in some cases."

*In some cases.* Not that we had enough pills to begin with, but Steven was wrong. Laddie maybe could have survived if we'd given him medicine too.

Dr. Brown goes on. "We haven't tried the pills on humans yet. Well, except on ourselves. Anyway, in the animal trials, if the infected subjects began taking the pills early enough, about eighty percent never reached the pox stage. That's an improvement from fifty percent. For those subjects who did reach the pox stage, about eighty percent avoided the zombie stage. And for those who did go zombie anyway, the pills seemed to help...a bit."

An image of Pearl's face floats in my vision. "What do you mean by 'a bit'?"

He leans forward. "Untreated, the survival rate once you reach the zombie stage is zero. Nil. You're going to die. Nobody's ever pulled out of it. With the pills though, a good ten percent

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of our test subjects came out of it with no lasting ill effects. At least, from what we can tell. It's hard to determine the mental state of animals. And humans could respond differently."

I ponder this. "So, if Pearl does go zombie..."

Dr. Brown's tone becomes more urgent. "Yes, but that's what we don't know. We haven't tested the pills on humans who might go zombie. From what you've told us, Pearl has always had maniac bouts, but she went from highly temperamental before the hurricane to incredibly productive after it. Kira said what worried her most was that Pearl was so insistent you all leave her there, alone with the two siblings who are already zombie."

"Yes," I say. "I don't know her as well as the others do, but it seemed weird to me. I mean, she always seemed so protective over 'em."

Dr. Brown scratches his chin. "We *need* to observe Pearl. See what happens to her. If she was the only one of you who got the pox, she's the only one who might go zombie. And her irrational behavior fits in with studied preliminary zombie symptoms. She'd be incredibly valuable for us to observe, and we could possibly help her. We could start her on another dose of the pills. You must have some trust in us at this point, right?"

Yes, the longer we stay here, the more I do trust Dr. Brown. He has his agenda, but he don't have some nefarious purpose. I nod.

"We can protect you here," Dr. Brown says. "Your whole fam."

My fam. I don't correct him. I guess they *are* my fam, especially now. I touch my belly. "But what happens when you're finished with us?" I say, getting back to my original question.



He shrugs. “What happens to any of us when our research is done here? Contacts back east are occurring less and less. They won’t happen at all once we push the pills into society – our work will be done here. I suppose we could all go back north, but what’s left for us there? Frankly, it’s nice here. We have our bunkers, our solar, our wells, a whole jungle for hunting, fish in the sea. We could do worse. And the plan always was to make this a self-sufficient place, if needed.”

Unlike Camelot. That would never have become a self-sufficient place. I can see possibilities here, though. The crops they’ve planted seem to grow like crazy. There’s gotta be plenty of fish out to sea. There aren’t many animals ‘cept dogs and a few goats and some half-wild chickens, but that’s better than nothing. As long as we have solars – and there are tons of spares in the supply bunker – we’ll always have juice for things. The wells are good and deep. The only scary thing is the jungle. And what new disease might bust out of it.

I lean back in my chair. “If we stay, we’ll need jobs.”

“Well, Kira’s already helping out. She’ll make a good lab tech once she’s trained up a bit.”

“You expect to keep the lab runnin’?”

He shrugs. “As long as we can. And Steven has already half-taken over supervising the garden, even though you all have only been here a couple of days.”

“He says he hates farmin’, but it’s what he knows how to do best. What ‘bout me?”

“Well, what are you trained for?”

And I think, killing. But no, that was in self-defense. Stealing. But that was to survive. I wasn’t trained for anything. I can read, write, but I was still a kid when Mom died, and I went

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straight from that to a murderer on the run, living however I could. And then to a jail cell where I didn't have to do anything but sit. I'm not good for much.

'Cept surviving. I know how to survive.

### 15

I WATCH THE LAST pages from the Bible burn. All that's left in the mauled leather binding is the page containing the family names. The other pages weren't enough to get the wood going, so I hobble back inside and stare at the two remaining books.

*The Wind in the Willows*. My first and most precious book. I had held that book in my hands and read the words aloud to my mother once, long ago. And I've read it ever since.

Shakespeare. How I love to read Shakespeare. But, if I can get my vid charged again, I can always read Shakespeare's plays on that. The big leather-bound volume don't hold the same attachment that my copy of *The Wind in the Willows* does.

I rip out all the sonnets and other poetry and push 'em under the smoldering wood. I never liked reading sonnets much anyway. I watch the pages catch fire and burn.

The flames chew away at the sticks and twigs I'd found in the ruins of the little copse of trees near The Enchanted Place. I'd even taken the hatchet and hacked off most of the branches still clinging to the mangled trunks, but the branches are so fresh they mostly smolder. I manage to boil a big pot of rice and beans and hope they'll soften enough for us to chew before the fire dies out.

I put the lid on, leave the smoldering fire and the bubbling

pot, and head down to Mirkwood. I bring a bucket to collect sticks, figuring I can find plenty of those now I've exhausted the little bit from the trees near The Enchanted Place.

But right now, I'm more worried about the cistern. I'm not sure how the aqua dropped so low so fast. When the kids left it was full, and we haven't drunk nearly as much as the cistern holds, but now there's barely a puddle. I drained most of it into a bucket because the cistern must have a slow leak somewhere. Makes it imperative that I find the spring. It's gotta be somewhere in Mirkwood. There's no way Chicken Little could have survived without it.

I find the bush where I'd first seen the hen's shiny eyes peeping out at me. It had darted into the tangled growth last time I saw it, so I leave the trail, push past the bush, and use Grant's cane to hack away at the vines now threatening to entangle my feet and pull me down. I listen for chicken clucks or the sound of a burbling spring, but all I hear are gnats buzzing.

As I venture deeper into the undergrowth and farther from the trail, I wonder, did I really see Chicken Little the day I found Mike's body? Or did I imagine it? I swear I saw two glinty eyes peering from under that shrub, but was I mistaken? After all, the chickens used to come on up to Camelot because they knew we had chicken feed. Why would this one hen refuse to venture up to the bunker? Did it smell death around us, maybe? Did it sneak on up after the hurricane and see its fellow chickens all twisted and mangled in the wreckage of that coop? Or does it not exist at all and I'm wishing poor Chicken Little into existence?

Maybe those little shiny black dots I thought were eyes were only a hallucination. Something the shadows wanted me to see. I remember once when we were on the *Argo* during that last crazy

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storm before we reached Avalon. The wind was whistling and we were all horribly sick and I was about ready to fling myself over the side and let the waves take me, Grant took my hand and the scene I saw was Avalon, pretty and serene. No tossing seas, no thundering skies. He showed me a haven. Or, his shadows showed me. But Avalon hasn't been much of a haven lately.

So maybe you can't trust the shadows. They're sneaky – they show you what you want to see and lull you into a sense of false security when that's not what's waiting for you at all. Maybe Chicken Little isn't real, after all. Maybe my shadows showed me those eyes so they could lure me into this tangled mire. What if I trip here and break my leg? How would Grant ever find me? He wouldn't. I'd die here, surrounded by gnats and possibly big spiders, the kind that haunted my nightmares whenever I thought of Mirkwood as a kid.

A shadow falls over me, and a high-pitched yelp pierces through the tangled brush.

The gnats stop buzzing. It's so quiet I can hear my heart hammering against my chest, and I realize the yelp came from my mouth. The shadow blanketing me now isn't one of my sneaky shadows, or Grant's, it's from a passing cloud. Oh, how I wish it were a rain cloud, but it isn't. It's one of those puffy, pretty things that look great in Steven's paintings but don't do much good when you need aqua to fill a leaking cistern. I take a deep, steadying breath and push on.

I find nothing but small spiders, a long centipede that skitters under a fallen branch, and some ants. Great pickings if you're a hen, but neither Chicken Little nor the elusive spring appear. I do find a fat, dry log, though. It'll burn nicely.

I sit on the log and vainly listen for the cluck of a chicken

or the gurgling of a spring, but I hear nothing but the faraway waves and the gnats that begin buzzing again. There is no spring. It was all in my head. There's no Chicken Little either. I stand and drag the log back the way I came, gripping it under one arm and hoping one of those nasty centipedes don't crawl out of it. I keep myself steady with the cane. The sciatica sends a warning spasm down my leg but then goes quiet.

It's a long, hard slog back to Camelot when you're dragging a log and an empty bucket. But it isn't half as hard as dragging a bloated corpse.

I wonder how hard it'll be to drag Grant when the time comes.

Halfway to Camelot, where the path runs closest to Mermaid's Lagoon, I stop for a breather. I sit on the log and stare out at the gutted beach. There's not even enough of it left now to lay a blanket on. Debris washed up from the *Argo* covers the sand.

Amid the debris, something winks at me. Something shiny.

I leave my log and head down the beach path, my eyes trained on the piece of metal glinting in the sunlight. I reach it and stoop to pull it up.

Miriam's knife.

And a chill runs through me as I grasp its handle. This knife is a killing knife. It stabbed that Morlock on the pier. I wonder how many other people its cruel tip has punctured. I touch the sharp point and draw my finger away quickly. No wonder Miriam always kept it in that thick leather scabbard.

Part of me wants to chuck the knife back into the lagoon, where it can't do any more damage to anyone.

But I don't. I hold it carefully, like it's a China doll, and take it and the log back to Camelot where Grant lies on his cot.

Grant is becoming skin and bones, even more so than he

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already was, and it's my fault. I know it is, but I can't help it. Why waste precious food on him if he isn't gonna help? He's doomed anyway, hardly even moves anymore 'cept to take his walk in the morning. Finding a shell on the beach is getting harder because the *Argo's* wreckage covers the lagoon, so I took the bucket of shells Kira had collected and dumped 'em down near the lagoon so at least Grant don't have to search as hard. He can pick one up off the pile before he heads up to Pook's Hill.

I still follow him. I don't know why. I don't care anymore if something happens to him and he gets hurt. I've started to fantasize about him stumbling into the lagoon and drowning or slipping near the cliff edge and tumbling off it like Mike did, but he's too solid in his routine for that. He don't venture near the cliff edge. He shuffles to Dad's tombstone and drops his shells over the graves, then shuffles back to Camelot and sits on his bunk and waits to be fed.

He's going downhill so fast though. He pees and poops in his pants sometimes, so I've stripped him of clothes. The weather has warmed outside, so he don't need 'em. Now when he suddenly squats to take a dump or when piss dribbles down his leg, I can clean it up where it lands. The bunker is starting to smell like urine. The incineration toilet don't work without the solars, so even I have to go outside and squat somewhere to do my business. I've dug a hole out in The Doldrums and figure I can cover it when it gets too full.

I give him mint tea in the morning, just a cup — that's all either of us can have now. We only have about two gallons of murky aqua left in the bucket. I feed him mushy beans that are starting to sour from the heat. We're out of oatmeal. I don't know how we ate it so fast, but it's gone. And the grinder isn't

working right, so I can't grind chickpeas into flour and now all we can do is boil beans. I use up all of Shakespeare's comedies and half the dried log to make a fresh pot, and frankly, if I'm doing all the work, I should get to eat those beans. Grant can have the older, ranker ones.

I glare at the blue sky and then turn my attention to the bucket, and the shadows whisper, *It would be easier, so much easier, if it was just you. If Grant was gone. The aqua would be yours. The beans would last longer, and you wouldn't have to cook so much. He's using up supplies, and he's gonna die anyway.*

And it makes me wonder, is this why I wanted the young ones to leave? Why I was so glad when they sailed away? I distinctly remember being excited that they were finally gone because I was preparing for something to happen here. Something I didn't want anyone to see. And that something is the demise of the three ancient ones, Mike, Grant, me. I was actually happy about the idea. Euphoric, even. I couldn't wait until they'd left so we could start our quick disintegration into nothingness.

But I don't want to die.

Mike did. He was prepared for it. He came here specifically to fulfill that purpose, to die and be buried on top of Pook's Hill next to Dad.

Grant too, this is where he should be buried, beside Noah, no matter how much they fought in life. They were soulmates, when it came down to it. Grant was never happy unless Noah was around. When they broke up, he crawled back to Toad Hall and buried himself in his study and grew older and sadder, but it seems the second Noah called, he leapt up and was gone, just like that. Sailed across the sea and brought Noah to Avalon. And now Grant has made the final return trip and he's disin-

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tegrating fast. He'll join Noah soon.

*You could help him along, the shadows whisper as I spoon the beans into Grant's mouth, half of which dribbles back out. You could reunite him with Noah now. Then you'll have twice as much aqua, twice as much food, and you might make it until the kids get back.*

If the kids get back. When they left, I kind of hoped they wouldn't return. That they'd sail away and find a real Avalon—a magical place where they could grow old and be happy. I didn't expect to join 'em on that quest.

But now, the only choice I have is to die here, and I don't want to die. God, I want to live.

*If you didn't have to share the food and aqua, you might survive until the next rain, the shadows say.*

But that's a big "if."

The sky is bright blue today, only marred by the brownish smoke of my fire and the bits of Shakespeare that escape the flames and flutter away in the breeze. I'm boiling the last of the kidney beans. Down to black beans, chick peas, and only *The Wind in the Willows* left to stoke the next fire.

Mike always said that when he flipped over the last puzzle piece in his dream, his life would end. And all I can think of is, *If I burn my favorite childhood book, that will be when my life ends too.* I have to preserve that book. I won't burn it. Toad Hall is gone, I understand that. My Shakespeare, it's gone too. But what will I have to live for if *The Wind in the Willows* goes up in flames? It's my last connection with the library at Toad Hall, with Dad, with my mother. With everything I loved. I read that book to Steven and Kira when they were kids. That book is going in the grave with me. I'll starve to death before I burn it.



## 16

DR. BROWN SAYS, “I believe we figured out how your brother got the pills.”

He’s helpin’ me in the garden. The sun’s out, and it’s a weekend (he says anyway; it’s been a while since I’ve thought ’bout the days of the week) so he isn’t in the lab. Diggin’ in the dirt is good for his arthritic hands, he tells me.

It’s weird to be harvestin’ and plantin’ things. I hated it when I lived at Toad Hall—plantin’ in the spring meant another year of drudgery where you couldn’t leave on any trips ’cause the farm always needed tendin’. I was lucky if I could wangle enough time to take the trip down to Avalon, and that was only if there were enough people left at Toad Hall to tend to things. But now, we’re doin’ the opposite. We’re leavin’ Avalon, and helpin’ to plant here might mean that they’ll let us stay. I think I’d like that.

It’s January here, but we’re near the ’quator, so we can plant and harvest all year ’round. The dirt is dark and rich. The green mountain risin’ behind us, only marred by the towers on its top, is technically an active volcano. Grant once told me the last time it went off was five hundred years ago, so we’re probably safe from that. But you never know. Anyway, volcanic soil is great to plant in.

Mike would love the herb garden they have here. Right now, I’m trimmin’ a humongous rosemary plant and Dr. Brown is plantin’ pumpkins. Back when this town used to have a bigger population, before the tsunami and diseases, they’d grow rice

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and sorghum out in the now overgrown fields and paddies. My brain is already thinkin' 'bout how to refurbish 'em, make 'em produce again, make this place more sustainable in case supplies stop comin'.

I say, "How who got what?" 'cause I'm not payin' too much attention to what Dr. Brown was sayin'.

"Your brother. The doctor. How he found the Pan4 pills. About a year ago, when we were starting our first trials, some doctors came down here to observe our work. One was called Dr. Alex Lister, from the Seattle area. Sound familiar?"

"Kinda. Mike took Pearl to see him a few months before we left, to ask 'bout her sciatica. They were old friends."

"I believe Dr. Lister swiped some when he was down here. We weren't keeping careful track at first and didn't realize they were missing, and he didn't take much, just a few vials. They were the prototype, and we've tweaked 'em since then but not a whole lot. Anyway, now we have all the electro up and working again, I tried to contact Dr. Lister on my vid."

"And?"

Dr. Brown pushes his fingers into the dirt. "He's dead. Pan4 got him."

So, it's definitely gripped the west coast now. "Even with the pills he died?"

"It could be that your brother swiped all his stock. Or he used 'em to treat others before he could use 'em himself. Or he took 'em and died anyway. We just don't know." He turns to me now, pulls his hands outta the dirt. "A ship with supplies is coming soon. I saw the notice on my vid. We're sending out most of the pills we've got when it gets here, but I'm afraid our efforts are a little too late. We should've sent 'em all out

sooner and damn the tests. Hopefully they'll be in time to save folks on the west coast."

I say, "What will you do here, if you don't get any more fundin' or supplies?"

"Keep working as long as we can. We've got a good stock of food and solars and desals and a fresh aqua supply. We've got plenty of drugs if anyone here gets sick, that's for sure."

"I can help you with the farmin'. So can Miriam. She don't know much 'bout farmin', but she learns everythin' quick."

Dr. Brown studies me for a minute. "You talked to Miriam lately? About staying here?"

Somethin' in his gaze makes me nervous. Has she told him somethin' she hasn't told me? Like wantin' to leave, to head out on her own? I say, "Not really."

He brushes the dirt off his hands. "Talk to her. And you've been here four days now. You trust us now, right? We should go fetch the rest of your fam."

I nod. "I'm gettin' nervous 'bout 'em. We left 'em with plenty of food and aqua, but what if another hurricane hits? Or if Pearl can't take care of Mike and Grant cause of her sciatica"

He says, "It should be nice for another week or so. No rain on the horizon, at least not according to my vid. Not sure how reliable it is anymore, but this isn't the rainy season anyway. The dousing we got last week was a fluke. So was the hurricane. Anyway, we know where they are. I've located their dots on my vid. Isla de la Roca, right?"

I forgot Dr. Brown's med vid could locate little red dots like Mike's can. I wonder how long he's known. I clip the last twig from the rosemary and drop it into my pail. "We call it Avalon, but yep, that's where they are. We can leave tomorrow mornin'

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early and get 'em, bring 'em back here, if you want. Me and Miriam'll go."

He says, "Let Miriam stay here. I'll go with you. I can check your fam out, help get 'em to the boat. We can take Raoul if you want."

Raoul was one of the guards who accosted us that first night. He didn't recognize me then, and I thought he looked kinda familiar but couldn't place him, either. "I taught him how to sail way back when he was just a kid. I reckon he'd like a little adventure."

"It's settled, then." Dr. Brown stands, pats my shoulder, and moves off.

And I'm relieved now, 'bout goin' to Avalon to get Pearl and Mike and Grant. But I don't like the idea of goin' without Miriam. What if she slips out and leaves while I'm gone?

She won't stand for it anyway. She'll wanna come. She loves the sea even more than me.

I head back to the house and find her lyin' on the couch, not lookin' so great. I tell her, "We're gonna go to Avalon and get the rest of the fam. You're comin', right?"

She says dully, "No. I'll stay here."

And I can't help it, tears drip outta my eyes. I can tell she's not interested in me anymore. I say, "I love you, Miriam. Please don't leave me."

She sits up. "What the hell are you talkin' 'bout?"

I take a deep breath. "You wanna leave. I can tell. That's why you keep pushin' me away."

She laughs. Not a cruel laugh though, 'cause her eyes shine with amusement. "That's not why, dummy. I'm tired. I haven't felt so great lately. But Dr. Brown told me why." She grabs my hand and lays it on her tum. "I'm gonna have a baby, Steven.

No way I'm getting' on that boat as queasy as I am."

And this makes me cry even harder. I put my arms 'round her, and she don't flinch or push me away.

She strokes my hair and says, "Go get yer fam, Steven. Bring 'em back safe. Maybe Dr. Brown can even help Mike and Grant with their zombie too. Who knows?"

## 17

THE SHADOWS REMINDED me of something important last night. I don't know why it hadn't dawned on me before.

Every time we bury someone on this island, it rains.

Dad. The day we buried him it poured buckets.

Susan. The skies cried a river when we dug her grave.

Laddie. It mostly dribbled, but we still got wet.

Noah. He was dead already, had been for a couple of years, but when Grant finally carved his name into the tombstone, we got absolutely drenched.

Mike. That was the last time it rained. Not the day I buried him, but the day he fell off the cliff and died and we added his name to the tombstone.

Right now, the sun blazes and there isn't one wisp of white in the sky.

*You can change that, the shadows say. You know what you have to do.*

*Yes. I know.*

Grant is a wisp, a shadow of himself. A blurred version of someone who once lived but now totters on a thin wire, ready to fall into the oblivion waiting below. He even moves like a shadow. I barely can focus my eyes on him anymore. But he's

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still eating, and I have to share the little dribble of drinkable aqua I have left with him.

And all we have left is a handful of tea leaves, a piece of jerky, and a small container of beans. Did we truly eat everything else? Even the chicken feed is gone, and I *know* we didn't eat that. I wonder if Grant maybe isn't as zombie as he seems. Maybe, while I'm asleep at night, he secretly gets up and cooks things and eats 'em, although he don't look like it. You can see his ribs sticking out, struggling to push through his thin, splotchy skin.

I pour the remaining beans into the pot and douse 'em with salty aqua from the lagoon. I stoke the fire ring with what wood I can scrounge. Two hacked-up chairs. The tabletop, splintered into shards. Kira's violin. She'll never finish her violin concerto now, like I'll never finish my story about our time spent on Avalon.

I use the last match in the box to set the deck of worn-out cards and Mike's puzzle of Venice and its box crackling, which is enough kindling to get the fire lit and the beans bubbling. I frown at the inch of aqua remaining in the bucket.

The rain gods need a sacrifice. It's the only way I'll get more aqua and survive another day on this desolate rock.

So today I'm happy. It'll be raining soon.

I let Grant have a final drink. A small cup of tea. I even allow him a mouthful of chickpeas and the last piece of beef jerky. After breakfast he stands, naked, and walks to the door.

I follow him to the lagoon. He gathers some shells from Kira's pile, and I pick one up too.

I follow him up Pook's Hill to the tombstone.

I slit his throat with Miriam's knife.

I bury him and carve his name under Mike's, then I chuck the chisel off the cliff as a final part of the sacrifice.

I drop my seashell – the last seashell – on Grant's grave.

I leave Pook's Hill and walk past the smoldering fire with its last pot of beans, past the now-empty bucket, all the way down to Mermaid's Lagoon. I swim to Mermaid's Rock, still entangled with the *Argo*, pull myself onto it, and wait for the rain.

The sky is blue. A deep, never-ending blue.

My leg gives a quiet spasm. I close my eyes and open them again.

Everything in this world is colored in shades of blue and gray. Rippling blue waves break over the gray wreck of the *Argo*. Behind it, blue waves roll over the old coral reef like it isn't even there. Probably isn't after that hurricane. Behind where the reef used to be, the sea is flat, the same blue color as the sky. Something moves out there, something big and gray, but my shadows – all grayish blue – now swarm around this rock so thick I can't tell if the big gray something is in the sky or the sea.

Maybe the something I see is a ship.

Maybe it's a rain cloud.

Or maybe it's another shadow, coming to join the rest.

# TOLLAN

Home! That was what they meant, those caressing appeals, those soft touches wafted through the air, those invisible little hands pulling and tugging, all one way.

*Kenneth Graham - The Wind in the Willows*

## 1

HEY, JOEY, THIS is the last vid I'll ever send ya. You won't see it, though 'cause I know now you're dead. Dr. Brown has a med vid, and on one of those sporadic days when the tower decided to work and we got reception on our vids, he found your records. I reckon you were the one who gave us Pan4, after all. I hope you didn't suffer too much. But Susie has her daddy with her now, and that makes me feel a little better.

We're OK here in Puerto de Luz, or The Sopona, if you go by what the facility here is called, but almost everybody calls it by its new name now – Tollan. Raoul thought of it. He said we really aren't a port anymore, if you think about it, cause ships



hardly ever come here. But what we are, maybe, is the startin' of somethin' new. Like the old world out there has gone away and we're startin' over. And like the old Aztec myths, the city where everythin' started was called Tollan. So that's what we all agreed to call this place. Tollan.

There are families here, and we're gettin' to know 'em. We have a little house near the fields that Steven and some other guys cleared. Me and Steven and Miriam all live in the house. Pearl is still in The Sopona. Steven and Dr. Brown—he says to call him Phil though, since everythin' is so informal down here now they've shipped out the pills and we haven't heard if any other ships'll ever be comin'—anyway, Phil and Steven and Raoul found her on Mermaid's Rock, naked and garblin'. She's all zombie, but Dr. Br—I mean Phil says maybe she'll get better. There's always a chance, since she took the pills right near the beginnin', and they have her on 'em again now.

But Mike and Grant are gone. Steven couldn't find 'em when he went lookin' for 'em, after he and Phil and Raoul landed and found Pearl lyin' naked on Mermaid's Rock, just yammerin' on 'bout nothin', and got her on the boat. Steven went up to Pook's Hill and saw the graves and the names carved into the tombstone. I don't guess we'll know what happened unless Pearl can ever talk normal again, but I suppose the zombie finally did 'em both in. Crazy that it happened to both of 'em the week we left.

So that's four people for me to mourn now—you and Susie and Mike and Grant. It's almost t-t-oo m-m-much to take, J-Joey.

Sorry, hold on.

OK, that's better. Not cryin' now. Anyway, I'm also sad 'cause my violin's gone. Pearl burned anythin' she could find,

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accordin' to Steven. She burned all the wood and the table and my violin and all her books 'cept *The Wind in the Willows*, which Steven went and got from Camelot 'cause Pearl got all maniac when they tried to get her on the boat. Kept screamin' 'bout her book. So that's when Steven hiked up to Camelot and discovered that everythin' 'cept the book was burned. And then he found the solars lyin' 'round, all beaten to shreds. Like somebody took a hammer to 'em and bashed 'em all in. And he found a hole in the cistern, like somethin' had punctured it. The chisel, he's guessin'. Phil told us that the animals they tested the pill on went kinda crazy durin' the zombie stage, not like normal Pan4 zombie where people just get all sluggish and slow and finally die. No, the animals got all maniac, but the ones who did go crazy pulled through and didn't die. So, he figures maybe that's what's goin' on with Pearl, and she went all nutso and burned everythin' and put a hole in the cistern and bashed the bean grinder to pieces and flung all the chicken feed and rice and chickpeas all through the Doldrums. Steven says it looked like another hurricane had torn through, 'cept this hurricane was named Pearl.

And now I feel totally guilty, Joey. If I'd stayed with her, maybe none of this would have happened. There was no one who could keep an eye on her. Grant and Mike sure couldn't. What were we thinkin'? Why'd we wait so long to head back to Avalon? It was like once we got to Puerto de Luz – or Tollan, which is still hard for me to 'member, since I'm so used to the old name – we forgot about Avalon, like it turned into a fantasy, a dream, not real.

Anyway, Miriam says I can't beat myself up over that. Grant and Mike couldn't have been saved, not even if they came to

The Sopona. They were too far gone. They're out of their misery now, she says. And Pearl's back with us now, all safe. And I hope she'll be OK. We can't see her yet. She's still pretty unstable. Phil says that one moment she's all zombie and maniac and they have to tie her down, and the next she makes perfect sense but don't remember what she said or did when she was in Zombieland. He says normally Pan4 victims don't go in and out like that – once they're zombie they stay that way – so he's figurin' the pills Pearl took right at the beginnin' did somethin' to alter the normal symptoms. We still don't know if she'll totally pull through or if she'll always be unstable. She could still even die. We have to wait and see.

Joey, it's weird here in a way. So quiet. We don't have to worry 'bout much, at least not yet, 'cause The Sopona has a good supply of food and plenty of juice to keep everythin' charged and runnin' and two deep wells with fresh aqua. It's so nice to turn on a faucet and get aqua without havin' to lug it from the sea and desal it first. There's not a lot of people here though – sixty tops. A couple of folks from the old town who survived, even the guards who are actually pretty nice, although they seem big and scary. Raoul's especially nice now I've gotten to know him, and the doctors and lab folks who work in the Sopona and their fams.

But we're secluded too. Cut off from everythin'. The jungle surrounds us, and even though there are roads through it, they haven't been maintained and nobody uses 'em. The best way to get to Tollan is by sea, but we haven't seen a ship since the one that took the shipment of pills. And it's harder and harder for the tower to get reception, so we don't hear much news of the outside anymore.

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So, it isn't high civ, not like how we dreamed. But there's still some work to do in the lab. Although I'm bottom rung, Phil says — mostly I go and fetch stuff and sweep up the floors and things like that — maybe someday I'll learn somethin' that can help civ, like Mike used to do. It's a start here, anyway.

Phil says if a boat comes with supplies, we can get on it, if we want. We don't hafta stay. But Pearl does hafta stay. We can't move her. They've still got a load of pills stashed here to send out in the world, so we know another ship'll come someday to pick 'em up. But it might not be for a while. And after that, who knows if we'll ever see a ship again.

But we're safe here, so far. I suppose we could end up somewhere a hell of a lot worse. East coast, for one. Sounds like high civ has broken down pretty bad, but maybe when they get the pills, they'll bounce back. At least here we have all the Pan4 pills we'll ever need.

Oh, last bit of news, Miriam is preg. First time I've ever seen her look scared. Steven's mondo happy though. And I reckon Miriam's happy too. Now she'll have a true fam of her own.

And am I happy? I dunno. Too much has happened for me to be happy yet. But maybe someday I will be, Joey. Wish you and Susie were here with me. But as Miriam says, ya can't live on wishes. They aren't real. You gotta leave 'em behind, pick your next path, and begin the trudge down it.

## 2

BY THE TIME we finish plantin' the fields, it's March, and Miriam and me sail back to Avalon. We asked Kira if she

wanted to come, but she looked at us all scared and shook her head. She don't even wanna visit her little baby's grave any more.

It's not like we're gonna live on Avalon again or anythin', but it's only a few hours boat ride and Miriam isn't sick in the mornin' much now. So, one day, she said, "Let's sail out to Avalon and have a vacation."

I laughed and said, "Vacation?"

"Yeah, like you and Mike and Grant used to do before all the world went crazy."

And I said, "The world's always been crazy."

"Yeah, well, you know what I mean."

So, we packed some food and a desal and loaded up jugs of aqua, just in case, and we climbed in the dinghy with our puppy, Buck. He's kind of a crazy little puppy, all over the place, half wild. His parents were dogs who got injected with Pan4 in the lab, and they both went zombie but recovered, and so Phil keeps 'em as pets now. Miriam says Buck was born with a bit of crazy zombie in him, but that's 'cause she's never had a puppy. I told her all puppies act a bit crazy 'til they outgrow it, just like little kids. They can't help it.

She named him Buck after the dog in *The Call of the Wild*, which she's readin' on her vid to the baby in her tum. We haven't named the baby yet 'cause we don't know what it is, but she wants to name it Mike if it's a boy.

"What if it's a girl?" I say as we putter away from the harbor.

She says, "Camille."

"Who's that?"

And she gives me a sad smile. "That was my mom's name."

Well, Camille is pretty so I smile back.

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Then she turns away, her red hair blowin' in the wind as we speed up and leave Tollan behind.

It's weird returnin' to Avalon, though. It isn't the same, like the place died after we left. It gives me the same sad feelin' I used to get when I'd walk by the Millers' old place, with their porch screen door swingin' open, half on its hinges, and dead leaves scattered over the porch Mrs. Miller used to keep so tidy, and the frayed rope from the old tire swing hangin' off the tree in the front yard, the swing that Maggie and me used to play on when we were kids. Avalon makes me feel like that now.

We tramp up to Camelot through The Doldrums. The seagulls have pecked away all the chicken feed and beans Pearl scattered, and all the rain we got last month has already half-rusted the Pater's old fire ring, and the bunker's roof has fallen in, even over parts of the main room, and a couple pages of the old Bible lie crumpled on the floor, smattered with seagull poop, and the cots smell of mold. The only parts left of the old table – the one the Pater and Grant had brought out when they first built the bunker, and where Mike's puzzle dreams happened – are its legs, lyin' scattered on the concrete floor, and the puppy runs off with one of 'em to chew on it. In the kitchen, we open the cooler and have to move back a step when the stink oozin' out of it hits us.

Miriam holds her nose and peers in. She laughs. "It's the egg! The only one the hens laid. We forgot to eat it."

We clean it up, usin' the shovel to dig a hole and bury the remains so Buck won't get to it. Then we hike up Pook's Hill and say hi to the Pater and Grant and Mike and Laddie and Susan and even Noah, but it feels spooky to me up here now, not comfortin' like the Pater's tombstone used to make me feel.

Buck pushes the seashells with his nose, then whines. He don't like it here either. The sea is still pretty with all the blue and green sparkles glintin' off it, but there's somethin' threatenin' 'bout this place now, treacherous.

I glance down to where Buck has shoved around the seashells. A knife handle sticks outta the sandy dirt.

Seein' it too, Miriam gasps and reaches down, pulls it up. Spots of rusty red cover the blade. She says, "Blood." And she drops it, back onto the pile of shells, whistles for Buck, and strides away from the graves.

I run after her. "Don't you want your knife back?"

"No."

"Why not?"

She turns to me, her eyes stormy. "'Cause it killed somebody, Steven. Mike or Grant or both, I dunno. But it isn't up here by accident. And I don't want it anymore."

So, we leave it and head to The Enchanted Place, Miriam's fave spot, but the cliff has crumbled and the little grove of trees are all dead on the ground, hacked to bits.

Miriam sighs and shrugs and turns away. "We might as well walk the rest of it."

We trudge out to Mirkwood, but most of it is submerged and a dead smell hangs over it, like rottin' branches mixed with muck.

We picnic on the last little sliver of pink beach. I gaze at the bits and pieces of the *Argo* scattered all over it. "We should come back here and clean it all up. Make the beach pretty again."

Miriam shakes her head. "It'd take forever. We could probably clean up the stuff washed up on the beach, but you'll never haul that big boat off Mermaid's Rock. It's there to stay."

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We strip off our clothes after we finish eatin' and swim to the part of the rock not covered by ship, the same spot Pearl lay on when Phil and Raoul and me came out here figurin' we'd be bringin' her and Grant and Mike back to Tollan. We watch the blood red sun set over the sea. Miriam stretches out full on her back and stares at the sky, and I watch her belly rise and fall. It's gettin' nice and round, the only part of her that now isn't all sharp angles. Buck swims 'round the rock a couple times, then climbs onto it and shakes and gets us all wet again. Miriam laughs and rubs his head, then rubs her tum.

I say, "If we stay in Tollan, we could still come here to get away, just like we're doin' now. Anytime we want. We can fix Camelot's roof, bring a new table, and maybe a nice sofa and stuff. It'd be fun for our baby to get to come here every once in a while, don't ya reckon?"

She turns to me and says, "No. I don't reckon it'll be the same here ever again. And I don't ever wanna come back."

Maybe she's right, but it's sad admittin' it. "Do you figure Pearl did it? Used that knife? Killed Mike? Or Grant?"

She shrugs. "Who knows what anybody might do in a maniac, zombie state."

I'm quiet for a bit, starin' at the blue sky. "Miriam, you do wanna stay in Puerto—I mean Tollan—though, right? 'Cause I like it there."

She says, "Sure. Where else are we gonna go?"

And I'm happy, 'cause Tollan feels like home now. I'm happy my old friend Raoul survived, so is Kira, I reckon. They hang out together a lot.

Phil says somebody's dog originally brought the virus into town from the jungle. But how the dog got it, nobody knows.



In a way it's weird, livin' so close to where it all began. But maybe it's the safest place to be.

I say, "I figure we'll do OK in Tollan, Miriam."

She laughs. "Yeah, 'til we get a tsunami or hurricane or that volcano behind us blows."

I laugh too. "At least there's no nados here."

She hugs me and says, "No, I guess we don't have to worry too much 'bout that."

### 3

I'M READING *THE Wind in the Willows* when the girl called Kira comes in.

"How ya doin' today, Pearl?" she says. She's wearing a lab coat and her thick hair is pulled back in a ponytail. Reminds me so much of my Ruby,

I lower the book. "When will we hear from Ruby, do you think?"

"Oh, soon," Kira says. "I'm sure. She's awfully busy. Out savin' the world, you know."

That's my Ruby. Always thinking of other people. At least I remember *her*. "Can I go to the library today?"

"That's what I'm here for," Kira says.

I put down my book and pull my shoes on, and we walk out of the room, through the dark gray corridor and out into the bright sunshine. Once you get outside the ugly chain link fence surrounding the compound, this place is pretty. I like the tall green mountain rising behind the plowed fields.

"We used to have fields like that back home."

Kira squeezes my hand. "Do you remember where that was, Pearl?"

## THE QUEST FOR AVALON

I try to remember, but no...it's hazy. I vaguely remember staring out a tall window across fields like this. "Maybe it was a dream."

Kira smiles. "No, it wasn't. But you'll remember it all someday, I'm sure."

They keep the library in an old house, shingles falling off its roof. Inside, rows of shelves line the walls. Shelves stacked with books.

Kira moves into the small kitchen to prepare my afternoon snack. I sit in a chair and stare at the books.

Sometimes I pull down a book. Mostly just to feel it, to smell it, to study its cover. Most of the library books are about science or diseases – nothing I'm interested in. A lot are in a language I can't read. Some, scattered through the collection, are fiction and in English, and I recognize some of the author names. Charles Dickens. William Shakespeare. I pick those books when I want to read something besides *The Wind in the Willows*.

I scan the bottom shelf. I spot a smallish book stuffed in between two fat ones. It's close enough so I can read the faded title on the spine.

*Return to Avalon*. I wonder what that's about. I stand, lean forward, reach for it.

And then I see my name. Pearl Rogers.

"Kira!" I say. "Come look at this."

She scoots in from the kitchen, clutching a butter knife smeared with jam. "What?"

I show her the book.

She laughs. "What are the odds they'd have that in their library?"

"Did I write this?"

“Of course, you did. A long time ago. It’s all ’bout kings and knights and their adventures on a magical island. You have a copy on your vid.”

I never look at my vid, she knows that. I don’t like it, the words glare at me. I won’t read anything on a vid screen. I flip open the book and read the first couple of paragraphs. Sounds like it might be a good story. But I sure don’t remember writing it.

I wonder if it has talking animals, like *Wind in the Willows* does.

## 4

SOMETIMES I DON’T get how my fam manages to survive. They’re all still so unrealistic. Steven still sees this world full of color when in reality it’s all browns and grays, but you can’t tell him that. Kira still hears music in everything: the buzzing of insects, the swing of an axe, the rumbling of a wave. She still talks to Susie like the baby can actually hear. And Pearl still spins her fantasies, although I guess she has some excuse. She’s not fully out of the zombie stage yet, Phil says.

But maybe they’ve hit on the only sane way to deal with life. To see it in dazzling colors and beautiful sounds and fantastic stories. To talk to people you miss like they’re still there. It sure seems to work for ’em, to get ’em all through the drudgery that fills our days while keeping a bit of hope and wonder for the world alive in their hearts. Sometimes I’m envious, wishing I could think their way. Sometimes I’ve gotten close, like when we wasted all the flour making gingerbread men that Christmas. The survivalist part of my brain was appalled, but the part wanting to live in the moment loved every bite of those

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cookies. I figured they'd probably be the last I'd ever get so I'd better enjoy 'em.

But I don't wanna live in a fantasy. Reality is almost fantastic enough as it is, especially now I have Camille. There's something magical about little babies, how they look at everything with wonder: other people, a dog, a flower, a rock, even. They don't know that the world is a scary place, not yet. And sometimes, when I'm playing with her and listening to her coo and babble on to anyone who'll listen, I almost forget the world is a scary place.

Steven sometime still sketches, but he's too busy out in the fields to concentrate much on painting, and when he isn't working, he's playing with our little Camille. He loves her so much. He don't even mind when her nose gets oozy or when she spits up all over the place. He just picks her up and hugs her and cleans her and never even looks like he's gonna be sick.

We take Camille out with us when we're working in the fields. It's hard work, but it's so drippy hot here that everything grows well, and we've got one good harvest stored away in the bunkers. Good thing too, 'cause we haven't seen a ship in months. It almost seems like the rest of the world don't exist at all.

Kira lost her violin when Pearl burned it, but Raoul found her an old guitar in one of the houses. A guitar is a far cry from a violin, she says, but she's learned how to play it and makes pretty music. And Raoul plays too, so now we have half a quartet, Kira says.

She strums her guitar now as we sit around a campfire, a year to the day since we first landed on Avalon — our new Thanks-

giving Day. She plays her concerto for us. It has happy parts and sad parts and ends with a kind of whimper.

"That's it?" Steven says.

Kira laughs. "Well, it's not quite done yet. I'm not sure how to finish it. And it don't sound half as impressive as it would if I had my violin."

Raoul, who sits next to her, reaches over and gives her hand a squeeze. "I like it."

She smiles, her face crisscrossed by the jungle's shadows. We're so close to it, right on the brink. Behind us looms Lobo Trieste, its red tower light still blinking but in a desperate kind of way. We haven't gotten reception on any of our vids for a while now.

Steven sits next to me, sketching the jungle in the waning light. He points his pencil toward it and says, "That's the new Mirkwood."

Kira rolls her eyes. "Can't you call it somethin' else?"

"But it's really a lot more like Mirkwood than the place on Avalon," Steven says. "*This* Mirkwood definitely has big spiders that could bite you."

Pearl sits next to Phil and smiles at this. She's busy typing into her vid. I bounce Camille in my lap and glance at Buck, who is sprawled next to my feet and chews on a stick. "What're you typin', Pearl?"

"A rewrite of that story I wrote way back," she says. "*Return to Avalon*. It needs animals."

"Don't it have horses and dogs and stuff already?" Steven says.

"Yes, but they don't talk. I want talking animals in my story."

She's still not all there in the head. She walks and talks and remembers how to cook and writes and reads to us and stuff,

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but she don't remember Toad Hall 'cept the window in the library. She don't remember Avalon either. She believes Ruby is still alive and talks about Mike sometimes, but she don't mention Grant at all. Steven once suggested taking her back to the island, maybe it'd jog her memory if she saw the tombstone. Phil didn't figure that was the greatest idea. "Maybe not remembering everything is a blessing," he said.

I reckon, in some far corner of her mind, Pearl remembers. But she saw another road, half-hidden in shadows, a road leading away from all those memories. It's the road she always picks, the one where she can make up how her story goes whether it's true or not. Like how Ruby is alive in her mind, not dead and buried in the graveyard near Toad Hall. It used to bug me a lot, how she makes up her own reality. But maybe Phil is right. At least Pearl seems happy now. She hardly ever gets maniac, even when her sciatica acts up.

Camille squirms in my lap, and I hug her, still amazed that she came out so perfect. My red hair and Steven's blue eyes – more importantly, all ten toes and ten fingers and she's hardly ever sick and always babbling. I kiss her head and hope I don't have to ever choose another path. I wanna stay right here. I have a good fam and the people here are nice. It's hard work since we can't rely on any help coming from the east, but we harvested a good autumn crop and the fishing off the coast is pretty good and we have plenty of solars to keep us running for a long time. Even Kira seems happy here, although sometimes I swear she's getting restless. Not many folks her age here 'cept Raoul. Sometimes I wonder, if another ship ever does come to visit us, will she and Raoul jump on board and leave us to search for a place with high civ? Or maybe high civ don't even exist anymore.

Sometimes I remember my old life. Sometimes I wonder if the boy Jack made it through Pan4 and is happy. But mostly I focus on now. Maybe I don't see colors in everything like Steven or make beautiful music like Kira or can write wonderful stories like Pearl, but I don't worry 'bout that. If I was the kinda person who wanted to do those things, I guess I would. Me, I just wanna survive and watch my baby grow.

You never can get too comfy, though. It's right when you do that something you don't expect happens, something that forces you off your path and into another direction. But for now, I'm happy watching Camille as she grabs Steven's pencil and hearing Steven laugh as he begins a game of tug-o-war with her over it, and listening to Kira's music float through the air. I don't even mind watching Pearl, who beat the zombie odds and is still alive and fighting, typing on her vid. That's good enough for now.

"Well, happy Thanksgivin', everyone," Steven says.

Pearl puts down her vid and raises a glass filled with the last of the hard cider from the old apple orchard. "Kiss the book."

And we laugh, 'cause at least she remembers that, so we all raise our own glasses and say, "Kiss the book," 'cept Phil and Raoul, who have no idea what we're talking about.

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