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Mukade Island

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Nikki Bennett

To Steph, Pete, Mark and Reann
And especially to my husband Steve. I love you!

The Island Chronicles Volume 1
Mukade Island
Second Printing 2013
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Editing: Helen McCarthy
Published by Firedrake Books, LLC

ISBN-10: 1941036007

ISBN-13: 978-1-941036-00-6

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Printed in the United States of America

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ANANSI ISLAND SNEAK PEEK

ONE WISH

I stare at the door, lick dry lips, and clasp clammy hands behind my back.

The red door has no doorknob. You use the brass knocker to get in. I shuffle my feet and glance behind me. A long hallway stretches into the dark. Nowhere to go but forward.

This is The Day. This day will change my life. All I have to do is knock.

My shaking hand grasps the cold brass, lifts and lets go. A hollow “bong” echoes down the corridor as the knocker meets wood. The door creaks open. Darkness lies behind it. Darkness and a weird smell of rotting fish and lilac.

I hesitate.

“Hurry up, boy. I’ve got other kids to get through today too, you know.”

I take a steadying breath and step into the room. The door slams behind me. A light flicks on, illuminating drab walls and a metal desk. The figure behind the desk sits in shadows.

“Well?”

“Well, w—what?” My fingers run through sticky hair and I lick my lips again.

“Your wish, boy. What is your wish? Spit it out and let’s get on with it.”

I shake my head in an attempt to clear my panic. This is it. My one wish. I sure as hell better not screw this up.

Somewhere under the desk, a foot taps.

“I wish...”

The tapping stops. I steel myself and steady my voice.

“I wish there were no more wishes.”

Silence. The shadowy figure moves forward. Bulbous yellow eyes glint through the gloom. Do they look sympathetic?

No. They’re gleeful. Amused.

“Sure you used the correct phrase? You only get one wish, you know. One’s the limit. You’ll never get another.”

My dry throat clenches. I gulp, praying for moisture.

“So what do you mean when you say, ‘I wish there were no more wishes’? For you, that’s true. Did you mean you wished no wishes were granted to *anybody else*?”

Damn it, Jack. How could you screw this up? “Yes, that’s what I mean. No more wishes for anybody else.”

Malicious laughter fills the room. “Sorry boy. You wasted your one wish,” the owner of the yellow eyes says, not sounding sorry at all.

A long finger pushes a button on the desk. A mind-blowing pain fills my head as the room blinks out of existence.

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How long have I been out? Minutes? Hours? Days, I don’t know. Eerie sounds bombard my ears. I try to clear my head and make some sense the sounds. Something finally registers. A voice.

“Hey Boy. *Boy!*”

A blurry shape flits into focus—a skeletal face framed with flaming red hair. Sunken, haunted eyes stare at me. I almost scream, but don’t because the voice coming out of the thin red mouth belongs to a girl who sounds as scared as I feel. Her hand clamps on my arm and tugs.

I groan. “Where am I?”

“Get up. We need to move. Now!”

Yanked to my feet, I stumble after the girl, my head pounding, eyes refusing to focus. Rocky walls surround us. Flapping shapes whistle overhead.

“Are those *bats*?”

“No time for explanations. Run!”

I run. Flickering torchlight illuminates a twisty path. The girl grasping the flaming torch exudes a contagious panic. My legs pump as fast as they can.

The girl runs faster. We pelt down the tunnel, following the wavering torchlight, and enter a room dripping with stalactites. The girl sinks to her knees, gasping for breath. Three purple bats flit next to her, chirping.

Purple. When the hell did bats become *purple*?

“Name’s Steffi.” The girl holds out a bony hand. I shake it with a trembling one.

“Jack. Where are we? What am I doing here?”

Steffi stares at me with her sunken blue eyes. “Jack, as in ‘Jack Outrigger?’”

“What? No, Jack Jones.”

“Oh. Well, can’t help hoping.” Steffi gets her breath back and stands up. “Sorry about the running. That place where I found you, it isn’t safe.”

I peer around the gloomy cavern, my breath visible in the still air. I’m freezing. “And this place is?”

“For the most part. They can’t come in here.”

Who does she means by They? “Where am I?”

The girl ignores my question. She scoops up a purple bat and whispers in its ear. The bat chirps and flies down another tunnel.

“Come on.” She grabs my hand and pulls me after the bat. “They’ll be waiting for us.”

“Can you talk to bats?”

“Sure, we all can. Well, we can’t understand them too well, but they know what *we’re* saying, all right.”

This is too nutty. I mean, bats are cool—last summer, my father helped me build a bat house for the bats living in our yard so we could watch them—but *talk* to them?

These bats are sure different though. They're larger than any bat I've ever seen. They've got purple fur and sparkling green eyes.

We move through the squiggly tunnel, slower now. Calmer. Soft, wavering light fills the next room we enter. A crackling fire warms the air, and smoke billows out the cave's mouth. I try to stick my head outside, but Steffi's arm holds me back.

"Don't go out there now. It isn't safe after dark."

I keep my feet inside the cave and peer out. Twisty jungle trees silhouette against the starless sky. In the distance, water splashes against rocks. Waves maybe. A sea or an ocean, but invisible in the inky blackness.

Something slithers close to the cave's mouth. Tiny feet click across the rocks. I step away from the eerie night and move closer to the comforting fire.

Steffi taps my shoulder. "Jack, this is Steve, Keiko, and Rob. Everyone, Jack."

I jump—I hadn't noticed them sitting there, silent, watching me. They cluster around the fire. Torn, dirty clothes hang off their skeletal bodies. They stare at me with haunted, hopeless eyes. Lost, forlorn.

The oldest looking, Steve, wears a patch over one eye. A grizzly beard spouts from his chin. He nods but doesn't speak. He's scrutinizing me, sizing me up. I feel almost criminal, standing here in clean clothes with a bit of fat on my bones while these poor people huddle in the dirt, hugging knobby knees to their chests, wearing tattered clothes, trying to keep warm.

"He needs food," Steffi says.

No. You need food, not me.

“We don’t have much,” Steve says. His voice is gravelly, harsh. “Rob only caught a couple of slugs before he chickened out.”

Rob stares at his dirty feet. “The last one bit me.”

Slugs? I don’t think so. “I’m not hungry.”

“You will be soon enough,” Steffi says. “Sit.”

My legs crumple beneath me, and I sink to the sandy floor, exhausted. I rub my throbbing head.

“Get him some water too, he’s gotta be thirsty,” Steffi says.

Keiko, a small girl with stringy black hair, squirms down another passage. She returns with a shell full of water and something pink and slimy lying on a leaf.

“Here’s the slug,” Steffi says. “It looks like crap, but you’ll get used to the taste. Shutting your eyes sometimes helps.

Rob grins. “Yeah, sometimes.”

The gloppy gunk oozes over the leaf. My stomach churns. I remember the time Mom tried to make me eat escargot. Cooked snails. She couldn’t force them down my throat. The slug looks a hell of a lot less appetizing.

“Can’t you cook it first?”

“We *did* cook it. Be thankful we didn’t give it to you raw.”

The others stare at me. They’re starving, all of them. They probably went through a hell of a lot to get this one miserable slug. I can’t refuse their offer. I close my eyes, hold my nose, slide the pink gunk into my mouth, take a large swig of water, and swallow before my mind dwells too long on the slimy texture. The slug tumbles around my churning stomach.

Steffi grins. “Next time, try chewing. Food helps the headache. What did you wish for?”

“What?” I gulp the last of the water and put the shell down.

“Your wish. What was it for?”

Four pairs of eyes fix on me. How did they know about my wish?

ONE WISH

“It’s stupid. It didn’t work.”

“You’re damn right it didn’t. That’s why you’re here,” Steve says. “Tell us.”

I take a deep breath. “I wished for no more wishes.”

A collective sigh passes through the group. “He isn’t one of The Others,” Steffi says, smiling at me. “He’s one of us.”

THE ISLAND

I grew up near the ocean. My parents worked hard, but they spent every free second they had with me. Dad was an old surfing pro and taught me how to ride the waves. Mom was a big nature freak. She took me for hikes in the mountains and taught me all about plants and birds and things.

We had a great life, but Mom and Dad always seemed sad. Even when Mom laughed, she looked like she might burst into tears. When my dad smiled, the smile rarely reached his eyes.

When I was a little kid, my babysitter, Ms. Givens tried to explain why.

“They’re sad because of your older brother,” she said. “Don’t you remember him?”

My only memory of Cody was the pictures hanging over my parents’ bed. They showed a smiling kid with ruffled blond hair. Surfing a wave in one photo. Hanging out on the beach with his friends in another. Sitting next to a happy Mom and smiling Dad. My parents never talked about him, and I never asked.

“He left when he turned fifteen,” Ms. Givens said.

“Why?”

“Well, when you turn fifteen, you get to ask for one wish. It can be anything you want, and it’s guaranteed to come true. Now, your brother, like your father, loved the ocean. Whales and sharks, and things that live in the sea fascinated him. He wished he could study to become a marine biologist. So, they sent him away to learn all he needed.”

“They?”

“They,” Ms. Givens said, and that’s all she would say.

“So why are my parents sad?”

She shrugged. “Becoming a marine biologist and studying out at sea was your brother’s one wish. He has to always stick with it. I think he got a job working in the Antarctic or something. That’s what your parents say, anyway.”

“Can’t he come visit?”

Ms. Givens sighed. “No, I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way.”

In the following years, other kids in my neighborhood disappeared after they made their wish. Frank Mullens, the dude who lived a few blocks down, wanted to become an astronaut more than anything. He went in to make his wish and never came out. They sent him to astronaut school right away.

Much to the relief of every kid on the street, Mike Mullens, Frank’s younger brother, disappeared on his birthday. We all hated Mike. He beat up younger and weaker kids, stole bikes and wrecked them, and painted graffiti all over old Ms. Brody’s house after she called him a no-good disgrace to the neighborhood. He shot defenseless baby birds with his BB gun, just for fun. I was scared to death of him. He stole gum, comic books, even money from me. He beat me up more than once.

Nope, I wasn’t sorry when Mike disappeared.

But I worried *I* might disappear. I decided early on not to wish for anything stupid that would send me away from my mom and dad. They’d had enough sadness already. Over the

years, I thought long and hard about what I would wish for when I turned fifteen. An idea began to form. I would wish for no more wishes. That way, parents wouldn't be sad when their kids disappeared and I could stay with mine.

It hadn't worked out that way, after all.

<<<>>>

This place super-sucks. Everyone else is asleep, but I'm wide awake, restless, and jittery. I want to walk outside and escape the snoring kids, even though they've warned me about stepping out of the cave at night. But those freaky clicking sounds keep me in. I don't know what creature makes them, but they sound ominous. I toss and turn and wait for morning to arrive.

Nighttime ends in an abrupt blaze of brightness. I blink my eyes, hoping to adjust them to this sudden barrage of light. I shake Steffi, who grumbles and rolls over.

"What the hell?" I whisper. "Where'd the light come from?"

"Oh, that." Steffi sits up and stretches, her rumpled red hair drooping over sleepy eyes. "Yup, it's daytime now."

"Just like that?"

"Mhm. Nighttime is the same way. It's like turning on and off a light switch around here. One second it's daytime, next thing you know, it's night."

"How?"

Steffi shrugs. "Who knows? We don't have a sun here so I'm not sure where the light comes from. But, now that it's here, it's time to get up."

No sun? I sit in the cave's entrance, staring out at a crazy orange sea and a vibrant purple sky.

Where the *hell* am I?

After a gag-alicious breakfast of slimy slugs, Steffi says it's safe to head outside. "They disappear in the daytime. The daytime is safe."

"They?"

“The things that creep around at night. C’mon. I’ll show you the beach.”

Sharp rocks covered in slippery algae litter the ground, and we pick our way around them as we move to the shore. Behind me the cave’s entrance yawns, carved into a cliff that rises to form a dismal gray mountain. A few shrubs cling to the mountain’s rocky sides.

Graffiti covers the cliff. People have chiseled their names, carved messages and dates, left notes for each other. Years of desperate scribblings.

“Don’t touch the water,” Steffi says. “The water’s poison.”

“Why come down here then?”

“The slugs live here. They’re the only food we’ve got.”

Steffi stoops, and her hand shoots forward. She pulls her arm back up. A fat, purple glob tries to gnash at her hand with its sharp teeth. “You’ve gotta grab ’em by the middle, see? They bite, and slug bites aren’t pretty.”

I can’t help gaping at the wriggling, hissing, snapping lump of slime. “Slugs don’t *have* teeth.”

“They do here. Another reason why this rock we’re imprisoned on isn’t on Earth. You try.”

After an hour, I’ve nabbed six slugs without getting bit once. I’m proud but exhausted. Steffi puts the slugs into a pot with a lid, so they can’t escape, and we lug the pot back to the cave.

“You cook them like lobster, alive in boiling water. I’d feel sorry for them if they weren’t such nasty things to begin with,” Steffi says.

“Don’t you get tired of eating slugs?”

“Sure, but that’s all we’ve got. We don’t have much choice.”

My stomach rolls. The thought of never eating anything again except these lumps of slime depresses the hell out of me.

“Any fish in the sea?”

Steffi shakes her head. “The sea burns you if you touch it. I don’t think anything lives in it. It’s just there.”

“Maybe we could build a boat. Sail away from here.”

“And go where? Others have tried it. The seawater eats right through the wood. You try to sail out on that sea, you’ll be burned alive. It’s easier to accept that you’re stuck here.”

We climb back to the cave. “Steve has a theory,” Steffi says. “He thinks if anyone makes a wish They don’t like, that person gets sent here.”

“*They?*”

“Yeah, think about it. We all grew up knowing we’d be granted a wish when we turned fifteen. So did our parents. But the generation before them, they didn’t get a wish. Neither did all the generations before that. So this wish thing is new. Maybe only over the last forty years or so.”

Steffi leans forward and whispers, “Humans can’t make wishes come true.”

“They can’t?”

“Of course they can’t. Otherwise people’d do it all the time. Didn’t you ever wonder how a wish could possibly happen?”

I hadn’t. Like everyone else, I just took it for granted that it would.

“So if humans can’t make wishes come true, how do we get them then?”

“Aliens,” Steffi says. Rob snorts. She turns and glares at him.

She’s nuts. “You think aliens run Earth? Seriously?”

“If the aliens like your wish, they grant it. If they don’t, you get sent here. And here is no place on Earth, guaranteed.”

My eyes travel to the sea. The *orange* sea. And green-eyed, purple bats that understand what we say. *They* sure as hell aren’t Earthy-type creatures.

We’re on another planet. Unbelievable, but in a weird way it makes perfect sense. I’m petrified and excited at the same time.

“So we’re stuck here forever?” I’m hoping the answer won’t be ‘yes.’

“You won’t last long here.” The resignation in Steffi’s voice chills me to the bone. “No one does.”

“How come?”

“Lots of reasons. Starvation. Disease. Loads of creepy-crawlies prowling around. The only place you’re safe is in this cave. The bats protect us here. If you wander outside at night...” She shrugs and doesn’t finish the sentence.

Rob pipes up. “And if you try to leave our side of the island, you could end up in The Other’s territory. The Others can get you too.”

“The Others?”

Steffi nods. “The guys on the other side. The Bad Ones. I’m glad I got to you first. If The Others had found you, well...”

She doesn’t finish that sentence either. I decide I don’t want her to.

Keiko takes our slugs and dumps them into a boiling pot of water. They let out horrific shrieks. Poor things. They might be vicious little biters, but I still can’t help feeling sorry for them.

I turn to Steffi as the shrieks die down. “What got *you* sent here? What did you wish for?”

Steffi laughs. “Vengeance. Not a smart move on my part.”

“Vengeance? About what?”

She falls silent.

“I wished I’d be rich but never have to work,” Rob says. “Not a good choice either.”

I like Rob. He’s whiny and a little lazy, but good-natured. Like a little brother who needs looking after, even though he’s as old as any of us, a few months older than me, I’d guess. But he *looks* younger. Acts younger too. He’s tall but thin. Big dimples when he smiles, but sad, brown eyes.

“What about you?” I ask Keiko.

Keiko stares into the pot and doesn't answer. She's skinny, almost to the point of bones. Limp, black hair cascades over her shoulders.

"She doesn't talk much," Steffi says. "She's from Japan, but she speaks some English. Well, she used to. Before..."

"Before what?"

Steffi shakes her head and lowers her voice to a whisper. "Best not to talk about it where she can hear."

Steffi tells me about The Others as we eat. "They manage to nab most newbies who show up. If they get you, you've gotta fight to prove yourself. If you fail, you become their slave."

"How do you know any of this if you've never been to their side?" I ask as I try not to gag on my rubbery slug.

"The bats," Steve says. "That's what the bats said."

The three bats nestle in the corner, hanging upside down from the rocks, chirping to each other.

"I thought you couldn't understand what they say."

"Well, *we* can't. But sometimes a special person shows up—someone the bats will talk to. A couple years ago a guy lived here who could understand them. I knew him. The bats told him about The Others and he told me."

"The bats do communicate with us though," Rob says. "We can't understand what they say, but we can figure out what they mean. At night, they let out this weird whistle and we know it's gonna get dark. When they flutter around in the cave and screech, we know a new kid's shown up."

"Does that happen a lot? New kids showing up?"

"Not a whole lot. Every few weeks. Sometimes months go by."

Now, I'm not a math whiz, but this doesn't make sense. If every kid on Earth gets a wish, and if They don't like the wish and send you here, you'd think people would pop up every *day*.

I chew on my slug and stare into the jungle. “What’s out there? Why can’t we go out at night?”

Steve shakes his head. “We don’t know what creatures lurk out there, we’ve never been stupid enough to go find out. They never try to come inside the cave, but you don’t want to get caught outside after dark, trust me. Last year a guy called Alexi was dumb enough to do it.”

Keiko, sitting by herself in a corner, shudders and pulls her thin knees to her chest.

“Stop,” Rob says. “You know she hates hearing about this.” He shoots a worried look at Keiko.

Steve’s voice drops to a murmur. “We found parts of him the next day. We didn’t find much.”

A sickening sensation spreads through my gut. I move closer to the wall and stare out at the uninviting landscape.

After dinner, the bats fly in and whistle, shrill and high. I plug my ears with my fingers to drown out the grating noise.

Rob sits next to me and covers his ears too. “They’re so loud you can hear ‘em all down the beach. They whistle about five minutes before the lights go out, and if you aren’t in the cave by then, you’re screwed. So they’ve gotta be loud enough for everybody to hear.”

At night I’m unable to sleep. The others snore next to me, lying in a heap like a pack of puppies, huddled together for warmth. I don’t get it. How can they just accept their fate without trying to change it? Maybe they tried but went through too much horror and gave up. Maybe they decided cowering in this cave was easier. At least they’re safe here.

I lie next to them. Even with the fire and their slight warmth, I’m cold.

And I’m not so sure. About the safe part.

Something tells me we aren’t safe at all.

BATS

So here's the rundown, and it isn't pretty. The small cave we live in doesn't allow for any privacy. At night, we huddle together for warmth. No blankets to keep us warm, just a pile of ferns to lie on. We use a hole in the rocky floor as a toilet, right in front of everybody. Everyone turns away of course, but they can see and hear you, which is embarrassing as hell. I'm not sure where our excrement ends up. The hole is deep, that's for sure. Hopefully it doesn't connect with our water supply.

We get our water from an underground stream that bubbles into a tiny room behind the main cave. The water trickle barely wets the rocks. It's not enough to bathe in; the best we can do is fill up the shell and splash a little water on our skin, which doesn't help much.

The kids here don't bother with bathing. They stink so much they don't notice the smell anymore. But I do. They smell like they're rotting.

Steve especially stinks. Sores cover his body and exude a foul pus. He says the sores are from scurvy. Lack of Vitamin C. The others have them too, but not as many, or as reeking.

To the cave's left, jagged cliffs fall into the sea. To the right lies an impenetrable jungle. Keiko collects ferns at

the edge of the jungle, and we use them for bedding, towels and toilet paper. We can't enter the jungle. I tried once, even after Steffi warned me not to. The jungle is full of spiky grass that tears your clothes and shreds any bit of exposed skin.

So that's it. Our world. A cave and a beach with sharp rocks. The lights go out, and we fall into a pile to stay warm while we sleep. The lights flick on a few hours later, and we head outside to do our daily chores. We catch slugs to eat, we cut jungle branches to burn, and we bang flinty rocks together to start fires. Our whole existence. Nothing else to do except sleep and be miserable. And stare out at the freaky, starless sky. Not a star in it. Ever.

The days here are just as weird. That brilliant magenta sky hovers above the orange sea. Not a cloud dots the sky, not a bird flies across it. Sometimes it slides across the horizon in undulating, unnerving waves, sometimes it's as solid as a wall. It somehow manages to make me feel just a little off-kilter, like I'm going to lose my balance and fall flat on my face if I stare at it long enough.

I try to help out as best as I can. I wrestle with the slugs and I chop the jungle branches, hacking at them with the crude axes Steve makes from sharp rocks. It's hard work. The branches are so rubbery that chopping takes forever.

Steffi's come up with a much more entertaining way to collect wood.

She heads to the beach and grabs an extra-large slug. The slimy thing writhes and gnashes sharp teeth, but Steffi holds on and strides towards the jungle. She holds the slug next to a branch and the super pissed-off animal lashes out, biting and gnawing until the branch falls to the ground.

"Nothing to it," Steffi laughs, "except keeping a grip on the buggers is hard. If you can, they do all the work for you, which is nice."

Steffi has a Scottish accent. Rob is from Canada and Steve came from Hawaii. And Keiko is Japanese. Folks from all over. Everyone must get sent here. Everyone *They* don't like.

We move into the cave and toss the branches on the drying pile. Because they're so rubbery, the branches take a long time to dry, but when they're ready to burn, they burn forever. You can light the end of one branch and use it as a torch for hours, and a few ignited branches create a fire that burns all night.

A huge, purple bat flies into the room. It flaps over Steffi's head and screeches. Steffi freezes.

"What is it?"

"New kid," she says, grabbing a torch. "We've got to get him before The Others do."

She takes off, and I dash after her. We barrel through the tunnel, the bat leading the way.

I puff behind Steffi. For someone on the brink of starvation, she is super-fast. I can't remember the last time I ran like this. Besides the other day, of course, when we were running the *other* way.

The kid lies on the ground, unconscious. Huge. Big muscles. A shock of white-blond hair. Steffi shakes his shoulder.

"Hey," she whispers.

The bat flutters close to Blondie's face, taps his nose with a tiny winged paw, and lets out a few soft chirps.

Or are they words? I stare at the bat. Then I look at the dude on the ground. The bat gives me an insistent chirp.

"Don't wake him," I say. "He's not one of us. He's one of them. The Others."

Steffi shakes her head. "We can't leave him here."

"Yes we can. He's a bad one."

"How do you know?"

I stare at the bat. How *had* I understood it? It hadn't said any words, but I knew what its chirps meant.

Footsteps echo through the gloom. I stare down the dim passage, dread washing over me. Two long shadows approach. Flickering torchlight follows the shadows.

I tap Steffi's shoulder. "They're coming. The Others. We've gotta go."

"Hey kid," Steffi growls, shaking the comatose figure once more. "Wake up, dammit!"

I grab her arm and yank her away. "Forget this guy. Let's get the hell out of here."

The footsteps get louder and the shadows move closer. Steffi glares at me and stands. We both run for it. Around the bend, I stop.

"What are you doing?" Steffi hisses. "We've gotta go before they see us."

Instead of following her advice, I peer back around the corner. Steffi curses and takes off.

I'm not sure why I stopped. Somebody shouted out an order, and something familiar about the voice halted me in my tracks. I watch, transfixed as two figures hurtle into view. One skinny and tall. The other thick, round, and huffing as he runs.

My stomach clenches.

Mike Mullens.

Fricking Mike Mullens, *here*. He bends over Blondie and slaps the poor kid hard across the face. I inch slowly backwards. Steffi has the torch, I'm almost blind in this dark. And the last person I want to meet up with is Mike Mullens.

My foot hits a rock and I fall forward, cursing as my hip slams into the rocky floor. The pain shoots right through my leg, and a groan escapes my lips. I try to scramble back up, but the leg gives out.

From behind me, Mike Mullens snarls. "Get that kid. *Now*." "I'm on it." Mike's lackey sprints towards me.

I scramble to my feet. A dull pain throbs in my hip, but I push forward as fast as I can.

I'm not fast enough.

The dude smashes into me from behind. "Where do you think you're going?" he rasps in my ear as he grinds me into the rocky ground.

I twist my head and stare up at a pimply face and mean, piggy eyes. His pungent breath creeps into my nose, making me gag. Terror courses through me. What the hell was I thinking? Why didn't I follow Steffi when she told me to?

A screech echoes through the corridor as the large bat dives, wings beating my attacker's face. Claws scratch, teeth gnash. The kid yelps and tries to beat the bat off, but it keeps up the barrage until the dude rolls off me. I clamber to my feet and hobble as fast as I can after Steffi, adrenalin coursing through my veins. I can't outrun them if they decide to give chase.

I don't even breathe until I reach the large cavern.

"Thanks," I gasp, as the bat flies into the room. He chirps. Just a chirp, but I know what he means.

"What the hell do you think you were doing?" Steffi yells as I limp into the cave. "You let them have that guy!"

She glares at me with blazing eyes. Keiko cowers in a corner and Rob whimpers. Steve looks stony. Animosity hangs in the air like a storm cloud.

"He was a bad one. The bat told me so."

Steve gives me a sharp look with his one good eye. "You understand the bats?"

I nod, hoping like hell he believes me. The large purple bat swoops into the room and flutters over my shoulder, nuzzling my ear.

"Maybe he *can* talk to them," Rob says.

"He wouldn't be the first," Steve says. "It's pretty rare, but it's happened before."

Steffi's anger flips to excitement. "Just think what we could learn if he can talk to 'em. They can tell us all sorts of things."

Steve sighs. “Like what? Like how good they have it over on the other side? The bats can’t help us much. We can already catch slugs and make fire, and there’s not much else we *can* do.”

Keiko boils up some ferns and makes a poultice for my hip. She presses the warm leaves against the bruise, and the pain lessens. Exhausted, I slump against a wall. Steffi serves me a dinner slug. I’m so spent I can barely swallow it.

“Do they have names?” I ask, motioning to the bats.

Steffi nods. “The big one is Spike. The one with the streak of white running across its head is Pepe.”

Rob grins. “’Cause he looks like a skunk, get it? The smallest one is Peanut. I named her. Peanut was my dog’s name.” He smiles at the bat.

“What did Spike say to you, back in the corridor?” Steffi asks.

“He didn’t really say anything. He chirped, but I knew what he meant.”

Steffi frowns and shakes her head. I don’t blame her. I’m not sure if *I* believe me. So I change the subject.

“One of those guys was from my neighborhood. Mike Mullens.”

Steve sits up, interested. “You know him?”

“I wish I didn’t. He’s an arrogant asshole. I wish I could remember if he has any weaknesses—something we can use.”

“Use for what?”

“You know, use against him. Maybe we could do a surprise attack or something. Take over the island.”

Steffi snorts. “They have more people than we do. They’re bigger and stronger too.”

“We don’t know *how* many people are over there.”

Rob nods. “Yeah, why should they get all the good stuff? The good food, the good water, they might have all sorts of cool stuff on their side.”

“We don’t know *what* they have,” Steve says. “I bet they don’t live any better than we do.”

“And you’re forgetting one thing, boys,” Steffi says. “We *can’t* get over there.”

“We can’t?” I ask.

“Nope. Same as they can’t get over here. Once you pick a side, it’s your side for good. They can’t get into our cave and we can’t get into theirs, and there’s no other way to get over to their side. We can’t swim to it, the jungle’s too thick to get through, and I dare you to climb the cliffs. They’re way too steep.”

“Then we’re stuck.” I hadn’t thought I could feel any worse. I gaze at the others, my stomach rumbling, even after eating the pitiful slug. I’m going to end up like them. Sick and starving. Tattered clothes hanging off my bones. Weeping sores and stinking, rotting breath. Void of hope.

“We’re stuck,” Steffi says. “And that’s that.”

TUNNELS

Spike has become my shadow. He rarely leaves my side. He's comforting. He reminds me of my dog Riley, although he's much smarter. Riley was a happy but stupid dog.

He flutters next to me now, as I sit on a rock and stare out at the orange sea and wavering purple sky above it. I've been wondering: if I'm here, is my brother Cody somewhere here too? Being sent off to work in Antarctica is obviously bogus. Cody was sent here, I'm sure of it. He must've wished for something They didn't like, like everyone else here. But was he sent to this side or The Other's side?

I've been reading through the cliff's graffiti, but I haven't found any messages signed with his name. At some point, everybody writes a message on the cliff. The older writings are chiseled close to the ground, and as that area filled up, people climbed higher to scrape in their messages. If Cody did write something here, I haven't found it yet.

He could be on The Others' side. If he's still alive, he'd be what—twenty-five by now? What's he like? Bad? Good? I don't know. I can see his face: blond hair with freckled cheeks like me, but I don't know what his voice sounds like or what kind of person he is. I don't know anything about Cody.

But I do know one thing. I need to find him.

Spike chirps into my ear. I turn my head and stare at the bat. Spike stares back with unblinking green eyes.

My brain puts Cody aside as other thoughts crowd in. I get up slowly—my hip still hurts although the bruise has faded—and hobble down the beach to find Steffi.

Steffi and Keiko are gathering ferns. The ferns are soft and smell sweet, almost like strawberries, and they grow on the jungle's edge. The girls' arms are both full.

"I'll take that," I tell Keiko, "if you want to go back and get some more, I'll help Steffi carry these to the cave."

Keiko hands me her load and shuffles back to the jungle, silent like usual. Steffi and I maneuver around the rocks and head to the cave.

"Spike talked to me just now."

"What'd he say?"

"He says the cave has other tunnels."

Steffi stops, excitement lighting up her chalky face. Then the spark dies.

"No there aren't. There's only the one tunnel. It goes from our cave to where the new kids show up."

"No, there's more. Spike says so."

Steffi shakes her head. "Jack, I've been over every inch of the cavern and I swear there's not another passage. But I'll help you look if you like."

Steve doesn't believe me either, and isn't happy about us exploring new areas, so Steffi and I make our plans without him. I'm excited to try. Maybe the bats can show us a way to The Other's side. Maybe I can find Cody.

The others don't want to explore. Rob says he doesn't like the dark, Keiko shudders when she's asked, and Steve decides he'd better stay with the other two.

Steffi yawns. She doesn't look too enthused either. "When do you want to start?"

I glance over at Spike. The bat chirps. I don't want to wait, but I listen to Spikes advice. "Tomorrow. We'll go tomorrow."

<<<>>>

We don't have a lot of stuff in our cave. We've got a large iron pot used for cooking slugs. Rocks for starting fires. A heap of branches and ferns. A mound of molding, tattered clothes. Rob says most people don't last long here. When they die, their clothes are removed so others can use them. The mound sits in the corner, and I rummage through it.

I pick up a frayed, leather coat. "We could use this."

"What do you need a coat for?" Rob asks. "It's hot out."

"We should take a backpack with us, and since we don't have one, we might use this." I finger the coat. The zipper and snaps will hold the front together, but the top and the bottom are, of course, open. I wish I had a needle and thread. I've never sewn in my life, but I've watched my mom. Sewing can't be too hard. If I could just secure the bottom somehow...

I wrap a tattered t-shirt around the coat's bottom and tie the sleeves together, hoping it will hold. We load the coat with a few branches, two flinty rocks, in case we need to start a fire, and four cooked slugs wrapped in leaves.

"We don't have any way to carry water with us," Steffi says.

Spike flies over and lets out a reassuring chirp. I nod.

"Spike says the tunnel follows a stream. If we're thirsty we can drink from that."

I turn my attention to the makeshift backpack and fasten some vines to the sleeves and the coat's bottom to make shoulder straps. I stuff a few extra vines in the backpack, figuring we can use them as rope in a pinch. The bulky pack fits across my shoulders.

"We're ready," Steffi says. Spike flaps down the passageway and we follow, holding our torches high in the air.

We reach the large cavern. Spike flies towards the far wall. I follow him. "The passage must be this way, Steffi."

Steffi shakes her head. “I’ve searched that wall a hundred times, Jack. There’s nothing there.”

Spike disappears from view. The other two bats, Peanut and Pepe, hover but don’t follow. Steffi stares.

“No way.”

Dark shadows and a large rock hide the horizontal slit in the wall. Steffi scrutinizes it. “How the hell are we going to get in there? I mean, the bats can fly in easy, but that’s one tight hole. We’ll need to slide on our bellies.”

I drop to my knees and peer in the slit. Utter darkness. I slide the pack off my back and attach it to my belt with a vine. The ceiling isn’t high enough keep the pack on; I’ll drag it behind me instead.

I shove my torch in front and keep my body low, hoping I don’t bang my head on the ceiling. I inch forward on my belly, holding my breath. My nose scrapes the ground and I fight down a wave of panic. What if I get stuck and can’t move forward or go back? I suck in a steadying breath and inch forward. It feels like forever, but after belly crawling a few feet I raise my head without conking it, and after a few feet more I can stand.

“It’s not far, just keep your head low.”

“Okay!” Steffi squirms through the hole and straightens up, holding her torch in front of her.

The tunnel widens and slopes downward. Rocks cover the ground, making walking difficult. I’m wearing shoes, but Steffi has bare feet. She wore her sandals out months ago. Her feet must be tough as leather by now, not to feel the sharp rocks.

“Where does this go?” Steffi whispers.

“I don’t know.” I’m glad for the warm pack on my back; the cave is a bit chillier than the outdoors. “Are you cold?”

“I’ll be okay as long as we keep moving.”

The torch sends flickering shadows through the tunnel. Everything else is dark. We’ve left any outside light far behind.

Our path crosses the stream, and we stoop to get a drink of the cold, clear water. The path straightens and follows the stream, further and further down.

Steffi stares at the ceiling, high above us. “Just think of all the tons and tons of rock hanging over our heads at this very minute.”

I shiver at the thought. Down here in the mountain’s depths, it feels like we’re the only two people in the world—the only living beings, apart from Spike.

We hike a good distance before the tunnel enters another chamber. I stop and stare.

Glittering stalactites hang from the ceiling. Towering formations of rock flow down the walls like water. Columns climb into the air. A waterfall tumbles over the rocks. Tunnels shoot into the darkness like arms of a starfish. I spin around in a slow circle, trying to take it all in. Holy hell, it’s amazing.

“Wow,” Steffi says. “Where do all these passages go?”

“I bet the bats know. Do you think anybody has ever been down here before?”

“No. If they had been, we’d have stories about it. Wait...” She peers into the darkness. “What is that over there?”

An old box sits in the cavern’s center, next to a thick rock column. Spike flutters over to it, chirping.

“Somebody *has* been down here,” Steffi says.

The wooden box is nailed shut. “We can use a branch from my pack to pry it open,” I say. “They’re hard as rocks; the box’ll break before the branch will.”

I pick a skinny branch with a flat end, force it between the box’s top and sides, and push down hard. The wooden pegs give way and the box opens.

Steffi peers in. She uncovers a worn, leather book with an old-fashioned lock holding it shut.

I peer over her shoulder. “Do you see a key?”

Steffi rummages through the box. “Wow, look at this.”

She pulls out a short, silver scabbard covered with pink and red stones. She yanks a glinting silver knife from the scabbard. Her eyes sparkle with delight.

“A knife. A fricking *knife*.”

It’s amazing how much hope the knife brings. Living without a knife is like losing an opposable thumb. You don’t realize how much you depend on it until you don’t have one.

Life will be so much easier with a knife.

Steffi digs deeper. She pulls out a long, golden object. Weird, loopy engraving covers it, and a small glass is embedded on one side. Like a telescope, but when we look through the glass we don’t see anything.

Steffi uncovers a small jar next. Like the scabbard, beautiful stones encrust it. She unscrews the lid, and we peer at the fine black powder inside.

“Any ideas?”

I shake my head. Steffi screws the lid back on and places the jar next to the telescoping thing.

I pull out the last of the box’s contents: a scroll in a long tube. I unroll the scroll a bit, holding my torch close enough so I can read but not so close that the flame will burn the paper.

“It’s a map.”

“Not just a map,” Steffi whispers. “This is a map of the whole damn island. Look, here’s our beach. You can tell it’s ours because the jungle’s right next to it, and there’s that large rock that juts into the sea. There’s our cave. And look—the passage that goes to where we find the new kids. And...”

My heart thumps hard in my chest. “Wow. That must be The Other’s side.”

“It’s fricking *huge*. Look at all the space they have. They’ve even got a meadow. It’s ten *times* bigger than our side.”

“Look.” I point to the middle of the map. “This must be the cave we’re in. This map shows all the passages. And where they end up.”

My heart thumps even harder as the realization hits me.

We can go *anywhere* with this. We can get to any part of the island.

Passages radiate from the main chamber like spokes on a wheel. I trace the map's edges with my finger. "We're in this chamber now. The passage behind us is the one we came out of, so that must be this line here. This line to the left comes out into our jungle. The next line enters their meadow. This line looks like it goes to the mountaintop somewhere and this last one, well, I can't tell where that goes. It just ends."

"I wonder what's in the book," Steffi says, picking it up. It won't open without the key. We search through the box again, but come up empty handed.

"That's all," I say. "The book, the map, the jar, the telescope thing and the knife."

"It's enough," Steffi says. "It's more than anyone else has ever found. Let's take it all and get the hell out of here. This place is pretty, but I'm beginning to get the creeps."

We stuff everything into the bulging backpack before heading back. I almost bring up the idea of trying another passage while we're down here, but Steffi is shivering. Her bony body can't handle the cold. We need to get out into the warm light.

"We're ready to go back now," I tell Spike.

Spike stares at the tunnel next to ours, ignoring my request. He soars high into the air and begins to screech.

Terror builds in my chest. "We've got to go. Now!"

Steffi's eyes grow large. "Why? What's going on?"

"Something's coming." I break into a run, Steffi following close behind. "We've gotta get out of here before it finds us."

THE MAP

We run. I don't stop or look back. We scramble through the low crawl, bolt through the cavern, and fall gasping into the safe, sandy soil of our cave.

"What happened?" Steve says. His one good eye flicks back and forth between Steffi and me.

Steffi shakes her head. "I don't really know. We heard this crazy sound. It sounded like the same things that are out on the beach after dark."

The eerie clicking sounds still pulse through my ears. Like thousands of claws scuttling across the rocks. Spike had been frantic with fear and had guided us out as fast as he could. I had never experienced such a sense of impending doom as during the scramble out of that beautiful cavern.

My excited dreams of exploring the passages and reaching The Other's side felt dashed. I wasn't sure if I'd ever want to enter that cavern again if evil things haunted it, but once we ran a good distance up the corridor, Spike calmed down and so did we. Whatever monster lurked down there, it hadn't followed us up our passage.

Everyone is excited about the stuff we found. Steffi keeps the knife. She'll put it to better use than any of us will. Keiko

THE MAP

safeguards the jar. Maybe it contains something to help us if we're hurt or sick. If anybody can figure out what it's for, Keiko can.

I keep the map, book and the telescoping thing to peruse later. I figure I deserve them.

Steve argues that these things belong to everyone, but I don't agree. They're mine. The bats led me to the box. They wanted me to have it. That's what I tell Steve.

"Have it do what with, exactly?" he asks.

"To find my brother Cody. I'll bet you anything he's on The Others' side."

"We can't go over there," Rob says. "There's more of them, and they're bigger."

"How do you know?"

"We know there's at least three," Steffi says. "You met two in the passageway the other day, and they took the new guy. I'll bet there's more. Most of the time, The Others beat us to the new kids."

"Some might be friendly to us." I think of my brother and hope he is among them. "The ones that aren't bad—the ones they use as slaves. We could get them on our side."

"But we can't even *get* there," Steffi says. "It's impossible."

"We've gotta try. At least one of those passages *has* to lead to their side."

"Oh, all right. We'll try, but only if Spike says the coast is clear. I don't want to run into any of those...those *things*."

The *things* give me the creeps too. I'm in no rush to meet up with them again. I want to look at the map first, anyway. And figure out how to open the book.

Thick brown leather covers it. The clasp holding the book shut looks like pure gold. We can't break through that. If we can't find the key we can cut the leather open as a last resort. The knife might work, but the pages might be too brittle to withstand the force.

The map doesn't show the mountain rising behind our cave. It outlines both the cavern and tunnels inside the mountain, along with drawings of our beach, jungle, and cave. It also has the spot where the new kids show up and the tunnel connecting our side with The Other's side. This tunnel doesn't pass through the center cavern. Instead, it runs along the mountain's outer edge.

The Other's side has a series of small caves that open on a beach. A large area annotated as "Meadow" lies to the right. The meadow borders the cliffs running around the island to our beach.

So, according to this map, the entire island consists of mountain, beach, jungle, meadow and cliffs.

"I wonder if they eat slugs on the other side," Rob says.

"Or if they have anything better," Steffi says.

My stomach rumbles. "Mike Mullens sure looked like he was eating well."

"I bet they make the slaves eat the slugs," Steffi says. "They keep all the good grub for themselves."

I ignore my stomach's complaints and run my finger along the yellow, crinkled paper. "There's writing next to this passageway. Can anybody read it?"

Rob squints. "It says '*beware*.'"

Steffi and I exchange glances. I'm not sure what she's thinking, but I'm wondering if that's where the noises came from. The clicking noises that drove Spike nuts and scared the hell out of us. The same clicking noises we sometimes hear at night. Claws scampering over rocks. What kind of monster do those claws belong to?

I unroll the scroll a little more. Past our island is an expanse of nothing. But then...

"It's an island. A different one," Steffi says.

I roll out the scroll as far as it goes. Three islands are drawn on it. Three. Does this mean two others lie past ours?

THE MAP

Is escape from this crappy place that way? What lies after those islands?

The other islands are smaller. One looks flat. One has a steep mountain.

“Do you think this map is to scale?” Steve asks.

“No,” Steffi says. “If those islands were that close, we’d see ‘em. I’ve never seen another island. Have you?”

Steve shakes his head.

I don’t really care if this map is to scale or not. Those islands wouldn’t be on it if they didn’t exist. Are they nicer? Worse? Would we be better off if we tried to reach them?

“What should we do now?” Rob asks.

Steffi rolls up the map. “We collect slugs. We’ve spent way too much time on this, and we’re out of food.”

My stomach begins to rumble. I can’t believe I’m agreeing with Steffi, but she’s right. We ate the last slug this morning. Everyone got so caught up in the new adventure they forgot to collect slugs, and now we have nothing to eat. I stand up and head down the rocky beach with the others.

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I’ve only been here a week, but it feels like an eternity.

I stare at the wavy sky, trying to picture home. My parents. My dog Riley. I can barely remember them. They live in another world, another time. I see them through an impenetrable fog—blurry, shapeless, alien. I haven’t forgotten them. I just can’t quite picture them anymore.

I should feel fear or sadness in losing them, but I don’t. Those feelings had disappeared by the second or third day. My mind grasps future things: the map, The Others, my plans. Survival.

Mom always said I had a forward-thinking mind. I never thought much about the past, I was always focused on the future. She said this was a good thing, it would keep me from yearning for the past. For people I might lose.

She had been talking about herself. And Dad.

The bats let out their crazy-loud whistling, and I head up the beach. The clicking noises haven't started yet, but they will soon, once the lights go out. What lives out here, emerging only at night to terrorize the beaches after dark? Are they the same things we heard clicking in the tunnel? Or does something else lurk in the mountain's depths?

I'm convinced the book explains all this. Maybe the book explains everything about this world.

Maybe it can even tell us how to get back home.

The urge to hack off the lock with the knife is intense. But I've got this feeling that doing so would destroy the book. And we need to find out what secrets it holds. It could mean the difference between survival and death.

I reach the cave seconds before darkness blankets the sky. I blink, adjusting my eyes to the crackling firelight. The others are already conked out on the cold ground, exhausted by the day's work. They don't have too much energy in those emaciated bodies. Usually they're dead out and snoozing on the hard ground as soon as darkness hits, sometimes even before.

But I'm wide-awake. My crappy slug diet hasn't entirely sapped my energy. Yet.

I can't get used to the day and night here. The day feels shorter than a regular twenty-four hour day back home. The other kids seem to know when it's time for the bats to whistle their night warning, and they wake when the lights blink on in the morning. But I'm not used to it yet. I'm not sleepy at night, and by the time I *do* fall asleep, it feels like daytime comes way too fast.

Spike chirps into my ear and flutters out into the inky darkness. I stare after him, not sure I should trust what I just heard.

He wants me to follow.

The others snore and mumble in their sleep, but they aren't going to wake up. They're too programmed. They won't open their eyes until morning. They'll never know.

THE MAP

Unless I step outside, meet up with those clicking creatures, and never return.

I take a steadying breath and step into the starless night.

Spike flutters over my head. He grabs a handful of my hair with his tiny claws.

“Ouch! Watch it, Spike.”

But before I can swat him away, I gasp. Everything outside is suddenly clear. Not clear like flipping on a light in a dark room—more like putting on night-vision goggles. Eerie blue light spreads over the rocks and colors the sea purple instead of orange. The jungle trees shimmer in a strange silvery hue.

I hold up my hand. It glows a faint blue.

“What are we doing out here? Is it dangerous?”

Spike chirps and holds on to my hair. I don’t feel any urgency or fear. He nuzzles my ear and I understand.

We head for the jungle. When I reach the spiky grass I don’t hesitate. I plunge in.

JUNGLE SECRETS

I push through the soft grass. *Soft.* The blades caress my palm. No spikes. Where the hell did the spikes go?

The grass parts before me as I walk. The trees grow thick and tangled on either side, but the grass forms a straight and wide path that cuts through the jungle's center. I'm not afraid. Spike flutters in front of me, flying from one side of the path to the other, moving slowly forward. If he isn't scared, I won't be scared either.

A warm, comforting sensation envelops me as I move down the path. I feel safe. I stare up into the trees. Large round objects hang from the branches. I reach up and pluck one.

Fruit. Not twenty yards from the cave hangs fricking *fruit*. From the looks of it, edible fruit, and nobody knew. No one tried entering the jungle at night when the grass pulled in its barbs. No one. Why?

Because of the things. The things are out here, and if people wander out at night, the things make them disappear. Eaten? I think so. And here I am, in the dark, alone and unprotected in their territory.

Something moves. My fear returns in waves. Spike chirps and flutters towards the thing in the grass. Short barks answer Spike's chirps. I wait, trying to slow my beating heart.

Spike returns, followed by—a *turtle*? A huge turtle, it's as high as my knee. Spike grabs my hair and I watch the turtle's shell glinting in the strange blue light.

Bright eyes stare into mine. Large jaws open and shut as the turtle barks. I don't like the looks of those jaws. But the turtle moves slowly. It stops next to me and I climb on its shell, straddling it, feeling a bit idiotic. Somehow, riding this plodding animal will get me through this jungle. The turtle lumbers down the path and I turn my attention to the fruit.

Blue in Spike's light, but probably a nice red in the daytime. I peel the thick skin. Light, pulpy flesh lies underneath.

"Is it safe?" I ask Spike.

The bat chirps an assent. I bite into the fruit.

God, it's good. After a week of nothing but chewy, slimy slugs, the sweetness bursts in my mouth and erases all traces of the foul creatures' taste. I close my eyes and relish every bite. I pick another. And another. By the time the turtle stops, I've eaten so much fruit I'm ready to explode.

We stop in a clearing surrounded by gnarled trees. Behind us lies the path. In front, a dark hole hides in the grass.

This is where the tunnel on the map exits into the jungle. I throw away my fruit peel and stare at the hole. Small. You'd have to crawl through it to get in or out.

The clicking sound echoes out the hole. The same clicking we heard in the cave. The sound that terrified Spike and sent us fleeing in a panic. It gets louder. Spike flutters over the turtle's head, staring at the dark hole. I fight back the fear and hold my ground.

The monster bursts out of the hole.

Wriggling, hissing, it squirms into the clearing, careening towards us. Long, thick, *huge*, and white as a ghost. Dozens of red legs protrude outward as it thrusts its way into the jungle. I fight back a scream. Spike and the turtle wait.

The long body shoots forward and scrambles towards us. A scream escapes my lips as the centipede's sharp pincers gnash at me. An immense body, longer than a car, whips back and forth. Disjointed legs scuttle forward, sharp claws clicking through the grass. The urge to run is almost overwhelming. Why did Spike bring me here? How will we escape?

The turtle bolts forward. I fly off its back and land in the soft grass. I jump up and watch the slow reptile morph into a fleeting projectile. It launches towards the squirming centipede and clamps down on the insect's head with its powerful jaws. The centipede writhes and then its legs stiffen, dead. Its attacker drags the lifeless body into the jungle.

Another turtle plods into the clearing and stops, eyes fixed on the dark hole, waiting for the next monstrous insect to emerge.

I've seen enough. "Can we go back now?"

Spike chirps in assent. We move back along the path. I want to get the hell out of here, but as I walk I fill my shirt with the awesome fruit. Then I run down the path, making it back to the cave safe and uneaten.

I shake Steffi. She groans and throws one arm at me.

"Stop. I was in the middle of a really good dream for once."

"Steffi, I went into the jungle."

"You *what*?" Steffi scrambles up, her tangled red hair sticking out every which way. The others sit up also, staring at me in disbelief.

"I went into the jungle. There's fruit in there, Steffi. Tons of it. Look."

I hand her a round, red fruit. She peels it with trembling hands and stares at the milky flesh.

"It's safe," I say. "I must've eaten twenty of them."

Steffi bites into the fruit. Her eyes close as she savors the delicious taste. "Oh, my God," she says, tears running down

her grimy cheeks as she stuffs her mouth with the remaining pieces. “Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had anything but slugs? Months.”

“Years for me,” Steve says, grabbing a fruit.

Rob yanks at his peel in a furious attempt to get to the insides. “How’d you get through the spiky grass?”

“It isn’t spiky at night. I’m not sure where the spikes go. The grass must retract them because at night it’s the softest stuff you’ve ever felt.”

“So you didn’t meet any creepy-crawlies?” Steffi asks.

“I did, and that’s the scary part of it. The ‘creepy crawlies’ are centipedes. Huge ones.” I shudder, thinking about how they moved: hundreds of thick legs wavering and tiny claws clicking.

“The centipedes must live in the cave by day. They don’t have eyes, or if they do, the eyes don’t like light. So they only come out at night. The grass lets them through so they can hunt for food. I bet they eat the slugs on the beach like we do. But to get to the beach, they need to get past the turtles.”

“The *what?*”

“The turtles. I know it sounds crazy, but they eat the centipedes. So, as long as you stay close to a turtle, the centipedes won’t get anywhere near you. They avoid turtles like the plague. And the turtles, at least the one I met, are friendly. I rode on its back.”

Keiko shivers. “Mukade,” she says.

I’m so flabbergasted Keiko spoke that I just stare at her.

“Mukade,” she repeats. “Poisonous.”

Steve nods. “Mukade. That’s Japanese for ‘centipede’. We’ve got ‘em in Hawaii too, but we call ‘em ‘kanapi’.”

“Mukade sounds creepier,” Steffi says.

“So,” Rob says, summing it up, “the only way we can get the fruit is to go into the jungle at night, when the grass lowers its spikes.”

“Right.”

“But we have to find a turtle quick so the...mukade...won't find us first and eat us for dinner?”

“Sounds too risky, just for fruit,” Steve says.

Steffi grabs another one. “Nothing's too risky for this stuff. It's amazing.”

“I think the grass spikes lower right about the time the bats whistle,” I say. “The mukade come out after the lights go out, but there's a little window in there where they're fighting past the turtles. We've got time to run in, grab a few, and get out again before the mukade get to the beach. If we want to go further in, we'll need the turtles' protection.”

“Why would we want to go further in?” Rob says. “If we can get the fruit right near the edge, we won't need to.”

I don't answer. An idea is forming in my head, but I'm not sure if anybody will want to hear it.

We can ambush The Others at night. I know the jungle's secrets now; I'm sure I can get through to their side. The grassy path forks when it reaches the mukade's tunnel. One trail heads to our beach, but another path travels around to the mountain's other side. To The Other's beach. If The Other's side is anything like our side, they don't dare step outside at night. So they don't know about the grass. If they had known the jungle's secrets, they would have attacked long ago.

They don't know. And we do. I wonder if I can convince the others. I scrutinize them, sizing them up.

Steve stares at his fruit. He'd be difficult to persuade.

Steffi. She might go for it. She has more guts than the others.

Rob? Never. He'll wuss out.

And Keiko. I know nothing about her except she likes to do the cooking and she's a good nurse. Other than that, she stays to herself. One week I've been here, and only the word '*mukade*' has passed her lips.

THE LEGEND

Steve flips out when I explain my plan. “Are you, *insane*? You’ll give yourself away, or get caught, or The Others will figure out how to use the jungle too. You can’t go, I won’t allow it.”

I’m desperate to think of some excuse Steve will buy. “Look, I’ve got a brother. He disappeared, maybe ten years ago. He’s not here, so he must be over there.”

Steve snorts. “Nobody lasts that long on this rock. If he did end up here, he’s dead now. You can’t go.”

“Who made you boss?” Steffi says. “Just ’cause you’re the oldest doesn’t mean you run things, Steve. We’ll go if we damn well want to.”

Steve stomps out, too angry to talk anymore.

Steffi sighs. “He’s just afraid. He doesn’t want to lose us. You can’t blame him. A few years ago, when he first got here, he might have been all for exploring the jungle and infiltrating The Others, and everything you want. Now he’s scared. He’s seen too much.”

I think he’s trying to control everything, but I don’t say so.

When Steve comes back, a little calmer, he tries another tack.

“Thanks to Jack, we can get fruit now,” he says. “Before the mukade come out at night. We can get enough fruit to eat,

that'll help supplement the slugs. We don't need to explore those caves anymore. Or the jungle. We don't need anything from the Other's side."

"What about the slaves?" I ask.

"What?"

"You know, the ones who should be on our side but aren't because The Others captured them."

Steve shrugs. "That's not our problem, is it?"

"If my brother is there, it's my problem."

Steffi gives me a sympathetic look. She must think I'm close to my brother. The truth is, I don't remember him at all. I was about five when he disappeared, so I should remember him a *little*, but as hard as I try, I can't picture him.

It doesn't matter, though. The mere thought of finding real family on this island is enough to make me want to search for Cody. Even if he *is* one of The Others.

"Of course it's our problem," Rob says. "Why should those poor guys suffer? They'd be safer if we bring them to our side, wouldn't they?"

"Or we can send The Others over here, and take over their side," I say.

After studying the map, I'm convinced The Others have it easier on their side. They have more space, materials, and more food to eat.

"What are you thinking?" Steffi says.

I know she's going to think I'm nuts, but I say it anyway. "If we could trick The Others to this side, we could use the jungle path to go over to their side."

"They can't come over to our side," Steffi says. "We've been over this already."

"Not by using the main passage. But what if we lead them down one of the other tunnels? If we can get through to their side using those tunnels, then you'd think they could get to ours."

“They could also get back, in that case.”

“I guess. Either way, we need to do some more exploring first. We need to see if we can get to their side through the jungle. Or through another passage. We need a plan. A good one. One to trap The Others here and give us free access to their side. I’m sure it can be done. We just need to explore the other passages.”

I decide to go tomorrow. Steffi agrees. Steve stomps off in anger but there’s nothing he can do.

We’re going to explore the tunnels and find a way to The Other’s side. Nothing is gonna stop us.

We decide to start out after nightfall. We’re hoping the mukade will all be outside and will leave us alone while we explore the tunnels. To be honest, if anybody except Spike told me to try this plan, I’d have told him he was an insane idiot, but I trust Spike. He knows the tunnels, and he must know when the mukade are all out.

When we tell Steve our idea, he loses it. He forbids us to go, like he’s our parent and we’re two-years old. He even tries to rip up the backpack. We wrestle him for it. Rob jumps into the fray at the last second, and Keiko cringes in a corner. I grab the pack, and Steffi and I take off, before Steve can stop us.

“He doesn’t mean half of what he says,” Steffi says as we push through the tunnel. “He’s scared.”

“He’s an asshole. He can’t tell us what to do.”

“He’s scared we won’t come back.”

“What does he care?”

Steffi sighs. “He’s just seen too many people die.”

“So what?” I’m still too angry to think rationally.

Steffi pushes through the tight crawl and stands up, dusting off her tattered jeans. “Give him a break. He’s been through a lot more than us.”

“Like what?”

“Well, think about it. You, me, Rob, and Keiko are all about the same age. Keiko is the oldest after Steve. She’s seventeen

even though she looks younger. The rest of us are fifteen and sixteen. We're newbies."

"So?"

"So, Steve is twenty. That means there's a three-year gap between him and Keiko. Where are all the eighteen- and nineteen-year olds? Gone, that's where. After a couple of weeks they can't stand the place anymore and go nuts. They lose their minds and run outside when they shouldn't, and the mukade get them. Or something else does 'em in. Disease. Breaking a neck. Burning up in the sea. Whatever. The point is, Steve saw people die, and had to live almost two years all by himself."

Wow. I try to imagine how I would survive if I were alone. At least I'd have the bats to talk to. Steve had nobody.

"He hates talking about it. Can you imagine? Stuck alone on this rock? He told me once he even tried to go over to The Other's side. He figured he'd rather be a slave than be alone. But he couldn't get over there. So he rescued Keiko when she came, and Rob, and Alexi and me also. He's like our big brother. Once he got us, he became terrified something bad would happen to us."

She pauses. "Alexi went nuts one night, said he couldn't take any more, and ran outside. We tried to stop him, but he screamed and was gone." She falls silent.

"I can't imagine it," I say. "Giving up and running out to let the mukade have me. I would never do that."

"Yeah, but when you first get here you're sane. Scared but sane. *Everyone* gets to that depressed point, some of us sooner than later. It happens to everyone. A feeling of total despair. Where you don't see the point in putting up with this place any longer. You either get past that point or you give in. It'll happen to you too. One of these days."

I don't think so. I don't get moody or depressed. Well, not *that* depressed anyway.

"What about you?"

“Yeah, me too. Rob went through it, and so did Keiko. You know who pulled us through? Steve. He’s the rock. He’s been through the worst and is still here, still fighting. Still protecting us. That’s why he doesn’t want us to risk our necks now. He’s worked too hard at keeping us all alive.”

I start to feel guilty. Steffi goes on.

“It took a lot of guts for him to let us explore the tunnel the first time, after you found you could talk to the bats. Now that he knows the mukade live down here—monsters who could rip us apart in an instant—well, you can see why he want us to stay put in the cave, where it’s safe.”

“Are you sorry you came with me?”

She grins. “Nope. You’re right, we can’t go on the same way we always have. Did you know, there’s a legend here? Passed down by everyone, one year to the next. The legend said this kid will show up—a guy called Jack Outrigger. He’s the one who’ll get us off this island, help us find our way home. We never put much stock in the legend though. Just a way to comfort ourselves when we felt low. But I think you’re him.”

“You do?”

“I do. You’re Jack Outrigger. You’re the one who’s gonna kick The Other’s ass. That’s what I think. That’s why I’m with you, no matter what Steve says. He’s wrong and you’re right. You’re gonna save us.”

She says it with such a ferocious confidence, and it scares me a little. She’s wrong. My last name sure isn’t “Outrigger”. I didn’t plan to come and save anyone.

I mean, sure, I can communicate with the bats. But others had understood them too, Steffi had said so. Why hadn’t the bats shown *them* the secret tunnels?

And yeah, I guess I have some big ideas. Ideas to take back the island from The Others. To free the slaves. To find a better way to live. But to save everyone? Is that really my

plan? Or am I doing it because I can't stand to sit still and do nothing?

Maybe it's a little of both. All I know is one action pulls me to the next. I talk to the bats. They show me the passage. I find the box. We decipher the map. I discover the mukade. Now I have to take the next step and find a way to The Other's side.

I don't know *why* I'm doing this. Maybe it boils down to simple revenge—revenge against Mike Mullens for the crappy things he did to me when we were kids. Maybe I'm desperate to find the brother I don't even remember. Or maybe it's nobler than that. Maybe I *do* want to help the people on the other side.

I sure hope that's the reason.

MUKADE

We reach the main cavern. Steffi gazes around in the flickering gloom. “Which tunnel should we try first?” She doesn’t sound too excited about trying any of them.

I don’t blame her. Any second, a huge, poisonous insect could burst in on us. I peer around, getting my bearings.

The tunnel next to the big column is ours. The tunnel near the large rock heads into the jungle. The passage half-hidden behind the waterfall leads to the meadow on The Other’s side, I think. The tunnel behind the big clump of stalagmites winds its way to the mountaintop.

The last tunnel must lead to the mukade’s lair. Small bones are strewn around the opening. I shiver, wondering how many are human bones.

Spike chirps, and I hesitate. What I’m hearing *can’t* be right.

I point to the mukade’s hole. “That one. We need to go up that one first.”

“What are you, nuts? That’s the one we should *avoid*. Pick another one.”

“No, Spike says to go that way.”

“You’d better ask your bat why,” Steffi says. “I’m not going up that tunnel without a damn good explanation.”

I stare hard at the purple bat. He flits around my head and chirps again. My heart beats even faster.

“The key. The key is up there. The key to open up the book.”

“Well, why don’t you ask your bat friend to fly up there and fetch it then?”

“He doesn’t know *where* it is. He just knows it’s up that way.”

Steffi hesitates. I don’t blame her. I mean, is Spike’s suggestion a good enough persuasion for us to brave a trek that may end in a feast for the mukade? Is finding the key really *that* important?

Yes, I decide, *it is*. I want to know what’s in the book.

“Let’s do it,” I say.

Steffi makes a face. “I bet it’s slimy in there.”

“Mukade aren’t slimy. Although, they might secrete mucus. Poisonous mucus.”

“Great,” Steffi mutters. She isn’t backing down, but she’s not moving forward either. “That’s all we need. Touch the walls and we’ll get paralyzed.”

“Maybe, or maybe not.”

That doesn’t sound too reassuring.

Still, we hesitate. Steffi’s knife is all we’ve got to protect us, and I doubt it’ll do much good against a mass of monster mukade.

In the real world—our world—I doubt we’d ever try this. But I really hate this place. I don’t think I can take much more. The risk of dying, of a horrible huge insect eating me alive, appeals to me more than doing nothing.

I take a deep breath. “Ready?”

Steffi grips her torch like a sword. “Let’s run up it. Otherwise, I’ll never have the guts.”

We run. The further along the stifling, smelly corridor we get, the slower we go. Soon, exhausted by our initial charge and consumed by an ever-increasing fear, we stop. One crazy thought races through my head. *What if they’re right behind us?*

Panic spreads through my body, and Steffi's breath comes in short wheezes. I grab her hand. "We're okay, we're alright," I keep saying, until I almost believe it. Steffi's breathing slows down a bit.

"What do we do?" she gasps.

"Go forward. Slowly. Spike is still with us. He'll warn us if we need to make a run for it."

"Run to *where*? If they come on us from behind, all we can do is go forward. Right into their frickin' lair. How do we know there's a way out?"

I try not to think of it and force one foot forward. The other foot follows. We creep up the tunnel. The stench grows fouler and the humidity thicker, but all we hear is our own footsteps, our shallow, terrified breathing, and an occasional comforting chirp from Spike.

"All this for a key," Steffi says. "You sure this is worth it?"

"Yes." Right now I have plenty of doubts, but want to sound confident. I search the ground as we inch forward.

"I don't think it's here," Steffi says. "I get a bad feeling if we do find it, it'll be right in the middle of their lair. The King Mukade probably has it on a chain around his neck or something."

I fight down the insane laugh rising in my throat. The fear of making too much noise keeps me quiet, but I grin at Steffi, and she smiles back. We move a bit quicker.

The stink increases tenfold when we reach the main nest. My stomach heaves and I fight down the urge to puke. I take shallow gulps of the foul air, enough to keep breathing but not so much that I'll pass out.

Steffi holds up her torch.

The mukade live in squalor. Heaps of dung cover the floor. Rotting bits of flesh—slugs, dead mukade and other things that I really don't want to guess at—litter the place. Not one living thing moves. The mukade are all out. The place is empty.

Steffi gags. “No *wāy* am I searching through this stuff.”

“The key is either buried under all this crap or stuck in a crevice somewhere.” I take a step forward. My foot sinks in the dung and I struggle to get it back out. “God, it’s like glue. We can’t get through this. Imagine if the mukade came back. We’d be stuck in here like roaches in a trap.”

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Steffi says. She’s fighting down the urge to bolt and beginning to lose. “If the mukade come back, we’re screwed.”

She’s right. This trek was all for nothing. I turn to head back. “Ok, let’s go.”

I hold the torch in front of me. Something glints in the light. Something metallic.

I jump forward, reach out my hand, and grab. I’ve got it! The key was lying right in the middle of the damn tunnel. We must have overlooked it on the way up.

“Stupid bat could’ve fetched it and saved us the bother of this trek,” Steffi says, shooting Spike a venomous look.

I stare at the large, gold key. The key to the book. I put it in my pocket, elated.

The feeling doesn’t last. My heart freezes as hundreds of *click-click-clicks* echo up the tunnel.

The mukade are returning from their night feed.

Steffi grabs my arm. “What do we do?”

I try to inhale but can’t. My breathing decides to just stop as my brain wrestles with the options. We can’t go back. We sure as hell don’t want to go forward. The clicking noises fill my head and drown out any rational thought.

Spike flies into the mukade’s lair, chirping, and my heart lightens, a little bit.

“He says there’s a way out, but it’s on the other side. We’ve gotta get through this gunk. It’s the only way.”

Steffi takes charge. “Stay to the edges. The goop isn’t as deep there and we can hold on to the wall for balance.”

We push through the muck and clutch the slimy walls. At every step the smelly shit sucks at my shoes, threatening to yank them right off my feet.

The clicking grows more frantic.

“Oh God, they know something’s up,” Steffi says. “They know we’re here.”

We can’t do anything except follow Spike’s insistent chirps and inch through the chamber. The mukade scramble up the passage, frantic to capture fresh meat.

“Up there!” Steffi says. “There’s a hole. We’ve gotta climb.”

“What’ll stop the mukade from following us? If we can fit into it, so can they.”

Spike’s chirps become more insistent. Steffi starts the climb. My feet break out of the ooze and scramble to find holds. I grip the rock with shaky hands and pull, my muck-encrusted shoes sliding on the rocks.

Steffi disappears in the hole.

The clicking reaches the chamber. I don’t dare look behind me. I push forward, adrenaline surging through me. In a desperate panic, I clamber into the hole.

A second too late.

THE SIGN

A sharp, searing pain shoots through my leg as the mukade's jaws clamp shut. Hot poison burns right up my veins. I kick with my free leg, smashing my foot into the monster's head. The mukade doesn't loosen its grip an iota; it tugs me backwards. I'm too petrified to fight. I can't even scream. I can't do a goddamn thing.

Spike whooshes between my head and the ceiling, screaming and batting at the mukade's head with his wings. The monster lets my leg go and lunges for Spike instead. I don't hesitate. I crawl as fast as I can, tears streaming down my face.

"Hurry!" Steffi says. "I can see the exit."

I drag myself after her, out into the black night, and almost pitch over the edge. I grab the rocks and stare at the churning, poisonous water below. Waves of nausea crash over me, but that peculiar sensation, like the one I experienced in the jungle, envelopes me for a second. Just a second. A warm, comforting feeling.

Then it disappears, and the nausea takes over.

"There's nowhere to go." My sweaty hands grip the rock. I feel hazy, floating, even though the pain consumes my leg.

"I know," Steffi says. Her hand grips mine. "We're toast, Jack."

The mukade slides its head out the hole, not five inches from my foot. Antennae wave and sharp pincers snap. I stare at it, waiting for the end. But then...

The head disappears back in the hole.

“What the hell?” Steffi breathes. “Why is it retreating? It has us cornered.”

It has us, but it’s letting us go. Why? I can’t focus on my own question, so I give it up and close my eyes.

“This must be a safe zone,” Steffi murmurs. Her voice floats in and out of my head.

“What?”

“Steve has this theory. Well, the guy who came before him thought of it, you know, the one who could talk to the bats. That guy said safe zones were scattered all through this island. Places where some things can’t enter. The cave we live in is one. The mukade can’t get past the entrance. Maybe this ledge is a safe zone too. How’s the leg?”

“It burns.” Talking is getting harder and harder. I can’t seem to concentrate on what I’m saying.

“If Keiko were here she could put a poultice on it,” Steffi says. She peers over the ledge to the foaming sea below. “I don’t know how we’re going to get down. I guess we’re stuck here until morning anyway. Jack?”

I try and fight the drowsiness, but sleep will feel so much better than this pain. I stop fighting and wait for the darkness take me.

<<<>>>

The lights blaze on. I sit up so fast I almost pass out again from the dizziness.

Where am I? I can’t remember. I try to move my legs, but can’t. I can’t even *feel* the mauled leg. The other won’t move either.

Steffi has tied me down with vines. I broke the top vines when I sat up, but she’s tied the lower ones tighter, and

I struggle to loosen them. I yank them off and stare over the ledge.

The ledge. *Mukade*. I feel my leg with one hand. Pus oozes out the wound and gets my hand all sticky, but the wound doesn't hurt. My leg is completely numb.

Steffi's disappeared and Spike hasn't come back. I fight the rising panic. *Breathe Jack, just breathe. They'll be back soon.*

The cliff falls twenty feet to a rocky outcrop jutting into the sea. It rises maybe fifteen feet above my head. I *could* try to climb it. I slap my leg, hoping to get some feeling back. At least the searing pain is gone, but the leg is useless. I wonder if it will ever get better or if it'll just hang there for the rest of my life, unresponsive and dragging.

At some point, Steffi must have climbed to the top and gone for help. I'm glad she tied me down. I could easily have rolled right off the thin ledge to the sharp rocks below. That wouldn't have been good.

I rub my leg, but it doesn't help. I don't feel anything.

I search through the backpack, grab a slug, and chew on it, wishing for some water to wet my parched throat. The slug has a bit of juice, but not much. I sit with my back against the cliff and stare at the placid orange sea. I try not to look at the hot pink sky, which seems to undulate a little more than usual this morning. Watching it makes me super queasy.

Waiting sure sucks. There's too much to worry about while I'm uselessly lounging here. Will my leg ever get better? Will we have to amputate it? Where the hell did Steffi get to? Did the mukade get her?

And where's Spike? He hasn't shown up. If he were okay, he'd surely be here, helping me out. He wouldn't leave me. All I can deduce from this is that the mukade have gotten to Spike. My fists clench. I *hate* those monsters. Tears trickle down my cheeks—tears of sadness for the loss of Spike, and

of frustration for my inability to do a damn thing about it. God, I hate it when I cry.

Steffi finally shows up. She doesn't descend from the top, which is where I thought she had gone. Instead, she scrambles on the rocks below, avoiding the splashing waves. She hugs the wall until she is right below me, and starts to climb.

I grab the vines and begin braiding them together. I'm afraid Steffi will slip and crash down on those sharp rocks. The vines might act as a good rope for her to hold. Before I can finish, she clammers over the ledge, huffing.

"How's your leg?"

"I can't feel it. Where did you go?"

"Well, I figured we must be near our cave. You know, if you walk out of our cave, to the left is cliff and rocks. I figured the ledge hung over those rocks. I was right. Our cave is around the bend. I couldn't get across the rocks at high tide, that's why it took me so long to get back. I had to wait until low tide. Sorry. Can you climb down?"

"No, but I can try making a rope and lowering myself down."

Steffi helps me braid the vines and we fasten our makeshift rope as best we can around a rock. "This rock won't move, will it?" Steffi says. "That'd suck if you took it down with you."

"I bet it weighs a few hundred pounds. We won't pull it over."

"How are you going to use the rope?"

I take a deep breath to steady my nerves. "I'll wrap it a few times around my good leg. It should hold me up and I can shimmy down. I think."

"Well, it's the only way," Steffi says. "Let's try it."

I take another deep breath. One slip will send me crashing on those jagged rocks, if I'm not careful. Even if that doesn't kill me, the poisonous sea will burn me to a crisp.

I wrap the rope around my leg, grab it with both hands, and inch down the rocks. I take my time, holding my breath for most of the trip. I stare at the wall and try not to look down.

The rock is strange here. Different colors. White on black. The white looks scratched in. Manmade.

I stop moving and stare. It is manmade. The white words must each be two feet tall, and they run along the cliff. You'd never see them from the beach. They face the sea. I lean back as far as I dare and read.

WAIT FOR JACK OUTRIGGER

Steffi almost bonks into me from above. "What the hell are you stopping for? Get going."

I scoot down the cliff. I grip the vine tight and don't release it until my butt lands on the rocks below. The orange water laps about five feet away.

Steffi shimmies down the rope like a monkey. "Stay against the cliff."

"Did you see that? The writing?"

Steffi nods. "I saw it when I first climbed down. Freaky, isn't it? I wonder who wrote it. Can you walk?"

"Nope. I'll scoot on my butt until we get to the beach. Then I'll crawl to the cave."

I inch forward with painstaking slowness, the water creeping closer. I keep waiting for a rogue wave to wash over me, pull me into the churning surf, and burn me to a crisp.

We make it to the beach, and I crawl across the rocks and flop in the sandy cave, exhausted. Keiko comes over and touches my leg.

"Can you fix it?" I ask.

She shrugs and hurries off to find something that might help.

"So was it worth it?" Steve asks, sounding so sarcastic I want to punch him in his one good eye.

Breathe, Jack. Remember to breathe.

"We got the key, and we found a safe zone up the cliff. Has Spike come back?"

Rob shakes his head. "We haven't seen him, and the other bats seem sad. The mukade must have gotten him."

“He gave up his own life to save mine.” Dammit, here comes the tears. I’ve *got* to stop blubbering every five minutes.

“You lost us a good bat,” Steve snaps. “Spike has been around here forever, he knows more about this island than the other bats. He’s the one who tells us when a new kid shows up. We *needed* him.”

“Leave him alone,” Steffi says.

I shake my head. “No, he’s right. It’s all my fault.”

“Damn right it’s your fault,” Steve says, walking away. “What the hell were you two thinking?”

“It isn’t Jack’s fault,” Rob says. “It’s Spike’s. He *wanted* Jack to find the map and book.” He looks at me. “Jack, Spike knew we needed the key, why do you think he went with you through the mukade’s tunnel? *He* planned it, not you.”

Steve stops and turns around. “How do you figure?”

“It’s obvious. I can’t speak to bats like Jack, but even to me it’s obvious. The bats planned to show Jack these things. Spike knew what he was doing. He knew the risks. It’s not Jack’s fault at all. He did everything the bats wanted him to do.”

Steve sighs.

“Sorry,” he says, which takes me by surprise. “Rob’s right. I was scared. When you didn’t come back, we thought the worst. Then Steffi showed up this morning and said you were hurt. I didn’t know what we could do.”

“It’s all right now,” Steffi says. “We’ll fix Jack’s leg and everything will be all right.”

“Not for me,” Steve says. He stomps out of the cave.

“He’s been like that all night,” Rob whispers. “He first yells at everybody and then apologizes and gets all depressed and moody. I’m glad you guys are back.”

Keiko returns, carrying a gloopy concoction. She presses the stuff against my mukade bite. The warmth radiates up my leg, and even though I still can’t put any weight on it, some sensation returns.

I sigh in relief. The leg will heal. I'll be fine.

Steffi stares at the sticky, black goo. "What is that stuff?"

"She made it from the powder in the jar," Rob says. "I saw her. She took a little bit and mixed it with hot water. It must be a cure for mukade bites. Keiko, you're freaking amazing."

Keiko stares at the ground and smiles. A little red creeps into her cheeks. She gives me some water to drink. Rob hands me a piece of fruit.

"We still have some left? I thought we ate it all the first night I brought it in."

"I got some more," Rob says. "Last night. Right after you left. I did what you said, and waited until the bats whistled. The grass lost its spikes, and I ran in and picked as much as I could before it got dark."

Steffi grins and pats him on the back. "Good for you, Rob. You're braver than I thought."

Rob smiles. "We should see if the key works. I'll get the book."

That's right. The key. I pull it out. Even with years of cave dust and muck, it still shines.

Rob lugs the book over. I push the key into the keyhole and turn it. The book falls open.

Rob stares at the unintelligible writing. "Strange language."

"All that and we can't even read the damn thing," I say, slamming the book shut.

From the corner, Pepe chirps.

I turn my head to look at him. He's smaller than Spike and more maroon in color. He chirps again.

I open the book and flip a couple of pages. The squiggly writing ends. Plain English, begins.

"It's one of us. One of us wrote in the book."

"You think?" Steffi asks, bending over my shoulder. "What does it say?"

I start reading.

THE JOURNAL

The entries are terse and to the point. I read slowly, but my heart is beating a mile a minute.

“Found the treasure my third week here. A bat showed me the way. It came to me in the meadow when I was supposed to be out collecting eggs. It showed me the tunnel. It led me into the mountain.”

“Eggs?” Rob says. “I’ve never seen any eggs.”

Steve shakes his head. “The guy said ‘meadow.’ The meadow is on the other side.”

“Nobody knows about this place but me. Nobody can get down here but me. It’s my secret place, and I’ll keep it secret. Nobody else will ever know. The bats say I need to watch out. Bad things live down here.”

Rob nods. “Mukade.”

“I explored some of the other tunnels today. One leads to a small cave with a rocky beach. I’m far away from the others here. I think I’ll stay. The beach has slugs and there’s some water in the stream. So I should be okay.”

“Wait a minute,” Steffi says, reading over my shoulder. “This guy who’s writing, he found our cave? That means...”

“He was one of The Others,” Steve says.

I nod. "Sounds like he was one of their slaves, anyway. He must've been the first person to come over to this side."

I keep reading. *"Lonely. Nobody here but the bats and me. I'm thinking of going back. They'll kill me if I do. But I can't be alone much longer."*

"Found another tunnel. It leads back to the main cave where the others live. I can't get down it though. I can only go part way. The bats say I can never go back. I'm alone."

"Found a kid lying in the tunnel today. Now I'm starting to remember. When I first came here, they found me at that spot too. I brought the kid back to my cave. Now there are two of us."

"This is the beginning," Rob says. "The beginning of the two different sides. He started it. This guy."

"You don't know it's a he," Steffi says. "It could be a she."

"Lost the new girl today. She went outside after dark. I told her not to. Very sad. Thinking about ending it."

"Ending what?" Rob asks.

Steffi glares at him.

"Oh," he says.

"Talked to the bats today. New kid in the tunnel. Saved him from the others. Hope he makes it okay."

"The big bat tells me the island is a prison. Why was I sent here? What did I do?"

"A prison," Rob says.

"We already knew that," Steffi says. "Why we're prisoners is the million dollar question."

"We've talked about it and figured it out. We've been sent here because we might make trouble. They've put us here to get rid of us. A place we can never escape. We're doomed to die here. We'll never get out."

"She—or he—is hitting it," Steffi says. "You remember what I told you, Jack? About the despair? This guy is now at that point. I bet he cracks by the next entry."

“Had to fight down the urge to end it again today. Almost ran outside at night. Didn’t do it. Jenny talked me out of it.”

“See?” Steffi says.

“We found a new kid today. Almost lost him to The Others, but we made it back. The Others couldn’t follow. I think we’re safe here. Now there’s three of us.”

“Talked to the bats again. They told me of a way. I’ve got to get to the other side. Must get to the woods without the others seeing us.”

Rob frowns. “Woods?”

Steffi rolls out the map. “Here. On the edge of The Other’s meadow. Somebody’s written ‘woods’ next to this area. This has gotta be where the guy is talking about. I wonder what he means though. A way to what?”

“A way to escape the island,” I say.

“Or a way to kill himself,” Steve says, grimacing. “He seems pretty focused on that.”

“Lost Jenny today in the tunnel. We met up with a horrible monster—a centipede. It bit me and took her. I got back to the cave. Very sick, but made it. Can’t take much more of this. Gonna go nuts if I stay here any longer. Must escape.”

Rob looks sick. “This is terrible. I almost don’t want to read any more. This poor guy had a really bad time.”

“Not any worse than I had it,” Steve says. “At least he could talk to bats. Seeing people die is nothing new. Not to any of us. We’ve all been through it.”

I haven’t. I haven’t seen anyone die yet. I pray I never do.

“The bats told me to use the powder. The bite is healing.”

“Keiko figured that out all on her own, without the bats telling her a thing,” Rob says. He gives Keiko a smile. She smiles back, one of the few smiles I’ve ever seen her give, then looks at the ground, her face reddening.

“Now immune to seawater. Not sure how, but it doesn’t burn anymore. Thinking about building a boat. Must get to the woods first. Must go back to the other side.”

A ton of information is hidden in this short paragraph, if you scrutinize it. Now immune to seawater? How? My mind whirs. This person, he (or she) was a lot like me. He talked to bats. Got bit by a centipede.

Immune to seawater?

Pepe flits close to my face and chirps. I suck in my breath, stunned by his revelation.

“What?” Steffi asks.

I’m not ready to tell her yet. Not until I’m sure. “Nothing, Pepe’s claws poked my skin, that’s all.”

Steffi doesn’t look like she believes this, but she lets it drop. “He wants to get to the woods so he can build a boat. I wonder why he doesn’t just use wood from our jungle.”

“Our wood sucks, that’s why,” Steve says. “It doesn’t last long in the water. The sea eats it up.”

“Maybe their wood is made of stronger stuff,” Steffi says.

“A centipede went after Sam, but tried to run from me. I killed it with the knife. Why did it run? We can’t eat it. It’s too horrible. Left it outside. Will get rid of it tomorrow.”

“The centipede’s body was gone when we went out this morning. Something took it. I wonder what?”

Rob grins. “Turtles.”

“The bats showed me how to get into the jungle. We have fruit. And fish. I met a turtle.”

Steffi frowns. “Fish?”

“From the sea,” I say. “If he’s immune to sea water, he can get fish.”

Steffi shakes her head. She’s convinced nothing lives in the poisonous water. After what Pepe chirped to me, I’m not so sure.

“Tried to get to the woods today. Chickened out. Hate it here but don’t want to go over there. It’s safer here.”

And then, the writing suddenly switches from a neat scroll to a hurried scribble:

“Must hide the treasures. They are coming. Hide.”

“They?” Rob says. “You think they mean The Others?”

Steffi shakes her head. “The Others can’t get here, I keep telling you. It’s something else.”

“Everything is gone. Only the bats and I are left. Nobody else survived. They’ve killed them all.”

Rob grabs the journal. “Hold up! They? Everything gone? Killed them all? What the hell happened?”

I stare at Pepe. He doesn’t know. But he’s shivering.

“They are coming,” I murmur. “They.”

“The aliens?” Steffi says.

“No,” I say. “Something else.”

Steve frowns. “Whatever They are, it sounds like They killed off everybody. Except this guy. How’d he escape? It doesn’t make any sense.”

He looks worried. So does Rob. Keiko shivers in the corner and stares nervously at her feet.

“If these things came before,” Rob says, “do you think they’ll come back again?”

Steffi shudders. “Let’s not think about that now. What else is there, Jack?”

“Just one more entry. I’ve found another way out. I’m going to take it. Good-bye.”

I look up. “That’s all.”

“What did he mean, ‘another way out’?” Rob says.

“I don’t know. Maybe he killed himself. Maybe that’s what he meant by another way out.”

The journal gives us a lot to think about, but it doesn’t give us a clue as to how these jewel-encrusted treasures got here in the first place. What were they doing in a box in the middle

of a deep cavern on a far-flung island? Who would've hidden them there?

And what about the strange writing we couldn't figure out how to read? Was it alien handwriting? If so, why would an alien leave this valuable stuff here? For us to use? For safe-keeping? Was somebody planning to come back and retrieve these riches?

Steffi looks at Steve. "The guy who wrote in the journal, was it anybody you knew?"

Steve shakes his head. "No. This happened way before any of us got here. I wonder though. The guy I knew, he...well, he just...disappeared."

"Do you think the mukade got him?" Rob asks.

"No. He totally disappeared. He was standing in this cave, right about where Keiko is standing now. He was there when the lights were on. When they went off, he was gone."

We stare at him in silence. "Why on Earth didn't you tell us this before?" Steffi says.

Steve takes a deep breath. "It freaked me out. If we can just disappear...where do we go? What happens to us?"

"Maybe he found a way out of here. Look at the last line this kid wrote. *'I've found another way out. I'm going to take it.'* Maybe the guy you knew left the same way the dude in the journal left."

"How?"

I shake my head. The idea is crazy, and I'm not sure where I'm getting it. Maybe from Pepe. "Okay. We were transported here from Earth, right? One minute we're on Earth, the next we're here. How does that work?"

"A portal?" Steffi says. "A wormhole maybe?"

"Exactly. If a portal can take us here, a portal can take us back. It must work both ways."

"You think we might have a portal here in our cave?" Rob asks, jumping up and looking around.

“Maybe, I don’t know. It’s just a thought. The big question is: how do you *use* a portal?”

Nobody has a good answer to this one. Steffi goes back to the other option. “The guy in the journal, he was thinking of making a boat.”

“Sounds like we need to get to the woods on The Other’s side to do it,” Rob says. “But we can’t get there.”

“We can,” I say. “I *know* we can. We’ll take a passage tomorrow. The one leading into the meadow. If we can use the tunnel, we can get into the meadow.”

“And if we can’t?” Steffi asks. “If some barrier stops us?”

“Then unless we can figure out how to disappear, we’re stuck here forever.”

I’ll be damned if that’s my fate.

SEAWATER

We creep up the passage, keeping an eye out for any skulking mukade. I rub my leg. The feeling had returned last night. It still tingles, but I can walk on it if I'm careful.

We pass through the middle cavern and climb up a thin, low passageway.

"I can't believe The Others never discovered this," Steffi says.

"It's hidden, like our passage. They've just never noticed it."

The tunnel shrinks, forcing us to crawl. By the time I see light ahead, my jeans are torn and I can feel the bruises forming on my hands and knees.

We squiggle the last five feet on our bellies. The opening is so overgrown I doubt we can push through. I stare between branches and blades of grass.

"Listen," Steffi whispers.

Birds twitter in the grass. *Birds*. I have never even *heard* a bird, let alone seen one, on our side. All we get is chirping bats, waves lapping on the rocks, the freaky clicking of the mukade, and an occasional angry slug squeal.

The birds must live in the meadow. And where there are birds, there are eggs. *Eggs*. My mouth waters at the thought.

“We need to get through the weeds if we want to explore,” Steffi says.

“Yeah, but if we clear the brush, we’ll expose the hole. Then The Others could use it to get to our side. Look.” I push my arm through the branches. “If my arm can get to The Other’s side, the rest of me can too. And if we can get into their territory using this passage, they can use it to get to us.”

Steffi shudders. “We don’t want that.”

“Nope. We’ve done what we came here to do. We should get back before the mukade figure out we’re crawling around in their tunnels.”

We backtrack to our cave and inform the others what we’ve found out.

“What do we do now?” Rob says.

“We don’t just want to storm into the meadow, they’ll spot us for sure,” I say. “We need a plan.”

“What plan would that be?” Steve, who still has reservations about the idea, asks.

I shrug. “Well, before I was mostly thinking about freeing the slaves over there. But that’s not what I’m thinking now.”

“You’re thinking of escape,” Steffi says.

“If we can get wood from the trees near the meadow, and if we can collect enough food, I bet we could do it.”

Steve shakes his head. “Even if you build a boat that doesn’t sink, where would you go? You have no idea.”

“We know other islands are out there. The map says so. I’d risk it just to live somewhere nicer than this.”

“In which case, your first idea makes more sense. Lure The Others over here and take over their side. Their side is nicer, why sail across a poisonous sea to try and improve your living conditions? You can’t escape this place. If Steffi’s theory is right, we’re on a different fricking planet, for crying out loud.”

Steve is getting worked up again. I get all his points, but I can't sit here forever, or until I die, and hope I'll just miraculously return home one day. That isn't me. I *have* to try.

I turn to Pepe. "Spike wanted me to do something. What was it?"

The bat cocks his head sideways and chirps, but he doesn't have an answer.

I give up trying to convince the others as I focus on working out a good plan. I eat a lunch of fruit and slugs and amble down to the sea's edge.

Steffi follows me. "What are you doing?"

"I want to see what the water feels like."

"It'll burn you," she says.

"I don't think it will. Remember what the guy wrote? In the journal? He became immune to the seawater."

"So? Why do you think you're suddenly immune?"

"I don't know if I am or not. Pepe said I am. So I'm gonna find out."

My heart thumps hard in my chest. I dip my toe in the water and brace for the burn. Instead, the seawater tingles against my skin. I wade in further and let the water run over my hurt leg. The last numbness disappears. I turn back to Steffi.

"This water is *awesome*."

"Not to the rest of us," Steffi says. "We'd burn up the same as if we swam in a tub of acid. It's not fair. What makes you so different?"

"I don't know. Maybe you're immune now too."

Steffi frowns. She takes a step towards the surf, squats, and pokes her fingertip in a small pool of water.

"Ow! Damn it. That fricking *hurts*."

"Sorry. But it was worth a shot."

"No it wasn't. Damn you to hell, Jack. How are you able to do that?"

I'm just as curious as Steffi but not as anxious to figure it out. I'd rather enjoy this now that I can. This water is so cool and soothing. The past two weeks of grime sloughs off my body as I fall neck-deep into the water.

Rob trots down the beach and joins Steffi. "What does it taste like? Is it salty like the seas back home?"

I take a cautious sip. The water tastes sweet. Not salty at all. I gulp some more of it. Steffi stares.

"Careful. You don't know what that stuff will do to you."

But I *do* know. The more I drink, the stronger I feel. The seawater fills me like a three-course meal, and for the first time since I've landed on this crappy rock, my stomach is full instead of gnawing and empty. I drink a couple more handfuls and swim back to the beach.

"Not fair," Steffi says again. "Now you have *three* things you can eat: the slugs, the fruit and the seawater. Well, you can *drink* the seawater anyway."

I sigh in complete contentment, flop on a rock, and gaze out over the sea. What's out there? Can we get across it? Or is Steve right? If we are on another planet, what difference would it make if we left this island? If we cross the sea we'll still be stuck in this freaky world. How can we get back to Earth? I mean, I might build a boat but building a spaceship? I don't think so. Unless...

I sure hadn't taken a spaceship to get here. I just appeared. After I made my wish, the person behind the desk pushed a button, and I woke here.

That stark room with the funny fish and lilac smell contained a portal. The portal took me to this world.

A portal must exist where the new kids show up. If new kids can get transported to this island through a portal, there must be a way to use it to get back. *That's* what I need to find out.

Once the initial excitement of discovering we can enter The Other's territory wears off, we're stumped on our next plan

of action. Should we storm The Other's side, or just explore it and hope we don't get caught? Should we try to rescue the slaves? Should we booby-trap the passageway so if The Others do find it, they can't get through?

And what about my portal theory? How the hell do I figure that one out?

I don't have an answer to any of my questions, so I busy myself with exploring the sea instead. I swim every morning. I body surf the waves and dive into the deeper parts. When I open my eyes underwater, everything looks crystal-clear, not orangy at all. I marvel at the ocean life. Steffi was so wrong. The sea teems with fish and wavering seaweed.

I harvest some seaweed and use our spring water to wash the poison away. The other kids won't touch it at first, they're scared it'll burn their throats, but it tastes great. Chewy and a bit stinky, but yet another new food source.

Finally, Keiko picks some up with her hand. She doesn't get burned, so she takes a cautious bite and smiles. Soon, we're all munching on the stuff. I can't collect it fast enough to satisfy everyone's appetite.

I try catching fish next. Steve helps me weave a net from the jungle vines. He has a knack with knots. After a few hours we've constructed a small but strong net. The fish are plentiful and practically jump into it. I wash the fish and Keiko cooks them whole on the open fire, which dissolves all the poison. Another food source.

But the jungle vines don't last long in the water. They disintegrate quickly. Steve has to make a new net almost every time I want to catch something.

We're all so elated that for a while we forget about The Others and my crazy plans of escape. I spend the next few days gathering seaweed, catching fish, and collecting fruit with the others. We give up totally on the long-suffering slugs. Losing them as a source of sustenance doesn't upset

anybody. For once, we have plenty to eat and a variety to choose from.

We're almost happy.

It's amazing what good food will do to you. I haven't been here long enough to lose too much weight, but the others, who have lived here for a while, all looked like sticks. They start filling out now. Thin layers of fat grow over the protruding bones. Sallow skin takes on a rosy tint. Dull eyes brighten. Everyone laughs a lot, even Keiko, whose laugh sounds like tiny tinkling bells. The others are still dirty and smelly, they can't wash in the seawater like I can, but their spirits soar.

Life on the island is almost pleasant. Almost.

STEVE

I can't get my thoughts off that dude. The one Steve knew, the one who disappeared. How'd he do it?
I think the answer lies with the bats.

When it comes down to it, all of our knowledge about this place has come from the bats. Even the guy who wrote in the journal gleaned his wisdom from the animals. The bats are the key to our survival. Understanding and using their wisdom falls to the person who can talk to them.

The first kid started the work. He (or she) discovered the passages and thought about making a boat, but got no further. He/she hid the treasures because They were coming. Whoever They were, they put an end to the kid's efforts. Whether that poor kid found a way off this rock or became mukade dinner, we'll probably never know.

Enter the second kid. The one Steve knew. Spike started teaching him the island's secrets, but he disappeared. If what Steve says is true, he didn't meet his end from a mukade or some other horrible way. He plain vanished. Either someone made him disappear, or he figured out how. And if he figured out how, the bats must have given him the clues.

I watch Pepe snoozing as he hangs in a corner. He is never far from me. He has taken over Spike's duties, but

Steve is right. Spike was the wisest. Pepe doesn't know half as much.

Pepe can't tell me how Steve's friend vanished. All he can convey is that Spike had shown the guy how to disappear.

I curse myself once again for the folly that caused Spike's death. Why hadn't he trusted me? Why hadn't he told me his secrets sooner?

Because he wanted you here.

Pepe says this to me. And I begin to understand what happened that day.

This dude, he wanted out of here more than anything, just like all of us. Spike didn't outright tell him how to use a portal, but he must have dropped some hints and the guy figured it out. He grabbed his opportunity.

He took the portal back to our world. Once he took it, he couldn't, or wouldn't, return. Which was fine for him, but what about all the others left on the island? Steve? Us? That guy took the knowledge with him. All Spike could do was wait for the next kid to show up. The next kid he could communicate with.

Me.

He wasn't about to give me the big secret so easy. He wanted all of us to take the portal back. Together. He had to wait until the right moment before he taught me how to use it.

The moment never came. Spike is gone. The secrets of this place died with him.

The thought fills me with despair.

We are *never* getting off this planet. We are *never* going home.

<<<>>>

I'm surprised when Steve comes to talk to me.

He looks so much fitter now. He was always more muscular than the rest of us, even in his weakened condition, but he was worse off in other ways. He had thin, flaky hair and a tangled

beard. Scurvy sores covered his body. The sores started to clear once we discovered the fruit, but some still persist.

The beard is gone now. Steve uses the new knife to shave, even though Steffi complains it'll dull the blade. Rob uses it too. I haven't needed to shave yet. The little stubble I've got growing on my chin looks pretty cool, and I don't want to cut it off. We've all gotten haircuts with the super-sharp knife, though. Even Steffi gives in and trims her long, limp hair.

Steve sits next to me. We watch the others in silence. Steffi and Keiko are gathering ferns, and Rob trying to whack a mischievous slug with a stick.

"Things sure have improved," he says.

"Yeah." I sound gloomy, even to myself.

"What's the matter?"

I shake my head and sigh. "We're never getting off this rock."

Steve stares out at the sparkling sea. "Yeah, sooner or later, we all comes to that realization. It hits you hard. But I think you're wrong."

"You do?"

"Yup. I thought that way too, but you've given us hope, Jack."

That's the best—the *only*—compliment he's ever given me. I don't believe him. Without Spike to help us, we're stuck.

Steve starts talking, I'm not sure why. Maybe he's trying to motivate me, or maybe he finally wants to talk about things. He's usually silent, bottled up.

"You know," he says, "the worst were those years by myself. I even tried to get to The Other's side. I didn't care if I became a slave, as long as I could be around other people. I thought of killing myself too. Walk out at night and let the mukade—I didn't know what they were then—eat me. Or burn up in the sea. I thought of all sorts of crappy things."

"But you didn't do it."

“No, I didn’t. Instead, I made sure I saved the next four kids from The Others. Keiko, Alexi, Rob and Steffi. Helping them got my spirits back.”

“What did you wish for? Why’d they send you here?”

Steve grins. “I wished for a chicken sandwich.”

“Seriously.” I almost grin myself.

“I’m not joking. I was a super cocky kid. Made all sorts of trouble before I came here. I didn’t bully kids, but I sassed off a lot to the adults. Made my parents’ life a living hell. When I had to make my wish, I had it in my head that the whole thing was a big scam. In a way, I was right. Anyway, I went into the room, and asked for a chicken sandwich.”

“They sent you here for that?”

“No,” Steve’s smile doesn’t reach his one good eye. “I was a troublemaker, that’s why they sent me here. I could’ve wished for peace on earth and I still would’ve ended up on this rock. They had my number already.”

Had it made any difference then, what I had wished for? Was I already damned to this place? Why? What danger do I possess that would make Them want to put me here?

Steve goes on. “Anyway, I don’t think that way now. Cocky, I mean. It’s a stupid way of looking at things. This place took it out of me. No, I don’t think that way at all now.”

He sounds old. I can sympathize. My carefree childhood ended when I went into that stinky room and made that wish. I can’t even remember sleeping in a real bed, heading to school, hugging my mom good morning.

I resolve not to think of Mom. I’ll end up even more miserable than I already am.

“I wonder why the aliens are so worried about us ‘troublemakers,’” I say. “I mean, we’re just kids. What, are they scared we’ll try to overthrow them or something?”

Of course. They’re weeding out the ones who’ll give them problems later on in life. The bullies. The kids too smart for

their own good. The troublemakers. They send us here, where we're doomed to die, from madness, sickness, or by turning into a mukade dinner. No hope of rescue.

But why me? I'm not especially smart. I don't talk back to adults. I'm not a bully. What possible threat am I?

You can talk to bats, I remind myself. *You can swim in the poison seawater*. But how would they have known I could do these things? Why would that make me dangerous?

Steffi insists that aliens are responsible for our crappy living conditions. They've taken over our world and control things for their own benefit. What the benefit is, she can't say. Except for the small numbers cast into this island prison, Steffi thinks that humans don't even realize they're being controlled, manipulated, *run* by an alien species. Or if they do, they keep their mouths shut. They don't rock the boat. They stay content because they've been granted their wish. They're happy.

Except for the parents who have lost their kids, of course. *They* aren't happy at all.

I'm not sure if she's spot-on with her theory. I mean, what do the aliens want? Why don't they get rid of all humans, if we're such a threat to their existence? Why the whole "wish" charade, if they already know who they're going to weed out and who gets to continue living a normal life? It doesn't make much sense to me, but I can't think of another viable explanation. Maybe Steffi's theory isn't watertight, but I'm beginning to think in some ways she might be right.

If she is, how can the aliens be beaten and forced to give up their hold on our planet? My head hurts just trying to think of a good answer.

"I'm going to stop now."

"What?" Steve says.

"Sorry. I'm thinking too much. I'm telling myself to stop. Sounds stupid, but sometimes I have to tell myself that or I'll drive myself nuts."

I change the subject.

“What happened to your eye?” I’ve always wanted to ask, but wasn’t sure how. Now I’m more comfortable talking to Steve.

He sighs. “It happened when I was alone. When I tried to go to The Other’s side. I went through the tunnel where we find the new kids. Once I got past that point, this horrible pain went right through my whole body and threw me backwards. When I came to, my eye was dead. After I rescued Keiko, she tried to fix it, but she couldn’t. The eye gives people the creeps, so I made a patch from an old leather jacket.”

“Can I see it? The eye, I mean?”

Steve nods and pulls up the patch. A solid, blood-red orb stares at me. No sign of a pupil, or the whites surrounding it. It’s like someone sucked the real eye out and inserted a huge, red marble in its place.

“Freaky, huh?” Steve says. “I can’t feel it, but nobody likes looking at it, so I keep the eye covered.”

“And you can’t see anything out of it?”

Steve sighs. “Nope. It’s dead.”

We sit in silence for a bit. Then Steve speaks up again.

“You know, I didn’t like you at all when you got here. I could tell you were different. Going to make trouble. Now I’m starting to think your trouble is what we need.”

I shake my head. “Maybe not.”

I tell him what I think about the portal. The guy who left. The loss of information now Spike is dead. My hopelessness.

Steve frowns. “It’ll come.”

“What?”

“The knowledge of this place. It’ll come to Pepe eventually. It’s how they learn.”

“What do you mean?”

“The bats. They don’t teach each other. They grow in knowledge as they get older. They learn from the island. From the

world. Not from each other. Pepe doesn't know the answers yet because he's too young. But he will. Someday."

A glimmer of hope sparks deep in my heart. "Are you sure about that?"

Steve shakes his head. "I'm not sure about anything. But that's what Mark—the guy who disappeared—said. He said if there was only one bat here, with no other bats to teach it, the bat would still learn what it needed."

My heart lightens.

"He'll figure it out," Steve says. "So will you. And when you do, we'll find a way back home. But I don't think we'll find it here. I think we need to leave this rock."

I grin. "What changed your mind?"

"Well, as much as I'd rather stay here, where at least I understand how things work, I don't *want* to stay here. Not forever. If anybody can get us off this island, you can."

I don't reply. Everyone, now even Steve, has so much faith me. I sure wish I had the same confidence. Yeah, I've found out things nobody else has. I've discovered the secrets for a more comfortable survival and I can pull nourishment from the seawater when others disintegrate in it. But how much is luck or just my genetic makeup? How far will it take me? When will I make a mistake ending in someone getting hurt?

Or killed?

Still, Steve's encouragement strengthens my resolve. Steve had been the one most adamant in keeping things as normal as possible: not rocking the boat, not going out on a limb. He had been thinking about his family's safety. So nothing bad would happen to them and he wouldn't be left alone again.

Now, he's willing to take a risk. I hope this willingness lasts.

"Did I ever tell you about Jack Outrigger?" Steve says.

I perk up. "You know something about the myth?"

Steve nods. "A little. I'm not sure who started it. The writing on the cliff, Mark did that the day before he disappeared, I

think. He told me about the rumor, about how someday a kid would show up who would save everybody. The bats told him this. I don't know where the bats heard it. Mark never found the map or the journal, or the treasures. But he hinted at the woods on the other side. Spike must've told him."

"Why didn't Spike lead him to the treasure?"

Steve looks at me with his one good eye. "Because he wasn't you. The bats were waiting for you."

"Where does 'Outrigger' come from? That's not my name."

"I don't know. Maybe it's a clue. An outrigger is part of a boat, right? Well, we need to make a boat. A boat to get us the hell off this damn island."

"And take us to where? That's the problem."

Steve shrugs. "I don't know, but it's a start. We build a boat."

"How the hell are we supposed to do that?"

Steve grins. "We do it with wood. My dad was a fisherman. I grew up around boats. We can figure it out. We need to find some wood first. Wood that won't fall apart in this sea. And we *will* do it, Jack. I really think we will."

SAFE ZONES

Rob is sleepy and doesn't want to go out, so Steve volunteers for fruit picking duty while I help the girls skin the fish. We scrape off the scales with rocks and use our fingers to scoop out the guts. Keiko has found a great way to cook fish: wrapped in seaweed and covered in hot coals until they're grilled to perfection and juicy as anything. She garnishes them with slices of fruit. We can't add the fruit until Steve gets back so we wait.

And wait.

Rob stares out the cave entrance. "It's getting way too late to be out there. I should've gone. What if the mukade got him?"

We can hear them, clicking their way across the beach. An icy numbness creeps through me. The fruit-picking window ended long ago.

Rob begins to cry. "It's my fault. Steve's gotten eaten, and it's my fault!"

I try to calm him. "He might've found a turtle."

Deep down though, I doubt this. The turtles congregate around the tunnel entrance this time of night; they wouldn't be loitering near the jungle's edge.

Keiko sobs. Steffi stares at the jungle shadows in disbelief. Rob breaks down and starts bawling like a baby.

Pepe flies over and chirps into my ear. I exhale as warmth creeps through me. I shake Rob. "He's okay. Quit blubbering like a baby."

Rob snuffles. "How do you know?"

"Pepe says so. He's okay. We need to wait."

Excruciating minutes tick by before a panting Steve stumbles into the cave. Rob blows his nose and gives one last snuffle. Keiko sinks to the ground. Steffi sighs.

"What happened?" she says.

Steve is huffing, his one good eye wide with fear. "I don't get it," he gasps. "I was standing right in the jungle, getting some fruit. I guess I forgot how long I'd been out there. Anyway, I heard the clicks, turned around, and here comes a whole fricking army of mukade heading right for me. I froze. I couldn't run. Then they just passed right by me."

"They did?"

"Yeah. They streamed past me on either side. Like I wasn't even there. I waited until they all left, and a turtle came over and brought me back here."

"I don't get it," Steffi says. "They didn't even *touch* you?"

"They didn't even *look* at me. I don't think they saw me."

Pepe chirps. I begin to laugh.

"What?" Steve asks, watching me. "What did he say?"

I turn to Steffi. "The ledge we found, the one the mukade couldn't follow us to; you said it became our safe zone, right?"

"Yeah. The mukade couldn't get on it once we were there."

"I had a funny feeling come over me when we got on the ledge. Just for a second. A feeling of...safety. I had the exact same feeling the first time I walked down the jungle path. And when Steve went into the jungle tonight, the mukade stayed away from the path."

Steve sucks in his breath. "Are you saying...?"

I nod. "When I first went into the jungle, I walked on that path. After I walked down that path, it must've become a safe zone."

Everyone falls silent as they digest this information. “So... that means the mukade can’t use the path anymore,” Rob says.

“They can’t. We don’t even need the turtles to protect us if we stay on the path. The mukade *have* to stay off it. The path belongs to us. We can use it any time we want. The passage-way leading to the cavern where we found the box is safe too.” I turn to Steffi. “Remember the first time, when the mukade chased us? They stopped when we started up the passage. Spike calmed down then too, he knew they couldn’t follow us. We were safe. When the first dude, the one who wrote in the journal, went down the passage he must’ve made it a safe zone.”

“How?” Rob says.

I glance at Pepe. “Just like Steve’s original theory. Something has set places up to become safe zones once somebody claims it. If we walk into the safe zone first, it becomes our territory. If The Others find it first, they own it and we can’t get in.”

“I wonder,” Steffi says, “if the island has other spots we can find. Other spots we can make into safe zones.”

“I’m thinking the same thing. Especially if we can find them on The Other’s side.”

At first I had thought the safe zones were only safe from the mukade. Now I think different.

When I was a kid, I had a favorite video game called Construction Zone. In the game, you used a dump truck to fill in areas with dirt. Those areas became yours, and the game’s bad guys (safety inspectors) could no longer get into them. The safe zones on this island work the same way. Once somebody claims them, neither the mukade nor the people from the other side can get into that space. That’s why the guy who wrote in the journal couldn’t return to The Other’s side. Neither could Steve. And that’s why they can’t get into our cave.

“Kind of kills our original idea of switching places with The Others,” Steffi says. “If your theory is true, they could never come here and we could never go there.”

“Only in the safe zones. Our cave is a safe zone. Their cave is too. But our beach isn’t a safe zone. We’ve been all over it, but the mukade can use it also. I stuck my arm into The Other’s meadow, which means the meadow isn’t a safe zone. But maybe, like the jungle path, some areas are. We need to find a spot on The Other’s side where they’ve never been.”

Steve snorts. “Good luck. I’ll bet those guys have been over every inch of their side. How can we tell if we find a safe zone we can use?”

“I can tell,” I say. “If I get the tingly feeling I had back in the jungle or on the ledge, I’ve found a safe zone. We’ve just gotta explore their area. And not get caught.”

“Why don’t we wait for a rainy day?” Steve says. “The rainy season will begin soon, and you know how it absolutely pours when it rains. The Others won’t be out in the meadow on one of those days. We can explore then. Or at least Jack can.”

This is a new one on me. I’ve never even *seen* a cloud in that crazy purple-pink sky. “You really get rain here?”

“Well yeah, sort of. It’s weird rain though. It burns, like the seawater. When it gets rainy, it gets really windy too. I think it isn’t rain at all, it’s just seawater kicked up by the wind and blown over the island. I mean, it definitely doesn’t come from clouds, like on Earth. There are no clouds here.”

“Yeah, on those days we can’t even step outside,” Steffi says. “It’s a crappy season, we always go hungry because we can’t get outside and hunt slugs. And you can’t store slugs in the cave for too long anyway. You have to keep them alive to cook. If they’re dead, they get all rotten and poisonous. Kids have died from eating rotten slugs. Or so Steve says.”

Steve nods. “It’s true. And the rainy season will be starting soon, and it’ll rain for several days at least. It’s the worst time of the year, usually.”

Rob groans. “*Usually*? What makes you think this season will be any different?”

Steve points a finger in my direction. “Because we’ve got him. Jack can get enough seaweed to last us through the rainy days. And we can pile up fruit too. This season won’t be half as bad.”

“How do you know the season is close?” I ask. “How do you even know what day it is? Or month? Or year? It all feels the same to me.”

“Maybe, but you can tell from the sky. When it’s really wavy, you never have to worry about rain. But when it’s super solid like it is today, you know the rain is coming. And it’s coming soon. Look at that sky. It’s so pink I can barely focus on it.”

I stare at the sky. Steve’s right. The sky is flat today; so solid I feel I could reach right up and smack my hand against it.

While we wait for the rains to start, we gather as much food as possible. I also decide to double-check my theory and brave the jungle path at night. If we can stay on the path all night, we can collect a hell of a lot of fruit.

Rob volunteers to go with me. We creep along the path and stop when we hear the *click-click-clicks* scrambling towards us. Rob’s eyes bulge, but he holds his ground.

A gang of mukade burst into view. They avoid the path and wind their way among the jungle trees. They stream around us without stopping and vanish in the night.

“It’s like they didn’t even see us,” Rob says.

“Or smell us. I don’t think they *can* see. They don’t like light, that’s why they come out at night. I think they use their sense of smell more than anything. But they can’t even detect our scent when we’re in the safe zone. When I was on that ledge, the mukade crawled right out next to me but didn’t even swivel its head my way. I didn’t register with it. Same as on this path. They don’t even realize we’re here.”

Rob laughs. “This is awesome. We can collect fruit any time we want.”

Rob takes this job for himself. Nobody else wants it. Even though the mukade can't touch us if we stay to the path, watching them scuttle around is still freaky. Only Rob enjoys striding among them, picking fruit to his heart's content.

This breaks the chores pretty evenly. I fish and collect seaweed, Rob picks the fruit; Steffi still wrestles a slug on occasion (she enjoys the challenge, she says) and cuts firewood. Keiko cooks and tends the fire.

Steve starts making weapons.

"If we're going to go to The Other's side," he says, "we should be armed. We've got the knife now, but only one person can carry it. We need to make some other weapons. Just to defend ourselves," he says after Keiko shoots him a disapproving look. "We wouldn't hurt anybody with 'em. Not unless we needed to, anyway."

He starts by making some spears. He picks a couple of long branches from the drying pile and, using the fire, burns the ends into sharp points. Keiko watches with distaste.

"She doesn't like the idea," Steffi says. "We never had weapons before. She's afraid we'll all go mad with power and start doing stupid things."

I don't like the idea of weapons either, but Steve's right. I bet the Others wouldn't hesitate to use them given the chance. And weapons will sure come in handy against mukade, if we ever meet up with the freaky things in the tunnels. We're bound to at some point.

We try some tests with the jungle wood. Rob is right, why traipse all the way over to The Other's side for wood if we have plenty to make a boat with already? But, like we thought, the jungle wood is hard and strong on land but breaks down in the sea after a few hours. Like the vines. The wood will never hold up under a long voyage. The trees on The Other's side must be made of stronger stuff.

Steve is working on his third spear when a crazy wind picks up and the rains start. The pink sky darkens to a blackish-purple. Sheets of water pour down. The rain falls all morning.

“Try stepping out in it, Jack,” Steffi whispers, staring at the drops hissing against the rocks.

“Won’t this kill the jungle wood?” I ask, staring outside. “If the wood disintegrates in the sea, and this is sea water, you’d think it’d eat the poor plants alive.”

“It doesn’t seem to,” Steve says. “Maybe the jungle trees are immune to the rain when they’re living. Maybe they’re a lot weaker once you cut them down.”

“Pepe?” I whisper. “Is it all right?” Pepe gives a sleepy chirp from his corner. I stick my hand out into the pouring rain.

“It’s seawater all right. It doesn’t burn me at all.”

“Great,” Steffi says. “Now’s the time then. You can get over to The Other’s side and explore, no problem. They won’t be out in this crap. I’ll go with you as far as the opening anyway.”

“I’ll go too,” Rob says. “I want to see the cavern.”

“What about the mukade?” Steve says.

“They’re not in the tunnels during the day,” Steffi says. “This is their nap time, they won’t leave their lair. We’ll be okay.”

The spears double as walking sticks, and after we let Rob ooh and ahh at the beautiful cavern, we climb the low passage to the meadow. I use Steffi’s knife to hack away just enough vegetation to let me crawl out, but don’t remove so much that I make the hole noticeable, I hope.

Steffi and Rob crouch in the tunnel, and I creep into The Other’s territory for the first time.

THE OTHERS

The rain douses me, but I don't care. I'm somewhere new and forbidden, and that's exciting. I creep along the meadow's edge, hugging the mountain and scanning the area. I spot the woods looming in the distance and head for them.

The rain pours down, and I tilt my head up and open my mouth, letting the cool water dribble down my throat. I stride through the meadow. The high grass shields me from view. If any of The Others are peering out of their cave, they won't see a thing. Not that they could see much through all this rain.

The meadow stretches to the cliffs, which fall into a churning sea, that pummel the rocks. I follow the cliffs until I reach the wood's edge. Unlike the jungle trees, which grow all gnarled and low, these trees rise into the air, tall and thick. They're covered with wide, green leaves.

I stare at them, wondering how we could ever cut one of those monsters down. It'd be impossible. And even if we managed it somehow, how the hell would we get the wood back to our side?

I check them out anyway. I move between the trees and rest my hand on one, feeling the hard, black wood. I draw my hand back, startled.

The tree *shivered*.

I rest my palm against the bark. The tree rumbles and sways. Pepe swoops over and chirps.

“They’re afraid of the trees?”

I grin at Pepe. *The Others are afraid of the trees*. They’re too alive. I know that doesn’t make much sense, but these trees aren’t like regular plants. All plants are living things, but these trees are more alive than that. They can’t move or talk, but they can *feel*.

I have a feeling they can be dangerous, too.

I move deeper in, creeping through the shadows. I stumble into a clearing where no trees grow. A warm, tingling sensation envelops me.

This is it. A safe zone. I’ve found it.

The trees circle the clearing. A lone tree lies in the center, pulled up by its roots. I wonder how long it’s lain there. These ancient trees probably take years to decompose. I stare at the dead tree. I can feel the smile spread across my face.

That’s our boat.

I walk around the uprooted tree and run my hand along the smooth trunk. I’m not sure how we’ll get it back to the other side, but it’s a perfect tree for making a boat.

“Will the other trees let us take it?”

Pepe chirps. They will. They’ve been guarding this tree for us. They’ve protected it by keeping The Others away from this clearing.

Now this place is our safe zone. We can do whatever we like here, and the trees will protect us.

I stare at the mountain looming behind the glade. I wonder if we could climb up there and find the tunnel leading into the cavern. If we could use that tunnel, we could avoid the meadow completely. The mountain passage might be a hell of a lot safer for us to use. We’ll have to try exploring that tunnel next.

I turn my attention to the tree. How can we make it into a boat? We *could* do it right here, in this clearing, now that it's a safe zone. But can we do it without letting The Others catch on? I don't think so. The clearing is visible from the meadow, and if anyone comes out this way, they'll spot us.

But they won't get into the clearing. It's our safe zone now. Although I wonder, what if they throw things at us? Like rocks or spears? Could those things enter the safe zone?

I hadn't thought of this before, but I think about it now. The mukade don't have weapons except their pincers, but The Others will have something. What will happen if they lob a spear into the clearing? Will it break the plane and enter the safe zone? Or will it be repelled somehow?

I sit on the dead tree and stare up at the rain and that crazy, solid, magenta sky. It has no clouds but rain still pours down. No sun but somehow we get light. How the hell does that all work?

I peer behind the trees and stare out at the churning sea. The wind whips it into a froth. Waves smash against the rocks. Even without the wind, the sea has waves. But the sky has no moon to make the tides. No stars either. Absolutely nothing is up there. I'm almost terrified by its vastness; its nothingness.

I'm not sure how long I sat there, getting more and more obsessed and terrified of that damned sky, but I suddenly jerk out of my stupor. My face is dry. The rains stopped; I have no idea how long ago. What if The Others decide to come out in the meadow? I decide I'd better head back to the tunnel. Steffi and Rob must be wondering where the hell I got to.

I stand up and then freeze.

Two figures approach the glade, and neither are Steffi or Rob. I duck behind the tree, but it's too late. They point my way. I gulp, not sure what I should do. All I know is that The Others have spotted me. They know I'm here, and they're blocking off the way back to the meadow tunnel.

I peer over the tree. I was right, they've noticed me and are making their way towards the grove's edge. Slow. Hesitant. Not sure if they want to approach. Are they afraid of the trees, or are these "slaves?" They're thin. Shabby. Scared. I make a split decision. These aren't The Others. These are the guys we didn't get to in time. The guys that belong on our side.

Of course, that doesn't mean they won't tell. They could've been here for a while, and they might be brainwashed. Or maybe they'll tell because they're too scared *not* to. I hesitate, wondering if I should take the chance.

What do you mean, 'take the chance?' It's too late, they've already spotted you, you idiot.

They stop at the forest's edge. The boy has black hair and sallow skin. Huge brown eyes. Indian, maybe. The girl's skin is dark, almost jet-black, and tight black curls frame her face. They stare between the trees, but don't enter the grove. They know I'm here. I'd better talk to them. They might tell The Others either way, but maybe I can convince them not to.

I wave, hoping they won't bolt back to their cave. They don't. The girl raises her hand and gives me a shy smile.

But they don't want to enter the trees. So I move towards them, keeping a good-natured smile on my face. They stand their ground.

"Hi."

The girl stares at me with big black eyes. The boy hesitates, but finally nods. "Hello. Where did you come from?"

"The other side of the island."

They stare at me, dumbstruck.

"There's another side?" the girl finally says.

I nod. "We're the good side." I try to make it sound like a better place than it is. "But the bad guys got to you first. You should've been over on our side."

“Did you come to rescue us?” the girl whispers. She’s gotta be over fifteen, but she looks so small and scared, she could pass for ten.

“Yes.” Now that I’ve said it, I *have* to help. Can I rescue them? Can they even *get* to our side?

There’s one way to find out.

“Follow me.” I move back through the trees. The kids hesitate, staring with fear at the branches and nervously glancing up at the sky before finally stepping into the woods. The trees rustle their leaves and let them pass.

“Usually if anyone tries to enter, the branches get in the way,” the girl says. “You can’t get through.”

“What’s your names?” I ask.

“I’m Bhasker,” the boy says. “And this is Malika.”

“How long have you been stuck on the island?”

“About three months for me,” Bhasker says.

Malika nods. “I’ve been here for six.”

They look so thin. I rummage through the backpack and pull out some fruit. “Eat this,” I say.

Malika’s eyes widen. “You have fruit on your side?” she asks, cupping the red ball and gazing at it before peeling the rind.

“Mhm. Fruit and fish and seaweed and things. What do you have here?”

“Eggs and the birds, but they won’t let us eat any. We just get the slugs.”

I can’t stop myself from grinning. “I can sure sympathize with you there,” I say, as I watch the kids eat. The girl, Malika, scratches her arms. She looks uncomfortable.

“Are you okay?”

“The grass burns. It’s still wet from the rain.”

“Why are you out here, then? You should be inside.”

“*They* made us come out. They said that whenever the rain stops, we have to go out and find more food. We can’t wait

until everything dries. The rain will start again, and we have to find food while it's stopped." She stares at the solid sky, tears welling in her eyes. "What if it starts again while we're out here?"

She's right. I'd better get them back to the tunnel and over to our side quick, before the rain starts pouring again. Anyway, my hunch had been right. The kids were able to get into the glade okay, even though it's now our safe zone.

That proves it to me. These kids should've been on our side, but they were captured. They were forced to live on The Other's side, but they really belong with us. And now they're with us, they can't return to The Other's cave.

They can now get to our side and enter our safe zones, but I'm pretty sure the bad kids can't. Whoever controls things will not grant The Others the same allowance.

I look at the poor shivering kids. "Let's go. You won't have to worry about The Others, food, or the rain ever again."

We tiptoe along the meadow's edge. I slip into the hole, followed by the new kids. They don't even hesitate. Rob and Steffi stare at them as I arrange the branches to hide the hole.

"Wow," Rob says. "Are they okay?"

"They're slaves. And starving, and scared to death."

Steffi grins at our newest members. "Good enough for me. Come on."

Steve and Keiko are surprised when five enter the cave instead of three, but they don't let it faze them. They bring fish and seaweed and more fruit for the starving kids to eat.

I want to know everything about The Others, and Bhasker and Malika are willing to talk.

Ten altogether live on the other side. Four are considered "helpers" and are forced to sleep in a rocky part of the cave. They dig for their own slugs after collecting all the food The Others demand, which means they sometimes go a day or two without eating.

“Animals,” Steffi says, looking thunderous.

The Others keep to a strict hierarchy. The leaders fight for their position. Right now, like we suspected, good old Mike Mullens controls things. If somebody else wants to be leader, he has to fight (and win) Mike for it, which hasn’t happened since Mike took over a couple years ago.

Seven guys. Three girls. Two girls are “helpers”. A girl called Marissa, is one of The Others, and she is the meanest of all.

I steel myself and ask the question that’s been on my mind since I got here. “Is there a guy named Cody on your side?”

Bhasker shakes his head.

“Have you ever even *heard* of the name ‘Cody’? Maybe from before you got here?”

“No,” Makila says. “They keep a written tally of everyone over there. Everyone scrapes their name into the wall, as soon as they arrive. I’ve never seen the name ‘Cody’.”

“He *had* to be there at some point. I haven’t seen his name here, and if he wasn’t here, he *must* have been on your side.”

The inability to find the brother I never even knew really frustrates me. Once we met, even if he was one of The Others, we would become close. Brothers. Confidants. Two of us standing together against this world. At least, that’s what my brain had dreamed up over the past few weeks.

I half-listen as Rob says, “So what do you call each other on your side? We call you The Others, but I guess you call yourselves something different.”

“Well,” Malika says, “we call all the non-helpers ‘Sir.’ Except Marissa. She makes us call her ‘Your Majesty.’”

Rob snorts. “Full of themselves, aren’t they?”

“What do they do all day?” Steffi asks.

“Fight. Play games. Sleep. Beat us up when they get bored. They don’t have anything else to do, see. We do all the work. We collect the food and we do the cleaning. We tend the fires,

wash things, everything that is hard work, we do. The only work *they* do is hunt snakes. I guess snakes are good eating, if you can catch 'em."

"We don't have snakes on this side," Rob says.

"Good," Malika says. "They really scare me. They live in the meadow where we hunt for eggs. You have to watch out for 'em."

"Do the snakes only come outside at night, like the mukade—the centipedes?"

"They're always there," Bhasker says.

Malika shudders. "Is that what comes out at night? Centipedes?"

I nod. "Yup."

"We don't go out at after dark," Bhasker says. "Sometimes, if *they* decide to punish us, they'll force us out at night. Those guys never come back."

"The mukade get 'em," Rob says.

I nod, feeling sick at the thought. "They're in the tunnels too." Thankfully we hadn't run into any on our trip back. "They sleep during the day though. They're only active at night."

Malika shivers. "I don't want to meet one."

"They're not so bad," Rob says. "They can't come into the safe zones. You should come out with me to pick fruit at night. The mukade can't get on the path. The tricky part is getting from the jungle back to the cave, but a turtle is always there to help us."

Malika laughs. "A turtle?"

Rob explains about the turtles, and then he tells the newbies how I can swim in the sea, fish, and collect seaweed. They stare at me with even more awe, which makes me squirm.

Everyone's almost worshipping reverence scares the hell out of me. Even Steffi and Steve have lost their previous authoritative tones, and defer to me on practically everything.

Having complete loyalty might get to some folks' heads, but I'm more uncomfortable with it than anything else. I can't help that I can do these things. I just *can*. It doesn't make me any more special than anybody else.

I change the subject and tell everyone about the new safe zone I found in The Other's territory, and the dead tree.

"It's perfect for a boat, but how we're gonna get it back to this side without The Other's finding out is beyond me."

Steve ponders the problem. "We could burn the wood into a boat. Kinda like how the American Indians burned out canoes. They'd get a fire going and burn the wood away to make it the shape they wanted. I'm getting pretty good at burning spears, I could maybe do the same with the wood."

"The Others would notice that for sure," Steffi says.

"Maybe not," Bhasker says. "You can't see the forest from the cave. If you could work at night, a fire might go unnoticed."

"Yeah, but how would we get there at night?" Rob asks. "The mukade are out then."

"We couldn't use the meadow," I say, "but maybe we can use the passageway that opens on top of the mountain. Pepe says the mukade hardly ever use it, even at night. There's nothing up there to eat, it's all rock. They head for the beach where the slugs live. Maybe the mountain way would be safe. We'll try it once during the day and see if we can even find a way down to the forest. Bhasker, do The Others climb the mountain? Is there a path up there?"

Bhasker shakes his head. "I don't know if there's a path, but I doubt anybody's bothered to explore it. To get there you'd have to go through the woods, and nobody except you guys can get through the woods. The trees never let us through."

"Then it's all settled," I say. "We'll check out the mountain tunnel tomorrow."

THE BOAT

The Others know something is up. They may not see the forest from their cave at night, but they're getting restless. The constant smoke must have registered with them. Yet they can't do much about it.

I was right about the mountain passage. It leads to a craggy cliff with a steep but climbable path down to the forest's edge. The forest protects the path from The Others. To reach that path, they'd have to pass through the trees, and the trees won't let them through without a fight.

We have to wait a couple of weeks before we can start to put our plan into action. I can reach the glade okay, but until the rains let up, the other kids don't dare risk it. Now that the rigid sky is undulating again, Steve says it's safe enough to chance everyone going.

Getting all the supplies over to the other side is an endeavor. We need fire to burn the dead tree, but can't use the living ones, so we lug jungle branches through the mountain and over to the glade. Steve and Rob, being the largest, get stuck with this task. Steffi and I protect them with spears as we sneak through the tunnels. So far we haven't run across any patrolling mukade, but the possibility always exists.

Keiko and the new kids stay on our side. They have no intention of wandering back to The Other's side. Now that the majority of us are busy with the boat, it falls on these three to harvest as much food and firewood as possible. During the day, I still fish and collect seaweed, but Rob helps build the boat at night, so Bhasker has bravely taken over fruit picking duties.

I feel sorry for the two new kids. They're doing as much work now as they did on the other side, but at least now they do it of their own free will. And they're eating better. Bhasker is happy he doesn't have to eat slugs anymore. It went against his religion to eat a living creature, but his choice was either to chow down on slugs or starve to death. He chose the slugs over dying, but says he always felt guilty about it.

I worry about him just eating fruit and seaweed, though. He won't touch the fish, which has more protein than the other food sources.

Steve's boat burning idea is what we decide to try, although he figures the process will take weeks, if not months. Before we even start the burning, Steve wants us to scrape off all the bark.

We try using our crude axes, but they don't work at all. They're dull and heavy and every once in a while the vines give and we have to retie the blades to the sticks. By the first morning, my arms are killing me and I haven't removed much bark.

Steffi breaks down and uses the silver knife, which works pretty well. She's worried that this will dull the blade, but nothing we do seems to dull it.

The tree trunk is about twenty feet long. We begin removing the branches and roots. Steve hacks at these with his axe while Rob, Steffi and I grapple with stripping the bark. Some branches are pretty freaking thick. Steve puts these in a separate pile.

“We can use those for the outrigger,” he says.

“Like your name,” Steffi whispers. “The legend was right.”

Rob looks up from his chopping. “What’s an outrigger?”

“It makes the boat more stable. If we want to take this boat over a sea, we’ll want outriggers on each side.

“We’ll also need oars,” Steffi says.

Steve nods. “Put all the branches to the side. Don’t use ‘em for firewood. We’ll use the roots and branches from the jungle for that.”

“So how do you know so much about boats?” Steffi asks.

Steve shrugs. “My dad was a fisherman.”

“I didn’t know that. Why didn’t you think of building a boat before now?”

“I did,” Steve says, “but I didn’t have anything to build it with. I didn’t want to get anywhere near the sea anyway. It’s poison.”

“Not to Jack,” Steffi says.

“No, but to the rest of us it sure is. I’m not too excited about trying to sail this boat anywhere, even if we do finish it. It’s okay for Jack. If spray hits him, he’ll think it feels good. It’ll burn us. And what if it rains? How are we supposed to travel across a huge sea in a small tub and *not* get wet? It’ll be impossible.”

His worries don’t slow down our progress. After a week of hard night labor, we’ve scraped the bark off the tree and removed all the branches. We haul firewood from the other side and stack it next to the boat. Steve spends one night chopping a thin trench in the tree trunk. Steffi and I hack the axes into the loamy soil and make a fire pit. The living trees’ roots don’t enter the glade, so our fire doesn’t hurt them any.

“How’s this going to burn the tree?” Rob asks, looking at the fire and then gazing over at the tree trunk, about ten feet away.

“When the coals get super-hot, we remove them from the pit and put them into this trench I’ve cut in the tree trunk,”

Steve says. ‘Then we fan the coals, and they’ll burn the wood. We’ll need to monitor it so the coals don’t catch the whole tree on fire.’

“What happens in that case?” Steffi says. “We don’t have any water to put a fire out with.”

“That’s why I brought this.” Steve motions towards a pile of ferns he lugged over on our last trip. “If the fire spreads, we can put it out with the ferns. The healing juices that help our wounds also will help smother out flames. The ferns are pretty flame retardant. They stay moist for days after you pick them. If we keep a good supply here, we’ll be fine.”

Steve’s plan works. It’s tricky moving the coals from the fire to the tree, since we don’t have shovels. We scoop the coals into turtle shells Rob found in the jungle, and we transfer the coals to the tree trench before they get the shells too hot. We fan the coals with the ferns, which helps the burning process. Thick smoke rises into the air.

Not good.

“They know something’s up.” I say as I motion towards The Other’s camp. “See the lights? They’d come out and investigate if it weren’t for the mukade skulking around out there.”

“They can reach the trees by day,” Steffi says. “We can’t hide this stuff, and they can see it, if they look hard enough. You can bet they notice something’s going on in here.”

“But they don’t know what, yet,” I say. “Or who’s doing it.”

“Maybe somebody should stay here during the day,” Steve says. “To guard the place.”

“Guard it from what? If The Others could get in here, one person couldn’t fend them off. Plus, this is a safe zone. The best they can do is find a way to get up into the mountain, and cut us off that way. It’ll take weeks before they figure it out.”

“Unless they find the tunnel in the meadow,” Rob says.

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Burning a boat takes much longer than anyone expected. The work is slow and tedious. We can't dry the jungle wood as fast as we burn it. Sometimes days pass before we have enough sticks for a decent fire.

The longer it takes, the edgier I feel. I keep expecting something bad to happen: either The Others will confront us or the mukade will give chase. Each day I get more nervous and testy, wondering which will happen first.

The mukade get the honor.

It happens about a month into the venture, as Steffi, Steve and I head back home. Rob had stayed at the cave to help cut down branches, so only the three of us head down the passage this morning. We're in the main cavern when we hear it.

Click-click-click.

The sound reverberates down the tunnel. A couple of errant mukade have stayed longer than normal out in the jungle and are returning to their lair. I curse myself for agreeing to head home so early in the morning. We've gotten lazy. We haven't seen a mukade in over a month and we've let our guard down. We don't even have the spears with us.

Steffi is the closest to the mountain tunnel and she runs back up it, hoping to make it to the glade. Steve has walked about halfway through the chamber and hesitates. He knows he can't get to the tunnel before the mukade enter the cavern. I'm almost at the jungle tunnel entrance and have no hope whatsoever. I stand still, panic sweeping over me. This cavern isn't a safe zone.

I can't do anything. I can't outrun the mukade. I can't fight them either. I am going to die. An almost paralyzing resignation spreads through my limbs.

An ugly head thrusts into the cavern, antennae flailing. I hold my torch high, hoping I can fend it off with the flame. Other mukade creep behind this one. Their squiggling bodies erupt from the tunnel like toothpaste oozing from a tube. Hun-

dreds of long red legs scramble over the rocks as the mukade squirm towards me.

And shoot right past me. Like I'm not even here.

A silent scream is frozen on Steve's parted lips. The mukade head for him, their sharp pinchers clicking with rage. I yell and scramble after them. I'll be damned if I give up Steve without a fight.

They scuttle off, forgetting Steve in their haste to get away from me. I pull up next to the trembling guy and stare after the scattering insects. My breath comes in short, panicky gasps as I try to understand what's happening.

Steve stares at me. "They're afraid of you."

"Maybe they don't see me."

"No, they see you all right. Or smell you. They tried to avoid you. But they didn't do the same with me. They wanted blood from me, I think."

My hammering heart slows down to normal. "They're gone now, anyway."

Steve stares at me, horror visible in his eyes. "Which way did they go?"

I suck in my breath. Two of the mukade headed back to their lair. The third...

Screams echo through the cavern. We scramble back up the mountain passage.

Steffi.

IMMUNITY

I hurtle up the tunnel, Steve chugging behind me. The mukade's legs wriggle ahead. I lunge for them, grabbing on. Sharp claws dig at my arms as the mukade lets Steffi go and turns to confront me.

Then, inexplicably, it shrieks and lunges forward, scrambling right over Steffi in its attempt to escape. Steffi screams even louder. I let go and watch, mesmerized, as the mukade scuttles up the passage, towards the mountain and daylight.

The mukade has picked daylight over me. I don't get it.

"Get it off! Off!" Steffi shrieks.

"It *is* off. It's gone. Are you okay?"

Steffi tries to suppress her sobs. "No, it bit me in the ankle. It *hurts*."

My leg twinges in sympathy. "I know it does. It'll be numb soon. Can you stand?"

Steffi crumples to the ground as soon as she tries.

"I'll carry her," Steve says. "You stand guard. They don't want to get anywhere near you."

"I know, and I don't get it. Where's Pepe?"

"We sent him ahead, remember?" Steve hoists Steffi on his back. She wraps her arms around his neck and moans in pain.

We move through the cavern. I scan the area for mukade, but I only hear trickling water and our hollow footsteps. We make our way up the passage.

“She’s slipping.” Steve stops and lowers Steffi’s limp body to the floor.

I remember how the mukade poison conked me right into la-la land. “She’s passed out.”

“How are we gonna get her through the crawl?”

“You push, I’ll pull.”

Steve shudders. “What if a mukade comes up behind me?”

“Okay, you pull, I’ll push.”

“What if it comes from in *front*?”

“Look, take a dam side. We aren’t going to meet up with another mukade, trust me. Choose your end, and let’s get it over with.”

So Steve pushes and I pull, and we get Steffi back to our cave. Keiko rushes over as we lay the comatose but still twitching Steffi out on a bed of ferns. She cleans Steffi’s ankle and smears the black powder on the bite.

I sink to the ground, exhausted. “She’ll be out for a bit.”

Bhasker brings me some fruit. He looks scared.

“She’ll be okay, don’t sweat it,” I tell him. “The leg will go numb for a bit, but she’ll recover. I did.”

Pepe flies over and chirps into my ear. I straighten up, listening to the bat. Un-fricking-believable.

Steve sits up too. “What is it? What did the bat tell you?”

I don’t answer. I just watch Steffi as she sleeps. She wakes up the next day and I hand her the shell.

“Here,” I say, “you’ve gotta be thirsty. Can you feel your leg?”

“No.” Steffi takes a sip from the shell. “This is good. It’s not the spring water. What is it?”

I grin at her, I can’t help it. “It’s seawater.”

Steffi’s eyes fly open and she drops the shell. Then, staring at the spilled water with an incredulous look, she touches a drop with one fingertip.

“It doesn’t burn.”

“Nope.” I get her some more water, and she slurps the whole thing down.

“That’s the best stuff I’ve ever tasted,” she says, wiping her mouth. “Why can I drink it now? I thought only you could touch the stuff.”

“Pepe says that if I had tried touching the seawater when I first got to the island, I’d have been burned, just like everyone else. But I tried touching it *after* the mukade bit me. Once the poison got into my bloodstream, something changed. I developed an immunity to the seawater.”

Steffi wipes her mouth. “Get out.”

“No, I’m serious. A mukade *has* to bite you before you can tolerate the seawater.”

“Impossible,” Steffi says.

“It’s true. And it gets even better. Once you drink the seawater, you get stronger, healthier. And, most important, the mukade start to fear you. They can smell the seawater, or something. They’re scared of it. The seawater is poison to them, like it was to us. Once we drink the seawater, we become poison to the mukade.”

“I don’t get it,” Steffi says. “If the mukade’ poison makes us immune to the seawater, you’d think they’d be immune too.”

“You’d think,” I say, “but that’s not how it works.”

I watch Steffi’s face, waiting for comprehension to dawn on it. Her smile widens.

“So...if I drink the seawater, and the mukade become afraid of me, like they are of you, I can walk around at night anywhere I want. They won’t dare get near me again, will they?”

I smile back. “We don’t have to worry about the mukade or the sea. Or the rain. The island is ours.”

“What about everyone else? Can they get immune too?”

“Yes, I’ve figured it out. Pepe says all the mukade are poisonous, even their babies. I bet we could catch a baby—they

aren't half as big—and bring it back here. We can give all the others a 'shot' with the baby mukade. One small bite will get the poison into everyone's system. I can walk right up to the mukade jungle entrance now—they won't try to attack me—and I'll net a baby mukade and bring it back here."

"Sounds like a plan," Steffi says, "although please leave me out of it. I can't get the feeling of that mukade crawling all over me out of my head. I don't want to get anywhere near those damn things."

"No, I'll go by myself. I didn't want to risk it until I made sure you were immune to the seawater."

Steffi's blue eyes twinkle. "What if I hadn't been? What if my throat had been burned and I had choked and died a horrible, painful death? You should've told me what was in the shell."

"If I *had* told you, you'd never have drunk from it. Sorry I had to trick you."

"I want to go in." Steffi tries to stand but her limp leg buckles under her weight.

"In what?"

"In the water. Didn't it help your leg when you went in? Get me down there now, and this leg'll heal faster."

I help her totter to the shore. The others stop what they're doing and come to watch, sitting on the rocks like spectators at a circus. Steffi falls into the water, laughing.

"I can feel my leg already."

"Drink the water while you're in there!" Keiko says. "You'll get better faster."

Steffi dives under the water. I grin at Keiko. It still shocks me whenever I hear her voice, since I seldom do, but I like hearing it.

Steffi heals rapidly. By the afternoon she says she's feeling stronger now than she has since she arrived on the island. Her once greasy, limp hair falls soft and curly around her shining face. She looks beautiful, but I don't say it out loud.

The others began whining for their own mukade bites. So that night, I stride down the jungle path and join the turtles at the jungle hole. I brace myself for the rush. The larger mukade hurtle out first and I wait until the turtles nab their dinners. The smaller mukade scuttle out last and I grab one. It wriggles more than I expected, but I manage to wrestle it back to the cave. It never once bites me, it just thrashes about and tries to escape.

As soon as I step into the cave, the mukade shrieks so pitifully I feel almost sorry for it. I back out.

“Mukade can’t come in the cave,” Steffi says. “It’s a safe zone, remember? You’ll kill it if you bring it in here.”

“Okay, you guys come out here then.”

Bhasker peers out. “But...the mukade...”

“Don’t be an ass, they aren’t going to touch you,” Steffi says. “They won’t get anywhere near Jack or me now—they’re scared of us. You can go outside, just stay close to Jack.”

The boy takes a tentative step into the night. He stares at the writhing baby mukade. “Is this going to hurt?”

I hug the mukade close so it won’t escape. “Yes. And hurry up. I can’t stand to hold this thing much longer. It creeps me out, plus my arms are killing me.”

Bhasker screws his eyes shut and thrusts his arm forward. The mukade, grateful to have something to take its frustrations out on, clamps down on the arm. Bhasker screams.

“Get it off!”

“I’m trying,” I grunt. “Steffi, a little help please? I can’t hold on to both ends at once.”

“I’ll do it.” Steve grabs the pinchers. “I need to get bit anyway.”

The mukade lets Bhasker go and latches on to its new victim, who grimaces but refuses to scream. Keiko strides in and pulls the pinchers off Steve. The mukade grabs her arm next.

Keiko screams in Japanese. You can tell without even understanding the language that she's cussing. Long and loud. The barrage is so unexpected, coming from the quiet girl, both Steffi and I burst out laughing. Keiko glares at us.

Soon, five moaning victims clamp their arms and fall on the ferns. I let the mukade go. It scampers into the jungle.

We apply Keiko's poultice and wait for the poison to do its work. Even though it's only a baby, the mukade's bite has the same effect as the adults, and within an hour all five lie asleep and twitching.

"Wow," Steffi says. "Complete quiet."

I laugh. "What should we do now? Maybe we should start chopping some more firewood?"

Steffi jumps up. "Let's go swimming."

"At night?"

"Sure. The mukade can't hurt us, right? Let's go."

Striding right outside at night is both weird and exhilarating. We weave our way through the slithering insects searching for slugs. The mukade scuttle away from us as if we're scary ghosts.

Steffi laughs. "How the tides have turned." She stops and bends over, pulling off her tattered jeans.

I freeze and look away. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, come on, Jack. You can't tell me this is the first time you've seen me naked."

True. With one set of clothes each and the bathroom right in our sleeping area, you're bound to catch glimpses. But that was when we were all together. Then, Steffi was bony, grimy and barely surviving. Now she's filled out a bit. The seawater has washed away any stinkiness. She looks almost normal. And very pretty. And we're alone.

I try not to watch her as she peels off her shirt and sprints for the water, yelling at the mukade to get the hell out of her way. They scurry up the shore, and she dives into the water.

I follow her a bit more slowly. Once I'm swimming I forget my nervousness. The water calms me. We swim and splash and drink our fill.

"You could live off this stuff," Steffi says. "You know, if we all get immune to it, and we can sail over the sea, we won't even need to take any food or water with us. Whenever we're hungry or thirsty, we can drink the seawater."

"You're right. All we need is a boat to take us across the sea. We won't need much else."

Steffi nods. "Jack, I've been thinking of something. Something that Rob said."

"Rob said something worth thinking about?"

She grins. "Shut up and listen. Remember when he said the bats *wanted* us to find the tunnels? How Spike wanted us to go up to the mukade's lair and hunt for the key? How it was his idea, not ours?"

Where is she going with this? "I remember."

"Do you think—well, do you think Spike *wanted* you to get bit by that mukade? Do you think that's the reason he took us up that path? I mean, I know the key was up there too, but I don't think that was Spike's real reason."

I digest this new information. It makes weird sense. At some point, I needed to get bit by a mukade. Spike knew this. He knew I'd never become immune to the seawater or the mukade if I didn't. Maybe he *did* plan it. Maybe he knew, when the time came, that he'd have to let the mukade bite me and then sacrifice himself to keep the monster from finishing me off.

Why? Why was it so important to a bat that a human get immune? Why would he give up his life for me?

Steffi's right though. And the thought that Spike didn't die in vain lessens some of my guilt. I watch her, floating on her back and gazing up at the black nothingness above.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Steffi murmurs. "You know, I hated this place once. Now it almost feels like a grand vacation, doesn't it?"

“Don’t tell me you want to stay here now.”

Steffi sighs. “No, I want to go home. But ever since you came, Jack, our lives sure have gotten better.”

She gives me a dreamy look and I feel embarrassed. That look has become all too familiar with the girls and I’m not sure if I’m ready for it.

Especially from Steffi.

LITTLE MIKE

They lounge on the rocks, wet and happy, dripping and smiling. I look them over. Everyone, even the new kids, looks so much better after only a few days. Fatter. Healthier. Glowing, clean skin and bright eyes.

Keiko has shown the most remarkable change. Since her first outburst, when the mukade bit her, she's found her voice and now joins in discussions instead of skulking in a corner. She laughs a lot too. Her laugh is infectious, high and tinkling, like little Christmas bells. Up until now, I had never really seen her smile. It lights up her eyes.

Now that she's immune to the mukade, Keiko enjoys wandering outside at night and collecting the soft jungle grass. The grass stays soft once it's cut, even in the daytime. Steffi dissected a grass blade with the knife and discovered that the spikes are concealed in the blade, immersed in a sweet-smelling, jellyish goo. Keiko's already figured out the goo is good for healing scrapes, mosquito bites, and other things. She keeps the salve in an abandoned turtle shell she's found.

She also started weaving the long grass into mats. Now we sleep on both mats and ferns, and the cave is much more comfortable. The mats keep the dirt off us when we sleep and make wonderful blankets. Nobody gets cold at night anymore.

Instead of sleeping in a pile we claim our own spaces in the cave. Steffi's space is close to mine.

Steffi's hair is now thick and shiny. Even with the sky's bright light, her skin stays a creamy white. Her blue eyes glisten. The seawater has calmed her down in some ways. She always acted kind of frantic before. Now, although she still works hard and keeps herself busy, she's gentler. Relaxed. Content.

Steve's eye is starting to heal. He can make out shapes, still blurry, but getting clearer every day. His scurvy sores vanish. He laughs with Keiko. His sternness melts away.

Bhasker and Malika fill out. Their once haunted, tortured eyes now glisten with laughter. Bhasker still won't eat fish, but the seawater compensates for any protein his diet lacks. In fact, if it weren't for craving a variety in our diets, we could survive on the seawater and nothing else.

We grow stronger than we have ever been. We have such a wonderful time those first few days, we forget about the boat.

"We'd better get back to the glade at some point," Steve says one day, "and work some more on it."

I yawn. "Yup, we'd better. We'll go tonight."

"Can we go with you?" Bhasker asks. "We want to check up on Little Mike."

"Little Mike?"

"A helper. He'll be doing all work now, since we're gone, and he was already looking pretty weak."

"I hope he made it through the rainy season," Malika says. "He'd have had to collect food, once we left."

"You can't see him from the glade though," Steffi says. "It's too far away from The Other's cave."

"We could sneak over there at night," Malika says, looking frightened but determined. "We can walk right through the meadow now the mukade can't touch us."

"What about the snakes?" Keiko asks.

“Maybe they’ll be scared of us, like the mukade.”

Bhasker nods. “Even if they aren’t, we should be okay. I’ve only seen a few myself and they always slithered away when I got too close. They only attack when they’re hungry. They’ll be too busy hunting mukade to bother with us.”

“I’m almost sorry for the mukade,” Rob says. “They have too many enemies: the turtles, the snakes, and now us.”

Steve gets back to the more important subject at hand. “What if you get caught?”

Bhasker shakes his head. “What can they do if we’re outside? The mukade’ll eat them up if they try to chase us.”

“The bad ones—the ones you call The Others—sleep in the back room where the floor is sandy,” Malika says. “The front room is all rocky and that’s where the helpers sleep. The Others don’t like sleeping so close to the entrance. They’re scared of the night noises.”

“I’m positive we can alert Little Mike without waking The Others,” Bhasker says. “We can convince him to follow us back.”

I wonder if checking on this one guy is worth the risk. Then I decide that’s a selfish thought. If Little Mike lives anything like Bhasker and Malika say, we *have* to rescue him.

“I’ll go with you,” I say.

“And I’d like to help with the boat,” Keiko says.

“So we’ll all go,” Steffi says. “Should be fun.”

We start off at dusk. Steve, Rob, Steffi, and I are loaded down with branches for the fire. Keiko carries the backpack with some food and first aid; Bhasker and Malika haul ferns.

Keiko has never been in the cavern. She gasps with wonder at everything. We explore a bit more than usual, ignoring the errant mukade that scuttle around us. They’re still creepy, but we don’t fear them anymore.

We finally reach the glade. I dump my sticks and turn to Bhasker. “How late do The Others stay up?”

“Not late. Even if they are up, they’ll be in the back room.”

I grab a spear, just in case. “Let’s not take a torch, unless you think we’ll need light to get through the meadow.”

“No, it’s pretty flat, and the beach is sandy. No rocks to trip over. We’ll be okay, even in this dark.”

Pepe grips my hair, and the area glows a faint blue around me as I walk. We steal through the tall grass. Every once in a while, I hear a swish as something moves past me, and I jump, thinking it might be a snake, but it’s just a mukade out looking for birds. I relax when we reach the beach.

We sneak along the cliff wall until we reach the cave entrance.

“Can we get in?” Malika says.

I shake my head. “I don’t think so. You’re on our side now, and that’s The Other’s safe zone. And even if you could, you shouldn’t. You can let your friend see you from out here.”

We move into view. Little Mike sleeps curled over uncomfortable rocks, hugging himself for warmth. He doesn’t even have a fire to keep the cold away.

“Is he a good kid?” I ask.

Bhasker frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Well, just ‘cause he’s a helper doesn’t make him good, right? Malika told me one of The Others was pretty mean herself, but they bumped her down to helper status because of something she did.”

Malika nods. “Sarah. She got into a fight with Her Majesty, and Her Majesty forced Sarah into becoming a helper. Her choice was either that or getting kicked out of the cave at night.”

“Try to wake up Little Mike first. If Sarah’s bad, she might go and tell The Others what’s up. I don’t want a fight.”

Bhasker nods. “Mike’s awake.”

I peer into the cave. Little Mike stares at us with large, horrified eyes, as if we’re zombies.

“Mike,” Bhasker whispers, motioning the boy to come forward.

Little Mike shivers, but doesn’t move. Malika tries. She smiles and makes a signal for him to stay quiet and come over. The boy scoots within earshot.

“We’re here to save you, Mike,” Bhasker whispers.

He explains what’s going on, and the look on Little Mike’s face changes from fear to incredulity to excitement.

“Come on out,” Bhasker says. “And be quiet.”

Little Mike hesitates. “What about the *things*?”

“Follow us,” Bhasker says. “Don’t worry about the bad night things, they won’t hurt you. I don’t have time to explain, but trust me. Follow us now, and they’ll never bother you again.”

Little Mike nods and scoots out after us. We hug the mountainside and inch our way to the meadow.

A scream of rage blasts from the cave. Lights spring up. Little Mike yelps. I clamp my hand over his mouth.

“Shh! They can’t come out to investigate, the mukade’ll get ’em if they do. They can’t see us, not if we stay in the shadows.”

We huddle against the cliff, listening. More screams, these now of fear.

A girl stumbles onto the beach.

“Sarah,” Malika says. “They’ve made her come out to look for Little Mike.”

Sarah tries to fling herself back into the cave, but someone shoves her back out. A slithering shadow moves up the beach.

“The mukade are going to get her,” Bhasker says.

I hurtle towards the beach. Bad kid or not, I can’t watch a mukade eat a defenseless girl. Laughter echoes out the cave as The Others bar the poor girl from entering. She’s frozen to the spot, not sure which way to go.

“Hey!” I hiss. “Over here. Quick!”

The girl’s round eyes grow even rounder as she notices me. I don’t dare to get any closer. She takes one last look at the cave and bolts towards me, stumbling in the darkness.

The mukade gets to her before I can.

She screams and falls. I lunge for her and tug, kicking the mukade, which lets go and scrambles away. I drag the girl to the meadow, away from The Other's prying eyes. They'll think the mukade got her. Just as well.

The girl is sobbing. I try to steady her.

"It'll hurt for a bit, but the pain will go away soon. Can you hop on your good leg? I'll help you."

She nods, her head bobbing. She's already losing consciousness. Bhasker helps me drag her as far as the woods. I wonder if the trees will let her pass.

They move their branches to the side, and we make our way into the glade. Keiko has her powder with her, and she applies a dab to Sarah's bite. Bhasker and Malika fill Little Mike in on everything that has happened.

"We'll catch another mukade later to immunize Little Mike," Malika says. "Sarah's already got her bite."

I study Sarah. Emaciated like the others were, but when she's filled out, she'll be tough, I can tell. For better or for worse, she's on our side now. I hope she doesn't give us any trouble. I hope she isn't as bad as Bhasker and Malika say.

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Work on the boat speeds up. Sarah and Little Mike are both eager to help. Sarah seems thankful for her change in station. She approaches me one night as I fan coals in the now deep and wide boat trench.

"Hey, I wanted to say thanks for rescuing me from that mukade," she says. "You could've let me die, you know. I doubt Bhasker or Malika had anything wonderful to say about me."

I shrug my shoulders. "I wouldn't let even Mike Mullens die, I guess. I wouldn't want it on my conscious."

"They're jackasses, all of 'em. I'd let the mukade eat 'em all." She thinks about her statement and frowns. "Well, maybe not. I don't know." She sighs.

“I know I’m not the nicest person. But it’s ’cause I was scared. When I was with The Others, I had to be mean and pick on the weaker ones. Just so I’d fit in. So *I* wouldn’t get picked on. They threw me out of their little club when I stood up for a helper.”

Maybe Sarah isn’t as bad as Bhasker and Malika think. “They didn’t mention that.”

“They don’t know.” Sarah grabs a fern and helps fan the coals. “I never told ’em. Her Majesty—Marissa—was mad with the helpers. She wanted to throw one outside at night, to teach the others a lesson. She wanted to throw Malika out,” she says, bringing her voice down to a whisper.

I don’t understand how someone can be so cruel and force another human being out to certain death. Those kids really *are* the worst. Once again, I try to fathom why my group ended up on this island prison. Folks like Steve, whose only crime was that he mouthed off to an alien and asked for a chicken sandwich. Or Malika, who told me she wished for a puppy. Why the hell would people like that get sent here to suffer such torment?

My blood boils. Maybe, just maybe, I *wouldn’t* try and save Mike Mullens or Marissa from the mukade. They sure as hell wouldn’t return the favor.

“Why’d they kick you out the night we rescued Little Mike?”

She shrugs. “They were mad. I bet they’re regretting it now. They’re out of helpers to do their dirty work.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here.” I figure I owe Sarah at least that much for the thanks she had given me.

She nods. “So,” she says, waving her frond back and forth, “will we all fit in this boat?”

I laugh. “Well, when there were five of us, sure. Now we have...nine? It’ll be cramped.”

Steve comes over with more hot coals to put on the trench. “I’ve been thinking about that, and about the out-

rigger idea. What if we made the outriggers flat so we could sit on them?"

I furrow my brow, not sure about this plan. I scan the long, tipsy boat. The outriggers will stabilize it. Outriggers are long, wooden pieces attached to the boat's frame with curved poles. They work like a water beetle's legs. Water beetles have long legs that span out over the water, giving them more stability. The outriggers do the same thing. They give the narrow boat much more surface area, which makes the craft more stable and less prone to tipping over, even in rough surf.

But the outriggers are thin. They aren't meant to support people, they're meant to stabilize the boat. Steve is suggesting the equivalent of building rafts on either side of the main boat. I'm not sure if this will work. Or if we have enough wood to *make* rafts.

The idea is worth thinking about, though. Cramming nine people in one boat will make for miserable sailing conditions. At least we don't need room for provisions. We've all become immune to the seawater's poison, and we can sustain ourselves by drinking the stuff alone, even though we do grill an occasional fish and still love the juicy fruit.

But even without provisions, nine people in one boat will be cramped. Tempers might not be so cheery after a few days of such close togetherness.

I yawn and finish fanning the last coals for the night. It'll be daylight soon. Time to sleep. Sarah, Steve, Rob and Little Mike, are busy putting things away before we trek back to our cave. The others are there now. Nine people working on the boat is overkill, so Steffi conscripted them to wood and fern gathering duties on the other side.

We douse the embers well past daybreak. We've burned the tree's insides into a deep hollow, but it isn't quite deep enough yet. The sides are still too thick, but in a few weeks

the boat should be finished. We have time. All the time in the world.

“Let’s go,” I say.

We file through the trees, towards the mountain path. As we reach the path, I freeze.

Three large figures stand on the mountain, staring down at us. Little Mike lets out a muffled scream. Sarah curses.

The Others have discovered the tunnels. They’re blocking our escape.

SIEGE

Little Mike whimpers as the gang, Big Mike Mullens in the lead, barrels down the slope towards us. “What do we do?” “Get back to the glade,” I yell, swiveling around and pushing them back. “They can’t touch us in the glade.”

The trees lower their thick, spiky branches behind us as we run. I glance over my shoulder. Big Mike and his henchmen are fighting the trees, hacking at the branches with familiar looking instruments.

Steve runs right into me. “Damn it, Jack! What the hell are you stopping for?”

“They’ve got our axes. How the hell did they get our axes?”

“I don’t know, but the axes are working. They’re breaking through. Get to the glade!”

He shoves me, and my trance breaks. We bolt down the path and skid into the clearing, panting.

“How long have we been here?” I gasp.

Steve looks perplexed. “What, on the island?”

“No...not on the island, damn it, in this glade. We’ve been here two days right? A two-day shift?”

“Yeah,” Steve says. “Why?”

“They must’ve attacked our side. That’s how they got the axes.”

“How?” Rob says. “Our cavern is a safe zone.”

Sarah’s eyes widen in comprehension. “She was coming here with the axes.”

“What?”

“Don’t you remember? Steffi took the axes back to the cave. She was going to run them up here today, after she sharpened them up and tied them with new vines.”

My stomach lurches. The Others must have attacked Steffi in the tunnel. What did they do to her? Where is she now? Did they capture the others too? A rolling wave of nausea threatens to overwhelm me.

We had almost forgotten about The Others. At first, I had been leery about working in the glade. I kept waiting for The Others to turn up en masse, raring for a fight. As the weeks passed, my worry faded.

Now I’ll pay for my complacency.

After four helpers went missing, of course the kids on the other side would start putting two and two together. Figuring it out. How much have they guessed? They discovered the meadow tunnel, that’s for sure. What about the jungle? The mukade? The secrets of the sea?

The Others approach the glade. I eye them, nervous. What if I had been wrong about safe zones? What if The Others walk right in?

They can’t. One dude lunges at us, then screams and scrambles backwards. He smashes against a tree. The tree takes the opportunity to drop a branch on his head, and the dude falls down, knocked out. I recognize his sandy hair. The guy I told Steffi not to rescue. Blondie.

Sarah laughs.

“You won’t be laughing long,” the large girl standing next to Mike Mullens says. She flings an axe towards Sarah. The axe flies through the air, missing Sarah’s face by inches. Instead, it smacks into the boat and bounces off, landing harmlessly in the grass.

“Missed me, Marissa,” Sarah growls.

Big Mike shoves Marissa against a tree. “You *moron*. You just lost us an axe.”

I take a step forward. “You can’t get in here. This is our safe zone.” I feel stronger after saying this. If The Others can’t get in here, they can’t get into our cave. Everyone must be safe.

Everyone except Steffi.

“Where’d you get the axes?” Steve says.

Mike’s scowl turns into a grin. “Friend of yours? She didn’t want to give them up. Not without a fight.”

Anger boils up inside me. “What did you do to her?”

“You’d like to know, wouldn’t you? Maybe we fed her to the *things*. Or maybe we’ve got her back at our cave. Maybe we’ll throw her out tonight.”

“You can’t...” Rob says, and I shoot him a warning look.

They don’t know about the mukade. Or the immunity.

Big Mike glares at Rob. “What did you say?”

“He means, you didn’t take her to your cave,” I say. “She can’t go in there. Just like you can’t come in here.”

Big Mike shoots me an evil grin. “It’d be pretty painful for her if we tried though, wouldn’t it?”

Steve’s strong grip on my arm barely stops me from running full-tilt at that smirking jerk. I glare at him; so mad I can’t think of anything to say.

Big Mike stares at me. “I know you, don’t I? You’re from my neighborhood.”

“The best day in the whole neighborhood when you left,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Your name is Jack. I used to steal lunch money from you. Small world, isn’t it?”

“She’d better be okay, or I’ll make you sorry.”

Steve grabs me by the shoulders and forces me to take a few steps backwards. “Just chill out, Jack. You’re going to make things worse.”

“How could things be any worse? They’ve got Steffi!”

“We don’t know for sure. Yeah, they got the axes from her. It doesn’t mean they got *her*. Steffi’s pretty damn tough. Stop and calm down. We need to regroup.”

He moves me away from the glade’s edge, towards the boat.

Little Mike plucks up his courage. “You can’t get in here,” he says in his high, reedy voice, “so why don’t you go away?”

Big Mike laughs. “Yeah, but if we stay here, you can’t get out. So I think we’ll stay. Right boys?”

An agreeing cry echoed from the other side of the glade. Three large figures span that side, staring at us with evil eyes.

“That’s all of ‘em,” Sarah says, counting.

“You can’t get out during the day,” Big Mike says, “and at night you can’t get out either. The things come out at night. You’re trapped. You don’t have any food or water in there, so you gotta come out some time. We’ll be here when you do.”

I fight down a laugh. I shoot a warning glance at the others not to give anything away. Of *course* we aren’t trapped. Big Mike and his gang will have to retreat way before night gets here. They can’t stay out with the mukade lurking about. When they leave, we’ll trot on back to our side.

But should we? Would it be better if Big Mike and his gang think we’re caught? We can always run back to our cave, check on our guys, and return to the glade before The Others are up and skulking around. Now The Others know we’re here, we don’t need to hide what we’re doing. We can burn the boat during the daytime if we want.

But we need supplies. And bringing more supplies in will give our secret away. The Others will catch on that we can roam about in the dark. They’ll want to know how.

“Watch out!” Steve yells.

I duck just in time to avoid a rock connecting with my head. Mike Mullens and the others, tired of talking, decide throwing rocks will make a fun pastime.

“Under the boat,” Steve says.

We dive for cover. Steve flips the boat over us. Rock after rock smashes against its sides.

“They’d better not mess up my boat,” Steve says.

“A rock won’t make a dent in it,” Sarah says. “The wood is harder than any rock. Why do you think it’s taking so freaking long to burn? Let them have their fun. We’re safe here.”

I worry more about Steffi than the boat. As the rocks plunk to the ground, I dream up all sorts of horrors she might be enduring. What if they’ve tried to force her into their cave? She could lose an eye like Steve. She might be lying somewhere, hurt, or worse, dead.

The afternoon drags on in tedious monotony. The Others hurl rocks and insults, and we huddle under the boat. My legs cramp and my back hurts; I’m stooped in an awkward position but I don’t dare move.

Eventually, The Others grow quiet. *Too* quiet.

I peek out from under the boat. A flashing, red streak hurtles through the air.

“Fire. They’re shooting fricking *fire* at us.”

A projectile falls in front of me and sputters on the ground.

“They’re not burning the trees are they?” Steve says.

Rob peers out. “No, they’re using jungle wood. They can’t use the tree branches here. Too hard to catch on fire. They brought a stash of jungle wood back from their camp.”

The jungle wood burns, but the flames don’t spread. “What are they’re hoping to achieve?” Steve says. “They can’t catch the boat on fire; it’s hard enough to burn it with the super-hot coals. Those branches’ll roll right off.”

“Maybe they’re hoping to smoke us out,” Little Mike says.

I shake my head. “They don’t know what they’re doing, but they’re having fun shooting fire at us, so let’s let ‘em.”

We settle back in our cramped positions. The Others realize their firebombing isn’t getting a reaction. They give up

and start with the name-calling and threats again. We ignore them as best as we can.

Finally Big Mike has had enough. “If you don’t come out, something bad is going to happen to her!”

I bolt forward and conk my head on the boat. Steve grabs my arm.

“Don’t be an idiot, Jack. They’re baiting you. I don’t think they even have Steffi. If they had, they’d have threatened us with her a long time ago. They’re getting desperate and are just trying to lure us out.”

“But what if it’s true? What if they did get her?”

“Then they’d have done something bad to her already, and you giving yourself up to them isn’t going to change that. Let’s wait until nightfall. Don’t let ’em get to you now.”

God, I hate this. I hate Mike Mullens. I can’t wait for nighttime, when The Others head back to their cave and when I can hand out my revenge. Until then, I seethe in silence.

The day drags on. It must be close to nighttime. After several weeks here, I hardly need the bats’ whistles to know the light is about to vanish. The Others know it too. They begin their retreat.

“We’ll be back,” Big Mike says. “Until then, here’s to hoping the *things* don’t get you.”

“Of course they won’t,” I say, but not loud enough for Big Mike to hear. “You’d better hope nothing gets *you*.”

STEFFI

We wait until the lights click off. “They’re gone,” Rob says. “Let’s go.”

“Wait,” Sarah says. “Maybe we should stay here.”

“No way. I don’t want to go through another day like that. Yeah, they can’t get to us here. I’m way too cramped under this boat and I’m not spending another day in it.”

“You might be spending weeks in it,” Steve says, “if we ever float this thing out of here.”

“At least it’ll be right side up. I’m going back to the cave and see if everybody else is okay.”

Steve turns to Sarah, a quizzical look on his face. “Why do you think we should stay here anyway?”

“Well for one, we need to keep working on the boat.”

Little Mike sighs. “I’m too tired. We were up all last night and The Others kept us up all day today, and I want to sleep.”

“Sleep here,” Sarah says. “It’s safe.”

“So’s the other side. And we’re out of food here.”

“We can go get a drink from the sea,” Sarah says. “There’s a path leading through the meadow down the cliff, away from The Other’s beach.” We had explored this path several times over the last few weeks—Steve thought it would make the best boat-launching area.

Little Mike glares at her. “I know where the path goes. I’ve been here a year already and I’ve had to use that path every fucking day to hunt for slugs. I don’t want to use it now. I want to go home.”

“Let me take him back,” Rob says. “I’ll come back later with more provisions.”

I shake my head. “Let’s all go back.” I kinda agree with Sarah’s idea—I’d rather stay here and sneak over to The Others’ cave to see if they have Steffi. But I also want to make sure everyone else gets back okay. “Safety in numbers, right? We can check on the others, get more provisions, and be back before morning. Anybody who *wants* come back, anyway.”

Sarah shrugs. “Okay. But I think that the longer The Others think they have us trapped here, the better off we’ll be.”

“They’ll figure it out eventually,” Little Mike says. “They’re jackasses, but they aren’t stupid. I mean, all us helpers disappeared from their cave at night. They’ve gotta be wondering why we’re still alive.”

Sarah nods. “And they *heard* the mukade going after me. They must’ve thought I was dead until they saw me today. If they do have Steffi...well, they’ll get the truth from her sooner or later.”

I’m uncomfortable with this statement. Sarah says it coolly, without any emotion. Is she as heartless as The Others, or has she seen so many bad things she’s lost any feeling? Maybe she thinks the best way to deal with bad things is to not care. As long as it isn’t happening to her.

We make our way through the mountain. The Others won’t be skulking around at night, it’s too risky with the mukade out and about, but they could have set up a bunch of booby-traps, for all we know.

We stop when we hear the quiet footsteps. Rob sucks in his breath.

I grip my torch, ready to fight. “Who’s there?”

“Oh thank God!” Steffi hobbles into the light, and flings her arms around me, sobbing.

I brace myself, relief washing over me, even as I take in Steffi’s bruised face. “It’s okay. What happened?”

Steffi composes herself and stops crying. “It was horrible. We didn’t know how to get to you...to warn you.”

“No...what happened to *you*? What did they do to you?” I stare at Steffi’s battered face. My brain seethes with rage. I want to kill the people who did this to her.

“Oh that.” She waves away her injuries with one hand. “They got me while I was coming through the cavern. I surprised ’em though, they didn’t know what to make of me. Marissa, the big jerk, grabbed me and gave me a good punch in the face, but then she let go, and I ran for it. They couldn’t keep up, they don’t know the tunnels like I do. I tripped right when I entered our cavern and sprained my leg a bit. It’ll be okay.”

I breathe a huge sigh of relief. Steve was right. The Others had been faking it. They might have caught Steffi, but they lost her. They hadn’t found out anything.

“They’ve been lucky so far,” Steffi says. “Like we were lucky. They haven’t met up with any mukade in the tunnels yet, although if they use ’em enough, and are as noisy as they were, they’ll attract a mukade at some point. They followed me back to our tunnel, but couldn’t get in. We wanted to come warn you, but didn’t dare try until nighttime.”

“They surrounded the glade,” I say, filling Steffi in on our craptacular day.

“I’m sorry I let them have the axes,” Steffi says. “I couldn’t do much about that.”

“What’d they want with our axes, I wonder,” Little Mike says. “They’ve got plenty of their own.”

“You can never have too many axes I guess,” Steffi says, grinning. “And if they have ours, that means we don’t. One point for their side.”

“So everyone back on the other side is all right?” Rob says.

“Yes, they’re fine. And safe.”

I nod. “Good. We’ll head back to our cave and then get back to the glade.”

“I’ll come back with you,” Steffi says. “It’ll annoy the crap outta The Others.”

“They’ll wonder how you got there.”

“No they won’t. I mean, they’re not all morons, Jack. They’ve known we’ve been in the glade for weeks; I bet they think we use the tunnels in the daytime to avoid the mukade. We can keep letting them believe it.”

“They can use the tunnels now too, and you can bet they’ll keep patrols in there now.”

“Those patrols won’t last long if a mukade finds ’em,” Steffi says. “Even if they do have weapons, they’d be hard put fighting off those things. They don’t have a bat to tell them the secrets. That’s how you figured it out, Jack. The link between mukade bites and the sea. They’ll never work it out.”

“Not unless they *do* have a bat,” Rob says.

Little Mike shakes his head. “They don’t. I’ve never seen a bat on the other side.”

“Then I’m coming with you back to the glade,” Steffi says.

“So am I,” Sarah says. Steffi doesn’t look too happy with this, but doesn’t argue.

“I’m coming with you too,” Steve says. “But we need to get more supplies. Let’s go back now, get something to eat, load up on branches, and we can be back in the glade before it gets light.”

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“Do you remember when I asked you what you wished for?” I ask Steffi.

We’re relaxing in the glade. The new day’s light has clicked on, and the last mukade are scuttling back to their lair. The orange sea crashes against the cliffs. It’s nuts how normal it all seems now. Beside me, Pepe chirps to himself.

Steffi holds one of Keiko's miracle poultices over her eye and munches on a fruit. "I remember."

"You told me you wished for vengeance. What did you mean?"

Steffi swallows her fruit, removes the poultice and points to the yellowish-purple bruise. "You see this black eye?"

"Yeah."

"Well, just say it isn't the first black eye I've experienced."

She doesn't sound mad or sad, just resigned. I try to keep the shocked look off my face. "Your parents?"

"Kind of. My mom's boyfriend. Mom sucked at picking out a winner. My dad left when I was little. She said he was a bum, and with her track record, I'm sure he was. Anyway, I didn't get along with Roger. He moved in when I turned ten."

"And he beat you?"

"Sometimes. Usually when I sassed off to him, which I did a lot. I couldn't help it; I hated his guts. Anyway, on my fifteenth birthday we fought and he walloped me. Right in the eye. I went into that room and the only wish I could think of was for something bad to happen to him."

"You could've wished your mom would dump him."

"Yes, that would've been the reasonable wish to make. But my wish went something like: 'I wish a car smashes Roger in the ass on his way to work tomorrow.'"

I grin. "Really?"

Steffi laughs. "Well, maybe I wasn't quite *that* stupid. But it's what I was thinking. And They knew it."

"So you got sent here because of that?"

Steffi shrugs. "Who knows? If you believe Steve, they've already decided our fate before we make our wish. I could've wished for cute puppies like Malika and I still would've ended up on this rock." She sighs. "I wonder if she's still with him."

"Who?"

“Mom. If she’s still with that jerk Roger. Or if she got smart and dumped him. Oh well, I guess it doesn’t matter. I’ll never see them again anyway.”

I wonder if she might cry, but instead she stands up. “Here they come,” she says.

BATLINGS

After some half-hearted heckling, The Others get interested in the boat-making process. They settle under the shadier trees (careful to keep their eyes on the swinging branches) and watch.

“Not sure we should let ’em see this,” Steve says. “Who’s to say they don’t start making a boat themselves?”

Steffi laughs. “They’ll have a hard time trying. First of all, they’d need to cut down a tree, and they won’t get far if they try. The trees are barely tolerating them now.” She grins as Blondie dodges a swishing branch. “Even if they *did* manage that, they’d have to leave it unguarded at night. We could sabotage it.”

“I guess you’re right,” Steve says.

We decide to keep working and not worry about what The Others see. Every once in a while someone shouts at us, asking questions. Where’s Little Mike? How did Steffi get here?

“They use the tunnels at night, that’s how,” Big Mike says. “They used ’em last night, after we all crawled back to our cave. How did you get past the *things*?”

Nobody answers the question. I laugh, which infuriates him and he chucks a rock at my head. I duck and keep on working.

“We need to keep guards out, Mike,” Blondie says.

Marissa shakes her head. “We can’t. The *things* will get us.”
 “They don’t seem to get *them*,” Big Mike says, scowling.

Marissa nods towards Steffi. “We should have grabbed her while we had the chance. She’d have told us.”

The Others can’t do anything except hurl insults, which go unanswered. Finally, they give up and wander off, leaving one guy to guard the mountain path until nightfall.

We don’t plan to leave for the next few days anyway. We’ve stocked our supplies: ferns, wood, fruit which we eat when The Others are around to infuriate them further, and a good amount of seawater, which we pretend is regular water. We don’t want The Others finding out *that* little secret.

We carry the water in cleaned-out turtle shells. The shells make perfect bowls. We fill the bowls at night, after The Others have retreated to their cave. We swim in the water after dark and carry the next day’s supply as we head back to the glade. The cove under the cliff is well protected from prying eyes, except mukade eyes, and mukade hardly have any eyes to speak of.

Now that we work during the day and well into the night, the boat begins to take shape. We take turns fanning the coals. The kids not fanning work on stripping bark from the larger branches. Steve picks out two sturdy branches to use as the outriggers, and six bended branches to attach the outriggers to the main boat. He piles a bunch of flat branches to build two small rafts. We’ve decided to try attaching rafts to the outriggers. We’re not sure if it’ll work or not, but figure it’s worth a try. We’re also shaping several branches into oars. We’ll need something to steer with.

“Too bad we can’t make a sail,” Steve says.

I nod. “Or a way to attach a rudder.”

“What’s a rudder?” Rob, who knows squat about boats, says.

“You can steer a boat with a rudder,” I say. “It would attach to a keel extending under the boat. When you move the rudder, the keel moves and turns the boat.”

“Why can’t we make a rudder?” Steffi says.

“Too hard and I don’t know how. We’ll row instead.”

“How are we supposed to attach the outriggers to the boat?”

Rob says.

Steve frowns. “It’ll be tough. I’m not sure how we’ll do it. Maybe we can try binding them together with vines, since we don’t have anything else.”

I shake my head. “The vines’ll disintegrate in the water. Look how many fishing nets we’ve gone through.”

“What about the jungle grass?” Rob says. “That stuff is better than the vines. We should see if that works.”

I nod, resolving to test the grass later. Pepe chirps.

“What’d he say?” Steffi says.

“When did you last see Peanut?” I ask Rob. Rob is Peanut’s favorite. She can’t talk to him, but she enjoys his company and always flutters nearby.

“Not for a few days,” Rob says. “She’s been disappearing a lot. Sometimes she’s gone for two, three days in a row. Why?”

“Pepe says that Peanut wants to show us her babies.”

Rob’s face lights up. “Babies! So that’s why she hasn’t been hanging around lately.”

Steffi grins. “Cool. I wondered what would happen after we lost Spike. After Spike, the only bats left are Pepe and Peanut, and if we lose them we’ll be in serious trouble.”

“I bet Spike was the father,” Rob says. “Where do you think Peanut keeps ’em?”

I shrug. “Must be somewhere hidden. I’d bet the mukade would love to get their jaws on a juicy little bat baby.”

Steffi shudders. “Ew, don’t even say that.”

Peanut brings the batlings out after The Others have left. The Others haven’t found anyone willing, even under threat, to guard the mountain passage when the mukade are slinking about. The three batlings flutter unmolested into the glade and skid on the ground. They’re fuzzy, purple, and ridiculously cute.

Rob names them. Spike Jr., the largest and most inquisitive, hops around the glade, exploring everything. Lola, a female, peeks from under her mother's wing and stares at us with large green eyes. Skippy, the smallest, chirps and flutters right over to me, crash-landing in my hair.

Steffi laughs as Skippy flaps clumsily off my head. "I wonder why she brought them to us."

I'm laughing too. It feels really good to laugh sometimes. "They need to get used to us, I guess. They're the next generation of helper bats."

The little batlings make work in the glade a blast. They're a pack of adorable nuisances. Spike Jr. flies over the burning boat and almost sings his fuzzy hair off. Lola splashes into a shell and splatters seawater all over the place (the seawater doesn't bother her any). Skippy flies into the trees, bopping off them like a ball in a pinball machine.

I try communicating with the little bats, but they chirp in bat baby talk and I can't understand them. But I *can* tell they like us, and even Lola soon breaks out of her shy shell and allows her older brother Spike to introduce her around.

Peanut flutters close to Rob, watching her babies with pride. Pepe flies around the perimeter, making sure the batlings are where they're supposed to be and not wandering off. By the time we're ready to fall down and sleep, everyone, including the little bats, is exhausted.

Peanut coos to her brood, and they fly back to their hiding place. Peanut is no fool, she wants her batlings far away before The Others show up for their daily heckling, rock throwing, and general mayhem.

We try to keep the batlings a secret from The Others. Big Mike is pissed off enough already, knowing our side has bats. We can't keep it hidden, not with Pepe fluttering around and chirping into my ear all the time. Big Mike puts two and two together and realizes we understand the island's secrets be-

cause the bats told us. He wants a bat for his own, whether he can communicate with it or not.

Peanut brings her brood back every night and soon the little bats understand simple commands. They take to Rob and flock to him when he whistles.

“I wish I could understand them, like you,” Rob says to me one night.

“Yeah, but they can understand you. And they like you best. Can’t you tell?”

This makes Rob feel more important, and he makes it his special duty to watch over the batlings when they’re playing in the glade.

“Will they come with us?” he asks, stroking Lola’s head.

“You mean when we leave?” I hadn’t thought much about this possibility, and now I wonder. Life will be much more difficult without the bats. Can we take all five with us? I don’t even know what they eat, not that I had ever bothered to ask.

I ask Peanut.

“She says they eat the fruit. If they came with us, we’d have to pack fruit for ‘em. What if the other islands don’t have fruit? They’d starve.”

“Well,” Rob says, “if we have fruit, I’d bet the other islands have fruit too. Maybe more. Different kinds, even.”

“Have the bats ever flown to different islands?” Steffi asks.

“No,” I say, after asking Peanut. “They stay here to help us. They’ve never left this island.”

I wonder why the bats bother to help us at all. They must have decided to help once kids started arriving. Did more bats live here in the past? Why did they align themselves with humans, instead of avoiding us altogether?

Peanut can’t answer. She was born way after the first kid arrived. She has always lived with humans, and doesn’t know any other way.

“I sure hope they’ll come with us,” Rob says. “I’d hate to leave them.”

“Pepe won’t come.” I gaze at the bat. “Neither will Peanut. They belong here. One of the little ones might come, though.”

“They’re so young,” Rob says. “They need to stay with their mother, don’t they?”

“Not for long. By the time we get this boat ready, they might be old enough to come with us. If they wanted to, anyway.”

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We finish the boat. It won’t win any beauty contest, that’s for sure. The burning is uneven and one side is a bit thicker than the other, but it’ll float. We hope.

I’m pretty damn proud of the boat anyway. Everyone, the old and new crew, gather in the glade to marvel at it. We flip it upright and attach the outriggers.

We’ve used the jungle grass to lash the contraptions together. Rob was right, the jungle grass doesn’t disintegrate in the seawater like the vines. Something about that jellyish goo inside them makes them immune.

We still need to build seats on the inside and put together the outside rafts, but the main body is done, and everyone feels like celebrating.

Steffi, me, Steve, Rob and Keiko, the old crew, sit in a group, feeling a bit nostalgic for the old days, before a gaggle of new folks surrounded us. Little Mike, Sarah, Bhasker, and Malika huddle a short distance away. We’re all friends, but those four share a bond, one they don’t share with us. And I’m more relaxed around the original bunch.

Still, we’re all feeling happy. We cook slugs for old time’s sake (Malika says she misses them a little), grill fish, and drink seawater. We lie around and stare at the stars while Pepe, Peanut, and the little ones whiz overhead. We feed the bats fruit, now we know they prefer it.

“When should we leave then?” Steve says. “It’ll only take us a couple of days to finish the rafts.”

“Whenever.” I yawn and stare up at the stars. I’m not as eager to depart our little island now that life has become almost pleasant. Maybe we should relax for a while. Laze around. Swim. Eat fruit and play with the batlings.

Steve nods. “Well, we should definitely give it some thought. Let’s take a couple days off and go back to our side. After all this work, it’ll be good to relax a little.”

We pack up. Everybody is getting sleepy and we’re ready to head back to our nice sandy cave. We begin climbing the cliff trail to the mountain tunnel.

A flame pops up ahead. Then two. Three. My feet turn to lead and I stop, unable to move as I watch the approaching torches. “Oh God. They’re coming this way.”

“At night? Can’t be,” Steffi says.

“It damn well can. Everyone, get back to the glade. Now!”

We whirl around. I stare, horrified, as flames pop up in the forest, blocking our way.

This could only mean one thing. The Others have figured out the island’s secret. They must be immune to the mukade. And they’re cutting off any way of escape.

SHOWDOWN

What do we do?” Steffi whispers. I’ve gone blank. We’ve left our spears in the glade. We have torches. But The Others carry torches too, and other weapons. The axes they’ve stolen. Crude knives chipped from rocks.

“At least we’re not outnumbered,” Steve says.

“They have six,” Rob says. “We have nine, but some of us are gonna be useless. I’m not even sure if *I’ll* be worth a damn, if it comes down to a fight.”

The Others approach us from the front and behind. A sheer cliff wall rises to our left and falls to our right. We’re trapped.

“So. You aren’t the only ones who can come out at night.” Big Mike gives us an evil grin, or is it a grimace? He limps as he walks.

A wriggling behind him makes his two lackeys jump to the side. A long, white mukade glides close to them, snapping its jaws. Big Mike steps in and the creature veers off, scrambling down the cliff.

I tap Steffi on the shoulder. “He’s immune, but the others aren’t.”

“How can you tell?”

“That mukade threatened the others until Big Mike got in the way. It wouldn’t have tried to attack if they were immune

too. It would have stayed as far away from them as possible. They've gotta stay near Big Mike to stay safe."

"What about the guys coming from the forest?" Rob asks.

"I don't know. At least one of 'em must be immune. But Blondie isn't, and neither is Marissa. Not yet anyway."

"We need to break 'em apart," Steve says. "Get Big Mike on his own and move the others away. Then they'll be exposed."

I nod, steeling myself. Big Mike reaches his first victim, Little Mike, who shies away. Big Mike gives a shove and Little Mike topples off the cliff.

Steffi screams and barrels forward. Something shiny flashes in her hand. The knife. She charges, the knife outstretched in front of her. She heads right for Big Mike.

Marissa steps in the way. Steffi plows into her and they roll over the edge.

That does it. I let out a yell, and I, Steve, and Rob all charge at once. We tackle Big Mike before he can raise his torch for protection. He may be massive, but he can't handle three pissed-off opponents all at once. He goes down, hard, but not hard enough. He curses and starts fighting back.

Someone flops on top of me, pummeling me with his fists, but I'm too angry to feel the blows. My knuckles smash into Mike's skull, probably doing more damage to my hand than Mike's noggin, but I don't feel that either. Rage fills me. Mike's ugly face swims before me in an angry red haze.

We roll over the edge, the whole tangled ball of us. We slide down the cliff's side, dislodging rocks and scraping over bushes, but we don't stop punching and kicking and cussing. We land in a growling, heaving heap at the bottom; a tangle of arms, legs, branches and rocks. A huge wave smashes against the rocks, drenching us all.

Both Blondie and the pimply dude who jumped me in the tunnel start screaming. They roll backward, trying to escape

the sea. Big Mike screams too. He's forgotten that he's now immune to seawater.

The other two are out of the fight. They scramble towards dry ground. A few feet away, Marissa is shrieking as she holds her hand over her burnt face and hobbles after the others.

My body aches from sliding down the rocky cliff, but the seawater soothes me. I let Rob and Steve deal with Big Mike, and crawl over to Steffi. She lies face-down in the rippling water, her hair floating on the surface.

I turn her over. Steffi's eyes are open, blinking. She's breathing hard.

"Are you okay?"

Steffi nods, gasping. "She took the knife."

"Did she cut you?"

"No. I think I got her though. She would've returned the favor if that wave hadn't hit us. Where is she?"

"Forget about her, we've gotta make sure Big Mike is out of the fight. We get him out, the other two don't have a chance."

"We've gotta get that knife back. And where are the others?"

I look up the cliff, noting the lack of action up there. I hope our side hasn't been overpowered.

"We need to get back up there," Steffi says.

"After we deal with Big Mike." I move back into the fray.

Mike Mullens may be tough, but three guys and one girl (once Steffi gets her breath back) are too much. He cowers in the sand, covering his head against the blows Steve and Rob rain down on him.

Rob finally lets up. "What do we do with him now?"

Steffi still holds the tattered backpack that protected her back during the tumble down the cliff. She pulls out a clump of jungle grass.

"We can tie him up with this."

"Then what?"

"Leave him here for now." Steve says, wiping his brow.

“We can’t,” Rob says. “Somebody might rescue him.”

“What the hell do you want to do then, take him back to our side for tea and crumpets?” Steffi snaps.

An idea pops into my head. I know where he’d be safe and guarded, but first we’ve gotta rescue the others. We tie Mike’s hands behind his back and bind his legs together so he can’t wander off. He goes limp, refusing to move. His leg is puffy and red. A little below his knee, the mukade bite oozes green pus. Without Keiko’s black powder, the infected bite might not heal. Even with the seawater washing over it, his leg is weak.

We leave him in the water where the others can’t help him. We make our way down the beach, meeting a groaning but intact Little Mike who joins us. We find the path leading to the woods and start climbing.

“What about Marissa and Blondie?” Steffi asks as we huff up the trail as fast as our pummeled bodies allow. “I want my knife back.”

“If they can get back to their cave without having to fight off the mukade, they’ll be lucky,” Steve says. “Let the mukade deal with ‘em.”

My rage subsides. The battle lust dims. I feel kind of bad about Marissa and Blondie. Sure, they might deserve it, but a mukade gnawing on them for dinner—well, that’s no way to go.

But I can’t dwell on that now. I’ve got to rescue my friends.

“One of ‘em’s a traitor, you know,” Steffi says.

“How do you figure?”

“Oh, come on Jack. How do you think The Others figured out mukade bites and swimming in the sea gets you immune? Someone told them.”

“How’d Big Mike get bit without getting eaten in the process?” Steve says. “Too bad the mukade didn’t finish the job.”

“If we have a traitor,” Steffi says, “and I’m sure we do, he or she would’ve done what Jack did. Go get a baby mukade and bring it to Big Mike.”

“Why didn’t they all get a mukade bite?” Rob says. “Then they’d all be immune.”

Steffi shrugs. “Maybe they wanted to try it out on one person first, to make sure. Then they got greedy. They didn’t want to wait. They came and attacked us before they had all finished the immunity process.”

I nod. “Or they got scared. Did you see Big Mike’s leg? It isn’t healing right.”

“He needs the black powder,” Steffi says.

I grind my teeth in anger. “We need to catch who did this.”

“Sarah’s the traitor,” Little Mike says. “I’ll bet you anything.”

Sarah is the obvious culprit. She had been one of The Others once. But we can’t be sure until we question her.

My mind is made up. “We need to rescue them all. Even Sarah.”

We reach the forest. “How many of The Others do they have total?” Steffi asks.

“Six. We got Big Mike. Marissa, Blondie and the tall dude are out of the fight. So only two were left to attack our side.”

“And there are nine of us on our side,” Steve says. “I hope they all got away.”

We head up the cliff towards the mountain pass. Near the tunnel’s entrance we run into a white-faced, gasping Keiko.

Steffi reaches for her. “What’s going on?”

“The mukade,” Keiko whispers. “The mukade took one.”

My stomach heaves. “Which one?”

Keiko shakes her head. “I don’t know. I was fighting off the one guy...” she points to a killer black eye, “...and the other one started to scream. The mukade dragged him off. The other guy let go of me and tried to follow it, but it was too far ahead. He couldn’t catch up.”

She starts to cry. Steffi hugs her. I breathe a sigh of relief that the ‘one’ Keiko was talking about wasn’t one of us.

“Where did the other guy go?” I ask.

“He got scared,” Keiko says between sobs. “He went back to his side.”

“What about everyone on our side?”

“Sarah took them back to the cave.” Keiko tries to keep her voice steady. “She said she’d look after them. I said I’d stay here and wait for you.”

I exchange a glance with Steffi. Did Sarah take them back to our side? Or did she trick them back to The Others cave?

“Alright,” I say. “First things first, we’ve gotta deal with Big Mike. Little Mike, you and Keiko go back to the cave. It’ll take all four of us to wrestle Big Mike to the jungle.”

Steffi grins. “The jungle?”

“Yeah. We leave him tied up there overnight. Even if he *does* break free tomorrow, he won’t get anywhere. The grass’ll have its spikes up. I’ll bet we can get the turtles to guard him too. They won’t let him out. It’ll be better than a prison.”

We head back down to the beach. Big Mike has gotten over his cowering. He glares at us as we approach.

“Untie me, now,” he says.

“Sorry pal,” Steve says. “We’re taking you prisoner.”

“You’ll regret that,” Mike snarls.

“Maybe, but I’ll regret it more if we let you go. Get up.”

Mike refuses. He kicks and cusses at anyone who gets near him. “How’re we going to move him anywhere?” Steffi asks.

Pepe, who has been fluttering around us, sizes up the problem, gives a soft chirp and dives in.

“Stand back,” I say.

Rob takes a step backwards. “What’s he gonna do?”

“Not sure. Keep quiet.”

Pepe flits around the snarling jerk, trying to get close. Big Mike stares at the bat, the first glimmer of fear in his eyes.

“Get it away from me!”

I laugh. I can’t help myself. “Nope.”

Pepe hovers near Big Mike's shoulder. When Mike twists his head, the bat dives in. Sharp teeth snap down on his thick neck.

Mike lets out a few good cuss words and goes limp.

"Wow," Steffi says.

"He's out like a light," Steve says. "That bat's bite is like poison."

I shake my head. "More like a sedative, I think. He'll wake in a few hours."

We each grab a limb and begin the tedious job of dragging deadweight up the mountain. "Hey, you don't think he'll turn into a vampire now, will he?" Rob says.

I can't tell if he's serious or joking. "I don't think so, Rob."

Lugging Big Mike through the entire cave and then into the jungle takes forever. By the time we get to the jungle tunnel, mukade are streaming into the cave. One party has to give way. We keep moving forward, forcing the mukade to back up and retreat into the jungle until we move all the way through.

We drop Mike on the jungle floor. Two turtles take position around him, curling up as if to sleep, but keeping a watchful eye out. I feel better about things now. "He's trapped here. He can't use the path to get to our beach—that's a safe zone so he can't get on it. And even if he could, during the day, he won't get past the spiky grass. The turtles'll guard the passage back through the mountain. He's got plenty of fruit to eat in here, so he won't starve."

"Too bad we can't leave him here," Steffi says.

"Yeah, but the turtles won't watch him forever. At some point they'll lower their guard and he'll make a break for it. But he'll be out of our way for a couple of days at least, unless he's able to sneak back at night."

"We can finish the boat in a day or two," Steve says. "And get the hell out of here."

I agree. Any desire to stay on the island has vanished. The Others know how to immunize themselves. The island won't ever be safe now.

SHOWDOWN

I straighten up. “Let’s get back to the cave and find out who our treasonous friend is before we make the mistake of taking him with us.”

“You mean *‘her,’*” Steffi says.

TRAITOR

Steffi and Sarah don't get along and everyone knows it. They barely tolerate each other. I don't know why they annoy each other so much. Malika says it's jealousy. I don't get that—jealousy of what? We're all in the same boat here. Steffi and Sarah can't seem to work together very well, though they haven't let it escalate to a full-out blow up yet. Every once in a while they snap at each other but they've both tried to keep a semblance of peace.

That ends now.

Steffi storms into the cave. She heads for Sarah, who sits with the others, waiting for our return.

“Get out of my cave you bitch,” she snarls at the bigger girl. Sarah's eyes widen, startled. She stands up, glaring back at her nemesis.

“No,” she says. “I have as much a right to be here as you do.”

“No you don't, you traitor.”

Sarah stares at Steffi in puzzlement, then her eyes narrow. “I didn't sell anybody out. If you knew anything about me, you'd know I'd never do such a thing.”

“Yeah, well somebody told on us. Somebody let The Others know about the mukade. Who else would do it?”

“It *wasn't* me. Why don't you grill somebody else?”

I grab Steffi's shoulder. "Calm down. This isn't going to do any good."

Malika stands up. "It wasn't Sarah," she says, looking scared but sure.

Steffi glares at her. "Then who?"

Malika shrugs. "I don't know, but it's gotta be somebody else."

"All right, everybody calm down. Especially you two," Steve says to the fuming girls who still stand toe to toe, glaring at each other. "Steffi, move away from Sarah. Is everybody here?"

"No," Bhasker says. "Keiko and Little Mike aren't. Have you seen them?"

I stare at Steffi, who stares back, her eyes widening.

"We sent them back before us," Steffi says.

"Well they didn't get here," Sarah says, folding her arms.

"Little Mike," Malika whispers. "Little Mike's the traitor."

I drop to the ground, dumbfounded. Out of all of us, Little Mike would be my last pick. He's always been so eager to help, so willing, so grateful...

Of course he has, and that should have been our warning. The other helpers wanted to stay as far away from The Others as possible. Even Sarah half the time picked food-gathering duties over working on the boat, which put her closer to The Other's cave. Only Little Mike liked to work in the glade. He helped to build the boat. He always asked questions. Always wanted to know how we did things. He had been collecting information the entire time. Why?

Little Mike is a helper. The Others treated him like crap. Why would he go back when we treated him so well? What would make somebody do something like that? I can't get my head around it.

He took Keiko. Maybe Little Mike couldn't have wrestled the larger kids, but he managed to capture Keiko. We have to rescue her.

“I’m sorry,” Steffi mumbles to Sarah, not looking sorry but at least having the grace to admit her mistake.

“That’s okay,” Sarah says, but not in a very forgiving tone.

“What do we do now?” Rob asks.

I shake my head. I’m exhausted. I haven’t slept for almost twenty-four hours. I’ve been pummeled, thrown down a cliff, and I lugged a comatose body for at least half a mile through rocky passage. I’m not up to a rescue. Not now. None of us are.

“We need to sleep. And plan. We’ve got Big Mike. If they’ve got Keiko, well, maybe they’ll make a trade.”

Rob stares daggers at me. “What if they’re *hurting* her?”

“There’s nothing we can do now.”

Rob’s eyes turn to slits. “That’s not what you said when you thought they had Steffi. Steve had to hold you back to keep you from attacking Big Mike.”

“He did?” Steffi turns her blue eyes on me. Why the hell did Rob bring *that* up? True, if Little Mike grabbed Steffi, even in my exhausted state I’d be ready for a fight. But I can’t help Keiko now. I can’t.

“There’s another problem,” Steve says. “Little Mike, he can get into the glade. If he’s on their side, he could do serious damage to the boat. We need to get back there and guard it.”

I silently curse Little Mike for all the trouble he’s caused. Pepe chirps into my ear and flies off.

“What’d he say?” Rob asks.

“He said not to worry, and that’s enough for me. I trust Pepe. Let’s get some sleep. We’ll need our strength for tomorrow.”

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We sneak into The Other’s territory at night. We don’t want to leave Keiko all day in their clutches, but we’re hoping that, during all the commotion, The Others haven’t had a chance to immunize themselves against the mukade. Approaching their cave at night means only the one immunized dude can come out and meet us. We figure five can take out one.

Steffi, Rob, Steve, Sarah and I slink through the meadow and crouch near the cave. Little Mike is huddled on the floor, staring at us.

“Hi Mike,” Steve says. “See your situation hasn’t improved. Was it worth it?”

Little Mike chokes back a sob and doesn’t answer. If he had hoped The Others would treat him better now that he’d proved his loyalty, he was wrong. He looks bruised and worn.

“You’d better go tell your Sirs that we’ve got Big Mike,” Sarah says. “Let Her Majesty know too. We want a trade.”

Little Mike shakes his head. “Her Majesty is gone. She never came back.”

Mukade. That familiar sick sensation sweeps over me. Marissa may be the enemy, but nobody should die that way.

“Did she leave the knife?” Steffi says.

Little Mike stares at her but doesn’t answer.

“The knife, Mike. I want the damn knife back. Do they have it, or is it with Marissa? You know, you little shit, and you’d better tell.”

“Now’s not the time, Steffi,” Steve says. “We can worry about the knife later.”

Steffi folds her arms. “Who’s left?”

Mike gulps. “Hans. He’s in charge now.”

“The new guy,” Sarah says. “Blondie.”

“Who else?” I ask. We’d better find out now how many we’re up against.

“Carl,” Little Mike says.

Sarah nods. “The immune one.”

“Dan and Ahmed. That’s it.”

“Are they immune yet?” Steve says.

“No, they aren’t. Not yet. They’ve been bit. They just haven’t woken up from the poison.”

Steve pulls us into a huddle. “They need to get into the seawater and drink it before the mukade will leave ‘em alone. If

we can get them out here at night, before they drink anything, maybe...”

“No.” I know what he’s thinking and the idea sickens me. “We’re *not* feeding them to the mukade.”

Steve doesn’t blink. “It’s the easiest way.”

“We’re not killing anybody.”

“We wouldn’t be killing ’em,” Sarah says. “The mukade would.”

“It comes down to the same damn thing, Sarah. We’d be using the mukade as a weapon. That makes us murderers.”

Steve shakes his head. “No it doesn’t.”

“It does. Defending ourselves is one thing. Plotting to do this is murder. Plain and simple. I don’t want any part of it.”

Steffi scrutinizes me. I hope, for her sake, that she agrees. “Okay,” she says. “Let’s focus on getting Keiko back. And my knife.”

I turn to Little Mike. “How’d you get back in the cave?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, when we saved you, you could get into our safe zones. Which means you shouldn’t have been able to return here. You were on our side. But now you’re back. Can you still get to our side? Can you get into the glade?”

Little Mike looks defiant, but after we glare at him a bit, he shakes his head. “I tried. I can’t get in. Your bat wouldn’t let me. He flew around the glade and batted his wings in my face when I tried. Then he left but I still couldn’t get in.”

The bats. The bats control who goes where. Everything is beginning to make sense. I remember back to when we found Blondie. Spike had hovered over him and felt his face. Like he was deciding something. Then he told me the blond kid was bad. Spike had doomed him to The Other’s side.

The bats decide and the bats make the safe zones. I don’t know how they do it. But they can exile people or include them. They can change things. I wonder why they decide the way they do. Why did they give us the bad side? Why didn’t

they help us more when they could? Given us a bigger safe zone? Kept the mukade off our beach?

I stare at Pepe, hoping he'll answer my questions, but he flits around, ignoring me. His message is clear. It's none of my business why the bats do the things they do. They have their reasons. Just because we want them to do something, doesn't necessarily mean they're going to do it.

"Mike," Steve says, pulling me back to the present situation, "where's Keiko?"

Little Mike doesn't answer. He turns away from us and lies back down, pretending to sleep even though he must hear the curses and insults Steve throws at him.

Sarah puts her hand on Steve's shoulder.

"Leave him alone," she says. "I know where Keiko is. They couldn't have taken her into the cave. I bet they stuck her in the prison. C'mon."

She leads us along the beach, away from the cave. As we leave, I catch a movement. I turn around and watch Little Mike scramble into the back room.

"He's gone to warn The Others. We'd better hurry."

"Only Carl can follow us," Sarah says. "He's not knocked out from the mukade bite. We can take him on if we have to."

The Other's beach ends around a curve in the mountain. Here, jagged cliffs plunge into the sea. "There's a little cove in there," Sarah says. "You can access it during low tide through a tunnel. At high tide, the tunnel is swamped, so the seawater keeps the prisoner in. At low tide, The Others position a guard in the tunnel entrance during the day, and at night the mukade are wandering about."

"What if low tide happened at night? Could the mukade get in?" I ask.

Sarah nods. "It's not a safe zone. If They sentence you to spend the night in there, you'd better pray you had high tide for most of it."

I shudder. I'm not worried about Keiko, the mukade won't touch her and the seawater won't bother her. But I sure feel sorry for the poor people who have suffered under The Other's cruel regime.

"She could've escaped if she wanted to," I say.

"Maybe, except I'll bet good old Carl guards the entrance during low tide," Sarah says. "Even if she's immune to the seawater, she couldn't get through the tunnel at high tide. Unless she could hold her breath for the entire tunnel's length, she wouldn't make it."

"Keiko doesn't like to swim," Rob says. "She's been in the water, but she only ever wades in it. She won't try to escape if she has to swim, she'd be too scared."

We reach the rocks. Waves lap against the cliff, and water fills half the tunnel. "High tide is coming," Steffi says.

"We've got time," Rob says. "I'll go in and get her. You guys keep a lookout for Carl."

He wades into the tunnel. We watch as the water rises.

"If he stays in there too long, he'll have to wait until low tide to come back out," Sarah says.

Rob emerges from the water, holding on to a crying Keiko. They wade to the beach. Keiko is shaking.

"She was afraid to swim," Rob says between gasping breaths, "but I convinced her. She's hurt."

Keiko holds a swollen arm. "They tried to force me into the cave. I couldn't stop them. It *hurts*."

I stare at the sickly, green limb. "Put your arm in the water, quick. It might help."

Keiko snuffles. "They did it to torture me. They wanted to know things. I'm sorry, I told them everything I know. They took my medicine."

"Medicine?" Steve says.

"The black stuff. The stuff in the vial. I kept it in the backpack with the other first aid."

“Did they get the vial too?” I ask. If they did, they’d have stolen two treasures from us.

“No—I put the powder in a snail shell. The vial is still back in the cave. A little powder is left in it. But most was in the backpack. If they have the powder, they can heal their mukade bites. They’ve got the backpack. They stole it from me.” She wipes her nose with one hand and tries to stop crying.

“It’s okay, Keiko.” I help Rob ladle water over her arm. My blood is boiling again, and I want more than anything to run right into the cave and beat the crap out of those bastards while they sleep. Rob looks like he’s having a hard time controlling himself too.

“Do they know where we put Big Mike?” Steve asks.

Keiko nods. “Yes, but I didn’t tell them. Little Mike heard your plan. He told.”

“Is Big Mike back then? Did they rescue him?”

“I don’t know,” Keiko says, breaking down into sobs again. “They put me in here after they had questioned me.”

“Well, the turtles were guarding him,” Steve says. “Maybe they kept The Others from rescuing him.”

We help back up the beach. On our way we find Carl, lying cold in the sand.

“He’s out like a light,” Steve says. “What happened?”

“He must’ve met Pepe. Pepe bit him, like he did with Big Mike. He’ll be out for hours.”

“Geez, that’s easy,” Sarah says. “Why don’t we sic Pepe on The Others? Then we’ll never have any problems with ’em.”

I shake my head. The bats aren’t going to attack people just because we ask them. They’ll only do it when they decide to, for whatever reasons they have.

We head to the meadow tunnel. Steffi and I send the others back with Keiko. We check on the boat, which thankfully looks like nobody’s touched it. The Others still can’t penetrate the glade.

“The sooner we get off this damn island the better,” Steffi says. “There can’t be anything out there in the sea worse than these assholes.”

“Don’t say that.” I have no idea what lurks out in the sea, or what dangers we’ll face. I don’t want to know, but I agree with Steffi. The faster we leave, the better off we’ll be.

THE KNIFE

I want my knife,” Steffi says.

I shake my head. “I don’t know where it is or how we’ll get it back. Is it that important now?”

“Yes, it’s important. Besides being the only knife we’ve got, it’s a treasure and should stay with the other treasures. We found them for a reason. We need to keep them together. All of them.”

She’s right. We can’t hand that knife over to The Others. We need to get it back. “Little Mike didn’t say if they had it or not.”

“I bet it was with that bitch Marissa. A mukade must have attacked her either on the beach or on the way back to the cave. Think we can chance looking around a bit for the knife before we head back?”

I glance at Pepe. “Can you help us?”

Pepe chirps and flies off to scout for the knife. We make our way down to the beach to where we’d had the brawl the night before.

“When we were fighting,” Steffi says, “she grabbed the knife. I figured I was done for at that point, but then the wave hit and she headed for the shore.”

Marissa had enough presence of mind to keep the knife, even while she was getting burned. She understood that

knife's value. She held on to it until she ran in to a mukade, wherever that took place. We walk up the beach, searching.

We splash through the water. Steffi takes my hand. I'm not sure what to think of this new development, so I just grasp her hand back and feel the warmth of her palm on mine.

"There's Marissa," Steffi says.

I stare, horrified but unable to pull my eyes away. Marissa's bloated body lies crumpled against a rock, waves lapping over the burned skin. Part of one arm is missing, completely torn off. My stomach churns.

The mukade must have gotten her at low tide, before the water came up the shore. I force myself to look away and stare out to sea, trying to calm my sloshing stomach and hammering heart. Steffi lets go of my hand.

She strides up to Marissa's corpse and rolls it over, searching. How she has the guts to even approach Marissa's mutilated, lifeless body amazes me. How she casually flips it, as if it's a piece of driftwood in her way, stuns me even more.

"It's not here," she says.

I gaze at the broken body lying in the cold sand. "We should bury her."

Steffi shakes her head. "We don't have time. We've gotta find that knife. If it isn't here, the mukade must have it. Her arm's missing, maybe the knife is with it."

My stomach heaves. "You can't be serious. That's all you can think about? A dead girl is lying there, right in front of you, and you're worried about a damn *knife*?"

Steffi turns unblinking eyes towards me. "She's dead, Jack. She'd have tried to kill me if she could. You too. You think she'd waste any time crying over either of us?"

"Maybe she wouldn't. But that doesn't mean I have to act like her."

A bit of the hardness leaves Steffi's eyes. She shakes her head. "You haven't seen enough. It's easier if you think this

way. Feeling too much for others, it'll kill you, Jack. You haven't been here long enough to understand that yet."

I turn away. "How many dead people have you seen?"

"What?"

"How many?"

Steffi falls silent. Then she says, "Just Alexi."

One person. You don't get that callous after watching one person die.

I pivot away from her and plow back up the beach. Steffi follows me, but she doesn't try to catch up or take my hand. In the distance a speck flies towards us. Pepe zooms in, chirping.

"Pepe's found your knife. The mukade dropped it near the glade. You'll find it if you look there."

Steffi doesn't answer. I keep walking, and after a while her footsteps veer away from me. She's taken the little path up the cliff to the glade. I keep plowing up the beach.

I'm not sure where I'm heading. The beach ends and the cliffs begin, and I sit on a rock and stare at the rippling sea. I think about what Steffi said. How it's better not to feel too much. I hope I never get like that. I'd rather feel, even if I hate the feeling it brings. I think about Marissa, lying on the sand. No one to mourn her. No one to bury her. She's just food for the mukade.

I sit for a long time. Then I get up and rejoin the others. Steffi is with them, the silver knife in her hand. I look at her.

"We need to bury Marissa."

Steffi turns away from me, but Steve nods. We take the axes from the glade and return to the body, chopping at the sand until we've dug a trench deep and wide enough. Steve and I roll Marissa in and we cover her up. The water will eventually wash the sand away, but I feel better. Steffi has the grace to join us and help, but I don't talk to her.

I can't think of anything good to say.

<<<>>>

Big Mike isn't in the jungle. Carl and Little Mike must have rescued him when the turtles were sleepy. They fought off the turtles long enough to get Big Mike back in the passage.

"He didn't come out to meet us though, when we were rescuing Keiko," Steve says. "He sent Carl out to do it. Why?"

"Maybe he's scared," Rob says.

"Or too hurt," I add, remembering the oozing leg.

"Or beaten," Steffi says. "Didn't Little Mike say Blondie was the leader now?"

"I bet he took control after Big Mike disappeared," Sarah says. "And what with being tied up all night and bitten by bats and mukade, Big Mike isn't strong enough to fight him. Not yet. If I know how The Others work, and I do, Blondie has Big Mike tied up somewhere until he can decide how to deal with him."

"He should've left Big Mike in the jungle," Steve says

Sarah shakes her head. "No, he needs all the muscle he can get. Their numbers have been seriously reduced, think about it. You've stolen four of us, well, three now Little Mike went back, and the mukade took out at least two."

I frown. I hate how casually Sarah states this, but I keep my mouth shut. She's right. The odds are turning in our favor, and Blondie will need Big Mike to shore up his side.

"We've gotta get out of here," Steve says. "Now. Before they start a full-out war. We've had the island's secrets to get us by so far, but now they know them too. If we thought this place was hell before, it'll be ten times worse once The Others are all immune."

Sarah nods. "They'll either enslave us or kill us off. We'll have to fight through them every time we try to get to the glade."

"How long before we can leave?" I ask Steve.

Steve shrugs. "If we work hard, we can get the rafts done in one night. We need to strap the poles together and put some benches in the boat, although the benches are more of

a comfort thing than a necessity. We can throw the wood and tools into the boat and make the seats when we're already out at sea."

Eight of us. The boat measures eighteen feet, giving us each about two feet of room. Building rafts will take precious time, and we don't know if rafts will even work. But we need to try.

I make the decision. "Let's get everything and go there now, while those assholes are sleeping off the mukade bites."

"They could be up already," Steffi says.

"We'll have to chance it."

We set the bigger guys (Steve and Rob) and the tougher girls (Sarah and Steffi) in front and behind with the spears and axes. The rest of us group in the middle, carrying everything from the cave. I place the map, key, journal and telescope in their old box and lug it with us. Steffi straps the knife to her side using a long vine. Keiko packs the jeweled jar, the pot and shells in some extra clothing. The others carry all the fruit they can, as well as a few rocks to start fires and some mats and extra ferns. I can't imagine starting a fire on the boat, but if we reach other islands, the flinty rocks might come in handy.

We make it to the glade without seeing anyone. "We're safe in here," I say, but I'm not fooling anyone. We still need to finish the boat and get it down the steep path to the water. The Others will be out in full force very soon. And they'll be plenty pissed.

THEM

We work frantically. We lay out the poles for the rafts and lash them as secure as we can, using woven strands of jungle grass. We anchor two larger poles underneath the rafts for buoyancy.

“They’ll float on their own,” Steve says. “We can keep oars on ’em and use ’em as separate boats, or we can secure them to the outriggers with the jungle grass.”

I wipe my brow. “Then we’re done. We need to get these boats down to the beach and get the hell out of here.”

Nobody moves. Now the time has come, now that we need to go...what’s out there? We don’t have a plan for where we’re going. We don’t know what creatures lurk in the sea’s depths. Starving or dying of thirst isn’t an issue; the seawater will feed us, but what if we float and float forever?

Not knowing what we’re getting into keeps us imprisoned in the glade. We *must* get the boat down to the beach and leave before The Others wake up from their poisoned coma and confront us again. Still we stand there, gazing at each other and the boat.

No one wants to take the first step.

I take a deep breath. Looks like it’s up to me to rally the others for this last push.

“Listen. We’ve got to go. I can’t tell you what we’re going to find out there. I can’t tell you if we’re going to ever return to our homes or see our families again, or even survive the journey to wherever it is we’re going. But we can’t stay here. This place isn’t safe. Not with those morons on the loose. We’ve got to go and we’ve got to go *now*.”

The trance breaks. We throw the provisions into the boat. Steve, Rob, Sarah, and I push it through the glade. It glides through the grass. The others lug the rafts.

I’m forgetting something. Something important. I can’t put my finger on what, so I keep pushing the boat. We move it into the forest. The boat and its wide outriggers barely fit on the thin path.

“Keep control of the boat when we’re going down the beach path,” Steve says. “We don’t need it getting away from us and sliding all the way down and crashing on those rocks. That’d cut this journey short real quick.”

We lug the boat down the steep, rocky trail. We make it to the beach, unmolested. I breathe a sigh of relief.

Pepe flies towards us, followed by Peanut and the batlings. They’re all screeching at the top of their little lungs.

That’s what I’d forgotten. The bats.

Pepe dives towards me, frantic wings beating the air around my face. He screeches. Terror crawls up my spine. I shout to the others.

“Get the boats in the water! Now! They’re coming!”

Dread washes over me. I’ve never experienced panic like this, not even when The Others attacked us the other night, or when we were trying to escape from the mukade’s lair. This fear almost knocks me to my knees.

The kids aren’t moving *nearly* fast enough. “Hurry!” I yell.

“Calm down,” Steffi says. “We don’t see them yet, we’ll be out and rowing before they can get to the beach.”

“No, you don’t get it,” I say, pushing the boat as hard as I can. “It’s not The Others. It’s *Them*.”

I can't explain it any further. Them. The things the first guy wrote about in the journal, right before he disappeared. I don't know what They are, but They're coming, and if we aren't far off the island before They get here, something bad is going to happen.

Something really bad.

Screams break out behind me. I turn around. The Others scramble towards the beach, howling at the top of their lungs. Not in rage. In fear.

Even from a distance their terror is contagious. Everyone begins to panic and scream. The magenta sky grows dark as a vast, black cloud creeps over it, shadowing the island.

We have the boat in the surf. We thrust it out as far as we can. It bobs on the water; floating so light it barely touches the surface. *It floats.* I breathe a sigh of relief and run back to help the others get the rafts in. We throw ourselves into the water, pushing and clambering aboard whichever floating device is closest. We grab the oars and row as hard and as fast as we can.

"Wait!" someone yells. "Wait for us! Please!"

I look behind me as darkness blankets the island. Little Mike runs towards the shore, pleading at the top of his lungs. Big Mike, Carl and Blondie are scrambling into the water, swimming as hard as they can. I don't see the others. They must still be lying comatose in the cave, out cold from the mukade bite.

Little Mike scramble for the water, but he isn't fast enough. The ominous cloud reaches the beach and envelopes him whole, halting his screams. I stare, horrified, unable to even think.

Finally I get my voice. "Turn back! We have to save them."

"No," Sarah says. "We don't have enough room and they're the enemy. Don't you forget it."

"They're going to die!"

“So? They wouldn’t bat an eye if you died. Or if I died. Why should we risk our lives to save theirs?”

I shoot a pleading look at Steffi. She shakes her head and keeps rowing.

The shore falls further behind us. The dark cloud covers the land. Drops of black rain fall from it, but the drops don’t hit the ground. Instead they span out and circle the island.

They aren’t drops of rain. They’re living things.

Pepe watches them as he flutters above the boat’s bow, near Peanut and her little ones.

“What is it?” I whisper.

It’s *Them*. Pepe doesn’t know what They are. He just knows when They come, everything will perish. Everything that can’t get away.

“It happens every ten years or so,” I say as we stare, horrified, at the mass of swirling black things. “They come, destroy everything, and disappear. Only the bats escape. And some of the mukade who can burrow far enough into the mountain.”

“What about the poor turtles?” Rob asks.

I shake my head. I don’t know. Maybe the Things can’t get through their shells.

We made it off the island alive, though. Will the Things follow us until they catch and smother us?

Pepe says no. We’re safe in the sea. But The Others who couldn’t make it into the water...

The Others still comatose in the cave won’t make it. Little Mike won’t make it. Even though they’re shitty people, they don’t deserve to die. Nobody does. But I can’t do anything now. Sarah and Steffi are both rowing, not looking back. Right now I hate them both.

But what could we have done? Those things would’ve killed us too, if we had gone back.

I hope The Others—the ones who swam into the sea—survive. They can return to land once the things disappear. What will they find? Or is everything gone?

If these black things appear every ten years and destroy everything, there must be a way for the island to rejuvenate itself. The mukade, the turtles, the slugs—all had been there before the last invasion, and all would return after this one. But how?

Pepe doesn't know. The bats fly out to sea until they can return. That is all he knows.

What *are* those things? They're like locusts, they cover everything. Where did they come from?

Pepe doesn't know that either. He just knows they do. The only thing you can do to save yourself is to flee.

If the cloud had come a day earlier, and we hadn't been close to the sea, we could all be dead. Steffi, Steve, me, The Others—everyone would be gone. Everyone except the bats.

"Will you return?" I ask Pepe.

The purple bat chirps. He'll go back to the island. So will Peanut and her batlings.

Except Spike Jr.

Spike Jr. will come with us. Help us. The baby bat flutters around my head, chirping. He doesn't know much about the world yet. But he will. Some day.

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We don't need to row. The current pulls us further and further from the island until it, and the black cloud surrounding it, vanish over the horizon.

We've escaped. We're out on a bobbing orange sea and we don't know where we're headed, but we've done it. We're free.

When we get tired of staring at the endless expanse of sea, Steve and Rob climb on the outriggers and lash the rafts to the main boat so we'll all stay together during the night. We're all too tired to row anymore, anyway. Bhasker and Rob have already fallen asleep, exhausted.

We bob along. Steffi, Sarah, Steve and I are in the main boat. Rob and Keiko lie together on one raft and Malika and Bhasker sprawl on the other one. The silence feels suffocating. I reach over the side, splash water on my face and drink a few handfuls. My nerves calm down a bit.

“We’re okay. We made it.”

“Just in time too,” Steffi says. “Thanks to you, Jack.”

The others murmur their thanks also. I squirm, uncomfortable with Steffi’s words. I’m not sure if I want any compliments from her, yet.

“We all did it,” I say.

Steffi stares at the point where the island had been, now vanished beyond the horizon. “I can’t believe we made it. I can’t believe we’re gone.”

Malika stares almost wistfully after Steffi. “Maybe we could go back. The Others might be dead. We could have the island to ourselves.”

“We can’t go back,” I say. “Some of The Others survived. Big Mike did, I’ll bet. I don’t want to go back there while he’s still lurking around. Anyway, if we go back, we’ll never find a way off this planet.”

Steve sighs. “We’ll never find a way off it anyway. We’ll just keep floating and floating.”

“Better than being on that island,” I say, although I have my doubts. My legs are already cramping in the narrow boat. And I’m not too happy with anyone. They wouldn’t go back. Sure, maybe The Others survived, a couple of them anyway. The ones who reached the water and escaped the black things.

Little Mike didn’t survive. We could have saved him. Even if it meant dealing with Big Mike, we should have tried.

The day nears an end. We sit, waiting for the switch from light to dark. I reach into the box, pull out the long, golden object and flip it open.

Pepe flutters near it and chirps.

“But how do you use it?”

“What did you say?” Steffi asks, peering over my shoulder.

“This thing. Pepe says it’s a telescope.”

“It’s a good thing you brought it, then,” Steve says.

I stare at the tube. Back in the cave, I couldn’t see anything through it. When I open it now, a strange glow spirals out one end. I put the end to my eye. I see is the orange swirls, but nothing else.

“It doesn’t work.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Steffi says. “We’ve got all the time in the world to figure it out.”

I nod. She’s right. I’ll study the telescope more tomorrow.

Pepe chirps again. Tears build in my eyes as I stroke the white fur between his ears.

“Can’t you stay a little longer?”

Pepe nuzzles my ear. Peanut chirps too, and caresses Spike Jr. with her nose.

The bats are saying goodbye.

The things must have left the island. I can picture it: The Others, those who are left, are now dragging themselves out on the water. Back to their captivity. I hope they survive. Even Mike Mullens. Maybe even Mike has suffered enough.

I watch the bats fly away until they’re lost from my view.

Spike Jr. whistles. The light vanishes as night clicks into existence. The sea ripples against the boat and lulls me to sleep.

THE TELESCOPE

I roll the telescope between my palms and stare at the flat, pink sky. I wonder if it will rain soon, and worry about how choppy the water might get when the winds pick up. Spike Jr. hops along the bow, chirping. He wants breakfast.

I thank my lucky stars that we decided to bring some fruit. Spike Jr. will need it to survive. He punches a hole in the rind with his tongue and sucks at the juice. I'm hoping, if it doesn't rot, our pile of fruit will last for weeks.

After a breakfast of sweet seawater, I resume my study of the telescope. I peer inside it. The orangy light swirls. I put the end up to my eye and stare out at the horizon. Unlike the day before, I now see something.

Shapes. Vague, faraway shapes. I stare even harder and the shapes sharpen. They zoom towards me. I stare, surprised.

An island. Our island. But we must be miles away by now. I drop the telescope and squint at the horizon. With my naked eye I can't see anything but orange water and pink sky.

But I can see the island. I put the telescope back to my eye and turn the other way. In the direction we're heading. It takes longer for the blurred shapes to come into focus. Maybe because they're further away. But I see an island. Small.

Almost flat. No mountains, just lots of wavy purple grass. I stare harder. The island zooms even closer.

Humans walk along the sandy beach. One reaches down and pulls up a wriggling creature. A slug.

I shake Steffi's shoulder. "Hey, I see an island ahead."

"Already?" she mumbles, sitting up.

"No, it's a few days journey I'll bet. But I can see it through this. Look."

Steffi blinks to clear the gunk from her eyes and peers into the telescope. "I don't see anything. It's all black. I guess this is another thing only you can do, Jack."

She hands the telescope back, yawning.

I peer through the telescope again and watch the people wrestling the slugs. People. The other islands have *people*. We aren't the only prison island. There's more. Maybe hundreds. After all, lots of kids disappear when they make their wish. Only a handful ended up on our rock.

These islands are all prisons. Surrounded by the poison sea, isolated on a different planet, the humans on them have no hope. They're here until they die.

Unless we can find a way to save them. We can survive the sea. We know the secrets. How many islands are out there? How many people need our help?

The idea is overwhelming. No *way* can we rescue all these people. The best we can do is try to save ourselves.

But something tells me maybe this isn't the best plan of action. Not for me, anyway. Maybe Sarah and Steffi can leave others behind to die a slow, miserable death, but not me.

Spike Jr. chirps into my ear. He's still a baby and his chirping is garbled, but I think I understand him. A little. I stare through the telescope at the skeletal humans prowling their beach, searching for food.

"I wonder if they're bad like The Others," Steffi says. "I mean they're prisoners right? They can't be good."

“We’re good,” Rob says.

Some of us are good, I think. Maybe not all of us.

“What do you think is past this island?” Keiko asks.

“I can’t see that far. The map shows another island past this one. But this telescope thing, we won’t steer wrong if we have it. I’ll keep an eye on the islands. We’ll be all right.”

I don’t share my thoughts with her. She thinks we’re saving ourselves. We’re finding a way off this planet. We’re searching for a way home.

Yes, we are. But we’re not leaving right away. I have to do something first. Steffi, Sarah, Steve and the rest will have to put up with my plan until it comes to fruition or I’m ready to abandon the idea. They owe me that much. If it weren’t for me, we’d never have gotten off the island.

True, Steve was the one who really built the boat. But it wouldn’t have been possible if the bats hadn’t shown me the cavern. If we hadn’t found the treasures. If we hadn’t infiltrated The Other’s side. If we hadn’t found the safe zone. If we hadn’t immunized ourselves to the sea and the mukade. And I figured most of that out.

The bats guided me then, and Spike Jr. guides me now. He doesn’t know a lot yet, but he is sure of one thing. We aren’t searching for a way off this world.

Not yet.

We are searching for something. *Someone*. Someone who will help us not only get out of this place, but who will show us how to save everyone else. Someone who can help us end all this.

He’s out here somewhere and it’s my job to find him. Discover his secrets. Engage his assistance. If I’ve gotta sail every inch of this stupid sea and land on every island out there, I’ll do it. I’ll find him.

But the others aren’t ready to know this yet. They want to hear good things. They want to be safe. To find a place better than the island we left. To make it home.

I turn and look at Steffi. I haven't made eye contact with her since we found Marissa's body on the beach, but I do now. She smiles, looking relieved. I'm still not ready to forgive her for what she's done. But she doesn't need to know that. Right now she, and everyone else, has to think of me as the leader. She's gotta be willing to follow me. Because I have a mission to do. And like it or not, she's coming with me.

I smile back at her. Then I shift my eyes to the orange sea. I take a deep breath and feel almost happy.

I don't know what or who waits for me out there. But I'll find what I need.

And I'll find a way home. Not just for me or Steffi or Steve, or the other kids, yawning and opening their eyes to face the new day.

I'll find a way for every person out there. Every suffering soul crouching on the shore, staring with anguished, desperate eyes at the endless horizon. The aliens may have sent me here to get rid of me. But they'll find out it wasn't a smart thing to do.

Not a smart thing at all.

About The Author

Originally from Virginia, Nikki Bennett avidly read C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and any book that had to do with fantasy while growing up. After spending the first part of her “adult life” on a farm raising horses, she and her husband Steve moved to Japan. There, Nikki developed a love of Asian mythology and history.

MUKADE ISLAND is Nikki’s second publication, and the first book in The Island Chronicles. Keep reading to get a sneak peek of Book 2 – ANANSI ISLAND.

You can follow Nikki on Facebook and Twitter. And check out her website to find out about Jack’s further adventures.

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ANANSI ISLAND

SNEAK PEEK

(Volume 2 in The Island Chronicles)

This is a dream.

In this dream, a lonely island bobs in a vast orange sea. A mountain rises in the island's center, stark and gray and surrounded by a tangled jungle that creeps down to the shore. Long white insects slither along the beach, waving dozens of red legs and snapping large, poisonous pincers as they search for food. Giant centipedes. Mukade.

The mukade raise their heads to the sky. They detect, rather than see, an ominous black cloud engulfing the mountain. A living cloud, made up of hundreds of tiny black things.

Those things swarm the island, devouring everything. They eat the terrified mukade. The jungle. Every grass blade, every tree leaf, every slug.

Everything.

They even attack the people who run out of a dark cave, screaming for help. The creatures cover the terrified kids, and when the swarm flies away, it leaves nothing except bones.

I jerk awake, sweat dripping into my eyes.

A dream.

I raise my head and try to refocus my terrified eyes. The orange sea ripples in front of me, stretching out to meet a dense magenta sky. That horrible island has long since vanished beyond the horizon.

We escaped. We escaped right before the black things devoured everything.

I sit up, wide-awake. Next to me lies Steffi, her red hair splayed across the raft, her blue eyes shut tight in a restless sleep. Is she dreaming of the island too? Probably. We left two days ago. Only two days since Little Mike crumpled on the shore, overpowered by the black things. Since The Others frantically swam out to sea in an attempt to escape. Since eight of us, the lucky ones, floated away on a makeshift boat, leaving the others behind.

We didn't return for them. We left them to a horrible fate.

The little raft I'm sitting on is tied to a long boat. Made of wood, tediously burned into a canoeish-type floating device, it holds four others. Malika's tight black curls poke above the edge. Keiko's long silky hair spills over the side. Rob sits next to her; his brown hair ruffling in the breeze. Bhasker must be in the canoe too, because Steve and Sarah lie on the opposite raft. They're both the largest, and their combined size fills most of the free space. Steve's left arm trails in the warm seawater.

Eight of us. We survived the island and escaped a prison where we had once been doomed to spend the rest of our short, meager lives. Why we had been sentenced to this prison is still anyone's guess.

Who had sentenced us is also a mystery.

Steffi thinks aliens sent us to this place. I'm not totally convinced. But I'll agree that we aren't on Earth. This world is too crazy different from ours. For one thing, the orange sea is poisonous if you haven't gotten an immunity to it. And the vibrant sky doesn't have a sun or moon or stars. During the day, the sky glows so we can see, but when night comes, it comes in an abrupt jolt. One minute the world is light, the next it's pitch black.

Then there's my pet bat, Spike. He's another weird product of this world. In this place, bats can tell you secrets to help you survive, if you can understand what they say. Most people can't. Out of us eight, I'm the one Spike communicates with.

Steffi rolls over and yawns. Her blue eyes open and stare at the sky. "What time is it?"

"Day time," I say.

"Where are we?"

"In the middle of the sea, Steffi. Just like yesterday."

Spike the bat flits over to me and chirps. He's only a few months old and talks in a baby bat garble. I understood the adult bats, back on Mukade Island, but I have a hard time figuring out Spike's chatter.

Spike's trying to tell me something now, but I can't quite understand him.

Steffi sits up and stretches. "Is land any closer?"

"Not sure, but I know how to find out."

My naked eye can't spot land, but the strange brass telescope we found buried on Mukade Island will show me anything I want to see, no matter how far away it is.

"Hey Rob!" I yell.

Rob's sleepy eyes peek over the canoe's side. "What?"

"Pass me the telescope, would you?"

He digs through the canoe, finds the telescope, and shim-mies out across the boat's outrigger towards me. He stops to yawn, slips, and splashes into the orange water.

Steffi laughs. I grab the telescope before Rob drops it. He clings to the other end, spluttering.

“How’s the water this morning?” Steffi says.

“Cold,.” Rob lets the telescope go and swims from under the outriggers, drinking the seawater as he strokes. The seawater is like a five-course meal when we drink it. It also cleans us when we’re dirty. We’ve already gotten into the habit of swimming beside the rafts for a few hours a day. The canoe and its rafts are horribly cramped with eight of us, plus swimming helps our limbs stay supple.

I peer through the telescope as Rob splashes around the raft. The shapes are blurry but soon come into focus. A flat island with a small bump, a tiny hill maybe, comes into view. But I see even more.

The crazy thing about this telescope is, the harder you stare into the end, the more you can zoom up on things. I stare into it, and the island looms closer. Pretty soon I can focus on grains of sand on the beach.

People live on this island. I’ve seen them before, but they aren’t up yet. I don’t see any mukade, but they avoid the light. They’ve probably scooted back to their lair for the day.

“We’re closer,” I tell Steffi, “and we’re still on course. I’d say we have a couple days out here on this sea before we reach that island, though.”

Steffi sighs. “Bleh.”

I search the horizon. The island we escaped, Mukade Island, lies behind us. I keep waiting for the cloud of black things to pass over us and head for the island we’re trying to reach. But I see no sign of it. The things must have gone back the way they came, their hunger satiated for now.

Immersing yourself in the seawater is the only way to avoid the black things. That part is tricky because the seawater is poison to most people. It burns them if they touch it. But the eight of us are immune. We became immune in a weird

way: we got bit by mukade. Instead of killing us, their venom spread through our veins and a weird change happened in our bodies. The same seawater that used to burn us became our life source. It made us grow strong.

The water also cures old injuries. Steve, the oldest of us, used to have a dead eye. He would cover the red and unseeing orb with a patch, but after a few weeks swimming in the sea, his eye returned to normal.

I zoom in on the island we left. “There’s Mukade Island,” I say.

“See anything moving on it?” Steffi asks.

Tall black trees surround the glade where we built our canoe. The trees still stand although most of their leaves are gone. The black things ate those.

“I see three kids on the beach,” I say.

“So some of ‘em survived,” Steffi murmurs. She has a relieved look on her face. Maybe she’s feeling guilty for leaving them behind. I focus the telescope on the kids. “The Others,” we called them then.

Mike Mullens, large and mean, hobbles through the meadow. His leg hasn’t fully healed from the mukade bite he had gotten. Hans, the big blond dude follows him. And Carl. The only three left.

I don’t feel sorry for them now. They swam out to sea to escape the things, and so they’re still alive. Now they own the whole island. If we had made room for them on the canoe, they’d have made our lives miserable.

I glance at Steffi. She faces the other way, towards the new island. Her red hair flutters in the breeze. I’ve been mad at her for the last two days, although I’ve tried hard to keep my anger hidden. I was angry because she wouldn’t help me save those kids. Now I sigh and shove down my anger. She was right. Those guys, if we had rescued them, would make our lives a living hell.

“Breakfast?” I say, and she grins. We dive off the raft.

The cool seawater washes away the last traces of sleep. I take huge gulps of the stuff. Steffi, Rob, and I race to see who can swim around the canoe and rafts the fastest.

Soon everyone splashes in the cool water.

Back in our world, if you were stranded on a raft in a desolate sea, you wouldn't have much fun. You'd be starving, thirsty, sunburned, seasick and full of sores from the salty seawater. In this world, wherever this world is, the healing water relieves any burn we get, quenches thirst and satiates hunger. None of us have even gotten seasick. We could probably float this way until the end of time without ever getting sick, hungry, or thirsty, but the one thing the seawater can't cure is boredom. We have nothing to do and all day to do it.

Steve, the oldest, finally scrambles, dripping, onto the raft. He sits and kicks his feet in the water. “We need to think of some sort of plan,” he says. “What are we gonna do when we reach that island? We can't fit any more kids on this boat. We can't save them.”

“True,” I say, “but we can immunize the kids to the mukade, if they aren't already. Then they can at least swim in the seawater. They'll have food and drink and they can escape the black things if they ever attack the island.”

“So that's our plan?” Steffi says. “To stop at these islands, immunize everyone, and then head on?”

“I'm not sure what else we can do,” I say.

We can't leave these people to suffer. We can at least make them more comfortable with their fate. But we aren't here to rescue them.

We're searching for something else. Someone else.

That someone lives on one of these islands, and I'm going to find him. That someone can tell us how to escape this planet and find our way home.

I don't say this out loud. It's a loopy idea, I have no proof to provide that there is another person out there except my gut-feeling, and they aren't ready to hear that yet.

"We have one problem," Keiko says. "We're almost out of the black powder. The Others took the rest."

We had discovered the black powder when we found the telescope and Steffi's jeweled knife. Keiko figured out that it was an antidote for mukade bites. The wound would fester and refuse to heal if you didn't use the powder. We still have the vial. A thin layer of powder lies in the bottom.

Rob frowns. "Well, we have enough for the folks on the next island, maybe."

We splosh around until we're tired of swimming and lazily stroke back to the rafts. Steffi pulls herself onto the raft and sits next to Keiko. Her long legs trail in the water. She squints out to sea.

"What's that?"

I follow her pointing finger. Tiny ripples dance on the surface. Nothing unusual.

"I see it too. In the water, over there," Keiko says.

Spike flutters off the bow, peers across the water, and shrieks.

I hate the sound of bat shrieks. Whenever I hear them, something bad is bound to happen.

"Out of the water now!" I yell. Everyone flounders for the nearest raft, which is the raft Keiko, Steve, and Steffi are already on.

"Other side, other side!" Steffi squeals. "You'll flip us if everyone gets on here!"

Nobody listens, they're too busy panicking. I steel myself and swim for the raft on the other side of the boat. A huge lump of ice bobs in my stomach. I don't breathe until I reach the raft and pull myself out of the water. Rob, Sarah, and Bhasker follow me. Our combined weight evens out the sides.

“It’s getting closer!” Steffi yells.

I still don’t see anything, but Steve points. A ripple. Tiny at first but growing as it heads straight towards us.

Right before it reaches the first raft, the ripple disappears. A second later the whole sea heaves, and the canoe and rafts bob skyward before slamming down on the sea. Bhasker screams as he flies off the raft and splashes into the churning water.

I stare, horrified, as he disappears.

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“It’s getting closer!” Steffi yells.

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Right before it reaches the first raft, the ripple disappears. A second later the whole sea heaves, and the boat and rafts bob skywards. They slam down on the sea. Bhasker screams as he flies off the raft and splashes into the churning water.

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