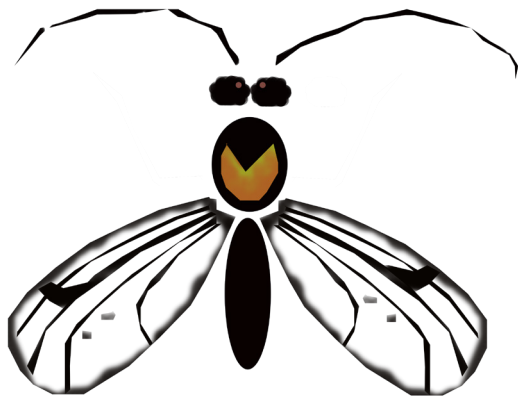


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Moka Island

Moka Island



Nikki Bennett

To Steve

The Island Chronicles Volume 3

Moka Island

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Contents

THE GAME	1
MAGIC	10
THE TRAIL	17
JELLIES	24
THE DOOR	31
THE VILLAGE	37
THE ISLAND	44
THE FALLS	51
REUNION	57
WISHES	65
THE STONES	72
THE WAY OUT	83
ANSWERS	95
THE RETURN	102
ESCAPE	113
NUZZLES	120
SEAWATER	126
REUNION	135
THE LAST BATTLE	143
THE END	151
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	163

THE GAME

There it is. I can see it.”

Steffi squints. “What does it look like, Jack?”

“Huge. Lots of mountains. Smoke.”

“Smoke?” Steffi cranes her neck in the direction of my telescope, but she can’t see anything. We’re too far away from the island for her to see it. Our canoe bobs on a quiet orange sea, no land visible to the naked eye. If I weren’t gazing through the telescope, I wouldn’t see anything except the sparkling sea either. But with the telescope the island comes into perfect focus. Its desolate landscape hugs the skyline—a long line of craggy mountains surrounded by arid beach. I don’t see a tree or a blade of grass anywhere. I can’t tell how tall the mountains are; their tips disappear in a low cloud of fog—or smoke.

“Volcanoes, do you think?” Steffi says after I describe the scene.

“Maybe.” I put the telescope to my eye again. “Man, those mountains seem to go on forever.”

She sighs. “No pretty palm trees or pink lagoons like the last island, I guess.”

“Not that I can see. But maybe that’s all hiding on the other side.”

Steffi reclines in the canoe and trails her arm in the warm water. “I wonder if it’s dead, like the last island was.”

My mind drifts back to Butterfly Island, the island we’d rowed away from a couple of days ago. Already it feels like an eternity. But that island hadn’t been completely dead. Trees and flowers covered one side of it. I understand what Steffi means, though. Nothing *lived* there. No horrible monsters like the other islands we’d visited. And because it seemed deserted, we figured it would be a safe place to leave the other kids while we scouted ahead.

“I wonder if we’ll see any of them again,” I mutter.

Steffi doesn’t respond. I put the telescope down and face her. With only two of us in it, the canoe has tons of space and we can both stretch out. She faces the direction of Butterfly Island, the island we’ve left behind, and I stare toward the new island ahead. It’ll take a couple of days before we reach it, depending on if the current picks up or slows.

Steffi runs a fingertip along the telescope’s smooth sides. “I wish I could see through it.”

I nod. So far, I’m the only one who can use the telescope. All the other kids have tried, but they see nothing when they peer into its lens. Me, I can spot things far away when I gaze through it, even at night. I have no idea why I can use the telescope when the others can’t, but it’s a good thing it works for at least one of us. Otherwise, we’d never know what lies ahead in this endless sea.

Steffi drops her hand. “Well,” she says. “We’d better plan a strategy. One: land on that island. Two: find the box. Three: if there are any kids stranded there, figure out how to immunize ’em against the seawater and protect them from whatever evil the island throws at us.”

She ticks these activities off like she’s reading a to-do list. She makes it sound easy, but it won’t be, if our past experiences have anything to say about it. The first island we’d been

stranded on—Mukade Island (it seems like years ago since we were there, but it's only been maybe a month or two)—had been a miserable place. That's where I'd met Steffi and the others. We'd been sent to that island when we were fifteen, for no good reason any of us can figure, by people we don't even know. Mukade Island was like a prison sentence—there'd been no chance of escape, not until we found a box in a cavern that contained the secrets needed to battle the island's monsters, gain immunity to the poisonous sea, and build a boat that would hopefully take us home.

Of course, that hasn't worked so far. We haven't found the way out of this place. After leaving Mukade Island, we ended up landing on Anansi Island, another miserable place populated with stranded kids and a horrible, kid-eating spider we named Pooky. But we found another box, triumphed over Pooky, and managed to escape again. The next island we found, Butterfly Island, also had a box, but the monster that once skulked around that island was long dead.

And now, Steffi and I are approaching what we're hoping is the last island—the island that will contain the secrets to send us home.

“Land, find the box, immunize the kids, disable the monster, leave,” Steffi whispers again. “Although maybe we can skip the immunizing part and just leave after we find the box. What do you think?”

I shake my head. “We can't. We have to go through all the steps, like you said. That's how the game works.”

Steffi snorts. “How are you so sure this ‘game’ theory of yours is correct?”

I shrug. “I'm not. But that seems to be how all the islands have worked so far.”

Steffi chews thoughtfully on a fingernail. “You know, if this world we're stuck in is all some laid-out game like you think, there was one problem with that last island we were on.

It didn't quite follow the game plan. There was no good guy on it."

"Come again?"

She leans forward, reaches out, and scratches Spike's belly. The little purple bat hangs off an outrigger pole, snoozing. Spike doesn't usually sleep much, but even he is getting bored with staring at nothing but flat orange sea.

"Mukade Island had the bats, like Spike," she says. "They helped us when we needed it; Spike still does. Anansi Island had Goliath, the big worm. He helped us out too. But Butterfly Island didn't have a helper. We found the dead butterfly—that was the island's evil—but we never found the good guy."

"Maybe it was dead, too," I suggest. "Or..." and I don't like to think of this idea much, "...maybe the butterfly *was* the good guy. And the evil, whatever it is, is still lurking around somewhere."

She shudders. "Don't say that. We left all our friends on that island." She turns her head again, craning to catch a view of the new island. "Jack, if this *is* some weird game we have to get through, and these islands are all set up the same way, there must've been a helper somewhere on Butterfly Island. And this island coming up—it'll have the same sort of setup, too. An evil that torments the kids. A helper that aids them in figuring out how to escape. And a box that holds the key to solving the island's secrets."

"Don't forget the terror from the sea," I say, remembering the cloud with the black things that ate everything on Mukade Island, the lightning that wreaked havoc on Anansi Island, and the tsunami that continually crashed on Butterfly Island.

Steffi shudders. "Exactly. And that's something else. On Mukade Island, the terror came every few years. On Anansi, every couple of weeks, and on Butterfly Island, that tsunami hit every other day. If this new island follows the trend, there's

probably some horror every damn afternoon. And we're gonna land right into it without any idea how to survive it."

I hadn't thought too much about this, but leave it to Steffi to ponder these things. I'd been more curious as to what sort of "evil" lived on the approaching island and how we'd protect ourselves from it.

And how, in the multitude of mountainous peaks, we'll find the box with the treasures that will save us.

Steffi reads my thoughts. "It'll be in a cave," she says. "It always is. Somewhere deep underground."

I splash some sea water in my face. "That'll take forever. This new island could be twenty miles long, for all we know. I can't see the end of it, and I can't tell how wide it is."

"Did you see any kids in the telescope?" she asks.

"No."

"Why don't we circle the whole island, then?" she says. "Scout it out first before we land."

"Sounds reasonable, except for the terror from the sea problem," I say. "If we could figure out what that is *before* we circle the whole island and potentially meet up with it, that would help."

"Mhm." She taps a finger on her cheek in thought. "You know, the black things that terrorized Mukade Island could only be avoided if you got *into* the sea. But the lightning cloud on Anansi Island could only be avoided by getting underground. And the only way to avoid the tsunami on Butterfly Island was to stay on the sheltered side, where the pink lagoon was, or get high up enough on the cliff so it couldn't hit you."

"So how do you think we avoid this new one?"

She laughs. "No damn clue. But if the terror comes more frequently than the one on Butterfly Island, we'll find out quick."

She reaches into the treasure box, pulls out the map, and unrolls it. I lean forward and gaze at it. This map is incredi-

bly handy. It shows what island lies in front of us and what's behind us, and, if we keep sailing, it will eventually show us anything beyond.

The island we're approaching takes up most of the map. Butterfly Island is beginning to fall off the bottom of the scroll. And a tiny sliver of a new island pokes over the top.

"Damn," Steffi says. "There's *another* island after this one? Does this sea go on forever, or what?"

My stomach takes a dive as I stare at the little arm of this new island. I've been hoping the island we're approaching is the last one. The one where I'll find my brother, Cody. And where I'll meet the stranger I've been searching for—the one who can show us how to escape this world, or this hologram, or whatever this reality is—and return home.

Steffi rolls up the map and slumps into her corner of the boat. I do the same. We bob with the current in silence, closer and closer to a place we have no clue how to survive.

Silence. Most of this journey has been mired in it. After we had pulled away from the pink lagoon and waved good-bye to our friends, I had hoped the solitude would bring Steffi and me closer. Maybe even in an intimate, romantic way. But an almost depressive silence has filled the boat since we left Butterfly Island. It's not like we're suddenly scared to talk to each other, that's not it. It's more like we've sailed into a part of the sea that sucks the energy out of you and makes you want to do nothing but sleep and think and stay quiet. This conversation about what lies ahead and how to deal with it has been the liveliest talk we've had in two days, but seeing that new island suddenly pop up on the map—*another* island—has switched my depressive funk into overdrive.

From his perch Spike rustles and gives out a sleepy squeak. It's his lazy attempt to let us know the lights are about to click off for the day. Back on Mukade Island the bats always warned us, loud and shrill, about the approaching night because if we

weren't in our cave when the lights went out, we'd become a quick dinner for the giant centipedes that roamed the dark beach. But after we escaped to the sea and landed on Anansi Island, the need to seek shelter after dark wasn't quite as important. The giant spider that roamed that island was active in the daylight too, and although it was easier to spot him when the lights were on, Anansi Island was never completely dark. Even at night it had a luminescent glow to it, enough to see by. And when we reached Butterfly Island, where the evil had already died (if the butterfly *was* the evil), a light's-out call became totally unnecessary. But, out of habit or some ingrained instinct, Spike still chirps his nightly warning.

Here on the sea it doesn't matter at all. There's no difference between night and day. The sea is always flat and still, barely a movement except for the current that pulls us steadily along. The tsunami that crashes into Butterfly Island every other day must peter out quickly once it hits, because we've never even seen a ripple from it.

Whoever created this place didn't give much thought to the sea. All the creative energy went into devising horrors for the islands. Once, on our journey away from Mukade Island, a strange, snaky sea monster attempted to attack us, but it had disappeared as quickly as it came, and although we'd been on high alert for something like that to happen again, we haven't worried much about it lately. It seems that nothing will happen in this part of the sea. There is no life except Steffi, me, and the snoring bat.

The lights click off. Instantly, the sky switches from bright pink to inky black. Seconds later I hear Steffi's light breathing and know she's asleep. I stare at the sky, wishing there were stars to gaze at, but there's nothing up there except black. You can't see anything in the inkiness, except if you're looking through the telescope, which has a weird infrared-type property. I pull it out of the box and

stare through it, focusing on the smoky island now covered in darkness.

And I see something new.

Where ten minutes before gentle waves had lapped on the shore, the sea now foams and rolls like someone's put a fire under it and set it to boil. I almost drop the telescope in surprise as a long, eely beast bursts out of the foaming water and rolls back in, followed by another and another until the sea looks like one rolling mass of giant snakes.

I gasp so loud that Steffi wakes.

"What? What is it?" she asks, instantly alert, grabbing for the jeweled knife she always keeps strapped to her leg.

I lower the telescope, trying to catch my breath. "Remember that sea monster, Steffi? The one that attacked our boat after we left Mukade Island?"

"How could I forget it?" She grips the canoe's edges and swivels her head, straining to see what my now telescope-free eye still stares toward. The pitch blackness is suddenly comforting.

"The sea near that island is teeming with 'em," I whisper.

"Is there one heading towards us now?" she says.

"No." I steel myself and raise the telescope to my eye. The monsters are now sliding out of the sea and slithering up the rocky shore, heading inland. The beach is so thick with them I can't even see the pebbles.

I move the telescope down the beach, but it's the same everywhere I look. Hundreds—thousands—of huge, snaky monsters flounder out of the water and stream toward the base of the smoking mountains. There doesn't seem to be a break in the migration anywhere.

"There's no way we can land," I say. "Even in the daytime. Those things must live close to shore; we'll never sail through them unnoticed."

"Do you think they'll come into the current?" Steffi whispers.

"What do you mean?"

“This current we’re in. If they don’t come into the current, we could sail past the whole island and try circling it, like we planned. Maybe the other side is monster-free. Maybe we can land there.”

“I don’t know. That lone monster we ran into on our way to Anansi Island was in the current. I’m not sure how we’ll get through this.”

“Well,” Steffi says, “the sensible thing to do then would be to stay well away from the shore during the day and float around the island at night when the monsters are all on land. Right?”

I put the telescope down. “That might work.”

She scoots down into the boat. “Just makes you wonder though...are those monsters the terror from the sea? Or are they the island’s evil?”

I raise the telescope back to my eye. and peer through it. And I see something else.

Red lava spurts from the volcanos. It gushes into the air, but something’s odd about it. I zoom in, but it’s hard to see through all the smoke. The lava breaks into tiny bits that stream upward before floating down to the island, moving to and fro like its riding some weird air current. I study the little blobs of light now streaming around the island. The more I watch them, the more I realize they aren’t bits of lava after all.

They’re living things.

“What’s that glow?” Steffi whispers.

“Can you see it?” I say. “It’s coming from the volcanos. Little blobs of light.”

“I see it. Faintly.”

“I think,” I say, “the monsters are the terror from the sea.”

“Oh, yeah?” Steffi says.

“Yeah. And those blobs of light...I’ll bet you ten to one, they’re the evil we’ll have to deal with when we land.”

MAGIC

The current takes us so swiftly towards our destination that halfway through the next day even Steffi can see the island's smoking peaks. We turn the canoe to the right and paddle until we're out of the current. We've decided to wait until close to nightfall before we get any closer. Steffi spends most of the afternoon staring into the sea's orange depths, searching for an errant sea monster. She finally spots one.

"There," she whispers as a snaky shadow slides under the canoe. She cranes her head over the side, thinks better about it, and ducks down, curling her knees to her chest. I keep watching the shadow as I grip the boat's sides, a tiny knot forming in my stomach. But the monster glides towards the island as if it has more important things to worry about than a boy and a girl in a canoe. After a while my fingers relax.

"It must not have seen us," I say.

"Maybe the canoe is a safe zone," Steffi suggests.

I turn to Spike. "Is it?"

The little bat flutters over the bow, staring after the sea monster's shadow. He chirps. I turn to Steffi

"Not exactly," I say. "But Spike doesn't think that sea monster can see the canoe."

She frowns. “That one we ran into on our way to Anansi Island sure saw it.”

I shake my head. “If you think back on it, it only attacked the rafts. It left when it realized there was nothing on the rafts for it to eat. Boy, Steve made a good call when he told us to get into the canoe that day, although he did it because he was worried about the rafts capsizing, not because it put us in the monster’s blind spot.”

Steffi sits up and stares at me. “Jack, you really think those things can’t see us if we’re in the canoe?”

I watch the little bat flutter over the bow. “Remember that tree trunk we used to make the canoe? There’s something...magical about it. And the shellac Goliath put on it with his sticky goo—there’s something magical about that too.”

Steffi’s eyes flit from the chirping bat to me. “Explain.”

I’m trying to form into words what Spike is chirping at me. “OK. You remember how we were talking about how each island has an evil and a good?”

“Go on.”

“Each island also has some type of substance that, when you use it, builds up your arsenal against the evil things. This wood from the tree on Mukade Island is unbreakable. Even when the sea monster smashed the boat and Pooky attacked it, it didn’t even crack. The sticks and outrigger came undone from the canoe because they were tied with jungle grass, but they were still intact.”

Steffi nods. “I’m following you. It makes sense. Remember when the island kids stole the canoe and then got struck by lightning? They all got fried. The canoe was a little charred, but fine.” She stares at her feet. “You can’t even see the char anymore. It was all superficial; the seawater washed it clean.”

“Goliath’s goo...that’s unbreakable too,” I say. “Now that the canoe and outriggers are sealed with it, they’re almost invincible. Same with the rafts we made on Anansi Island.”

Steffi frowns and gazes at the arm she broke in a fight with the kids on Anansi Island. It's still encased in Goliath's goo-cast. "If that's true, how the hell am I going to get this thing off?"

"There are ways," I say, listening to Spike's chirps. "You have to have a magical object to break it."

"Such as?"

"Well, when we carved the canoe, we used your knife. That broke the wood easier than anything else. It'll probably break your cast too. It's about the only thing that can. Well, that and maybe the axe."

Steffi laughs. "I'm not gonna try breaking my cast with the axe. I'll probably take my arm off with it."

"Anyway, the point is, we're floating on an almost invincible, practically invisible boat. If we stay low in it, we could probably sail right through those monsters without them even noticing us."

"Hang on," she says. "We used regular old fire to burn the tree trunk into the canoe shape. And the branches came from that tree, but the sea monster attacked the rafts. It *saw* those."

I turn to Spike, who ponders this, then chirps again.

"He thinks the branches weren't as magical as the actual tree trunk. And the trees *allowed* us to use the fire."

She frowns. "Come again?"

"That whole glade where we built the boat—that was a magical place. So maybe the fire we built in it was magical too."

Steffi leans back and rubs her head. "This is all so ridiculously complicated. But if it means those slimy swimming snakes can't see us, I'm good with that. I still think we should travel around the island at night though."

"I think so, too," I say. "Better not take any chances."

We move back into the current when Steffi decides we only have a couple of hours until night-time. A few sea monsters glide under the canoe, and one breaks the surface and swims

not ten yards off the bow but doesn't even turn its ugly head our way. It's intent on reaching the shore before night time.

"I wonder why they all crawl out of the sea at night," Steffi whispers.

"To feed, maybe?"

"On what? That island looks as barren as the last one."

"Yeah, but Butterfly Island wasn't all barren, was it? Half of it was paradise, when we finally got to the right side."

She nods. "Let's hope we find a side of this island that's like that too."

<<<>>>

When the lights click off for the day, I pull out the telescope and watch the mass of monsters boil out of the sea and onto the shore and the red things, whatever they are, burst from the volcanos. They swarm around the island but don't come out to sea. The current swiftly moves us down the shoreline, past the mountains that occasionally light up the sky with puffs of red.

"They all move inland," I murmur, watching the sea beasts, so lithe in the water but lumbering on land, scuffle up the beach.

"Can you see what they're doing?" Steffi says.

"They're all heading the same way, to the base of those volcanoes. But I can't really see what's happening when they get there. There's so much low-lying smoke; they just disappear into it."

We move down the island's shore in silence. Steffi finally says, "You know, if what Spike says is true, and those sea monsters can't see the canoe, we could pull up along the beach now, while they're all preoccupied with moving inland."

I shake my head. "There's those other things flying around out there. I don't think landing at night is safe."

I scan farther down the beach. "We're going to have to row to get out of this current at some point," I say. "If we stay in

it, it'll shoot us right past the island and head us on out to the next one."

"Let's wait until we get to the end of the island," Steffi says.

I nod. "There should be another current going the opposite way on the other side," I say, remembering Frank's discovery on Butterfly Island. "We could scout the entire shoreline before daybreak."

Steffi yawns. "I wish I had the foresight to take a nap this afternoon."

We drift along the shoreline. Whenever I gaze through the telescope, I see the same thing. Sea monsters streaming inland. Little glowing red things zooming around the island. The sea monsters finally all exit the sea, and after a couple of hours, the shores grow deserted. Even the red flying things settle down somewhere. I can't see them anymore.

"Everything's disappeared," I whisper.

"Great," Steffi says. "I mean, it's good in a way, but now how will we know if the far side has sea monsters and those glowing bugs as well?"

"You think they're bugs?" I say.

She shrugs. "All these islands have bugs. Centipedes, the spider, the butterfly...makes sense those things must be some kind of weird insect too."

I strain through the telescope as my eyes catch something. "Hey, I think there's a little inlet over there. Let's go investigate it."

"Why?" Steffi says, yawning harder now. "What if those insects—or whatever they are—try to investigate *us*?"

"Maybe Spike can make it a safe zone."

"Again, why?"

"Well, it's a small area, it looks sheltered, and if the sea monsters or insects can't get in, we can at least get out of this current and have a safe spot close to shore where we can figure out what to do next. I'm getting tired of staring through

this telescope, you're yawning like crazy, and we could use some sleep, someplace safe."

We head for the little inlet. It's small, maybe thirty feet across, and not very long. A rocky cliff lines one side and the other side has a gravelly beach. We keep the boat bobbing in the water, closer to the cliff.

"You sure this is safe?" Steffi whispers. "We don't know when those sea monsters head back this way. Or if those insect things can fly over the water."

I turn to Spike. He whistles softly. "He says this place is safe from both those things. He doesn't have to do anything to make it any safer. We can sleep easy, as long as we stay away from shore."

"Good," Steffi says, slumping onto the canoe's floor. "I'm done for."

In no time, she's snoring lightly. I tie the canoe to a jutting rock and follow her into a restless sleep.

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"Jack," Steffi whispers. "Wake up. The lights are on."

I sit up and rub my eyes.

"I don't get how you can sleep at all once those lights click on," Steffi says, reaching over the canoe's side to scoop up some seawater for breakfast. She yanks her hand back. "Ow!"

"What?" I say, staring at her.

She cradles her hand with her broken arm and peers over the side. "Something stung me. Holy crap! Look, Jack."

I follow her gaze. The water below us pulses with pink, blue, and purple hues. Jellyfish is piled upon jellyfish. The entire bay is crammed with the things. It's like we're floating on a bed of multicolored, undulating blobs.

"Where did they come from?" I say. "They weren't here last night."

"Maybe they were but we didn't notice," Steffi says, grimacing.

“You’d think we’d notice the color. Is your hand OK?”

She gazes at it. A line of angry purple dots crawls up her palm. “We’ll have to row back into the sea so I can dunk it in the seawater,” she says. “And so we can get some breakfast. I’m starving.”

I glance at the jellyfish again, then scan the beach. The sea monsters have either made their way back to the sea or they’re still hidden in the island’s smoke. “No wonder Spike said this inlet was safe from the sea monsters,” I say. “I don’t suppose they’d want to swim through these things.”

“They’re kinda pretty,” Steffi says, staring at the jellyfish. “In a poisonous, owie sort of way.”

We move the canoe into the open, jellyfish-free sea, and Steffi soaks her arm in its healing waters. We drink our fill of the seawater, then try to figure out what to do next.

“Let’s look at the map again,” Steffi says. “Maybe it’ll show the coastline and a decent place to pull in.”

I take out the map and unroll it. The picture has scrolled to the top of the island, revealing not only it, but the entirety of the new island past it. Steffi scrutinizes the new island, then sits bolt upright.

“Jack! That’s Mukade Island!”

“Impossible.” I stare at the squiggly lines.

“It sure isn’t. Look! There’s our beach. And the woods. And the mountain. Do you realize what this means?”

I nod, my stomach sinking. It means we haven’t been going in a straight line like I thought. We aren’t any nearer to finding our way out of this place. All this time, we’ve been traveling in a big, damn circle.

THE TRAIL

I collapse in the boat, feeling sick. It's just a big loop...a never-ending circle. There's no way out.

"This is *great*," Steffi says. "If we've come full circle, that means this must be the only island left. And the person we need to find must be on it somewhere, right?"

"Look at it though, Steffi," I say. "It's all rock and smoking volcanoes. We've sailed almost halfway around it and haven't seen anything."

"Oh, for crying out loud, Jack, don't get all morose on me now. There's always been a good chance we'd never escape this place anyway; don't give up hope and get all whiny until we've at least checked this island out. If it *is* the last island in the loop, it's gotta hold *some* secret."

"Or it doesn't hold anything," I say, refusing to feel happy yet.

"It *has* to have something. At least another box for us to find."

I lean my head against the bow. "So? If whatever's in that box doesn't teleport us out of here, what use is it?"

She picks up her oar. "What about that guy you're trying to find? What if he's here somewhere, on this island? Damn it, Jack, you convinced me we'd find someone out here. We

aren't giving up now. We're landing on that island, and we're going to explore it."

"What about the sea monsters? And those flying things?"

"Well, the sea monsters can't stay on land all day. Yesterday, you saw them slither back into the sea mid-morning. And I'll bet you my knife that the insects only come out at night."

"They did kind of vanish," I say. "I haven't seen anything flying around since a couple of hours after dark fell."

"Let's duck back into Jellyfish Inlet, wait until the sea monsters skedaddle, then land this boat." She grips the oar and winces. "Man, that still smarts. The sea water helped, but I have a feeling I'm gonna have these welts for a while. I'm a mess, aren't I? One arm broken, the other one covered in jellyfish stings."

She breaks into a smile, and I force my lips to smile back. I pick up the other oar. She's right. We still have to explore this island. I can give myself up to doom and gloom after we do that.

If we survive.

"I'm gonna fill up the pot with sea water," Steffi says, lowering it over the side. "We'll need it if we have to trek far inland. We've got some coconuts and fruit from Butterfly Island that we can bring with us, but the fruit is going bad already, and lugging a ton of coconuts won't be very practical."

"Lugging that pot won't be either," I say. "There has to be some food somewhere on this island, if it works like the other ones. I say we sail to the other side, see what else we find."

Spike flits to my shoulder and chirps. "What'd he say?" Steffi asks.

I frown. "He agrees with you. He won't say why, but he thinks your 'Jellyfish Inlet' is where we should land."

"We'll just have to avoid the tentacles," she says, dunking the pot into the sea as I start to paddle. "Anyway, if we keep the pot in the canoe, we can always come back for it, if we get thirsty and we're close enough."

As we pull into the now aptly named Jellyfish Inlet, the sea monsters come into view. They slither across the bleak landscape like ungainly lizards and plunge into the sea, leaving swarthy trails in the gravel. It takes about an hour for all of them to make the journey, and even then we wait, worried about stragglers. Not one sea monster gets near our little hiding place.

“One good thing,” Steffi says as she jumps gingerly from the canoe to dry land and begins dragging it onto the beach, “we can follow their trails.”

“What?” I say.

“The trails all those sea monsters made pulling their eely bodies through the sand. They’ll be pretty easy to follow, and we can see where they went last night. I mean, those things move slow as snails on land. It can’t be far to their congregation place, and maybe that’ll tell us something about why they crawl to the mountains every night.”

Her plan sounds as good as any I can think of (actually, I can’t think of one good idea), so once we take a long drink of seawater from the pot, we head out. I carry two coconuts under one arm, not having any other means of transporting them, and hold the axe in my free hand. Steffi has a couple of coconuts too, and she stuffed the brass knuckles we found on Butterfly Island in her back pocket. Her knife dangles in the jeweled scabbard tied around her waist.

“I sure wish I’d kept that backpack from Mukade Island,” I say, hefting the coconuts into a more comfortable position under my arm.

“It wasn’t a very good one,” Steffi says. “Besides, if we run across some creepy crawlies, we can use the coconuts to defend ourselves. They don’t have much heft, but they might do some damage if we throw ’em right.”

I glance back at the canoe. It seems so unprotected, resting on the beach. I asked Spike to make a safe zone around it, but for

some reason he refused. We left the telescope behind; it was too bulky to carry, and I worry about it lying around for anyone to find. Granted, we haven't seen a soul yet, but that doesn't mean there might not be kids here somewhere. They could be hiding close by, watching us, waiting for their chance to pounce.

"Do *you* think there *are* any kids here?" I ask as I scan the smoking landscape. I'm already starting to drip with sweat; this place is miserably hot.

"Dunno," Steffi says. "Maybe this island'll be deserted, like Butterfly Island was."

We follow the multitude of trails left by the slithering sea serpents. After a half-hour of trudging, we meet up with the smoky wisps that hover near the base of the volcanoes. I wipe my brow. Almost unbearable heat permeates from the ground through the soles of my sneakers. I glance at Steffi's bare feet. The gravel must be scorching them to shreds.

"Are your feet OK?" I ask.

She coughs. "I'm all right so far. Don't care for this smoke, though. Let's take a break."

We sit on a large rock. I pull a half-squished fruit out of my front pocket and share it with her. She sucks on it and scrutinizes the ground.

"Look, Jack. The trails are turning to the left."

The smoke stings my eyes as they follow her pointing finger. "We can try to follow them a little bit, I guess. But I'm not sure how long either of us are gonna last in this smoke."

We inch along the trail. The smoke gets denser. Steffi grabs my hand so we don't lose each other, and I almost drop the coconuts.

"This is crazy," I gasp. "We're gonna suffocate out here."

"Just a little further...ow! Damn it!"

She stops short. I take a step forward and my left knee smashes into the same rock wall she must have hit. I almost crumple to the ground.

“Well,” Steffi gasps, “We’ve hit the base of the mountains.”

I reach up the rock, trying to feel for a ledge. “It goes straight up,” I say. “Where did those sea monsters go after they hit this?”

Steffi peers at the ground. “The trails follow the cliff. Let’s go a little farther.”

I nod. “OK, but I hope we can find our way out of this smoke before we pass out.”

We move carefully, single-file, each of us keeping one hand against the cliff. Steffi walks ahead, coughing and peering at the ground. Suddenly she falls sideways, right into where the cliff should be but now isn’t.

“A tunnel!” she whispers, her voice scratchy from the smoke. She ducks in. “Air is clearer in here. C’mon!”

I follow her. Spike chirps and grabs my hair, and I gaze around in the green light. Miraculously, no smoke enters the cave. I breathe in stale air—stale, but smoke-free.

Steffi sinks to the floor, rubbing her feet. I expect her soles to be blistered from the hot gravel, but they look just a shade pinker than usual. “They aren’t too hot, are they?” I ask.

“The gravel was rough, but I don’t feel much heat. Let’s break open a coconut,” she says. “I could use a drink and something to eat, and I’m sick and tired of carrying them.”

She attacks one with the knife, punctures a hole in it, and guzzles the milk inside. I go ahead and break open another one, and we both drink and eat our fill. I give Spike some of the fleshy nut to nibble on.

Steffi wipes her mouth. “What do we do now?”

I gaze at the slick ground, swept clean of dirt and rocks by hundreds of scaly bodies sliding across it. “The sea monsters definitely came in here,” I say. “This tunnel must lead somewhere, but I can’t believe all those hundreds of sea monsters all came through here. There must be tunnels scattered throughout the bases of all these mountains for them to use.”

“I can’t believe how smoke-free it is in here,” Steffi murmurs. “And cool, do you notice? Not like how you’d expect the inside of a volcano to feel at all.”

“It doesn’t feel that cool to me,” I say, wiping the sweat from my brow and straining my eyes to see in the darkness. When Spike grabs my hair, the tunnel is washed with a dim green light, but it isn’t enough to see far. “Let’s try following the trail. At least for a little while. The tunnel is up ahead.”

“If there are more tunnels like you say,” Steffi whispers as we creep forward, “I bet they all end up at some huge communal room in the center of this island. Kind of like how that mountain on Mukade Island was set up.”

“That’s where we’ll probably find the box, then,” I say. “Like *you* said, the boxes always seem to be in a cave of some sort.”

The farther we trek down the tunnel, the warmer it gets. Not smoky like outside, but steamy, like a sauna. Sweat drips down my brow into my eyes. Steffi’s hand, clamping my shoulder, feels clammy even through my shirt, although the shirt is soaked at this point anyway.

“God, it’s hot,” I say.

“It isn’t too bad,” Steffi says. “Can’t you ask Spike to fly down the tunnel and let us know where it ends? Wouldn’t that be faster?”

“If he leaves, I’ll be blind,” I say.

“I’m blind already.”

“Yeah, but at least *I* can see a little, with Spike’s help. If something sneaks up on us from behind...”

She grips my shoulder tighter, but her voice remains steady. “Those sea monsters only come here during the night.”

“What about those flying things?”

“I bet they only come out at night too, like the serpents. Maybe we’ll stumble upon the helper thing, like the bats or Goliath, but we should be safe from the evil things. Don’t you think?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Spike, do you mind going on ahead and scouting it out?”

Spike chirps.

“He *does* mind,” I tell Steffi.

“Why’s your bat so ornery today?” she says as we inch forward. “He won’t set up safe zones, he won’t scout things out—he isn’t acting very helperish at all.”

“He has his reasons,” I say. “We might not know what they are, but he’s still helping us, Steffi. In his way, not ours.”

We continue in silence. The air is thick and hot and I’m not sure how much longer we can go on, whether Spike scouts for us or not.

“I see something,” Steffi says. “There’s a reddish glow. You see that?”

“Spike,” I whisper. “Would you *please* just go check it out? Just this once?”

Spike lets go of my hair, and red shadows replace the green glow. The little bat flits ahead, visible in the slight light. He turns a bend and disappears.

Then I hear his high, warning shriek. I pull up quick, my heart hammering.

Whatever’s around that bend, it can’t be good.

JELLIES

Spike!" I hiss. "Come back!"

But the little bat doesn't, and now I'm really afraid. His shrieks have stopped. All I hear is an ominous quiet punctuated only by Steffi's nervous breathing and a distant, familiar sound, like waves lapping on a beach.

I heft the axe in front of me. Steffi lets go of my shoulder, and I hear her knife slide out of its scabbard. We move cautiously and peek around the bend.

I'm glad we didn't rush around it. Not five feet from the turn, a huge pit filled with steaming lava blocks our route.

"Where the hell is Spike?" Steffi whispers.

I scan the room. Steam billows from the pit. The lava, maybe ten feet below us, boils and smacks against the rock. I can't see how large the pit is; sweat from my brow stings my eyes so bad I can hardly keep them open.

"Spike!" I whisper, wiping my eyes.

No response.

Steffi sinks to the ground and stares at the bubbling lava. "What do we do now?"

We only have two choices. Stay here and search for Spike or go back. "Where could he have disappeared to?" I say.

A huge burst of lava sprays into the air. We scramble backwards to avoid the hissing, boiling, liquid rock as it spatters across the room. My insides heave.

“You don’t think...” Steffi whispers, gripping my hand with her good one.

“Oh, my God,” I say. Hot tears are already pushing into my eyes, threatening to burst out, mimicking the lava burbling up from the deep pit.

We hide behind the bend and call for Spike for what seems like forever, but it is useless. My throat is parched and dry and I’m beginning to feel lightheaded. Fear and sorrow, mixed with the intense heat, are starting to scramble my thoughts.

“We should go.” Steffi still sounds clear and reasonable. “We can’t do any good here. We need to get back to the canoe before dark, and you look like you’re gonna pass out, Jack.”

I wipe my brow, wondering vaguely how Steffi can look so cool and collected while I’m not only panicking but feel like I’m going to drop dead from the heat. I finally nod. Steffi takes my hand and we begin inching our way back up the passage, our free hands gripping the walls for guidance. We take a break when we reach the end of the tunnel, and kill the last two coconuts before stumbling back to the canoe in silence.

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“It’s odd, isn’t it?” Steffi murmurs.

She sits in the canoe’s bow, studying the jellyfish with a contemplative look on her face. I don’t understand how she can think about anything except the loss of Spike, but it seems she isn’t dwelling on that at all.

I am, though.

When we lived on Mukade Island, Spike’s father sacrificed himself so Steffi and I could escape the giant centipedes. He had voluntarily done it, but the guilt had gnawed at me for days. Rob had convinced me that Spike Sr.’s sacrifice was all a part of some grander plan and I shouldn’t feel guilty.

After a while I overcame my grief, although the guilt never quite disappeared.

But this is different. I'd goaded Spike Jr. into doing something he hadn't wanted to do. And he's gone because of me. If I hadn't insisted that he scout ahead, he wouldn't have flown smack into danger. I loved that little bat. This guilt will never go away.

"It's all my fault." I don't mean to say it out loud, but I do.

Steffi pulls her gaze away from the jellyfish, reaches out, and takes my hand. "No, it isn't. I was the one whining about how unhelpful Spike was behaving, if anything, blame me." She sighs. "But maybe what happened to Spike is all part of the grand plan. And we don't really know that he's gone, do we?"

"What do you mean? He got sucked into that boiling pit, what else could have happened?"

"No, I agree, I'm pretty sure that's what happened too. But I was just thinking...we're presuming that there are other tunnels like the one we used, right? All the tunnels must end at that pit, or similar pits, don't you think? The monsters go in every night. And then they all traipse out again in the morning."

I have no idea where she's going with this. "So?"

"So...there must be a reason why they make the trek each night. That lava was definitely hot stuff, and if we fell into it, I'm pretty sure we'd be toast, but what about those sea monsters? Why do they go in there?"

I don't understand what any of this has to do with the loss of Spike, so I slump deeper into my corner and don't answer.

Steffi continues. "They use it, I think. The lava. Maybe the sea monsters feed off it, or something. I don't know. But I bet they don't boil away if they fall into it. And maybe Spike hasn't either. He's from this world. Maybe he's immune to it."

I shake my head and rub my eyes.

"And maybe, Jack...maybe there's a way for us to get immune to it too."

I glance up at her. Her eyes are sparkling, like they've just figured out something of great importance. I'm too miserable to catch her enthusiasm. "If Spike is immune to it, why did he disappear?"

"I don't know. But Jack, I was thinking...maybe that pit is like the pond on Anansi Island. Maybe, if you can swim in it, it immunizes you to something. But unlike the pond, where we could all just jump in, we can't get into the lava pit until we have an immunity to *that*."

I sigh. "And how will we get an immunity to boiling lava, Steffi?"

"I don't know; you're the one who usually figures these things out. What do *you* think?"

I can't answer her. My head is throbbing and I'm too miserable to focus on figuring out Steffi's complicated immunity theory. I close my eyes. Dimly I hear a splash, and then very loudly:

"Son of a *bitch*, that hurts!"

My eyes jerk open. Steffi cradles her good arm, now covered in thick purple welts. Tears stream out of her eyes as she grits her teeth.

"What the hell happened?" I lean forward and grab her arm. She yanks it away.

"Ow, dammit, don't touch it! I put it in the seawater. I was thinking..."

She stamps one foot and curses for a few minutes before continuing.

"...I was thinking: what if the *jellyfish* make you immune?"

I blink. "Come again?"

She wipes her tear-streaked cheeks. "The jellyfish. Everything seems to have a purpose on these islands, otherwise why would they put 'em there? The jellyfish have to have some purpose, or they wouldn't be filling this little inlet. You don't see 'em anywhere else, just here. Why are they here?"

I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

“I got stung earlier, just a little sting, but when we were walking through that tunnel and you said the heat felt like it was burning your...*ow!*...feet, I didn’t feel hardly anything. You had sneakers on, and I was barefoot, but my feet stayed cool. Same in the...*dammit!*...sand. The sand was rough and gravelly, but it didn’t feel all that hot. So. I started thinking...*ow!*... maybe the jellyfish stings make you immune to the heat. And then you can go into the pit.”

“And why,” I say, “would we want to go into a pit full of lava?”

She blows vainly on the welts, hoping to take away the sting. “I don’t know, but the pit wouldn’t be there if we weren’t supposed to do something with it. That’s how the game works.”

I’m still feeling too disconsolate to really care but have to admit she has a point.

And later—after the lights click off, the sea monsters make their nightly migration inland, and the glowing red insects burst out of the volcanoes—when Steffi’s eyes suddenly roll back and she faints dead on the bottom of the boat, I have to concede that she probably has a damn *good* point.

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“They sure are pretty,” I whisper.

“Yeah, they are—would you just put your arm in there, already?”

Steffi gives me an annoyed glare. Not for the first time do I realize how much braver she is than me. She’s about the only person I know who will voluntarily tolerate intense pain if she figures there’s a benefit to it. She was like that with the poisonous spider web on Anansi Island, and she did the same with the jellies here, but I’m not that brave. I don’t like pain and I’ll avoid it when I can. And I’m remembering a time, years ago, when I’d gotten stung by a jellyfish. It was one of the worst experiences I’d ever been through. Well, up until the point I got thrust into this insane world.

To tell the truth, I'm also not excited about breaking down and bawling like a baby in front of Steffi, especially because she did no such thing. Her eyes voluntarily watered when she got stung, sure, and she cussed a lot, but she didn't scream and blubber and turn into a complete wuss, which is what I'm afraid will happen to me. The fear of that almost outweighs the fear of the pain.

I try to stall.

"How do we know this will work? Just because you fainted doesn't prove anything."

"Of course, it does. It always works that way. You have to go into a coma for the metamorphosis to take effect."

"Metamorphosis?"

She frowns. "You know what I'm talking about and stop stalling."

I lick my lips. "You didn't faint the *first* time you got stung."

"No, but remember Steve and Bhasker on Anansi Island? When they got exposed to lightning? We got exposed too, but we didn't lose our immunity to the seawater like they did. We didn't get *enough* of the lightning is why. When I got stung by the jellies that first time, I didn't feel the scorching heat in that tunnel like you did, sure, but I felt *some* heat. And I didn't pass out like I did this time, which means that first jellyfish sting hadn't fully changed me. I bet this time, when I go into that tunnel, I'll feel no heat whatsoever. I bet I can *bathe* in that lava and I won't feel a thing."

"I don't see why we have to go back in the tunnel," I say stubbornly.

"Yes, you do. You're just acting all chicken and are trying to stall for time. Put your damn arm in the water before I push you overboard."

I screw my eyes shut, take a deep breath, and shove my arm into the mass of floating jellies. A second before the pain hits, I feel the rubbery tops of the jellyfish on my palm, but

then an excruciating sting sears up my arm and paralyzes me to the point where I think I will never move again.

A scream bursts out of my mouth.

Steffi yanks my arm out of the water, and I fall back into the canoe. The initial scream was involuntary, but now I feel the tears bursting from between my eyelids, and I will myself not to sob or cuss.

“Quit playing the martyr and let it out,” Steffi says. “It hurts like hell; there’s nothing wrong with letting the world know it. The only ones that’ll hear you are me and the jellies, and none of us care.”

She might not, but for some stupid reason, I do. I take deep breaths until the pain subsides a bit. “What do we do now?” I gasp.

Steffi yawns. “Go to sleep, I guess. We’re safe here in the inlet, you’re probably going to pass out soon anyway, and then tomorrow morning, when the sea monsters have skedad-dled, we’ll try the tunnel again.”

I reach for the pot of sea water, hoping to relieve the sting. Steffi grabs my hand.

“No,” she says. “Let it hurt. You need to make sure you’re immune. You have to wait until *after* you pass out before you use the seawater.”

“I don’t see why,” I moan.

“Trust me. It’ll stop stinging in a few minutes.”

I sigh and crumple to the floor. After the day’s trek, waiting for Steffi to wake from her coma, and getting stung by the jellies, I’m exhausted. I close my eyes and, despite the burning arm, drift into a dreamless sleep.

But when the lights click on and I wake, I can’t tell if I’m *really* awake or still dreaming.

Because the island, Steffi, the canoe—even the jellyfish—have completely disappeared.

THE DOOR

A door. A shiny red door. My feet clunk along the corridor leading to it. I stop in front of the door. Already I can smell that weird stench permeating from the cracks around the red door—a combination of rotten fish and lilac. I try to remember back to the first time I smelled that stench. It seems like years ago now.

Back then, there was only a brass knocker. You had to knock to get in. Now there is a knob. I take a deep breath, grab it, and yank the door open.

Gloomy light fills the room. Behind a stark metal desk, a shadowy figure sits up in surprise.

“What are you doing here?” it says.

I step into the familiar room, squinting. I can’t make out any of the shadowy figure’s features, but I know who it is. It’s the same person who pushed a button the day I turned fifteen and sent me to this horrible place, all those months ago.

“Who are you?” I blurt. “What am I doing here? What are *any* of us doing here?”

The figure shrinks into the shadows. “You aren’t supposed to be here. How did you get in?”

I’m still not sure if I’m really here or if this is some absurd dream, but I step into the room. “I made a wish. My fifteenth

birthday wish, and you told me it was the wrong answer. And you pushed a button and sent me here.”

“What did you wish for?” the shadowy figure says. “I’ve forgotten.”

“Does it matter?” I take a shaky step toward the desk. If I can get close enough—if I can just see what my tormenter looks like—

“Everything matters,” the figure says. “I’ll advise you to stop moving, please.”

I ignore the command, take another step, and smack my nose against something hard.

“That’s as far as you go, boy. I tried to warn you. Now, answer my question. What did you wish for?”

I rub my nose, then put my hand out. My palm touches a flat surface, like glass. A forcefield of some sort.

“I wished for no more wishes.”

“Ah, yes. I remember now. I got quite a chuckle out of that one. Clever. Most kids wish for money, you know.”

“Did it make any difference? What I wished for?”

The figure shifts in the shadows. “No matter what you had said, boy, you would have ended up here.”

“Can you tell me *why*?”

The figure raises a skeletal hand and scratches its head. “No. Not yet.”

“What about my brother? Cody? Is he here too?”

The questions pile up in my mouth, fighting to get out. I catch a glimpse of one bulbous yellow eye as whatever it is sitting behind that desk scrutinizes me.

“He could be.”

“Then...”

“Sorry, boy. No more questions.”

He—or she, or *it*—reaches across the desk, a long finger now positioned over a big button. “Wait!” I yell, but too late. The finger plunges downward.

A mind-numbing pain fills my head.

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“You okay?” Steffi says.

She hovers above me, staring at my sweaty face with concerned blue eyes. I try to sit up, but the headache is almost unbearable.

“Here, drink this,” she says, holding some seawater in her cupped hands. I slurp it down and the pain eases a bit. I rub my temples.

Steffi sits back. “Boy, did you have me worried. I didn’t get all crazy like that when I passed out from the jellyfish stings, did I?”

I shake my head. “No. What did I do?”

“You rolled around screaming, like you were on fire.”

“Well, my head sure feels like it.” I pull myself to a sitting position and look around. We’re still bobbing in the little inlet, but the jellies are gone. I lean over the canoe’s edge and peer at the inlet’s sandy bottom. “Where’d they go?”

Steffi shrugs. “They disappeared about half an hour ago. Just kinda floated down and toward the cliff. Maybe there’s a ledge under there where they hide during parts of the day. So, what happened? Bad nightmares? Cause I don’t remember dreaming anything.”

“I dreamt about a red door,” I say.

She frowns. “Like the one we had to enter when we turned fifteen? To make our wish?”

I nod. “Exactly. Your door was red, too?”

“Yeah. I remember walking down a long corridor, and there was this bright red door with a knocker in the middle. And when I knocked, the smell...ugh.”

“Rotten fish and lilacs.”

She laughs. “That’s not what I smelled. More like sewage mixed with oranges. The orange smell was pleasant, the sewage smell made me want to puke.”

I take another drink of seawater, my curiosity overwhelming the throbbing in my head. “Was there a big metal desk?”

“Yes. And someone sitting behind it with a raspy voice and big, ugly eyes. They were yellow. Like a cat’s, but not pretty like a cat’s.”

“That’s so weird,” I say. “Except for the smell, you’re describing my experience exactly. But you lived all the way in Scotland, and I was on the California coast.”

She shrugs. “Maybe there’s a whole race of beings with ugly yellow eyes, and they’re controlling the planet.”

“But the door, and the corridor...don’t you think it’s strange? You know, we’ve never really talked about this before. We’ve only talked about the different things we wished for. I wonder if the others had the same experience as us. The red door and the corridor, I mean. And the smell.”

She frowns. “You think maybe we were all in the same place?”

“I dunno. I mean, we’re all in the same place now, which means whoever controls all this must be able to teleport us, or something, right? So maybe once we all entered that corridor—well, maybe it was the *same* corridor.”

She snorts. “That’s crazy, Jack. I mean, *everyone* gets a wish when they turn fifteen. Everyone in the world, right? You know how many kids would be traipsing up and down that corridor if that were the case? There’d be a long line waiting to get in. When it was my turn, I was the only one.”

“Me too,” I say. “But I dunno, it just seems weird. That’s all I’m saying. Anyway, the thing—the person, or the alien, or whatever it was—this time it was surprised to see me.”

“Yeah, but you were just dreaming, Jack.”

I shake my head. “It felt so real. Exactly like it felt when it actually happened the first time. And when it pushed that button, boy did I get the same intense pain.”

She puts her palm on my forehead. “You okay now?”

“Yeah, it feels better. It’s going away much quicker than the first time; the seawater really helps. Anyway, I think it means something. The dream.”

She shrugs. “Maybe it does, but it won’t help us much right now.”

I fall silent and contemplate the jelly-less inlet. I’m not sure if I agree with her. I made a connection somehow, with whoever that person is, and I’ll bet anything the experience I just had was real. Maybe my actual body was still in the boat, but my *mind* was somewhere else entirely.

And wherever that person is, he (or she) must know it’s real, too.

“If this is a game, like we think,” I say, “do you think it’s some sort of entertainment? Like there are a bunch of people watching us right now on some TV show? Or do you think it’s an experiment?”

Steffi rubs her head, and I vaguely wonder if I’m transferring my headache to her by talking about this. “An experiment? What do you mean?”

“Like what scientists do to rats in mazes. All these clues we have to figure out—what if we’re put here on purpose so somebody can study how the human brain works in stressful situations or something?”

She shrugs. “I suppose that could be true. But why?”

That’s the question we always come back to. Why? And it’s a question I don’t have an answer to.

“I think the person we’re looking for will be able to explain it,” I say.

“Do you think he’s on this island?”

“He has to be. It’s the only island left on the map. If we keep going with the current, we’ll end up on Mukade Island again, and that just starts the whole journey over, right? The person in my dream hinted that Cody might be here. Maybe it’s something my subconscious just wanted to hear—maybe

that's why I dreamt it—but if Cody is still alive, he has to be on this island.”

“Yeah, but there's nothing here except spitting volcanoes and a big, fat lava pit,” Steffi says.

I sit up and take an oar. “We haven't circled all the way around the island like we originally said we would. I think we should do that. If we row close to shore, we'll round the island and end up in the current that takes us back towards Butterfly Island. We can circle the whole island in the daytime because we know those sea monsters won't pay any attention to the canoe. We oughtta try it.”

“What about the tunnel? I want to go back and explore it again.”

“Think about it, Steffi. There are probably tunnels leading to the inside of the mountains all over this island. How else could all those zillions of sea monsters get in otherwise?”

“Well,” Steffi says, reluctantly picking up the other oar, “we don't know for sure they all go down to that pit. That's just our guess.”

“If nothing else, we'll round the island and return to Jellyfish Inlet and start again,” I say. “It should only take a day, at most. There might be a whole village of kids on the other side. We shouldn't rule it out.”

She nods. “You're right, I get it. And it's only one extra day. I just really wanted to try it out, to see how close I could get to that pit.” She sighs. “I wish we still had Spike. I feel safer when he's around.”

A sadness washes over me at the mention of the little bat. I push it away and start paddling. “He'd have wanted us to continue,” I say. “He was sent here to help us, but we'll just have to make it on our own from now on.”

THE VILLAGE

Look at that,” Steffi whispers, pulling one hand off the oar so she can point. “Smoke.”

“How’s that anything new?” I say, my eyes swiveling from her to a sea monster gliding under the boat. I still cringe every time I spot one, but they sure don’t seem to notice us. Every once in a while one will turn its head and hesitate, as if maybe it hears the splashing of the oars, but it always moves on.

“It’s coming from way up the side of that mountain. And there’s *green* around it.”

I finally pull my eyes away from the sea and focus on where Steffi’s finger still points. I grab the telescope and train it on a rock outcrop high up the mountain’s side. She’s right. Smoke. From a *house*. A stone house with a stone chimney surrounded by other little stone houses with stone chimneys. They’re in a tiny glade with tall green trees and a sliver of a waterfall that burbles through a crack higher up the cliff face before plunging to the beach far below.

“That’s it,” I say, my heart lifting. “That must be where the kids on this island live.”

“It’s such a small ledge,” Steffi says. “And it’s a sheer drop all the way to the beach. Do you think they’re stuck in that teeny spot? Can you see any way up through that telescope?”

I study the cliff. There doesn't seem to be. No stairs in the rock, no crevices where kids might clamber down. I move the telescope to where the mountain meets the sandy beach. Like the rest of the island, low-lying smoke shrouds its base.

"Maybe there's a tunnel inside the mountain there that leads up," I say.

"Or," Steffi says, putting down her oar, "a tunnel that leads back to that pit. We must be directly on the opposite side of the island from where Jellyfish Inlet is."

We bob in the water, about a half-mile off shore. It's too close to light's out to chance landing now. Those sea monsters might ignore us in the canoe, but we have no idea what their pointy teeth might do to us on land. I train my telescope back to the stone huts, hoping to catch some movement. But the kids must all be locked securely in their little fortresses already, ready to brave out the night for whatever terror is unleashed upon them.

When the lights click off, we watch the show. Sea monsters glide under us, intent on reaching the shore. They boil out of the water and onto the beach as the fireworks begin above. Puffs of red shoot out of the volcanoes and disperse, breaking into little dots that almost look like firework sparks, except the dots fly through the smoky air like thousands of sparrows, close together then spreading out, circling the volcano tops. They swarm toward the village and land, covering everything in a red, undulating blanket.

"What *are* they?" Steffi whispers.

I zoom in with the telescope. The things flit around so fast it's hard to focus on one.

"They're small," I say. "Super-small."

"Yeah, the black things on Mukade Island were super-small too, but look what they did," Steffi says.

"They've got wings—I think they might be gnats, Steffi."

She frowns. "Gnats?"

“Yeah—little glowing gnats.” I watch the swarms of insects swoop around the huts, trying to find a way in. “I wonder what they do to their victims.”

She shudders. “Well, we knew they had to be some sort of insect. Do you think there’s a way to immunize ourselves against them?”

“There wasn’t a way to immunize ourselves against the spider on Anansi Island,” I say. “The mukade didn’t want to get near us because we had sea water in our veins, but that didn’t seem to faze Pooky at all.”

“Well,” Steffi says. “We definitely can’t trust those things. It would be great if we can find the box before we figure out how to get up to that village.”

My head agrees with her, but my heart wants to get to the village more than anything else. If Cody is still alive, that’s where he’ll be. It’s the only place left. I think about the map and how close we are to where we originally started all those weeks ago.

“If we had just entered the other current when we escaped Mukade Island,” I say, “we’d have landed on this island first.”

“I’m glad we didn’t,” Steffi says. “Remember how we were thinking that each island was getting easier, the farther we traveled?”

“Yes.”

“Well, this island isn’t easy at all. But at least we know how to handle it. If we had tried to land here first, Jack, I don’t think we would have survived. There’d have been eight of us, for starters, and even though you think those sea monsters can’t see this canoe, I think that first sea monster we ran into after we left Mukade Island *did* see it, a little bit. We needed Goliath’s layer of shellac to make us extra invisible. And we also know now that each island has a box we must search for. We wouldn’t have known that if Goliath hadn’t led us right to the box on Anansi Island, that first night we landed.”

“So, where do you think the box here might be?” I say.

She reaches through the darkness and takes my hand. “No idea. But I feel drawn to that lava pit, somehow. Don’t you?”

“I’m more drawn to the village, but that might just be because that’s where I want to go. Cody’s there, if he’s still alive.”

“Well, the only way we’ll find a way up there is to scour the base of the cliffs for a path up. But I don’t think we’ll find a path. Not on the outside, anyway. We need to go back *inside*, back to the pit. And now that we’ve had the jellyfish stings, I’m sure the heat won’t bother us a bit.”

I decide to trust her instincts. It seems that instincts, or at least a strong *feel* for what we’re supposed to do, tend to be the right way to get through this world’s traps. We’ve been lucky with following instincts so far.

No reason to stop trusting them now.

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Steffi was dead-on with the heat thing. It’s daylight, we’re tromping along the cliff face, and although the smoke still bothers us, the heat doesn’t.

“Here,” Steffi whispers. “A tunnel.”

We duck in without hesitation, but there’s one problem this time. We don’t have Spike to guide us.

“I don’t like this,” I say. “At least on Mukade Island we had torches. We’ve got no light source at all here. We could fall right into a crevice and break our necks.”

In the dim light streaming in from outside, I can see Steffi frowning in thought. “Well, you saw the sea monsters disappear into the smoke right around this area last night, right? And they swarmed out again this morning. So, there must be a clear path to wherever it is they go.”

“If they come in here at all,” I say. “Just because we saw them disappear into the smoke doesn’t mean they all crowded into this tunnel.”

She stares at the ground. “Some of them did. Look, you can see their scaly trails through the dirt. It’s the same as like that other tunnel. I bet anything this tunnel ends at the pit too. Let’s go. You can follow me this time.”

We inch into the darkness, and for the first time I understand why the other kids were so nervous when I led them through the tunnels on Anansi and Butterfly Islands. Not being able to see anything is terrifying. It’s like nothing in the world exists. If it weren’t for the soft sound of Steffi’s feet landing on the dirt and the sound of my own shoes clomping on the ground, I might begin to believe *we* don’t exist either.

After twenty or so minutes of silent shuffling, Steffi whispers. “There. A glow. Up ahead. Careful now.”

She takes short, tentative steps, not wanting to plummet into the imminently close lava pit. Apart from the dim glow, I can tell we must be close because I hear the lava splashing against the rock. When Steffi comes to a stop, I do too.

Below us the lava burbles. Besides that, we see nothing but all-encompassing black.

“What do we do now?” I say.

She licks her lips then lowers herself to the ground until she’s sitting on the pit’s lip, her feet dangling off the edge. I can’t help squirming. “You sure about this?”

She shrugs. “It’s either this or we wander around the base of that cliff forever.” She peers into the glow. “The lava is only about three feet away from my feet, Jack, but they don’t feel the heat at all. If the heat were going to affect me, I’d have blisters all over my soles by now.”

I have to agree with her. I’m staring directly into the pit, and I can see the steam, and I remember how sweltering it felt the last time we ventured in here, but I’m not hot or sweaty at all right now. I still am not sure where Steffi is going with this idea, though.

Then, she drops into the pit with a splash and vanishes from sight.

“Steffi!” I yell, so in shock I can’t feel anything until her head bobs up, then my heart starts racing like it’s been switched to overdrive.

“What the hell?” I yell.

“It feels great!” she says, smiling and flipping on her back. “It’s like water, Jack. I mean, it looks thick but it doesn’t *feel* thick, if that makes any sense.”

“How are you gonna get back out of there?” I say, trying to sound calm.

“Well, you could be a gentleman and pull me back up, but you won’t need to. There are plenty of hand-holds on the rocks. Watch.” She grabs the wall and climbs over the ledge, dripping. I reach out a hand and touch the lava running off her, expecting, even though I saw how she reacted to it, that I’ll get scorched in the process.

Nothing. She’s right. It feels like water. Warm water, but definitely not scalding hot lava.

“Okay, so you’ve proved we’re immune to it,” I say. “What now?”

She rubs her chin. “I think we need to swim through it.”

“The other side must be hundreds of yards away,” I say, “if not miles. This is a pretty big island, Steffi.”

“I know, but that lava stuff is so buoyant. I think it’d be impossible to sink in it. When I jumped in, it popped me right to the surface. You know what I bet, Jack? There’s an island in the middle of this pit. A pretty big one too, I’d bet. I think the sea monsters must all head for it each night.”

“Why?” I say. “That’s what I want to know.”

She shrugs. “We still have plenty of time to find out before the lights switch off for the night.”

“We have no food though,” I say, my stomach rumbling.

She plunges back into the pit. “C’mon, let’s try for a little bit anyway. We can always swim back.”

I sit on the ledge, gripping its edge. “How do we know we’ll find our way back to this tunnel, though? We might have to swim around the pit for ages before we find it again.

She frowns. “I didn’t think of that. But we’ve got to do this, Jack. It’s the only way, I know it.”

I don’t disagree, but I wish we had a long rope, or something. We have rope on the canoe, but it’s pretty short and wouldn’t do us much good here. I watch as Steffi begins to stroke away from the ledge.

There’s nothing else to do. I take a deep breath, plunge into the lava, and follow.

THE ISLAND

It seems like we swim forever. At one point I try taking a mouthful of the lava, hoping it might be tasty like the seawater, but I spit it back out. It's acrid and undrinkable. My stomach rumbles as we swim, and I'm getting thirsty. My throat feels raw after inhaling all the smoke outside.

"See anything yet?" I call to Steffi, who swims a few yards ahead.

"Not yet...ow!"

My stomach twists. "What?"

"Nothing, my fist just hit a rock. Why couldn't it be the fist in the *cast* that hit it? Wait...I see land up ahead. Or rock. At least it's a place we can pull out and rest for a bit."

We swim the last few meters and clamber out of the lava onto a rocky beach. Small waves lap on the rocks. "You think we're on the other side of the pit?" I say.

She shakes her head. "We didn't swim that far. This must be the island in the middle of the lava pit. Told you there was one."

I'm not so sure, but I've never been the best at directions, and I'm so disoriented in the dark I can't tell where we are. For all I know we could've swum in a half-circle and landed close to where we started. But Steffi seems more confident.

She's lived in caves a lot longer than I have and possesses a better sense of direction.

"There's a little light from the lava glow, at least," she says, "although if we try going any farther in without a light source, we might have trouble. This place is so open; we can't rely on any walls for guidance."

"We could head back," I say somewhat hopefully, knowing she won't buy it—not yet.

"Let's explore a little. No point in coming out here and *not* looking around."

"We'll have to stay close to shore," I say.

We creep along the shore. I follow Steffi, my nervousness increasing with every step we take. The farther we go, the farther we'll have to get back to the canoe, and it's impossible to tell what time it is in this darkness. The lava gives out enough of a glow for us to see a bit, but only if we stay close to shore.

"How will we know when it's time to turn back?" I whisper.

"I'll know," she says. "My timing is like clockwork. I always know when the lights are about to click off. My body is programmed to it now. You haven't been in this world long enough, Jack, but trust me. I'll know when it's time to turn back."

"You'd better give us time to get lost in, too," I say. "I have no idea where we are anymore."

"Keep looking and stop talking," she says. "I'll bet you anything that box is on this island somewhere."

"Yeah, but we have no idea how big this island is, Steffi. It could be anywhere. It could be miles..."

I stop talking. Because there it is. Sitting not ten yards off the shore on a big, fat rock.

"Aha!" Steffi yells, her voice echoing eerily off the ceiling. I cringe, hoping she didn't wake up anything that might be snoozing in the darkness, but I follow her as she marches in triumph to the box. "What did I tell you?"

We lose no time in yanking off the lid with Steffi's knife. Opening these boxes feels more and more like unwrapping presents on Christmas day. The same sort of excitement rises up in my stomach as I used to get clambering under the Christmas tree when I was younger.

A map lies on top. I pull it out and lay it flat, but it's too dim to see much. Steffi isn't interested in perusing it at all; she's busy searching for the weapon.

"Here we go," she says, drawing out a snaky silver whip that glints in the firelight. "Now *that's* an interesting weapon," she says, studying it. "You take it, Jack. I've already got the knife."

"I've got the axe," I say, feeling it by my side in its scabbard.

"Strap it to your other hip. Look, it comes with a clip. You can snap it onto your belt loop."

I take the whip and begin to coil it. "Aren't whips supposed to be made of leather?" I say. "This stuff feels like wire."

"*Silver* wire," Steffi corrects. Her hand is already digging through the box. "Let's see what else is in this bad boy."

I peer into the box and pull out something long and round.

Steffi laughs. "A torch! That'll come in handy."

"In America we call it a flashlight." I push the gold button on the end, and a bright light pulses out of the bulb.

"Totally utilitarian, but super handy in these tunnels," Steffi says. "Now we'll at least have some light on our way back to the canoe."

She digs deeper into the box, pulls out a small, round instrument with a clasped cover, and pops it open.

"It looks like a compass," I say, peering at it. "Although there are no letters on it to denote north, south, east, or west."

"Well, that wouldn't make any sense in this place anyway, would it?" Steffi says. "There's no direction here, at least not in the normal way." She scrutinizes the compass face. So do I. Two lines bisect each other in a cross, like a normal compass. At the points of each cross are tiny drawings.

Steffi points to one. “That one to the left looks like a picture of a campfire, doesn’t it?”

I squint my eyes in the dim light. “The one opposite of that looks like a wave.”

“And the top one here...it’s a cloud. And the bottom...”

She stops suddenly and sucks in her breath. “Jack, I think these drawings represent the islands.”

I frown. “How do you figure that?”

“Well, that bottom one looks like a mountain, right?”

“I suppose so.”

She’s silent for a minute, then whispers, “Earth, fire, air, water.”

I can feel my frown getting deeper. “Come again?”

“The Four Elements. They’re like the elements of astrology, or nature, or something. My stepdad...you remember the one I told you about? The one who punched me in the eye? Well, he was big into that sort of stuff. You’d think someone so nature-loving and astrology happy wouldn’t have such a temper, but he did. Anyway, he was always going on about this stuff.”

“What does that have to do with this compass thingy?”

She traces her finger along the lines. “Look, the lines are different colors. The red leads to the campfire, the blue leads to the wave, the green leads to the mountain, and the black one leads to the air.”

“So?”

“Jack, I know it looks like I’m kinda grasping at straws here, but you know how a thought comes on so suddenly you have to believe it’s right?”

I nod because I know that feeling well. “Okay. So which symbol represents which island?”

“I’m not totally sure, but fire definitely has to represent this island. And if these islands are all in a circle, like your map suggests, then the earth one is Mukade Island, the water one is Anansi Island, and the air one is Butterfly Island.”

“I don’t get it,” I say. “Why doesn’t water represent Butterfly Island? That’s where the wave always hit.”

She frowns. “But the butterfly flew. Into air.”

“And the spider crawled, but so did the mukade. Either one of them could be earth. It makes no sense.”

“Okay, think about it logically then. Fire definitely has to represent this island...it’s the only time we’ve run into it. Mukade Island has to either be the one above or below it.”

“Where’s the compass pointing to now?” I say.

She frowns. “Fire.”

I nod. “Then you’re right about fire representing this island, anyway. Unless it just represents the pit we’re sitting in.”

She clicks the compass shut and tucks it in her back pocket, the one that doesn’t have the brass knuckles stuffed in it. “Let’s try deciphering it later. What else is in here?”

I point the flashlight into the box, but it’s empty. “Nothing in here to ward off the gnats, unfortunately.”

“Well, there was nothing in the box on Mukade Island to ward off the centipedes, so I suppose there must be another way to deal with the gnats,” Steffi says. She rolls up the map. “I hope this doesn’t burn up in that lava. Anyway, c’mon. If we swim back the way we came, I’m sure we’ll make it back to the boat before the lights click off.”

I swivel the bright light around the island. Nothing but rock. I’m about to switch it off and follow Steffi into the pit when the light lands on something.

“Steffi!” I gasp.

“What.”

“Stairs. In the wall over there. They lead up.”

“Well, I sure hope they don’t lead down,” Steffi says, pulling herself back out of the lava. “Do you think they lead to that village?”

“Only one way to find out,” I say, striding that way.

“You sure? We won’t have enough daylight left to explore *and* make it back to the canoe.”

I barely hear her. My brother is at the top of those stairs. That’s all that matters.

I’m two steps up, when Steffi yells, “Jack!” I turn around. Steffi’s feet are glued to the rock as she points. I follow her finger.

The lava. It’s beginning to bubble. Like a pot of water on a stove, it starts out slow but then bursts into a rolling boil. A strange buzzing sound echoes through the cavern as the bubbles in the lava burst, sending out thousands of glowing insects who whirl around the cavern’s ceiling before diving towards the island.

The glowing gnats. They’re awake.

And they’re heading right for us.

In an instant, my view of Steffi is obliterated by the swarming gnats. I don’t have any time to react—milliseconds later they’ve swarmed around me as well. I involuntarily wince, ready for a sting or a hot, searing pain, or the feel of tiny teeth gnawing at my flesh until there’s nothing left but bones.

Steffi barrels into me and I lose my balance and sit down hard on the steps. She clings to me; I can feel her nose pressed into my cheek as her arms grip around my neck. After a minute, she relaxes.

“Nothing’s happening,” she whispers.

My eyes are shut—I’m afraid one of those bugs might fly into them if I don’t keep them screwed closed. “We must be immune to them, Steffi,” I say as they buzz around us. “Like the centipedes on Mukade Island. I bet the jellies made us immune to the lava, and swimming through the lava, where those things live, has made us immune to the gnats.”

“I guess so,” Steffi says. “Maybe, since we’ve got the smell of lava on us, they don’t even notice we’re here.”

We hold on to each other until the buzzing subsides. The gnats have made their way out of the pit and into the night sky. It must be night, I reason, if they're out and about.

"Your internal clock is off," I say.

Steffi pulls away from me and grins. "I guess so. We must've been swimming longer in the lava than I thought." She glances up the stairs. "Well, I guess we don't have to worry about getting back to the canoe now, at any rate. Let's see what's up those steps."

THE FALLS

We climb. The weapons roped around my waist bounce uncomfortably against my hips, and it's hard to remain balanced while climbing the steep steps and holding on to the flashlight. Steffi, much less unencumbered, flits up the stairs in front of me.

"You don't think the sea monsters use these stairs too, do you?" I say. "To get to the village?"

As soon as I say it, I wish I hadn't. Because the absolute certainty that the sea monsters, at least some of them, *do* use these steps washes over me. As far as I know they are right now swimming through the underground lava pit and slithering onto the island's shore. Steffi picks up the pace, and so do I.

The staircase is long, and before we even spot the end of it my throat burns from thirst and lack of breath, my empty stomach rumbles, and I have a cramp in one thigh. "God, it doesn't end!" Steffi gasps. "I need to stop, Jack."

I don't want to stop, not with the imminent arrival of slinky sea monsters, but I have to admit that a rest is needed. I lean against the wall and rub my cramping leg as my lungs try to take in as much air as they can.

Then the noises drift up from below.

Snorts and grunts. Hisses. The soft, spine-tingling slap of slimy fins against hard rock.

“Shit,” Steffi says, and begins climbing again, faster this time.

I struggle to keep up. I can’t tell how fast those sea monsters are coming, but I have to figure that climbing stairs isn’t exactly their preferred choice of travel. Our legs are much more accustomed to stairs, and we finally burst into the green glade, well ahead of the lumbering monsters.

But the air here is thick with glowing red gnats. They buzz around the smoking chimneys and settle on the thatched roofs.

“Weird,” Steffi says between gasps. “You’d think they’d fly right through that smoke and head down the chimneys. They *live* in lava after all.”

“Yeah, but we can swim in the lava, but the smoke still bugs us,” I say as I wave the flashlight in the air. The bugs don’t like it; even though they don’t seem to be interested in eating us, I feel a little better watching them flit away from the light beam. I direct it towards the steps, half-hidden behind a big rock. Grunts and snarls echo through the opening.

“They aren’t all the way up yet,” I say, “but we need to find some shelter.”

We run to the nearest stone house and beat on its heavy wooden door. “Hey!” I yell. “Let us in!”

I hear muffled sounds behind the door, but it doesn’t budge.

“They aren’t going to open it,” Steffi says. “The gnats would get in. They’re locked up tight for the night.”

We run around the house, searching for a window, but there isn’t any. Panic begins to bubble up my esophagus.

A meandering path wanders between the little stone cottages, and we run down it. It’s the same everywhere: doors are locked tight. The kids in there must know we’re out here with the deadly gnats and (for us) even deadlier sea mon-

sters, but they aren't opening. Better us than them, they're probably thinking.

It isn't until we get to the last cottage, where I now definitely hear the sea creatures scrambling off the steps and onto the path, that I suddenly yell, "Cody!"

No response.

"Dammit, Jack, there's no way any of those kids are gonna open the doors, even if your brother *does* recognize your voice," Steffi says. "We need to find somewhere else to hide."

My eyes frantically scan the area. The ledge we're on is a bit larger than it looked from down on the sea, but it's still a ledge. I've counted six huts; the last one is close to a crop of trees that huddle around the waterfall's edge. The path continues between the trees, right up to the waterfall itself.

"That way," I say, bolting down the path.

"What good'll that do us?" Steffi says, huffing after me. "This trail probably dead-ends there; they'll get us for sure."

"Maybe we're immune to the sea monsters," I say.

"You really believe that?"

No, I don't. The jellies and lava might have immunized us against this island's terror—the gnats—but I'm positive it hasn't done diddly to safeguard us against the terror from the sea—the serpents. But there's only one way we *can* go, and that's toward the waterfall.

We scramble down the path. Maybe they sense our presence, or maybe they see the light, but it seems to me the grunts from those monsters sound more excited and the shuffling seems faster. I keep the light shining ahead of us, knowing the path must end any minute...

It does, so sudden and abrupt that I barely have time to stop. I have no time to warn Steffi, who barrels into me and sends us pummeling into the freezing water five feet below.

It's a small pool: I'd been able to glimpse it for a couple of precious seconds before we fell in, and I can tell that the water

in it is fast-moving and heading toward the ledge. I grab Steffi with one hand and somehow manage to grasp a rock without letting go of the flashlight. Steffi clutches the rock too, and we lean against it, panting.

“What do we do now?” she gasps.

“Don’t let go of the rock,” I say.

Above us, an ugly head pokes over the edge. Sharp fangs glint in the flashlight’s glow. A hiss escapes between the fangs. Red eyes glint in the darkness. Another head joins it, then another. The sea monsters stare down at us, growling and hissing. If they couldn’t see us in the canoe, they sure see us now.

My teeth start to chatter and my fingers begin to go numb. I can’t believe how cold this water is. It must be only a degree or two above freezing. We can’t last out here. I rip my eyes away from the hissing serpents and focus the flashlight on the waterfall. It tumbles into the pool only a few meters away, and something—a feeling again—urges me towards it. My feet find traction on the stony river bed—the pool is only four feet deep or so. The current is strong, but I think we can push through it. If we don’t lose our footing, we won’t get swept over the cliff edge.

I let go of the rock.

“If we stay right in the middle, the current isn’t too bad,” I say through chattering teeth. “Make for the waterfall.”

“Are you nuts?” Steffi says, still clinging to the rock. “How will that help us? And what about the sea monsters?”

“They haven’t gotten in the water yet. Maybe they don’t like fresh water.”

“Or fricking freezing water,” Steffi says, finally letting go.

We flounder toward the waterfall. It thunders in my ears, but when we reach it, I realize that when I point the flashlight at the waterfall’s base, I can see through it.

“There’s a ledge behind it,” I say.

We crawl under the cascading water. It looked harder than it feels, and we're able to get through it and clamber onto the ledge, shivering almost uncontrollably.

"They're still on the shore," Steffi says between chattering teeth. "Although if we freeze to death out here, we won't be much better off."

I nod in agreement, but suddenly—almost instantly—a welcoming warmth spreads across my back. I turn my head.

"There's a vent here," I say, watching the steam engulf us.

Steffi sighs in contentment. "It must be boiling hot. I bet if we weren't immune to the lava, we'd be steamed like lobster in a pot by now."

"You'd think this vent would keep the water in that pool warm," I say.

"Well," Steffi says, "let's just be thankful that the sea monsters don't want to come this way and we can spend the night here in comparable warmth."

I dip my hands into the frigid water and gulp the cold liquid. The burning sensation leaves my throat. Now only my stomach rumbles.

"I wonder what the kids here eat," I say.

"Whatever it is, we won't get a chance to find out until those monsters disappear," Steffi says. She pulls her legs onto the ledge and curls up on the hard rock. I lie next to her. The steam envelopes us in its protective cocoon, and even though the ledge is as uncomfortable as hell, I relax in the steam's comforting warmth. My eyes get heavy and I yawn. The last sensation I recall before I drift off is Steffi pressing her shivering body against my back and wrapping her arms around me.

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After the monsters tromp back to the sea, the gnats buzz back to their lava cocoon, and the lights click on, we brave the freezing water and leave our little sanctuary. But the water

doesn't feel quite as cold. We pull ourselves out of it, dripping, and head for the nearest hut.

"I bet that steam vent only comes on at night," Steffi says. "Maybe it heats the water a little so in the daytime the water isn't as frigid."

I nod. "And it's warmer out now, anyway. Hey Steffi, where do you think the warmth in this world comes from?"

She wrings her long hair with her hands. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, there's no *sun* to warm things. Just light. But at night it's cold, and in the day it's warm. And the temperature seems to vary on the different islands too. Butterfly Island was definitely the most tropical in feel."

Steffi shrugs and stops in front of a thick wooden door. "Who knows, Jack. I suppose it's manipulated, same as everything else in this place."

She knocks. "Open up, dammit! All the creepy crawlies are gone, and we're hungry!"

The door creaks open. A face stares out. And even though it's older and a rough beard covers most of it, I know that face.

Cody.

REUNION

It's you," I whisper. "Cody. I've finally found you."
He gives me a blank stare. "Who are you?"

The elation I felt plummets. He doesn't recognize me. Somehow, over the last few months, I had fantasized that when his eyes fell on me, he'd know me right away. There would be a rush to each other, hugging, maybe even a few tears. Two brothers reunited at last.

Steffi frowns. "You don't recognize your own brother?"

He runs a finger through his long hair. It's still blond, like in the old picture I had of him back home, but darker with a few streaks of gray. I try to calculate it out. Cody left thirteen years ago. He can't be thirty yet. But he looks much older. He's dressed in a brown robe that looks like it's been woven from some sort of plant fiber. His old clothes must have disintegrated years ago.

"I'm sorry," he says. "You think you're my...brother?"

I shove down my disappointment and take a breath. "My name is Jack. Jack Jones. You disappeared when I was two."

His blue eyes stare at me, round and incredulous, but suddenly they hold something else.

Tears.

"Okay," Steffi says, pushing me into the hut. "C'mon, let's get indoors and you guys can get all mushy in private. At least,

I'm assuming it's private?" She stares around the little cottage, and I yank my eyes away from my brother and follow her gaze into a small, sparse room.

"It's just me," Cody says. "I'm the oldest so I get my own hut." He breaks into a smile. "Who am I kidding; there's only four of us. We *all* have our own huts. Are you hungry?"

"Ravenous," Steffi says. Cody heads to a box where he pulls out something that looks like a coconut. It's wrapped in a brown fibery substance that looks a lot like the stuff Cody's garment is made out of. I breathe a sigh of relief. No slugs.

"Isn't it funny," Steffi says, "how each of these islands has a food source?"

Cody frowns as he breaks open a fruit and hands her half. The fruit might look like a coconut, but it isn't hard like one. He hands me the other half. "What do you mean, *each* of these islands?"

She smiles at me and nods. For the rest of the morning we tell Cody our story. During the course of it, three more kids pop in from the other huts, and we have to start over.

The kids living on this island really aren't kids. They range from about nineteen to twenty-eight, Cody being the oldest. He introduces us to a black girl named Mamy who tells us she's twenty-five. She smiles at us, blushes at Cody, and lays her hand on a swollen stomach. Steffi gives me a knowing look, and I wonder if Cody is the father, and whether any other babies have ever been born in this world. On Mukade Island, kids died too quick, same with Anansi Island. They never had much of a chance to procreate, let alone actually birth a baby. I glance at Steffi. Heat rises into my face, and I pray I'm not blushing like Mamy.

"You have an interesting name, Mamy," Steffi says. "What nation are you from?"

Mamy smiles. "Madagascar. I'm of the Malagasy people."

Steffi smiles back. "That's a place I've always wanted to visit."

“How often do new kids show up here?” I say, trying to get the conversation back on track.

“Every couple of years, by our best guess,” Cody says. “Of course, there are no months or years here; it’s all in our heads. See the walls?”

He points. The stone wall of Cody’s hut is lined with marks. “Some kid way back started it,” he explains. “Every day, we make a notch. We group them by the number of days in a year and label the year above it, so we can keep track of Earth leap years. See the big slashes? Those are the days when new kids show up. There aren’t many.”

Every couple of years. Yet the terror from the sea comes every day. I glance at Steffi, wondering if she’s thinking the same thing.

“The islands we’ve told you about,” I say. “Mukade Island, the one we started on, had kids spring up every few weeks. But they died off quick. Lack of food, sickness, the centipedes—that sort of thing.”

“Well,” Mamy says, “we rarely lose anyone to the moka or the monsters.”

“Moka?” Steffi says.

“Sorry. You said you thought they were gnats? They are called *moka* in my language. Anyway, they can’t get to us in these fortresses of stone, as long as the smoke is constant.” Mamy nods towards a small fireplace huddled in the corner of the room.

Steffi scrutinizes it. “I don’t see any wood.”

Cody laughs. “Wood smoke wouldn’t work to keep those things from swarming down the chimney. But they don’t like the smoke from the stones.”

“Stones?”

He nods and points to a pile of colorful stones lying in the hearth, where wood should be in a normal fireplace. The stones are about as big as my fist and transparent like

diamonds, except for colorful patterns in the center of each one.

“Pretty,” Steffi says.

“They look like flowers embedded in ice,” I say, picking one up to get a closer look.

Cody nods. “Right before the lights click off, those stones begin to glow. And then they start smoking. If we’re outside, and we see smoke start to drift out of the chimneys, we know to come in and bolt the doors. The stones don’t produce any heat, but the smoke they emit sure repels the moka...gnats. And the sea monsters, you say?”

“Those must be the large things that sniff around the huts at night,” the youngest, Jamie, says. “So that’s what they are? Sea monsters?”

He looks incredulous, so I nod. “They come up from the sea, swim through the lava lake, and get up here via the stairs.”

“At least,” Steffi puts in, “some of them do.” She frowns and I wonder what she’s thinking now.

“Wait,” Cody says. “What lava lake? You’re losing us.”

“Down the stairs,” Steffi says.

“The ones behind the large rock,” Mamy says. She pushes a pair of cracked glasses up the bridge of her nose. “We always wondered what was down there.”

“You’ve never tried going down?” I say.

“Well, of course not,” Mamy says. “The heat is too unbearable. I tried it once. Only got a few steps down before I couldn’t stand it anymore.”

Steffi looks at me and I inwardly frown. I don’t get it. Even before I was stung by the jellyfish, I was able to get all the way to the edge of the lava pit. I sweated like nuts and felt like passing out but survived it. Why does the steam and heat affect these kids differently?

“Well,” Steffi says. “That’s where we came from. We landed on the beach, found a tunnel, swam through the lava pit, came

up here.” She reaches unconsciously for her back pocket and pats the compass stashed away in there. “The jellyfish stings from jellies on the shore made us immune to the heat and the gnats, but not the sea monsters. The only way we survived last night was by crawling behind the waterfall.”

She doesn’t tell the kids about the treasures in the box. Interestingly, I’ve avoided talking about that too. But Cody nods towards the axe and whip strapped around my waist.

“Where’d you get those?” he says.

“Found ’em. They’re weapons, but we’re not sure what we’re supposed to use them for yet,” I say.

Steffi nods. “We’ve used them for chopping things and defense against other kids, but we’re pretty sure that’s not what they’re for. They’re for something else.”

Mamy leans forward. “What, exactly?”

Steffi and I look at each other. “Well,” Steffi says, “that’s what we’re not sure of yet.”

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The kids—well, inhabitants, I guess I shouldn’t use the term kids—the inhabitants on this island interest me. Not because they’re so much older than most of us, but because they seem so settled. Cody tells me that during the day they have nothing to fear living on the ledge. They always have fresh water and food, and the huts are fairly comfortable. The tall trees hugging one edge of the cliff provide both fruit and bedding, and the fibrous covers on the fruits make soft clothes. Some kid years ago taught everyone how to spin the fiber into string and weave it into cloth. Mamy showed us a rough weaving machine, made out of wood, that someone had cobbled together.

They all seem quiet and...*content*. There are three boys and one girl, Mamy. They have a pretty set routine during the day. They meet daily for breakfast (the main reason why everyone ended up at Cody’s, although they were also curious about the noise we had made last night). They sit around and

discuss things. They take a run five times around the path that circles the ledge; Mamy calculated it to be exactly three miles. They eat lunch, they weave clothes and rugs and blankets out of the fruit fiber. They read. And write.

“Read and write?” Steffi says. “Read and write what?”

A young man with already thinning hair—Dennis—says, “The cottage walls. And the cliff near the waterfall. They’re both made of the same rock, you notice, very white. A few years ago, Mamy discovered chalk deposits toward the end of the ledge. Black chalk. So, Jamie fashioned the chalk into nice writing implements.”

“We’ve assigned each cabin a subject, and we can go in there and write. Then we read each other’s writings and discuss,” Jamie says. “Cody’s cabin is already full with the etches for days of the year, so we don’t write in his. But we write stories on my wall, we write theories on Dennis’s wall...”

“Theories?” Steffi says.

“Yeah, like what the place is and how we can get off it.”

“And where ‘it’ is,” Cody says.

“We think it’s artificial...like a hologram,” I say.

Cody nods. “We do too. I mean, it’s real enough, this place, it’s solid, but it must be contained. In a vast cave, maybe.”

“It must be *really* vast,” Steffi says.

“But it would explain how someone, we’re not sure who, can manipulate the dark,” Dennis says. “The night is completely void of light, like in a cave. Then the lights click on. They’re up there somewhere in the ceiling...super-powerful lights. So, the land is real, it’s part of the cave, we’re figuring. But everything else is fake.”

Steffi nods. “Like the sea. If you aren’t immune to it, it’s poison to touch.”

“Is it?” Cody says. “None of us have ever gotten off this ledge to find that out. We had a guy here once who claimed he was a great rock climber. He decided to climb down, but he

fell half way down. We could see him lying on the shore, but the next day he was gone.”

“Sea monsters ate him,” Steffi says.

Cody shudders. So do the others, and I realize, with an unexpected sense of elation, that these kids haven’t built up a tolerance to death. Death is such a rare occurrence here, so they’re still horrified by it. Somehow, that seems comforting.

“What we’ve discovered,” Steffi says, “is that there’s a trick to all these islands. The trick to this particular island is the jellies in the cove on the island’s other side. You get stung by the jellies, you get immune to the lava. You swim in the lava, the gnats avoid you.”

“I don’t see how that does us any good at all,” Mamy says, sighing, “since we can’t *get* to the jellies.”

Steffi nibbles on her lower lip. “There has to be a way. The islands are all set up so the kids can figure out a way, if they’re lucky.”

Cody gives out a harsh laugh. “Well, we’re the unluckiest island, then. Here we are, all smart as anything, and none our theories or ideas have come to anything worthwhile.”

“So we just sit here,” Mamy says. “Day in and day out, and even though it’s comfortable, for the most part, we do the same thing day after day.”

“Do you fight at all?” Steffi says. “Seems like on the other islands, there was a divide between the kids, at least, there ended up being one eventually.”

“There’s not enough of us to fight about much,” Cody says. “We don’t have to fight over food—there’s always plenty of fruit, even though we’re sick of it. There’s enough water; these huts are even equipped with toilets, of a sort.” He nods in the corner where there’s a deep hole. “I’m not sure where the waste goes, but it never even stinks.”

“Anyway,” Dennis says, “We have an extra hut. You two can take it, if you want.”

Steffi frowns and glances at me. “We don’t plan to stay.”

“No,” I agree, “but we aren’t going just yet either. Not until we figure out the last puzzle of this island.”

Steffi frowns. “Which is what?”

I jerk my head towards Cody. “How we get these guys off it.”

“That could take ages,” Mamy says. “We’ve never been able to figure it out, what makes you two think you can?”

“Because we know what you have to do,” Steffi says. “We’ve already told you. We need to get you stung by the jellies.”

“And we get down to where the jellies are, how?” Mamy says.

“What if we could bring one up?” I suggest. “We could leave here tomorrow morning after the sea serpents disappear, get to the canoe, paddle it back to the other side, and bring a jelly here. We could bring it in the pot.”

Steffi nods. “That should work. Let’s try that.”

WISHES

The next morning, after the sea monsters trudge back to the sea and the swarms of gnats settle into their fiery bed, Steffi and I swim through the lava and reach the canoe. I was worried that the sea monsters might have smashed it; we had pulled it up on the gravelly beach, and it didn't have the protection of Jellyfish Inlet. But the canoe must be as invisible and non-inviting to the sea monsters on land as it is in the sea, because it lies, unmolested, on the beach. We push it into the water and begin working our way around the island.

"This'll take a while," I say as we enter the far-side current and swing around the island again.

"Not really," Steffi says. "After we nab a jelly, we can use the first tunnel we found—the one near Jellyfish Inlet—to get back to the lava pit and the stairs that lead up to the village. That'll save time, although I suppose we'd better spend the night in the canoe. By the time we reach Jellyfish Inlet it'll be close to lights out."

We row in silence for a while. Then Steffi says, "Jack, I've been thinking of Spike."

I have tried not to. My grief has lessened to a numbness, but any time my thoughts flit to the little bat, that grief washes over me in a tsunami of guilt. So, I've tried not to think of him at all.

“And?” I say.

“And I don’t think he’s dead. Nothing seems to drown in that lava, so he couldn’t have sunk in it; we’d have seen his body floating on it if he had died, right? That’s not what happened. He just totally disappeared.”

“Either way, he’s gone,” I say.

“Maybe he’s gone from *here*, but I bet he’s somewhere else. Remember the portal theory?”

I laugh. “Are you saying Spike somehow found a portal, which conveniently disappeared when we turned the corner to where he was?”

“Or somebody opened a portal the instant he went around that corner and shut it again.”

I stop rowing. “Somebody *who*?”

She puts down her oar and turns to me. “You had that dream the night you passed out. The dream about that person behind the red door. What if it wasn’t a dream?”

“I don’t think it was. I mean, my body never left the canoe, but I swear I connected with that person, Steffi.”

“And what if he’s the one controlling all this? Maybe he decided to remove Spike from the equation. Send him somewhere else so we couldn’t use him. So we’d have a more difficult time.”

“But Spike disappeared *before* I had that dream, Steffi.”

She frowns and falls silent. Then she says, “Maybe your dream had something to do with the portal too. Your mind passed through it even though your body didn’t.”

I rub my head. “This theory is getting too bizarre for me to follow, Steffi.”

“I know. I’m just thinking out loud. But remember what that kid in the diary on Mukade Island wrote? How he figured out how to use the portals? Maybe—I dunno—maybe what happened to you in Jellyfish Inlet is the first step in figuring out how.”

“In which case, the portal doesn’t take you home. It just takes you to the corridor with the red door. And if our other theory is correct, that corridor and room isn’t in our world. It’s in a portal, too.”

“Ugh,” Steffi says. “Now *I’m* getting confused. Let’s stop talking about it.”

We fall silent, but my mind is now stuck on her theory. *Was* my dream some sort of break-through? In it, the person— whoever he was—sure wasn’t expecting me. He was surprised to see me, so he definitely didn’t call me. But if Spike *did* fall through a portal, it happened back in the cave. And I found that red door when I passed out on the boat’s floor in Jellyfish Inlet.

None of it makes sense.

And when we finally round the island and get to the inlet, things make less sense.

The jellyfish are gone. The inlet is empty.

“Well,” Steffi says, throwing her oar down in disgust, “that was a long row for nothing.”

I peer over the canoe’s side. “Where do you think they went?”

She sighs. “I don’t know. But come to think of it, when we first rowed into this inlet, that first night, they weren’t here either. We would’ve noticed ’em, they’re so colorful and bright. It wasn’t until the next morning when I stuck my hand in the water that we realized they were there. And when you fell into your weird trance, they disappeared too.”

“So we wait,” I say, matching Steffi’s sigh. “I wonder how long that’ll take.”

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“You again.”

The figure behind the desk doesn’t look as surprised to see me this time; he seems resigned. I step in the room but still can’t get near the desk.

“I found my brother,” I say, trying to sound less frantic than last time. I hadn’t had time to think my strategy through, but I’m hoping some friendly banter will get better answers.

“How nice for you,” the shadowy figure says in a bored tone. I lick my lips. “Do you know what happened to Spike?”

Damn. Asking questions already. The bulbous eyes give me a puzzled stare.

“The bat,” I say.

“Ah. No, I don’t know.”

“But...you knew we had a bat with us, didn’t you?”

The figure goes silent. I pedal back a bit.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“My name is of no importance to you,” the figure says, a hint of irritation flitting into his voice.

“Well, I can’t keep calling you ‘that guy’. If you don’t tell me your name, I’ll just make up one. How’s...Sam?”

The figure shrugs. “Call me what you will. Here’s a question for you. How did you get here?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I think I’m asleep.”

He rubs his pointy chin. “Asleep, you say? Interesting.”

I nod. “So am I really here, or is this a weird dream?”

Sam leans forward. “You are here. And you are not.” His long finger reaches out...

“No, don’t hit the button yet,” I say, scrambling for some time. “Let’s talk a while longer...”

“I wasn’t going to hit that button,” Sam says. “I was going to press this one.”

He reaches forward and presses a button I can’t see. I wait for something to happen, but it doesn’t.

“What did you push?” I say.

“A button that releases the forcefield that keeps you from getting close to this desk. The first time you entered, I worried that you were real. But now, I don’t think you are. Come here.”

I walk forward. The closer I get to the desk, the more the man comes into focus. He's human. Even with the bulbous yellow eyes I can tell that. Maybe his eyes have become all limpid and huge because he's stuck in this dank, dark room day after day. His back curls in a hump. His long fingers look a bit asymmetrical, like he can't relax them into a normal position. Arthritis, maybe. He looks pretty old.

I reach out and lay my hand on the desk.

But it isn't there.

Instead of resting against something solid, my hand melts right through it. Sam smiles and sits back in his chair.

"I thought so. You're here, but you're not."

"Maybe it's the other way around," I say. "Maybe I'm here and you're not."

He shrugs and rubs his chin. "Maybe so. Maybe this is a figment of both our imaginations. Although I can say for some certainty that I'm not asleep and I am very much solidly here in this room right now. *You're* the intruder."

"And where is this room, exactly? Because it's the same room I entered back in California, but I don't think we're in California now."

"No," Sam says, smiling. His teeth are crooked and yellow. "No, you figured that out correctly. When you entered that corridor all those months ago, you weren't in California any more. Same for all the other children who entered. Once they started down the corridor, they were in a different place entirely."

"How?" I say. "If every kid in the world gets a wish, how can they all end up here? How would you have time to see them all?"

He leans forward, and his smile turns ugly. "I'll let you in on a little secret...Jack? That's your name, correct? Very few children walk into that corridor. Very few."

"But..."

His palm slams on the red button before I can ask anything else. I squeeze my eyes shut and wait for the blinding pain to hit.

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“Very few,” Steffi mumbles. “He really said that?”

I rub my head. The pain isn’t as bad this time, but my temples still throb. “Yes. But it doesn’t make any sense. Every kid I knew, when they turned fifteen, they all got to make a wish.”

Steffi nods. “And some of them disappeared but most came back. My best friend, Corrine, she turned fifteen six months before me. She wished for a horse. She’d always wanted a horse. And she got one.”

“How?” I said, staring down at the jellies who, after I’d woken up, miraculously filled the inlet again. “Did the horse just show up?”

“No. Some guy came to her house with a check for enough money to buy one, and said that a farm up the road had been paid to keep whatever horse she chose to buy for free, until she turned twenty-one. It wasn’t a miracle like a wizard waving a wand. It was just...arranged.”

I dip my hand in the water. A jellyfish tentacle curls around my fingers, but it doesn’t hurt like it did the first time. It feels tingly, like a vibrating massage. “Did you know any kids that wished for something insanely outrageous like I did...like a wish for no more wishes?”

She picks up the metal bowl and reaches for a bobbing jelly. “No...the kids that came back had mundane wishes to be sure. They wished for *things*...like horses or a car.”

“Cody wished to become a marine biologist. Sounds like that could’ve been arranged. He didn’t have to disappear because of it.” I help her collect the jelly’s tentacles, and we force it into the pot.

“It’s all so random,” Steffi says as she sits back and wipes dripping hands on her jeans. “Who disappears and who

doesn't. Maybe they *had* to get rid of all the kids who wished for unattainable things. Like you with your 'no more wishes' thing. But Steve just wished for a ham sandwich, remember? And Malika asked for a puppy. Those would have been easy to grant, but they ended up here instead. Why? And the kids who didn't get sent here...where did they go to make their wishes if they didn't go into that corridor?"

I shrug and rub my still pounding temples. I don't want to think about this anymore. "Who knows, Steffi. Who knows?"

"Well," Steffi says, staring at the pulsing jelly in the pot. "At least the jellies came back and we can finish this."

"When did they come back?" I say.

She shrugs. "Well, we both fell asleep while we were waiting for 'em. When I woke up, there they were. I tried to wake you, but you wouldn't budge. I was worried there for a minute, then you woke up, screaming again."

"Sorry."

"That's OK. You didn't scream half as long or as loud as the first time. Now, let's get back to the huts, immunize those kids, and get the hell off this island."

THE STONES

Steffi gazes at my brother, now comatose on his bed. “How long, do you think?”

I shrug. “You were out about an hour after you got stung.”

“I wonder if any of these guys will meet up with Sam,” she says.

Cody snores softly but doesn’t thrash around like I apparently did. “Doesn’t look like it.”

She sits at the table, staring at the walls covered with years of scribblings. “All they did was theorize,” she says.

“What do you mean?”

She leans back in her chair. “I dunno...it’s just weird, Jack. Whoever sent us to this world has definitely sorted us: all the strong kids ended up on Mukade Island, the weak ones on Anansi Island—who knows what kind of kids on Butterfly Island—but the real brainy ones, they put here. On Moka Island. Look at all the writing they did—that’s *all* they did. They were perfectly content to sit in these huts and discuss things, but never tried to get down from the ledge.”

“What about that one guy who tried to scale it?”

“Yeah, he had a bit of guts, but the rest, they’re just complacent.”

“So were the kids on Anansi Island, if you think about it,” I say. “So were everyone on Mukade Island until we started unraveling things.”

“Yeah, but these guys are the smart ones. They should’ve figured out a way, or at least attempted it. I mean, they gave up on the stairs because that way was too unbearably hot. But you got to the lava pit, Jack. It was hot for you, but you did it.”

“Maybe I’ve developed a bit of an immunity,” I say. “The seawater...that might’ve helped me get through the heat. Maybe these kids are just too sensitive to it.”

She watches Cody as he begins to stir. “Maybe. But there’s a puzzle to each of these islands, one the kids *can* figure out, if they really think of it. Like on Mukade Island, where we just happened to notice that slit in the rock that allowed us to crawl into the cave and find the box.”

“You’re right,” I say. “And on Anansi Island, the box and the pond with the blue things were in easy reach of those kids, if they had happened to stumble upon it.”

“Exactly,” Steffi says. “And on Butterfly Island, you just needed to find the mushrooms. So there must be a way for these kids to immunize themselves, on their own, to the heat and the lava. And the answer must be here, on this ledge. But they couldn’t figure it out.” She stares at the jellyfish, pulsing in the pail. “What are we gonna do with it once we’re done immunizing all the kids? I mean, I guess we could throw it off the ledge. If we threw it hard enough, it might end back in the sea.”

“No, the fall will probably kill it. We’ll have to take it with us when we lead the others out of here.”

Steffi turns to me, a frown on her face. “And what will we do with them once we get them down to the beach? They should be able to get through the lava because of the jellyfish sting, but what about the seawater? How do we know they’re immune to it now?”

“I bet they are,” I say. “They’ll have gone through both the stings and the lava, and both things change you.”

“They can’t all fit in our boat,” she says.

“They can, Steffi. There’s only four of ’em. And two of us. That’s six. We had eight originally to begin with, remember?”

“Yeah, and it was cramped and miserable. It just bugs me, Jack. It bugs me that if there’s a way for the kids on each island to figure out how to get off it, then there must be some way they could’ve done it. And they didn’t even try.”

I lean forward and grab a fruit off the table. “And?”

She paces the room, glancing at Cody. “OK. On Mukade Island, anyone could’ve gotten to that box we found. It wasn’t guarded by anything except the mukade at night. It was just well hidden. Same with Anansi Island. Any of those kids could’ve gotten to the box if they had enough guts to explore the tunnels.”

I nod. “They were *in* that room, with Goliath and the box, every time the lightning hit. They were probably feet away from that box, they just never knew it was there.”

“They didn’t have a light source,” Steffi says. “On Mukade Island, we figured out how to make torches, but it wasn’t until the bats started helping you, Jack, that we were able to do it.” She frowns. “It all comes back to the bats, doesn’t it?”

“The other islands didn’t have bats,” I say.

“No, but Goliath could’ve pointed those kids to the box on Anansi Island. And the bats could’ve helped us before you showed up on Mukade Island, but they didn’t.” She studies me, a little too intently. “Maybe it’s all about you. What is it about you, Jack—you in particular—that made the bats want to help you? And made Goliath help us when we got to Anansi Island? It’s you—something about you—but *what?*”

The door creaks open, and Mamy peeks in. She nods towards Cody. “How’s he doing?”

“Fine,” Steffi says. “He should wake up in a bit. You sure you don’t wanna try it?”

Mamy frowns. “Not until I see what it does to him first.” She scoots in the room and peers at the jellyfish floating in the pot. “Funny. It looks a lot like the stones.”

Steffi shifts her gaze from me to the girl. “What?”

“That jellyfish. It looks like the fireplace stones. I mean, it’s all soft and smoochy, and the stones are hard as well—stones—but they look the same...”

Steffi’s chair scrapes across the floor and crashes to the ground as she jumps up and darts for the fireplace. “Dammit, Jack, she’s right! Why didn’t we notice it before?”

Her face is wild with excitement, but I have no idea why. “So, the rocks look like the jellies, so what?” I say, moving over to the fireplace. The colorful rocks haven’t started smoking yet, although it’s getting close to light’s out.

“Look at the patterns in the stones, Jack. You said they looked like flowers, but now, if you really look at ’em, they look just like the patterns on the jellies.”

I reach out and scoop up a stone. “And the rest of the stone is clear, like the parts of the jellies that don’t have the color.”

“I bet this is it,” Steffi says, plucking the stone from my grasp. “That’s the answer. And it was right here in their own huts. Watch...”

She hurls the stone against the rocky wall. “Hey!” Mamy yells as the stone breaks into shards. “What are you doing? We *need* those to keep the moka away.”

Steffi grabs a shard. I pick up one too. An oozy substance drips from it. I stare at the goo and touch it with one tentative finger, but nothing happens.

A scream fills the hut. I drop the shard and spin around. Mamy is staring at her palm where huge red welts have bloated it into twice its size.

“What the hell...” Mamy moans, clutching her hand. “What did you do?”

“I just immunized you.” Steffi picks up the shard that she must have shoved onto Mamy’s palm before the older girl could react. “These stones—they must be jellies. Maybe when jellies die, they become hard like this, but their poison is in the inside.”

“How’d you guess that?” I asked, amazed at Steffi’s sharpness.

She shrugs and grins. “A gut feeling, I guess. It just came to me.”

“What’s going to happen to me now?” Mamy whispers, staring at her hand.

Steffi reaches out and runs the shard up Mamy’s arm. “Sorry...sorry!” she says, half-laughing and darting across the room before Mamy’s welt-covered fist, now flying through the air, can connect with her face. “Getting stung on the hand isn’t quite enough, I needed to cover you with more of the goo. Jack, help me gather up the shards.”

Mamy clutches her arm, tears running down her face. “Dammit, that really hurt.”

Steffi moves back to the girl and gently takes her other arm. “C’mon. I’ll take you back to your hut. You’ll pass out in a few minutes anyway; you might as well be in your bed when you do it. Jack, take the shards and go immunize the others. By tomorrow morning, everyone will be able to swim through the lava and our work here will be done.”

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“I’ve been thinking,” Steffi says.

My stomach lurches a bit. Every time Steffi now says she’s “been thinking” that means there’s something else we have to figure out. And I suddenly realize that Steffi’s been doing almost *all* of the thinking on this part of our adventure.

“What is it?” I say.

We’re down at the waterfall. The last kid has been immunized, and we’ve shut everyone in their huts for the night. The

lights haven't clicked off just yet, although the jellyfish stones have started to smoke. We have the flashlight and figure we have plenty of time to get back to the hut before the sea monsters lumber up the steps, so we're getting a last drink and a quick washup before bedtime.

Steffi stirs the frigid water with one hand. "We're missing a piece of the puzzle," she says. "As much as I hate to say it, there's something else we have to figure out before we leave."

I wipe my chin. "And what's that? We've discovered the box and immunized the kids. What else is there?"

"Well, on every other island, we've figured out a way to make a boat—you know, some way for the kids to actually *escape* the island."

I scratch my chin. "We didn't on Butterfly Island."

"No, but we left the kids there with Steve, and he'd already figured out how he'd make a boat out of the palm trees if he needed to."

A nagging, uncomfortable sensation starts in my stomach. One I'm not too happy about. A worried feeling. "Steffi, do you think we left Butterfly Island too quickly?"

She turns to me, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"Well, we never found all its secrets, did we? I think you're right about the good and evil: we found the butterfly, but was that the evil or the helper? The helper, I think, is needed to make the boat. Like how Goliath shellacked the rafts we made on Anansi Island."

"The bats didn't help with the boat on Mukade Island though," Steffi says.

"They stood guard while we built it, and they showed us the way. We couldn't have gotten to that glade without the bats' help. And here..." I stare back at the smoke emitting from our hut's chimney. "The *jellyfish* must be the helpers here, Steffi. They aren't as interactive as the bats or Goliath, but they're the protectors, even in stone form. I bet any boat built

here needs the goo from the jellies to make it invisible to the sea monsters. You remember when we were in Jellyfish Inlet... those jellies were all over the canoe. They swarmed around it like flies on a piece of meat. They kept gliding their tentacles over it, like they were *feeling* the wood.”

Steffi nods. “You think they were coating it with a protective goo?”

“Yes. And if the kids build a boat here, they have to use the jellyfish goo to coat it—to give it protection. *Then* they can leave.”

Goo. On Mukade Island, we didn’t have any goo. Spike said the wood itself was magical, at least that’s what I *think* he chirped. But the bats never did anything physically to the boat to protect it, at least, nothing we observed. They made the glade a safe zone so we could build it, but that was it. They didn’t even use their safe-zone-making abilities on the boat itself—the kids from Anansi Island were able to steal it.

I glance over my shoulder. Nestled behind the last hut lies the grove of fruit trees. “You think we could make a boat using that wood?”

The lights click off. Steffi stands and flicks on the flashlight. “Maybe, although the food source on these islands never seems to be the boat-making source.”

I frown at this statement. “If that’s true, the kids we left on Butterfly Island can’t use the palm trees. That’s where *their* food source comes from.”

“And they don’t have a helper there to invisibilize the boat,” Steffi adds.

We begin to walk back to the hut. Steffi reaches out and squeezes my hand. “Well, we can’t worry about them right now, Jack. Listen, there was another set of steps on that map we found in the box. I was looking at it when you were comatose the other day. Those steps are a lot closer to Jellyfish Inlet. We should go explore up there in the morning. I bet we don’t

find any huts or kids up there. But I bet we find what these guys need to make their boat and get off this island for good.”

We reach the hut, and Steffi heads to the bed, under which she’s stashed the compass and map. She brings them out and lays them on the table. “You know, this is the last hut before the waterfall,” Steffi says. “We could’ve gotten in here that first night, but we didn’t try the handle. I guess we figured it was locked, like the other ones.”

I nod. “You’re right. Well, let’s look at the map. We haven’t really studied that yet.”

She unscrolls it. “Here’s the pit, and here’s the lagoon with the jellyfish. Looks like it’s the only one. But wow, Jack. Look at all the tunnels.”

I gaze at the map. The tunnels all lead to the lava pit...and there’s the stairs we climbed to get to the village.

“There’s the other set of stairs,” Steffi says, pointing. “I don’t think there’s a village up there; see, you can see little houses drawn on our ledge, but on that ledge there’s just a lot of loopy lines, like bushes or trees.”

I frown. “I don’t remember seeing another ledge when we went around the island though, do you?”

“No, but we could’ve passed it at night. Even in the daytime; we weren’t always studying the mountains as we floated past. It’s lucky we saw this ledge...the one with your brother on it.”

Lucky. I’m still a bit underwhelmed with my reunion with Cody. I guess I had built it up so much in my head, like it was important, like it would mean something. Something more than just meeting up with a long-lost brother who you’d never met and who barely remembered you. I thought we would talk a lot—that he’d ask about Mom and Dad. But, looking back on our brief talks, I hadn’t mentioned our parents either. Or Mrs. Givens. We hadn’t talked about our old lives at all. Just about this one.

Steffi rolls up the map and flicks open the compass. “So. Back to the compass puzzle. These are the islands, I’m sure

of it. But how do we get out of this place if we just keep going round and round in circles?"

"Maybe we should ask the 'smart' kids," I say, smiling too, but absolutely serious. "Maybe they can figure it out."

"Or," Steffi says, "Maybe we don't ask them."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

She takes my hand and stares directly into my eyes. "Jack, why did we leave the others behind?"

"So we could go alone," I say. "So we didn't all have to slog through the sea."

"Exactly. Maybe it's best if we leave these guys where they are."

"But..."

She grips my hand tighter. "I know you just found your brother, Jack, and I know you think you owe him something, but..." She pulls her gaze away from me and stares around at the walls with all the scribbles covering them, like she can't bear to look me in the eye now. "...but how can they possibly help us? Won't they be just as much of a burden as the kids we already left behind? I know they're older and smarter than us, but they've been sitting on this ledge just theorizing about things for ages. They aren't half as well-prepared as Steve and Sarah and the others were, so why should we help them find a way off this ledge? They seem pretty content here, and they'll only be a burden if we help them off it."

Something in the back of my brain tells me, *she's right, you know*. But what comes out of my mouth is: "Isn't that what we're supposed to do, though? Isn't that the game? Figure out the island's secrets and free the kids?"

Steffi sighs. "That's what we've been telling ourselves. That's what we've chosen to believe, Jack, but how do we know that's right? I believe we have to figure out the island's secrets before we move on, but what will those kids do once we do free 'em? Where will they go? With us?"

She stares at the compass again, with its four little symbols. “I’m pretty sure this is it. Mukade Island, Anansi Island, Butterfly Island, and here...Moka Island, let’s call it. There’s nothing else. There aren’t any other islands out there.”

She’s right. Unless...

I follow her gaze and peer at the compass. Four symbols connected by lines that meet—in the middle.

That’s it.

“Steffi,” I exclaim, and my voice is so loud she almost jumps out of her chair, “that’s where we need to go!” I point to where the lines intersect. “The current takes us around all the islands, and they all are laid out in this great circle, but maybe what we need—where we have to go—is to the center. The spot *between* all the islands.”

She squints at the lines. “But what’ll we find when we get there? Another island? This compass doesn’t show anything.”

“No, but the map will. I’m sure of it...once we start rowing that way, we’ll see it on the map.”

She still frowns. “So, what’s this compass for then? It only has the four islands. And the current takes us to them all, and the map shows us the islands when we get near ’em. What the hell does the compass do?”

I sit back in my chair. The surety of my idea is so strong, I don’t really care what the purpose of the compass is. “We need to row to the center, Steffi. We’re on the inner side of this island now. If we head out of the current and row directly away from it, we’ll get to the center. That’s where we need to go.”

She nods. “Okay. And do we need to bring everyone with us?”

“No,” I say. “I think we should go check it out first, to see if my theory is right. But we still have to free them.”

“*Why?*”

I don’t know why, although the sureness of this conviction matches the absolute confidence I have that what we seek

THE STONES

isn't on these islands. It's somewhere in the middle of them all. But, like a game where you can't advance until you solve the level you're on, we can't reach that spot until we find a way to get the kids off this island.

Now we just have to figure out how the hell we're going to do it.

THE WAY OUT

I'm excited that we're close to figuring out this island's secrets. But I'm worried about what to do when we leave. The desire to row to the center of the ring of islands is strong, but is that what we're supposed to do? Something suddenly feels incomplete.

We left Butterfly Island because we could. We had a boat. And because of that we didn't finish discovering the secrets of that island. We found the dead butterfly and the mushrooms, but what about the helper? And making a boat? It bugs me now that we didn't discover these pieces of the puzzle, although I hadn't thought of it at the time. We left the kids with only the one raft because we promised we'd return after our search for my mysterious savior. The kids stayed there because they felt safe. We felt they'd be safe. But what if they aren't?

The raft we left them, shellacked by Goliath's hard glue, is invisible to the sea monsters, but it isn't big enough to hold everyone, and any new boat the kids attempt to make won't work right without some kind of intervention. They'll need the helper to protect it against the sea monsters. But they don't *know* that.

"Maybe they found the helper," Steffi says. "Stumbled upon it somehow."

We're lying on our backs, listening to the monsters snuffling outside the huts and the gnats buzzing on the roof. Our hut has two beds, but we lie side-by-side on one. After huddling together in a shivering pile on Mukade Island, squeezing against each other in the once-crowded boats, and squishing into the tunnels of Anansi Island, sleeping alone feels weird. Like there's too much air around us and not enough warmth.

"What if the helper is dead?" I say. "Like the butterfly? Steffi, when I look back on it, we left those kids lounging on a beach with practically nothing. We took the weapons. We didn't even leave them anything to build a shelter with. All they have is the cave on the cliff, and what if a new butterfly appears? Or something else shows up on that island that could hurt them?"

She rubs her nose and stares at the ceiling. "So, you think we should go back?"

"I think we *have* to. It's only a couple of days' journey if the opposite current is as fast as the one we took."

"What about the guy you're so intent on finding? Or...are you not so intent now?"

I turn my head to face her. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's like on Anansi Island, remember? For a while both of us had such a great desire to leave, but then that changed. Suddenly. As soon as we realized there was something else we had to accomplish, the desire left. So I'm thinking...if you're feeling so strongly about going back to Butterfly Island, then we should. Somehow, heading to the center right now doesn't feel quite as important right now." She pauses then says, "Jack, who do you think that guy—Sam—is, in your dream? Do you think he's the person you're looking for?"

I frown. "Originally, I didn't think so. But now...kind of... yeah. Maybe. Isn't it kinda weird? Both times I connected with him we were in the canoe in Jellyfish Inlet. That place is special."

I glance at Steffi. A strange smile flits across her lips, and I know her line of thought is the same as mine. “You think there’s a portal in that inlet.”

I nod. “A portal guarded by the jellyfish. When they disappear, you can use it. The rest of the time, they’re guarding it. You know what? I think that wherever the helpers live, that’s where the portals are.”

She sits up. “You could be right. The bats were usually around us on Mukade Island, in our cave. But it isn’t where they *lived*. Remember the little bat babies? They had a special place where they nested, but we never discovered where it was.”

“You know,” I say. “I bet that kid who came before us—the one who wrote in the journal—I bet he discovered where the bats lived, and *that’s* where he entered the portal and escaped.” I sit up too, suddenly, and stare into her eyes, glinting in the darkness. “Steffi, what if, in my dream, I had walked *away* from the red door instead of toward it? What if that corridor is the way out? We all got here by walking down it towards the door, originally. What if the *other* way leads us back home?”

She frowns. “If it does, the only person who could go through it would be you, Jack. So far, you’re the only one with the ability to get there.” She switches the focus. “What about Goliath, on Anansi Island? We were in his lair plenty of times, and you didn’t find a portal then.”

“Yeah, but he was always there too, wasn’t he?” I say. “He was guarding it.”

She sighs and flops back down. “Except the first time, when we found the box.”

“He had just left, though. Maybe he knew we were coming and had some way to protect it.”

“Well, that was mean of him. If Goliath was supposed to

be the ‘helper’ on Anansi Island, why didn’t he let us use the portal and escape?”

I follow Steffi’s lead and lie back down. “I don’t know. The bats and Goliath and the jellies...they might help us along, Steffi, but they’re still part of the game. I guess guarding the portals is part of their job.”

Steffi closes her eyes. “I wonder why the jellies keep disappearing and letting you through, then.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe because we’re nearing the end of the game.”

She reaches out and takes my hand. “Promise me something, Jack. Promise me if you find that corridor again, you won’t go the other way and leave us.”

My heartbeat quickens, and not because she’s gripping my fingers so tightly. It’s because I suddenly feel that there *is* a way out. A way I can take. The price, though, would be to leave the others behind. But *I* can leave. I can be free. All I have to do is get to Jellyfish Inlet when the jellies are gone, enter that corridor, turn my back to the red door, and walk the other way. It doesn’t matter if my body is still in the boat. If my mind finds its way out, the body will follow. I’m positive this is the way it works.

I try to fight down the overwhelming elation and muffle the excitement from my voice. “I promise,” I say, much too late.

She doesn’t respond. Even in the dark I can tell she has a worried frown on her face.

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“Are you ready?” I say.

Cody, Mamy, Dennis, and Jamie sit around Cody’s table, all looking nervous. Finally, Cody clears his throat.

“I don’t suppose we all have to go, if you’re just going on a scouting mission to another ledge.”

Steffi gives me a dumbfounded stare before turning to Cody. “You don’t want to come with us? What are you afraid of?”

Mamy bites her lips, then says, “What if it doesn’t work?”

“It will,” I say. “Guaranteed. You’ll be able to get down those stairs and swim through the lava. Don’t you even want to try it?”

“Yes, but then what?” Cody says. “Even if we build a boat—and I don’t quite see why we have to since you’ve said your canoe could fit all of us in it—even if, then what? It sounds like we’d just be floating in circles. It doesn’t sound like floating around on a boat is the way out of this world at all.”

I fight down the urge to agree. Because after the talk with Steffi last night, I don’t think the boats will get us out of here either. My mind has fixated on the corridor idea. *That’s* the way out, I’m positive.

Steffi’s eyes dart to mine, and I try to plaster my face with the most innocent look that I can. She frowns and turns back to Cody. “But don’t you want to get off this island?”

He shrugs. “It doesn’t sound like any of the other islands are any better. In fact, it sounds like we’re living on the best one. If we bathe in that lava, like you’re talking about, we’ll become immune to the moka, and the sea monsters don’t really bother us anyway. Eating the same old fruit every day is kind of boring, but it seems to have all the nutrients needed to sustain us. If we can swim that lava and can roam around the rest of this island—maybe even swim in the sea like you say—well, it seems like we couldn’t do much better.”

“But don’t you want to go home?” I say.

He gives me a quizzical smile. “Jack, I’ve lived here for thirteen years. That’s almost half my life. This *is* home. It’s quiet, it’s peaceful—except at night—and the view is pretty. Some people would call it paradise.”

“Except for flesh-eating gnats and hungry sea monsters,” I say.

“They can’t hurt us, not in the huts. We aren’t afraid.”

He leans back in his chair. I can't quite comprehend what he's saying, but my mind races back to our adventures on the other islands. There was more terror, that's for sure. The mukade, the spider—I guess that huge butterfly must have been terrifying when it was alive—but here there is relatively little danger. These kids don't have to fight for their food or scrounge for water. They have no fears during the day except the fear of boredom, and at night they're locked up snug and comfortable and safe.

"But it's so small," Steffi says. "How can you stand living on such a small ledge with nowhere else to go?"

Cody shrugs. "You get used to it."

"Don't you want to go home? See Mom and Dad?" I say.

He stares at me with his frank blue eyes. "Jack, I hardly remember them."

I open my mouth to argue, but I can't. I understand fully. The only time I think about Mom and Dad is when I'm consciously *trying* to remember them, like right now. Otherwise, I hardly think about them. Maybe because it's we've been too busy fighting to survive, but maybe it's this place. The more we're in it, the more that other world fades into a sleepy memory.

Steffi stands. "Well, I suppose you all don't have to try it right now if you don't want to. But Jack and I are going to see what's up the other set of stairs, and if anyone wants to try out the lava pit, you're welcome to it. Then you'll be immune to the gnats...the moka."

"And the sea?" Mamy asks.

Steffi nods. "I'm guessing that either the jellyfish sting or that lava pit immunizes you, although your sea is chock-full of slithering sea monsters. *I* wouldn't want to swim in it."

"They could swim in Jellyfish Inlet," I say. "Those sea monsters never enter that."

Steffi studies me without saying anything, then turns to the others. "Who's coming?"

Mamy glances at Cody and says, "I'll stay here for now. I don't want to take any chances until I know it's totally safe." She places a protective hand over her swollen belly.

I turn to Dennis, the second oldest. "How 'bout you?"

He rubs his nose and frowns. He doesn't want to try either. What is *wrong* with these kids?

Jamie stands and pats Dennis's shoulder. "I'll go. I'll check it out for you guys first. If it works for me, it'll work for you." He turns to Steffi and me. "Sound OK?"

Steffi nods. "Sure. It's mid-morning; we have plenty of time. Let's get going."

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I study the back of Jamie's head as we move down the steps. It makes sense he'd want to try this: he's younger than the others, not quite as settled. Maybe he remembers his old home a little more clearly. "Feel hot yet?" I say.

He grins at me over his shoulder. "Not at all. You guys are right. The jellyfish sting seems to be working."

We reach the rocky island, and Jaime tries his luck in the lava. He floats around in its steamy murkiness for a good while. Steffi and I sit on a rock with the flashlight, watching him.

"He should be immune to the gnats now," Steffi says.

I nod. "What should we do now?"

"Find that other set of steps. Maybe it's on the other side of this island."

"You know," I say, "this can't be an island if it butts against the sides of the cave like this. It's more like a divide between the two sides, a land-bridge through the lava."

She nods. "Well, the other set of stairs must be on the opposite side, so that's where we should head."

"What do you think we'll find when we get up there?"

Steffi shrugs and stands. "A way to make a boat, I'm assuming. Even if these kids want to stay here, we shouldn't leave until we can at least show them the way."

“And then, we go,” I say. “Back to Butterfly Island.”

“If you still think we should,” she says.

“I definitely do.”

The feeling has been growing stronger all morning—an intense desire to go back the way we came. A flashback of my mother suddenly invades my thoughts: every time we’d take a day trip, she’d always worry that she’d left the oven on and want to go back home to check. Or she’d be positive she’d left a sink faucet running. Or something. This feels like that. The ever-consuming dread that we’ve left something vital undone, and if we don’t get back to finish it, doom will fall on us all. Or at least on the kids we left there.

“How many days since we left Butterfly Island?” I say as I watch Jamie rise, dripping, from the lava.

“Well, it took us three days to get here, and we’ve been here for about the same amount of time.”

“And it’ll take three days then to get back,” I murmur.

“Relax, Jack. They’ll be OK. They’re probably slurping coconut milk and lounging on the beach as we speak.”

Her voice sounds light, but I think she’s a little worried too.

We make our way across the rocky landscape. The “bridge” isn’t that long. It seems we only stumble along about twenty minutes or so before we reach the opposite set of stairs that climb into the gloomy darkness.

“So,” Jamie says as we start up the stairs, “what exactly are we looking for up on this ledge?”

“A way to make a boat,” Steffi says.

“You know, I think Cody’s right,” Jamie says. “Sailing away from this island won’t get us home.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Steffi says. “I mean, if the islands are arranged in a circle, what if we row away from them? What would happen then?”

“You’d eventually hit a wall, is my guess,” Jamie says. “I’m sure of it. We’ve long ago come to the con-

clusion that we're in some sort of vast cave system, well underground."

"How'd we all get here, though?" Steffi says. "I mean, we all popped into existence in this place, just like that. One second we were in our own world, then we were here."

Jamie laughs. "How do you know it was instantaneous? When I got here, I woke up with a blinding headache. *Woke*. Which means I was unconscious when I got here. I could've been out for hours, who knows? Was it like that for you guys?"

"It was for me," I say.

Steffi stops so quickly I almost run into her. She turns to face us. "So...you think somebody physically carried and put us here?"

He shrugs. "Seems more plausible than us just instantaneously 'popping into existence'."

Steffi frowns and leans against the tunnel wall. "What do you think, Jack?"

In a way, I don't care. What Jamie is saying, while it sounds logical, doesn't make much sense. Sure, if we're in some vast sort of cave, there could be ways for people to physically carry us here and place us in the tunnels or caves or wherever kids pop up, but what about the bats? And the sea monsters and glowing gnats? The mukade? What about the poison sea that suddenly becomes a miraculous elixir that keeps us fed and strong and free of disease? And the lightning storms that fry kids' brains, and magical blue dots that cure them? And most of all, what is the *point* of all this?

Thinking about why we're here always scrambles my thoughts like eggs in a pan, and I always revert to the easiest solution: focusing on the problem at hand. So, all I say is, "Let's just find out what's at the top of these stairs. We can theorize all we want, but then we're just standing in the same spot doing nothing and not getting anywhere. Steffi, quit shining that flashlight in my face."

She grins, turns, and we resume our march.

“Here’s another thought,” Jamie says as light begins to wash into the tunnel’s entrance. “If this ledge is where we build a boat, how the hell do we get it down to the shore?”

“Dunno, but there must be a way,” Steffi says. “There always is.”

We exit the tunnel onto a ledge far different than where the kids live. This one is covered with scraggly, thorny brush. A thin dirt path cuts through the brush, so we follow it.

Steffi flicks off the flashlight. “They must come up here, too.”

“Who?” Jamie says.

“The sea monsters. Look, you can see their slithering tracks. Why would they bother coming up here?”

“Well,” I say, “I’d guess that they don’t come to the island to feed, like we originally thought. They’re like the mukade. They scout the island for stragglers who aren’t indoors when lights are out. Think of it. If you were a kid building a boat up here, and you didn’t leave soon enough to get to the other ledge before dark, you’d have nowhere to hide.”

“We were able to hide behind the waterfall on the other ledge,” Steffi says. “I wonder if there’s a safe spot here too.”

I scan the ledge. I don’t see anything except the thorny bushes.

“I don’t get it,” Jamie says, touching one and drawing his hand back quickly. “How would you make anything floatable with these prickly things?” He stares at his finger. A tiny drop of blood oozes out of it.

Steffi frowns and scratches her chin. “I wish Steve were here. He could make sense of this.”

“Well, he’s not,” I say. “We’ll have to figure it out. You know, on Anansi Island, we just piled up grass and Goliath shel-lacked the whole thing together. I wonder if it’s the same kind of thing here.”

“Yeah, but what shellacks it?” Steffi says. “The jellyfish?”

“They must have something to do with it,” I say. “But they don’t produce goo.”

“No, just owie stings. Except...”

Steffi turns to me, her eyes staring through me to something I can’t see. It’s her usual lost-in-thought look, and I wait patiently for her to try and put that thought into words.

“The stones in the huts,” she finally says. “They were jellyfish once. When jellyfish die, they curl their tentacles inwards and turn hard, like glass. But there was goo inside. Like the tentacles dissolved into jelly once the jellyfish had turned to stone.”

“Maybe there’s more of those stones on this ledge,” Jamie suggests.

Steffi nods. “That’s what I’m thinking, too. Let’s search around and see if we can find any.”

The trail branches off in several directions, so we each pick a route and wander off. It’s such a small ledge, and the bushes are so low that whenever I search around for Steffi or Jamie, I can spot their heads bobbing above the scrubby brush. I can hear them, too.

“See anything?” Steffi yells.

“Nothing yet,” Jamie calls back.

“How ‘bout you, Jack?”

“Nope!”

I keep moving down my chosen trail until I reach the edge of the ledge. The normal low-hanging cloud of smoke that usually hugs the cliff has dissipated a bit, and below I spot Jellyfish Inlet, glistening in the light.

Glistening...and jellyfish-free.

My eyes swivel back to the others. Steffi is on the other side of the ledge, about a hundred yards away. Jamie is climbing a little rise toward the cliff that borders the ledge’s interior side. Neither are looking my way.

I glance at the trail. It doesn't end at the ledge. A steep but entirely scalable path winds down the cliff to the beach below. It's so obvious I wonder how we missed it, but every time we've been to Jellyfish Inlet, the smoke was so dense around the cliffs we hadn't even realized the ledge was here, let alone a path leading straight up to it.

I stare at the inlet. The jellyfish aren't there. Now is my chance. It's always when the jellyfish have disappeared that I find that portal. The portal with the corridor that can lead me home. I glance over my shoulder again.

No. This isn't right. I should let them know the trail is here; I shouldn't sneak off on my own.

My right foot disobeys me and steps forward, towards the path to Jellyfish Inlet.

I let out a surrendering sigh and allow my left foot to follow

ANSWERS

When my feet hit the gravelly beach, I break into a desperate run. I don't want anyone to stop me. The closer I get to the canoe, the more frenzied I become. This is my chance. If the portal opens, I can follow that corridor and it will take me home.

Home.

That word fills my brain. The faces of my mother and father push out everything else: the islands, the bats, the kids. Even Steffi. A sliver of conscious thought lingers on her, but I ignore it.

I throw my body against the canoe and push it into the water. I dive into the canoe's comforting depth and close my eyes.

And I'm here.

If Steffi and Jamie notice I'm missing now, it won't matter. My body might be in that canoe, but my mind isn't. In front of me, the sinister red door waits for me to open it, but when I turn around, the corridor meanders into a dim fog. My heart slams against my chest as I gaze into the murkiness. At first, it beats with wild excitement, but after a few steps, that excitement morphs into an uncomfortable uncertainty.

A few steps more, the uncertainty is replaced by dread. I halt as a peculiar but familiar sound invades my ears.

Thuk-thuk-thuk!

And suddenly, heading toward me, I see the beating wings of a bat.

“Spike?” I whisper.

It *is* Spike; even in the dim light I can tell it’s him, but he flits past me and heads toward the red door. I spin around and watch him fly right into the door and disappear.

Almost unconsciously I follow his movements and head towards the door. Part of my brain is still clamoring for me to flee down the corridor—*get out of here, Jack, while you’ve got the chance!*—but my hand grips the big brass doorknob and twists it instead.

And, once again, I enter the room smelling of rotten fish and lilacs. Sam’s bulbous eyes stare at me, but this time all he does is roll them in an exasperated sort of way.

“Did Spike come in here?” I ask, scanning the room.

“Who?”

“The bat. I saw him in the corridor.”

Sam’s thin, waxy fingers scratch his chin. “Interesting.”

I take a deep breath. “Where does it go? The corridor?”

His fingers stop scratching and he gives me a shrewd look. “Where do you *think* it goes?”

I take a step forward. “It’s the same corridor I came down when I left home. The same one we *all* came down.”

Sam nods. “You have that part right. But do you *really* remember coming down it? Or how you ended up in that corridor to begin with?”

His question brings me to a quick halt, one foot still in the air. How *did* I originally come to enter that corridor?

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That day has faded in my brain since I entered this world, but now I remember it clearly.

That was the day I would finally get my wish. At the time, I thought my parents seemed a bit worried about it; now I realize their faces were etched with fright. They were afraid of losing another son, but I didn't notice their fear then; I was too excited. And maybe a bit nervous myself.

My father drove me to an abandoned building on the edge of town. Rotting boards blocked the empty spaces where windows used to be. Over the years, kids throwing stones had broken almost all those windows. I'd even broken one. Mike Mullens had dared me to do it, then threatened to pound me if I chickened out.

"This is it?" I asked my father, amazed.

"This is where they told us to go," Dad murmured.

I opened the car door. "Is this where you took Cody?"

He frowns. "No. That was another spot."

"Is there anybody even in there?"

As soon as those words tumbled out, I saw him: an old man dressed in a white lab coat. He waved to us, and we got out of the car.

The old man gave me what I suppose he thought was a cheerful smile, but I remember it looked a bit morbid to me. He had perfect teeth: straight and white—a young man's set of teeth. It looked unnatural in his wrinkled, sagging face. He held out his hand.

"Jack, is it? This way, boy. Got your wish all ready?"

I took a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

"Then there's nothing to it but to go in and ask. Your father will wait here."

Dad reached over and hugged me. "Come back to us," he whispered.

An overwhelming fear of the old man and what might lurk inside that abandoned building suddenly enveloped me, and I gripped my father tight.

"Come on, now," the old man finally said. "We have other kids to get to today too. You aren't the only one turning fifteen, you know."

“But we’re the only ones here,” I whispered. “What if I don’t *want* a wish?”

“Nonsense,” the old man said. “Everyone wants a wish.”

“You’d better go in and get it over with,” my father said gently.

“Why?” I whispered back. “Why do I have to?”

And at that question, he wrestled free of my grip, took a deep breath, and wiped his eyes. “Go, Jack. I’ll be waiting here for you when you’re done.”

I wonder now, how long he waited. Or if he bothered to wait at all.

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“I don’t remember,” I say to Sam as I slowly lower my foot. “I mean, I remember saying goodbye to my father, then I remember approaching the door. I don’t remember entering that building at all, or going down that corridor.”

Sam leans forward. “Of course, you don’t. The second the door shut behind you, the scientist escorting you gave you a shot.

I frown. “Scientist? You mean the old man?”

“Exactly. You fell asleep instantly. Then, the two orderlies waiting inside put you on a gurney, wheeled you to the back door, and loaded you in a truck.”

I try to wet my dry mouth. My voice comes out in a croak. “Where...*why*? And why are you telling me this now?”

The yellow eyes scrutinize me before he answers. “Because you’re close, aren’t you? You’ve almost figured it all out. You wanted to go down that corridor before you came in here. You figured out that the way out of this place must be down it. But you’re wrong. It won’t take you home.”

“Won’t it?”

“No. You can never go back to where you started, Jack. You *will* never go back.”

My stomach begins to churn, and I fight down the nausea. Sam sits back in his chair. “Jack, you think this place you’re

in now—you think it’s all fake, right? Somebody designed it and put you in it?”

“I know it is,” I say.

“And you’re right. Your placement here was entirely deliberate. But answer me this: the place you came from originally—your home—was *that* real?”

My hand involuntarily clutches my stomach. “Of course, it was. I grew up there.”

An ugly, crooked smile fills Sam’s face. “How does that make it real?”

I take a deep breath and fight down the nausea. My head begins to spin with the questions, but the one that blurts out is: “Where would that corridor take me?”

“To your reward, Jack,” he says. “But it will never take you home.”

My breath begins to come in gasps. “Was it Spike I saw in the corridor?”

He shrugs. “I suppose so. The bats can come and go as they please. Nobody controls ’em.”

“But you...you made them?”

“Somebody did,” Sam says. “It wasn’t me.”

He reaches for the button, but I don’t see him push it. I blink once, and I’m back in the canoe.

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“Jack, damn you to hell!” Steffi yells as she rushes down the beach, followed close by Jaime. “Don’t you *dare* try to leave!”

I sit up and rub my head, but it doesn’t hurt. No searing pain, no throbbing ache. I’m clear as I’ve ever been. “Too late for that,” I say as she barrels into the inlet and swims towards the canoe. The jellyfish, now back in full force, part before her as she plows through the water. I reach out and help her into the canoe. She grips me with her good hand, her eyes wild with anger and fright.

“What do you mean, ‘too late’?”

“I’ve already been, and I’m back.”

She takes a deep breath and loosens her death grip on my arm. “You didn’t try to go down the corridor?”

“I did, but Spike stopped me.”

“Spike?”

“Yeah. It’s too jumbled to explain fully, but Steffi, I was pretty much told that corridor won’t take us home.”

She plunks into the bottom of the boat. “Where does it lead, then?”

“Hey!” someone yells, and I pull my eyes away from Steffi’s face. Jamie stands on the beach, breathing hard. “Come back to shore, why don’t you?”

“Why don’t you try swimming out here?” Steffi says.

He stares at the pulsating jellyfish blocking the fifty-foot swim to the canoe. “Why can’t you just row back here?”

Steffi’s frown breaks into a grin. “C’mon, Jamie, at least stick your hand in. I’m curious to see if you’re immune to the seawater.”

“And if I’m not?”

“Then you’ll get a hell of a burn, but I bet you’ll be OK. We’ll row back in a second.” She turns to me. “Jack, where does the corridor go if it doesn’t take us back home?”

I shrug. “Sam said it led to our reward, whatever that means.”

The frown returns. She leans over the canoe’s edge, studying the jellyfish. “I’ll you tell what it means. We’re rats in a maze. That’s all we are, were, or will ever be.”

I nod, amazed that her conclusion is exactly the same as mine. Rats. When we figure out this part of the maze, get to the end of it, and push the button that gives rats their treat, we’ll get our “reward” too. But then what?

“Steffi,” I whisper, “what if our lives—even our lives before we came to this place—what if they’ve been controlled since Day One? Lab rats are born in a cage and die in a cage, so how would they ever know a cage isn’t the natural state of things? They’ve never experienced anything else.”

“But our lives before, she whispers, “that was real. Wasn’t it?”

I sit back and stare at Jamie, who has waded into the seawater and now wears a happy grin. “It was real to us. Our parents were there. Our friends. Even if it was all controlled somehow, it was still our home. What we knew. Maybe in the end, that’s all that matters.”

THE RETURN

Did you find any more of the jellyfish stones up on that ledge?" I say to Steffi, trying to pull her mind away from the morose idea of rats in cages—rats meaning us.

"No," she says. "Just more thorny brush. Maybe our original theory was right. Remember how we were talking about how the jellyfish felt the canoe with their tentacles? Maybe that's all we have to do here. We just bring a bunch of those thorny twigs down here and let the jellies do their stuff." She glances at the whip curled at my side. "I wonder if that'll work to cut down the brush. Like a big weed whacker."

I unclip the whip and begin to uncoil it. "And then?" I say.

"I don't know exactly, but remember what you said, about Goliath and his goo? I think you were on the right track there. There were no jellyfish stones up on the ledge, but there are jellyfish here—all we have to do is drag enough brush down here to make a raft."

I frown. "And then what?"

She picks up an oar and begins rowing back to shore. "Quit asking me that. I don't *know*, but the jellyfish are the key. Let's try it, anyway."

I glance up at the sky. It doesn't tell me anything, and since we don't have Spike all we can do is count on Steffi's not too

accurate internal clock to tell us when the lights are about to blink off for the night. “How much daylight do you think we have left?” I say.

She glances at the sky too. “Three or four hours, at least.”

We take a long drink from the inlet, then hike back to the ledge and begin chopping. Steffi is right—the whip winds under the thorny branches with an electric *crack!* and slices through the trunks like a knife sliding through butter. The trunks are thorn-free, and we manage to grab them and drag several bushes down to the inlet without getting too scratched.

“Now what?” Jamie says, panting as he hauls the last bush to the water’s edge.

Steffi shrugs. “Shove ‘em all in and see what those jellies do with ‘em.”

Jamie gives her an incredulous stare. “And what, exactly, do you expect a swarm of jellyfish to do with a bunch of hacked-down brush?”

She ignores him and drags a bush into the water. The second she has it deep enough, several jelly tentacles wrap around it and drag it into the depths.

“Where are they taking it?” Jamie whispers, watching the brush disappear.

Steffi shrugs. “The jellies must go somewhere when they aren’t in the inlet. My guess is there’s a cave under that cliff, and they disappear in there from time to time. Maybe that’s where they’re taking the wood.”

We drag the other bushes into the water. One by one they disappear as the remaining jellies cart them away. Soon the inlet is void of both jellies and thorny bushes.

Jamie frowns. “What do we do now?”

Steffi glances up at the sky again, right as the lights click off and we’re enveloped in blackness. She switches on the flashlight. “We’ll stay in the canoe tonight,” she says, “and see what happens in the morning.”

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I'm up before the lights click on. Without disturbing Steffi and Jamie, who still lie comatose on the canoe floor, I flick the flashlight over the silent black water. No jellies. The sight of that empty water opens up a melancholic feeling that totally engulfs me in a matter of seconds.

I flick the light off and lean back in the bow. Rats in a maze. It's a delayed reaction, but the utter hopelessness floods through me. Back when we first came up with the game theory—that this whole world was a puzzle we had to solve—we had a distinct reward in mind. We figure out the puzzle, we find our way home.

But what *is* home? Or, rather, what *was* home? My parents were real enough; I've no doubt that they *are* my parents, not part of some weird setup. And they lived in the normal world, or at least what was normal for us.

But—we never traveled far from our little home on the California coast. I've read books about different countries; I've seen globes of the world. Steffi came from Scotland—almost on the other side of the planet. Bhasker came from India; Malika from Africa. Steve lived on the Hawaiian islands. We were scattered across the globe, but we all ended up here.

And I've never been to Hawaii. Or Africa. Or Scotland. How do I know those places really even exist? For all I know, it's all fake—Scotland could have just been over the mountains from our house, not thousands of miles away, like they'd have you believe.

"We never travelled," I murmur.

Steffi rolls over, and her sleepy eyes blink my way. "What was that, Jack?"

I scratch my chin. "Steffi, back when you lived in Scotland, did you ever travel far?"

She yawns and sits up. "No, we were pretty much homebodies. I went to London once. That's as far as I ever got."

I can feel the frown taking over my face. “I’ve been to L.A. That’s a big city with tons of people...but we’ve never travelled much farther than that.”

She rubs her eyes. “What are you getting at, Jack?”

“Well,” I say, “I almost want to say that our world wasn’t real—it was all fake too. Like this place. I mean, besides reading about different countries in books, I’d never actually been to any of ’em. How do I know they even exist?”

She shrugs. “You don’t, I guess. I had plenty of friends that traveled around, though. My family just didn’t. Maybe that’s why they picked us.”

“Did you have any desire to travel?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Not really.”

I sigh. “Me neither. Isn’t that weird?”

“Well,” Steffi says, as the lights click on and she blinks, “We’re sure doing some travelling now.” She peers over the canoe’s side. “Look. They jellyfish are coming back.”

They return in a tight swarm, straight up from the depths, and I wonder how deep this inlet actually is.

“They’re clumped around something,” Steffi says. She shakes Jamie’s shoulder. “Wake up, sleepyhead. I think they’re bringing your boat.”

Jamie sits up and peers over the edge. The jellies bob to the surface and suddenly part, like a living curtain opening to reveal a prize, and a perfectly round object shoots out of the water and lands on its surface, bobbing like a cork.

“What the hell,” Jamie says.

It’s the boat. The jellies must have pulverized the thorny bushes because they’re almost indistinguishable; the best I can compare the boat material to now is sheets of plywood. The jellies have smashed, flattened, and glued the branchy wood into an almost unrecognizable mass. Steffi reaches out an oar and manages to pull the floating contraption closer to the canoe.

“It’s perfectly round,” she says, running her hand along the boat’s smooth, lacquered sides. “Like a hollowed-out doughnut.”

“What’s that in the middle?” Jamie says.

I peer at the large handle-looking thing sticking out of the boat’s center. “Looks like a rudder.”

“How the hell would you even get this thing to move?” Steffi says. “There aren’t any paddles.”

I cautiously stand in the canoe and throw my leg over the side, into the round boat. “Careful you don’t tip it,” Steffi says as I pull myself into the new vessel.

“I don’t think you *can* tip it. It’s so round it evens itself out. Like a big inner tube. This is pretty cool.”

The floor of the round boat slopes gently so when I sit in it, it’s like resting on a comfortable bench. I grab the rudder shaft; it swivels the boat around as I pull on it.

“Well, you could have fun spinning across the sea in this thing, but I think it’d make me dizzy,” Steffi says. “There’s no way to really stabilize it so it’ll move in a straight line.”

“Well,” I say, turning to Jamie, “It must work OK, otherwise the jellies wouldn’t have made it. If you guys ever want to get off this island, you now have a boat.”

“And we’ve now officially figured out all this island’s secrets,” Steffi says, glancing over her shoulder toward the sea. “The immunity, the terror, the bad guys, the good guys, the box. Jamie, once the sea monsters all slither back to the sea, you can get back to your ledge and the others. And we can head on out.”

She gives me a penetrating look, and I nod. I can’t think of any reason to stay. Part of me wants to say goodbye to Cody, but what would I tell him? The warm, friendly big brother of my dreams never materialized; the man I met is a stranger. Plus, he’s already made up his mind to stay. And how would convincing him to come with us do him any good? He’s safe

here, on this little rock. His baby will be safe here too. Just as safe as anywhere else.

And if we find our way out of this world, we really have no idea whether we'll end up in any place safer or not.

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"There it is," I say.

Steffisquints, but of course can't see it yet. "Butterfly Island?"

I lower the telescope and try to will away the knot that's clenching my stomach in a painful ball. "Not more than a day away."

The closer we get, the more apprehensive I feel. When we pushed away from Jellyfish Inlet two days ago, the insistent urge to get to Butterfly Island had stopped me from even saying goodbye to my own brother. And the closer we've gotten to our destination, the more my trepidation has ratcheted up.

Steffi and I have hardly talked since Moka Island disappeared behind us. We had re-entered that strange, doldrummy part of the sea where talking, even moving, seemed too much of a burden. But that part of the sea hadn't dulled the gnawing terror that has grown non-stop in my gut. And now that I've seen Butterfly Island with my own eyes, I know something is seriously wrong.

I reluctantly bring the telescope to my eye again and zoom onto the beach.

It's deserted. No kids anywhere.

"There's no raft," I say. "They must've left."

"Where to?" Steffi whispers. "And *why* would they have left?"

"I don't know." I fling the telescope onto the floor. Steffi picks it up, folds it, and puts it gently back in the box.

"We'd better check it out," she says. "We don't know if they're really gone or not. The raft could've been destroyed—the tsunami could've smashed it—we don't know."

We continue the slow journey. The closer we get, the harder it is to keep calm. Something is wrong here. The raft isn't there, but I can't help feeling that the kids are still on the island, and I've come to trust these feelings.

At some point during the day the tsunami crashes against the island's far side, cleaves itself in two, and heads our way. We're close enough to watch it without the aid of the telescope. It's only a ripple by the time it reaches us. We grab oars, paddle out of the current, and head for the pink lagoon.

It's no longer pink.

The rest of the sea still maintains its normal orange color, but the water in the lagoon is a sickly green, like the color they use on a poisonous acid bottle to warn little kids against drinking it. A foul stench rises off the water as we paddle through it. The air feels still and thick.

"What the hell happened here?" Steffi whispers.

I raise my oar out of the water, half expecting it to be eaten away by the noxious water, but it's made of strong stuff and is still intact. "I don't know."

Then we hear it.

A low hiss rises from the thick ferns lining the beach. It almost sounds like a snake's hiss, but not quite; it's deeper, more mammal-like. The hiss is followed by a series of low clucks.

Steffi stops rowing. "That can't be a butterfly. Jack, do you think maybe it's the other thing—the good guy?"

"If we're assuming the butterfly *was* the bad guy," I say, remembering our earlier conversation that happened only days ago but seems almost a lifetime ago. "We don't know for sure."

She scratches her nose. "Well, let's think. The butterfly was in the cave, but it was dead like you said, and we have no idea if it was the good or bad guy. The mushrooms growing out of the poop, that was the cure to immunize kids to the sea..."

“*Do* butterflies poop?” I say. “I mean, seriously, that poop must’ve been from something else. Something more...animal-like and less insecty. Like the bats. Bats would poop. And it would make sense that something good and magical would come from helper poop.”

Steffi breaks into a smile, then starts giggling. “Stop saying poop, Jack, please!”

I begin to chuckle too. For some reason, I’m not too nervous about this new sound we’re hearing. There’s almost something comforting about those clucks. Somehow, the levity helps unravel the knot in my stomach—just a little. Then I frown again. “Steffi, where can they be? The raft might be gone, but I think they’re still here. They’re either dead, or...”

She turns around to face me. Her good hand drops the oar and covers my mouth. “Let’s assume it’s the ‘or’, Jack. We just have to hope for that.”

Whatever is making that noise decides to make a run for it. The ferns rustle as something scampers up the mountain. We can’t see it, but we watch the steady moving of the ferns until whatever it is reaches the ledge with the cave entrance. Then, everything becomes still again.

Steffi turns to me. “Think we should follow it?”

I begin to row again, towards the shore. “Yes, I think we should.”

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Something’s been using this path, and it wasn’t just kids. Scuffling tracks head up the tiny path to the cave’s back entrance, but I can’t tell what types of footprints they are. They’re all mixed together—a footprint here and there, claw marks, and long trails of prints that make no sense to me. Steffi scrutinizes them, her good hand clutching her knife.

“This was recent, Jack, all these scuff marks. I mean, I know we haven’t been gone that long, but they weren’t here when we left.” She glances into the sky, and my eyes follow her gaze,

expecting to see something silent and lethal zooming toward us through the trees. But there's nothing except pink sky.

"We'd better follow the tracks, I guess," I say. "At least we have the flashlight."

Steffi nods and we begin to climb. "We should've left it with Jaime. I hope he got through the tunnels on Moka Island in one piece," she says.

"I'm sure he did," I say. "It's pretty straightforward there—the tunnel leads you straight to the lava pit, and then the lava produces enough light to find the stairs. He'll be OK."

We keep climbing. "Jack," she whispers as we move closer to the cave mouth, "did you really see Spike in the corridor—the one with the red door?"

"I don't know. I mean, I definitely saw him, but whether he was real or not, I'm not sure. Sam didn't notice him. He flew right into the door and then disappeared."

"Maybe there's a portal in the door the bats can use," she says.

"Yeah, but you'd think if Spike could use portals, he could pop back into this world and help us out."

"Maybe he left us on purpose," Steffi says.

I stop my climb and turn to her. "Why?"

She shrugs. "Maybe we didn't need him any more, not for what we had to do in this world. I mean, we got along just fine on Moka Island without him, right? He showed up when you needed it though. I mean, honestly, if Spike hadn't flown past you, would you have kept going down that corridor?"

I turn away and begin the slow climb again. "I don't know. I was getting more and more nervous heading that way, but I still wanted to try. Spike definitely changed my mind when I saw him."

"Exactly. He's still watching out for us, somehow, but on a different plane. Maybe, when we lost him in the lava pit, he popped into a portal—maybe it's one only the bats can use—

and he's now guarding the in-between places. You remember the journal, the one we found on Mukade Island?"

I stare ahead at the dark, gaping cave mouth, wondering what terror lies inside. "I remember."

"Somebody, maybe it was you, came to the conclusion that that kid escaped too easily, and the bats wanted to be sure that the next kid who figured out how to escape didn't just disappear without helping out the others. That kid is you, Jack. And you aren't supposed to disappear alone. You're supposed to help us escape too."

We reach the ledge, and I turn to her. "Yeah, but escape to where, Steffi? Wherever we're escaping to, it isn't home. It's somewhere else. Sam said so. How do we know it's any better than this place?"

She flicks on the flashlight and aims it into the cave's murky depths. A couple of mushrooms glint from the dried poo we had found on our last trip. "We don't," she says. "But what else can we do? Settle here like Cody? I don't want to do that, and neither do you. We're driven, Jack. Unlike Cody who has decided to stay where he is, we have an urge to keep moving. And that must mean something."

She stops talking as we step into the gloom. The footsteps lead further in. "You think they came in here?" I whisper, not liking how my voice amplifies against the walls.

"I don't know." She shines the light along the floor. "Looks like the tracks veer off to the left. I see some footprints, but how would they have known to turn here, I wonder? If I flick off the lights, you can't see a thing."

She *does* flick off the light, to prove her point, and I hiss, "Turn it back on!"

She laughs. "OK, OK. Don't be such a baby."

The light flicks on. Steffi's laughing eyes fade from my vision as two huge red orbs fill the previously unoccupied space behind her. They are the largest, most evil eyes I have

THE RETURN

ever seen, and they sit above a huge, gaping mouth with fangs that close around Steffi's torso before I can warn her.

I open my mouth to scream, but not a sound comes out as I helplessly watch the monster swivel around and drag Steffi away.

ESCAPE

All I see is its tail. I have no idea what sort of monster this is, but it isn't a butterfly—not with a tail like that, and those pointy teeth. I don't see any wings. The light from my flashlight glimmers off its scuttling rear end as I barrel after it. My blood feels like it's frozen in my veins. Any second I expect my insanely beating heart to stop dead, solidified into a fatal block of ice.

Steffi doesn't scream. I have no idea if those clamped jaws have killed her or if she's too busy defending herself with the knife. She hasn't dropped it; the path ahead of me is clear of anything except bits of crumbled rock. My free hand reaches to touch the whip thumping against my hip as I run. The axe swings on my other hip. I'm praying I don't have to use either one, but I will if I have to.

All I can think of is: we've come so far. We're so damn *close*. How could something like this possibly happen now?

Down...we're heading down, and I wonder if this tunnel will meet up with the one from the island's other side—the one with the huge dead butterfly. No, we're going far too deep. I begin to pant, trying desperately to keep the horrible insect's scuttling legs in my vision. My throat burns with each rasping breath, and I stumble, grabbing the wall with my free hand, trying not to fall.

Then I careen into a huge room lit with something other than my flashlight. The monster spits Steffi out and spins around to face me, its huge jaws open in a wide, threatening grimace. I slide to the side as it charges, my sweaty fingers frantically attempting to grip the axe handle but not succeeding.

But the monster slides by me, its stubby legs clicking along the stone floor, sounding eerily like mukade claws. It disappears up the tunnel, shooting out a mass of sticky threads that completely block the exit. I run to Steffi, who has already jumped to her feet.

“Are you hurt?” I gasp.

“What? No.” She shakes her head, as if to clear it. “Wow, that was weird. I feel so...zonky. What just happened?”

I gaze at her, amazed that thing’s jaws hasn’t cut her in two. They didn’t even leave a mark. Her eyes swivel to the tunnel exit and the sticky threads blocking it. “We’re trapped,” she says.

I nod. “Looks a lot like Pooky’s web, doesn’t it?”

Her gaze has already flitted past the blocked tunnel, searching for another way out. Her blue eyes suddenly widen, and she screams and bolts past me. My hand instinctively grasps the axe handle.

“Jack! Steffi!”

Rob’s voice echoes through the room. I swivel around to see Steffi throwing her arms around him. The other kids peer out of the darkness, nervous smiles plastered on their faces. I count them. They’re all there. Our original group, anyway. I don’t see any of the kids from Anansi Island.

I lope towards the group. “What happened to you guys? Where are the others?”

Sarah gives me a hug. “They left, Jack. Two days ago, we figure. We heard a scream—well, more like a hiss, I guess...”

“Yeah, we heard it too,” Steffi says.

“Well, it scared ’em. We’re not sure why.”

Bhasker nods. “We knew something else must be on the island, but for some reason to us—to the kids from Mukade Island—it didn’t seem like something we should fear. It was more friendly-like, if that makes any sense.”

“We heard it too,” Steffi says. “When we were rowing into the lagoon.”

“Well,” Rob says, “the Anansi Island kids insisted that it was the evil thing, and if we stayed, we’d all die. We disagreed. They must’ve had a pow-wow or something when we were sleeping, because the next day when we woke up, the raft was gone, along with all the kids. And then the caterpillar showed up.”

“That’s what that thing is?” Steffi says.

“Yeah,” Steve says, glancing to where the insect had disappeared, “It’s hard to tell, except it has that long, snaky body and all those stumpy legs, but that’s what we think it is. I mean, caterpillars in our world don’t have big teeth like this one has, but we think those teeth might work kinda like Goliath’s...they make the tunnels here.”

Bhasker pokes his head around Steve’s big torso. “It came down the path and grabbed each of us, one by one, and brought us here.”

“And it hasn’t hurt anyone?” I say.

“Well...” Rob says, licking his lips, his eyes full of worry and fear, “...we haven’t seen Sven. You know, the kid that popped up here right before you guys took off. He was the first one that thing grabbed. And we haven’t seen him since.”

Sarah nods. “It was freaky when it happened. That thing just scrambled out of the cave and down to the beach before we could even react, grabbed Sven, and scuttled back up the cliff. There was nothing we could do. The other kids had already left with the raft, so we swam out into the lagoon, hoping it would leave us alone.”

“It didn’t do any good though,” Bhasker says. “Unlike the mukade and Pooky, the caterpillar *can* swim. It came and grabbed us, one at a time, until it had us all down here.”

“The water in the lagoon was green and stinky when we came in,” I say.

Steve nods. “I was the last one it caught. I noticed the water turning color. As soon as that monster entered it, the water began to change. Like it had been contaminated.”

I sit down next to Steffi, my stomach churning. This isn’t good. Sven is gone. There’s no doubt in my mind that caterpillar had him for breakfast. Then it poisoned the lagoon. And it corralled the rest of us in here, unharmed, but why?

“No wonder there were no kids when we landed here,” I say.

“And then what?” Steffi says. “What happened once it dragged you all in here?”

Steve scratches his chin. “Well, once we realized none of us were hurt, we figured it brought us here for a reason. It brought us a bunch of fruit from the trees, and there’s a spring in the corner there, so we have water. It’s keeping us alive for something, but we’re not sure what.”

“And it’s a caterpillar,” Steffi mumbles.

Bhasker nods. “Yes. And will, we’re assuming, turn into a butterfly at some point.”

Steffi sits on a rock and turns to me. “The butterfly has to be the bad guy, Jack. That other thing we heard—I’m pretty sure *that’s* the good guy, whatever it is.”

“We think so too,” Steve says. “I wonder why the kids from Anansi Island were so scared of it? Scared enough to take the raft and leave? I mean, the sound it made—it sounded kinda like...”

“Like a snake?” Steffi says.

“Maybe, I don’t know. But then it grunted. Kinda like a pig.”

Steffi nods. “It didn’t sound like an insect.”

Rob frowns. “You think there’s an actual animal here? Like the bats on Mukade Island?”

Steffi turns to him. “Yeah. Most islands seem to have a type of insect and then other animals that aren’t insects. Like Mukade Island. It had the centipedes, but then it had turtles, snakes, and bats. Moka Island had the gnats and the jellies. And the sea serpents, if you want to count them.”

“What about Anansi Island?” Bhasker says. “It just had the spider and Goliath...whatever he was.”

“He might’ve been an insect, or a worm, but he might’ve been something else. Like a slimy, bloated snake, or a walrus without the tusks...we don’t really know,” Steffi says. “But it’d be reasonable to assume that this island would have an insect and something else.”

Keiko reaches for Rob’s hand and frowns. “And insects always seem to be the bad guys, don’t they? So the caterpillar must be bad. I mean, it didn’t eat us right away like the mukade or Pooky would, but that doesn’t mean...”

She frowns and scrutinizes the white stuff blocking the tunnel exit.

“What are you guys doing back here, anyway?” Rob says, slapping me on the back with his free hand, trying to take our minds off the precariousness of our situation. “You haven’t been gone long.”

“Jack felt this urgent need to come back here,” Steffi says. “Like we had unfinished business.”

I nod. “It worried me after a while that we hadn’t discovered all this island’s secrets. I just didn’t feel like we could go on until we did.”

“Well,” Steve says, “I’m glad you came back. Now let’s figure out how the hell to get out of this cave.”

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In the end, getting out is fairly easy. Steffi tentatively tests out the caterpillar’s threads by touching it, and although the threads don’t burn or stick, she can’t break it with the knife. But the brass knuckles work.

“Kinda like how the shield shattered Pooky’s web,” Rob says as he watches the threads disintegrate against the weapon.

“Except it doesn’t turn solid, it just disappears,” Steffi says, pushing the remaining threads aside. “Kinda a letdown on whoever set up all these stupid traps. It isn’t very inventive.”

“Yeah, they’re getting sloppy,” Rob says, grinning. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Wait,” Sarah says. “We’d better have the folks with the weapons go first. You never know if that caterpillar might head this way.”

“You want your axe back?” I ask Rob.

He shakes his head. “Give it to Sarah. She’ll use it better’n me.”

“Here,” Steffi says, flinging the brass knuckles to Rob. “You can’t chop anyone’s hand off with that, but it might come in handy.”

We head up the tunnel. Steffi and Sarah lead the way, I keep the whip, and walk with Rob in the rear of the group—in case the caterpillar sneaks up from behind. Steve, Bhasker, and Keiko group together in the middle. “Where are we going?” Rob whispers. “We can’t go out to the beach. That thing’ll just try to grab us all again.”

“Nowhere is safe,” I say. “We’ll have to fight it. Maybe the brass knuckles will stun it, like that shield stunned Pooky.”

“Where’s Spike?” he says. “Maybe Spike could make us a safe zone somewhere.”

“Spike’s gone,” I say.

He stops, a stricken look on his face. “What?”

“C’mon, keep moving. We don’t think he’s dead. We think he went through a portal...”

And suddenly, as I say the words, I stop too. Because something seems incredibly obvious to me now.

“Steffi!” I yell. “The portal!”

“What portal?” she hisses.

“We need to find the good guy, whatever it was that was making those hisses we heard on the beach. We need to find it, Steffi. Wherever it lives, it’ll be guarding a portal, remember? And if we can find it...”

Everyone has stopped dead by now, and we’re huddled into a big mass, blocking the tunnel. “What?” Steve says. “What happens if we find it?”

“Sam,” I say.

The others stare at me blankly, but Steffi nods. She knows who I’m talking about.

“We’re this close,” I tell the eager faces turned toward me. “Sam is the last piece of the puzzle. He can tell us what we need to know. The last piece of info we need to get out of this place.”

NUZZLES

The only other tunnel is the one that leads down to the stream, where we first saw the dead butterfly. The only light we have to find the way is the flashlight. We stumble along as careful as we can, listening for any sound the caterpillar might make, but we reach the cavern unmolested.

“Where do you think it goes?” Rob whispers. “The caterpillar. Where does it hide if it isn’t on the beach or down here?”

“There’s probably a bunch of tunnels squiggled throughout this mountain,” I say as I swing the flashlight around the room. “Where’d the dead butterfly go?”

“I bet that caterpillar ate it,” Steffi says, scanning the ground. “It has to be pretty ravenous.”

“It ate Sven,” Keiko says sadly.

“We don’t know that,” Rob says, patting her shoulder.

She turns to him. “Yes, we do. That’s how it works, Rob. You know what I think? I think that caterpillar is getting ready to molt—to turn into a butterfly itself. And it needs all the food it can get. That silky stuff it used to close the tunnels and keep us in—that’s the same stuff it’ll make for its cocoon, I bet. And that room we were trapped in—that was where it’ll hole up. We were its food source.”

“That’s not how caterpillars cocoon though,” Sarah says. “They don’t eat while they’re metamorphosing.”

Keiko shakes her head. “I think that whole cavern is this caterpillar’s ‘cocoon.’ And it needs sustenance to change. That’s what I think.”

A big speech for Keiko. I can’t help but agree with her. Premonitions usually turn out right, no matter which one of us makes them. And Keiko’s premonition feels right. We escaped from that prison just in time.

We all take a drink from the stream, then sit down on whatever rocks we can find. It’s cold in here, yet feels safer than anywhere else. “What are we doing?” Sarah finally says.

“Waiting,” I say.

“For what?”

I lick my lips, hoping I’m right. “For whatever it is that lives here. It isn’t the caterpillar. Keiko’s right. That other cavern is where *that* thing lives.”

Steffi nods. “We need to find the *good* thing that lives on this island. There has to be one. We have to meet it before we can move on.”

Bhasker shoots a nervous glance up the tunnel. “Is it really necessary? Can’t we just head to the canoe and get out of here?”

“No,” I say. “We can’t go anywhere until we finish the job here.”

Bhasker doesn’t argue any further. We wait. At some point, Rob begins to snore softly. He tips against Keiko, whose eyes are beginning to blink. Steffi yawns. “I wish we had something to eat.”

“We should’ve taken some of the fruit from the other cavern,” Steve mumbles.

Bhasker suddenly sits up. “I hear something.”

We stop talking. We can all hear it now, a snuffling and snorting echoing down the tunnel that leads up to the cliff, the one we first explored when we reached Butterfly Island.

“It sounds big,” Steffi whispers. Her good hand grips the knife tight against her side.

“It isn’t the caterpillar though,” Rob says.

“How can you tell?”

“The caterpillar didn’t snort. Or wheeze,” Rob says as a low groan echoes into the room. “And its legs sounded kinda like the mukade—all clickety-clackety.”

Steffi chuckles. “Clickety-clackety.”

“Quiet,” Steve whispers.

“Why?” She stands and swings the knife around. “If it’s the good guy, we want to meet it, so why keep our voices down? And if it’s the caterpillar—well it’s probably hunting for us anyway so we might as well stand and give fight.”

“You might be right,” Steve says, but nobody else moves. Steffi waits, defiant, closer to the tunnel entrance than the rest of us.

In it comes.

Shuffles is more like it. Rob stares at it and starts laughing.

“What the hell is it?” Steffi says, staring at the ground where a small, fluffy, rodent-looking thing shuffles past her foot, not even acknowledging her existence.

“It’s awfully small,” Sarah says.

“It sure didn’t *sound* small,” Rob says.

Steffi sheathes her knife. “Must’ve been an echo that made it sound big.”

The little animal opens its mouth and hisses—a loud, ear-shattering hiss. Steffi’s hand reaches for the knife but she refrains from pulling it out. My hand feels for the whip, but I don’t move to pull it out either. The hiss is loud—my ears ring long after the sound dies away—but it isn’t an unfriendly sound. The little furry animal shuffles up to me and sniffs my shoe.

“It looks like a wombat,” Sarah says. “You know, one of those marsupials from Australia.”

I reach my hand to the floor, and the little animal climbs onto it. “It’s a mini-wombat, if that’s the case. This thing fits onto my palm, no problem.”

I lift it up to my face and shine the light on it. The little creature doesn’t seem to mind the light; its big brown eyes blink at me in a sleepy sort of way. It yawns.

And I see something.

It’s a translation of sorts, like how I could decipher what the bats were saying. But instead of chirps, this new animal opens its mouth and a vision pops into my brain. It fills the room and blocks out the other kids, except I can still see them, shuffling but shadowy behind this more vivid image.

I see a massive rock pushing out of the orange sea. There’s nothing on it: not a blade of grass or a slithering slug or a creeping insect. Just a boring old brown rock rising to a pointy apex.

The tiny animal closes its mouth. I stare at Steffi.

“I know where we have to go,” I say. “I was right. We go to the center.”

She nods. Everyone else gives us blank stares, but we can explain to them later. I stroke the little wombat’s head in thanks. It opens its mouth again.

And this time, I see Mukade Island. Frank and Mike Mullens sit in a patch of grass, talking to each other. A serious, brotherly conversation, like the one I was expecting to have with Cody—the one that never happened.

“We’re ready,” I whisper.

And Frank looks up, like he might have actually heard me.

The scene switches now, to a raft drifting in the sea. The kids from Anansi Island are on it. They’re fighting, like they don’t know what they should be doing or which direction they should be rowing. They’re lost, adrift. Matt sits alone in one corner, frowning, an arm trailing in the seawater.

“Head to the center,” I whisper.

Matt blinks, pulls his arm out of the water, and rubs his eyes.

Once more, the scene vanishes and turns into some place new. Cody's hut. They're all sitting around his table, but it's Jamie who I speak to, not my brother.

"If anyone wants to come," I say, "take the boat and head directly away from Jellyfish Inlet. If you do, you'll meet us at the center. It's the way out."

The wombat shuts its mouth and chirps.

"We should name it," Rob says, reaching out a tentative finger to pat this new creature. It wraps its little paws around Rob's stubby finger and rubs its head against his knuckles.

"Nuzzles," he says, taking the little creature from me and stroking it. "We'll call you Nuzzles."

I turn to Steffi. "It's time. Let's go."

"What about the portal?" Steffi says. "Aren't we supposed to find a portal here?"

"I think that little thing *is* the portal," I say. "Only not one I could disappear into, like on Moka Island."

"Can we take it with us?" Rob says.

"No, but let's at least bring it down to the canoe," I say. "I bet the caterpillar steers clear of it."

We head back through the mountain. We keep our weapons out and ready, but the caterpillar is nowhere to be seen. When we reach the turn, where one way goes to the beach and the other way creeps down to the caterpillar's lair, we find the caterpillar's way blocked solid with the white, silky stuff.

Nuzzles scuttles up Rob's arm to his shoulder and turns to face me. He opens his little mouth again, and I see a quick glimpse of the caterpillar.

"It's cocooned itself in," I say. "Keiko was right, I think. It was planning to use us for nourishment during its cocoon phase."

"Good thing you guys came when you did," Rob says.

"It would suck to meet that thing as a butterfly," Sarah says, shuddering. "Can you imagine? It could swoop right down on

you, unroll its sticky long tongue, and snatch you up wherever you were on this island.”

We reach the path to the beach. The canoe still lies beached on the pink sand. Rob lowers Nuzzles to the ground, and the creature shuffles to the canoe. It climbs inside.

“You think maybe he wants to come with us?” Rob says hopefully.

I shake my head and watch as the little wombat snuffles along the canoe floor. “No, I think he’s adding another layer of protection.”

Rob frowns. It’s another thing we can explain to him later.

“I wonder if there are any more,” Steffi says, turning her gaze from Nuzzles to the thick ferns lining the beach. “Caterpillars, that is.”

“Maybe we should leave the brass knuckles for any other kid that comes after us,” Sarah says.

“No,” I say. “The brass knuckles is a weapon. And I still think we need it. For something else.”

I can’t explain for what, even to myself. We’re going to row towards a big rock. And although in my vision, that rock looked barren, I know damn well it isn’t. There’s something there that we’ll have to fight if we want to escape. It’s the last piece of the puzzle, the last roll of the dice in this weird game. And all of us will have to play it.

SEAWATER

Well, here we are again,” Bhasker says. He stares at the expanse of flat orange sea as Steffi and I row. We take turns rowing; we’re well out of the current and heading to the center of the circle of islands, and it’s slow-going. All seven of us are smushed uncomfortably in the one canoe. The raft boards still line Pooky’s nest on Anansi Island, so the inside of the canoe is all we have.

“Hopefully it’ll be over soon,” Sarah says, staring ahead. “This is the way out, right, Jack?”

“Well, it’s the way out from *this* world, anyway,” I say.

She frowns. “What do you mean?”

We explain everything we’ve learned and experienced since we left them. I’ve been dreading it, remembering how miserable I felt when I realized I might never make it home again, if home really existed in the first place.

But they take it better than me. They’ve all been here longer, that might have something to do with it, and like me the memories of their past life have faded. Bits and pieces remain, but those were our old lives—our past lives. Sometimes you just can’t go back.

“So this Sam guy—was he the one you were looking for when we set sail from Mukade Island?” Sarah says.

“Yes. I think so. I had to go to Moka Island to find him—well, to find the portal to him, anyway.”

“Who is he? Is he human?”

I nod. “I think so. He’s a scientist, and this is all some weird experiment. That’s the best we can figure, anyway.”

“And he told you the way to get out?”

I frown and remember how, on Mukade Island, I’d been sure that finding this “person” was the key to our escape. Yes, Sam cleared up a few things. But he’s brought up more questions than answers. For instance: where will we end up once we leave this place? Was he serious that we couldn’t ever get home, or was he just trying to scare us?

“No,” I say finally. “No, we figured out how on our own.”

I glance at Steffi who nibbles a fingernail nervously.

Bhasker pulls his eyes away from the flat sea and focuses them on me. “Are you sure?”

I shake my head. “Truthfully Bhasker, I’m not. Not one hundred percent, anyway. But I *am* sure that we’ve been manipulated all our lives, even in our old life someone was controlling us. We’re all part of some big experiment, but who knows what that experiment is for.”

“It must have something to do with the seawater,” Keiko murmurs.

Steffi puts down her oar and turns to Keiko. “What do you mean?”

Keiko’s hand trails in the warm water. Her dark eyes stare into it. “Don’t you see how miraculous this stuff is? Once you’re immune to it, it can cure you of all your ailments. Steve’s eye got better. So did Frank’s.” She pulls her eyes away from the water and stares dreamily into the magenta sky. “It didn’t matter if you got the ailment here, like Steve, or you came with it already, like Frank. It cured both.”

Her eyes flit to us, now all staring silently at her. “But it can kill you if you aren’t immune. It burns. And the only way

you can get immune to it is by having your cells changed with some sort of chemical. Like the venom from mukade bites.”

Rob nods. “Or the blue things we drank on Anansi Island.”

“And the mushrooms on Butterfly Island,” Steve murmurs.

“And on Moka Island it was the jellyfish stings,” Steffi says.

“And maybe the lava in the pit too, although I think the jellyfish stings were what got you immune to the seawater. But why?”

Keiko runs a slim finger through her ebony hair. “Think about it. We had to get ‘injected’ with a chemical for the seawater to help us, but when the lightning hit Steve and Bhasker on Anansi Island—another ‘injection’ of sorts—they lost their immunity. Then, once they were exposed to the blue dots, they got the immunity back. Imagine it. A substance that can cure anything—or kill anything.”

Sarah rubs her chin. “And it can be controlled. The immunity to it can be given or taken away.”

Steffi nods, and her words come out breathless. “That’s some awesome power, if you’re one of the people who control the chemicals that can change you back and forth. Imagine. You can create a world of super-beings who never get sick, or you could send people to their doom. Imagine if you wanted to take over a country, say...”

She falls silent as the implications of Keiko’s theory bore into our brains.

“It’s like a magic elixir,” Rob breathes.

“And we’re the guinea pigs for this stuff,” Sarah says, staring down at the lapping water with sudden contempt. “We’re the ones who get to test it out, to make sure it works.”

“Yes,” Keiko says, straightening up and grabbing the oar Steffi dropped. She begins rowing, almost angrily. “That must be it. Each island tests out different ways of how people can get immune, or *in*-immune, to the seawater. Like on Anansi Island, with the blue dots that gave you immunity and the lightning that took it away. That was one way.”

Bhasker taps his finger on his chin. “On Mukade Island, the black things that ate everything except for those who could swim in the sea—that must have been some sort of test too.”

Steve nods. “And on Butterfly Island, that caterpillar was able to poison the lagoon. I bet if any of us had fallen into it, it would have stripped our immunity to the seawater. And then, miraculously, we would have probably found a way to reimmunize ourselves.”

“The mushrooms,” Steffi reminds him.

“Yes,” Keiko says. “They’re setting up different tests and they’re trying it out on us.”

“And all the kids that came before us,” Bhasker murmurs.

Rob frowns. “But what about all this other stuff? The bats and Goliath and little Nuzzles? And all the stupid insects that try to eat us? Why do they need all that?”

Keiko shrugs. “Who knows? Maybe they’re working on more than one weapon here. But Jack is right—this is all one big experiment.”

Rob rubs his nose and sighs. “And our ‘reward’ for getting through all this is to go to some other place? Do you really think that place will be any better?”

He looks tired all of a sudden. Older too, like he’s gained years in the last couple of hours. Keiko sighs and takes his hand. I remember on Anansi Island, how she’d wanted for a while to stay, and how easy it was for Rob to agree to stay there with her. The spider had changed that, but I can tell that the thought of having to start again somewhere new and unknown isn’t sitting well with either of them.

“Maybe your brother has the right idea,” Rob says. “Settle down in one place that you at least know and deal with it. I mean really, how much worse is this world than any other place?”

Steffi shakes her head. “But they can change it at any time, Rob, don’t you see that? They can send some new horror any

time they want. They can strip us of our immunity whenever they feel like it. They can manipulate us *whenever* they want. Any time they want to test some new aspect, we'll be the ones they test it on. You'll never get away from it."

"And you think this new place—a place the people who brought us here have set up, by the way—will be any better?"

Steffi frowns, and a depressed silence falls over the boat. My stomach begins to ravel into knots. I'm positive that *anywhere* is better than here, but how can I convince anyone else of this? Steffi seems set on getting out of here, but the others have confused looks on their faces. And, with a sinking sensation in my chest, I wonder who will end up actually leaving when we do. Now that we know the secrets of this world, the lure to stay here might be great for some. It's a place that is at least familiar to them. How can I convince them that they *should* leave when I don't even know where we'll end up? When I only have some vague feeling that what Sam says is true: that our reward lies out of this world not in it?

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Steffi clicks open the compass. The arrow points toward Mukade Island.

"What do you think that means?" I whisper.

The others are asleep, and we're smushed together in the bow. I've been peering through the telescope but haven't seen anything yet, and I'm getting worried. We've figured that the center of the ring of islands should be a journey of a day or two, but if we're heading for a rock—and not a very big one—we have a good chance of missing it, especially without the luxury of a current that will take us directly to it.

Steffi stares at the compass. "Well, I suppose that if the islands really are laid out in a circle, then Mukade Island is directly opposite of Butterfly Island. So, it makes sense to head this way. It should take us straight to the center of the circle. Seen anything yet?"

I raise the telescope to my eye again. “No. I haven’t seen anything.”

“What about the map?” Bhasker says. “Maybe we’ll see the rock on that.”

We pull it out, but there’s nothing. Not even a little ink spot on the scroll to give us some hope.

“I wonder if the telescope can even zoom to that rock,” Steffi murmurs.

“What do you mean?” I say.

She shifts slightly, so her head rests on my shoulder. She stares up at the starless night sky. “Have we decided that we’re in a cave? A vast cave?”

“It seems the most plausible answer,” I say.

“Well, maybe the rock you’ve described is its dead center. Maybe it’s *real*.”

I lower the useless telescope. “What do you mean, real?”

“I mean, these islands...they’ve all been constructed, right? Maybe their bases are made of cave rock, but everything else about ’em is fake. I mean, the trees and bushes are real, but they’ve all been *manipulated* into being. They aren’t natural trees, not ones you’d find in the real world. They’ve been created by someone. So have the animals. They’re real, flesh and blood animals, but they aren’t *natural*.”

Steve nods. “Genetically modified.”

“Well, that makes sense,” I say, wondering again what sort of genius, or geniuses, came up with all this. Thanks to Keiko, the *why* is explained, yet all this seems such an elaborate way to test a product. If someone had developed both the elixir of life and the harbinger of doom—because the seawater can obviously be both—why would they go about testing it this way? By having a bunch of kids try to figure out a series of riddles in a manipulated environment?

“The rock we’re heading for,” Steffi goes on, “well, maybe that is the only lump of rock in this place that *hasn’t* been

changed. Maybe that's why we can't see it with the telescope or on the map."

"Except it has been changed, hopefully," I say. "It's a portal that will take us out of here."

She sighs. "Hopefully. You said the tunnel with the red door was the way out, if you headed away from the door."

"It was a way to some place," I murmur. "And the desire to go down it was really strong. But Spike didn't want me going that way. So maybe it was a bad place."

"Spike," Steffi says, "is a creation of these people too, Jack. He might have helped us, but he's helping us for their end, not ours. I think that tunnel might have led home—to the home we knew. But I don't think your friend Sam wanted us going that way. So he sent Spike to turn you around."

"Sam isn't my friend," I say in a clipped voice.

"Neither is Spike," Steffi whispers.

I lay the telescope next to me and shut my eyes tight and refuse to answer. Part of me wants to fight her on this, but deep down I know she's right. Nothing here, not even the bats, are really on our side.

"Anyway," Steffi goes on, "maybe finding this rock is the last puzzle. We *all* have to find it—Frank and Mike, Matt and the kids from Anansi Island, and the guys on Moka Island, if they decide to come this way. And we're all just rowing blind, hoping to reach it."

"And what happens when we *do* reach it?" I say, my hand touching the whip that lies next to my leg. "Is that where these weapons finally come into play?"

She sighs. "I don't know. But I'm guessing they do. It'll be the last battle we'll have to fight before we can bust out of this place."

She falls silent, and gradually her breathing changes and I know she's asleep. I can't seem to follow her lead. I stare at the blank sky, wondering how high up the cavern's ceiling

is. It could be miles up there or mere feet. We don't know. So many questions about this place jumble through my brain as I stare into nothing.

Steffi's comment about how Spike isn't my friend, he's really on Sam's side, eats at me like a festering wound. At first it didn't hurt, but the more I dwell on it, the more upset I become. It seems like such a betrayal. Innocent little Spike, who we watched grow from a cuddly baby bat into a trusted friend. When I saw him in the tunnel that day, he had given me such hope. But that was all planned too, and not by Spike. He'd been sent to lure me away from the tunnel—to bring me back to Sam's lair.

I wonder if I will ever see Spike again. Somehow, I doubt it. His part to play is over.

I also wonder about the portals on Mukade and Anansi Island. What did they do? The portal on Moka Island brought me directly to Sam. The one on Butterfly Island—if I'm guessing right and Nuzzles's open mouth *was* the portal—allowed me to see things happening in real time in other parts of this bizarre world. But we never found the portals on the other two islands. And it's too late now. I'm not going back to either.

The kid we read about in the journal disappeared when he found the portal on Mukade Island. But was that a way out? Or did it transport him somewhere else, like to another island? And what about Goliath's cavern? There must have been a portal in there somewhere; what did that do?

The weapons. We collected them all, but what do we have to fight? The rock Nuzzles showed me when he opened his mouth is barren—devoid of anything. The weapons have all been useful one way or another during our journey, so why am I so sure we'll have to use them for one big battle? And who will that battle be against?

I rub my eyes and wonder if any of my questions matter. Once we're out of this world, they won't. I try to shove them all aside.

But the biggest question still lingers. Why *me*? Why am I so special? Why was my name etched into the cliff on Mukade Island? Why do the bats talk to me? Why can I use the portals when the others can't? Is it something about me in particular, or is it just chance?

Or maybe I was assigned to it. Maybe that doctor, when he first met me in that old abandoned building, when Dad let me go and I walked trustingly through that door, marked me in some way. Injected me with some sort of tracer or dye, something the bats and Goliath might recognize and respond to.

My brain gloms on this idea, and for some reason, the acceptance of it calms me. It's always bugged me that everyone here thought I was special. And while it was cool that the bats picked me and I was able to figure out all the island secrets, the idea that even *that* was random, that it wouldn't have happened if someone hadn't especially picked me to be *the one*, makes me utter an audible sigh of relief. I'm not special. I was just tagged that way. Like a rat injected with a special drug that might smarten him enough to head out and find the end of the maze while all the other rats mill around sniffing each other. That's all it is.

I close my eyes and decide that whatever the goals are of the scientists conducting this bizarre experiment—whether it's a psychological experiment or a test to develop some magical elixir—we're just pawns in it. The rats. Our goal isn't to understand why all this is happening. It's simply to figure out how to survive and find the right passage out of the maze.

REUNION

Hey, did anyone see that?” Bhasker almost stands up as he peers toward the horizon. I finish gulping down my seawater breakfast and follow his gaze.

“Something’s out there, all right,” Steve says. “Jack?”

I raise the telescope to my eye.

“Is it the island?” Keiko whispers.

“Nope. It’s Frank and Mike.”

“Oh, God,” Sarah groans. “Mike Mullens. I hope you don’t expect me to be civil to that ass.”

“Anyone else with ’em?” Steve says.

I put the telescope down. “No. Mike must be the only survivor.”

“He’d better not cause any trouble,” Steffi says.

I don’t answer, but I don’t think Mike will be a problem, at least not a viable threat. Not any more. He looks scared. Beaten. I don’t expect him to be all happy and rosy and glad to see us, but I suddenly remember back to when I was a little kid. Mike was always a bully, but every once in a while he treated me nice. And when he did, I could tell it was genuine. It was almost like if everything went exactly right—if the sun shone and the breeze was perfect and he didn’t have any homework and everyone was happy—Mike could be happy

too. And friendly. But when things deteriorated, he reverted to meanness. It was his coping mechanism. And he sure had a lot to cope with on Mukade Island. It didn't excuse him, and I doubt I'll ever trust him—not fully. But Frank is with him. Frank will keep him in check. Mike always looked up to Frank.

I can tell they've spotted us, and after a bit of rowing, we meet up. "Well, who'd'a thunk," Frank says, grinning. "Fancy meeting you guys here." He turns to me. "You called, didn't you?"

I nod. "You heard me?"

"Not *heard*, exactly, but we were sitting in the woods—you know, those trees where you made the canoe? It was like the trees whispered that it was time to go. Does that make sense?"

"Not any more than anything else in this crazy world makes sense, but I'm glad you heard it." I turn to Mike, hoping to make a connection. "Looks like the trees finally let you in."

Mike scratches his nose and focuses his eyes somewhere over my shoulder. "Yeah. After everyone else was gone. I guess they took pity on me, then."

"What happened?" Sarah says. "After the black things left, Jack said there were a couple of you still alive."

"The snakes," Mike says. "Before, they were just kinda annoying and we mostly ignored them, but after the black things came those snakes changed somehow. Got bigger. Meaner. Their bite was lethal." He turns his gaze to the endless sea, like he's scared to make eye contact with any of us. "They'd even slither into our cave when we were sleeping. Only place those snakes wouldn't enter was the glade."

Frank nods. "When I got to the island, I headed straight for the glade, and Mike was already there. We didn't dare leave it except to take the trail down to that little beach where Mike said you launched the canoe. We'd go there to swim and drink the seawater. The snakes didn't seem to go down there, either."

I meet Steffi's gaze. She can tell I'm tempted to ask about Marissa's body, half-buried in the sand. She lays a reassuring hand on my arm and squeezes. I don't ask the question, and neither Frank nor Mike bring up the subject.

"So, what are we doing out here?" Frank says.

"Looking for the way out," I say. "It's somewhere near here; we just have to keep floating around until we find it."

Mike frowns and finally brings his eyes to mine. "We left the safety of our island to just float around?"

"Doesn't sound like your island was very safe," I say. "Anyway, all we have to do now is wait for the kids from Anansi Island and Moka Island to show up, and we'll have everybody."

Rob rubs his chin. "What if any new kids pop up on the islands after we leave?"

I shake my head. "I don't think that'll happen. Not until they've gotten rid of this test group, anyway."

Mike stares at us, puzzled, as does Frank, but the rest of us get it. This particular leg of the experiment is coming to an end. It'll probably start over again with a new set of test subjects, or maybe whoever is running this kooky show has proved what he wanted and is ready to wrap up the experiment. The urgency to find the rock island and get out of here has increased in all of us, even the kids who had been a bit hesitant. I wonder if Cody and Mamy will show up after all, or if they'll still insist on staying put on Moka Island.

One thing I'm certain of, though. We won't spot that island until we've met up with the other kids. Only when we're all together will we find what we're looking for.

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It takes a couple of days. The raft from Anansi Island limps first into view; only a couple of kids are left.

"What happened?" I ask as the raft bumps against our canoe.

A gaunt and exhausted Matt blinks at me. "Sea monsters," he says flatly. "They got Zane first, when he was taking a swim.

Then Terry. One reared right up out of the water and plucked him straight off the raft.”

Next to him, Nadia and Rafael stare nervously at the sea as if they expect a monster to attack any second. But we haven’t seen any, not since we left Moka Island. Steffi and I exchange glances. We’re both thinking the same thing: their raft has only been to Anansi and Butterfly Islands. It hasn’t gotten all the protection it needs to make it completely invisible to the sea monsters.

“Why’d you leave Butterfly Island anyway?” Sarah asks. “You took off on us.”

“The noises. We figured the island wasn’t as safe as it seemed when we heard ’em,” Matt said. He chewed on his lower lip, then said, “We kinda panicked. Terry thought we’d be safer on Anansi Island. At least we knew how to handle Pooky...”

His voice trails off weakly, and he ends his explanation with an apologetic shrug.

“Well,” Sarah says, her normally gravelly voice sounding kinder than usual, “I don’t guess you could’ve helped it. Seems like we were all destined to break up before we found each other again.”

“How ’bout you?” I ask Frank. “Meet up with any of the monsters?”

“Once, I think, off the coast of Anansi Island. I tell you, it was weird sailing past that island. I saw Pooky—I swear I almost could hear the bells. And I’m pretty sure something swam under the raft, but it didn’t bother us. We weren’t paddling at the time, just kinda floating along. Maybe it didn’t notice us.”

I nod. “I hope the guys on Moka Island make it okay. They’ll be the most exposed. The waters around there are teeming with sea monsters, and they’ve only got the jellyfish goo to protect their boats.”

But the jellyfish, living in such proximity to the sea monsters, must work their magic the best because a few hours

after Matt's raft reaches us, we spot Jamie and Cody moving steadily towards us in the ridiculously round raft. Mamy's head peeps over its side, and she waves.

Dennis is missing.

"The moka got him," Cody says grimly when they pull alongside our canoe and we ask him. "We heard him screaming, but there was nothing else we could do until morning, and when we went into his hut, all we found were..."

He gulps and shudders.

"Bones." Jamie finishes. "And stones with no color."

Mamy nods. "His stones died and the moka got down the chimney. And we figured, if his stones were gonna go, ours might too."

Cody lets go of the rudder. "I had thought our stones were dimming a bit. It was like the island was dying on us. We had no choice. We *had* to leave." He takes a shaky breath and turns to me. "I'm glad you're okay, Jack."

He smiles, and for a second he looks like the carefree boy in the photo back home. I smile back.

Steffi nods towards the round raft. "That thing work OK?"

"Weirdly, yes," Cody says. "It was easy to steer when we were in the current, but then the current kinda stopped."

"How'd you know to row this way?" I say.

Cody shrugs. "We didn't. But there was a light in the sky—a blinking one, kinda like a star. We figured we should row towards it."

"Without any oars?" Steffi says, laughing.

"Yeah, we were worried about that, but we pointed the rudder in the direction of the light, and we just sort of bobbed along towards it."

"Same here," Frank said. "The current suddenly disappeared, and we saw the blinking light. We had to row, though."

Matt nods. "It was the same for us."

"We didn't see anything," Rob says.

Frank shrugs. "Maybe because the light was right over you. Maybe it was out of your view. But it led us to you, that's all I know."

I turn to Steffi, and once again we lock gazes. It's ending. The protection on the islands and the currents that surround them. Everything is forcing the kids to either make the journey here or die. I wonder if Sam is manipulating it. Or if other scientists are watching, flipping switches somewhere. Can they see us? From Sam's reaction to me when I suddenly showed up, I don't think *he* can, but that doesn't mean somewhere up there, in the cavern roof, a myriad of cameras aren't watching our every move. I stare up into the pulsing pink sky, suddenly feeling more violated than I ever had felt in any other time in this prison.

"Let's go," I say. "Row close, everyone."

"Which way?" Frank says, picking up his oar.

They all stare at me, waiting for me to give the direction. As if I know. I put the telescope to my eye in desperation, hoping to see something I haven't seen before.

And I *do* see something. I zoom in closer until I make it out.

Hovering inches above the sea is Spike. I frown, rub my eye, and push it against the telescope again.

"That way," I say, pointing in Spike's direction.

"How can you be sure?" Steffi whispers.

"Spike is there. He's hovering above the sea like some weird marionette on a string."

"How far away, do you think?"

But my intuition for figuring out distances doesn't click in. He could be yards away, or miles. I have no idea.

"Just row," I say. "Hopefully he isn't too far away."

Steffi picks up an oar and dips it into the water. "Think we can trust him?"

I sigh and shrug. "I don't know, Steffi. But, if Spike is hanging mid-air in the middle of nowhere, I've gotta assume he's like the big X that marks the spot. Don't you?"

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Now that we're all heading in the same direction, I contemplate the weapons. I'm not sure why I focus on them now, but it suddenly seems unfair that we have them all stacked in our canoe and the other boats don't have any weapons at all. As Steffi and Steve row, I pick up the whip. The boat from Moka Island drifts the closest to us. "Jaime," I call.

He paddles towards me. "What's up, Jack?"

I reach across the small expanse of sea that separates us. "Here."

He frowns and takes the whip. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"I don't know, but you guys are from Moka Island, and that's where we found the whip. You should have it."

Rob sits up, reaches for the axe, and holds it in a protective grip. "You sure it's a good idea, Jack? Giving away our weapons?"

"They aren't ours," I say. "None of 'em really belongs to us, except the knife from Mukade Island. *Our* island."

He frowns. "But we found 'em all. Finders keepers."

Steffi doesn't stop rowing, but she glances back at him. "Quit being a baby, Rob. You getting another one of your premonitions, Jack?"

I nod. "Yup."

"Then Rob, give Matt the damn axe. After all we've been through, you might as well trust Jack's instincts. He's gotten us this far."

No, I think, shooting her a quick smile. We've *gotten us this far*.

Rob sighs, leans over the canoe's side, and hands Matt the axe. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the brass knuckles. "What about these?"

"Well," I say. "There aren't any kids from Butterfly Island left, so I guess you can keep it."

He pitches the knuckles to Sarah. "Here," he says. "If it comes down to fighting, you're our best bet."

Sarah grins, and then does something that completely surprises me. She takes the brass knuckles, reaches over the water to Frank's raft, and tosses the weapon over to Mike Mullens, of all people.

Steffi gasps. "What the hell are you doing?"

Sarah shrugs. "He's stronger than me. I'm not all that great at punching, which is all those knuckles are good for. I saw Mike smash his fist into a cave wall once and not even wince. Besides, his raft doesn't have a weapon. And he's on our side now, right?"

Mike grips the brass knuckles between two fingers almost like he's holding a dead rat. Then his fist closes around the weapon. He turns to Sarah.

"Thanks," he grunts. "I won't let you down."

"You'd better not," Sarah says, a hint of malice behind her reluctant smile. He nods in a grave sort of way and stuffs the knuckles in his pants pocket.

"Well," Steffi says, still shaking her head in disbelief. "I guess at least all the rafts are protected now."

"From what, though, that's the question." Steve murmurs, pushing his oar into the water as we inch slowly, inexorably, toward the little purple bat hovering over the orange sea.

THE LAST BATTLE

In that final stretch of sea, where we quietly paddle and Spike flits above the orange water, always a bit out of reach, like he's moving a little further each time I look through the telescope so we can keep him in sight as he leads us to our salvation or doom—that weird sense of ennui that enveloped Steffi and I on our trips between Moka and Butterfly islands returns. We row in silence, taking turns, keeping up a steady, slow rhythm. We don't really sleep, but it doesn't feel like we're quite awake, either. We drink handfuls of seawater, and although the water fills us, it also acts like a drug, dulling our senses until I can't tell if I'm dreaming or awake.

I have no idea how long the rowing lasts or how far we travel—if it's minutes, hours, or days—but gradually, like coming out of anesthesia after an operation, the fuzziness in my brain dissipates and something sharp and solid forms in the orange sea. A rock. A dark, craggy, wet rock rising out of the water like a beckoning hand. It thrusts into the sky, the sea lapping around its edges.

“I don't see a beach to land on,” Steve says.

“Don't think we need one,” Sarah grunts. “The base of that rock is at sea level and slick as a water slide. We can glide the boats right up on it.”

“Where’s Spike?” Steffi says. “Jack, do you see him?”

I’d been thinking the same thing, and my eyes had been scanning the rock for the little bat, but I don’t see him anywhere now. With a sinking feeling I realize his part is over. He guided us to the rock. We won’t see him again. I wish I could have stroked his head one more time and listened to his happy chirps, but the best I can do is whisper, “Goodbye, Spike,” as our boats glide to a stop against the cold black rock.

We climb out and pull the boats out of the water. With all of us and the boats crowding on the slick rock, there isn’t much room left. Steffi clambers to the rock’s highest point.

“See anything?” Rob says.

“No. This whole thing isn’t more than ten meters across. There’s nothing here.”

Mike Mullens turns to me, frowning. “Are you sure this is where we’re supposed to go?”

And that’s when the torrent begins.

It comes from the cloudless, pink sky, and it comes in buckets, like a sudden waterfall that almost grinds us to the ground with its force. The frigid water stabs us like hundreds of tiny icicles and we all scream—and then it’s over. Steffi, now crouching on the top of the rock, says, “What the hell was *that*?”

“I feel funny,” Keiko says. “Like something’s happening to me, but I don’t know what.”

“I think I know what it is,” Bhasker whispers, and when I glance at him, I notice his face has gone pale with dread.

“I do, too,” Steve murmurs, gripping Bhasker’s shoulder. “We’ve lost it.”

The fear pulsating through Bhasker and Steve reaches me: a sick, stomach-dropping terror, like when you wake up and realize you have a test in an hour and you’ve forgotten to study for it. An end-of-the-world dread. I gulp. “Lost what?”

“Immunity,” Bhasker whispers.

Steve nods. "This is what it felt like last time, when I lost it on Anansi Island. It's so slight, but..."

Steffi scrambles off the rock and moves to where the water laps innocently against its edges. She touches her toe to a wet puddle and yanks it back. "Shit."

"Oh my God," Sarah says. "What the hell do we do? One good wave and we're all done for."

Mike Mullens turns to me, his eyes stormy. "You led us here. Now what? We don't have any food or water, and now we can't get near the sea. This is your fault."

He takes a step towards me, but Frank intervenes. "Stop it, Mike. This is no place to get into a fight. One wrong push and you could kill somebody." His eyes, calm and clear, steady his younger but larger brother. The eyes turn to me. "Jack, what do we do?"

But I don't know. We're stranded on a rock the size of a cul-de-sac, we're surrounded by a deadly orange sea that will burn us to bones if we touch it, and I'm supposed to think of something? I can't. My mind is blank. All I can do is slide down to a sitting position, resting my weary back against the rock.

Steffi squats next to me. "We failed. If this is all a game, we've lost it."

"This is all I saw though," I whisper. "This rock. It's the only image I was given. It *must* be right. We're supposed to be here, I'm sure of it."

"But what are we supposed to do?"

She stares at me with trusting blue eyes, the same stare she used to give me on Mukade Island, when she expected, somehow, that anything I said would work. She should know better by now.

"Maybe we're supposed to die," I say.

The eyes harden. "Bullshit." She stands and looks around. "There's gotta be something we're missing."

She scrambles up to the top of the rock again, peering around. Then she says, in a low, desperate voice, "Oh, no."

My blood turns icy. “What? What do you see?”

She doesn’t say anything. She just points.

Out to sea, but close enough for anyone to see with their naked eye, churns a huge sea monster. I can see the glint of its eyes—eyes that focus intently on us.

“Onto the rock!” Steve yells. We clamber up as best we can, but it’s precarious up on top, with fifteen people vying for the best position, which is the one furthest away from the fast-approaching monster. But then Bhasker, glancing behind us, sucks in his breath.

“Jack!” he screams, and I turn. Below us, writhing against the opposite base of the rock, is a large white centipede, thrashing its red legs around and snapping its pincers. It hisses and begins a slow climb up the rock.

“Where the hell did that come from?” Sarah growls. “It couldn’t have swum here, could it?”

“Who cares where it came from,” Mike Mullens says. “We gotta kill it quick, or it’s gonna get one of us.”

“It’s me,” Steffi gasps. “I have to do it.” Before I can stop her, she begins sliding down the rock, towards the mukade. Steve lunges out and grabs her collar.

“Are you nuts?” he says. “You can’t take that thing on single-handed.”

“Yes, I can,” she says, wrenching from his grip. “I’ve got to. I’ve got the knife.”

“What?”

But she’s gone, dropping towards the snapping jaws so fast that I’m sure it’ll grab her leg before she can steady herself enough to use the knife. And suddenly, I get it.

“The knife is from Mukade Island,” I say. “It’s the only thing that’ll work against the mukade now.”

“If that’s true,” Matt whispers, “then that means...”

We hear the high-pitched scream before the first long, purple leg pokes over the far side of the rock. Nadia is closest

to it. “Pooky!” she screams, bolting away and crashing into Matt, who drops the axe he’d been clenching in one hand. Rafael curses and dives for it, catching the handle before the axe tumbles off the rock and into the sea.

And another sound fills my ears. It comes from the rock face opposite of where Pooky scrambles—the only side left—the side closest to me. I swivel around and stare as the caterpillar from Butterfly Island begins inching up the rock. “Mike!” I yell.

Mike Mullens pushes me, not too gently, aside as he lunges towards the caterpillar, one fist clenched around the brass knuckles. I regain balance as my eyes swivel back to Steffi. I’d almost forgotten her, everything had happened so fast. She flails at the mukade’s head but misses, the knife slashing through air, and the monster whips its head around, its pinchers missing her neck by inches. She loses her footing and tumbles towards the sea. Sarah dives after her, managing to land one good punch to the mukade’s head before grabbing Steffi’s arm and pulling her back to the rock. Both girls whip around as the mukade circles back towards them, but this time they’re ready. Sarah throws her big frame across the insect’s back, pinning it, as Steffi plunges the knife into the space where the mukade’s head meets its body. It screams. I turn away, anxious to see how the others are faring.

The spider has managed to unleash a torrent of sticky goo all over Nadia and Matt, who now lie screaming and useless, pinned to the ground. Rafael stumbles towards the spider, hacking off one flailing leg. Pooky screams and turns his multitude of eyes towards his foe. *We should have brought the shield*, I think, and wonder if Rafael is wishing the same thing.

My eyes swivel towards Mike Mullens, who must have already smashed the knuckles into the caterpillar’s face, because it has slid down the rock and looks dazed but it isn’t dead. Mike charges after it. The absence of all fear and the

presence of a kind of happiness in his motions both thrills and terrifies me. He is actually *enjoying* this.

I swing my gaze towards the sea monster, who is almost on the beach. Unlike Mike, Jaime looks utterly petrified. He stands on the rock with the whip lying limp by his side. Cody runs to him, yanking the whip from his hand and sliding towards the boats. Fear fills me. When Steffi rushed towards the mukade, I'd been a little nervous, but I'm used to her charge-in-like-a-bull-type attitude. But I have no idea whether Cody can fight. I glance at Mamy, who has her petrified eyes trained on Cody's every movement. I guess he has someone to fight for, and so he'll do his damndest.

I turn in a slow, useless circle. I feel, oddly, like I'm glued to this spot, like my part in all this is over and the most I can do to help is to stay out of everyone's way and watch. Rafael is barely visible now; he's tangled up in a jumble of hairy spider legs. Keiko has rushed to where Nadia and Matt struggle against the spider web Pooky had thrown at them, but she has nothing to help them with except her bare hands. Steffi and Sarah are still busy hacking and pummeling at the mukade that I'm pretty sure is dead by now, but it isn't stopping them from taking out some much needed anger and frustration on its corpse. And Mike has punched the stunned caterpillar back to the sea edge.

The sea monster scrambles onto the rock, smashing the boats with one good tail swipe. If it hadn't been able to see them before, it sure sees them now. It stomps on the wood, and even the canoe cracks. It's like the rain that had washed away our immunity also washed all protection from the magical boats, and now they're just pieces of driftwood. Another swipe from the monster's tail sends them tumbling into the hungry sea. Now it turns its eyes toward Cody, and I wonder how my brother can possibly fend off that monstrous thing with just a whip.

Frank has now joined the Pooky-fray. He's tearing at the spider legs with his bare hands, trying to get to Rafael. But suddenly the spider lets out a horrific cry—not one of excitement or triumph, but one of immense fear and pain. Its legs involuntarily shoot out to all sides, flinging Frank aside, and I catch a quick glimpse of Rafael, his hands gripping the axe that is buried deep in Pooky's exposed belly. Then the legs curl up tight, and the spider, along with Rafael and the axe, tumbles into the sea and sinks, the water hissing angrily around it.

"Rafael!" Frank yells, but it's too late for anyone to help the boy now. I can only feel a quick surge of sorrow before my eyes swivel back to the sea monster, now lunging towards the rock.

Cody raises the whip and cracks it across the monster's ugly head, and it howls in rage. But the whip doesn't stop it; it lunges forward as Cody whirls the whip above his head.

"Outta the way," Mike Mullens says, huffing past me and heading towards Cody.

"Is the caterpillar dead?" I yell.

"See for yourself," he says as he lunges down the rock. I quickly turn my head to see the caterpillar lying still, half in the water and half sprawled on the rock. Then my eyes swivel back to Mike, only to realize Sarah and Steffi have joined him, along with a screaming Steve and a nervous but solid-standing Bhasker. Keiko is still attending to Nadia and Matt, and Mamy has gone to help her.

The sea monster scrambles forward. Cody cracks the whip across its head again. Mike bravely, but ineffectually, smashes one claw with the brass knuckles. Steffi lets out a war cry and follows Mike's punch with a stab, which works a little better; the monster swivels its head and snaps its jaws where Steffi was but now isn't—she's already rolled between its legs and stabs the other claw. Before the sea monster can track her,

Cody, who has finally got the hang of things, wraps the whip around its neck and yanks the whip handle, hard.

And then, it seems, the sea monster is caught. It can't move. It tries to wrench its head free but, for all its size and supposed strength, it can't dislodge Cody, who's braced his feet against a ridge in the rock. Jaime, finally breaking from his trance, runs up to him and helps hold the whip steady. Steffi, who sees her chance, slides under the beast and stabs upwards, hard, with her knife, mimicking Rafael's move with the spider. She's just as successful; the beast screams and its eyes roll back in its head. But she has a little more luck than poor Rafael, and manages to roll away before the monster crashes dead to the ground.

And then there's silence. The screaming ends, and there's no sound except the lapping of the waves against the rock. Even Matt and Nadia are quiet; Keiko and Mamy have managed to get the sticky web mostly off them. They're hurt but still alert. Keiko and Mamy have welts lining their arms, and Mamy is sobbing silently, but they're both OK.

The only casualty is Rafael. And while it hurts to lose him, we're lucky one person is all we lost.

Mike holds a hand out to Steffi and hoists her to her feet. She's almost laughing. "We did it," she says. She says it to Mike, not me.

"Your knife is still under that thing," Mike grunts.

Steffi shrugs. "Leave it. I don't think I need it anymore."

She turns her eyes to me, and for the first time I realize with a horrible pang of remorse that I'm the only one still standing on the top of the rock. Throughout the entire battle, I stood stock still and did absolutely nothing. Everyone pitched in; everyone fought; everyone helped.

Everyone but me.

THE END

It seems to me that a sense of exultation circles the island. It's what the winning army must feel after a decisive battle. Even with the loss of Rafael, the living kids on this rock pulse with a sense of ultimate victory. Like all our experiences have led up to this one big fight, and now that it's over everything will turn back to how it used to be, before we were stranded in this place.

I don't feel that. I'm the only one who can't get a sense of accomplishment from this. Because we *aren't* going back to how things used to be in our innocent childhood. I don't suppose, even if they sent us back to our old homes, we could. We've been through too much.

They aren't going to send us back home. They have future plans for the people living there—more experiments, more lies. That's their testing pool, and we can't contaminate it with the knowledge we have about this place. No, if they don't just exterminate us outright, they'll send us somewhere else, somewhere we know nothing about, where we'll all have to start over. I don't think Sam was lying when he said we would get our reward. But there are a lot of ways to interpret "reward", and his way might not be the same as ours. "Reward" could mean a swift, painless death for all I know.

So, as the others grin stupidly at each other and breathe sighs of contented relief, I stare around, wondering what's coming next.

And then I see it. A huge, gaping hole on the far side of the rock. Someone must have opened it after we got here because we hadn't seen it on our first foray of the rock. But the mukade, centipede, and spider must have crawled here from somewhere, and that hole was probably it.

"Hey!" I yell, beckoning the others over. "There's the escape route."

Steffi springs up the rock like a gazelle. She peers to where my finger points. "That wasn't there before."

Frank frowns. "You sure it's safe to go down?"

I can't help laughing. "No, I'm not sure. I've never been sure about anything. But it's the only way they're gonna give us, so we have to take it."

"It'll lead somewhere," Steffi says.

Still, we hesitate. When it comes right down to it, when you only have one choice, your reluctance in taking it grows. Maybe it's because this is not just our only choice, it's our final one. There's no turning back once we start down it. We stand on the rock, staring down at the hole, until we hear a crash behind us, and we all, in unison, swivel around to look at it.

Waves are beginning to roll in. Smallish at first—that's what the first crash was—but I can tell they're larger further out. Eventually a wave will hit this rock and totally inundate it, and that'll be the end of us.

"They aren't giving us any choice," Steve says grimly. "Let's go."

Steffi and I wait until everyone else has ducked inside, then we follow. The darkness envelopes us as we enter. Steffi grabs my hand. "This is it," she whispers as we move slowly into the darkness. "Isn't it?"

It isn't until we're a few steps in that I realized she grabbed me with the hand from her broken arm. "Where'd your cast go?" I say.

She laughs. "I hacked it off with the knife after I killed the mukade. Stupid thing was getting in my way. Good thing I did too, now that the knife is gone, huh?"

We fall silent and move forward. There's an electric pulse running through this tunnel, almost like it's alive. I hadn't felt it before, not in the tunnels where I met Sam, and I realize now that those must have been holograms, even though they felt so *real*. My mind was there but my body was always in the canoe. But this tunnel is the real thing, and we're really in it. This is the portal that will lead us out.

But out to where?

Steffi's words mimic my thoughts. "What do you think the new place will be like, Jack?" she whispers.

"I don't think it'll be home," I say.

"Fine," she says. "I hope it won't be."

"Don't you want to see your folks again?"

She sighs. "I can hardly remember 'em. And I don't remember being very happy, ever. So maybe this place, wherever it is, will be a happy place. Or at least a place that doesn't completely suck."

I laugh. "It can't be worse than here."

"Oh, it can. Home, in a way, was worse. It wasn't as dangerous, but I never felt alive there, Jack. Only bored or scared. So I don't want to go back there. And I don't want to go to a 'reward' where everything is perfect and easy. I think I'd hate that, too."

My free hand reaches out for the tunnel wall while my other hand squeezes hers. "So, what do you want?"

"Honestly? Some place like this. But with more food and less death. I never felt better than swimming in the sea or ex-

ploring the caves; I loved that, Jack. It was the best time ever. Don't you think?"

She's right. There were moments of terror here, but also moments of extreme wonder. How many people get to experience stuff like this? More importantly, experience it and live through it? Only us, as far as I know.

"In a way, I feel helpless, though," she goes on. "Controlled. Like the whole rats in a maze metaphor. I bet a rat understands that a maze isn't its natural habitat, but the best it can do is find a way to get out of it before it gets put right back in the next day and has to figure it out all over again. I wish there was a way we could escape completely, just be free."

"Maybe that's our reward," I say. "Maybe they're gonna let us go. Never bother us again. Let us live in peace."

"Yes, but how will we ever know for sure? How do we know in a few weeks...months...years...someone isn't gonna yank us back into another experiment?"

She can't see me do it, but I shrug anyway. Maybe there isn't such a thing as total freedom. Maybe the best we can do is live with what we're given and try to be happy with it for as long as it's ours.

I squeeze her hand again. "Back there, on the rock," I say. "You guys were great...amazing, even. All of you. I didn't do anything but stand there and watch."

"Feeling guilty, huh?" she says, and although I can't see her face clearly in the gloom, I can tell she's grinning. "You got us to the rock, Jack. You did the biggest part. It's OK if you didn't help in the final battle. How does that saying go? Too many cooks spoil the broth? We didn't need you to fight."

"I still feel bad about it, though. Plus, we left everything behind," I say, suddenly realizing this. The telescope, the pot, the map—all crushed by the sea monster or chucked into the sea by its tail. The knife, buried in the scaly monster's belly. The axe, long gone with Rafael and Pooky. The whip—Cody

had dropped it when the sea monster crashed to the ground. I'm not sure what happened to Mike Mullens' brass knuckles, but something tells me they've been left behind too.

"Yup," Steffi says. "We're heading into this new place—wherever it is—bringing nothing of this world with us. Just ourselves. A fresh start. I hope." Her hand suddenly grips mine tight, and she slows down. My footsteps get slower too, and the kids in front of us move farther ahead. She stops, and I stop with her. I feel her fingers creep around my neck, and she lowers my head to hers. She kisses me and whispers, "We're in this together still, right, Jack?"

"Right," I say, wrapping my arms around her and holding her tight. "Whatever happens, we're together."

We walk on. A soft blue light fills the tunnel, and we head towards it. And then, we walk into a hazy fog. I breathe in a lungful of it, and cough.

"What the hell is this?" Steffi says. Her voice sounds far away, as if she really isn't there at all. Then she, the others, and the tunnel dissolve into a peaceful nothingness.

<<<<>>

"Jack."

I moan and rub my head. I try to blink. Steffi's red hair waves in front of my eyes. Her face finally comes into focus. "What happened?" I whisper.

She just holds out a hand and helps me to my feet.

"You've been drugged, I'm afraid."

Steffi doesn't say that. The voice is unfamiliar. I rub my eyes. Standing next to Steffi is an old man. Old. Grey, stringy hair, a bony body draped in a flannel shirt and jeans. I shake my head, trying to clear my fuzzy ears. "Who are you?"

"He's one of *them*," Steffi whispers. "One of scientists who drugged us back when we were fifteen. You were right. These 'portals' aren't really magical or anything. Remember what

Sam told you? You walked into that old building, they gave you a shot, you woke up on Mukade Island. They've done the same thing again, but with gas. They've drugged us and moved us to this new place."

The old man nods. "The girl is correct. You're stuck here now, with us, I'm afraid."

I turn away from him and stare around. We're on top of a cliff overlooking a deep blue sea. Above the sea, puffy white clouds float through a blue sky.

Blue. Not orange like the sea in that other world. Not pink like the sky. Plain, ordinary, wonderful blue.

Below the cliff lies a little village nestled between rolling verdant pasture. A dirt road winds away from the town and climbs up the hill, running past near where we stand.

"My name is Herbert, by the way," the old man says. "Welcome to your new home."

The tone of his voice seems familiar. I turn towards him. "Were you expecting us?"

"Not until we saw the flash in the sky. Apparently, the flash always happens when someone new appears. They sent me up here to fetch you." He holds up a wicker basket. "I brought you food. Figured you must be hungry. Sorry it isn't much. They didn't expect so many of you."

Steve frowns. "They?"

"The other folks in the village. I'm new, see. Just got here a few months ago myself."

I have a ton of questions I want to ask this man, but the last bit of sustenance I'd had was seawater, hours ago, and I suddenly realize I'm ravenous. The basket is stuffed with bread, cheese, and apples—normal food, stuff I haven't tasted in months. In Steve's case, years. His teeth sink into a crust of bread, pure bliss emanating from every pore of his face.

We don't bother asking questions until everyone is awake and we've finish eating. We each get a slice of bread, a hunk of

creamy cheese and half an apple. Steve wipes the crumbs off his lips and says, "So...where are we?"

"The End, I suppose you could say," the old man says. "This is where everyone ends up once they've finished participating in the Project."

Steffi frowns. "And what exactly is 'The Project'?"

Herbert smiles. White teeth flash in the sunlight.

Perfect white teeth. I suck in my breath.

"Nobody knows all of it," he says. "I had only a slight part to play in it, myself."

All the warmth the sun and good food has given me suddenly rushes out of my body, replaced by a cold anger. "I know you," I say. "You're the man in the lab coat. The one who met me and my father in that warehouse. You gave me that shot. You sent me here."

He gives me a sad, gentle smile. "Son," he says in a low voice, "unfortunately, I was hired to do just that. Escort the kids in, give the shot. Load the kids in the truck. That was it. My only part to play. I had no idea why I was asked to do it. After a while though, it began to bug me. I started to ask questions. Got no answers. Turned in my resignation. Got drugged one day myself and ended up here."

He takes a deep breath and holds out his hand. "I am truly sorry with my part to play in all this. Believe me, I haven't ended up any better off than you."

"You didn't have to watch kids die," I growl. Tears spring up in his eyes.

"No," he says, "I guess I didn't have to go through that."

He seems genuinely regretful. My anger lessens and I take his outstretched hand. His skin is dry and soft. I suddenly feel sorry for this old man. All he did was take a job, and when he got some gumption and quit, they sent him here. I guess the Project was pretty secret stuff, and they couldn't let anyone go free, even someone like Herbert who probably didn't know much about what was going on at all.

“Did they at least let your family come with you?” I say.

The sad smile remains plastered to his face. “No. Of course not. That’s not how it works.”

Bhasker gulps down the last of his bread and says, “So there’s no way for us to get back home, then?”

“Not from here,” Herbert says. “This is a dead end, I’m afraid.”

“And exactly where are we?” Steve says, gazing around at the peaceful scenery.

Herbert shrugs. “It’s a holding area, I suppose you could say. Much like the world you and I originally came from.”

Steffi and I exchange glances. So our theory was correct. Rats in a maze. “Do they ever bother you here?” Steffi says.

Herbert begins packing the leftovers into the basket. “No. They leave us alone. We can’t travel too far from the village, of course. There are...obstacles in the way. But it’s a good place to retire, I suppose.”

He doesn’t sound quite convinced of this, but he gives us a cheerful, resigned smile. “Come on,” he says. “I’ll take you down to the village. There’s a couple of houses you can use. You’ll have to bunk up together though, I’m afraid. We weren’t expecting so many. And we certainly weren’t expecting kids.”

“That’s OK, we’re used to living together,” Steffi says, falling beside the old man. “So, what was it all about? Why were we sent to that place? I mean, we figure it was to test something...”

“Yeah,” Keiko says. “We figure the sea is some elixir: makes you strong or kills you, depending upon what they want.”

Herbert shrugs. “I never was part of that,” he says. “I just got the kids into the truck. But there are higher level people living in town who know more about what it was all about. You can pick their brains, if you like. And there’s a man down in the village...Scott. He’s the baker, made that great bread you just ate. Like you, he came here as a kid. He’s told us tales about being trapped in a strange world. Stories about a poi-

sonous sea and huge, man-eating centipedes. I thought he might be crazy, but some of the high-level executives who have been sent here collaborated his story.”

Steffi stops walking and grabs my arm. “Jack, it’s the kid. The one who disappeared through the portal. The one who wrote in the journal.”

“He isn’t a kid now,” Herbert says. “He’s forty-five.”

“Why did you think he was crazy?” Steffi asks.

Herbert shrugs. “He’s the only one who’s been there, you see. The only one who entered that world and made it out again. The rest of us living here worked for the company that runs the project, and whenever we quit or retired or start making a fuss, they sent us here. There’s about sixty of us living in the village. He turns to Steffi and gazes at her. “Were you all there too? In the cave?”

“Well, yeah,” Steffi says. “Where else would we have come from?”

Herbert frowns. “And you all came out of it. Just like that. All together. I wonder if they’ve finished the experiment, then.”

“If they have,” Frank says, “I wonder they plan to do with the seawater now?”

Keiko shrugs. “Start a war? Solve all illnesses? Who knows?”

“Whatever it is,” Herbert says, “its benefits aren’t for this world...or the world you came from.”

“Then *what* is it for?” Steve says.

Here Herbert stops, turns, and gives us all a kind smile. “Would you believe me if I told you I don’t know? I was hired to do a job. I don’t know who hired me. I don’t know why. I just knew I was getting a paycheck.”

My head is spinning with so many questions, I can’t think what I want to ask first. And I wonder if it matters. Do I really need to know the answers that badly? We’re here now. It looks like a nice place. There are no creepy crawlies to try and eat us after dark. The sea, I’ll bet, is warm and salty and it won’t

matter if we've developed an immunity to it or not. It's a real, normal sea. Like the ocean back home in California.

I can think of only one last question. I almost think to ask about Sam, but find that I don't really care anymore who he is. He's just another employee, probably. Maybe he'll even end up here someday. So, what I do ask is this:

"What do you call this place?"

Herbert turns to me and smiles. "We don't call it anything. It's the only village here, so it doesn't really need a name. It's just a quiet place. Fairly boring. But peaceful."

"Quiet and peaceful. Damn," Steffi whispers to me, but in a relieved sort of way. I breathe in the warm air and sigh. The feeling is similar to what I felt when we were rowing to Firefly Island, or to the rock. A sleepy sort of happiness. I gaze at the view—the deep blue waves rolling onto a soft, sandy beach, then the village nestled in the valley, then the low, rolling mountains behind it. My gaze returns to our little knoll and the kids standing there. Rob and Keiko, holding hands and smiling at each other. Steve, looking less worried than I've ever seen him. Bhasker standing next to him, an almost happy expression on his serious face. Sarah, gruffly giving Steffi a pat on her shoulder. I turn to Cody. He has his arm around Mamy's shoulders. He turns to me and smiles.

"It *is* peaceful, don't you think?" I whisper to Steffi.

"Yes," she says, taking my hand. "I'm sure that's how they *want* you to feel. They probably release some type of gas in the air to make sure everyone stays happy and content."

I return my brother's smile, although deep down I know that Steffi's right. This place is an illusion too. In one way, I want those questions that burned so hotly when we were in the cave—in that vast, crazy, manipulated world—to still feel relevant. Who were the masterminds behind the Project? Where did they come from? If the place I grew up with my

family was deliberately contrived like the cave, and like the world we're in now, where is the *real* world?

Then I look around at the kids. They're real. There's Steffi, the girl I love, even though I've never told her so in those words. My brothers: Steve, Bhasker, Rob. My real brother Cody, who seems more like a distant relative, but who maybe now I'll get closer to. My cousins from Anansi and Moka Islands—even that black sheep, Mike Mullens. They're real, they're here, and they're all my family now. And this is our new home.

Happiness—genuine or induced, I don't care—washes over me, and I squeeze Steffi's hand. Already the orange sea and crazy, insect-infested islands are blurring into nothingness in my mind.

We follow Herbert down the path, towards the village and the people waiting for us there.

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. Nikki now lives in the Pacific Northwest.

MOKA ISLAND is the final book in The Island Chronicles.

You can follow Nikki on Facebook and Twitter. And check out her patreon site to find out about Jack’s further adventures.

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