

The Island

a collection of writings by the students of the
Centauri Arts Academy

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Introduction

In 1542, a young woman called Marguerite was marooned on an island in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence and survived two brutal winters alone there, before being rescued.

There is an island off the coast of Labrador which was labelled 'Isola de Demoni' on several 16th century maps. Early European explorers described the island in detail - including the strange, other-worldly noises they regularly heard from its shores as they sailed by. Yet in the place where 'Isola de Demoni' was said to exist, there lies nothing but open sea.

Oak Island, off the coast of Nova Scotia, is supposedly the repository of pirate treasure. Legend has it that the treasure is cursed, and seven people will perish hunting for it before the hoard finally gives up its secrets.

What do all these stories have in common? They illustrate our long-standing fascination with islands. Islands are often places of isolation and mystery, where anything could happen and where compelling truths wait to be discovered. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* takes place on a magical island filled with spirits. The *Jurassic Park* movies are set on a fictional tropical island where dinosaurs still roam. *Treasure Island*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Robinson Crusoe*... all these classic novels are set on islands that capture the imagination of the reader.

This year, we took 'islands' as the inspiration for our anthology. For several weeks, writers aged 9-18 responded to prompts loosely connected to the subject of islands. We wrote about shipwrecks, fantastical creatures, land masses that shifted and moved, islands that time forgot, portals on islands and more. We crafted poems, wrote monologues, created flash fiction and even structured the first chapters of novels. Then, we edited our favourite pieces ready for publication. This year, 36 students

were registered in Creative Writing programs at the Centauri Arts Academy - the highest number ever. We offered more courses than ever, too - including a Junior Creative Writing program for ages 9-14. As in all previous years, we were astonished by the scope and quality of the writing our young writers produced, and we are proud and honoured to share their work with you in this book.

Our Digital Art program also participated in the 'island' anthology project, and some of their work is represented here. Artists not only designed covers for our book, they also created treasure maps which inspired the writers in their work.

I would like to thank Aaron Alviano, the instructor for our Digital Art programs, and also Briana Brown, the Creative Writing Instructor who ran programs for our virtual writing students. Huge thanks also to every instructor at the Centauri Arts Academy for entering into this project with such enthusiasm: in addition to this book, our arts classes created a devised theatre piece, two short films and a gallery of art all inspired by the idea of islands. Finally, enormous thanks to our talented and enthusiastic writers and artists. You are the reason we all love what we do at Centauri Arts - and the reason we look upon the future with hope.

Julie Hartley

Writing Instructor; Co-director of Centauri Arts

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Part One:

Fantastical Islands

The Island of Never-Ending Time

Elvie Rennie

Inspired by The Book Thief by Mark Zusak and Girl in Pieces by Kathleen Glasgow.

The wind sneaks its way through the trees, carrying a lingering scent of salt and earth. I listen to it, the sound I've come to know better than any human voice, and watch the waves crash almost soothingly against the shore. For what must be years at this point, I've sat here, tucked into the shadows of a small cave, a blessing from the island that never ceases to spin its strange, cruel web around me.

I don't know how many days—or years—it's been. Not in the way I used to, at least. In the world beyond, it's been so long that I'm sure no one remembers me. I don't even remember the exact day I was brought here—no one ever does. Time doesn't work the same here. What was once hours on Earth became minutes on this island, and what I've lived has been warped until the idea, the concept, of time itself is as unreliable as the waves that roll in.

Somewhere, deep in the pit of my chest, I still cling to the hope that someone out there is still looking for me, but deep down, I know that hope is just a quiet voice in the back of my mind. It's been so long. I've heard the soft murmur of my own voice far too many times now, each word a desperate plea for salvation that no one ever hears.

I've tried to mark the days, you know. I've written on the walls of my cave with charcoal and blood—no, not blood, ink. Yes, ink. A lie I tell myself to cope. The markings were meant to keep me tethered to something. To remind me that I existed, once, outside of this place.

But now the marks are just scribbles, meaningless scrawls that blur into the stone.

Time is slippery here. On Earth, a day is a day. A moment is a moment. Here, though, time bleeds, and I can never hold on to it. A day on the island is just a minute in the world I left behind. What used to be an afternoon stroll has become an eternity of shifting light and darkness, a painful cycle of sunrises and sunsets that happen too fast, too many times in a single breath.

The cave has become both my prison and my haven. Its stone walls are my only company – along with the occasional spiderweb – and the damp earth beneath me is the only texture I can feel anymore.

The air is thick, and the shadows stretch, curl, and twist into shapes I don't recognize.

When I close my eyes, sometimes I hear strings of mumbles – soft voices that call my name, as if they are trying to pull me back to the world I used to know. But the voices are always so far away, fading as soon as I reach for them.

I rarely leave the cave anymore. There's no reason aside from finding water – and food if I'm lucky. The island doesn't offer anything worth chasing. I've explored its edges, its forests, its cliffs, and every inch of sand in between, but nothing changes. The same trees, the same hills, the same sea. I could swim, but I've tried that before.

It doesn't matter. There's no escape.

But I remember what it was like before. I remember the laughter of my friends, the taste of a cold drink on a summer day. Sometimes, when the sun dips low enough, I close my eyes and pretend I'm there again, somewhere with other people, somewhere warm and bright, somewhere safe. But then the sun flickers, time warps, and I snap back into the hollow quiet of this place. And in the silence, the memories fall apart, the forgotten moments scattering like pieces of broken glass.

You may wonder how I know others have been here, even though no one has ever returned. Well, it's actually quite simple. As I mentioned earlier, my feet have touched every speck of soil and sand on this island. I've discovered human skeletons curled up in the corners of dark caves, with molding food beside them – sometimes even animal meat. I can't imagine what it would be like to have meat now, as all that remains are the berries growing on scattered bushes in the forest, barely enough to fill my stomach.

And occasionally, I find their markings on the walls. But none have ever lasted as long as I.

I'm awoken by the blinding lights of a ship.

Wait, no. That can't be right. I remind myself of where I am and what little meaning my life has left. However, as I blink the grogginess out of my eyes, it's clear that I am not mistaken. There is a large ocean liner that's gliding over the strong waves and heading straight towards the island. Straight towards me.

I must be hallucinating.

I've only just woken up after all. Or perhaps I'm not awake at all and this is just a dream. Either way, it's almost pitiful that my mind thinks there's still hope of being found. I can't afford to hope for safety, for freedom. It will only make it hurt more when I remember the unsettling reality.

Despite this, I leave the cave for what must be the first time in weeks. The lack of using my legs has nearly made me forget how to walk, which means I stumble out onto the sand, tripping over my own feet. Yet I manage to make it to the shoreline, wrapping my arms around myself as shivers wrack my body. And so, I wait for the ship to arrive. And wait. And wait.

It finally docks but by now my head is pounding from the exhaustion that comes with both my lack of sleep and lack of food. The world is spinning around me and I'm helpless to stop it, no matter how hard I try.

The face of my saviour is the last thing I see before the world around me fades to black and I collapse onto the beach.



Image by Nicolas Rodriguez Sanchez

The Others

Lucy Micklea

I awoke to three sensations: coarse sand rubbing against my back, cold and frothy water lapping against my feet, and the heat of the sun beating down on my body.

Slowly, I began to wiggle my fingers and toes, counting in my head to make sure they were all still there. I twitched my eyebrows, licked my lips, and slowly but surely, began to flutter open my eyes. I did my best to anchor my hands on the sand beneath me, digging my nails in to steady myself, and gently, I forced myself to sit up, ignoring the dull ache in my head.

I realized that no one was in my immediate vicinity, and I looked around, searching for Harper. It was difficult to spot her from a seated position, so I slowly rose to my feet, taking a few steps on shaky legs, and looked around.

“Harper?” I called, my voice croaky and quiet.

Soon enough, I spotted what looked like her. I walked over, regaining motion and strength in my legs, but sped up once I realized that she was lying face down with only her torso out of the water. I broke into a run, urgency gripping me like claws. I fell to my knees the second I reached her, managing to pull her mostly out of the water and flipping her over so her head was clear of the sand. Her face was cut up, but other than that, she just looked dirty. I gently slapped her face, shaking her shoulders in an attempt to wake her. “Harper?” I croaked, my voice gradually smoothing out. “Come on, Harper. Wake up.”

I sat there for a few more moments, shaking and shouting at her, until suddenly she let out a strangling cough, spitting out sand and seawater. I sighed with relief, helping her turn to cough into the sand so she wouldn’t choke. Eventually, her breathing returned to normal, and she pushed herself up off the ground to sit, turning to look at me.

“Jesus,” she rasped, “you look terrible.”

I shoved her shoulder gently, laughing. “You’re not in a position to be offering criticism right now.”

She looked around. “Where are we?” she asked.

I shrugged, gazing around too. The island was seemingly pretty big, and further in, past the beach, was a forest of foliage, crowded close together.

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Where’s our boat?”

I followed her gaze to the ocean, but there was no evidence of our boat or any of the supplies it had held - only vast, blue, water.

"Must have sunk or got swept away in the storm," I said, focusing back on her. "Can you walk?"

She wiggled her legs. "I think so," she said. "It feels..."

Her voice trailed off as she looked at me. I frowned. "What? What is it?"

I heard her inhale a shaky breath, swallowing a gulp. It was only then that I realized that her gaze was no longer on me, but on something behind me. "Harper, what's wrong?" I asked, feeling an uneasy sensation in my chest. Her eyes held something: not uneasiness, not nervousness, not even fear. Instead, her features were warped into an unrecognizable mask of complete terror.

"Andie..." she whispered. "Look behind you."

Dread crept up my spine, prickling between my shoulders as I slowly turned.

Exiting the forest was a group of people. The group divided into two, and each of the groups approached us at an increasing pace. They looked friendly enough, aside from the fact that each person, in their respective group, was walking the exact same way. Their arms were swinging in time with one another, and their smiles were completely identical.

Both groups looked familiar, and one so more than the other. It was only when they got closer that I realized, with a more intense and crippling horror than I had ever experienced before, where I had seen them.

They were... me.

"Andie?" Harper's voice cut through my thoughts, quiet so as not to be overheard. "The group on the right, are they..."

"Me." My voice escaped before I could stop it. "And on the left..."

"Me," she replied, her voice filled with quiet terror as the two groups reached us.

We sat side by side on the beach, watching as the figures stared down at us, their identical faces blocking out the sun, their smiles stuck on their faces as if they had been sewn. Suddenly one of the replicas of me - one of the Andies - piped up:

"Hello!"

I blinked.

"We hope your journey wasn't too unpleasant," one of the Harpers said.

"What?" I managed. "Wh-who are you?"

"Oh," one of the Andies giggled to herself. "Our apologies. We're The Others."

"Wait, what do you mean, The Others?" Harper asked.

"We're you! Well, you from before you made different choices," an Andie exclaimed.

"I'm sorry, what?" I asked.

"In every person's life, there are choices to make," a Harper replied, "some of which are simple, and some... less so. Things like what job offer to accept or where to live. And it's decisions like those that can lead you off The Path."

"The Path," an Andie continued, "is the course that your life is set to take, and in theory, if you never strayed from The Path, you would never create Others. But we're human. We make mistakes and we change our minds, which is why The Path is changeable - but at a cost."

"You see, when every person is born, they're The One. The person who is living their own life and making their own choices," a different Andie added. "But the moment The One makes a choice that strays off The Path, they're not The One anymore. They become one of The Others, and the new One, who is formed by their unplanned decision, takes their place."

I blinked, trying to process this overflow of information. "So, you're all..."

"The Others," they clarified, in perfect unison and with a smile.

"And we," Harper said, looking at me, "are The Ones."

"Ooh," one of the Harpers winced, "not quite. You *were* The Ones, but you made a choice recently that strayed from The Path, and now you're an Other -" she looked around at everyone else, "- with us." Again, they all grinned widely in unison, and I felt a shiver travel up my spine. Indignation settled deep in my belly - this had to be some sort of joke.

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand what you're trying to say," I cut in, making all their heads cock to the side in unison. *Stop doing that*, I yelled in my head.

"Well, you're a-" one of them started, but I interrupted.

“No, I-I understand, but you’ve made some kind of mistake.” I looked over at Harper, who had gone gray in the face. “We’re not Others. Or Ones. And there’s no such thing as ‘The Path’,” I insisted. One of the Harpers chuckled and spun in a circle, looking around her.

“Well, how else do you explain all this?” she said, causing all of them to laugh.

“I don’t know... maybe we’re hallucinating or something,” I said, frantically grappling for an answer. “Or! Or, whoever is behind all this, whoever sends The Others here and makes The Ones - they messed up, okay? They made a mistake. Because Harper and I aren’t Others. Or Ones. We’re Harper and Andie, and we are in control of our lives.” My chest was heaving and my mind spinning as I added, “and we *always* have been.”

They all laughed again. I wanted to punch them in their synchronized laughing faces.

“Well, clearly, you haven’t always been in control of your lives, or none of us would be here,” Other Andie explained.

I blinked, trying to come up with some sort of rational way to explain this.

“I,” one of the Andie’s piped up, “I was you before you chose to go to SDSU instead of Berkeley.”

I frowned, confused. *How does she know that?* I mean, she did have an eerily similar haircut to mine before I turned down Berkeley, but... no. It wasn’t possible.

Was it?

“And I,” one of the Harpers added, “I was you, Harper, before you decided to move in with Andie instead of going back home to live with your parents.”

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I looked over at Harper, who had seemingly snapped out of her trance and was now staring at them with a mix of confusion and quiet fury.

“How did you know that?” she asked, her voice eerily calm.

They all smiled, and one of the Andies stepped forward.

“Our parents’ names are Cassandra and Michael,” she said.

My heart rate sped up. Another Harper stepped forward.

“They live at 310 Besscroft Crescent,” she said.

I looked at Harper, whose arms had broken out in goosebumps. Other Andie stepped forward.

“We lived in Escondido until we were five, and then we moved to Solana Beach.”

Other Harper stepped forward.

"We're allergic to kiwi and tabby cats."

Harper swallowed audibly. "S-stop it," she stuttered, her voice meek.

Other Andie stepped forward.

"We spent eleven birthdays straight at a trampoline park."

My hands started to sweat. Dread settled ominously in the pit of my stomach. "No, no, stop. Stop it," I cried, my voice growing louder.

Other Harper stepped forward.

"Our first boyfriend's name was Spencer."

"Our aunt's been married three times."

"Okay, that's enough." My head was spinning, my thoughts blurring.

"Our favourite song is 'Something' by the Beatles because Papa used to play it for us before he died."

"Stop!"

"We drive a 2018 Toyota Camry."

"Stop it!" The air felt too thick to breathe.

"We hate red velvet cake."

"Quit it!" My stomach twisted, my breath was coming faster and more uneven.

"We wanted to be an actress, but we didn't think we were pretty enough."

"Stop!" The weight in my chest got heavier, suffocating me.

"We're dyslexic."

"We sunburn easily."

Another Andie turned to me, her smile not quite reaching her eyes.

"We can't get in red cars since the accident."

"*SHUT UP!*" I screamed, jumping to my feet. They all leapt back, almost looking scared for a moment before returning to their normal stilted expression. I stared at them, chest heaving, eyes blazing.

They smiled.

My feet staggered away before I could tell them not to. *Go, go, go. Get out.*

I broke out into a run, slipping on the sand. My pulse was racing as adrenaline washed over me. Dimly, I heard Harper, the real Harper, calling my name, but it sounded faded, like I was underwater. My ears rang and my stomach felt like it was flipping upside down.

Suddenly, my foot hit a rock, and I catapulted forward, launching in the sand.

I laid there for a few moments before flipping onto my back with a groan. My ankle throbbed, but I ignored it, trying to process what the hell was happening. I felt... purposeless. For a split second, I didn't want to exist. What was the point of having a life if it wasn't mine to control? If I'd been reduced to nothing but a thing of the past, a has-been, an Other. I was on the right track. I was top of my class, I had a nice apartment and a loving family, and I knew exactly how I wanted my life to go. For a short, blissful period of my life... everything had been perfect. *And now I'm stuck in my own personal hell.* I thought bitterly.

I didn't know how long I laid there, but eventually, I realized I was trapped, whether I liked it or not. I had left Harper behind, and I had to go back.

I had been walking on the beach for what couldn't have been more than ten minutes when I spotted the Others. I sighed, bracing myself. I scanned the crowd for Harper, my Harper, but to my confusion, I couldn't seem to find her. *I'm probably just having trouble picking her out of all of them,* I thought, but I still couldn't shake the familiar sense of dread building in me. When I reached them, they all turned to look at me, giving me surprised smiles.

"Welcome back!" one of the Harpers exclaimed.

"Yeah, thanks..." I frowned, still not spotting Harper.

"Where's Harper?"

"Right here." All the Other Harpers announced in unison, bursting out into laughter. I fake laughed along with them.

"Yeah, no, I mean, the Harper I came with," I clarified.

"Oh, she went to find you," another Andie replied. I furrowed my brow.

"What? What do you mean?"

"She ran after you. She was worried about you."

"But I never saw her, and I didn't hear her," I said, fear creeping up my spine. "Where is she?"

Another Andie stepped forward, concern written all over her face.

"What's the matter? You seem scared," she said, reaching out for my hand. I recoiled, but not before her cold fingers brushed mine, making me shiver. "I'm not scared." I insisted. "Where is my sister?"

The Others smiled at me.

“Don’t worry, Andie. It’s okay.”
They took a step towards me.
“Everything is going to be okay.”

To whoever finds this message,

My name is Andie Pierce and I’m 22 years old. I live in Solana Beach in San Diego County and I’m a student at SDSU. I live at 16 Gordon Road in apartment 52C, and I live there with my sister, Harper Pierce, who is a student at University of Irvine. My parents' names are Cassandra and Micheal Pierce and they live at 310 Besscroft Crescent. On July 16, 2018, the drought caused San Diego to catch fire, starting in the center and spreading out to the whole city. In the early hours of the morning on July 17, Solana Beach caught on fire and everyone was forced to evacuate. Harper and I took a motorboat from where it was docked at the marina and left in hopes of reaching Catalina Island. Several hours into our journey, we hit a very bad storm. When we woke up, we were washed up on a beach. We were on an island, but it had no buildings, roads, cars, etc., and there was a group of people there.

The people on this island are us. Harper and me. They call themselves The Others - the versions of us when we made different choices in our lives.

After an incident, I left to gather my composure, and when I returned, Harper was missing. They claim that she left to find me, but I’ve scoured the island and can’t find her anywhere.

They took her.

They want to take me.

I’m not crazy.

And I need help.

Andie Pierce

The Legend

Owen Cheng

The World

Ah. A perfect place. A place outside time. War. Responsibility. Orders. A perfect place. Just as I planned. A place that your kind will never attain, I have made sure of it. Dear creators, I hope you enjoy the mess you have made. Because I am leaving for another universe. Do not follow me. Your kind will regret it. Consider your knowledge of a utopia just out of reach to be my final gift to you. Goodbye.

This island I have created myself: it's perfect. A perfect cycle. A world with no end. A world without change. Change creates too many problems. Much easier to know all my variables constantly. Nothing will happen unless I will it. "Madman" you call me? Well, I'm certainly not going to deny it. By your standards this is insane. But remember I'm not orcish, human, elvish, dwarfish or any sort of your kind here. I am Other. Beyond you or any of the species that live on this world. Though I made a construct to be more friendly, know this. For this is not my true body. For it is this building. All 700m cubed of it: of pure knowledge and perfection. I am more akin to the gods that you pray to. So watch your tongue, mortal.

The Hanged Man

"A prophecy?" the Mannequin questions, "what's that?"

You gulp. You understand the danger of this Construct, it has told you such. It is on par with most of the gods. But you have to get off this island. The things you saw here, the unchanging suffering, the nightmare they live in, the unchanging island, bodies in between death and life. A mockery of nature and life. A foul pretender of benevolence. Forever in a state of decay and flourish. This place scares you. You MUST LEAVE.

You say: "A prophecy is a vision, like a dream. An accurate prediction of the future."

"Oh? Your kind has power over time?" it asks.

"Yes...!"

"And... how do I know you're speaking the truth?"

"It's something I taught you! Trust," you lie.

"You amuse me, wanderer. Tell me about your 'dream'."

"So the dream starts off with..."

Death

So, the wanderer told The Mechanical God about their prophecy. The prophecy of death and life. A prophecy of trust and deception. A prophecy of hope and of despair. A prophecy that The Mechanical God... feared. It did everything to stop it. A field of electricity, a wall of magic. A bubble outside of time. It even gave some animals powerful artifacts. But the prophecy did not change. The wanderer made The Mechanical God realize the change would stop if they left. So, The Mechanical God made a chariot, pulled by Birds that burned brighter than the sun and Stags as fast as light to pull the wanderer away from its island. And the wanderer left the island and travelled into the stars. But the prophecy the wanderer decreed had been fulfilled. The island had been changed. And continues to change. The perfect balance of unlife and undeath had shattered. The island cannot be controlled anymore.

The island flourished, grew unexpectedly, died and continued to do so. The island slowly began to grow, spreading across the ocean and becoming the World.

So that's where the story ends. No one really knows what happened to The Mechanical God, nor the wanderer. But one can imagine. If they are happy. If they are loved.

The Catalogue of Humanity

Leah Chan

Inspiration: I've always liked the idea of either a cemetery of souls or a library of books, with the stories of people's lives in them. In my mind it was always a little place nestled in the mountains or at the base of a valley, and so for this anthology I decided to put my location on an island. The piece below was written during a free write session. I wanted to write something that was exciting to me and unfolded as I wrote it; for example, I didn't know there was going to be a museum of ideas until I started to write! The idea of creating things as I write has always been exciting and enjoyable to me.

Noémie stretched slowly in the warm morning sunlight before standing and splashing cold water on her face from the washing basin, bringing life back into her cheeks and clarity to her thoughts. She donned a simple dress that brushed the backs of her calves and braided her hair as she watched the sun rise above the slope of the mountain through her window. The golden rays of light painted the sky pink and amber, making the clouds glow with their ambience. She picked up her satchel from where she had left it on her armchair and unlatched the door, exiting her tiny cabin.

Noémie was a library worker at *The Library of Souls*, an old institution in the middle of nowhere that defied all concepts of time. It was on a tiny island, nestled in the valley floor between two large mountains. Noémie walked down the path from her home, ducking into the forest and following the well-worn trail she walked every morning. Upon reaching the grand house, she slipped inside the kitchen and helped herself to a serving of bread and butter. Although the island had no access to most luxuries, their goats produced good milk, and they had a mill for their wheat and flour. As she was spreading her butter on the toast she had warmed on top of the hearth, she noticed Maël walk in the room with a basket full of apples. She waved to him, and he waved back.

Both Noémie and Maël worked at *The Library* under the careful instruction of Julien, the head librarian. Each day consisted of watching and documenting the unfolding of a life before carefully placing the work in the library. Then, they would break for lunch and get some fresh air before starting on island chores, such as milking the goats, feeding the chickens, or harvesting some fruit. When the sun reached the highest point in the sky, selected visitors would slowly

arrive and dig through their books to find a life they wished to remember, directed by a couple of library workers. Noémie would fly around the library, trying to help them find a book in the trillions that they had on hand. When visitor hours closed, they would watch and document one more life and file it, before joining the entire collection of staff for dinner. Julien gave a speech each evening before releasing them to their own personal projects. Noémie and Maël were working together on a research project about music and philosophy, and they would spend this time conducting careful research and writing essay drafts and manuscripts for a novel that would go in a separate, slightly smaller library that was filled with advice and good information that could be accessed by the visitors. When the sun finally touched the edge of the horizon, Noémie and Maël would part ways and Noémie would walk around the edge of the island, her shoes under her arm and the skirts of her dress just barely above the water. She would feel the cool waves against her feet and would make several laps before returning to her cottage and preparing herself for the next day. She would undo her hair, undress, and wash up before picking up a book and sitting in bed until her breaths evened out and she sleepily stretched out beneath her covers as sleep welcomed her into its warm embrace.

On this day, Noémie finished her breakfast and took an apple with her for good measure before making her way to the working space. She waved hello to her colleagues before getting set up at her desk. She pulled out a blank book, a pen and her tablet, gently inserting a shiny gold card that read ADRIEN BLACKWOOD, 1946-2025. As her finger hovered over the play button, the doors to the working hall creaked open and Julien slowly walked into the room, his long white robes swishing against the floor.

Julien was a man who knew no age. Although his hair was grey and his face was lined with wrinkles, he had been the head librarian for over five thousand years. His robes were cream and embroidered with crimson detailing, covering his entire body, save for his hands and head. He strode through the working hall with confidence, and Noémie watched him out of the corner of her eye apprehensively, one eye still trained on her work. It wasn't uncommon for Julien to visit the library workers while they were documenting, but it wasn't common, either.

Her eyes widened as he grew closer to her, finally stopping in front of her desk.

“Noémie,” he said in a kind voice, soft enough that only she could hear.

“Yes, head librarian Julien, sir,” she replied, her fingers trembling with fear. She was comfortable with Julien, but one could never be too careful with a creature of five thousand years who ruled over every life that had ever been lived.

“No need for such formalities,” he said with a soft chuckle. “You are not in trouble. But come, I have a project for you.” He turned swiftly, and Noémie quickly shut down her work to follow him, doing her very best not to look desperate as she trailed him across the island. They walked along the stone path that cut through the island’s gardens, weaving around the grazing goats and fields of wheat, spinning between the apple trees and bubbling fountains, curling around the side of the beautiful domed library and towards... the port?

She was confused as he led her to the visitor’s center, a small white building next to the vast expanse of water. Trees rustled in the slight wind and birds chirped their morning song, which only made their destination stranger. Visiting hours were after lunch, generally around what would be 1pm in traditional time telling. Of course, time worked differently on the island, but it was consistent, and no visitor had ever visited before the library opened.

Julien gently eased the front door open and let Noémie inside. As her eyes adjusted, she noticed the visitor, who was sitting on a bench next to an anxious-looking Cosette.

Cosette was a friendly brunette, and she was normally loud and outgoing, but she, like the rest of the library crew, was not a fan of events that happened out of the ordinary, or against routine. Her long, delicate fingers clutched her clipboard, and relief showed in her eyes when she saw Noémie and Julien. “This is our visitor,” she said. “He’s looking for a book about a woman named Vivien Auclair who was born on April 22, 1945, and passed away in 2003.” As usual, she got straight to business, not missing a beat. Julien began to speak with the visitor in low tones.

“I’m afraid I’m not sure why he’s arrived ahead of visiting hours,” Cosette whispered softly to Noémie. “But Julien said he has a feeling that what he’s looking for is important and cannot be delayed. He wants you to look for the book about Vivien Auclair.”

“My name is Noémie,” she said, and, at a loss as to what else to say, she led him out of the visitor’s centre and towards the library.

Five hours later, Noémie had had no luck in finding the book on Vivien Auclair. She gritted her teeth as her fingers ran through the books written in 1945 and found nothing. She had checked every year between 1903 and the current year, every year that ended in '03 or '45, and had gotten Maël to look through the records. Nothing had come up, and Noémie was starting to get tired.

"I apologize," Noémie finally said, after she had gone through the year 1945 for the millionth time. "It appears that we are missing this record. I shall report it to Julien immediately."

But something in the visitor's eyes stopped her. He watched her with a cautious expression, his eyebrows furrowed.

"Noémie!" Maël called softly, breaking her out of her daze.

Noémie looked up sharply to see him hurrying over with a binder in his hands.

"I found her, and it says she was shelved in 1945."

"I still don't see anything," Noémie whispered back, her eyes darting back to the visitor.

"Noémie..." he murmured.

"What is it?" she asked impatiently.

"Cosette researched a case like this for her last personal project. Files have been going missing for years. And there's always a person who comes looking for the book who alerts us that something is wrong. Julien has been keeping it under wraps because he doesn't want to worry anyone and distract them from their work. But last year, he told me, and now he's told you, and Cosette knows more than anyone... I think this is serious, Noémie. There's no way that this is a coincidence. If we keep losing files, Noémie... that's not good." Maël shook his head, his face wiped of any levity.

"Alright. Let's go to my desk," Noémie decided. She brought the two men to her workstation, where the life she had been about to start before Julien had interrupted sat, untouched and painfully unfinished. "Tell me everything you can," she said to the visitor, pulling out a blank notepad and a pen. She started taking notes as he spoke, her pen flying across the page with the effortless writing of a librarian of *The Library*. "She was born in 1945, and lived in Toronto, Canada for much of her life. She was married, but they split within five years," Noémie said to herself, before pausing and glancing at her background notes on Adrien Blackwood. "Hold on... There's no way."

Maël had caught on and watched in stunned silence as Noémie extricated the file from that morning and opened it.

The visitor's eyes widened as he realized what conclusion Noémie had drawn. "I-I'm sorry, but I don't remember her ex-husband's name," he whispered, the colour draining from his face.

"No worries," Noémie said calmly. She showed Maël the shiny gold card with Adrien Blackwood's name. "I'm going to speed through this to confirm that he was married at some point to our Vivien. If she was, I'll take note of any other people that he knew so you can find their files. Many of them are likely still alive, which is unfortunate, but I'm sure you can ask for Julien's permission to go into the card room and temporarily take some of the cards to find any mention of Vivien. Maybe we can get to the bottom of this."

"I want to help," the visitor said, looking Noémie in the eye. Maël and Noémie exchanged looks before Noémie finally nodded, and Maël ran off to seek Julien's permission.

"Once we get some names, you can take any finished reports of people we find and you can write down any references you can find to Vivien, alright?"

Noémie dove into her work, words flowing from her fingertips as she watched the playback of Adrien's life. She took note of all the people in his life and was dimly aware of the books around herself, Maël, and their visitor, slowly stacking up.

At some point, Cosette had joined them, and was attempting to form a coherent file of Vivien's life. Noémie had finally finished reading through the fifth book about another person's life when Cosette tapped her shoulder. "I've found all the people that they reference her talking to at the end of her life and Julien is almost certain that she joined an organization not unlike our own. Everything that we're seeing about Vivien has happened to the people who joined *The Museum*."

Noémie froze. "*The Museum*?"

"That's a special personal project Julien and I had," Cosette explained. "A long time ago, when we were trying to figure out why all these people were going missing. It's time for some exploring. Julien will probably give it to you and Maël because he's sick of travelling with me." She gave Noémie a small smile. "It's time to find more secret islands," she said wistfully. "These little islands: *The Library of Souls*, *The Museum of Ideas*, and whatever this is." She gestured vaguely at the file in front of her. "We call them *The Catalogue of Humanity*."

Poisonous Paradise

Eva

I got my inspiration for this piece from the new Hunger Games book where all the natural resources in the arena are poisonous. I wondered what it would be like if this environment was not just a part of their life, but their home.

The burning creeps up my throat, slowly but surely, as if teasing me and making me hurt for its entertainment. Not that I care though, I'm used to it. Used to the feeling of hurting, of pain, of desperation. It's all I have ever known, all I have ever been given. So, this pain, this pain I feel in my throat, is nothing compared to the pain I have felt since I got here.

Everything I touch hurts me back, everything I eat causes me pain because I am not immune like the others, I am stuck forcing food down my throat that I know will eventually kill me. Why? Because of the *poison*. It's everywhere. It runs through the plant's vines and all the humans' veins except mine. To them I am an alien foreign to their land, but the few memories I have left tell me that they are the aliens, the foreign ones, to my mind anyway, but not anymore, this is my life, my endless eternity. Sometimes I revisit the corners in my mind. I try to remember something from my old life, my past world: a familiar voice, a familiar sound, but I end up with nothing and must return myself to the way things always are.

I'm told I'm broken; messed up. The nicer ones tell me that I will become immune soon, but I don't come across nice people a lot and I know what they are saying is lies. That I will never become immune because that is what I wish for, and I never get what I wish for. I eat what I know will soon kill me; how I have survived this far I don't know. Maybe I'm immune, but I know deep in my heart that no one else feels pain in their throat or feels as if their stomach is being flipped inside out whenever they eat the food here. I am an outsider, and I hope when the poison takes me, it takes me fast.

I am told that I showed up on the beach one day, as a child, looking confused and lost. I didn't know where to go or what to do. Everyone assumed that when I was playing on this island, I got swept into the ocean and it spat me up here. But I know, I do not belong in this place. A kind family took me in, giving me a home and food, but immediately after eating I would start crying, saying I was in pain.

Soon everybody realized I was not from here and I was kicked out of my home because the thought of someone who was not immune to the poison living in their home terrified them. They didn't want someone in their home who was not like them.

I missed my sister so much, though I don't know if I should still call her that.

One day, I was at my makeshift home when I saw someone. She looked familiar, but I couldn't tell from where. She said she needed my help and that she was losing her ability to digest the poison. At first, I was a little selfish, I didn't want to help her. I wanted someone else to feel how their world treated outsiders, and maybe now I wouldn't be so alone. But then I had a flashback: my sister walking with me, even after she knew about my inability to digest the poison. And then I remembered where the face was from. This was my sister!

For the next few days, I helped her, trying to get her to drink the water or eat the food. I felt so bad for her because she had never felt this pain before. Then, one day, I finally came up with a cure. IT WORKED! IT FINALLY WORKED! My sister hugged me and cried. She would be back to normal.

I wondered whether to administer the cure to myself, hesitating because if I took it, I would become just like everyone else. Did I really want that? Then I thought about the pain I felt when I ate.

I had been lying to myself. It hurt too much to turn the antidote down.

So I took it, and my life changed.

It's been three years since I took the cure. Though I still despise the people who shut me out, I have new hope. I never thought I would love, run around with no worries or eat the food here. It is delicious! I have new opportunities, and I get to live my life for real now that I am not constantly worried about poison. Even though it was hard for a while, I am now living the best possible life I can live, alongside my sister and my husband. Sometimes I worry if my kids will inherit my gene but in that case, I can give them the cure just as I gave it to many other people after they came out of hiding. It turns out I was not the only one afflicted - just the only one who had enough potential to make a difference.

Some people view this island as a home while others see it as a prison, but I've had the opportunity to see both sides of this magical, deadly island. Even though one was harder than the other, now I can

help people who felt the same and for that I am grateful. I finally have my happy ending.

But will the antidote last forever?

Last night I felt a pain in my stomach, and it can only mean one thing...

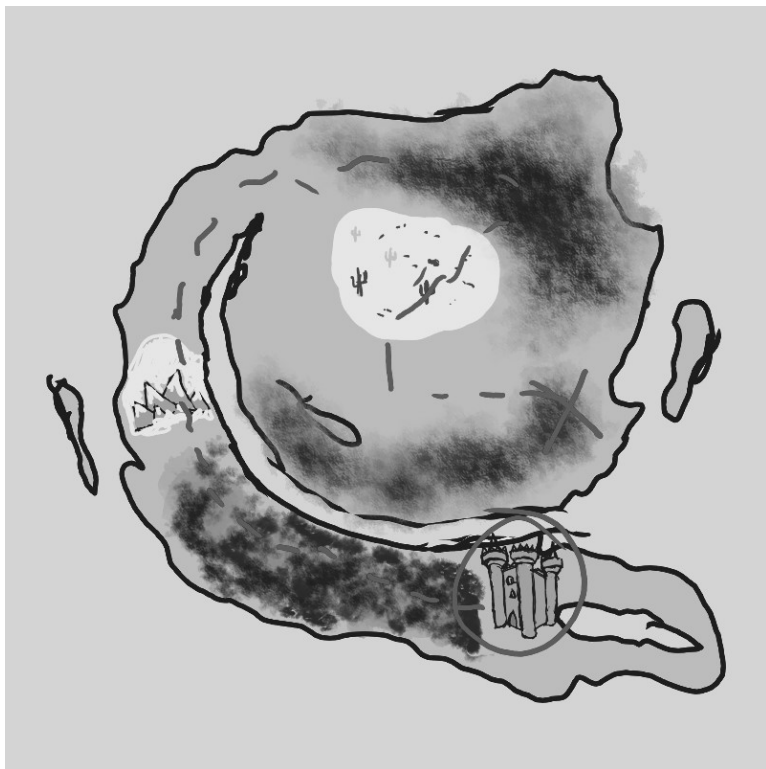


Image by Lydia Li

Island in the Sky

Chelsea Eason

Inspiration: I've always been inspired by the thought of people living in the sky, on islands and in cities just out of sight, out of reach. The thought of exploring these sky islands often kept me awake at night, and when sleep did fall upon me, I was always met with the clouds that held up these worlds.

Waterfalls. Waves, crashing down sharp, rocky mountains, pulled by gravity from high ponds down into the never-ending sea. We are always told not to climb a waterfall - but what happens when someone is *pulled* up a waterfall?

The captain, worried about another storm, looked up to see a thick stream of water pouring down, stagnant in one spot only. He sailed closer to the stream and trailed his hand inside to feel the cool water. He watched his hand float up in the water, almost pulling him, as if it wanted to carry him into the sky.

He watched as small, golden fish swam up around his hand, then he let himself step off his ship and into the stream. The water held him close inside itself, drawing him up and up into the bright, sunny sky.

Awakening in a small pool of water, the captain watched as the golden fish jumped over him and onto land. He rolled over, letting his head rest on the muddy bank. Astonished, he saw the fins of the fish press themselves flat to the grass, lifting the tiny creatures up and walking off, as if they were always meant to run in the fields.

The captain peered closer, making sure they were really fish, making sure what he was seeing was correct. He rolled onto his stomach, his chin sinking deeper in the mud. One of the fish turned back to look at the pond it had just leaped out of and stared at the captain. It blinked its black eyes emotionlessly at the man before turning away and continuing on its journey behind the other fish.

The captain climbed out of the shallow pond and followed close behind the fish, his shoes making faint squishing sounds along a cobbled path. He looked around at the strange structures around him, as

if this place was frozen in time. The buildings were tall and made of stone, moss creeping up the sides of tall pillars that held up crooked roofs.

There were no windows on any of the homes, only broken, brown shutters that hung out and swung in the wind. The doorways were left bare, as anything that could have been a door was long gone, taken by age and the elements.

He followed the fish into a forest, the cobbled road turning to gravel, then to stone, then a long-beaten path that was overgrown by shrubs and low hanging trees.

The captain looked around the forest as the fish led him deeper into the trees. He shoved branches and cobwebs out of the way, whipping leaves and twigs from his damp hair.

The forest parted to reveal a large lake. A waterfall on the far side poured water into a water wheel that spun in a steady rhythm. The captain watched the fish jump into the lake, seeming to grow three sizes at the touch of the water. He bent down to touch the surface of the lake. It felt warmer than the ocean water he had touched upon awakening that morning, but it left his hand the same size.

The captain headed along the banks of the lake to a house that looked a few centuries younger than the other structures around it. He pushed open the driftwood door to reveal a bare, messy room. He gazed around, noticing books and writings scattered on the table and counter. Chunks of the paper were missing, and tiny teeth marks covered most of the writing. The books had water stains on almost every page, making them stick together so they were almost impossible to read.

Finding a ladder, the captain climbed up to a small attic room. He saw a rickety bed in the corner and the walls were lined with empty shelves that the scattered books must have once rested on.

On the wall above an empty desk the captain saw a photo of a woman, her smile large and bright, her hair wet. She was sitting atop the waterfall that ran out of the lake and below her was a man attempting to climb the waterfall. The two smiled not at the camera but at each other, smiles wide and reaching their eyes. The large goldfish were jumping off the waterfall next to the woman.

The captain looked closer at the photo and saw a small basket next to the woman. It rested on a rock, and it had a blue blanket crumpled up inside. The woman's hand was reaching into the basket as she smiled at the man below.

Then the captain heard a faint sound of footsteps below him. Someone was slamming books shut and closing the shutters of the house. Panicked, he rushed to a window, hoping to jump onto the water wheel below. As he sat on the windowsill, preparing himself, he heard a faint voice behind him.

“Sam?”

He turned to see the woman in the picture standing in front of him, a small smile on her face. “You fell off the island years ago... I never thought I would see you again,” she muttered as she stepped closer to the captain. She held his cheek in her hand, her warm touch reminding him of something. Her brown eyes held specks of gold, as if the fish he had encountered not long before swam inside. He searched her eyes, hoping to remember something about this woman who somehow knew his name, then it came to him.

“Lana,” he muttered, his eyes welling up with tears as he embraced her. His tears fell onto her shirt as he sobbed into her shoulder.

“I knew you'd come back, and the fish knew it too,” Lana said as the two embraced.

“It's been so long, I can't believe I'm finally home,” Sam cried through his sobs. He held Lana in front of him, examining her face after so many years. “My son, Steve, is he okay?” he asked, a flicker of concern in his eyes. “Is he here?”

“Yes, he's okay, he's playing with the goldfish,” Lana replied with a laugh.

Sam and Lana went outside, hand in hand, watching a young boy splash at the shore of the lake.

“Dad?” the boy said as the two joined him.

“I'm home, son,” Sam said. He picked the boy up in his arms, pulling Lana in for an embrace.

Soul

Lisa Yermakhanova

Inspiration: *I was inspired to write this story because I wanted to show how war can change people. Bluey, the guardian of Comet, has been to war with the humans. He believes they are reckless, greedy, and selfish because they stole the one thing essential to their land: Souler. One Souler can keep the Earth running for another hundred years.*

Human View

The blue moon is beautiful today, filled with its lustrous halo glow. I looked and saw the Great Lunpax. Lunpax is a mythical island filled with creatures the size of my shoe. It is said that a guardian is protecting Lunpax from us humans. This creature is known as Bluey. Don't let the name fool you. It is not Bluey the dog. This Bluey is ruthless and deadly, mostly known to hide in the shadows once a blue moon.

The blue moon rises tonight - a chance to meet with death. The worst part is that no one believes Lunpax and its great guardian Bluey exist. I saw the island with two eyes in the sky with striking shades of red, purple, and pink. It was like a whole other world filled with mysteries. My only problem was that I saw the eyes of the great guardian, Bluey. Bluey was a majestic blue owl. It was the size of a house, maybe even bigger, but it looked at me with its purple eyes. Those purple eyes showcased the meaning of life. Though people don't believe me, I have seen it all.

Myths are real, hidden within sight of the world.

The Guardian

Bluey is what these incompetent humans call me. I am Listra Nova, the protector of our great Queen Lily. Lily is the savior of our land, which is called Comet. Comet used to be a land so well known to humans in the Dark Ages.

Those dark ages caused us to hide since, apparently, we were a nonexistent natural phenomenon. EXCUSE ME! We have lived longer than those disrespectful, resource-abusing humans. Yet here I am in the sky looking at the beautiful blue moon.

Blue Moon is the only time a dumb human will ever see us again. Lucky me. I see a human on a tiny little boat looking with his

tiny wide pupils. Has this human never seen a creature before? I mean come on, you stole our home first. We have always been here.

According to humans, we are a mythical island called Lunpax, and I am named Bluey. I hate when humans see our beautiful island filled with resources that they can never take from us again.

One special thing about this island is it is made not of soil and dirt but of a gem called Souler. Souler is a gem filled with the power of a thousand men.

I will never forget how those humans betrayed us and almost killed our queen, all to gain Souler.

This is COMET!

NO HUMAN WILL WALK ON HERE AGAIN!!

Human View

The winds changed, and now I am on Lunpax. My airship is toast: it is burning like a campfire. I see the big blue owl, Bluey, coming my way.

"Hi," I say.

"Do you humans have any manners?" *Who does he think he is? Also, he can talk. CRAZY.*

"Excuse me?" I ask, confused.

"Must I repeat myself, you dumb human? I asked you if you had any manners!" *Why so posh?*

The large blue owl pointed to my burning airship.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry," I said, embarrassed. *I didn't mean it.*

The owl started to walk down the gem-filled forest, which was glowing like fireworks. *It was gorgeous.*

"Bluey?" I asked. *Well.*

The owl turned its big head around and gave me the coldest glare. "My name is Listra Nova," he said stone-cold.

Listra? Nova? What?

He turned his head back and continued to walk.

"So Listra? Nova? How are you?" I said in the sweetest tone possible.

He pinned me to a glowing green crystal tree and said, "Don't ever call me by name, you murderer."

What is wrong with this owl? I didn't commit murder.

He let me go, and we continued walking through the glowing crystal forest. I saw unusual animals like hippogriffs, ghost horses, and a dog with the body of a rhino, and wings. I kept on staring at that particular animal with fascination; *who knew that was possible?*

“Keep staring at the Rog and it will kill you,” he said in a sweet posh tone.

Rog? “Why is it called a Rog? Also, I don’t see a problem with me staring at it,” I said angrily.

“A Rog is that wonderful animal you are staring at.”

That’s quite something.

“It is a Rog because its horn allows it to create a den out of wood. It has keen vision and perfect tracking.”

Oh god.

“See, you dumb human, if you stare at it too long or look it in the eye, it will come charging.”

Not dumb.

“Dumb humans nearly destroyed our home,” he added in a piercing tone.

How? What? I didn’t destroy your home.

The mist all around us was filled with sapphire and emerald. It looked like a fairytale. Gold was woven within the door filled with tapestries of hardship and hope.

The Owl started talking.

“These tapestries are our history and honour. We once handed them to you disrespectful, gem-stealing humans!” he said.

Great, so I am still disrespectful. And I just crash landed here!

“You see, there was a time when we trusted humans. We respected them, and they respected us. But then a guy named Maxwell Tetherwether found out that our land was made of gems.” His voice was filled with heartache as he spoke.

“Maxwell Tetherwether is our prime minister, and he found a gem called the Stoneheart,” I said. “He told us it could power the Earth, so we would never die.

“Imbecile!” the creature responded. “Your prime minister stole our gem using this thing called ‘mining.’ Our land was on the ground before we made it fly.” He spoke in a sarcastic tone.

“How did-” I began, but he interrupted me.

“Before you ask how we made it fly,” the creature said, “I want you to look at this tapestry and tell me what you see.” His tone was mean.

I looked at the tapestry which had a smooth gold lining filled with a natural glow. The tapestry depicted an owl signing a paper while beside it there stood a man in a top hat. The man’s expression was sweet, too sweet, as if he was up to no good. The owl’s eyes were filled

with hope. Finally, I saw in the tapestry a woman with a lustrous gown fit for a ball. She wore a crown fit for royalty.

“What do you see?” he asked.

“I see you, with hope in your eyes,” I replied. “I see...our prime minister, and he looks... deceitful. I see a woman filled with kindness and wearing a crown. When can I see her - your Queen?”

“I will share with you the story of how our land came to be, and how our Queen became the kindest creature of them all,” he replied, his tone neutral.

Time for a story.

“Our land - Comet - was made from a real comet,” he began, “but instead of dust and ice, it was made out of gems filled with soulful power. It landed on the Earth. I used to be a normal owl - a barn owl - but once I touched the gem, I turned into the grander owl you see before you. The gem spoke and told me, ‘Be guardian of this place. Keep it safe from intruders. Protect it with your heart and soul, kind one.’ The more animals that touched the island, the more it grew. Little did we know that the gem that made this island grew twice the size every time it was touched. It was beautiful to see all kinds of ordinary creatures turn into something extraordinary. Mice turned into Deather Mouse Rats. Deather Mouse Rats look like rats but they have horns and only come out in the shadows. Anyway, I am going off topic: my point is that as the land grew, it also grew in value. It became something others might want to steal.

“Our Queen Lily was extraordinary. She wouldn’t embroider or sew, and she refused to learn basic female etiquette. She would always come into the dark woods that led to our glowing one. Lily fed the animals, despite the fact that they were unnatural and odd. The day she met me she was seventeen and had just left home. She came here after being kicked out of her house for refusing an arranged marriage. Her tears would soak our land, later causing the glowing river you see flowing through our forest. She saw me and didn’t run or call me a “monster”. I protected her as I did all the creatures: her grace and intelligence are what built this castle you walk on.

“Queen Lily ruled our land in peace for many years, until humans started to walk our land. They brought with them guns and axes, and they were led by the worst of them all: General Maxwell Tetherwether. Our Queen, using her grace and kindness, made an agreement with the general to stop humans returning to our land, and

that's how the Treaty of Soul - seen here in the tapestry - came to be signed.

“On October 2, 1930, Maxwell discovered that the gems which make up our land have the power to keep us alive for centuries. He was behind the bush and saw me melting a piece of land to let Rog drink it. The Rog was near death, so we gave it some souler to keep it alive and immortal. A month later, armies came with guns and artillery, chipping the land to pieces bit by bit. Queen Lily tried to fight back, but Maxwell almost killed her with a shining silver dagger. That was when I did the one thing I knew how to do: I flew, using my wings to blast away the humans. With one final blow, I caused our land to fly, with all the creatures and the Queen upon it.” The creature gazed at me as his story neared its end. “Wait,” he said, “what's your name?”

It took you long enough to ask.

“Ethan,” I replied.

“Well, Ethan, I believe it's time for you to meet our Queen.”

As he spoke those final words, we walked together through doors that were huge and white.

“Welcome,” said a voice as smooth as honey. I stared at the astonishing form of Queen Lily, as glorious as any angel.

[the story continues here]

The Quest for Home

Sequel to: **The Journey Through Rubixia**

Kristine

When our heroines find themselves stuck on an unknown island, they need to get back to Rubixia. But what dangers lurk on this land? A mysterious beast that can either help or hurt them? A vengeful spirit that hates humans?

Chapter 1: All Washed Up

A soft scuttling and a crash of a wave. “Ahhhhh!!! Pht, pht!!” a voice spluttered. I shot up, alarmed. A crab sat right by my cheek. Startled, he pinched my face and ran off into the water.

“Owwww!!” I was relieved to find that the scream was from my friend, Adle. He spluttered up salt water and smoothed down his spiky brown hair. Makenna was standing up, too.

“Sorry. A wave washed over me,” Adle said, flushing.

“Okay, but where are we?” Makenna interrupted, gazing around. It looked like we were on an island. Beautiful mother-of-pearl shells lay across the sand. A forest ran down to the beach, and unknown trees and star-berry bushes dotted the emerald green grass. Giant hills rose all around, like green sundaes.

“Oh no!!” I cried. “The evil queen’s spell probably washed us up on this deserted island! We need to get back to Rubixia to save our friends!”

A sudden noise startled me and I ran out of my den and towards the beach, my feet gliding over the soft green grass. There I saw three figures lying on the sand, clearly washed up from some foreign land. They were humans! I was shocked.

Humans have never been able to get onto this island. I’ve heard stories of them, told by my fellow islanders, but I’ve never seen them in real life.

I inched closer, until suddenly, one of them screamed. “OWWWW!”

I felt shocked, frightened and curious, all at once. Even though it was a risk, I decided to take a chance. After all, maybe, just maybe, they’d be able to take me back home.

Chapter 2: The First Night

“Guys, I think we have a problem,” Adle said in a funny voice.

“What happened?” Makenna asked suspiciously.

“How am I supposed to say this? Um... we lost our wands.”

“WHAT??! Adle! You said you would keep them safe!”

Makenna scolded, furiously.

“They probably fell out of my satchel when we were in the sea!” I sighed in annoyance. “Adle, Makenna, stop bickering. We have bigger things to worry about.”

With that, I turned towards the setting sun and the grey storm clouds above.

I looked at the sky, swollen with rain. I hoped the humans would be okay.

As we ran towards the trees to hide, I heard a panting sound, coming our way. We ducked under the trees, praying that it wasn't a terrible monster. I took a peek out and saw light. A creature was walking out of the bushes. It had orange fur and a soft white and black-tipped tail. A beautiful fire quartz glimmered on its forehead.

It was a fire-fox!

I still remember when I lived with my people. I wish I could go back home.

Chapter 3: Shimmers That We See

I gazed into the fire fox's yearning eyes. The poor little creature was still so sick!

"Is he okay, Shawn?" Adle asked, as he and Makenna walked into our shelter.

Makenna looked at the fox, worriedly. "We don't know what happened to this creature. It's best not to heal him with the potions in case it hurts him more."

"But it's clear that he's in a lot of pain. We need to do something!" I cried, petting the kit's head.

Suddenly, Adle's eyes lit up. "Guys! I have an idea for how to get off this island!"

Makenna and I looked at him, intrigued.

"We could send a message in a bottle. And then hopefully, it'll wash up on Rubixia!"

I looked at Makenna. "He could be onto something. After all, we still need to get back home before the evil queen hurts our friends."

Makenna didn't look quite convinced. "How will the bottle get onto the island?" she asked. "The chances are super slim."

But Adle wasn't listening. He had already started writing the letter. "'Dear Whoever's reading this,'" Adle began to read. "*We are on an island in the middle of nowhere. The evil queen stranded us on this island when we refused to help her. Snow White's life could be in danger if we aren't there to protect her! We promise we mean no harm and we just want to protect Rubixia. Our names are Adle, Shawn and Makenna. Love: Adle.*"

Before we could say anything, Adle shoved the letter into a bottle and threw it into the ocean!

"Adle! You didn't even tell the coordinates!" Makenna cried. "How are they supposed to find us? The bottle is probably already broken because of you being so careless!"

I felt annoyed. One thing's for sure; we were never going to get off this island.

Chapter 4: The Unicorn

"Thank you so much for helping me," the fire fox said, gratefully. Makenna and Adle nodded, but I was still worried.

"What happened, little kit, to make you so sick?" I asked.

“Honestly, I don't know. The day when I fell ill, I felt weird and weak. It was almost as if my body shut down. I probably wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for you.”

Makenna and Adle looked at me seriously. I knew what made the kit so ill. Soul-Stealing. It is when another spirit or ghost enters a living being's body. It is very dangerous. The spirits can eat or even steal the soul and can cause deathly harm. But who on this island would do such a thing? Soul-Stealing was forbidden by the ghost king some 800 years ago!

The fire fox's voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “By the way, you look like foreigners. Did you wash up here?”

We nodded in reply.

“Oh, I might know someone who can help you! And hopefully you can also help her.”

“Who?” Adle asked.

“It's a unicorn.”

Just then, Makenna interrupted. “Wait, wait, wait, WAIT....I thought unicorns didn't exist on islands, only on the mainland.”

The fire fox sighed. “That's the thing. We creatures on this island have no idea how she showed up. She says she came out of a portal from a land called Rubixia...”

Rubixia! The word struck me like a stone. Not only did we now have someone who could help us, we had also found someone who could take us back home!

Makenna and Adle looked equally shocked.

“Can you take us to her?” Makenna asked.

“Sure!”

As I grazed on my lunch, I saw four figures approach my cave. It was a fire fox and the three humans I had seen five nights earlier! What were they doing here?”

“You were NEVER supposed to be on this island,” the spirit snarled.

“Please, let us explain why we're here,” I pleaded. Even though I tried to sound brave, on the inside, I felt hopeless. What were

we supposed to do? We were trapped here, with no weapons! We were done for.

Just as the dagger was about to hit us, something leapt out of the trees. It was the unicorn! Her face looked courageous and she used her magic to stop the dagger just in the nick of time!

“Thank you so much,” Makenna cried, gasping.

“What?! Unicorn? Why are you standing in my path?! I don’t want to hurt you. But I do want to hurt them!”

Then the unicorn actually spoke! “Leave them alone,” she said. “These humans helped me and cared for the island. And I was so close to going back home! Why did you destroy the portal?!?” the unicorn demanded, in a silvery voice.

“You don’t know who I am, do you?” the ghost said. Just then, the ghost took off her hood letting loose a white mane of hair! A horn sparkled sinisterly and the spirit’s eyes shone with vengeance.

“I am your mom and the humans killed me.”



Image by Gulay Oktem

Part Two:

Shipwreck!

These pieces emerged from a prompt in which writers were asked to follow this format as they created the first chapter of a novel:

1. A ship is torn apart in a storm and the protagonist fights for their life.
2. In a flashback, the protagonist guides the reader through an experience in their past that sheds light on their personality and helps us understand the chain of events that brought them to the moment of the shipwreck.
3. The writer returns the reader to the present time, and the first chapter of the novel ends as the protagonist is washed safely ashore on an island.

Just Another Cage

Amalyn K.

The water enters my lungs, bone-chillingly cold. And yet, it is not the frigid chill of the ocean that I feel. No, it is the warm squeeze of a mother's embrace that envelops me. I have no will to leave the deep waters, I have no will to leave the endless abyss of blue that is as comforting as it is terrifying. Perhaps I just have no will anymore, or perhaps it is the fact that I cannot move. The water chokes my tired bones, still in their prime yet weary with the burden of a hundred years, and grips at my throat. I am nothing more than a porcelain doll locked in a glass box, only my glass box is an ocean in the midst of a storm and I am trapped between the icy chill and warm caress. I could just stay here, my body lapping at death's shore, preparing to take the plunge, except for the one person who still chains me to this life.

My daughter.

I open my eyes, as though I am a newborn experiencing the world for the first time. I have to escape the ocean. I have to see her again. I struggle for my life, determined not to drown. I try to cry out. And then I catch myself between my screams.

My daughter is gone. Already lost to me. And I am nothing but a man, drowning in a storm at sea, welcoming death like an old friend.

So why not succumb to the peace that is my end?

"Papa?"

Yes. I'm here. I'm always right here.

"Papa, where are you? I can't find you."

I'm here, I promise, I'm right here!

"Papa?"

Don't leave, don't leave me, I promise I'm here, I'm always here. Please don't go, please don't leave me.

"Man, how long do you plan on ignoring me?"

The young woman across the table stares at me, her hand extended towards my face as though trying to slap me. "Better. Glad to see you're still alive!" She sighs in triumph, plopping back down in her seat. I look away, attempting to avoid her piercing gaze.

"It does appear that way," I mumble, resting my chin on my palm as I gaze across the pub, keen to look anywhere but into those eyes.

"Aw, don't be like that. Your daughter ain't gone forever."

The woman, a friend, a good friend, pauses, rethinking her word choice as she lifts a cup of ale to her lips. "I mean, when you die, you'll be reunited with her! Ain't that a pleasant thought?" She laughs that deep, throaty laugh of hers, as she takes a swig from her cup.

If only that were possible.

"I suppose so." I laugh half-heartedly, desperately wanting to end this conversation. The woman gets up, adjusting her chair to place it beside me. I fight back tears as she reaches for me. My daughter used to do that. Her hand gently touches my shoulder and her voice drops to a whisper.

"I know it's difficult. Losing a loved one is always hard," she whispers. It isn't like her to say this kind of thing, and I'm ready to back away when she does it for me, standing up once more. "But you know what I do whenever I get sad? I drink my sorrows away! So come on, pal, take a sip!" She lifts the cup of ale to my mouth, but I don't move my lips. The tears are back, or they never left, and this time they are streaming down my face.

I push her hand away and rise from my seat abruptly.

I have to leave this pub, leave this town, and leave behind me all of the memories that come with them.

Exiting the pub, my eyes catch on an abandoned raft banging loosely against a rotten side-dock. Without thinking, I run towards the crumbling boat, hoisting myself over the edge and onto the deck. This raft, this ocean will be my freedom.

This will be my escape.

There is sand beneath my hands and beneath my cheeks. Wind ruffles my hair, and my lungs are full of water.

I am not dead.

Of course I am not dead. Why would I be dead? That's too easy! I begin to laugh, and with that action, I retch. Water spills out of my mouth, and I throw up. I cough until my chest hurts; the water is tinted red with blood and my throat is raw and sticky. I push myself up off the sand, letting it fall off me, and take note of my surroundings.

I've washed up on a beach. A small, narrow beach that reaches into dense forest. On every other side I'm surrounded by the ocean.

This may not have been the escape I envisioned, but it is an escape, nonetheless.

I rise fully to my feet and brush off the remaining sand that clings to my body, then I crack my back. Everything is sore. My throat is parched, and my eyes sting with salt. I turn around, blinking once, blinking twice.

All I can see is the vast expanse of water, with no other land in sight.

I am stuck here.

Alone.

But isn't that what I wanted? Perfect isolation?

I look up to the sun, laughing with childlike glee. And that's when I see it. Smoke, spiraling through the pale blue sky. My face falls, my energy depleted. I sigh, and collapse back onto the sand, before chuckling tiredly once more. I laugh because I am not free of people. I laugh because that's the way life is.

I thought I was alone on an island, but I was wrong.

This isn't my escape.

Just another cage.

Torch

Deaneka Anna

I started this journey alone on my small boat, with the calm grey sea lapping all around me, the salty fresh air in my face, and the naive certainty of one who thinks they have everything figured out.

But the universe has plans of its own. And in the swirling black and blue of a raging ocean storm, I started playing my part.

Yes, when I started out that fateful night it was later and darker than expected.

Yes, the weather was just a tiny bit rougher than normal.

And yes, my friends shook their heads and warned me not to go out on my own.

But it was a routine trip that I'd made hundreds of times! Head west from the second port, around the small fisher's cove, and up a short channel to the north. You can't blame me for thinking that this would be no different.

As you may have guessed, I was very wrong.

The winds were picking up, and my boat was rocking horribly against the pounding waves. The strong current pushed me even further out from the shores to my right, until I was morbidly off course. I thought briefly of turning back, but my super quick little venture was already more than halfway done! I plunged stupidly forward.

Actually, scratch that. I wasn't stupid. The storm was inescapable by that point anyway, and what happened next would have been my fate either way. Looking back, I'm glad I did what I did, even if it erased my entire future.

Then the rain started.

Driving, unrelenting, it pummeled me from above, sending up an impressive cacophony to rival the thundering clouds. I gripped the steering wheel against the onslaught, ramming it hard to the right. Red warning lights blinked evilly across my dashboard.

The waves picked up even more, crashing on the deck of my boat, and throwing my belongings every which way. Something bumped painfully against my ankles.

My small toolbox, some rope, a flashlight, and many other items were lost to the sea as it became harder and harder to steer and the barely visible skyline bobbed uncertainly in my vision. Water streamed down my face and into my eyes.

I reached up to wipe it away when suddenly my boat was slammed with a particularly large wave. My remaining hand lost its grip on the wheel, and I slipped and fell hard. Before I could regain my footing, something cold and hard cracked me on the side of my skull.

My eyes rolled back in my head and I felt the world tipping, sinking.

I slipped silently into the icy cruel water, and my breath escaped me in one final desperate gasp, and a plume of mocking bubbles.

I saw someone on that island.

I was eight, and my parents and I were on vacation. We were out whale watching with a group of other tourists, but the weather turned choppy before we saw a single animal, and the captain decided it would be safer to turn back early.

I was inconsolable, like any good nature enthusiast. My parents had given up trying to comfort me and left me to sulk alone at the back of the boat.

It was open ocean as far as the eye could see, which wasn't very far, considering the heavy fog. I remember leaning my elbows against the wooden rail, and thinking how wonderful it would be if a whale jumped out of the water right in front of me, and no one else got to see it.

I only half got my wish.

I saw an island.

Bioluminescent waves crashed against its ebony beaches, and its lush foliage swayed in strange colours.

And there was a person, too far away to make out any details. I only saw that they held a lit torch above their head.

And I had the most distinct and indescribable impression, that they saw me too.

We stood still for a moment, gazing at each other across the vast distance, until the mist closed in again and the island vanished.

No one I have told this story to has ever believed me. I don't believe myself sometimes.

But then I look back, and I cannot ignore the clarity, the realness, of this memory.

The island is out there, and I've spent my whole life looking for it.



Image by Shoma Sakai-Ellul

Shipwreck

Paris Chen

The moment I got on that ship I felt that something was wrong. The skies were immensely cloudy, and the dark grey colour unsettled me. Shouldn't they cancel the trip? It felt unsafe, but in a way I couldn't describe. Maybe it was the vibe, maybe it was a sign of the horrors I was about to endure.

Just hours later, a freak storm tossed the ship to and fro as I listened to the screams of the other passengers. The waves were huge, and the captain desperately struggled to keep the ship afloat. Was the ship about to capsize? I felt my heart drop as the screaming intensified.

Then I heard the unmistakable crack of wood.

The ship was splitting in half, right down the middle. People were sliding off the deck, getting impaled by the large wooden splinters, and the entire ship was in pandemonium.

I felt something tug at my leg. It was a person, about to slide off, and they were clinging to me as a last resort. I feared they might drag me with them over the railing, and I couldn't bear the thought of dying, not here, not now, so I tried to wrench my leg away, but I slipped to the deck, landing hard on my back.

This idiot was still grabbing me, pulling me under the water! Together we tumbled over the rail and crashed into the waves. I was desperate for a way to survive, thrashing around in the water for what felt like an eternity. Then, to my absolute horror, I felt my body giving in. The edges of my vision were darkening. I clung on to consciousness, hoping that I wouldn't pass out, but despite all my efforts, water crept up my nose and the world went black.

The last time I encountered water was when my father took me swimming. I was a clueless child, thinking that the lake was harmless. I did not know how to swim at the time, and I was just curious. I didn't think that anything bad would happen. Obviously, I did the most stupid thing I could and jumped off the dock into the deep water of the lake. Almost instantly I went under, thrashing aggressively, fighting for my life. I was terrified and I felt like my life was over. I blacked out in the

water, and when I came around, I was in the infirmary. I was told that my father had saved me and that I was very lucky to survive.

I've had a fear of water ever since.

I was still in the ocean, and I was sinking. Water rushed into my lungs, and I lost consciousness. Fortunately, I was saved by someone hanging onto a large plank of wood; I came around, coughing up litres of water, and this stranger explained how I had almost died.

Once again, I had the sense that something terrible was about to happen. My rescuer, clinging to the wood beside me, screamed and pointed to the left.

A massive wave was heading towards us.

I desperately hung on, digging my nails into the wood. Then I closed my eyes and waited for the worst.

The wave submerged me, carrying me away. I was underneath the water for a very long time, borne away by the huge wave. But then my feet hit something hard and grainy.

I had reached an island.

Lost Kingdoms

Sofia Romano

After two days of meetings and royal balls, we leave the dock. The King of Rothland sits on his large throne on the royal ship and reads the letter from the captain, telling him not to worry about the approaching storm. I stand next to him, my hands behind my back. My long honey blonde hair is braided, my fighting leathers on. As Pryth's strongest and most trusted assassin I am entrusted to keep His Majesty alive and protected. I take the letter from him, my green eyes scanning the page.

"Thea," he barks. "Warn Captain Tarquin if he does not get me home that you are going to make him regret it." He speaks through clenched teeth. King Pryth is not known for his gentle nature, something I learned years ago, the hard way.

I nod once before walking out of the room and up the steps of the ship, daggers strapped to my thighs and a large red sword at my back. Red is the colour of Rothland. As the King describes it, it is to symbolize his thirst for blood. I reach the ship's deck, suddenly exposed to harsh winds and splashes of water. Panic rises in me. This is no simple storm, this is going to be detrimental. I rush around, trying to find the captain. There are puddles everywhere. "This ship is a nightmare," I think to myself.

I find the captain, handing him the letter. "Captain Tarquin, what is going on?" I demand, my voice strong despite the winds threatening to blow me away.

"General Thea, everything is under control," he says, a smirk on his tan face.

As he finishes speaking, the ship tilts unexpectedly, knocking me off my feet. I pull a dagger from my thigh and stab it into the wooden planks, hanging on. Tarquin scrambles for a hold as the ship rocks onto its side and waves smack the deck. He lurches towards me, his elbow striking my head. As we collide my vision goes black and my hand slips from the dagger.

I stand with my back straight, next to the King. His frame is much larger than mine, my head barely reaching his shoulder. He is in a large red cape, covering his armor. He is deep in conversation with a

messenger. I stand at attention, waiting for instructions. The messenger walks towards the king and I draw a dagger, stepping closer, threatening him silently. King Pryth looks at me, his expression unreadable.

“Get Tarquin, we sail home in twenty minutes,” he demands. I nod my head, bowing to him, then I give the messenger a warning look before walking away.

I walk along the shoreline, searching for our ship. I take in the scenery, as I rarely have a moment to myself, watching as boats bob in the crystal-clear water, the pure white sails flowing elegantly in the wind. My leather boots are hard to walk in on the sand, slowing me down. The winds blow my hair out of my face, whipping at my arms. The sand is a coppery red reflecting the minerals of the earth. I spot Tarquin talking to a girl on the pier. They are deep in conversation, laughing and smiling. Tarquin’s dark skin gleams in the sun, highlighting his dimples when he grins at the poor girl. She is dressed in a long white skirt that reaches her ankles, and her feet are bare. She wears a tight brown leather corset and a white shirt.

I grimace at the way Tarquin’s looking at her. Love has never been my priority.

I walk up to them. “Captain,” I say, my voice calm. He turns to me, rolling his sinful, amber eyes. He’s holding his long red jacket over one arm and the other rests on railings of the wooden pier.

“General Thea. To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?” he asks, his voice sharp. He was mad at me for interrupting him, I can tell.

“King Pryth will be sailing in twenty minutes,” I reply, my eyes narrowing on him. “Try not to anger his Royal Highness.”

He sighs, taking off his captain’s cap and bowing to the girl. She giggles at him, waving her hand as he walks to the ship, then she turns to me, disgust on her face. I pull out a dagger and wipe the blade, maintaining eye contact.

“He’s all yours, princess,” I say. “Somehow, I don’t think assassins are his type.” I flash her a wicked smile. She looks past me at King Pryth as he walks up behind us.

“General Thea, do not terrorize the citizens,” he says, his voice sharp despite the joke. I sigh and sheath my dagger.

The girl runs off, her long white skirt held up in a delicate white hand. I snarl, boarding our ship as the wind picks up and the sun disappears behind a dark grey cloud.

I hear a loud voice shouting at me. My vision is black, my eyes welded shut. The voice gets stronger and stronger as I rub my eyes. I feel sand beneath my body, the soft texture familiar to me. Whoever is yelling at me comes to my side, shaking me. I resist the urge to keep my eyes shut and open them to find Tarquin standing over me, his amber eyes piercing me with worry.

“General Thea, can you hear me? Are you alright?” he asks, his arm supporting me. I shake my head, trying to get the sand out of my hair, and then I look around, taking in my surroundings. The woods. I stare at them, curiosity boiling in my veins. The woods are grey and there are vines of deep red winding around the trunks, splitting off at unnatural angles. It gives me a headache, trying to see anything past the treeline.

Something crawls up to me, settling on my leg. It’s a small creature, only about the size of a leaf. Its snout is bright pink, the fur that covers it dove grey, and splotches of white disrupt the solid colour. Out of its shoulders, black, leathery wings protrude, flared outward slightly. It has pitch black eyes and sharp triangular teeth.

I reach my hand out to move it off of me and the creature screeches, rears back its head and takes a bite of my thigh. I scream. Tarquin grabs the creature, throwing it away from us, but in that moment, hundreds more emerge from the woods, some flying, some running. I scramble back, my body hitting something hard. I turn to see the remains of our ship, the wood and metal scattered all over the beach.

I stand up quickly and grab a piece of wood for a shield. Tarquin follows my lead and we fend ourselves off against the little demons. My mind starts running through possibilities when it lands on something.

The King.

“Tarquin, where is King Pryth?” I ask, my voice sharp and demanding. He bites his bottom lip as he whacks one of the creatures flying at him. Then he glances toward the treeline, and following his gaze, I spot what can only be described as a mound of flesh and bone.

“We have to get back to Rothland,” I say, my grief non-existent. I throw Tarquin a blade and take off to get a closer look at the

remains of our ship. There should be a raft somewhere that can get us out of here.

He seems to understand what I'm looking for because he shouts at me, "It's in my pack, over on the other side of the beach." There's a hint of shame in his voice. Clearly he took the raft before I regained consciousness; it's hard not to roll my eyes.

I spot the pack and run towards it, fending off the demonic beasts. I'll be damned if I let little creatures such as these kill *me*.

"Guard me!" I demand, as Tarquin rushes over. I blow up the raft, but not before a creature takes a chunk out of my arm, earning a loud, pain-filled scream.

We push the raft into the water. Tarquin grabs his pack and together we scramble to leave the mysterious island. As we drift away, I look back at the shoreline. The creatures have stopped their pursuit and are retreating into the trees.

I settle into the raft as Tarquin looks out to sea.

"What are you thinking?" I ask.

"The king," Tarquin says. "He's dead." He looks back at me, confusion written all over his face. "What comes next?" he asks.

I contemplate this question. King Pryth's rule was one of hardship. Maybe we are better off without him. Better off still if we start new lives.

"We can run away," I say. "Let everyone think we died, along with the others."

Tarquin and I have never been friends, nor have we ever been romantic. But something about an outward threat bonds people; the thought that this person is the one you may die with. As I look at him now, something shifts behind his usual cocky and arrogant demeanor. He isn't a warrior, Tarquin. He's a captain. And his ship just sank without him. My King, the one I was trusted to protect, is gone. For the first time in my life, I feel lost and weak. I was weak against a threat for the first time. I move to sit next to Tarquin on the small raft, resting my head on his shoulder. A quiet sob escapes his lips. I hold him, the island disappearing in a cloud of mist behind us along with our past.

A Muffled Memory

Kashvi Dave

Salt water stung my eyes, and the tide pulled me in different directions. I tried swimming against the current, to make it back to my ship, but it was as if some sort of force was pulling me deeper and deeper into the great below, trying to prevent me from escaping.

My lungs constricted and my vision blurred as my body was pulled into the endless deep.

Everything went dark.

Then I heard a muffled voice.

“Wake up.”

But all I could see was blackness.

“Wake up!”

I managed to open my eyes. Light blinded me for a few moments, then it faded. I sat, feeling soft grass underneath me. I was sitting under a pink blossom tree.

I looked to my side to see eight-year-old Edric. He was wearing a Batman shirt and black shorts.

I remembered this. It happened in April 2020. 14 years ago.

“What?” I barked at him. My voice was squeakier back then.

“Mrs. Grunt is calling you,” he responded, his voice filled with pity.

I groaned with frustration. “Of course she is.”

“Come in here Elena! Get to work with the dishes!” Even from meters away, I could hear her obnoxious voice. “You too Edric!”

Edric rolled his eyes.

“I can’t wait for us to get out of this place,” I said, my eyes gleamed with hope. His eyes lit up, as well.

“You think we’ll be able to? I heard COVID will carry on for a hundred years!”

“Of course it won’t! We’ll be out of this orphanage in ten years. Then we can look for a new place, where we’ll make a lot of friends!”

“But how will we get away from here?” He tilted his head, his mind shifting off into imagination.

“By train!”

“In a spaceship!”

“On an airplane!”

“In a flying car!”

I stopped. “A flying car?” I scrunched up my face.

“Yep! I bet there’ll be A LOT of flying cars by then!”

“Hmm... What about a boat? We could sail across the sea and swim in the water whenever we want to!”

“Alright! But it will have to be a yacht!”

We laughed together.

“But no matter where I go,” Edric said with sudden seriousness, “I know I want to be with you.”

I forced myself back into consciousness. There was water all around, but the tide had pulled me closer to an island.

I felt my feet brush against sand.

I was safe.

Edric and his final words were now nothing but a muffled memory.



Image by Nicolas Rodriguez Sanchez

Where Fog Breaks

Vera Sevelka

Monica sat hunched alone in her small boat, soaked to the bone and shivering, her limbs heavy with exhaustion. The thick fog had swallowed the horizon, and she could barely see past her outstretched hand. The rain poured down, the icy cold hail-like pellets hitting her back like bullets.

She was ready to surrender to the storm and wait for the threatening, blackened sky to pass. With effort, she bent down to pick up her anchor, impossibly heavy in her weakened arms.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the mist swirling unnaturally, clearing in one spot to reveal the jagged outline of an island emerging through the fog.

Her breath caught in her throat. She stood frozen, awkwardly clutching the rusty anchor in her arms, muscles straining.

Monica couldn't believe it. Maybe... just maybe... she'd be okay. She could picture herself safe and dry in her cozy island home, curled in her favourite armchair, wrapped in blankets, reading a book while the storm raged harmlessly outside.

A sudden gust of wind rocked the boat, jolting Monica back to the present and nearly knocking her overboard. Pushing aside the fear that the island was only a mirage, she dropped the anchor back into the boat and sat down. Gripping the paddles with renewed determination, she rowed toward the island, desperate to feel steady land beneath her feet.

Finally, with her arms screaming with effort, she emerged from the worst of the storm. The island came into full view, and she momentarily stopped paddling to admire its beauty, her boat rocking gently in the calmer waves.

It looked like a gift sent from heaven, with the sun shining down on it. The rain was like a curtain, stopping just before its gorgeous, sandy white beach with not a drop touching the shore. The island had huge dark trees and thick, vibrant foliage rich with life.

Now, only feeling a couple of raindrops on her shoulders, the worst of the storm behind her, Monica felt a rush of excitement stronger than she had ever felt before. With renewed vigor, she tightened her grip on the paddles and steered toward the island.

When her small boat finally nudged the soft sand, it felt like a dream. The relentless rain had stopped. She'd made it to land and everything was going to be okay.

Monica jumped out of her boat, stumbling onto dry sand, wet hair flying. She dropped to her knees, so grateful to be out of the stormy sea.

She took a deep breath of warm, salty air and sank into the sand, relief washing over her.

Gazing out over the ocean, Monica saw dark storm clouds in the distance. The sun warmed her face, slowly starting to dry her hair and clothes. As she let her muscles relax, her mind drifted back to the moment that had led her to this point.

Monica lived on a small island in a house she and her dad had built together, just off the coast of the Bahamas, where she'd grown up.

That morning the weather had seemed balmy, and since she had to run a few quick errands in town, she took her rowboat instead of her larger boat.

She'd packed just the essentials in a tote bag and was rowing slowly towards the mainland when she noticed dark clouds rolling in fast over the horizon. She was too far out—nowhere near the mainland or her island home.

Panicking, Monica dug through her tote until her fingers wrapped around her phone. She tapped the screen. Nothing. She pressed the side button again, harder this time—still nothing. Dead. She must've forgotten to charge it overnight and tossed it in her bag without thinking.

"Oh my god, seriously!" she shouted, her voice rising with panic. She was stranded in a tiny boat, completely alone with a massive storm barreling towards her. She threw her useless phone back in her bag and started rowing harder, adrenaline kicking in.

What had started as a peaceful boat ride was about to turn into a nightmare if she didn't move—fast.

She sat up straighter, gripped the paddles tight, and turned the boat around. Her errands could wait. She needed to get home fast.

As Monica rowed, she kept glancing behind her, seeing the clouds getting closer with every passing second. She was still far away when the first few raindrops hit her head.

“No, no no...” she muttered, eyes wide.

She had sailed through storms before, but never in a boat this small, and all alone.

With a sharp inhale, Monica snapped back to the present. She glanced behind her at the vast island, its green hills bathed in the soft glow of the warm sun. She was safe now, a new adventure awaiting her.

She stood, took a deep breath, and decided to explore. Maybe someone lived here—someone who could help.

She grabbed her soaked tote from the boat and started up the beach. Her shoes squished with every sandy step, and she let out a soft chuckle at the sound.

She walks toward the forest, the warm air rich with the scent of damp earth and leaves. She noticed a narrow path through the bushes and decided to check it out. After about fifteen minutes, she reached a small clearing with a tall tree in the middle—perfect for resting. Sunlight filtered through the branches, warming her skin as she approached the tree and sat on the soft grass.

But something felt... off. Like someone was watching her. The peaceful clearing was too quiet, as if something was lurking just out of sight.

Her heart raced, and she couldn't shake the feeling that she wasn't alone.

She stood, glancing around quickly. “Hello?” she called.

At the edge of the clearing, the bushes rustled, as if something had just moved through them.

“Is someone there?” she called, her voice shaky.

Suddenly, a figure emerged—a tall man, about her age, with messy brown hair, a tattered white shirt and ripped jeans. He stood beside a tree, staring straight at her.

Monica's heart raced and she turned to run, but before she could, the man reappeared in front of her, blocking her way. She jumped back in shock.

“You... you can see me?” he asked, disbelief in his voice.

“Uhh... yeah? What’s that supposed to mean?” she replied, both confused and annoyed, her pulse still racing.

With an excited and relieved look on his face, the man smiled eerily.

“It’s been decades since anyone has landed here, let alone been able to see me!” he exclaimed.

Monica took a couple steps back.

“Okay, wait. Who even are you?” she asked.

“Oh... sorry. I’m Tobias and I have been here for... about thirty years now,” he said.

“Thirty years?! But you look like you’re in your twenties!”

“Right... that’s probably because I’m... well, dead. I’ve been stuck wandering this island, a restless spirit waiting for something but never knowing what... until now!”

“Hold on, I need to sit down,” Monica said, stunned. She walked around Tobias, returned to the tree and sat down.

“Okay, so you died thirty years ago and haven’t gone to the afterlife or escaped this island since?” she asked, looking up at Tobias, shocked.

“Yes, that’s about it!” He sat down opposite her. “Shipwrecked—like you. I’ve tried to leave, but every time I enter the storm, I end up right back here.”

“So once you’re here... there is no escape?” Monica asked, already knowing the answer.

Tobias paused, then nodded and said simply, “Yes.”

Monica’s stomach twisted at the finality in his voice, but she refused to accept it. She shook her head, pushing down the panic.

No. She wouldn’t let this be her fate.

“I’m getting off this island,” she said, louder than she intended. “I won’t end up like you—haunting this place forever.”

She stood, brushed herself off, and headed toward the island’s highest point.

Tobias followed. “That was harsh. You really think you can leave? If you try to get back in that tiny boat, you’ll die in the storm!”

“I don’t care,” Monica snapped. “I just need to get back home. Even if I die trying, at least I can say that I tried instead of dying from starvation or something.”

She picked up her pace, climbing toward the cliffs.

“You know you’re not going to see anything!” he exclaimed, annoyed. “There’s no use trying. I’ve been up there so many times, and it’s always the same view.”

“Well maybe you just can’t see well enough!” Monica yelled back.

“For your information,” the spirit cried, “I have perfect vision... and besides, I know this island like the back of my hand! If there was a way through the storm, I’d have found it!”

They had made it to the cliff’s edge. With her hand shielding her eyes from the sun, Monica looked at the horizon trying to see anything but dark clouds.

Tobias muttered, “You’re just too stubborn to-”

“Too stubborn?” Monica scoffed, turning to face him. Her anger was so fierce she had not noticed the rocks slowly crumbling beneath her feet. “Maybe if you actually helped, since you ‘know the island so well,’ then I could get out of here alive!”

“Jeez, calm down!” Tobias said, backing off, hands raised. “You’re right at the edge—I don’t want you to fall.”

“Oh wow, so now you care?” Monica shot back sarcastically.

She turned to look out again and as she did so, the rock beneath her feet shifted. She lost her footing and slipped.

Tobias lunged forward, but his arm passed right through her.

Monica stumbled backward, falling off the edge of the cliff.

“*Noooooo!*” she screamed, reaching for a handhold. Her fingers only grazed the rocks as she plunged into thin air.

It felt like she was moving in slow motion, falling for eternity. She watched as Tobias jumped after her, the cliff getting farther away as she fell.

“I’m sorry, I should’ve believed in you!” he shouted.

She could hear the wind whistling in her ears.

Was this it? Was this how everything would end?

Below her, jagged rocks jutted out of the water. Dark ocean loomed, rushing toward her.

Monica braced for impact. Her body plunged into the cold water.

She accepted that this was the end as freezing water pulled her under.



Image by Alissia Apolo

In the Wake of Flight and Fear

Aubrey Simpson

Elio loved the ocean, and he pulled ropes with calloused hands as one would speak to lovers. He threw sheets and drew sails with a longing so ancient, the depths of the ocean could only bear witness. There was something that drew him to the lip of the sky where the ocean kissed the horizon, like a thrill-seeking child, longing blooming between his ribs. But there was a difference between the lulling tide and the raging sea. Elio liked the ocean in tune with the sky but when the evening fog, shadowed and gray, pushed against the heavy sky and drew booming thunder, there was little room for longing and infinite cause for the thick coil of danger, lethal and acidic, that settled at the base of his spine like an open wound. The scalding obsession that comes when water pools at the bottom of your lungs, claws your throat raw and slows your fiery resentment. When the ocean seeps into your muscles and weighs down your animosity, when the Icarus-like yearning dispels itself from your body in the form of small ringlets of air. If you cannot fly, you are cursed to drown.

*There's a bluebird in my heart that wants to get out.
He waits for me in the heavy fog, avian eyes open, bleached dry tissues. He promises me that he is merely made of fever-soaked rags and cutlery, yet his wings scrape like dinner plates against lined concrete.*

Elio ran from deck to deck, frantically, feet slipping and heavy with sleet. He threw ropes around the sails and pulled the sheets taut as the waves crashed against the side of his boat, throwing him off his feet and pushing him towards the edge. The storm raged, fueled by an anger so ancient even the seabirds reeled in fear. In a desperate attempt at self preservation, he pulled the ropes tight and drew knots and figure eights. His fingers slipped for just a moment, and the rope pulled and stung against his palm. It flew out of his grip and the sail blew angrily against the raging winds. With nothing to keep the boat upright, it swayed with the waves and rocked

dangerously back and forth before hitting a rushing swell of water. The waves drew near, and Elio slipped, against his will. The ocean swallowed him into its totality.

His resentment grew like the untamed sea; there was no telling the extent of his immorality. Elio convinced himself that they were strangers, but he is a stranger to the bluebird in the way that the red-soaked skin under your fingernails knows our nail beds. The bluebird knew his red-soaked fingernails, for he taught him the salvation that comes with tearing flesh and sweating diluted promises of truth. Yet the bluebird did not sleep high in his throat today. It's a soft mass of heat, drowning deep in the depths of his ivory ribs.

Elio loved the ocean because it was colourful, he loved the shades of cerulean and the tarnished sea glass. Funerals were not colourful. This is not the main reason Elio didn't want to be in this room, surrounded by his extended family dressed in the least colourful colour he knew. The main reason his stomach churned and throat soured was because of a lack of space in his sea of extended relatives in the shape of a 11-year-old girl. Instead of frizzy brown hair and purple polka dot socks there was a sea of space beside him. No one to make fun of his messy curls after a day spent vicariously chasing waves. A ghost of a presence lingered by his side. She was in the empty chair at the dining room table, she was in her light-up toothbrush in the cupholder on the cracked bathroom sink. She was skipping downstairs to beat him to the sandy dock. She was a bluebird taunting him with each flap of their sharp wings.

Remember treading water. Remember pointing toes down again and again down, in the belly of the beast, dark blue sky reflecting the murky depths.

Nothing about Natalie was colourful anymore. She was perfectly, utterly dull in the black coffin. Dull like the colour of church, dull like the dead leaves on the trees and the dead grass on the hills. Dull like November chill, dull like death and sinking truths. And open mouths. And drowning decades. Blue feathers coiled between soft curls.

There are some places that the earth holds. That you're not supposed to see. There are cracks in the atmosphere where the sun retreats and the fog blankets; northwest of Orion and two paces behind the moon's dutiful gaze, the bluebird saw a city crafted by rock and stone. Nestled into the sharded cliff, shaded by mist, and caged by the raging sea, salt air and cracked parallel shafts of sun hazed through the fog.

A kingdom was no place for a bluebird, let alone this eastern coastal Canadian atoll. There was something religious in the way the island stood against the parallel shafts of sun, something in the way the cliff laid in the darkness, a damp patch of silence, old reverent anachronistic power.

Time hazed. It passed by in thick clots. The storm was gone when Elio awoke. It had been replaced by a thick wall of fog and calm waves, kissing his feet. Elio was soaked as he stood up, unsteadily, half convinced he was already dead. The surrounding environment did nothing to help convince him otherwise. He stood on a rocky beach filled with small pebbles and carefully-placed shards of stone. Behind him was nothing less than a spectacle. Sharded rocks stood up against the sky, blocking the light, creating the edge of a cliff that wrapped around the shore. The cliff was grassy and sprinkled with shrubs, arching with vines and soft trees. But the scenery was very easily forgotten in contrast to the spectacle nestled into the cracks of the cliff. Like pieces of a puzzle, old doorways and windows nestled themselves carefully into the rocks, winding up from the bottom of the cliff to the very top. They spiraled up like a meandering vine, antiquity-esque and imperfect terracotta. These ruined archways formed a broken city carved into the cliffs, the soft stone and cracked doorways only accentuating the lack of life. The city was familiar like the waft of incense and ash, ichor-stained liquor, sultry and amicably close to home. The atoll had an underlying presence that seeped into Elio's bone marrow and chilled his skin; salvation.

Wings in his stomach, a fluttering of air, warm and swirling. The bluebird flits his wings, relishing the sea of saccharine heat trickling down his stomach and pooling in his gut. If divinity was something real, something tangible, this

*would be it. He's Icarus, stretching his wings. Icarus. But he
refuses to hit the water.*



Image by Lydia Li

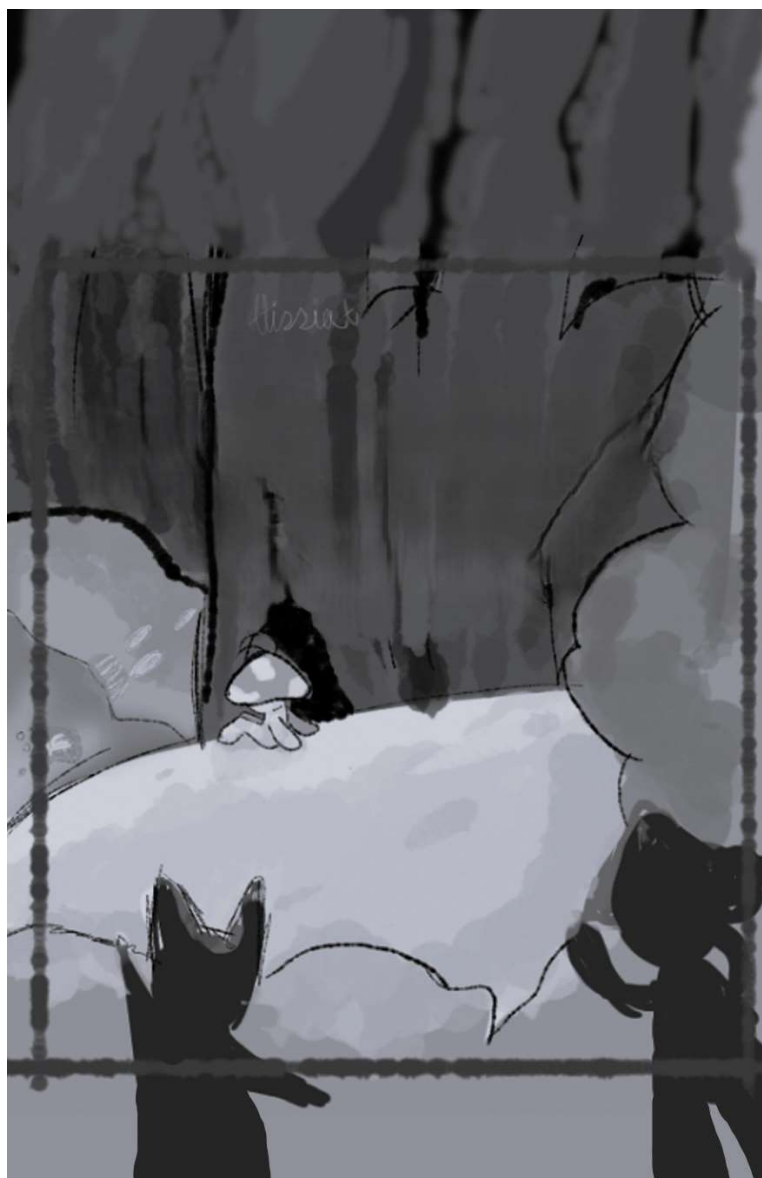


Image by Alissia Apolo

Part Three:

The Poetry of Islands

Infinite and Still

Hannah Topa

The colours of the sky fade with the parting clouds and one by one the stars begin to glow in the dead of night. The eternal moon shines so bright on the soft pale sand.

The soothing, cold waves crash against my ankles as I breathe in the everlasting scent of the deep red roses that scatter the isle, like a memory I can touch but can't quite grasp.

Fireflies flicker on and off throughout the night, casting golden trails across the tide. A hush falls over everything, as if the sea is holding its breath.

Above, a lone seagull circles in silence, watching the world below with ancient eyes. Each heartbeat feels slower here, stretched across the horizon like a promise never to leave.

The wind whispers secrets in a language I have learned to understand, carrying echoes of laughter and longing from a place I've never been.

The moon leans closer now, curious, like an old friend I'd forgotten. I wonder if he carries souls, or stories, or simply silence.

The ocean is beautiful, yet unsettling. In the distance I see a ship, gently breaking the water's surface as it moves slowly along the fragile ocean.

I can't let it spot me.

The ship fades into mist, swallowed by the edge of the world, as if retreating into a dream too distant to remember.

There is no past here, only this moment, infinite and still.

Gray

Isadora Riquelme

after Mark Strand

Soon, my life will be gray.
Gray like London fog,
softly stagnant

The walls of my town are gray,
ivy stretching out smoothly
across a slate canvas.

My life will soon be
gray, like the sky when it's scarf weather,
my wool, pale gray like the doves
who take flight in the gray dawn,
filled with pillowy gray clouds,
that send silvery gray tears,
to kiss the gray Earth.

My life will soon be a soft
gray, like a kitten's pelt.
I will sink in and take a breath,
know that I made it —

Soon my life will be gray.
Gray like London fog,
enveloping me in its drowsy spell.

Blue Feast

Bianca Pupato

Far in the island, in isolation
A little boy began to cry
He kicked and fussed and whined and wailed
Until a blue bird came down from the sky

The blue bird looked curiously and asked
‘Oh little boy, what happened here?’
The little boy sniffled and said,
“All of my food has disappeared.”

And so the blue bird flew off
And came back with food
The little boy scarfed it all down
And still did not feel renewed

The little boy kicked and fussed and whined and wailed
“More! I want more to eat and chew!”
The blue bird hesitated for a moment
And then off he flew

The little boy stayed unsatiated
His gluttony never ending
The blue bird grew worried
For he felt something bad was pending

So for nights and days with no end
The blue bird slaved away
Until without any warning
The boy ate the island one day

The blue bird cried with heartbreak and fury,
“You’ve eaten it all!” he began to fret
The boy smiled emptily and looked at him
“There is one thing I have not eaten yet.”

Atop the Island

Leo Chen

Atop of the island, around is sea,
Crystalline blue, strikingly free,
Atop of England, the clock tower rings,
The hand moves on, like all other things,
Atop of Ireland, violence galore,
The Union Jack, flag gone before,
Atop of Jamaica, racers cue up,
All tense at legs, all for the cup,
Atop of Haiti, the world's failed state,
With paradise across the gate,
Atop of Newfoundland, fish on the coast,
Net cast over, salmon to roast,
Atop of Borneo, monkeys call,
Howls to the sky, howls to all,
Atop of Greenland, red and white,
Denmark's emblem still drifts bright,
Atop of Hawaii, two different faces,
Tourist beaches, and naval bases,
Atop the Falklands, many years
Of peace, of threats, of war and fears,
Atop St. Helena, lost in sight,
Europe's monster, lost to light,
Atop New Zealand, sheep so fine,
Britain came and said, "It's mine,"
Atop Wake Island, scarred by war,
Gravestones stand upon the shore,
Atop the world, shaped by man,
And islands, where it all began.

The Isle

Hannah Topa

The trees so lush, the sky so wide.
But on this isle the world has died.
Beyond the reefs and the seven seas, its secret dances in the breeze.
It has a history vibrant and bold, yet its tales have grown gray and old.
The stars drift close with tired eyes, but they cannot hear nature's cries.
The birds sing a lullaby soft and pure, yet cannot seem to find the cure.
All who live under its skies never seem to question why.
The puppeteer plays his game, always looking for one to blame.
So my dear if you come to visit you may be greeted by a sinister spirit.
I wish you luck, distant traveler, for it was all a dream.

Part Four:

Disappearing Islands

Many of these pieces grew from a prompt in which writers were asked to imagine a character aboard a ship who sees an island that later seems not to exist. What is unique about the island they see? Is it real? Could an island be visible one moment, and the next moment simply disappear?

The Cursed Island

Azure Lingham

The skies are grey and cold, unlike me. I'm glad to be at the helm as my body automatically adjusts to the rocking of the ship. I am Elizabeth Aurora Hook, captain of this ship. I inherited the ship from my father, Captain James Hook. I am many things: a leader, smart, strong, immortal and a siren - all thanks to my mother.

And I'm cursed.

We sail the seven seas, destined never to leave, not that we would, the sea is our home. The real problem is the island, the mysterious disappearing island that never seems to stay in one place. My crew and I have been trying to find the island for decades but we never can. No matter how hard I search, aided by Matthew, my father's first mate and now mine, we can never locate it. No matter the maps we follow, we can never find it on a single one.

Why do we need to locate the island?

To find my father, avenge his death and lift the curse.

"Lizzie, come here," Father called. I was only nine years old, yet I scrambled over to the helm. "Come, take hold of the wheel, we wanna head to the starboard side."

I nodded, keeping the ship going where Dad had pointed. Landing on the platform, Matthew looked with his spyglass and screamed, "Land ho!"

His father, Michael, my father's first mate, laughed and said, "Good boy Matt, now go help little Captain Lizzie get there." Matthew bounced down beside me. He was ten and pointed his sword forward, yelling, "Dead ahead!"

I giggled.

We docked on the island and tied off. Then we stepped off the ship and touched the cold black sand.

I began to explore the vast island. It was large and had huge trees with coconuts and mangos. There were many flowers but not a single creature to be seen. Something felt wrong. Maybe it was the way

the sea didn't lap against the rocks, as if it was afraid to do so, or how nothing called out to me on this island.

Matthew poked me with his sword. "What's the matter Lizzie?" he chirped.

I shrugged. "Something isn't right," I said. "This place gives me the creeps. The sea isn't lapping the rocks the way it should. It's like the sea isn't even there."

Matthew's eyes widened, and he nodded.

"Come on you two!" Matthew's father yelled.

We scrambled after the crew, Matthew tugging on my hand to pull me along. Across the island we trekked until we reached the heart, and then my father turned to us all and said, "We have found new land. A new island all to ourselves!"

I shook my head and stepped closer to Matthew as I felt something cold, almost ghost-like around me. Behind my father, a black cloud began to form, and a person took shape. I stood horrified, Matthew squeezing my hand.

"WHO DARES STEP FOOT ON MY ISLAND!?" the cloud boomed.

My father turned around, horrified at what he was seeing. "I believe this island belongs to me now," he said.

The cloud didn't like that. The trees around us started to sway and bend and then, to our amazement, they uprooted themselves and surrounded us all. My stomach lurched; that was why I hadn't been able to feel the water - because this island didn't belong to nature, to the sea, it belonged to this dark cloud. We had to leave while we still could, but the trees blocked our way.

"Captain Hook, I can't believe I've caught you," the cloud said, addressing my father. It whirled through the air before hovering before me. "And this must be the lovely daughter you had with Amara, the siren queen. Such a pretty little thing." The cloud stroked my cheek, and its touch was ice cold.

"STAY AWAY FROM HER!!!" my father yelled. "LEAVE MY DAUGHTER ALONE!!"

The cloud laughed. "Touchy subject," it whispered. "Maybe I will take the little girl away."

I tried to scamper off with Matthew, but the cloud grabbed me. I struggled to pull away, screaming.

"NO!!!" my father cried. "Don't take Lizzie. Take me instead."

The spirit dropped me, and I felt tears prick my eyes.

“How about this,” the cloud said. “I let most of your crew go - with the exception of your first mate - though they will be cursed forevermore. Your precious daughter stays free, and I take you in her place.”

After a brief silence, my father nodded.

“NO DADDY!” I screamed, running to him.

“It’s for your safety, Lizzie,” my father said. “You will be a great captain one day. You have a great crew to help you and, of course, you have Matthew.”

I hugged him tighter. “Please don’t leave me,” I whispered.

“I have no choice if I am to protect you, my darling,” he said. Then he gave me his sword and whispered, “Keep it safe for me.”

I nodded as I wiped my tears, putting on a brave face.

Once the exchange was over, the crew and I trudged back to the ship, and the curse went with us.

Matthew sat on the platform as I steered the ship away from the island.

“So don’t you need a first mate?” he asked.

“I already have one,” I mumbled.

He gave me a weird look. “What do you mean you already have one?” he asked.

I raised an eyebrow at him, and realization dawned on his face. In excitement, he jumped up and pointed his sword towards the sky.

“ME!” he yelled.

I nodded. Matthew smirked and said, “Aye-aye, Captain Lizzie.”

And he was right. This was my ship and my crew.

The Island

Julia

We sailed smoothly, watching as the clouds began to part before us.

Off to the side, I saw a flash of lightning. Suddenly the clouds turned a deathly black. Our ship rocked and I was almost thrown overboard. My face hit the railing, and I could taste iron in my mouth.

I looked up and was surprised to see that the clouds had now parted completely. In the gaps that had opened between them, I could see an island. It was the shape of a jellybean and looked as if it held a small jungle. Misty, purple fog surrounded it, and I caught a whiff of lavender. My eyes widened as I saw something move.

Suddenly the clouds shut like heavy metal doors.

The island vanished.

The Island

Madeleine Opie

JOURNAL OF SIR NICHOLAS THE 5TH PROPERTY OF THE BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

April 24, 1908

No one would ever believe me. This was my first thought as the mist enveloped the island once more. The island was bigger than most, but like many islands it had mountains and a beach that slowly transitioned into forest.

No one *did* believe me, not even my crew, who I will fire as soon as we reach land. But the island was real. IT WAS REAL. I am sure of it. I had seen children playing in the water, fishing boats coming back to shore and so many people. In fact, the oddest thing about the island was the people: not how they lived but how they looked. They all had gems sprouting from their shoulders. The children had only small ridges of them that were barely visible, but the adults' shoulders were full of crystals of different colours. One person especially drew my attention. From where I was, I could not tell if it was a man or a woman, but either way their crystals were every colour imaginable, some colours I could not even name. I called to my crew, pointing out the island as they came running, but by the time they had arrived it was no longer visible, and the tall mountains were covered by mist. We sailed our ship directly into the mist, then out again, and by then, the island had completely disappeared.

Tomorrow, I intend to take a boat out and sail to the island. I shall prove to everyone that it is real.

The clouds ahead were dark and dense. We could see the rain piercing the water. Our boat began to whine and shift as we headed towards the storm.

"Cap'n! We should turn back, the rain is too heavy, we won't make it out," Al called from the deck below me.

"No!" I yelled. "We keep going. We've come this far, we are not turning back!"

“But-” he began.

Quickly I cut him off. “That’s an order!”

We had come this far. We were so close to the goal we had been trying to achieve for a decade now, I would not allow us to turn back now. Not only that but I had to prove to—

My train of thought was suddenly cut off as the waves grew stronger, pushing and pulling the boat back and forth through the choppy waters. We were entering the storm. The rain began fast and with no warning. I held on to the side of the crows nest to steady myself as a quick flash of light broke through the water next to me. Crap. I was still in the crows nest I had to get down before—

But it was too late. Lightning had already struck the boat and I was falling down, down, down. I stuck my arms out in an attempt to break my fall, but I wasn’t quick enough. I felt the impact course through my body. Then it all went dark.

The door was made of smooth, foggy glass, transparent enough that I could make out the figure of a tall man standing behind it. His voice was muffled as if he was talking to someone on the phone. I took a deep breath in, then let it out and knocked on the door. The man’s voice became clearer as he walked to the door.

“Yes, yes,” he said, frustrated. “I know what I’m doing. Look, I’ll call you back later. She’s here now.”

The door creaked open and a tall man stood in its frame; he had dark brown hair and sharp green eyes. He smiled. “You must be Alexandra,” he said.

“Alex,” I replied, matter-of-factly.

I had never liked the name Alexandra; it was the name my parents had given me. It was ugly and I hated it. It reminded me of them and their posh nature, of their large mansion and their strict rules. I hated them and they hated me, therefore I would not use any name they had given me.

He smiled down at me.

“Very well Alex,” he said. “I have a job for you.”

I turned away. “I’m not interested.”

“Ah, wait,” he said, his hand outstretched. “It pays good money, and I hear you have a baby on the way.” He smiled once more as I turned to look at him. “It would be a shame if anything were to happen to it.”



Image by Madelyn Gallant

Part Five:

Monsters, Spirits and Dragons, oh my!

In these pieces, writers focus upon the creatures we imagine when we think of uncharted seas and unexplored lands. Some of our classes looked at images of fantastical beasts once thought to exist in wild places across the world, and others took inspiration from pictures of long-extinct beasts that still capture our imagination today.

The Captain's Face

Mila Dansereau

La Matelot had set out to sea a few weeks back. It was always dark and grey out at sea; the deck was always damp from the constant light rain. Everything seemed to be in a monochrome filter. The clouds never left the sky.

Thomas Oftenbach was a sailor. He had been paid to work on this ship. He was down on his luck and needed the money. Thomas was tall and muscular; he had been a lumberjack before moving to the harbour. William Harris was also a sailor; he was more experienced than Thomas. William was shorter and stouter than him as well. He had a thick Russian accent and constantly berated Thomas. Thomas was classier than William. He wore what seemed to be a leather jacket and a formal shirt with dress pants, while William wore a loose white tank top and worn-down jeans. They both worked under Captain Hughes. He ran the ship and was the one to hire them. He was a medium sized fellow with a big hearty laugh. The captain had hired them both because he had no sailors and needed to sail his cargo to France. Since the rain started and the clouds had come, none of them had high hopes for the voyage.

Over the first few days, William and Thomas had completed all the chores. They had swept the deck, boiled potatoes for food and set coal to the fire. Thomas had gotten up one morning while William was still sleeping. He had walked up the stairs to the wheelhouse to find Captain Hughes.

"What do we need to do today, Captain?" Thomas asked, his voice rough from waking up minutes prior.

Captain Hughes kept his hands on the wheel. He spoke in a Scottish accent, coarse and deep.

"We've ran oot o' potatoes. A need ye an' William tae gae an get more from under the deck."

Thomas Oftenbach nodded. "Aye aye Cap'n. Do you think we have enough potatoes for the rest of the voyage?"

Hughes kept his eyes on the sea ahead of his ship.

"We'll see Thomas, Juist gae get the potatoes now, hmm...?"

"Aye aye Cap'n."

Thomas turned around, stepping down the stairs back to his quarters. He tapped William on the shoulder. The snoring man jerked awake, his eyes wide open.

“Vhat? vhat is it? Zomas! Vhat do sie zink sie are doing?” William yelled, his voice booming through the wooden ship.

“...The Cap’n says the potatoes have run out an’ he asked us to go get more from the underdeck.”

Thomas stared at William, waiting for him to respond.

“Alright... alright. How do sie suppose ve get down zere?”

“There’s a hatch at the tip of the deck...”

William struggled his way out of the uncomfortable bed and followed Thomas to the hatch. Thomas gripped the handle with both hands and heaved the hatch open. It started with a small creak of old rusted hinges and turned into a roar of old metal worn down by rain and time. There was no light in down there. William slapped Thomas on the back.

“Go on zen lad. Be a man.”

Thomas turned to William. “Aye...”

He went to put the first foot down on the ladder. The ladder was cold, even through Thomas’s heavy-duty boots. When they got down there it was dark. William reached into his pocket, fishing for anything that could help them. He brought out a cigarette lighter, the flint worn down with use, and flicked it on. The light illuminated very little but it helped, nonetheless.

Many days later, they needed more potatoes. Then they needed more coal. Each time down there they saw something... it seemed like a giant snake covered in mucus, slithering around the dark room. They thought they were just being superstitious; they had to act unfazed. But then, one day, the captain went missing. They searched the ship from high to low.

“William, the Cap’n is gone,” Thomas said, trying to shake him awake.

“Vhat? Oh... What do sie mean?” William asked, half asleep, sitting up on the bed.

Thomas looked around the room, then at William again.

“He’s not at the wheel. We must search for him,” Thomas said, encouraging him to get up and help search.

William arose eventually and they both walked around the deck, checking the kitchen, the storage where there were no potatoes left, and the engine.

“Zee broom closet is zee last place.”

They nodded and turned around, sloshing along the unclean deck. The door opened with a creak. It seemed everything on the ship

was old. There they found the captain's log. It described how Hughes thought he was going crazy, how he was hearing things below deck. The last entry in the log said he was going to down to investigate. The entry was from the previous night. Thomas looked to William, who pocketed the log.

It seemed darker today. The rain was heavier, and the clouds thicker. They knew what was down there, and neither of them had a gun.

The hatch opened and they went down.

The creature was slimy. It looked like a snake or a caterpillar just before metamorphosis. It had legs like a spider, reaching out and grabbing onto the walls of the under deck. It looked at them and they were struck with horror.

It had the face of their captain.

Sincerely, Jane Doe

Sadie L.

Eddy Wilson is a 17-year-old girl who was travelling the world with her friend Harper on a small sailboat, when a shipwreck left her stranded on a deserted island, seemingly alone, except for an emotionally unstable spirit who died there centuries ago.

The dagger gleams in their hand, so sharp, despite its age. I can see my face reflecting off its silver surface, pale and shivering at the thought of what this means for me.

No matter what happens next, I have to be calm, so I don't set them off again.

"Jane..." I say softly, trying to relax my shaking body.

"What's wrong?" they ask, genuinely confused. "It won't hurt. Just a quick slice of the wrists and you can finally join me!"

Their translucent body inches - or rather glides - closer, hair flowing in a nonexistent wind.

"What about Harper?"

The moment the words leave my mouth I wince, expecting Jane to blow up at me. They *are* the one holding a weapon. Instead, they give me a rather forced closed-mouth smile, while keeping the dagger hilt facing me, waiting for me to grab it.

"Harper is dead. She died in the shipwreck. You have no one to go back to. You only have me."

I freeze. No. No. She's alive. She has to be. She's the only reason I haven't given up.

Jane's voice suddenly goes cold. "Take the dagger, Eddy. You can finally be free."

I gingerly stretch my arm out, my fingertips hovering over the thing that could decide my fate. My mind cycles through all the scenarios that could happen next, before coming to a conclusion.

"You're lying," I say, before turning to face the dense forest behind me, and running.

This is definitely not the best way I could have handled the situation.

My heart pounds in my chest. The foliage becomes a blur and my throat aches. I don't know how long I've been running, but I'm going

to have to stop soon. The island isn't that big, and Jane knows it like the back of their hand. I'm stuck.

I give in to the temptation of looking, whipping my head around.

There's no one following me anymore.

In my confusion, my worn-down shoes become entangled with roots from a nearby tree, and my body slams against the rough wood and jagged rocks.

The next thing I know, I'm being dragged across the island, my limp legs getting more scratched up each time they bump over the rough landscape of the forest.

Where am I? The trees become sparser and the soil and roots slowly become more and more rocky.

Suddenly, I become aware of a cold grip around my wrists.

"Jane, please... let me go."

The only response I get is a tightening of the grip.

"Jane, you're hurting me!"

They quickly let go, though I suspect it's not because of what I said.

"Jane?"

"We're here."

"What's 'here?'"

"Arrowhead Peak. Do you know why it's called that?"

Centuries ago, there was a group of people living here. Whenever settlers came looking for new land, this is where they went to fend them off. You can still see some of the arrows littered across the sand."

As Jane continues to talk, I brush the dirt off my clothes, stand up and follow their gaze. My skin pales. A cliff. It's a cliff.

"What are we doing here, Jane?" I keep my voice steady as I speak, despite the clamminess of my hands and the cold sweat on my back.

"I thought it was obvious. Would this hurt less for you? Is that why you won't take the dagger? Is it too painful?" I watch as they fidget with their hands, specifically a leather bracelet fastened around their right wrist. They almost look a little bit sad. I would've smiled at their naivety if my life wasn't currently in danger.

"It's not that, Jane. You might have been able to become a ghost back then, but I don't think it works like that anymore. Even if I jump, there's no telling if I'll come back or not."

Jane slumps to the ground, inches away from the edge of the peak. They mutter something under their breath, although the only word I catch from it is “alone.”

I walk up to them, feeling sympathetic. *What is wrong with me?*

“I’m sorry.” I reach out as if to pat them on the shoulder and immediately they grab my wrist, their eyes showing signs of that all-too-familiar seething anger.

“Don’t. Touch. Me.” Their voice is calm, but their body language says something else. “I didn’t want it to come to this, but you just won’t cooperate. Why won’t you cooperate, Eddy? Did I do something wrong? Why do they *never stay?*”

Jane was standing now, walking towards me, forcing me to move backwards, closer and closer to the edge of the cliff.

“I don’t remember what things feel like anymore,” they say, “but I hope this hurts as much as you hurt me.”

I feel the ground beneath me become unsteady. All I can hear is the thumping in my chest, so loud that I barely acknowledge it when some of the debris falls away from the edge. There is a faint “thud” as it crashes against the sand.

“Jane, think this through,” I say. “What if I actually don’t come back? I’ll be gone, and then you’ll be all alone, forever.” They pause for just a moment, before looking at me with those emotionless, beady eyes, and sighing.

“You’re right,” they say.

Just as I allow my muscles to relax, the cliff crumbles beneath my feet and I fall.

First, I feel sand between my fingers. Then I hear the woosh of the tide rolling in and out. Finally, my eyes open and I see an almost see-through figure standing over me. It takes a couple of seconds before it sinks in. Jane Doe saved my life. The one who almost took it away from me in the first place.

“Eddy? You’re awake,” they say, probably to themselves. “I’m so sorry.” I sit up, grains of sand falling from my hair.

My better judgment tells me to get the heck out of here, but I push it away for the time being.

“It’s okay. I know what it feels like to have no one.”

Questions begin to pour into my mind, starting with: “Why did you save me?” Jane looks away.

“I was scared,” they say. “If you were right, there was no telling when another ship would wash up here. When you came, it was hundreds of years after the last one.”

I don’t know how to respond to that, so I just say, “Oh.”

Jane continues talking. “Anyway,” they say, “I’ve been here long enough. There’s something I need you to do.” They roll up their right sleeve, revealing the leather bracelet I saw back on the cliff. “This is an anchor. It’s what keeps me here. I want you to take it off. I can’t do it myself.”

I say “oh” again when another thought arises. “But you said Harper died in the shipwreck. No one else will rescue me. I’ll be stuck here forever.”

Jane smiles sadly. “Harper’s not dead. You’ll be okay,” they reassure me. I don’t know what else to say, so I slip the bangle off Jane’s wrist, whisper a small goodbye, and then they’re gone.

One week later...

Somewhere in the sky, a helicopter whirs.

Jane was right. It’s going to be okay.

No Man Is an Island

Nella Sevelka

I'm not surprised he's late; he always was, no matter the occasion.

I watch the door to the Tim Hortons open abruptly. A man twice my age walks slowly in. His hair is oily and his beard untamed. He's tall, but stooped and dressed in dirty, well-worn clothes. His shoes have holes, and one toe has poked through the top. I stare him down as if we are animals and he is my prey.

I wonder if that's really him. *Has he actually bothered to come see me?*

A Tim Horton's manager stops the strange man in his tracks. He says, "Sir, you need to leave unless you're a paying customer." I look at my bagel and back at him, then I walk over.

"He's with me," I say. The man turns around and, without saying a thing, pushes past me. I feel his bony elbow brush against my collarbone.

He sits at my table and waits. As I sit down across from him, he says my name, tempting me to feel comforted. Cautiously I say, "Dad," and we both just stare. I meet his eyes, his cloudy green eyes. I wonder if he can sense what I'm thinking. I wonder if he can feel my anger and disgust towards him.

He asks how long I've been waiting. I want to say *quite awhile*, but I've been lying for the duration of our relationship so I back down. "Not long," I say. "Only a minute or two." He looks at my toasted bagel; of course, a dead giveaway. It's half gone. He knows I've been here for a while.

Trying to change the subject, I ask how he's been. He looks down and sighs softly. I can tell he isn't in a good place right now. My mind trails off.

I wonder how long it's been since he's eaten. I remember his bony elbow brushing up against me in the doorway. I recall when he used to work out and had the muscles of a gym rat. I ask him if he's hungry. He looks at me and says, "I can't ask that of you." I know he's just being polite, so I go over to the counter and order a large black coffee and a cream cheese bagel.

While waiting for the order, I think about how so much has changed. It's almost unbearable to see him this way.

I walk back to the worn, red two-seater and place the food in front of him. I watch him eat like a stray dog, the bagel gone in three

bites, downed with the coffee. Without lifting his head, he says quietly, "Thanks. I needed that."

Anxiously crumpling the Tim's bag, my hand accidentally touches his; weathered skin, dry and paper thin, stretched over purple veins worming their way to nowhere.

Where, I think to myself, do we go from here?

Staring past him, I see the door open, and she flies in like a colourful bird. All rouged up with breasts overflowing her flouncy dress, her flushed face upturned to a man whose brawny arm she clutches.

I feel the sudden urge to haul my father up and push him out the back door. Slumping back in my seat, I realise it's useless. Somehow, I've always known this day would come.

Then, she sees me and with a look of recognition, registers who I'm with. I hear the word *Starbucks* as she whirls her partner around and hustles him back out the door.

The breath I'm holding fills the air and I feel moved to hold him the way he once held me.

Suddenly, I know where we go from here. "Dad," I say gently, "let's go to my place. Maybe we can watch the hockey game."

Escape from Dragon Island

Basil McGrath

It was hot and sunny as I was walking to school (a little late). The heat was like a ray gun being shot at me. The atmosphere was like a burning oven! For lunch, I planned to have a burger and fries with a milkshake to wash everything down. For snack, I would eat a granola bar and an apple.

I started to run, so I could make it in time for first recess. Suddenly I slipped in a puddle and slid into a construction site! I jumped over a garbage bag and ducked between a man's legs. Finally, I stopped- but not in time, because I fell through a manhole!

Everything went dark. There was no noise and no light. Then I felt air hitting my face. I felt like I was flying! I started to make out trees and birds, but something was different about this place. I didn't know what at first, but then I saw it. The trees were purple, and the birds had metal beaks and metal talons. Finally I fell down, but just before I hit the ground I halted, floating two inches off the ground. Then I face-planted.

I screamed so loud that the people in California could probably hear me! After screaming for four hours, I pulled myself together and started to look around. I discovered that the grass in this strange place was unbelievably strong, so I braided it into a blanket and hammock. I also found some bark that I used to make bark soup. Then I went to bed and dreamed of burgers, fries and a milkshake.

The next day, I found a squirrel sleeping in my lap. I didn't get mad; I actually found some berries and fed it to him and to myself. Then I started to explore the forest. I climbed a mountain that was right beside my new home, and on the slopes, I found more berries and some dead birds on the ground. I climbed even higher up the mountain and found something extraordinary! I found A DRAGON SLEEPING!

I could not believe my eyes! There was a dragon on this island! Carefully I crept past the sleeping beast and ran back down the mountain. I was heading back to my new home when I heard a roar coming from the top of the mountain. Birds flew everywhere and then I saw... the dragon! I almost fainted! He spat fire everywhere and burned down a lot of trees. The dragon had something hanging from his neck. It looked like a key.

Back at my new home, I ate berries and meat from the birds I had found on the way to the mountain. I used the metal beak and talons

from the birds and made a fire. I put the metal into the fire until it glowed red, then I took it out of the fire with two sticks and shaped it into a sword. Next, I put the sword into water to cool down and thirty seconds later I had a nice metal sword.

I yawned. It was getting dark, so I went to bed and dreamed very well.

The next day I went back up the mountain to where I had seen the dragon, and I found him sleeping in the exact same spot. Carefully I pulled the key from around his neck, but as I was doing so, he woke up! He roared and spat fire right in front of my eyes. I pulled out my sword and stabbed the dragon right in the eye! That made him even more angry! He swiped his tail at me and hit me right in the stomach. I ran behind him and cut him in the back leg. He turned around and spat fire at me. I slashed my sword at him, and that's when I realized that my foot was on fire! I screamed and kicked my foot in the dust to extinguish the flames. Then I made myself look as big and powerful as I could.

At last, the dragon flew away into the distance. I couldn't believe I had survived a fight against a dragon, and that I had also stolen something from him!

I looked at the key and wondered what it unlocked. That's when I saw a door which hadn't been there before. I walked towards it. I was suspicious about what might be behind the door, but an idea was taking shape in my head.

What if this key unlocked the door?

I tried the key in the door, I heard a click and then the door opened. I was surprised to see that this door led to the recess yard! Wow! So I walked through the door and started to play football.

I never told anyone about these adventures - but I would always remember this as the day when I scored a touchdown in football - and also defeated a dragon.

Thoughts of a Hungry T-Rex

Elise

Oh man. What *is* that thing down on the beach?

It looks DELICIOUS!

Wait. I'm big and it's gonna see me. I should step behind this rock.

At least I'm not as big as my mom.

She's so overprotective! If she knew I was out here, close to a creature that's so strange and unknown, she would get mad.

Like, super mad!

As she's always telling me, there's nothing like me or my mom left in the whole world.

Oh look! That thing is running under a palm tree!

Oh-o - lightning! Whatever the creature is, it didn't see that coming!

Aw... now it looks so sad. Or is it afraid?

Afraid of me?

Was it something I said? Was it my roar?

I know I'm a scary predator, but I'm just a baby.

That thing is cute. I wish I could pat him on the head, but my arms are too tiny.

Poor guy, all alone.

Huh? He's looking into the ocean.

What does he see? Another creature like him, in the water!

Is he magical?

That noise he makes! What is he yelling?

I should probably go, before my mom gets mad...but before I go, what should I do?

That creature down on the beach: should I eat it?

The Island of Powers

Vasila

The Big Storm

It is dark and terrifying. I feel so scared. I don't know where my parents are. All I know is that I am snuggled close to my pet cat, Stormy, and the water is up to my ankles. A lightning bolt struck our ship and people are screaming, begging for mercy, but I'm not interested. I snuggle closer to Stormy and the last thing I see is a blinding light.

The next second, I'm lost in darkness.

Times of Caution

Mew, mew, mew, Stormy cries. *Pant, pant, pant*.

"Oh god," I mumble. The beauty is stunning, but I realise I'm far from home. At first, I just stare around and scratch my head, but then it all comes back to me. "Oh, so it wasn't a bad dream," I groan as I look around. "Where am I?" I feel so tiny, looking at how big and magnificent the island is. "Oh, I never realized nature was so big," I say after an endless stretch of silence. "I feel so hopeless and don't know what to do."

Feeling stressed, I begin to cry. "I'll never go back to a pleasing and cozy life," I moan.

After about seven hours of crying, I feel a painful rumble in my stomach, so I stand up.

"Stormy," I say, "stay here while I fetch food for us to share. Who knows, there might be *something* good about this island."

For the next few hours I explore the island, cautiously. All along, I have the feeling that someone is watching me.

The Death of My Companion

Where is Stormy? I think.

"STORMY!" Panic rises from me as I scream. "STORMY!" I shout again, not bothering to look where I'm going.

I trip on something furry and covered in red. My breathing stops. I look around and fall on my knees, crying.

"Stormy, you deserved better!" I moan, then I realise something and look around for any trace of weapons. Right behind me, I see an arrow covered in blood. I grit my teeth and my head fills with a bubble of rage bigger than any I've ever had in my life. I imagine the

rage building up so much it would be able to take down an elephant.

Revenge. The word tastes so good on my tongue. *Revenge, revenge, revenge* I repeat, feeling better each time I say it. Then I snap back to reality.

Wait a second...

I turn around to look at the arrow that killed Stormy. The wind couldn't have blown it. Someone fired the arrow. And the wind couldn't have pulled the arrow out of Stormy's body, either. Someone else did that.

I flinch as I think about this. Then it comes to me.

There is someone other than me and Stormy on this island.

The Mysterious Person

I look around, hoping this was all a bad dream, but no. *I'm gonna die here*, I think.

All of a sudden, I have a feeling that I need to get up and walk around the island. Then something new bothers me: the island is so quiet, as if it is holding its breath in my presence.

I catch a glimpse of something, maybe feet, I don't know, and as I'm about to move on, someone in the shadows cries, "HALT!" The voice seems so dangerous that all my instincts tell me to stop walking and listen to whoever the creepy shadow person is.

I stand up, steady and quiet, to hear what else the shadow person needs to say.

"I'm the guardian of the Island of Powers," it cries. "Whoever sets foot on the Island of Powers must take a test, or else...they will die!"

I'm shivering from head to toe because I'm scared. A chilly wind blows and my teeth start to chatter. "Has anyone ever passed the test?" I ask, shivering in the cold. I hate myself for sounding scared and for being so afraid.

"Follow me and you will take the test," booms the voice in the shadows. "Pass the test and you are free to go home, or stay. Fail and you will die." This last word stings the air as if the most poisonous snake is pouring venom onto the island.

I have to make up my mind: die right now or take a risk and maybe die anyway.

"I will take the test," I say, trying to sound brave.

The Test

I'm staring at the lady as we walk. Everything about her screams, *I'm the prettiest lady in the universe*. I just can't take my eyes off her, she's so pretty. Then I look at myself and see how I look. My hair is a mess, my clothing is a mess and everything I'm wearing screams: *This girl stinks! Don't even get close to her!*

We stop in front of a tree that has a single word written on it: TEST.

I swallow my fear, or at least I try, but as soon as I do even bigger blobs of fear replace it. Then I give up and instead, add confidence to my collection of feelings.

"You first," the lady urges.

I gulp. "Where do I go?" I ask.

"You go straight into the tree."

Here goes nothing, I think.

"AAAAAAHHHHHH!" I scream, my heart almost falling out of my chest. Ahead of me is the scariest thing I've ever seen. A torture chamber.

"Are you going to torture me?" I ask.

"Why are humans so dumb?" the lady moans. "This is how I kill the people who don't pass the test!"

Next, she leads me into the most beautiful room on earth. Right in front of me is a beautiful tree growing the most gorgeous pink roses. When I look down, the tree is on a separate, tiny piece of land.

"What do I do now?" I ask.

"You must take the leap of faith and get me one of the roses," the lady says. "If you have any powers over earth, water or stone then you can tell the vines to do the work for you, or tell the water to walk you there, or you can use rocks as things to st-"

"But I don't have any powers," I interrupt.

"If you don't have any powers then you must make the leap of faith," she says simply, as if jumping five meters is the easiest thing on earth.

"Okay, I, uh, I'm hoping I misunderstood you because I can't jump five meters, not without powers," I say.

"Hmpf, so I guess we're going to need to kill you instead," the lady says, and she drags me away.

Now my heart is thumping fast. *I'm gonna die*, I think.

My Almost Death

I'm scared. I'm cornered now, and everything about the lady's actions scream *Wrong, wrong, wrong*.

"Don't do this," I say with a million pleas in my voice, but the lady ignores me and keeps on sharpening her sword.

Coming towards me, she says, "You chose not to do the test. I have no mercy for you."

"Please..."

"NO!" shouts the lady. She continues sharpening her sword and I keep on crying. After thirty minutes the lady walks towards me and I stare at the stains of blood on the blade.

"NO!" I scream, closing my eyes and holding my hands out to shield myself.

When no blast of pain comes, I open my eyes and see the lady motionless on the floor. My bonds have been cut and I am free.

"What's happened?" I ask, looking around for my rescuer, but there is no one in the room.

Then, just as I am about to leave, something catches my eye. There is a chart on the wall with millions of words on it - words like *flying, earth, ice*. At the bottom of the words I see descriptions such as this one: *Able to inflict pain on anyone who dares to scare or anger them. And if the person angers and scares them it is possible they might die from the pain*. I see other descriptions, too. Then I look up to the top of the list and spot the title, and I almost fall to the floor in shock.

POWERS, the title reads in bright, bold letters.

"Oh god," I squeak, "I just killed someone!" Although I feel horrified, deep down I know I have done the right thing.

Suddenly, water comes rushing in through the door. I don't feel scared at all and instead I stare at the water. It calms immediately, as if I am controlling it. Then I remember the lady's words: If you have any power...

That's it! I must have powers!

I stay the night on the island. The next day I build a raft and I lead the water to New Zealand.

Now I can go home, I think to myself with joy.

We Know Nothing

Kate

**I can't stand a creature with no backbone. Slugs. Snails. Spiders.
Slew and spit.
All I abhor, all I despise in this world.**

**An invertebrate, a woman of pure vile and bile.
She does not please, does not listen to the cries of the trees as she
steals their precious fruit.
She takes and never gives.**

**I follow my heart, and it leads me to hers, beating far too loudly.
Loud, polluting everyone with her noise.
Silence is key.**

**I hold my steel silencer, key, the washed blade obedient.
It shines with the moon's approval.
Sharp. Still. Silent. So it goes.**

She knows nothing.

I know enough about fruits to tell which ones are poisonous and which are less so. I toss the splotchy and sad ones away, snacking on some that seem better than others. Either I picked the wrong side to wash up on, or there's nothing here that tastes like anything. Not even water. The texture is nearly nonexistent, and I wouldn't be surprised if I was hallucinating all of it. But I'm getting calories from it... I hope.

I'm sure I can survive on this, whatever it is. I've survived on worse. Pirates are terribly crafty.

"... and unfortunately, some creatures don't have that craftiness to execute their plans correctly."

I turn my head away from the light of the moon and the cold breeze flowing from the shore.

"Like you. Aren't you moved to tears?"

The figure in the darkness twists their blade, stalking closer,

no longer cowering behind bushes and trees. I crack my knuckles and hop up onto my feet, no matter how much they groan.

“An apex predator is no good if they’re an obvious little thing.”

Unsheathing the crab legs from my pouch, I wield them both by my side, scowling and feeling my lip quiver in sync with my heartbeat.

“And if the weak ones scurry away, then they’ll be left all alone, hungry and aching.”

It comes out into the moonlight. My glower dims, dropping deep into a dull, displeased drone.

“You’re...”

It stalks closer, lunging at me with a blade.

“You.”

She knows *nothing*.

She knows not how my heart— my *body*— works.

She knows naught of the knots she’s travelled.

She knows not how long I’ve waited.

They brought her here. To me.

I have waited so obediently, with my executioner’s key.

I will silence her, listen to her pleas.

We clash and clang, we fight and swipe.

I’ve been patient. I’ve trained. I’ve been good.

All to watch as she looks on, distraught, as I slash open her puny crab legs.

I’m so very happy. Over the moon that gleams on my blade.

I am doing good. I can save them.

They need wait for only a few more days.

This crazed little girl is *really* bad at her job. There's no joy to her actions, no understanding of how that stupid, ugly ornamental dagger works.

"You're a horrendous hitman! I've seen seagulls more passionate about their thievery than you!"

You, I, us?

She's wild, practically frothing at the mouth as she whips her newborn hands to and fro, the shine conveniently stuck to the end of it being an annoying inconvenience.

Sadly, even with her horrific fighting, a dagger still beats crab legs. Not only does she still have massive zits on the side of her nose and eyebrow, she has the gall to bring a dagger to a crab fight!

"Petty *and* unfair is not a good look on you, kiddo."

Maybe.

I dodge her attacks. Her four-foot eleven stature— if you could even *call* it that— barely reaches high enough to go anywhere that could hurt me.

"Don't speak any longer."

"*Rude.* Mom taught us how to speak kindly when we were around four, right? Or are you not at that age yet?"

"You have no right to mention her!"

Taking long steps back that she has to match with two of her own, I lead her closer to the chill, the freezer-cold thrill of the sea and moon. Her stumbles and snarls accompany shivers and twitches as her feet graze the edge of the water, a witch melting. The dagger and the purple ribbons woven around the cross-guard tremble, just as she dips a bare foot in.

"And you still don't know how to swim."

I wade backwards. She follows, holding onto the dagger as if she were the accessory, not the holder. I want to puke, to vomit, to spit and frown at the one who glares at me.

"God, it's like looking at the ugliest mirror in the world."

"Don't say anything. You're a... a phony. You're the fake."

"The *fake*?!"

They must be right.

If they're not right, then nothing makes sense.

But why does that monster grab my blade?

She bleeds herself dry, her palm pulsing and ghostly pale.
Her 'lifeblood' drags down the steel, sopping onto the violet.
She's gripping the steel with her own obsidian digits.

I yank the dagger back, but it doesn't give.
My watery reflection does all but forgive.
Why is this all for naught?

... mother, father, brother.
I need more time. I need days and nights.
She will be vanquished, given time.

All I need is for her to let go.

"Now listen here, you brat. I'll count to three, and if you don't let go..."

I hold onto it tighter. I don't know why.

"... I'm not fond of the idea of getting rid of children, but I'm not afraid to start now. Space-time continuum be damned."

I don't know why, but I can't stop.

"One."

That little girl looks scared.

"Two."

But she's not—

"*Three.*"

Cast Away

Antonio Rosa

Context: A man has tried to rewrite his world. He attempted to break down the pillars of creation and rebuild them anew. A new order for mankind and all its strange desires. But it was an empty plan, a dream of notes and scribbles. He was cast away to a small island, one of bone and rock and sand. One of shining, multicoloured stars and vibrant neon fauna. This is the end of his story, the last night on that strange bed of sand which he once or twice called his new home.

The quiet, so suffocating and yet so freeing. The world had never been so quiet for Hail. No more thunder, no more crashing waves shaping the rough sand. All the birdsong had faded into the background, set strangely against the sounds he could only describe as the scraping of his mind.

He walked along that broken shore, every empty step cast with no real goal in mind. He just wandered, wandered against that strange red sky. Wandered without end, until his legs gave out and his mind had lost sight of every reason to push forward. He fell to the sand, sitting on his knees, watching the quiet ocean. And in the back of his mind, he heard a voice talk to him one more time. “This is the end, child,” the solemn voice spoke.

There was a moment of pause, a moment where the sea breeze whistled through every misshapen rock. A moment where this once confident man had to find his footing. “There is no end,” Hail said loosely, breaking the silence. “No end for us, no setting sun to look to.”

“Maybe” the shadow responded. “But then again nothing lasts forever.”

Then the island gave them a moment to look back on all they had done. Their lives, their hollow victories. A life so far off, now, that it almost seemed like the horizon, so far away yet cast in such an amazing light. It was while staring into that horizon that the final words of this story would be spoken.

“Remember what you said to me?” the shadow asked. “You said we were meant to bring change. As our role as children of nature and stars, we are meant to foster new status.” He paused, glancing at the little natural beauty this place had to offer. The sea quietly shifted, moss and mold growing on bone and rock. “There is no change in nature. Nature is order, a strict, never-changing system that has kept us all alive for eons.” The dark voice let his form rest next to Hail's

decaying form, his dark silhouette splashing against the sea-stained sand.

“You never understood the true danger of change,” the shadow continued. “You threw away what you have, only to shoot at false hopes and naive dreams that will probably never come true. It’s a tragedy, I know, but this world is not meant for change, not any more at least. After all, look at what it has done to you.”

In a way, the shadow was right. Hail could feel his flesh shifting with each passing moment. His joints were stiff, his eyes could only see a distilled, monochrome world. Moss and rot grew from his stone-like skin, stands of vibrant-coloured fauna blowing loosely to the rhythm of the sea.

“You can’t even remember your name, can you?” asked the shadow. Hail tried to blurt it out, but all that came out was an empty whistle.

“I am sorry, child,” the shadow uttered one final time. Hail watched his estranged companion get up and stand, his fine, black cloak dancing to the weaving wind. It almost consumed Hail, brushing against his new body and wrapping around every strange angle. He turned, letting their eyes lock for a moment.

“Enjoy your peace,” the shadow said. “There is no change left to fear. Only the ocean and sky.”

And as Hail saw the world again, in that same monochrome hue, he watched the shadow walk off to an unknown horizon. Watched as the sea swallowed it whole and that raging form found peace beneath the waves. And when it was all over and done, there was only Hail. Only him, the ocean and the sky. Just the quiet, and the faint memory of a man who looked awfully like a statue on that beach.

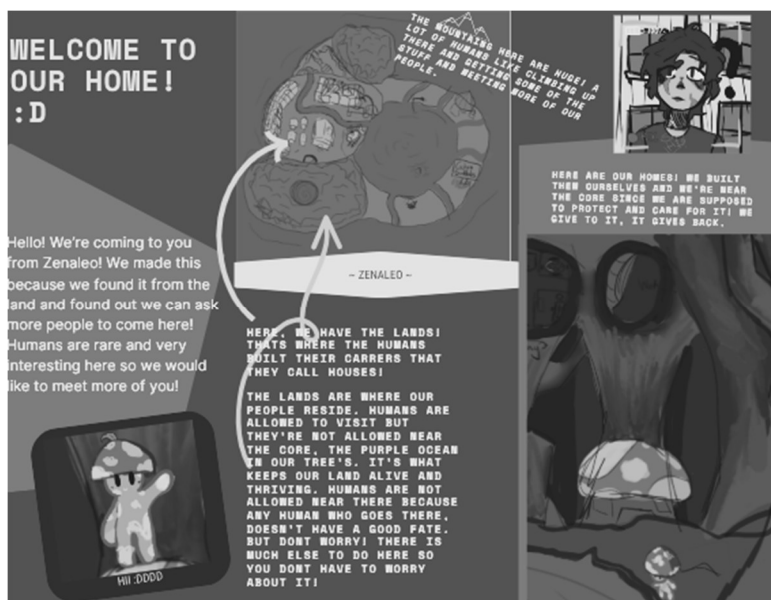


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