

MARITA BALTO
SURVIVAL
STORY

A GIRL AND HER DOG'S TALE
BOOK 1



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Many thanks to Giusy, Katie and Istvan for their work on this series!

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One

Emma Hanson knew three things.

One: her father was dead.

Two: his killer was still on the boat.

Three: she couldn't stay hidden beneath the bed forever.

Emma ears pounded, even over the lapping of the water on the hull and over the drizzling rain, the shifting of an overturned bottle, and the pacing of the man who had just committed unimaginable acts. Tears burned at her eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks. In an effort to keep quiet, she bit her bottom lip so hard that blood was welling up around her teeth.

Calm often followed chaos. A raging storm ended in what felt like an abrupt way. The moments after a car accident seemed to linger in stillness. And a ship fell still and silent in the wake of agonized screaming. Eighteen years old, and Emma was fairly certain her world had just come to a screeching halt.

They were on a boat in the middle of the ocean. There was no way to call for help. Her heart ached at the thought of losing her father. They were close; closer than Emma had ever been with her mother. To have lost him – it was a devastating thought. Her chest felt tight. All of her muscles were coiled so stiff, she thought they might burst.

The mattress weighed against her back. With each passing second, the space beneath the bed seemed to grow tighter and tighter. Emma couldn't stay here forever. She had to do – something. Her legs were numb. Her shoulders ached.

Her father was dead.

Dead, dead, dead.

Dead and never coming back.

Emma wanted to sob. She bit her lip harder. The pain was a good enough distraction, for the moment at least.

And there was another concern, absurdly prominent in her mind. Her dog, Cozzie, was on the ship, too. Emma didn't know what was a more terrifying thought: that something had happened to her beloved dog, or that he would come and investigate what kind of game she was playing, curled up under the bed as she was. Both options seemed equally awful.

Emma's whole body shook, fine tremors that laced through her thighs and into her spine. She took a breath, then a second one. Her fingers curled against the hardwood floor, dust caking up under her nails. Outside, a clap of thunder rang out, startling Emma so bad that she jumped.

The bed rattled against the floor. Her heart stopped but – no one came down. She was still here, alone.

It didn't make sense to her.

Johnnie had been friends with her father for a long time. She remembered him from years earlier when she attended primary school. He always seemed like a decent person, and had been her father's long time military buddy.

There had been an argument, but Emma had only heard parts of it. They had been talking in the hallway, their voices muffled by the rain outside, and then they had been really fussing at each other. There was a thump, a loud *crack* of something striking wood hard, and then Johnnie had been screaming.

"Eric," he'd shouted. "Eric! Wake up! Come on, mate! This isn't fucking funny! Wake up! What the fuck, mate? Don't do this to me. Don't you fucking be dead, mate! I'm not fucking playing man! Wake up! Get up! God damn it!"

Emma had cracked open the door just enough to see him, crouched over her father's still form. There was blood pooling across the wood floor.

Then she had thrown herself under the bed, terrified that Johnnie would come looking for her. He hadn't. Emma had been hiding since.

She took another deep breath, in and out, trying to calm her breathing. Very

slowly, Emma inched her way out from under the bed, thinking, *if he finds me, he's going to kill me.*

She pulled herself up on shaking legs, slowly inching her way towards the door. Emma cracked it open, peeking out into the hallway.

Empty.

There was a bloody trail leading up the stairs, to the top of the deck. Emma's stomach twisted itself into knots. She felt faint, like the fear had rushed to her head and filled it with clouds.

But she still knew three things. Her father was dead. The murderer was still on the ship. And... she couldn't stay under the bed forever.

Two

Carefully, Emma made her way up the stairs and onto the main deck. She stuck to the shadows. The fact that it was storming something awful and almost midnight helped. In a matter of seconds, the rain soaked her all the way through, her hair dripping and tangled around her neck, her clothes plastered to her skin.

It wasn't hard to locate Johnnie.

He had, at some point, drug Eric Hanson up onto the deck. Presently, Johnnie was collapsed over top of the man's prone form. Emma couldn't tell if Johnnie was asleep, unconscious, or had gone and died too. Did it make her a bad person to hope for the latter? Maybe, but Emma didn't care all that much about it just then.

She hoped he was dead.

A quick look around proved that Cozzie wasn't out in the open. In the galley then, maybe. He liked to sleep in there. It was the warmest part of the ship at night, and he could often beg his way into getting a treat if someone wandered in for tea or a snack.

Carefully, Emma started making her way towards the galley. There was a sound behind her, snorting, hiccuping – Johnnie, waking up!

Shit, thought Emma. She risked a single glance over her shoulder and then took off, barreling her way into the galley. The moment she was inside, she grabbed one of the worn wooden chairs and used it to barricade the door, wedging it under the handle so it couldn't be turned.

Cozzie, who was indeed curled up in his blankets, lifted his head and gave a questioning whuff.

“Quiet,” said Emma, her own voice a sharp whisper. “Quiet, Cozzie!”

Cozzie, who was a very good boy, put his head back down on his paws and listened.

The galley door had a window on it. It was hard to see through all of the rain, but she could tell that Johnnie was patting her father down, rooting through his heavy leather jacket. When he stood up, moments later, he was clutching a baggie of white powder in his hand. It looked like he was still talking, but she couldn't make out the words.

“Coke,” said Emma, softly. “That must have been what they were fighting about.”

Cozzie whined.

Emma ignored him, squinting to try and make out what was happening a little easier. Johnnie staggered to the side of the ship, baggie of drugs in hand, and braced himself against the railing. His whole body heaved as he retched overboard violently.

Shoving the baggie into the pocket of his own worn, green jacket, Johnnie staggered back over to where Eric laid. He nudged at Eric with the toe of his boot, then Johnnie shook his head, raking a hand through his rain-plastered hair. He was still talking, even as he took Eric by the arms and started to drag him over to the railing.

Emma couldn't breathe.

She couldn't look away.

Johnnie hauled her father up into his arms, and then dropped him down over the rail of the ship. Emma couldn't hear him impact with the water, but she could *imagine* it, clear as day. Clear as her own terror, as the bitter bile that was biting at the back of her teeth.

Feeling sick, she slunk down to the ground, bracing her back against the galley door. Cozzie, sensing something was wrong, got up and came to sit beside her, whining and pawing at Emma's shoulder.

“The radio,” she said, voice raw. Except, no, that wouldn't work. Emma

could *barely* work the radio. It was loud, and in the captain's quarters on the other side of the deck. Johnnie would see her, or hear her, and then Emma would end up as dead as her father.

Cozzie whined, pawing at her shoulder again.

Emma set a hand on his head, more habit than anything else.

What options did that leave her with?

There was no way that Emma could take Johnnie in a fight. He was twice her size and double her weight, a trained army soldier who was *evidently* deep in with cocaine. Drugs could twist a person's mind around something awful. Emma had seen it happen to her own mother, had seen it happen to friends back on the mainland.

No.

That wasn't an option.

Which meant –

“If we can get to the dingy,” said Emma, to Cozzie. “We can get out of here.”

Cozzie licked the side of Emma's face, as if in agreement.

Decision made, Emma stood back up. She took another look out the window of the galley door. There was no sign of Johnnie. The hatch that led beneath deck was open.

A cold chill ran down her back. Had Johnnie gone looking for her?

If so, it wouldn't be long before he realized Emma *wasn't* still in her room. This would be her only chance. She had to move fast!

Emma's backpack was still hanging on the back of one of the chairs at the table. She grabbed it, rushing through the galley, shoving everything that she could find into the bag. Gallons of water were stored under the sink. Emma grabbed one of those as well, slinging the bag onto one shoulder, and making for the door.

Still no sign of Johnnie.

“Cozzie,” she said, firmly. Emma tapped her leg. “Follow.”

Cozzie's ears pricked up. He knew that command! He was good at it!

Emma unblocked the door. She stepped back out into the storm, Cozzie hot on her heels. Emma put the gallon of water in the dingy, then pared a moment to rub the dog between the ears, just to ensure that Cozzie didn't wander. "We'll get out of this, Cozzie boi," said Emma. "Stay. Heel."

Emma set about unleashing the first line, releasing the rear. The boat immediately swung away, tethered tight by the stern line. Damn it! Emma grabbed for it, but couldn't reach.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Emma could still crawl down the ladder and get a foot over to it but putting Cozzie in would prove to be a bigger challenge.

Emma adjusted the backpack, so the straps were more securely on her shoulders. Then she scooped the small dog up, clutching him against her chest.

"Easy, Cozzie. I know, I know, it's scary. Easy, boy." Emma nearly got him to the front of the boat when he writhed in her grip. His fur was wet and hard to hold onto. "No, no, easy!"

But Cozzie, frightened, kept squirming.

Emma lost her grip. Cozzie plummeted down, down into the sea, vanishing into the dark waters with a splash that seemed to cut straight into Emma.

"No," she shouted.

From the other side of the ship, there came a slurred call of, "there you are! I've been lookin' for you, Emma. We got – we got some *things* to discuss."

It was Johnnie!

He looked a wreck, dark marks under his eyes and white still clinging to his knees. He was holding a bottle, making his way across the deck.

Johnnie was coming. Cozzie was drowning. Her father was dead.

Emma made a split-second decision. She flung her leg over the rail of the ship, and leaped into the waters below. The cold of the ocean stole the breath from her lungs. Emma kicked, flailing, struggling to get to the surface. Her head breached the water, salt stinging her eyes. The waves threatened to push her back under, briny liquid flooding her mouth.

Half-blinded by the storm and the sea, Emma struggled over to the boat. She

grabbed hold of the soaked rope, using it to haul herself to the wooden vessel. It nearly capsized as she hauled herself into it.

On the ship her father had so lovingly called the *Destiny*, Johnnie hung over the railing, wailing, “just wait a minute, Emma. We can talk this out! It’s not what you think!”

Emma ignored him. The storm turned the sea violent. The waves rocked the dingy violently from side to side, held fast by the stern line.

Cozzie paddled nearby, splashing and whimpering.

Breathlessly, Emma called to him, “here, Cozzie! Come here boy! Come on, Cozzie, you can do it!”

Cozzie tried his best. The moment that he was in arms reach, Emma grabbed hold of his fur and hauled him up into the boat. Cozzie yelped and wailed, but Emma kept her grip on him this time and flopped him down onto the floor at her feet.

The poor dog was as soaked through as Emma was, ears pinned back, tail between his legs.

Johnnie was still raising a ruckus. He seemed unaware of the fact that the stern line was still tied, but Emma didn’t want to take her chances on that lasting forever.

Cozzie licked the side of Emma’s leg. She managed a fleeting smile for the dog. “It’s okay, Cozzie boi. I wouldn’t have left you out there. It’s going to be fine. I promise.”

Her arms tightened, muscles threatening to cramp. The night air proved chilly against her soaked clothes and skin.

She grabbed the stern line, working at the knot. It wouldn’t budge. The fibers were soaked, making it nearly impossible to break free. She broke three nails, straining until her hands shook and her knuckles ached before it finally loosened. Once that happened, it was just a matter of time and patience, neither of which she felt like she had.

Emma gasped when the line suddenly slipped through the hole and dropped

into the water. The dinghy drifted away from *Destiny*. The wind continued to pull her away from the ship – and from Johnnie, who’s shouting was now nothing but a distant howl.

“We did it,” she shouted. “We made it!”

Cozzie, urged on by Emma’s shouting, yipped as well.

It wasn’t long before Emma realized that she was *not*, in fact, free of danger.

Johnnie might have been miles behind her, but escaping on the dingy meant that a new host of problems had to be faced. The first involved what to do with her newfound freedom. Sure, she had an electric engine but she had no idea which way to go. There was no land in sight and she didn’t know how to tell what direction she was heading anyway.

That left luck as her only savior.

Praying someone would come along; another ship, another boat, a barge. They couldn’t have been that far from the shore. Someone else would have to come along eventually!

Cozzie curled up on top of Emma’s bare feet. The sea rolled and surged, carrying away the berth of her father’s murderer, taking her to parts unknown. Worry clung to her chest, wrapping its fingers tightly around her throat.

Already, *Destiny* was nothing but a speck in the distance. Emma sunk down onto the floor of the dingy, hiding her face in her hands. She had *never* felt so scared before, so *alone*.

Emma had only been crouched there like that for a few minutes before she heard it: a knock, knock, knock against the side of the ship.

“What?” Emma uncurled herself, bracing her hands against the edge of the dingy. To her surprise and horror, the sound was coming from the still form of her father, urged by the sea to bump against the side of the boat.

Sobs racked her face, seizing her up, making her chest hurt and her throat sore. She cried until she couldn’t move, paralyzed by grief and despair. The fact she didn’t see the murder made it all the more difficult to tolerate. Her father

twisted there in the dark water for a moment, caught in an undertow.

Emma struggled and finally pulled him out of the undertow and up to the bow. She tried to pull his body into the dinghy. The storm raged around her, lightning cutting through the darkness. She caught flashes of her father's face, still and drawn. The ocean had washed away the blood, but her imagination did a good enough job filling in the details.

Emma struggled to pull him in, but she was exhausted. The body's weight drained every gram of energy in her, whisking away all her will. She couldn't do it.

She had to let her father go.

The moment she released him, he drifted off, swept away into the void of the ocean by a wave. Sobbing, Emma collapsed against the side of the ship, her forehead braced on her arm. Cozzie tucked himself against her, whining softly.

Overtaken with grief and misery, Emma threw herself at the dog, pulling him close to her. She curled up with Cozzie just like she used to when she was a young child, sobbing into his fur until sleep finally, finally took her.

Three

That night, Emma dreamed.

It was an old dream. She was young, and her parents had finally allowed her to get a dog. A puppy, even! And a cuter puppy God never created. Cozzie was her baby. The people at the shelter said he was born with his eyes open. *Too eager to see the world*, Emma supposed.

That very first night, he sat under the dinner table, whimpering and scared.

Emma's mom, Mrs. Hanson was of the opinion that a begging dog was a lazy and rude one. But that night Cozzie shivered, scared, cold and lonely, as he sat under the table. Mrs. Hanson had said, "giving him food now will only encourage him to keep begging. Return him to the shelter. You should get a *better dog.*"

Emma had not, of course, returned Cozzie to the shelter.

Instead, she fell in love with the dog, with his kindness, with the warmth in his eyes. Cozzie and Emma went everywhere together. They ran errands together. They walked out to the marina together, watched TV and played in the backyard. They adored playing out back. Cozzie, even as a puppy, loved to stick his little snout into everything.

"One day you're gonna stick your little wet nose where it don't belong, Coz," she'd often warned. Cozzie would look up at her with his tilted head and a whine to understand her words. "Aw, come here Cozzie. That's my Cozzie boi." He'd go on playing, sticking his nose in the dirt and sniffing.

Cozzie was so protective of Emma too. As a tiny little warm ball of fur he'd walk straight up to the meanest strongest dogs until they turned away from him

and Emma. If any dog tried to sniff him or her, Cozzie'd give them a growl and grab-bag of barks and snarls that eventually proved too formidable for any four-legged foe.

Emma's mother and father set forth all kinds of rules for her and Cozzie. Looking back most were reasonable. But some not as much. Like no feeding him under the table. Emma could not abide by that one. Ever. From day one, Emma sneaked little pieces of food for Cozzie. He sniffed them. He ate the little pieces. Then licked her fingers. His warm wet puppy tongue wanting the salt from her skin, to connect with her like a mother. Somehow Cozzie knew, from that first night, it was just he and Emma. That they would have to go it alone, eyes open.

And she dreamed of him, as a young pup, when their lives were solid and stable. She dreamed they were on the beach, and Cozzie was sniffing where he didn't belong. Emma laughed, clapping for him to come back to her.

Cozzie looked up, sand on his wet nose.

And then, to her dawning horror, a wave rose up. Cozzie yipped, turning back to the due he was sniffing. Emma shouted for him, but it was to no avail. The wave crashed over Cozzie, sweeping him away into the sea.

And she was alone on the beach.

Forever.

Four

Emma coughed herself awake. The sun beat down on her, rays strong enough it blurred her vision. She rolled onto her side, the sand rubbing rough against her bare arms. She couldn't stop coughing, sea-water and bile spilling from her mouth. It hurt her throat and her lungs.

The longer she was awake, the more aware she began of how *everything* hurt. It wasn't just her throat. Her sides ached. Her arms and legs. Every stitch of muscle and scrap of skin *burnt*. Emma could feel water lapping at her skin, the sand wet beneath her.

There was a surge in the surf. It shoved her further up onto the beach, sending more water over Emma's face and into her lungs. She struggled up onto her elbow, hacking again, spitting down onto the sand.

The ocean, beyond the breakers, stretched clear and flat and endless. The glare of the sun off the glassy surf made her wince. It was almost motionless, and the endless sheet of water to the horizon made things seem even more still, almost lifeless. There was nothing in the distance but the sky and the sea.

A squawk rasped out across the beach. Emma wiped sand off of her face and out of her eyes. She looked up and back. Two gulls bickered over a ripe banana. One was squawking. The other picked at the banana. The squawking one walked around, flapping his wings. A third gull joined the fray. The sounds they made only worsened Emma's headache.

The surge sounded like the wind back home, when it ripped through the trees. The foam fizzled in the sand. Emma pushed herself to her knees, and the gulls, startled, took off. The silence was a blessing.

Despite the soured circumstances, Emma couldn't help the joy that bloomed at the back of her chest. She was alive. She had made it off *Destiny* and away from Johnnie. She had survive the storm, and found solid land.

That was something, right?

That *had* to be something.

For a time, that happiness was all that Emma needed. It wasn't long, however, before she became aware of a very pressing matter.

Cozzie was not on the beach.

The kelpie was missing.

No amount of calling for the dog brought him back to her. When it became clear that Cozzie wasn't on the beach, Emma turned inwards, hauling herself through the sand dunes of the beach and up into the inland hills. The dust and weeds were thick and gnarled.

"Cozzie..." she called out, again. Her throat was sore. Her mouth dry as cotton.. "Coouoo-zzieeee."

The ocean sounds died out as she moved further inland and further down the beach. Two kilometers ahead, a point reached out into the dark blue ocean. It looked to be as high as a gull's flight. Emma went that way, hoping that the added elevation would give her both an idea of her location, and an idea of where Cozzie might have gone.

It turned out, she didn't have to go all the way to the point.

Emma found paw prints in the sand. Smiling softly, she followed them.

Five

Emma wasn't able to follow the paw prints for long. They were devoured by the thick brush, and the occasional outcropping of stone. The terrain became even more difficult to trek through the longer that she traveled towards the peak, boulders and stones littering the path, gorse and thorny vines.

Her skin had already turned pink and tender from the sun. Each rock was harder to get up. Emma ran track and field in high school back home. She was certain that was the only reason she could do this; leveraging herself up over stones, even as her calves burned from exertion.

She was starting to doubt that she would make it to the top of the peak, when the stones abruptly leveled out into an almost smooth surface. The slope was still at a slight incline, but it was so much easier to travel on now! The dark stone held the sun's heat and left blisters on her feet. She scrambled to the edge of the peak and – the sight was breath taking.

From here, the ocean sprawled out big and blue. It was a deeper, darker shade of blue than anything Emma had ever seen before. The long white beach spread out in both directions beneath her; the entire bay was visible, curving in a half-moon like it had been plucked from a post card.

But there was no Cozzie.

“Cozzie! Cozzie!” The waves crashed against the rocks and then receded, rhythmically, gobbling her words out of the salty air, swallowing then with a gulp and swoosh, stealing them back out into the ocean depths. “Please! Please be out there!”

Emma didn't know what she would do if Cozzie hadn't made it. If her own

selfish desire to leave home – to leave Roberta – ended the dog’s life.

Cozzie meant more to her than anything.

“I can’t give up,” she told herself. “I made it here alive, and Cozzie – Cozzie’s smarter than I am. He’ll be here too!”

Emma couldn’t believe anything else.

She *wouldn’t*.

Using her new found height to her advantage, Emma tried to get a grasp on where she had washed ashore. It wasn’t familiar to her – certainly, it didn’t look as though it belonged to any of the popular bays in Australia!

From where Emma stood, she could see another lifted point – a grove of palm trees at the inland crux of the bay. And, behind her, thick jungle and a barren, rocky mountain.

“More height means you can see further,” said Emma, rationalizing with herself. She took a deep breath and started clambering back down the point, skidding and sliding over the stones. They caught at her palms, leaving hard bruises on the tender skin, and scraped over her bare thighs. The shorts that she was wearing did little to help protect her legs.

Still, it took less time to get down the point than it had to get *up* the point. Emma oriented herself and started towards the palm grove, hoping that maybe it would give her a different set of angles, and she might be able to spot Cozzie from there.

As Emma walked, she tried to keep her eyes open for any identifying features. The fear of getting lost was nearly enough to drown her. So Emma looked out for strange shaped rocks, oddly twisted trees – anything that could be used to track her path.

Because of this, she was able to notice a pile of debris, half buried by the dunes. It was closer to the waters, just shy of where the waves swelled and surged. Whatever it was, high tide must have brought it in.

Emma grabbed a large rock and used it to hack at the base of the nearest tree

to her. Once she'd dug a noticeable gauge out of it, she changed direction and went to investigate. A broken glass bottle, mostly covered by sand, caught and reflected the sun. Her bare foot hit a half-full jug of water.

But it was the wad of cloth, sodden and sun-bleached, that held Emma's attention.

Was that -

Could it be -

It was!

Her backpack!

It had come partially unzipped at some point, and at least half of the food that she'd shoved into it was gone. It left enough room for her to shove the glass bottle and the jug of water, zipping it shut before slinging it over her shoulders.

Emma jogged back over, looking for the tree that she had marked, and then continued on her journey, feeling at least a little bit better about her chances.

She had food. That was something. It *had* to be something.

By the time that Emma made it to the very edges of the grove, the sun had crested to its highest point in the sky. She knew that the back of her neck was burnt horribly, but kept forgetting and making to swipe the sand off her skin. The sight of the trees were a relief – serene, pulled away from the crashing waves.

The ideal nature of the grove only became greater as she drew nearer the trees. There were coconuts and bananas high up in the branches. A few mangoes dotted the trees, but they were far more sparse in number.

Emma found a relatively flat rock to empty the contents of her back pack out onto, laying everything out so it could start to dry. She was thrilled to see that she still had her lighter. The glass bottle would make up for the fact that her knife appeared to have been lost to the churning tides. It wasn't nearly as sharp, but it would do for now.

"Okay," said Emma. Her tongue stuck to her teeth. Talking out loud made her feel less alone. "I have to find something to eat and drink, then I can go back

to looking for Cozzie.”

Food. Water. Cozzie.

The three most important things on Emma’s mind.

In fact, they were the *only* things on Emma’s mind.

Bees hovered around the fallen fruit underneath the trees. It was all too rotten to eat, squishing between Emma’s fingers when she went to pick it up. Bunches of fresh fruits dangled bright above her, but no matter how much Emma jumped or twisted, the fruit remained sorely out of reach.

The more that Emma tried to jump for them, the more frustrated she became, until there were tears prickling at the corners of her eyes. Her father would be able to get the fruit down, she was sure.

Her father.

The thought sneaked in out of nowhere, zapping her like a lightning bolt.

Her father was dead. Gone, lost forever in the ocean. What had they said to each other, before that? Their last conversation – what was it about?

Emma wasn’t certain. Try as she might, it wouldn’t come to her – the words just out of reach, like smoke slipping between her fingers.

Oh, but Emma remembered what her step-mother, Roberta, had said.

Your father’s a cheating bastard, she had snarled. Cheating, lying, and stupid! Of all the ways to find out he’s sleeping with another woman, I had to find out through herpes!

Roberta had been livid, and she had taken it out on Emma – slapping her, hard enough that her false, manicured nails had broken the skin. The scratches were still only half-healed on Emma’s cheek. She jumped again, desperate for one of the banana’s, but she still – couldn’t – reach!

Her foot slid out from under her when she came back down, skidding in the loose sand. She hit the ground, hard. Her head was spinning. The fruit hung above her, glittering in the sun like expensive jewels. Beautiful, but out of reach.

The sun baked her skin. The trees didn’t offer nearly enough shade.

This was stupid.

She was being *stupid*.

Emma could do this. She *knew* how to do this. Back home, she was an avid reader – always with her head in a book, scouring page after page. And, sure, reading a story about a boy who befriended a hawk, or a girl who was raised by a wolf, that was *entirely* different from *living* it.

But it gave Emma *something* to work with. Something to base her actions off of. Staying in the sun wouldn't do her any good. Neither would crying. She had to be tougher than that. She had to be *stronger* than that.

Most importantly, Emma had to be smart.

She got up, dusting the sand off of her sun-burnt skin. It took a bit of searching to find a rock that fit comfortably in the palm of her hand. When she did, Emma couldn't stop the grin that split across her face.

“Batter up,” she said, grasping for some semblance of humor. Emma didn't have the best aim. It took seven tries before she was able to *hit* a bunch of bananas, and twelve more before she managed to knock a bunch loose from the trees. They hit the ground hard enough that the peels split on several of them.

It wasn't the *best* method for getting dinner, but it would work for now.

Ravenously, Emma ripped open one of the bananas, then a second one. Two more, before the queasiness hit her. She was still starving, but managed to convince herself that the fruit wouldn't go anywhere.

Emma set it down beside her backpack and drying belongings. She took a swig of water from the jug. It tasted a little odd, from baking in the plastic container for so long. Food and water. Those were two things that she could cross off the list, and she had found somewhere shaded to rest, too.

Now, all she needed to do was find Cozzie.

Emma waited until the sun was starting to go down to venture back out onto the beach, desperate for a bit of relief from the sun. Once more, she took to walking along the beach, shouting and calling for Cozzie. The sky was painted shades of orange, pink, and purple. The sunset bled into the waters, picturesque if not for

the soured situation that Emma had found herself in.

Just as she was starting to give up and head back to the fruit grove for the night, Emma heard it. A barking on the wind!

“Cozzie! Here boi, here!” Clapping and shouting for her dog, Emma took off running after the sound. And there he was, just a speck in the distance, black and white fur blending into the shadows of the evening. “Cozzie! Cozzie! I found you!”

They raced towards each other, meeting in the middle. Emma dropped to her knees, skidding over the harsh sand, and flung her arms around Cozzie’s neck. He set upon her, licking her face and her arms, any part that he could reach.

“Where were you? Where *were* you, my Cozzie boi?” Emma all but sobbed, the relief at seeing her dog too much. Tears left tracks in the grit caked to her cheeks. ““Don’t ever leave me again, bubsy. Not – not ever!”

Cozzie whined with joy, his whole body trembling with the force of his wagging tail. For a long moment, Emma just crouched there in the sand, holding onto her dog.

“I thought I’d lost you,” she sobbed into his fur. “I thought I’d gotten you killed!”

Cozzie just yipped at her cheerfully, glad to have found his human. Eventually, Emma was able to pull herself away from the dog. She sniffed, scrubbing at her face.

“Okay. Okay. Come on, boi. It’s getting dark. We’ve – we’ve got to go,” said Emma, haltingly. Tomorrow, she would have to figure out what to do about this, being stranded here. For now though, she was just glad to have found Cozzie.

Cozzie was a very well-trained dog. When Emma told him to “heel and follow”, he listened, sticking close to her legs as she led the way back to the fruit grove. They made it there just before dark. Emma laughed, relieved.

She sat down, leaning against the rock where her few, meager supplies were drying out. Cozzie climbed into her lap. His fur was wet and caked in sand, but she couldn’t be bothered to care. Emma hugged him tight, settling in for the

night. She was exhausted. Sleep claimed her quickly.

It did not last long, however, and neither did the relief. As soon as night had fully settled over the island, Emma found herself facing a new problem. Mosquitoes! The bugs were horrible. They swarmed Emma in droves, buzzing loud in her ear and biting at her exposed skin, until she was covered in itchy, red welts.

Emma was only able to sleep in short, fitful bursts. Come sunrise, she felt just as exhausted as when she laid down for the night, and three times as itchy. The cries of the gulls drifted over the air, which was heavy with heat already. Emma scratched at her legs until they bled, only belatedly realizing how bad that might be.

“I’ve gotta start thinking,” said Emma, but it was hard to do when she was tired and weary.

Cozzie licked at her cheeks, clearing away tears Emma didn’t realize had even been there.

“Such a good boi,” she told the dog, sniffing. “I’m glad you’re here, Cozzie.” And then, “you must be hungry, boi. Okay. Let momma get you something to eat.”

The bananas were small, red-fingered ones. She peeled a banana, taking a bite, and then dropping the piece of fruit for Cozzie. He sniffed at it for a moment, nudging it through the sand before deciding he was, in fact, hungry enough for the strange food.

They went through the remaining bunch of bananas together, sitting at the base of that rock. Emma knew that she had to do something – she had to take stock of what she had, of where she was, of what she was going to do! But she just...couldn’t make herself do any of that.

When it was still early enough, Emma ventured out onto the beach, Cozzie yipping at her heels. The vast ocean seemed to stretch into infinity. It was unfathomable. Waves lapped at the shore line, already warmed by the over-head sun.

The seagulls were out in full abundance. It was almost overwhelming.

“There’s really no one else out here,” said Emma, softly enough that the crashing waves swallowed the words.

Cozzie licked at her fingers. She twisted her hand, stroking over the top of his head.

“That’s...maybe that’s a good thing. No more Roberta, right? I was – if she was willing to hit me, Cozzie, I’m terrified about what she would have done to you,” admitted Emma. “I don’t know why she never liked you. You’re the best boi anyone could ask for.”

Her step-mother was just a mean woman, Emma thought. And she only got meaner the older Emma grew.

Cozzie looked up at her. Perhaps he could sense her down mood, because his wagging tail slowed to a near stop. He whined, licking at her hand again.

“At least we never have to worry about her again,” said Emma. She grabbed onto that thought, holding it tight. Originally, Emma’s plan had been to take off as soon as her father’s boat reached port in Aireys Inlet, Victoria.

This might not have been the coastal city Emma had been hoping to run away in but – wasn’t there a saying about living in a tropical paradise?

Maybe?

And – maybe Emma had paid a steeper price for freedom than she’d originally wanted, but at least she’d survived.

Now, she’d make a plan.

That second day, Emma spent most of it in the fruit grove. She took stock of her surroundings, of what fruit was attainable, and what she had. Her backpack was in decent enough shape. The lighter had dried out enough to use, and the broken glass bottle would work in place of a knife. She didn’t have much water, and the only food that had stayed in her backpack were two granola bars and a can of beans.

She couldn’t open the beans. They weren’t a pop-top. Emma decided to hold

onto them anyways, just in case. Then, Emma found herself a stick, and began to write in the sand, making a list of everything she would need.

- shelter
- water
- food
- bugs
- leash

It might not have been the most productive way to spend the day, but it made Emma feel better. And besides – out here, Emma was her own boss.

Before long, the sun was setting again. Emma was able to knock another bunch of banana's from one of the trees, and they ate until their bellies were full. With each gust of wind, shadows swayed, caused by the mass of branches. Occasionally, Cozzie would perk up, ears pricked, and listen to something that Emma couldn't hear.

It was unnerving.

She didn't sleep much that night, either.

Six

On the third day, Emma came to the decision that her current place would not be fit for an extended stay. During the day, the grove offered little shade from the sun. At night, it offered no protection – not from the insects, and not from whatever kept getting Cozzie’s attention the night before.

And so, resigned to having to find somewhere else, Emma carefully loaded up her backpack with her meager supplies. She was able to knock two mangoes out of a tree, and added those to her pack as well.

Cozzie was thrilled with the chance to run around. He took the lead, wagging his tail as he raced over the land. Occasionally, he would stop to sniff something, and Emma would have to clap and goad him into moving again.

Gradually, they left the dunes behind, descending down into the island thicket. Then, into the forest. Insect buzzing cut through the vegetation. The bugs would be worse out here, in the thick of the foliage.

Emma had read something once, about how mud could keep bugs off you. The first time she comes across a muddy puddle, she stopped and gathered it up in her palms, smearing it over her arms, her bare legs, and the backs of her neck.

Cozzie leaped ahead, easily parting through the island jungle. He weaved in and out of the tree-trunks, ducking under the lower sitting bushes. Emma was so focused on following the dog, she didn’t pay attention to her surroundings. Suddenly, the trees parted, and Emma found herself back on the beach, albeit a different part of it.

They had gone in a circle. The sun was starting to set. The entire day, wasted. Emma’s stomach sunk down into her feet.

There was no place to find shelter that night. Emma and Cozzie had no choice but to curl up in the dunes and hope for the best. The mud had long since dried on her skin. It cracked and itched and peeled every time she shifted, but the lack of vegetation at least kept the insects away.

“I don’t get it,” said Emma, softly. She didn’t know how late it was. Her eyes itched from lack of sleep.

Cozzie was fast asleep. Not even an ear twitch.

Emma rolled onto her back, staring up at the sky. The stars were brighter here than Emma had ever seen them. “Back home, people come to the beaches and sleep on them all the time. What’s the appeal, huh? I’m not seeing it right now.”

Cozzie slept through Emma’s complaints. The world was quiet, save the rhythmic splashing of the waves.

When the sun finally started to rise, Emma felt like she hadn’t slept at all. That had to change. She wouldn’t be able to survive out here without some sort of proper rest. But before she could do that, she would need to solve Cozzie’s running off. That’s what had gotten her lost in the first place.

And, of course, water was an issue. There was very little left in her jug. It felt like Emma was never getting enough to drink. Her lips were chapped and splitting, and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth.

“One thing at a time,” said Emma, with a heavy sigh. She ate the last mango out of her bag, and then ventured back into the jungle, this time with a purpose. Eyes to the sky, Emma walked until she was able to find a low-hanging vine. Using the broken glass bottle, she cut it loose, and fixed it around Cozzie’s neck.

He whined.

“I know, you hate leashes,” said Emma. She patted him on the head. “But we can’t have you distracting me right now.”

With Cozzie secured, Emma began her search a-new, this time determined to find a proper place to make camp. The beach was open and unsecured, and the

jungle was full of insects that would devour her alive. What choices did that leave?

At first, Emma walked, aimless – just hoping to find a *good* spot to make camp. And then, as though coming from above, like waves parting, like the sun coming out after a storm, the answer dawned on her.

“The volcano,” gasped Emma. “Cozzie boi, we can camp there!”

Cozzie blinked up at her, head cocked to the side.

“This is a good thing,” promised Emma. “I can feel it in my bones.”

Emma and Cozzie walked all day and late into the night. As long as they were moving, the mosquitoes and gnats weren’t that bad. Without having to constantly worry about where Cozzie had gone too, Emma was able to focus on marking her path, striking at the trees with her glass bottle, and going in what she was fairly certain amounted to a straight path to the center of the island.

The dark made it hard to see anything. Emma tripped and stumbled often. She was still caught off guard when her foot hit something slick, feet sliding out from under her. Yelping, Emma hit the ground, not with a thump, but with a dull splash.

Cozzie yipped, rushing to her side and set about licking her. “I’m fine, I’m fine,” said Emma, batting him off. Then, as she took in her surroundings, “I think we’re *better* than fine, Cozzie.”

It was a river!

More accurately, it was a stream.

The narrow stretch of water was skinny and shallow, but it looked like it ran mostly clear. Even if it didn’t, Emma was too over-come by her thirst to care. She cupped her hands together, greedily slurping up the water. It tasted fine; cold and clear of debris. Emma drank until her stomach ached, and then filled up her jug with stream-water.

She hauled herself out onto the dry land, on hands and knees, and collapsed in the mud beside the river. With Cozzie’s leash wrapped around her hand,

Emma fell into a fitful sleep.

Morning brought with it a new rash of insect bites – not just for Emma, but for Cozzie as well. He scratched himself relentlessly, fur riddled with sand fleas. Emma coated herself in mud from the stream bed, and then coated Cozzie in it as well. He shook, sending globs of it flying in all directions.

Again, Emma drank her fill from the stream, and then hauled herself up. They had a lot of walking left to do, she was certain. The added weight of the water jug made Emma's shoulders ache, but she pushed onward all the same.

By noon, the ground became less dirt and more rocky. By late evening, the brush had started to thin out. Twilight painted the sky when the jungle finally parted, revealing the foot of the volcano. Emma all but sobbed in relief. Her stomach ached with hunger. It had been two days since she or Cozzie had split that last mango. But the volcano gave her hope.

Maybe, things were about to get better.

Seven

Emma woke, stretched, and groaned. The strain of many hard days' work weighed inside her muscles. Her arms and back still sting with sunburn. The vine left her hand chaffed where it dug in and rubbed, every time Cozzie pulled at it.

It didn't take much exploring to realize that Emma could hear the ocean. Sticking close to the volcano's base so she didn't get lost, Emma ventured around the curve of the stone. It turned out that the volcano wasn't at the center of the island, but at an edge of it: the beach to the jungle, the jungle ending at the volcano, and at least one part of the volcano butting out onto another narrow strip of beach.

The surf surged down on the warming beach; it swelled, then surged, then relaxed. The water was angrier here than at the crescent beach. The land was thinner, less deep dunes and more rocky, uneven surfaces.

Cozzie ran from hole to hole out on the beach. He sniffed and dug about, then would run off to the next interesting scent. To him, this must have simply been a very unpleasant vacation. It didn't take much exploring to discover that there were no mangoes or banana's on this stretch of the beach; instead, coconut trees dotted the shoreline, filled with brown and green fruits.

"Yes," crowed Emma. She ran to the nearest tree, tripping over her own feet. There were plenty of stones for throwing. When she managed to knock a coconut to the ground, Emma used the unopened can of beans in lieu of a hammer; beating on it until she was able to split open the shell.

Emma greedily drank part of the water inside. It was faintly sweet. Cozzie

pranced around her, barking and begging for his turn. She let him lap straight from the coconut. When the liquid was gone, Emma sat down, using the broken glass bottle to gauge the flesh from the coconut. She split it evenly between herself and Cozzie, then took the empty shell and cleaned it in the tides.

When she was satisfied it was clean enough not to attract bugs, Emma carried it to a rather large stone and sat it out to dry.

“This is it,” she told Cozzie. “This is where we make camp.”

Making camp was easier said than done.

Emma might have *read* about making shelters, but she had no real practical experience with it. She used the base of the mountain for one wall, digging holes and placing two large branches into the ground four foot apart from each other. Each branch was chosen for the notch at the top, which she was able to jam a third branch into.

She wrapped vines around the connecting points between the branches, and then collected palm fronds, more branches, and massive elephant ear leaves to fix up a faux roof and sides for the shelter. It was shoddy at best and unsteady at worst, but Emma was proud of herself. More elephant ears were put down on the ground, to keep her from laying flat on the earth.

Cozzie and Emma shared more coconuts for dinner that night, then crawled into the shelter to sleep. It was the best night they had shared since coming to the island.

Over the next few days, Emma and Cozzie grew well practiced in the art of making fires. More leaves were brought in, adding extra comfort to their bedding. When the jug ran low, Emma simply ventured back into the nearby jungle, to the stream that she'd found on their way here.

Each trip took an entire day. It wasn't the most feasible, but it worked for now. Her skin burnt, then peeled, than burnt again, gradually tanning with each round. The empty coconut shells became dishes, so Cozzie could eat and drink

from his own little bowls. It added some amount of normalcy to the routine her life was fast forming.

By the end of the first week, Emma no longer found freedom in the island. Instead, she found fear in it. At every turn, there was a new risk, a new danger. The isolation was already scratching at the back of her mind.

Emma spent her days talking to Cozzie, longing for the companionship of another person. At night, the sky turned so black it seemed fake. The stars looked like someone had hand painted them. There were less gulls on this side of the island; no doubt because there was less food for them.

Slowly, she tried to piece things together. The sun came up in the East, over the water, and gave Emma some sense of direction. It set into the canopy of the jungle, to the West. That meant the crescent beach she had shipwrecked onto was the South, and the volcano was the North.

Coconut wouldn't feed them forever. There were fish in the shallows of the ocean, in small clusters of reef, but catching them was a problem. One morning, while she was walking along the beach, she came across two rusted cans that had washed ashore. Through trial and error, Emma used them to create a desalination device. It was small, and slow, and often had to be repaired and fixed, but it allowed Emma to stretch out her trips to the stream by an extra day or two.

Most mornings, Cozzie spent running along the beach. Emma tried to leave him off leash as often as possible. She loved watching him run through the shallows of the ocean water and dig in the dunes, and he loved the freedom of it. In fact, Emma only hooked him to his vine-leash when they had to venture to go get water.

When they reached the stream, Emma would step into it, relishing in the cool water. The salt of the ocean stung the scratches littering her skin, so this was the closest to bathing she was able to come. Emma filled the jug and then sat in the shallow water, splashing it up over her dirty skin.

Cozzie growled.

Emma said, "I know, you hate the leash. Just let me sit here a little longer,

okay?”

Cozzie growled again, louder this time. Then he started to bark – loud and vicious, the sound straight from his chest. Emma had *never* heard the dog sound like that.

Head snapping up, Emma asked, “Cozzie? What’s wrong, boi?”

Cozzie was standing up, hackles raised. His head was lowered, and he was snarling at a sect of brush. Slowly, to Emma’s horror, the brush started to shake and move...and from its depths emerged a wild boar, eyes dark and tusks glinting in the late day sun.

Eight

The boar was big. Emma had never seen a boar like that before. She didn't even realize that they could *get* that large. And it's tusks! They were massive, curling things.

Cozzie was still growling, his hackles raised. The dog looked fierce. Emma could only ever recall him acting like this once before; when she and her family had gone on a vacation to Tasmania. Emma, still young, barely fifteen, had gotten separated. Someone had grabbed her shoulder from behind. A thief, most likely.

Cozzie had placed himself between Emma and the man, throwing up such a fit that it attracted everyone on the street. The tug had taken off, and Emma had scooped up Cozzie, praising him for the hero that he was. It had been the only day Roberta had *ever* claimed Cozzie had any use.

But where the thief had been cowed by Cozzie's ruckus, the boar only seemed angered by it.

"Cozzie," said Emma, barely able to croak out the word. "Cozzie, heel."

The dog ignored her, continuing to snarl and raise up a fuss.

"Cozzie," called Emma, more firmly. She tugged on the vine. Cozzie pulled back against it, snarling, unwilling to back down.

The jug was several feet away. Emma made the swift decision to abandon it. Instead, she stood up, slowly, taking one step towards Cozzie, and then another. If she moved slow enough, maybe the boar would leave.

Maybe - *maybe*- no!

The boar snorted, squealed, and charged!

Cozzie threw himself forward. The vine slipped free of Emma's hand, giving the dog full freedom to tackle the boar. Cozzie yipped and snarled and bite at the hog, but it did little to nothing.

Boars had incredibly thick hides. It was difficult to get a knife through them, let alone the teeth of a kelpie dog. But oh, Cozzie *tried*.

Emma screamed.

She didn't know what to do!

The boar's attention shifted solely onto Cozzie. It flung the dog off, but Cozzie staggered back to his paws.

"No," shouted Emma. "Cozzie! Cozzie, come here boy, come back!"

If Emma could get a hold of him, they could run! They could take off back to the beach and just *lose* the boar. But Cozzie was determined to protect his human from what was a very, very real threat.

Snarling, Cozzie charged the boar a second time. He leaped onto the boar's back, scrabbling, snapping – and managed to bite onto one of the boar's ears. It let out the most awful sounding shriek that Emma had ever heard. The bellow sounded almost human as it wildly swung its head from side to side.

Cozzie lost his grip, falling once more. This time, before the dog was barely on its feet, the boar charged. It speared Cozzie through with one of its tusks, using the motion to scoop the dog up and fling him into the stream.

Terrified, Emma sprung forward. She grabbed Cozzie, pulling the dog against her chest, and took off running. The water jug was left, forgotten.

The boar bellowed. For a moment, Emma thought it would chase after them – but it must have had other plans. There were no thundering steps as it charged behind them; just the thundering of her heart beat in her own ears.

Blood soaked into her shirt. Cozzie whined and whimpered with every step forward that Emma took. Branches snapped at Emma's face and legs. It was only instinct and good luck that kept her moving on the right path, emerging out into the clearing at the base of the mountain with a rib rattling gasp.

She was a good quarter mile further from her base than intended. Emma

paused just long enough to get her bearings and then took off again, charging forward with the same urgency a mother might use to save her child.

That's what Cozzie was to Emma, after all.

Cozzie was her baby boy. He was the guiding light that she'd clung too during her miserable childhood, and the only source of joy that she could still easily find, stuck on the island as she was.

Emma was bound and determined to do everything that she could for him.

As soon as she was back at the camp, she laid Cozzie out on her elephant ear bed. The dog whined, twisted, but didn't try to get up. The tusk had pierced him on the hind-leg, just to the right of the hip. It was an open bloody wound, red trickling down through his otherwise black fur.

More importantly, it was *deep*.

"Oh, Cozzie boi," lamented Emma. She briefly pressed her face into the ruff of fur on his neck. "You were so brave, Cozzie! I'll figure out a way to fix this, I promise you!"

At first, Emma thought that she might be able to get the bleeding stopped. But no amount of pressing spongy deer moss, or even the hem of her shirt, into the wound would stem the flow of blood.

It was just too deep.

"It needs stitches," she decided. "Cozzie boi, I'm so sorry. I think I'm going to have to give you stitches."

The dog whined at her. He wagged his tail, just once, and it thumped against the padded floor of the shelter.

Cozzie, it seemed, trusted Emma to do what was right.

Now if only Emma was able to give *herself* that much trust.

Emma unraveled the hem of her shirt collar, until she had a length of thread roughly twenty inches long. She fetched a coconut full of sea-water, a banana leaf, and as much deer moss as she could find.

Then came the hard part – the needle.

With no metal available, Emma was forced to scour the beach for a shell that might work in its place, splintering one off that was slender and sharp. She tied one end of the string around the blunt end of the shell.

“I’m so sorry Cozzie,” said Emma. She braced a hand on the dog’s neck, so he couldn’t sit up. “I know, I know boi. This is going to hurt, I’m so sorry.”

And then she stabbed the dog with the shell, forcing it through his skin. Cozzie wailed and thrashed, at first, but between the pain and the blood loss he quickly grew still. The shell didn’t work as well as a needle might have. It was thicker, for one, and left behind small wounds of its own. And Emma was no vet and no doctor. She stitched him up in wide, messy strokes, and there were parts that didn’t get cinched shut at all during the job.

Nausea bit at Emma. She felt sick, having to do this to her poor, loyal dog. Rationally, she knew it would save his life, just as he had saved hers. Irrationally, the knowledge she was causing Cozzie so much pain made her ill.

And what if this didn’t work?

What if Emma did this, and it wasn’t enough?

Just the thought was enough to make her want to heave.

When the wound was as close to being stitched shut as it was going to get, Emma used her trusty broken glass bottle to cut the thread and tie it off on either end. She washed the deer moss in the gathered salt water, hoping it would help clean it, and then pressed the spongy plant to the wound. She used the banana leaf to hold it in place, and a vine to tie it onto the dog.

Then Emma shifted, moving up so she could sit beside Cozzie’s head, petting him between the ears.

In low tones, she said, “do you remember when we first started planning this? I thought it would be so easy! We would stow away on dad’s ship, the entire trip. But you couldn’t help barking at those gulls, and he found us.”

Cozzie let out a big huff of air.

Emma continued, “and we convinced him that we just really, really wanted to go for a sail with him? So he didn’t turn around? I was still – I was still going to

run away, as soon as we landed in Victoria. I was going to make a better life for us, Cozzie boi.”

Cozzie tilts his head, pressing up into the palm of Emma’s hand.

Her breath hitched. Emma said, “I’m sorry, Cozzie boi. I bungled life up for us something awful. But – if you stay strong, if you stay strong for me, Cozzie boi, and you pull through this, I promise, I’ll make sure to fix it.”

They were stuck here.

As far as Emma could tell, there was no help coming.

But that didn’t mean they had to give up. If Cozzie pulled through this – if he could beat the wound, if she could prevent it from getting infected – then Emma would do everything to turn this island into a new home, just for the two of them.

That night, Emma stayed up, talking to Cozzie in those same low, hushed tones. Sharing stories about life when Cozzie was a little pup, and making promise that she hoped beyond hope she would be able to keep.

When sleep claimed Emma, it was fitful and brief. Often through the night, she would wake in a frenzy, only barely remembering what had happened, and rush to check on Cozzie. Twice, Emma had to replace the deer moss and banana leaf bandage, and once she simply had to readjust the vine that held it in place.

But when morning light finally did dawn on the two of them, Cozzie’s eyes were open. He licked Emma’s hand, and ate when she sliced a mango into small chunks for him, greedily licking her fingers afterwards. And though coconut water was far from Cozzie’s favorite thing in the world, he lapped that from a shell when Emma smashed one open.

“What a good boi,” cooed Emma, leaning down to press a kiss to Cozzie’s head. “Oh my Cozzie, what a fighter! What a fighter you are!”

Cozzie’s tail thumped against the ground, happy with the praise.

And at least for the moment, Emma thought that maybe they would both be okay after all.

Nine

Over the next few days, Emma gave Cozzie around the clock attention. She hand-fed him each meal, and religiously cleaned his wound. Her stitches were messy, and only partially pulled the torn flesh shut, but it was enough to make the bleeding stop. Emma thought that was all that mattered.

That, and keeping it from getting infected.

And so she cleaned the wound, and repacked it, and rewrapped it. Emma only left Cozzie's side when she had to take care of business or fetch more food, and even then, she always rushed back, leery of leaving him alone for too long.

By the fourth day, Cozzie finally felt better to sit up and move around a tiny bit.

"I don't want you to pop those stitches," said Emma, giving her dog a pat on the head. "So I'm gonna fix something up for you, okay?"

Sticking close to the camp, Emma searched until she found a short, thick piece of wood that hadn't yet started to dry rot. She took it and dug a shallow hole, putting it in. Then she took her trusty bean-can and used it as a hammer, further wedging the stake into the ground.

A second trip into the jungle, and Emma came back with a vine, which tied and knotted to the stake, and then looped around Cozzie's neck – it was a make shift way to keep him from moving around too much and further injuring himself.

Cozzie whined and fussed about it at first, but very quickly realized he couldn't just pull the stake out of the ground, and eventually settled down.

"Sorry, Cozzie boi," said Emma. "This is for the best though, I'm sure of it."

With the boar-wound so open, Emma wasn't able to take Cozzie out and wash him in the ocean, and she wasn't able to treat him with his usual mud-coating. In a matter of days, the sand fleas set upon him something vicious. It was both a blessing and a curse; Cozzie was often too busy gnawing at the fleas to put up much fuss about his stitches, or the scab slowly forming over his hind-leg.

Emma wasn't brave enough to return to the stream and fetch her jug, which meant the only water came from the coconuts and the mediocre, rust-tanged distillation system. It wasn't enough.

It was also a problem that Emma wasn't sure how to deal with.

"I'll worry about it tomorrow," said Emma, each evening. "Right now, let's just focus on getting you better."

Cozzie always answered by giving her a series of fond licks on the hand and arm, as if trying to reassure her: *it's alright, mom, things are going to work out. I trust you, and I know you're going to make everything okay!*

It made Emma feel better, knowing her dog loved her, and made her feel guilty.

But she would worry about it tomorrow.

This time, for real.

Two weeks passed by before Cozzie's wound finally started to truly mend. The crude stitches had been removed, partially by Emma and partially by Cozzie himself, who could no longer stand the itching of it. The scab was a thick, ugly thing, and he still couldn't move around very well.

But the dressing was able to be removed. Cozzie now barely flinched when Emma poked the wound. Still, Emma made sure to keep him hooked to the stake, just to err on the side of caution.

"We're very lucky you're so stubborn," Emma told him, late one evening. They had just finished eating, and she was burying the mango skin – that kept it from attracting bugs, she had found.

Cozzie tilted his head, wagging his tail.

“Yes, stubborn *and* handsome. You’re very - “

A sudden loud crash interrupted her.

Emma jerked, all but jumping to her feet. Her head snapped around wildly before she realized what the sound was.

Thunder!

Without Emma noticing, thick, dark clouds had been swept over the island. The wind was starting to pick up, sending small clouds of dust and grit up over the distant beach. This would be the first storm that Emma faced alone, here on the island, since getting ship-wrecked.

At first, all Emma could do was stand there and stare up at the sky in dismay. Rain meant that she wouldn’t be able to start a fire, and she wasn’t sure how well her shelter would withstand these rapidly growing gale-force winds.

Cozzie whined.

“You’re telling me,” muttered Emma, under her breath.

The clouds kept brewing. It was going to be one Hell of a storm. But, gradually, Emma realized that this didn’t have to be a bad thing.

Quick as a whip, she ran into her shelter, where she had been storing the cleaned out coconut shells. Emma sat each one out on the ground, nestling it into the sand and then piling rocks around them so the water wouldn’t tip the shells over.

Then, she grabbed the few banana leaves that were nearby, draping them out over boulders, pinning them in place with smaller rocks, so the rain water could settle in the middle.

Emma finished just before the storm broke: not with a drizzle, but with a resounding thunder clap and a deluge of rain. Emma grabbed Cozzie, pulling the dog into her lap. The leaf roof only gave her shelter for a little bit. Before long, the rain dripped in on them, and then poured in on them.

There was no way to sleep.

Emma was cold and wet. She wasn’t *afraid* of thunderstorms, but there was

something oddly haunting about being out here, along, stranded on an island, while all Hell broke loose around them. There was something *awful* about knowing that the most shelter she had was comprised of sticks and palm fronds, and each gust of wind made it sway and creak.

Sometime during the dark of the night, the shelter gave up and crashed down around them. Emma and Cozzie were forced to move, seeking shelter in the jungle. The thick canopy of branches helped a little with the rain. They found an old log to curl up under, and hoped that the storm wouldn't last long.

Come morning, the storm was still raging. Parts of the ground had formed massive puddles. Emma and Cozzie drank greedily from them. Soaked to the bone, Emma stayed under the log, in the jungle, until the hunger pangs grew too much. With Cozzie on a vine-leash, she finally ventured out to the beach, in search of fruit.

The sight that greeted her was terrifying.

Once idyllic, the beach had turned into a maelstrom of motion. The ocean water, black and grey, crashed angrily against the thin stretch of the shore line. The tide had risen, and Emma knew that if the waves caught her, or her dog, they would be ripped out to sea, never to be found again.

And the wind!

It raced over the open stretch of ocean and shore like a beast! It ripped and grabbed at Emma's hair, blowing so strong and so hard, that twice she nearly lost her balance. Not wanting to linger, Emma grabbed as much fruit, fallen onto the shore, as she could and rushed back to the jungle. There, she and Cozzie hunkered down, clinging to each other until the storm passed.

It was late afternoon before the storm finally ended. It felt like the air was full of water, weighing Emma down. She was drenched from head to toe. It felt like she might never get dry again. Despite the coolness that the wind had originally brought, the after-math of the storm made the humidity twice as awful.

Within minutes of the rain ending, the bugs came out en masse. Mosquitoes and gnats swarmed Emma and Cozzie, driving them out of the jungle and back to the beach. There, they were met with a foreign land – the storm having ravaged everything.

“Okay,” said Emma, pulling in a deep breath. “At least we made it through, right? And we know...we know that I need to make a better shelter. I can do that, Cozzie boi. It’s just going to take some work.”

A lot of work, Emma knew. There was nothing left of her shelter. Not only had it crashed down, but the wind had swept away the palm fronds, elephant ears, and banana leaves. She would have to start a new shelter from scratch.

“There’s no way I can have it ready by night,” admitted Emma, after inspecting the remnants of her camp. “We’ll have to sleep under the stars tonight, Cozzie boi.”

Thankfully, Cozzie didn’t seem to mind too much. He yipped, disappointed when Emma once more hooked him to the stake.

Emma told him, “you’ve done enough running on that leg for now. We don’t want it to get worse, do we? That’s right, we don’t!”

And then Emma set out, determined to see what other havoc the storm had caused.

The beach was in a similar state. Palm fronds and coconuts had been swept all across the sand. The water crashed, still swept into a fury by the winds. It was the state of the sand that startled Emma the most. The storm had swept a litany of broken glass bottles, drift wood, and refuse onto the beach.

She filled her sodden back pack with as many glass bottles as she could, took it back to camp, and came back for a second trip.

Emma went further this time. There was something black in the distance. Emma rushed over to it. “Holy shit!”

It was a trash bag!

Emma dropped to her knees, skidding through the mud. The shells and grit scraped her bare knees. The bag itself was made of a heavy duty plastic. It was

torn in a few spots, but felt mostly *full*.

“Yes,” crowed Emma. “Yes! I’ve struck gold! I’ve found my own buried treasure!”

Emma had never before been so happy to see trash. But here, today, it felt like a gold mine. It felt like a gift, like something that she couldn’t do without.

Gleefully, Emma grabbed the trash bag and hauled it back to camp. Careful not to rip the bag even further, Emma opened it, and began to spread the contents out on the ground. There was a lot of trash; crumpled up news papers, candy wrappers, and things of the like. She spread the news paper out, hoping it would dry enough that she would be able to read some of it.

The glass bottles were emptied from her backpack and set out to be examined later. Then Emma put the wrappers and the paper trash into the bag, so it could be stored safely until it was dry enough to start a fire with.

A lot of it was trash. Food scraps, molded and rotten, that had to be buried alongside her own mango peels. Shredded envelopes. There was a small stretch of neon green netting which looked like it might have held limes at one point, and Emma decided to keep that, figuring she might be able to use it for *something* later on.

Two glass mayonnaise jars, which Emma was quick to wash out. She paused her trash sorting to take apart her tin can distillery, replacing the metal with the two glass jars. The wind was starting to pick up again, but Emma found that she couldn’t care less.

This was a gold mine.

This was a *life-line*.

Emma returned to sorting the trash. The broken glass bottles and tin cans were pulled out, set aside to be cleaned later. The glass bottles could be used to help collect rain water, even the ones that were only a few inches tall after having been broken. And the cans, she would keep those for sorting. Her shells, the nuts, and other small oddities could be kept in them.

Near the bottom of the bag, there were several thin pieces of white paper,

sodden and stained. Curious, Emma pulled them out – and could almost *cry* with joy. They were coffee filters, with used coffee grounds still inside!

This, more than anything, made Emma's heart soar with hope. Even though it was clear that another storm was incoming, she got a small fire started. She filled a tin can with the rain water she had collected the night before, and set it over the fire to heat. When it had started to boil, Emma lowered the coffee filter into it, took it off the heat, and set it aside to steep.

The smell alone was enough to make Emma's heart flutter back to life. After all that she had been through – after everything that she had faced, that she had over come – here it was.

Coffee.

Something that she had once taken for granted, and now offered a glint of hope. It brought back a sense of humanity. Emma might have been dirty, with knotted hair, with torn clothes. She might have been craving the amenities that civilization brought, like showers, like real beds.

But, for the moment, she would have this. A glint of her old self. A slice of something normal.

When the coffee was brewed, Emma was careful to pull the filter out, and spread it out on a rock to dry. Both little filters of used coffee grounds would be kept in one of her newly found tin cans, and stowed in her back pack, so she could spread it out and drink it only when she needed a boost.

For now, she sat beside her dwindling fire, another storm looming in the distance, and clutches the tin can of weak, black coffee to her chest. Emma took her time, inhaling the fumes, savoring each sip, letting the bitterness wash over her, waking up parts of her soul that had started to go dormant.

Cozzie joined her, laying down beside Emma, his back pressed to her bare thigh.

Emma rested one hand on his side, the other curled firm around her coffee can. "It's okay, Cozzie boi. I think...I think we'll make it."

And Cozzie looked up at her with his big, wet eyes and wagged his tail. It

seemed like he was saying: *I think we'll make it, too.*

Ten

The sky was still dark. There would be another storm swinging in soon, Emma was sure. She decided to wait until it passed to burn the trash, keeping it stored in her backpack, in the newly re-made shelter. During the dry spell, Emma gently washed the trash bag off in the shallows of the ocean, and then stretched it out, using stones to both lift it off the ground and pin it in place, so the center sagged.

When it rained next, this would be one more means of catching water. The second batch of coffee was a temptation, but Emma resisted for now. If that was to be her last sliver of humanity, she would cling to it, and wait until her hope had dipped to new lows before brewing it.

Instead, she focused on the fact that Cozzie once again felt good enough to run around the dunes. The wound on his side was still heavily scabbed over and bare of fur, but it looked to finally be healing. His hind leg was still stiff, and sometimes he lost himself, and yelped as he stumbled.

It always made Emma's heart pang with sorrow to hear. Leery of him hurting himself, Emma called him over to the shelter. She slipped on his make-shift leash, and tied him to the stake.

"Stay here, Cozzie. I'm going to see if I can't find us something *better* to eat," said Emma.

Cozzie whined, but he'd grown used to this during his recovery. The dog settled down on the bed of elephant ear leaves, and watched Emma venture further down the beach.

Several hours of walking along the beach, following the curve of the volcano. Short, thin plum bushes were scattered about the dune. Emma picked any fruit she could find, tucking it into her backpack. She happened upon a few banana trees, fruit at various stages of ripening, and a single cluster of still green mangoes.

It wasn't much, but it gave Emma a boost. Something that *wasn't* a coconut to eat! Near the base of the mango tree was something else – bones.

They had clearly only been unearthed by the recent storm.

“Whoa.” Emma knelt beside them. “What are these from?”

She couldn't tell. A boar, maybe. Or perhaps a shark, washed to shore already dead? There were too few bones left to piece it together.

Emma put as many of them into her backpack as she could before turning and heading home.

Back at camp, Emma made them a meal of mangoes and bananas. She drank coconut water, and gave the fresh water from the desalination rig to Cozzie. The storm was still a looming threat, but the location of a few fruit trees had been a pleasant surprise. Emma sniffed the coffee grounds, letting the scent wash over her, relishing in it.

Then she carefully put them back into her little dug-out storage hole, and set about with her newest project. A thrilling idea had struck Emma. As she worked, she explained to Cozzie, “I can use the bones in place of a hook, Cozzie boi, and maybe get us some fish for dinner.”

At the word *dinner*, Cozzie's ear pricked up.

“I still have one more shoe lace, from the trash bag,” said Emma. “I can use that for the line. Probably nothing more than minnows, but – that's still meat, right?” A moment later, Emma answered herself, saying, “right indeed, Cozzie boi. Right indeed.”

Unfortunately, Emma didn't get a chance to try out her little fishing set-up. The

storm broke that night. This time, Emma's shelter withstood the wind. It was still terrifying, sitting out there, nothing but the palm frond and branches as a barrier. The roof wasn't full enough to keep the rain out, and it dripped on them all night long.

But the wind didn't bring it down.

Emma supposed that was a start.

When the weather reached a raging crescendo, she pulled Cozzie into her lap, hugging him close. And when even that wasn't enough to ease her terror, she pulled the old tin holding the coffee against her chest, too, and took a deep breath of it.

If she closed her eyes, she could pretend that she was back home. Her best friend, Nina, had a pool. Emma could pretend that she and Nina had just come in from the pool. They were sitting on the screen porch, having coffee. They were still dripping wet from their swim.

She could pretend that she was safe. That Cozzie was safe.

Things were going to be okay.

"They have to be," muttered Emma, into Cozzie's wet fur. "We've come too far for them to start back sliding, right?"

Cozzie whined, pressing himself tighter against Emma's chest. Despite the heat that pervaded the air during the day, the rain storm brought an awful chill to it. The wetness didn't help.

They shivered and shook together. Outside, the storm raged long and hard.

Everything was wet the next day. There would be no choice but to use the last of the trash for the fire tonight, and the sky was *still* dark. Not only was it wet, but the heat turned the air heavy and oppressive. The thought of hiking anywhere made Emma's chest go tight.

Cozzie, on the other hand, was thrilled with the weather. The moment that he was let loose from his leash, the dog took off racing across the dunes. He was fast out of sight, but Emma knew that he wouldn't stay out for long.

She set about repairing the roof, where the wind had ripped off the palm trees, and fetching fresh, dry bedding. Emma had only just gotten back with the new elephant ear leaves when she heard it – Cozzie, barking like a fiend!

Terrified that it could be another pig, Emma grabbed the nearest branch and took off towards the sound. She found Cozzie, not facing down the wrath of a boar, but standing at a shallow pool of ocean water, brought in during the storm and trapped in a rocky hollow.

Cozzie was barking, circling the water. Occasionally, he'd crouch down and shake his hind end at it. When Emma drew closer, it was easy to see why.

A small reef shark had been brought in during the storm.

It swum in lazy circles around the small hollow. During the next high tide, or the next storm swell, it would no doubt be taken back out to sea. Emma had never seen a shark up close like this before. She crouched beside the little tide pool, watching it with fascination, while Cozzie raised a ruckus.

Finally, Emma said, “we can't waste good luck like this.”

She called Cozzie over, praising him for his good find. Then, Emma returned to camp. Not wanting Cozzie to get in the way and get himself bitten, Emma hooked him to his stake.

“Stay here,” she told Cozzie. Then she grabbed the lime-netting, her bean can, and the sharpest piece of glass she could find.

Emma went back to the tide pool. She used the lime-net to catch the reef shark and pull it up onto the beach. It was surprisingly easy, bringing the bean can down on its head – once, twice, three times, until the shark stopped moving.

The allure of meat, for herself and for Cozzie, was so great that it kept Emma from thinking on it too hard. Gutting the shark was harder. She cried while she split it open, hot blood gushing out over her hands and onto the shore.

Emma didn't know much about killing and cleaning your own food, but she knew the organs could spoil the meat if left inside for too long. Digging her hands into the cavity of the shark was nearly enough to make her retch. The smell was unbearable – a cross between rotten trimmings and wet cotton.

When the organs were out, Emma took the carcass down into the tide. She held onto the tail tightly, letting the tide and the waves wash it out. Then she carried it back to camp, where she used the last of her trash to start a fire.

Emma roughly butchered the shark into large chunks, cooking it with the skin on. “We’re going to have a real feast tonight, Cozzie boi!”

How long were you supposed to cook a shark?

Emma wasn’t certain. But she knew that you could get worms from meat, if it wasn’t cooked long enough. Because that wasn’t something Emma wanted to try and deal with, she erred on the side of caution, and cooked the shark until the meat was dry and the skin had burnt.

Then she carved chunks of the meat off of the skin. A piece for her, and a piece for Cozzie. That night, they ate like royalty.

Eleven

This was the problem Emma was faced with: she had a good shelter and access to coconut and fish here at the foot of the volcano. As soon as the storms were gone, she had plans to try and *climb* the volcano, to set up a reflection device using glass she'd collected during her stay; it was surfacing en masse on the beach with each rain storm.

She also knew that there was an abundance of fruit at the crescent beach, and a chance that even more rubble and refuse had washed ashore there. *But* going through the jungle the way Emma did originally wasn't feasible.

The solution?

Blaze a new path, out past the dunes!

With Cozzie barely limping and a backpack full of water and the last of her plums, Emma set out almost an hour before the sun had finished rising. Hours into her journey, Emma was able to find *exactly* what she was looking for: a long rut in the ground, carved out from years of flooding, and years of being a hog-path. It ran nearly from the innermost segment of the island, all the way back to the point, where the fruit grove rested.

At first, Emma and Cozzie lounged about, just enjoying the grove. She filled her bag up with ripe fruit, and threw sticks for him.

Then, she buckled down and got to work. While Emma didn't build a shelter here, exactly, she did gather the materials for one, so she could build it if the need ever arose. Then she spent time just wandering around, exploring the area.

Emma figured that the more she got to know the island, the bigger of an advantage she would have. And though there was no use for it, when Emma

found a particularly colorful shell down on the beach, she picked that one up, too.

The way Emma saw it, she was going to be here for a while, more likely than not. There was no reason that Emma couldn't have some fun with it!

So the shells joined the fruit, and Cozzie would occasionally bring her a stick, or a piece of drift wood, and they meandered around, playing fetch for a bit, and cooling off in the shallows of the waves.

When twilight drew in, she decided to erect her shelter after all, and she stayed the night there, in the relative safety of the grove.

Again, Emma started her walk an hour before the sun rose. It gave her an advantage, because the heat wasn't quite so sweltering. Above her, the storm clouds finally seemed to be parting- instead of black, the sky was a muggy sort of gray.

Cozzie ran and jumped around her, more content here than he'd ever been back home. They were halfway through the trail back to the Mountain Base when Cozzie froze, perking up and barking.

By now, Emma knew better than to ignore it. Quick as a whip, she looped the vine-leash around Cozzie, so he couldn't take off after whatever he'd spotted. Emma crouched down beside him, asking in a hush, "what is it, boy?"

Cozzie barked again – and then, slowly, his tail dropped down between his legs. Emma picked him up, and Cozzie twisted, burying his head against her chest. Slowly, Emma backed off the trail. She was close enough to her Mountain Base that the ground was rocky and uneven, giving her a chance to climb a boulder, and lower herself down into the crevice behind it.

"What is it, Coz?" Emma asked.

The dog only whined again.

That was completely unhelpful – but it didn't take long for Emma to get her answer a different way.

Footsteps.

Crunching, lumbering steps.

Someone was here? In the jungle?

Emma found herself more confused than hopeful. And then, as the man revealed himself, that confusion was replaced with a sinking, gutted feeling.

“Dad,” said Emma, the word all but wrenched from her. “Holy shit. That’s my *dad*.”

Twelve

Emma and Cozzie huddled in place, only their breath making noise.

“Dad?” Emma called aloud, but timid too, as she stood up.

The man, terrified, threw himself to the ground. Startled, Emma crouched back behind the rock. Was it *really* her father? But – how could that be? She’d seen Johnnie throw him over board! Hell, she’d found him herself, in the ocean! The dinghy had slammed into him – he’d been dead! Dead!

And yet, when she finally drew out from behind the boulder, it was clear. There was no one else that it *could* be.

That was her father, Peter. He laid there, prone on the ground, so still that, for a moment, Emma thought perhaps it was a ghost.

But, no, it was solid. It wasn’t a mirage, or a hallucination. It was really Peter.

“Dad,” she called out, leery of getting too close. Just in case...what? It was a trap? Could Johnnie be here, too? Could he have found her island, and now he was trying to lure her out – so he could get rid of witnesses?

It might have been a hysterical thought, but the fact of the matter was this: Emma had been alone on the island for what seemed like a very, very long time. She couldn’t fathom her father simply showing up here now, like this.

There was no answer, though. Just the close-by buzz of a transparent cloud of mosquitoes and the far-off swoosh of the waves against an unseen shoreline. Emma was terrified, but she walked forward all the same, Cozzie clutched to her chest.

This was *her* island.

And whether this really was a trap or not, she refused to let it terrorize her.

When it became clear that her father wouldn't be waking up any time soon, Emma set about trying to haul her father back to camp. It was hard. He was a tall man, but Emma had been out here a long time. She had gained muscle, where it appeared as though her father had simply been wasting away – emaciated and sickly.

Emma had to keep stopping and catching her breath. She wiped her sweaty hands off on her shirt, then checked on Cozzie. Then she would take hold of her father and start pulling him again. Getting him into the shelter without knocking it down was another challenge entirely, but somehow, Emma managed.

And then she was found with a very heavy, weighty question to try and answer: now what?

Thirteen

Peter couldn't move. Emma went to the desalination rig, poured out a half-cup of pure water into one of her broken glass bottles, swishing it around to make sure it was cool. The desalination rig could only produce a few cups of water each day – barely enough for herself and Cozzie. If she had a second person in the mix...she would have to figure something else out.

Cozzie had only just returned from his frolicking out in the dunes. He was up first every day, gleefully racing about. Cozzie never seemed daunted by the vast emptiness of the island. Today, his fur was dripping wet; he must have found some puddles to tromp through.

Absently, Emma reached down and scratched his ears. “Oh, Cozzie. What are we going to do about this?”

Cozzie closed his eyes and wagged his tail. Clearly, he didn't see anything wrong with the situation. She put the glass bottle down beside Peter's head, and then ventured, Cozzie at her side, to the seaside.

The water close to the sand was much cooler. She filled two coconut shells with it, before returning to her camp. She had already stripped Peter of his shirt, and now used it to wipe the sand from his face, and try to cool down his fever. Carefully, she lifted up his head, helping him take a few sips of lukewarm fresh water.

Emma used the seawater to try and clean some of the scratches on his arms and legs. Then she thoroughly soaked his shirt, wrapping it around his forehead.

“We're in deep shit,” she told Cozzie. “I don't think he's going to wake up

any time soon, how about you?”

Cozzie didn't answer, but he didn't need to. Until the fever broke, there was no hope that Peter would wake up.

Just as things had started to ease up, now this! An entirely new host of problems!

“Come on, Coz,” said Emma. She started toward the point to look for another glass bottle, a bigger one. One that could produce more fresh drinking water. “Come on, Cozzie boi.”

Cozzie ran out to the point ahead of her. The ocean sprawled out calm today, as evening approached, but the sun streaked across it and warmed the turquoise surface. It was as lovely as candlelight.

She had a lot of work to do, and even more to think about.

Emma returned late in the day, alone and empty-handed. Cozzie stayed out on the point to play. Emma re-positioned the bottles in her water setup. She stoked the fire a bit, but she knew that more heat might not necessarily mean more water. If it got too hot, too much pressure would build up and both sides would start boiling. Then the glass would break, and she would be without fresh water.

She peeled a fresh, cool mango for Peter, slicing it up and feeding it to him, chunk by chunk. He woke, fitfully, and then went back to sleep. Confident that Peter wouldn't be waking up any time soon, Emma continued with the plans as she had originally made them. She loaded her backpack full of glass bottles, hefting it up onto her shoulders. She packed a coconut as well, for the water.

“Stay here,” she told Cozzie. “Watch over him, okay?”

Cozzie laid down next to Peter and barked.

“Good boi,” said Emma. Then she turned and started up the volcano. This was far from the first trip that she had made up the side of the mountain. It was easy to find the right handholds, the right place to balance herself.

She climbed halfway up the side of the mountain, to where she had slowly been piling up the pieces of broken glass that were too shattered for actual use.

Emma's hope was that it would catch the light enough to bring a ship to shore, and they could get help that way.

It hadn't worked so far, but Emma was still hopeful.

And – her father had found this island, right? That meant he'd survived between being thrown over board and now. Somehow, Peter had survived.

Emma imagined he must have come across someone else. Maybe another sailor, or a fishing vessel? That would explain how he'd survive so long.

Emma used her spot on the rocky ledge of the volcano to try and scan the shores. She didn't see any ships or boats on the beach, but she supposed that didn't matter to much.

If Peter had been thrown over board in the storm, that would explain things.

Right?

Or...was Emma just grasping at straws?

Could Johnnie *still* somehow be behind this?

The thought was unsettling – and it stuck with her, the entire way down the island.

Eventually, Peter's fever broke.

Then, he started to get stronger. He was awake for longer stretches of time. And then he was able to sit up, and then he could eat and drink on his own. This should have made Emma relieved, but it didn't.

She was *glad* that her father was alive, mind you! She just – didn't know what to do with herself.

Emma had once been close with her father. So, so close! But as she got older, he started to be away from home for longer stretches at a time. Sometimes entire weeks. And then, he cheated on Roberta – and she threatened to divorce him – and he got on the ship, bound for Victoria, with plans on never coming home.

With plans on leaving her, with Roberta and all of Roberta's fury.

It was even more difficult, after going so long with only Cozzie as company. Emma was well aware that this would affect every aspect of how her island life

went. And that was unnerving.

They sat in silence for a long while, both aware of the other's presence and neither willing to be the first to break the silence. Cozzie ran over the dunes in the distance, cheerfully yipping – maybe even looking to see if another reef shark had been washed into any of the dug-outs.

Eventually, Peter's thirst got the better of him. He leaned over, picking at the fresh water set up. Unsure how to do it, but afraid to ask, he picked up the bottle to the left, the one without the fire underneath, and poured out a half cup of water. He returned the bottle back to its place.

The sun had angled down on them. Even with the cover of the shelter, it was exceptionally hot. The break in rainy weather left the air thick and heavy.

Peter drank, and then passed the remaining water to Emma. She finished it off before Peter asked, "are you ever going to say anything?"

"When there's something to say, sure." Emma didn't look at him.

"You can ask me questions."

"Like how come you're alive?" Emma snorted. She *made* herself watch Cozzie.

The silence settled between them, stilted.

It was too much.

It was all just too much.

"Yo know what? There is something," said Emma. She hauled herself up onto her knees. "You can't treat our water system like that. You have to—"

"I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"That's right," she huffed. "You *didn't* know and you just! Grabbed it! You just *took* it!" She shuffled around Peter's legs, so she could fix the system. "Look, this isn't some haphazard setup. You have to put the fresh bottle back into the sand..." She adjusted it. "And they have to be butted flush against each other, mouth to mouth..." She adjusted it some more. "And here, you have to keep the fire up a bit..." She put a few broken twigs into the fire and stoked it. "But not too high. Or there will be too much pressure and blow the connection

between the bottles. Or it could get too hot and crack the glass.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I want to—”

“Well, now you know.” There were tears burning at Emma’s eyes.

Why was she crying?

She didn’t know.

She didn’t know, but she hated it.

She hated it, and she hated her father, and she hated *the world*. Everything but Cozzie.

Peter started, “Emma - “

But Emma didn’t want to hear it. She shook her head and said, “it’s hot. I’m going for a swim. *Don’t* move.”

And then she marched across the beach, calling Cozzie to join her. The dog gleefully bounded after her, yapping at her heels, weaving between her legs. Emma flung herself into the water, less about cooling down and more about just getting away from her father.

She needed to think.

When Emma returned to the camp, she felt a little better. There were no fish in her holes today, but there were plenty of fruits to slice up. It was old habit now, cracking open the coconuts with her dented bean can, using sharp glass to dug out rough, uneven chunks of mango flesh and coconut meat.

The sun was falling around them, casting the world in an array of colors. It had already sunk lower than the palms.

Finally, Peter said, “You really know how to prepare food.”

“Yeah. I should setup a catering business.”

“I meant - “

“But, wouldn’t you know it? I’m indisposed at the moment.” She scraped out another chunk of coconut meat, dropping it into one of the cleaned out coconut-shell bowls.

“Here. Use this,” said Peter. He held out a small knife. The blade glistened in

the last bits of sunshine. An emblem on the knife's handle stood out to Emma — a skull wearing a beret.

She took it, grumbling her thanks, and finished cutting up their dinner. They didn't say anything until all the food was gone, and even Cozzie had settled down for the night.

Once more, Peter broke the silence, "you're mad at me."

Emma snorted. She pulled her knees to her chest and looped her arms around them. "Gee, what gave you that idea?"

Peter flinched. He asked, "do you think I can make it up to you?"

Emma didn't answer right away. This is what she'd thought about, out on her swim. This, and how much more work it would be to supply for a second person.

When she did answer, she tried to keep her voice neutral, "sure."

"Really? How?"

"We need to establish the rules."

Peter stared at her, clearly caught off guard by the answer. "Rules?"

"Yeah," said Emma, dryly. "Rules."

"Okay. I agree. We should have rules. Do I get to make some of them?"

"No," said Emma, firmly. "You don't."

She waited for Peter to argue. He didn't.

Emma said, "we don't abandon each other. That's rule one. That's the most important rule."

A tense moment simmered there in the tropical heat of deserted nightlife. Peter said, "you don't understand. Roberta and I, we couldn't get along. We were a mistake. We never should have been together."

Emma swallowed, hard. "Rule two: No calling your daughter a mistake."

"What?" Peter looked like he'd been struck. "No, that's not what I meant!
Emma - "

Emma powered on, not willing to let him finish, "rule three. No talking after dinner."

"Emma... please..."

“Um...” Emma cleared her throat. “Mind the gap and watch your step, sir.” She mimicked a tour guide. “Don’t hit your head on rule four, please.”

When Emma left camp, heading for the beach, Cozzie ran after her. His wound had fully healed, finally, and it showed in how he pranced and danced along, running out into the gentle waves.

Emma called out to him, “run after those waves, Cozzie boi!”

At least one of them should still have their freedom.

The following morning, Emma came to the decision that *she* needed something more. And if her father was going to be here with her, staying in camp...they should at least try to get along a little bit, right? So she started a fire and directed her father through working the desalination rig. Then she set him to cracking coconuts while she get a can of water on to boil.

Peter asked, “what are you doing?”

Emma told him, “I’m making us a treat. And you’d better be grateful over it, because I don’t have a lot.” And then, “and I don’t have to share with you, either. You know that, right? I don’t owe you anything. Not when you were leaving me.”

Peter ducked his head, abashed. “I know that.”

“You weren’t even going to tell me,” said Emma. She stoked the fire. “You were just going to sail away, and not ever come back.”

Peter tried, “I was going to call you, when I got to land.”

Emma said, “that doesn’t count for anything.”

“I know,” said Peter.

And then they fell back into silence, while Emma carefully brought the can to boil, and then fetched her prize tin. She pulled out the little, well-used filter and put it into the can. “It washed up on the shore. I figure, I can get two batches out of each.”

“Coffee,” breathed Peter, amazed.

Emma said, “it’s *only* for special occasions.”

And Peter laughed. He asked, “does that make me being here a special occasion?”

Emma gave him a small smile. “I guess so.”

They ate their coconuts and mangoes while the coffee steeped. Emma let it sit extra long, since this was the third brew it would be making.

Then she divvied up the coffee, and they drank it, relishing in the brief comfort of humanity.

Things were fine, for a little bit. Emma showed Peter how they repaired the shelter after storms, which leaves to collect, and how to go through the daily business.

But then she said, “I’m going up the volcano. I’ll be back before it’s dark.”

Peter frowned. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Emma frowned, too. “Excuse me?”

“That seems like an unnecessary risk,” said Peter. “You shouldn’t be climbing that.”

And Emma puffed up, because she had been surviving by herself for – how many days? How many weeks? And even before that, before this island – how long had Emma been dealing with Roberta on her own? Dealing with school on her own? With Cozzie?

She said, “you don’t get to tell me what to do. Not here. Not anymore.”

And then she turned, and she climbed up the volcano, and she examined the shores. There was no sign that anything large had been washed onto the beaches.

When Emma got back down to the base of the mountain, Peter tried to talk to her.

Emma ignored him in favor of calling out, “come on Cozzie! We’re going to the beach!”

And off they went, alone together.

Before long, Cozzie grew tired of running through the waves. Emma took to throwing a stick to him. The playful dog loved to fetch. Back and forth, up and

down the shore. Twilight spread into pure night, and soon it was only the full moon above that lit the way.

“Last stick,” shouted Emma, pitching it for the dog. Cozzie barreled after it. He grabbed the stick, cheerfully bringing it back and dropping it at Emma’s feet – then pawing and whining when Emma didn’t pick it up, didn’t even look at him.

Her gaze was on the horizon, and a strange shape out in the distant bay.

“Shit,” said Emma, her stomach sinking. “*Shit.*”

Emma rushed back to camp. Peter met her halfway. “Look,” he said. “I *am* sorry. I’ll help with the water and – hey, what’s wrong?”

Emma ran past him, around their shelter, and started hauling herself up the side of the mountain. She had made this trip so many times by now, it was easy to find handholds. She just needed a better view and – but it was too late.

Peter had seen it out in the bay, too. He ran towards the shore, waving his arms and shouting, “hey! We’re here!! Help! Help us!”

From where she clung to the rocks, Emma snapped, “stop that!”

Peter swung his head around to look at her. “What? They could be a search party! And even if they’re not, we can get a ride out of here with them! We need to go, now!”

“Be quiet,” hissed Emma. She climbed higher. The bow and stern lights of the vessel glinted like fallen stars. “We don’t know who they are.”

“So?”

“So who do you think is going to be out here, docking on an abandoned island?” Emma couldn’t tell anything about the ship from here. Frustrated, she gave up, skidding back down the side of the mountain.

Peter met her at the bottom. “What are you talking about?”

Emma wanted to say *Johnnie could still be looking for me*, but she bit her tongue. Instead, she said, “look, new guy. I’ve been here for – I don’t know! I don’t know how long, but *long enough*. No one’s come to this island before. And

do you know why?”

Peter stared at her, baffled.

Emma continued, “because there is *nothing* out here. Nothing. And a search party? Sent by who, huh? The guy that tried to kill you because he was coked up? I don’t think so.”

“You can’t be sure,” started Peter.

Emma interrupted, “neither can you.”

And then she stormed past him, ducking into her shelter for the night.

It started raining in the middle of the night. Water dripping into the shelter woke Emma. She accidentally kneed her father in her haste to get outside, hastily setting out her coconut shells. She had almost thirty of them cleaned up, set aside *just* to collect the rain.

Groggily, Peter climbed out after her. “What are you doing?”

“Preparing the rain rig.” Emma was busy now, hurrying in case the rain picked up.

“Look,” said Peter. “I get it. You’re pissed. But you don’t have to act like I’m not here. I can help.”

Emma paused, just for a moment. The rain was a light shower right now, but the clouds that had swept in made it clear that the storm would soon get worse. “Fine. Just – look. Here. You can help.”

Peter gave her a smile, weary smile. “Good. Just tell me what to do.”

Emma gestured at the pile of banana leaves she had stacked to the side. “Put the leaves out on the boulders. They can catch water, too.”

Peter listened, getting to work. “You build this all yourself?”

Emma grunted in the affirmative. “Who else do you think did it?”

With a nervous laugh, Peter admitted, “okay, that’s fair. I just meant – it’s impressive.”

That was a compliment. Emma paused in setting up the worn trash bag. Just for a moment, caught off guard. Then she said, “yeah, it is.”

The system started collecting crystal cool water instantly, a slow trickle of freshness pooling on the leaves, the plastic, and in the shells.

“Now what?” Peter asked..

“We wait,” said Emma, getting back into the shelter. “And in the morning, if the ship’s still here, we can try and see who they are.”

The waiting game did not work out well for them.

Peter, new to sleeping in storms like this, asked, “are you ever going to not hate me?”

Emma was silent for a long moment. Finally, she admitted, “I don’t hate you.”

“You...don’t?”

“You left me. Roberta was horrible, and you left me with her. And then you died. I *thought* you died. How are you even here?”

Peter didn’t answer. Instead, he said, “you weren’t supposed to be on the Destiny. This never should have happened to you, Emma. I’m so sorry.”

Emma frowned. She thought it strange, that her father didn’t answer her.

Had he told her anything about his survival yet?

No, he hadn’t. This whole time, Emma had just been concocting her own story, making things up as she went.

That...was a problem.

There was a piece missing. Emma was sure of it. And in the morning, she would find out what had really happened to bring Peter here.

For now, with the storm raging, Emma was content enough to say, “I don’t hate you. I just don’t like you very much right now.”

And Peter promised her, “I’ll do everything that I can to change that.”

Fourteen

A click, a simple click. That's all it was. A small click that sounded as big as a tank turret. It could have been the snap of a twig. Or the crackle of a leaf. But it wasn't. It was a click, metal on metal. Man made. A click followed by the most dry, foreboding voice of choppy English: "Rise and shine, girl."

Emma startled awake. Someone grabbed her by the ankle, wrenching her out of the shelter, only for a boot to promptly slam down between her shoulders and shove her to the ground once more. She yelped, more out of fear than pain.

The world crashed into focus.

The sun was just coming up. She was pressed to the ground, a man's heavy weight baring down on her. The unmistakable scent of coffee filled the air. But – that didn't make sense.

Why would it smell like coffee?

"That's it, girl," snarled the man. "You just stay right put."

She turned her head, trying to figure out what had happened. The fire was raging. The tin can was beside it, coffee grounds and half-made coffee spilled out on the ground. Her father a few feet away, bleeding from a knock to the head, bound and gagged.

Fury filled her.

Peter had gotten into her coffee stash! He had brewed it without asking, and the smell, strong and pungent, must have led these men straight to them.

"I told you," she sobbed, squirming under the man's boot. He was too heavy to throw off. "I told you it wasn't a rescue party! I told you!"

"Rescue party?" The man pinning Emma down laughed. "That's rich, girl."

A second man, younger, said, “she’ll go for a good fair, don’t you think, boss?”

A shock of cold fear ran through Emma, drowning out the fury.

Boss said, “ain’t that the truth?”

Younger Man asked, “and the old guy?”

Boss turned to give Peter a sideways look. A third man, this one with a scar across his face, jabbed Peter in the ribs with the base of an oar. There was a dinghy down at the edge of the beach; they must have taken it here from the crescent shore.

“No use for him,” said Boss. “We’ll get rid of him before we leave. Or maybe not. Maybe we’ll just leave him here, let the island take its due.”

Scar Face jeered, “I think that one, boss. She’s been good to us, these years. Always kept us hidden. Might as well let her have a treat.”

The three of them laughed, awful, ugly sounds.

Emma tried again to throw Boss off of her, but only earned a kick to the back of the head for her trouble. She sobbed, lurching across the sand at the motion. The boot came back down in short turn, landing on her stomach. Emma gagged, nearly vomiting at the action.

Boss warned, “you’d best not try that again.”

Peter shouted and raised Hell behind his gag, but it was for nothing. His arms were bound behind his back. There was nothing he could do.

Boss said, “we got room for her. If not, we’ll make room. She’s prettier than some of the lot we’ve got down below right now.”

“Bet we could have some fun with her,” said Younger Man.

Boss shot him a sour look. “Curb your tongue, before I curb it for you. Thought you would know better than that by now. Too much risk messing up the pretty ones.”

Emma sobbed. She shoved and scabbled at Boss’s leg, desperate to try and get him off. All it did was make him laugh, and earn her a boot-heel ground into her stomach.

“Enough of that,” said Boss. “Someone get her bound up!”

Scar Face stepped away from Peter, a length of rope draped over one shoulder. Before he could reach Boss and Emma, a snarling, vicious sound tore through the air.

It was Cozzie!

He must have just returned from his morning jaunt through the waves.

Snarling, the dog shot across the beach, rocketing himself straight at Scar Face! He sunk his fangs into the trafficker’s arm, ripping into the flesh.

Boss spun around with a shout, reaching into his belt to pull out a pistol – and Emma took the chance for what it was, slamming her fist into Boss’s crotch hard as she could. When he wailed and staggered, Emma lurched up, finally throwing him off of her.

Cozzie ripped into Scar Face, sharp teeth tearing his skin. The man managed to throw Cozzie off of him, but the moment the dog’s paws hit the ground, he was charging again. Emma wasn’t still either, grabbing one of the many rocks littering the ground and throwing herself at Boss.

She brought the stone down against his temple, twice, before Younger Man hooked an arm around her waist, pulling her backwards. Emma kicked and screamed, trying to elbow him, but to no avail.

Scar Face was staggering, trying to shake Cozzie off his leg. The trafficker, more focused on the dog than anything else, didn’t see Peter throw out a leg. Scar Face tripped, hitting the ground – and the moment he did, Cozzie went for the man’s throat, sinking his teeth deep into tender flesh.

Lights were flickering on across the bay. The screams carried on the still, morning air. Before long, another set of men would come to investigate, no doubt. Everything was happening so fast. The world blurred around Emma.

Cozzie abandoned Scar Face, who was gurgling and heaving, and flung himself towards where Boss was kneeling, clutching at his bleeding head. The dog bit into Boss’s shoulder.

“I gotcha, boss,” said Younger Man. With Emma held against him, he used

his free hand to bring out his own arm, firing off one – two – three shots.

Cozzie squealed, falling backwards, into the ground. Boss, who had been thrashing with the dog so much he'd gotten in his own crew-mate's way, slumped to the ground, dead from a bullet to the head.

Peter, having worked his way out of the ropes that bound his hands, pulled his gag off and scrambled to his feet. A small boat could be seen, glinting, in the distance.

Someone was already coming this way, no doubt spurred on faster by the gun-fire.

“Shit, shit, shit,” wailed Younger Man. “You’re gonna pay for this!”

He leveled the gun at Peter.

Emma, fueled by sheer terror for her dog, brought her heel down hard on Younger Man's foot. Then she flung her head back, cracking it into his face. Younger Man gasped, staggering backwards – his grip loosening just enough that Emma could tear free, grabbing the gun from him as she scrambled backwards.

Without hesitation, Emma pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

She pulled it again.

Nothing. Not even a click.

The gun was jammed.

“You’re gonna be wishing you’d just come with us quiet! Not gonna be worth shit - “Younger Man wrenched a buck knife from its place on his belt. “-once I get through with that pretty face of yours!”

“No, no, no!” Emma flung the gun down, turning towards Cozzie – but Peter grabbed her by the wrist, hauling her in the opposite direction.

Emma wailed, shouting the entire way. Peter's grip was unrelenting. He pulled Emma through the dunes and into the nearby jungle. Behind them, Younger Man abandoned chase, turning and scrambling into the dinghy instead, no doubt bound for the main ship.

“Get off me,” wailed Emma. “Get off of me!”

“Stop it,” shouted Peter. “Be quiet!”

He threw a hand over Emma’s mouth, trying to pin her still. Emma, strung up high on adrenaline, elbowed him in the stomach.

Peter gagged. “What the Hell, Emma?”

Emma, tears streaming down her face, shoved Peter with all her might. He nearly toppled over backwards. “You asshole! You left Cozzie! You made me leave him! You *made me leave him!*”

“Emma, you have to calm down! You saw – you *saw* the second dinghy! There were more coming in! We couldn’t stay there!”

“It was the first rule!” Emma could barely breath through her own sorrow and rage. She felt like a different person; like she was no longer herself, but a husk filled with raw terror and with something worse, something darker.

Raw hate.

“It was the first rule,” she snarled, shoving Peter again. “We don’t leave each other!”

“It’s a dog,” shouted Peter, but that was entirely the wrong thing to say. He realized it too late. “Emma, you staying alive is the most important - “

“Fuck you,” rasped Emma. She took a staggering, hesitant step backwards. “My boy – my boy needs me. And I’m – I’m *not* like you. I won’t leave him, just because that’s *easiest*.”

And then she turned, and she ran. Back to their shelter by the base of the volcano, back to the dead bodies, to the blood, to the terror.

Cozzie was prone on the ground, rasping for air. When Emma dropped down beside him, he started wagging his tail. Just like when he was a little puppy, and she would come in from school. His black fur was wet, blood seeping from where he’d been shot in the shoulder.

Without thinking, Emma ripped her shirt off. She jammed it against the bullet wound. Cozzie wailed in pain, and it felt like the sound cut straight into Emma’s soul.

Peter arrived, spitting out curses. “Damnit, Emma! You can’t – we’ve *got* to

go!”

“Shut up,” snarled Emma, all teeth. She did her best to tie the shirt around Cozzie’s shoulder, then hauled him up against her chest.

She staggered trying to get to her feet, but Peter caught her, steadying her. “We’ve got to go. Emma, we have to go. If they come back, they’ll kill us.”

“Get off me,” spat Emma. “You caused this! You’re the only reason this happened!”

Peter’s mouth dropped. “No! I - “

“We were fine! Here together, by ourselves!” Emma couldn’t control herself, screaming, sobbing. “You yelled at the ship last night! You – you *stole* my coffee, you *made* it knowing there were other people here! You’re the reason they showed up here!”

Each accusation made Peter flinch.

Emma finished, “you *never* liked Cozzie.”

Peter said, “that’s not true! I *gave* you Cozzie!”

“Fuck you,” said Emma. She spun on her heel, throwing herself away from the shelter. It was almost noon, the sun at its highest peak. There was no way they could stay at the Mountain Base, and she couldn’t walk all the way back to fruit grove, not knowing how close to it the ship had docked.

Instead, she followed the beach as it wrapped around the side of the volcano, past the barren plum bushes, to the lone mango tree.

The sun was already baking the sand. It baked her bare skin just as fast. The mango tree offered little shade, but she laid Cozzie out in it all the same. The little dog was wheezing. The shirt was soaked through with blood.

“Don’t worry,” said Emma. “Don’t worry, Cozzie. I’ll fix this. I promise, I *promise* I’ll fix this.”

There were still bones buried in the sand. Only one entrance wound into Cozzie; the bullet still wedged into his shoulder.

“I’ll save you,” promised Emma. She dug her fingers into the wound, reaching, desperate, and scraped the bullet out. Cozzie was so out of it, he barely

did anything more than whine.

This was the second time that Emma had been forced to take something and fashion it into a crude needle, to stitch up her dog. She used the thread from the hem of her shirt, and a piece of splintered bone, and she prayed to every God that might exist that she wasn't lying.

Emma would do anything to make sure Cozzie lived.

Fifteen

They couldn't stay at the Mountain Base. Instead, Emma and Peter continued along the curve of the volcano, to a smaller patch of land. There were fewer fruit trees here; just a few lone coconut trees, and a handful of plum bushes that grew in wiry, sparse clumps.

Emma built a second shelter, cruder than the first. She said nothing to Peter while she worked, and while he collected the fruit and the coconut. That first day, they drank coconut water, unable to go back to their Mountain Base for the distillation system just yet.

Cozzie was given the most cushioned part of their shelter. Emma checked on him religiously. She changed his bandages, using salt cleaned deer moss the same way she had done for the wound that the boar had caused.

Each day, Peter collected the fruit. He had to walk further to get it. At meal times, he tried to speak to Emma, and she ignored him. She ate her fill, and dripped fresh water into Cozzie's mouth; the dog was too weak to sit up and drink on his own.

The sun off to the west started up with huge wisps of color. The sky out over the bay flared into orange and purple and pink. The temperature cooled. Like a blanket, the evening spread out darkness onto the beach and up to the grove.

Peter suggested, "someone should keep watch, don't you think? I can't imagine they're still here but...if we made them angry enough...they might be looking for us."

Stiltedly, Emma said, "you can do whatever you want. You're really good at that, after all."

“Emma,” tried Peter.

Emma ignored him, venturing into the shelter instead. That night, she slept with her back to Peter, curled around Cozzie. Peter sat up late into the night, keeping watch.

Emma left long before Peter woke up. She changed Cozzie’s bandages, and then went back to her camp. The stench of rotting bodies was overpowering; the hot sun doing severe damage to the bodies of the men Cozzie had killed. Insects flew around them in a thick swarm, buzzing loud enough to grate on Emma’s nerves.

This first trip, Emma ignored them. She set about, filling her backpack with everything that she could salvage. Sometime after they left, the other traffickers had come back and destroyed everything, kicking over the distillery, the coconuts, smashing the shelter.

There wasn’t much left to save.

Emma paused by the long-burnt out ruins of the fire her father had started. She crouched, kneeling beside the tin that had held her coffee in it. The grounds were spilled out across the sand, impossible to save.

Somehow, losing the coffee was the worst part about having to change camps. Emma mourned its loss, the same way she mourned Cozzie’s injury.

Slowly, Emma climbed up the side of the volcano, to her usual perch. The large vessel had been moved, but the traffickers clearly weren’t gone. There was still a dinghy on the beach.

Was that a way off the island?

Maybe.

Emma would have to think about it. And either way, nothing could be done right now. She just had to go back to doing the same as the last few weeks: focus on survival.

When Emma returned to the New Camp, she found Peter in the shelter, crouched

down next to Cozzie. Emma dropped her bag on the ground and announced, “I found a boat.”

Peter’s head snapped up. “What?”

“How did you get here?”

“I – *what?*”

“You were wandering the jungle when I found you. Where were you before that?”

“I had a camp, on the other side of the island,” said Peter. “It wasn’t near as good as yours. There...weren’t many fruit trees, either. That’s why I started walking. Now what’s this about a boat?”

Emma sat down next to Cozzie. She batted Peter away and set about changing his dressings. “There’s a boat, out where the traffickers had been docked.”

“What kind of boat?”

“A small wooden one.”

“Seaworthy?”

Emma gave him a dry, withering look. “I don’t have all the answers, okay? I didn’t go investigate it. That’s *across* the bay. I got what I could from our shelter, and then I came back. And when it’s dark, I’ll go see if there’s anything else worth saving.”

Peter was quiet for a long moment. Clearly, he was picking his words out carefully. “Okay. Well...what if we went looking for it...together? We could go out tomorrow, and see if it’s worth salvaging. Either they left it there because they haven’t gone away, or they left it because it’s wrecked. Either way, we learn something, and we get some good wood.”

“Okay,” said Emma, after a long moment. “We can do that.”

After a sparse dinner of tropical island fare, Emma and Peter huddled together. This stretch of beach was narrow. High tide brought the ocean almost completely to their door steps. As they sat there, waiting for night to fall, Peter asked, “why

did you name him Cozzie?”

Emma snapped, “don’t you think you should have asked me that when I was a kid?” But then, seeing her father flinch back, knowing he was *trying*, she added, “it’s short for Cosmos.”

“Okay?”

“Because he was my world,” said Emma. “He still is. I’ll do anything to make sure he lives through this. *Anything*.”

“You know,” said Peter. “There’s a saying about ships. I always think of you when I hear it.”

Curious, Emma glanced at him from the corner of her eye. “Yeah?”

Peter hummed. “Ships are always safe at shore, but that’s not why they’re built.”

“How does that make you think of *me*?”

“I don’t think you were built for the land,” said Peter. “I know...I’m your dad. It’s hard for me, not trying to guide you. But you *clearly* are doing better than I ever did. You were born for the ocean, Emma. I’m...I’m proud of you.”

The words *I’m proud of you* echoed in Emma’s mind the remainder of the afternoon, and through her hike back to the Mountain Base. Her father had *never* said that to her before. She was startled by it, and resolved to hold onto it for as long as she could.

Back at the base, Emma was forced to make a decision – but then, hadn’t she made worse? Killing a reef shark? Stitching her baby boy up, not once but twice? Pulling that trigger?

She had.

And so, Emma set about searching through the dead bodies, taking anything from them that she thought might have worth. Their knives, their boots, their jackets and hats – and then she finished raiding the remnants of her shelter, and went home.

In the morning, Emma and Peter set out early. They wore the stolen boots, the

heels packed with deer moss to help off-set their ill fit. They packed up gear and food and water. A stillness lay over the ocean, the bay and beach. It was eerie and cold and dark still, but adventurous too, a morning that says, *you were meant for the ocean, and the ocean was meant for you.*

Having rations and supplies secured, they set out walking. Emma led her father to the old trail, often looking over her shoulder as if she might be able to see Cozzie from way out here.

Peter said, “he’ll be fine.”

Emma said, “God, I hope so.”

The path made crossing to the other side of the bay far easier. As soon as they got close to the dunes, Emma urged Peter into a jog. The boots made it easier to move fast. She led the way to the fruit grove, where she had spent that very first night.

Peter was in awe of it. “There’s so much here! Why didn’t you just make camp *here?*”

“Because of the bugs,” said Emma. “And the volcano is a good middle ground between everything. There was no water here, either and I didn’t have the desalination rig yet. And it’s a good thing I didn’t, right? The traffickers would have been able to just pull us straight onto their ship. We wouldn’t have had anywhere safe to run too.”

“I suppose,” said Peter. He was much taller than Emma, easily able to grab a bunch of bananas from one of the low hanging branches. They ate a quick lunch, while Emma crouched down in the sand, and drew out a hasty map.

“This is the volcano.” She put a stone there, to mark it. “This is where Cozzie is.” An X. “This is our old camp.” Another X. She drew the line that marked the bay, and then the trail they had hiked, and then their current location in the grove. Then she asked, “where was your camp?”

It took Peter a while to mark it out, picking one of the very few locations that Emma hadn’t been. “Over here. But I was out of it for weeks, wounded, starving, so I don’t remember my trek through the jungle.”

Emma nodded. “And the boat is here. Now, what I’m thinking is we get the boat, and we fast track to the ravine.”

“I didn’t see a ravine.”

“It’s hidden,” Emma said. “The edges are overgrown. But if you blaze through it, you can jump down into it.”

“We shouldn’t rush, Emma.”

“I know, I know. No rushing. But we can maximize our effort, okay? And if we don’t make it by late afternoon, we can still camp...” She picked up a stick and poked it on the map, “Right about here.” Then she swiped a hand through the map, destroying it. “Let’s go.”

Peter said, “I’m right behind you.”

And they were off.

The boat was nothing more than a dinghy. It didn’t look sea worthy, as there was a split in the wood. Emma said, “we should take it anyway. Maybe we can repair it. And if not, we can use it as a roof for the shelter.”

“It will be heavy, trying to take it back to camp.” Peter kept looking around, as if he expected the traffickers to come out shooting at any moment.

Emma said, “we *need* it. We can just dump all our food here. That will take off some of the weight. Better yet, we’ll throw it in the ocean, so it doesn’t attract anything.”

Peter gave a nervous laugh. “I don’t know about that.”

“This island is one big produce market,” Emma said. “Even if we can’t find water, we could live off hydration from the pineapples and coconuts. And it’s just until we get back to camp. Which *should* be by this evening, tomorrow morning at the max.”

Peter countered, “look, we get stranded or stuck out here, we could—”

“Stranded? Out here? Dad! We *are* stranded.”

“Dad?” Peter pulled back, surprised at the term.

Emma gave him a stern look. “All we are is stranded. And we can move

much faster without the water and food. We'll be at my camp soon."

Peter, swayed by the affectionate term of *dad*, finally relented, "okay. We'll leave the food. Let's just...not stay here in the open any longer."

They threw the fruit they had been carrying out into the ocean. Then Peter and Emma each took a side of the dinghy and began hauling it away from the beach.

By mid-afternoon, they had reached the ravine. Over many hundreds of years, the water had created a pathway that enabled them to move through the jungle growth quickly. This provided freedom from the bushy floor and thickly briared overgrowth of the jungle. Not only that, but it offered a lot of cover, and plenty of fruit to grab for a mid-day meal.

They sat on the over turned dinghy while they ate. Emma used a stick to re-draw the map from before.

She stared at it, hard.

Peter said, "you're thinking about something."

Emma said, "the ravine runs further this way." She drew a line, towards her father's old camp. "I usually cut out of it here, to get back to the volcano."

Peter asked, "but you don't want to do that?"

"If we get a storm, the place we're at is going to flood. And our last camp isn't safe anymore, I don't think. But if we use this boat as a - a wagon of sorts, we could load everything up into it, and we could take the ravine all the way to *your* old camp."

"I don't know why we would. There wasn't much out where I was."

"Maybe not for you, but I can make it work. I can make *anything* work at this point."

"Okay, cap'n," Peter told his daughter. "I trust you."

They sat in the ravine a while longer, eating their fill of mango and coconut. The ravine was not much larger than a dry gully, only ten feet deep. It wouldn't be hard to get the boat out of, once they got closer to the volcano.

They set out along the dusty rocky bottom of the ravine.

It was easier packing up the boat than Emma had anticipated. Between the two of them, they were able to carry all of their supplies to the boat in two trips, and on the third run, Emma carried Cozzie. She nestled him into the boat, where he whined and whimpered.

“Easy,” she told him. “We’re going to be okay, Cozzie boi.”

While Emma changed out Cozzie’s bandages, Peter fashioned vines to the front of the dinghy. They were both able to take hold of a vine, walking side by side, to pull the boat along the bottom of the ravine.

They didn’t make it far before they had to stop for water, the both of them sweating and panting.

Emma said, “there’s a little spring up that ways, but it’s not safe. Boars.”

Peter said, “I’ll climb up and find us some coconuts.”

Emma mused, “I don’t know how I made it the first time with no water at all.”

“Grief,” Peter said.

“Yeah... I guess.”

“They say you don’t hunger or thirst while grieving. But when I lost you and your mom—”

“Lost us? You left,” said Emma. “Remember?”

Peter looked up the hill on the side of the ravine. “I’m going to get some coconuts. I’ll be back.”

And then Peter was gone.

And he stayed gone.

And Emma waited.

Emma climbed into the boat, sitting down next to Cozzie. There were no clouds out today. The white, hot sun beat down on them.

And Peter did not return.

Emma woke with a start when a hand touched her, spinning around and slapping at it.

Peter reeled back. “Sorry, sorry! It’s just – the sun, and all. I thought maybe there was something wrong!

Cozzie was panting, hard.

Sweat ran down Emma’s forehead and her neck. She stared at Peter. “Where were you?”

Peter looked abashed. “Sorry. It took a while to find anything. But I have good news!” When Emma didn’t answer, he said, “I found a grove with nice cool fruit and a spring.”

“You were gone for *ages*,” said Emma, aghast. “How far did you go?”

“Not far,” promised Peter. He produced half a coconut, offering it to his daughter.

Emma drank it greedily, then used her fingers to pull out the flesh and eat it.

Peter said, “we can eat and drink up there. It will only take about an hour. My camp isn’t that far away, either.”

“Okay,” said Emma, relenting.

And so the two hauled the ship up the bank of the ravine, and Peter led the way to the little nook he’d found.

There were coconut and banana trees, and a small little lake that ran clear and cool. Emma pulled Cozzie out of the ship, kicked off her boots, and stepped into the water with him. She washed out his wound, and held him in the shallows until he quit panting.

Then, while Peter readied a camp fire and dinner, Emma packed the wound again and wrapped it. For the moment, they were safe. All three of them.

Together.

A campfire crackled on the flat of a dune. The moon striped a midnight blue streak across the water. A gentle breeze from the distant bay stoked the fire and swayed a few trees around the site. Just a mile beyond would be Peter’s old

camp and hopefully, safety.

Peter and Emma sat around the fire. Emma dozed for a couple hours, but eventually woke, unable to sleep.

She moved to join her father by the fire. Emma said, “this is a good thing. We can make a mile’s hike both ways easily. Having fresh water so close to your camp – we can make this work.”

Peter yawned.

Emma told him, “you should get some sleep. I can...sit up, keep watch.”

Grateful, Peter said, “thanks, Emma.” He ruffled up her hair as he went past, just as he used to do when she was a young girl.

Peter slept in the boat.

Emma kept the fire stoked long, long into the night.

They were both up early the next morning, to bathe, drink, and eat before leaving.

Emma, after treating Cozzie’s wound again, said, “all that is, or was, or ever will be.”

Peter frowned. “What?”

“Carl Sagan said that, about the cosmos. My boi would do anything for me.”

“I saw that. He was brave. He would have kept fighting for you, if he could.”

“I knew from the very start, that he would do anything for me. When we were little, Roberta tried to make him stay outside on the porch at night. He would come to the side by my room and call for me. I used to slip out the window and down to the ground and cuddle him. Sometimes I slept out there.”

“That wasn’t safe,” said Peter. “There could have been dingoes.”

“Neither of you ever noticed,” countered Emma. “And it wasn’t safe for Cozzie, either. But Roberta didn’t like him, so you went with it.”

Peter took a bite out of his banana and said nothing.

Emma, sullen, told him, “I’m going to get out of this mess, for him. I need to make sure he’s got the life he always deserved. We were – we were going to get

an apartment together. I was finally going to be able to let him sleep on my bed.”

“What?”

“When you landed, in Victoria. I was going to take Cozzie, and I was going to leave. I knew...I knew things were only going to get worse. So I was getting him out of there, before they did. I still will,” said Emma, a vow to the universe. “And then I’ll find the authorities for these islands and shut these traffickers down, too.”

“Emma, I’m going to do everything I can to make sure that happens.” Peter reached out, pressing a hand to the back of Emma’s shoulder.

Emma leaned into the touch. Softly, she said, “do you think Roberta’s glad I’m gone?”

Peter struggled to come up with something to say to that. Finally, he settled on, “she’s a difficult woman, but she doesn’t *hate* you. I’m sure she’s worried.”

“She knew you were cheating on her,” said Emma. “And she took it out on me.”

A gull cried out in the distance. The sun was rising, slowly but steadily. They would have to get moving soon, if they wanted to get to Peter’s camp and set it up before dark.

Peter said, “you don’t understand what it was like to be married to her.”

“She raised me. I *know* what it was like *being* around her constantly!” Emma stood up. She started collecting coconuts, loading them into the boat.

A strong breeze carried in from the bay. Peter stood up, too, and went about looking for a few bunches of bananas to bring with them. They went into the boat, too. “I’m not proud of cheating on her, and I’m not justifying it. I’m just telling you that I loved Roberta once, and I don’t now. And maybe I should have tried to divorce her, but I knew that she would try to take!”

Emma asked, “take what, the boat? Is that why you were going to just – leave?”

Peter floundered.

And Emma wasn’t stupid. There was something her father wasn’t telling her.

Something he was *keeping* from her.

Just the thought made her blood boil. Emma was trying so hard to get along with him, to reconnect – she was trying so hard to make this work! And it seemed that Peter was doing everything to stop that from happening.

At every turn, he was lying to her, and omitting part of the story.

Emma couldn't deal with it. Not right now, at least. So she grabbed up one of the vines and said, "it doesn't matter. Let's just get moving, before the sun comes up."

Resigned, Peter picked up the other vine and began walking after her.

Sixteen

It felt like they had been walking for hours. The sky was especially clear, the sun especially hot. Near the mid-day point, they had to stop – not for their own sake, but for Cozzie. The poor dog was wearing a fur coat compared to the two of them, unable to even move around and get out of the heat. Laying on the bottom of the dinghy prevented the wind from cooling him, too.

At Emma's insistence, Peter stayed with the dinghy while she clambered up the side of the ravine. Emma collected thick elephant ear leaves, hauling them back down. Carefully, she fixed them between the two seats of the dingy, creating a little canopy of sorts.

"That's a good idea," said Peter.

"Yeah," answered Emma, dryly. "I tend to have those."

Peter said, "okay, you're back to being angry. What can I do to fix that?"

Emma put some serious thought into the question. Finally, she said, "tell me who it was."

"What?"

"Who were you leaving us for?"

"I wasn't leaving you for someone else," said Peter.

Emma turned to him, one hand on her hip. "You cheated on Roberta, and then you took off. You think I'm stupid enough not to *know* you were going to be with your new lay?"

"I wasn't," insisted Peter. "It was a one time thing, I swear. We weren't together."

Emma said, "I want to know her name."

Peter looked pained.

“Fine,” said Emma. “Don’t tell me.”

And then she picked the vine up again, and started walking. Peter had to rush to grab his vine, scrambling to keep up with Emma.

A mile might not be an insane walk normally, but it was different when you were hauling a boat filled with supplies and a small but rather porky dog. The trip was grueling. They had to stop again, thirty minutes later, so Emma could give Cozzie a drink. She was able to hand feed him a few slivers of mango today, which delighted her.

Emma said, “what he needs is fish.”

Peter laughed. “Good luck with that.”

“I’ve *caught* fish before. And a shark, once.”

“What? *How* did you pull *that* off?”

“Tell me who you cheated on Roberta with, and I’ll show you.”

Peter asked, “why do you want to know that so badly?”

“Because it ruined *my* life,” snapped Emma. “I *realize* you’re just thinking about how all of this has affected *you*, but it made Roberta snap. And she took it out on *me*. So I want to know who was so special, you couldn’t manage to keep it in your pants, just that *one* time.”

Again, Peter floundered. He floundered so long, Emma thought that she wasn’t going to get her answer. But, finally, he said, “alright, *fine*. It was – it was Sheila.”

Emma froze. “*Aunt* Sheila?”

Her father nodded.

“Oh my God,” said Emma. “Are you *shitting* me right now?”

Instinctively, Peter said, “watch your language!”

“Aunt Sheila, who just got out of jail? *That* Aunt Sheila?”

“Honey, she wasn’t – she wasn’t in jail for - “

“I know what she was in jail for,” scoffed Emma. “You and Roberta were using her to sell your weed, and she got caught. You literally cheated on Roberta

with her *sister*, who you sent to *jail*. How does that even *work*?”

“It just – happened. I don’t know, I can’t explain it. She called and asked me for a ride, because she doesn’t have a car anymore. And it just happened.”

“You’re so *stupid*,” said Emma. She couldn’t believe it. Clearly, her father had been doing nothing but thinking with his dick for a while, if he *still* hadn’t put everything together.

But it was obvious to Emma, the clues, the connecting points.

Peter’s affair was the only reason they were in this mess. And as soon as they got to camp, Emma was going to prove it.

Seventeen

A strong wind cut up.

They were almost to Peter's old camp. Emma was silent – not out of anger this time, like Peter assumed, but in deep thought. In fact, she was so busy thinking, rolling things over in her mind, and trying to piece everything together, that she missed the storm clouds rolling in.

It wasn't until a clap of thunder cut through the thick, humid air that Emma jumped, mind snapping back to the present. The first few patters of rain hit. Emma said, "we have to pick up the pace!"

They threw their backs into it, hauling the dinghy through the ravine. It was only luck that the rain wasn't a torrential one, instead coming down in light, cooling strokes. Emma knew from experience that the storm's could change with a snap, though.

It wouldn't do to drag their feet. They couldn't risk resting any more. They couldn't stop, not even to try and give Cozzie more protection from the weather.

They just had to push on. And push on they did, the vines chafing blisters into their hands, and the water stinging their eyes. Rain puddled on the floor of the ravine. It made the boat easier to pull, but it also turned the ground dangerously slick.

And the mud!

That wasn't any good, either. If it wasn't slick rocks that they were walking on, it was thick, sucking mud. Emma had never been more grateful to wear boots in her life, even if they had already torn blisters into her heels and had come off a dead man. It would be twice as hard making their way through here if they

were still bare foot.

Water ran in heavy rivulets down the sides of the ravine. The air was so heavy it was hard to breathe it. Pulling the boat out of the gully was harder this time around, but they managed. It would only be a short walk to where his camp was from here, but the jungle brush was denser than at the other end of the island, near the crescent bay.

With a sinking feeling in her gut, Emma realized that this side of the island would produce an entirely different set of problems for them.

“Watch where you step,” shouted Peter, raising his voice to be heard over the ripping winds. Uprturned roots and thick vines made the jungle floor a tragedy to hike through.

Pulling the boat became an entirely new problem.

Peter asked, “should we ditch it?”

Emma shook her head. “We can’t jostle Cozzie by carrying him. We *have* to bring the boat.”

But – Peter was learning. He didn’t suggest leaving Cozzie and coming back for the brave dog later. He just nodded, braced himself, and kept moving.

Making it to Peter’s old camp was a God-send.

There was no shelter, but the beach was wider. Even with the storm churning the water up, the waves didn’t crash to the tops of the dunes. A few coconut trees could be seen, as well. They pulled the boat over to one, carefully emptying out it’s contents.

Emma moved Cozzie as if he was made of glass. Had it been three days now, since he was shot? Or four? Time tended to blur together, when the only reason it mattered was the set of the sun. Either way, Cozzie was holding on for her. She tucked him right up against the base of a tree.

Peter tilted the dinghy up on end, leaning it against the tree. It wasn’t much, but they were able to crouch into the shelter it provided, relishing in the brief rest from the crashing rain. They had to crouch and curl up an awful lot.

Emma leaned against her father, letting him wrap his arm around her shoulder. There was no way they could sleep like this.

Emma asked, “why were you out sailing, with Johnnie? You said that you weren’t going to see – to see Aunt Sheila. So, where were you going?”

Peter countered, “how did you know about the drugs?”

“It’s not like you and Roberta were quiet. All you two did was – was scream at each other. All the time. I could hear pretty much everything the two of you *ever* talked about.”

“Oh,” said Peter. He frowned. “I guess we did do that a lot, huh?”

Emma insisted, “I answered your question, now answer mine. Honestly, too. Where were the two of you going?”

Peter sighed. “It’s a long story.”

Emma told him, “I’m stranded on a damn island. I think I have time for your story.”

After a moment, Peter relented, “alright, fine.”

Eighteen

Peter Hanson toiled in the rural back country working an excavator to rip dirt out of the ground. *Rrrrumhp, shlumph. Rrrrumhp, shlumph.* He dug out the rock and dirt, mostly rock, making piles that he would later sort through.

Meanwhile Peter's partner, Johnnie Parker, worked a dry trammel, which was blowing dust everywhere as it operated. Johnnie brought in pay dirt to the dry trammel, load after load. Suddenly there erupted a loud mechanical bang and metal on metal knocking sound.

Swearing like an alleyway drunk, Johnnie slumped sweaty over to the dry trammel and cut the power. Now that the trammel wasn't running, all that could be heard was Peter's backhoe and the diesel generator that was running the big machine. Johnnie walked to the generator and hit the red shutoff button. He got on the radio and called Peter. Johnnie saw from across the site, the articulated arm of the backhoe stop and Peter put a hand up to his ear.

"Yeah?" Peter yelled above the equipment noise.

"Shut it down for a second, mate."

"Huh?"

"The trammel."

"What is it?"

The backhoe hissed and the engine puffed exhaust. The smoke from the stack coughed once more and stopped.

"The trammel's down."

"Okay, for crissakes," Peter said, his voice still raised to rise about the backhoe's chugging, though the backhoe was no longer running.

“Something blew up in it.”

“Right.”

“Come give me a hand,” Johnnie said, and wiped his brow.

Peter jumped off the backhoe with a *humph* and took a few stuttering steps to get his legs under him. He wasn't impressed. The dry trammel just got repaired a month ago and the bill was more than twenty grand. Peter was the one who had to pay the bill because Johnnie told him he had no money to spare to reinvest, due to his divorce settlement and lawyer costs.

The excuses had been endless.

Eventually, Peter had just agreed to cover the costs himself.

Johnnie promised to pay Peter back, of course, before he took any pay this season, which they were now one week into.

“What is it?” Peter asked.

Johnnie came back. “Do I look like a heavy-duty mechanic?”

Johnnie squinted and stood tall and bold as Peter squatted and reached in for the trammel motor housing, grunting, “No, but...” He grunted and jerked his hand back. “Damn! Hot!” He licked his fingers. “But you are the one who claimed you know about this damn thing.”

“I know how to operate one that's working.” Johnnie squinted. “I don't know how to fix one that ain't.” He looked away and spat.

“You got a towel?”

“Whatta I look like, the maid service?” Johnnie quipped.

“Look, pal, I funded your part of this and I don't—”

“Awrite, awrite, don't blow a gasket, mate.” Johnnie walked to a nearby truck.

Peter sat up and wiped his face with his shirt.

“Here.” Johnnie tossed Peter a towel.

“Thanks.”

Peter leaned back into the trammel and used the towel to shield his hands from the heat. He opened the motor housing and pulled the casing back.

“Clean as a whistle.”

“Yeah, it was running fine.”

“You said—”

“The engine was running fine.”

“So...”

“It’s that squeaking, metal on metal, the scratching noise.”

“Ah.” Peter positioned from squat to kneel, then leaned over to the front loading mech and line feed. “Yup.”

“What? Those damn bearings again? Don’t tell me that’s what it is!”

“Those damn bearings again, mate.”

“How do they even sell these things? Work for half a day, and they break on you!”

“Tricky machines. Dunno how to get this fixed. Can’t take it into a shop. We know anyone to call?”

“No idea. We gonna be down for a while?”

“Oh, we’ll be down for a while,” Peter said. “I got piles and piles for days and days over there. It all needs to be separated. There’s no use digging up more piles now... in case there is gold in it, letting it hang out for the birds and everyone else to peck away at it would be stupid. We might as well take lunch, while I try to figure this wreck out.”

Johnnie returned from the truck with a beer and a sandwich. He didn’t bother to bring Peter’s over, the selfish git.

Peter wiped his face with the greasy towel, and made his way to the truck. He returned with his own cold beer and sandwich. “Thanks for getting mine, while you were up.

Johnnie shrugged. “Didn’t ask for yours. Say, you still got that connection in town?”

Peter threw an onion slice out of his sandwich. “Huh? Who do you mean?”

“That bloke, the one that works at the part store.”

“Naw,” said Peter. “He moved. We’ll have to order it ourselves.”

“How long will it take?”

“It depends. It could be just the bearing. If they are loose bearings, we get a similar sized one at any hardware store worth its signage.”

“What if it’s—”

“We grease the thing, set in the new ball next to the old, and away we go.”

“But...” Johnnie didn’t buy the happy path. He wanted to know worse case.

“But it could be a sealed bracket. In which case we have to order the whole unit, get a tool to pull the old one and set the new one in.”

“You don’t know which it is? Sounds like something you should know, mate.” Johnnie tossed back the last of his beer, and then pitched the can.

“I’m eating,” huffed Peter. “I’ll check when I’m done, see if I can’t get it figured out.”

Johnnie gave him a right sour look, but went back to his sandwich.

Only for a moment, though. Then Johnnie was back at it, saying, “you’ve been sitting up in that air conditioning all morning.”

“I’ve worked my share of this trammel too, mate.”

“That air cushioned seat.” Johnnie pats his own backside.

“In fact, I have more time on the ground with my nose in it that you.”

“Listening to tunes.”

“Far more time,” said Peter, making sure it’s clear he’s not enjoying this line of talk. “Far more time, and far more money. *And* far more reasons to want it to work.”

“Okay, okay.” Johnnie held his hands up. “Calm your tits. I’m just saying.”

“You’re just saying,” echoed Peter, daring Johnnie to keep talking.

Johnnie wizened up, and went quiet.

Come to find out, by late afternoon, Peter saw it was a sealed bracket. It would have to be special ordered. Not that expensive. Of course, if you are in the hole financially like Peter, and forking over most of the upfront investment for his *partner* Johnnie like he was, any part replacement, with ensuing delays, would

be costly.

The work delayed, and the sun baring down at full strength, put a heated tension between the two men. Johnnie stamped over to the trammel and gave it a kick.

“That’ll show it,” Peter said, rolling his eyes

“At least I *did* something. You coming?” Johnnie jerked a hand over his shoulder.

Peter shook his head. “Not yet. I’m gonna give old sparky a few swings.”

“You ain’t’ gonna find anything but sparkling heartache with that damn thing, mate,” Johnnie said. He had all but given up on the cause.

“Well, it will give my brain something to do at least.” Point made, Peter turned his back on Johnnie.

It might be hot out, but Johnnie was still acting strange. He was being a right git about things, managing to trample on every single one of Peter’s nerves.

Johnnie limped back to camp. Peter went back to the truck, put their empty bottles in the back, and took out the metal detector.

From outside their tent Johnnie strummed a guitar. For an angry, broke redneck, the song wasn’t bad. It’s a droning morose Spanish tune about lost love:

True we are through, my love.

True we are through.

Over by the craters left from his backhoe’s handiwork, Peter lit up the metal detector and swung it from side to side.

If I find two, my love... if I find two.

You and your lover are through too.

Johnnie continued singing, as Peter swung the arm of the detector to and fro.

You and your lover are through toooooo.

Crackle, crackle, beep beep beep!

Peter got a strong read. The light on the metal detector started flashing, the needle jumping around as if it had been hit with a live wire. But Peter wasn’t new to treasure hunting. He knew it was more likely to be a rusted nail or old

steel can than anything else, maybe a silver belt buckle if they're lucky.

Still, he turned the knob from *All/Any* to *Gold*. He swung again. *Beep, beep, beep, beep*. With each pass of the arm, Peter decreased the range of his swing. He looked back toward camp, back toward his partner Johnnie, but couldn't see him. He heard the guitar still and figured Johnnie didn't hear the detector's alarm bells going off.

Peter knelt down and dug. Even with the still-red hand burned from the trammel housing, Peter dug. Each time his hands hit a clump of dirt, he pulled it up, crushed it between his hands and – wait!

A clump that didn't crush!

Peter was quick to clean it off, revealing a gold nugget, roughly as big as his knuckle. Giddy as could be, he kept digging, coming up with *four* nuggets of what could only be gold.

The area he was in was hot! He continued to search with his now proven metal detector. Where there was one little cluster, Peter was certain there *must* be more...and he was bound and determined to find them.

Late in the evening, Johnnie was still playing the guitar. He hacked out a little rock tune, some old Nirvana song he learned a while back when grunge was big. Peter approached with a smile as big as the rising moon.

“What's into you?”

“Ummm, not much,” Peter said, full of cheek. “Except gold!” He dumped the handful of nuggets into the lap of his friend.

“You sly son of a gun!”

“Yup. Look at it.”

Johnnie jumped up. He hugged his partner and they both jumped up and down like schoolgirls. Johnnie stooped back down and picked up the gold. Peter held out his hands and Johnnie dumped some nuggets in them, just marveling at the sight.

It was something you didn't see all that often. Real gold. A proven hot bed.

Johnnie asked, “is this all of it?”

Peter countered, “what, not happy with a whole fistful of gold?”

And Johnnie laughed, easily swayed into thinking it was a joke. “I suppose not! I suppose I’m a greedy bloke!”

The two grabbed more beer and yelled out and sung together, out in the woods, out in the middle of nowhere.

Gold.

They had found *gold*.

Nineteen

“I don’t get it,” said Emma, barely biting back a yawn. The rain was finally starting to lighten up. “You found gold. What does that have to do with sailing?”

Peter shifted, purposefully, and the boat fell backwards. “Sorry!”

It startled Emma into full awareness. Temporarily forgetting about her father’s story, she hurried to stand up, stretching, shaking out sore muscles and cramped legs. “It’s fine. I think the rain’s light enough, we can probably just sleep through it. I’ve done it before.”

Even in the dim of the night, Emma could make out the relief in Peter’s smile. She just didn’t make the connection between the change in subjects, instead figuring that he, much like herself, was simply glad the weather was getting better.

Peter said, “sounds like a plan to me.”

And off in distance, out in the bay, two lights went unnoticed. A ship, drifting back in to shore. A herald of more danger to come, slipping past, like an owl circling overhead a mouse, unnoticed, uncared for.

Emma fell asleep fast, despite the rain, curled against Cozzie. Even now, the gentle rise and fall of his flanks, was a comfort.

Run off from the tree leaves still pattered against the ground come morning. Emma was up first, stretching, pushing wet hair out of her face. The first thing she did was take stock of Cozzie – and much to her immense glee, the injured kelpie dog was sitting up!

He wasn’t out of the woods yet. There was a chance infection could set in,

and moving around too much could pop the stitches, but still! The sight of him sitting up, starting to feel better, made Emma's heart swell with hope.

She flung her arms around Cozzie, hugging him. "Oh, my Cozzie boi! I'm so glad! I'm so glad that you're up!"

Cozzie licked her on the cheek. He was glad to be up, too.

Emma knew that she would have to make building a stake one of the first things that happened, along with a shelter. And – the water, stocking up on food, cleaning out coconut shells...honestly, the list seemed endless.

Once more, Emma sat there with nothing. She would have to start over from scrap. But...she wouldn't have to do it by herself this time.

Her father could help.

Maybe, just maybe, things would turn out alright.

Near two hours later, Peter woke up. Groggily, he asked Emma, "why didn't you wake me?"

Emma was sat several feet away, in the sun-kissed sand. She had her legs pulled up to her chest, her arms looped around them. "They're back," she said, dryly. "Why are they back?"

"What?" Still half asleep, Peter stumbled over to where Emma was sitting. "What are you talking about?"

Emma pointed out to the other side of the bay, where a familiar vessel had docked. "They wouldn't have just come back for us. We're not – one *person*, that can't be worth their time."

Peter suggested, "maybe we just made them that angry?"

"Angry enough to leave and then come back? That doesn't make any sense!" Emma dug her fingers into the curve of her legs, hard.

"You're right. That...doesn't make a lot of sense." Peter gave a heavy sigh. "I don't know what else to say. Sorry."

The waves were clear today. There was no more sign of a storm. Water crashed onto the beach, rushing back out and leaving white foam in its wake.

There were plenty of shallow tide pools left behind from high-tide. It would be easy enough to set up her little fishing hovels here, like she had at the base of the volcano.

“It’s okay,” she told him. “I think they’re docking in the same spot. We should be okay, making camp here. Come on. I’ll show you how.”

It goes quicker, with a second set of hands. Peter goes out of his way to take her directions without questioning them. They opt not to break the dinghy up for the moment, on virtue of it possibly having other uses later, if they need to leave camp again – and maybe Emma was a little bit hopeful that they would be able to patch the split wood and leave in it, but she was keeping that thought to herself.

They put together a shelter similar to the one that Emma had built at the base of the volcano, only larger, so the two of them could fit inside it more comfortably. It was high enough on the dunes that even a storm surge wouldn’t bring it down, and hidden from the ocean-view by a thick copse of palm trees.

After that, Emma showed her father how she built the stake, and how to set up the rig for desalination. While he took their empty coconut shells down to the ocean to clean them up for rain collecting, Emma set about finding all of the naturally formed tide-pools.

At each one, she used an empty coconut shell to dig them out deeper. That way, it’s a bigger chance of the fish getting caught in it when the tides go back out. When they had finished, Emma announced, “I’m going to the lake to get more fresh water.”

Peter frowned, glancing at the sky. “Is that a good idea?”

Emma pointed out, “if it gets too late, I can just sleep there. But we need more water. It’s going to take a while for the rig to start working again.”

“We have the coconuts.”

“I know, but – it’s not just about us, you know. Cozzie needs to drink more. He drinks fresh water best.”

Peter knew the moment that Cozzie came into the equation he'd lost. "Be careful, at least."

Emma flashed him a smile. "I always am."

Emma made it to the lake well before the twilight hours set in, and had plans on going back to camp in the same day. She filled up the glass bottles she had brought, carefully lining them into her backpack, deer moss wedged both between them and in their tops; that way, they were less likely to break, or spill.

She took a moment to rest in the shallows of the water, just to try and cool down a bit, and then she was heading back. Emma used the ravine for traveling. It was the quickest and safest option.

She hadn't been trekking back to camp for very long when she heard it – branches breaking.

Startled, Emma froze.

The sound continued, rushing away from her.

Emma scrambled out of the ravine, craning her head. If there were predators in this part of the jungle, they needed to know!

Except it wasn't the flash of a boar hide Emma saw vanishing into the trees. It was the flash of human skin, and long black hair.

A person, and *not* one of the men from the boat.

"Wait," shouted Emma. "Wait!"

But they were already gone.

At camp, Peter greeted her with, "do you see how dark out it is? I was *worried!*"

"I saw someone," said Emma. Quickly shrugging off her backpack and unloading the bottles. She poured some into a coconut for Cozzie, who drank it greedily.

Peter looked pale. "One of the traffickers?"

Emma shook her head. "No. It looked like a girl."

"A girl?"

“She had to have been close to my age, maybe a little younger. I – I don’t know. I mean, I do know. I know it was a girl. I just – don’t know why she would be here.”

“That...actually might make more sense than you think,” said Peter, slowly. He took one of the water bottles, slowly sipping it. “We made those guys pissed, no doubt about it. But they wouldn’t double back just for us. If someone they’d already *sold* had managed to get off the ship though...”

He trailed off, but that was fine. Emma could fill in the blanks just fine by herself. “We need to find her.”

Peter frowned. “Can we support a third person?”

“That doesn’t matter! If she’s lost out there - “

“Emma, don’t think I’m a bad person for this. I don’t like the thought of just – pretending you didn’t see her, either. But if we *stay away* from her, we might have a better chance at avoiding another run-in with those men. And we can do a lot more good to a lot more people if we make it off this island.”

It was a good point.

It made sense, even.

But Emma couldn’t bare the thought of just – pretending that hadn’t happened. Pretending that there wasn’t someone else here on the island, who needed help.

“We need to find her,” she said, again.

This time, Peter didn’t try to argue.

Twenty

They left first thing in the morning, the next day. Dew still clung heavy to the grass. Emma opted to leave Cozzie on the stake back at camp, so he didn't risk reopening his injury. It was healing a lot better than she could ever have hoped for, and she didn't want to chance anything going wrong with it.

They made the short trek through the jungle, dropping down into the ravine. Emma led the way to the point where she had seen the girl the evening before.

"She went that way," said Emma.

Peter said, "I guess we go that way, then."

This section of the jungle quickly turned hard to walk through. The recent rain storms had turned the surface of the ground into something thick and murky. It quickly built up along the soles of their stolen boots.

It wasn't long before Emma realized that she needed a distraction. Her mind kept flicking back to Cozzie, at camp. There was no way she could have brought him. Even carrying the dog could have pulled open the wound.

But Emma couldn't stop thinking about him, tied up on his own.

Desperate, she asked, "if Roberta tried to set you on fire, why the Hell did you think it would be okay to leave me with her?" And then, knowing how that sounded, "honest question."

Peter frowned. "How do you know about that?"

"I told you already. The two of you are way louder than you think. It's like you guys just forgot, hey, there's a third person in this house, maybe we shouldn't scream about drugs and stolen cars and burning dicks off."

"I – don't know how to answer that."

“The part about forgetting I was there, or the part about thinking it would be fine to leave me with her?”

“The first part,” said Peter, which was a start, at least. Emma would take an honest *I didn't think about it* over some sugar sweet lie any day.

Emma prompted, “what about the second part?”

Peter said, “I guess I figured you would be fine, since I was the one she was pissed at.”

“Oh.” Emma could think of a lot of responses to that. She could tell him how Roberta was nuts, and wasn't fit for anyone to be around. That she was so angry at Peter, she was taking it out on Emma.

That Roberta had hit her.

That Roberta threatened to get rid of Cozzie, to just throw him outside and let the coyotes get him.

She could say a lot of things that were mean and sharp and true.

But she didn't.

Instead, she opted for, “that didn't work out.”

And Peter said, “I've realized that.”

They found footprints in the mud. Broken branches. Places where someone had plowed through the under brush. Little things that made it clear they were going the right way – and that Emma hadn't been lying.

It was an oppressively hot day. Twice, they had to stop to get something to eat, cracking open coconuts and carefully burying the shells afterwards.

As Emma finished covering up the proof of their most recent meal, Peter noted, “it's going to start getting late soon.”

Emma looked up. “It's barely past the high-point. We've got plenty of time.”

“We have the whole return trip, too.”

“It won't kill us to walk back at night.”

“It might. Do you know how much more likely you are to find a venomous snake at night? More than twice as likely, Emma! And we've never been this

way. If we try to get back after dark - “

Emma interrupted him with a sour look, saying, “I can get us back. That’s not an issue. If you don’t want to keep looking, that’s fine. Go back to camp, and check on Cozzie. I’ll catch up with you when I get back.”

And then she turned on her heel and carried on, pushing her way even further into the jungle. Peter made an exasperated noise behind her, but followed.

Twenty-One

This part of the jungle, the ground was far more uneven. It made the trek feel like it went on longer than it really did. The rolls and hillocks weren't as hard to traverse as the dunes of the beach, but it was still more difficult than the flat of the ravine.

Peter waved his hand. "I need to stop. Hang on."

Emma, breathing just as hard, didn't put up a fuss. She said, "I hate the thought of not finding her, but..."

"But you're starting to see where I'm coming from?"

"No. I don't think we should just pretend that she's not here," snapped Emma. "But I'm thinking I might have to come out here on my own. So you can watch Cozzie, and I can make a camp over night."

"That's a horrible idea," said Peter.

"It's a better idea than - "The sound of branches cracking startled Emma both into silence, and into motion.

She took off towards the sound, Peter forced to chase after her. Around one tree, two, three – and then she nearly ran full body into the girl from before.

The girl spun around, scrambling backwards. Her shoulders hit a tree. She spoke rapidly, in a language Emma didn't understand.

Emma froze, throwing her hands up in the universal sign for peace. Peter came huffing out from behind the trees, stunned into silence by the sight before them.

The girl had to have been near Emma's age, maybe a few years younger. Her long black hair was knotted. Her clothing, a burlap dress, was stained and torn.

“It’s okay,” said Emma.

Peter cursed. “She doesn’t speak English?”

“Of course she doesn’t speak English,” huffed Emma.

Peter scowled at her. “You don’t have to be a smart-ass all the time.”

Emma ignored him. She pressed a hand against her chest and said, “Emma.”

Then she pointed at the girl.

The girl blinked, frowned for a moment, and then pressed a hand against her chest, too. “Dwi. Jenengku Dwi.”

Emma’s face lit up. “Okay. We can work with this. Dwi?” She said the name a few times, until she was closer to the correct pronunciation. “Dwi,” said Emma, again. “Do you know *any* English? English? Hello?”

“Little bit,” said Dwi, haltingly. She held up her fingers, pinching them together to further illustrate the point. “Little bit, English.”

Emma held out her hand. “Come with us? We have food? Food – dinner.”

Dwi hesitated. It was no wonder why. Emma couldn’t even begin to wonder what she had been through so far. But then she reached out, clasping their hands together. “Food,” she repeated. “Dwi come with.”

Peter and Emma led the way back to the camp, Dwi walking nervously with them. She stayed a few steps behind Emma at all points, and didn’t want to go anywhere near Peter. Getting into the ravine made things a little easier, but the sun was starting to set and twilight fell heavy through the trees.

As the sun started to set, the hordes of insects began to come out. They paused long enough for Emma to show her father how to coat himself in mud to help keep them away, Dwi hesitantly joining in with them after a few moments. And then they were off again, heading towards the dunes.

Cozzie heard the group before spotting them, barking and howling up a storm from where he was hidden. Dusk clung to the beach; the sky bleeding out into the ocean, the waves bleeding out into the shore.

Dwi’s face lit up. “Dog!”

And then before Emma could say anything, she was bounding across the beach and dropping down onto her knees in front of Cozzie. All of the reservation that had been in her features before was gone. Cozzie offered a note of calmness that neither Emma nor Peter were able to do.

He licked at Dwi's hands and her face, pressing up against her palms and her chest.

Emma sat down next to her. She put a hand on her dog's back and said, "Cozzie."

"Cozzie," repeated Dwi. She ran a hand through his unkempt, sandy fur. "Cozzie."

Cozzie wagged his tail, basking in the attention that the new comer brought to him. Emma stayed for a little bit, then went to go help her father cracking open the coconuts and peeling the mangoes.

Emma said, "still wish we'd ignored her?"

Peter frowned. "It's not about *her*, Emma. It's about *you*."

"...what?"

"I want *you* to make it through this. You're my daughter. Whatever path is safest for you, that's the one I want to choose."

It would be easy to throw the sentiment back into his face. That it was too little, too late. But the fact of the matter was this: it wasn't.

When Emma was little, she had been very close with her father. And she still wanted that, on some level.

So she told him, "I know." And then, "but we have to help her. It might not be the safest path, but it's the *right* one. And you always taught me to take that road."

A dark shadow crossed Peter's face. He turned away, saying, "maybe I was wrong."

Emma thought of the half-story about finding gold, and about Roberta, and Sheila, and all of the lies and hidden inconsistencies in the things her father had told her. And then she said, determined, "you weren't."

They ate dinner. Dwi was very reluctant to leave Cozzie's side, and got nervous and jittery any time Peter drew close. It was quickly decided that Emma would be the go between, and that Cozzie would be the watchdog.

Peter said, "there's no way she's going to want to come into our shelter. And if she does, she's *not* going to take it the way we intend."

Emma nodded. "We'll have to build another one for her tomorrow. I guess...for now -"

She glanced at her father. Peter nodded. She can have it. We can sleep with Cozzie."

It took a bit of charade playing for them to get the right point across, but eventually, both Cozzie and Dwi were settled inside of the little shelter.

Emma patted the dog on the head. "Cozzie, stay." Then to Dwi, she said, "Cozzie's a good boi. He'll keep you safe."

Dwi nodded, reaching out to touch him. She cooed at the dog in her own language – was that Balinese? Bahasa Indonesia? Filipino? Malaysian?

Emma wasn't certain. Languages weren't her specialty. It was lovely to listen too, whatever it was.

Then Dwi turned to her, and she said, "Cozzie, good boy."

"He'll protect you," promised Emma.

Dwi smiled.

Emma and Peter set up out in the dunes, far enough from the shelter that they wouldn't make Dwi nervous, but close enough to keep an eye on things.

Emma talked about an encounter with coconut trees in the past, during her early days on the island, when one fell to the ground, only missing Cozzie's head by an inch or two.

"It would have killed him for sure," said Emma.

Peter chuckled. "I don't know. It seems to me that he's part cat."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, cat's have nine lives, right? I figure he's gone through two of them so

far.”

“Three,” said Emma, without hesitation. “He wasn’t with me when we washed up on shore. He got on the island all by himself.”

Peter was silent for a long moment. Finally, he told her, “getting you that dog was the best decision I ever made. He’d jump straight into Hell for you, Emma. Fuck, I’d say he’s done more for you than I ever have.”

“He has,” said Emma. And then, tilting her head back to stare up at the stars, she added, “but there’s still time for that to change.”

The night sky was just as lovely as it had been the very first night Emma had been shipwrecked here.

Waves lapped gently at the shore, calm in the late hour. Above them, the moon hung almost full, its silver light turning to fractal smears on the choppy surface of the ocean. And the stars burnt like fire.

Peter, softly, asked, “still time?”

“We’re not dead yet,” said Emma. “And there’s still a chance we can get off this island. You can still be a big part of my life. If you wanted to be, I mean.”

“I do,” said Peter, no hesitation.

Emma said, “then it’s that simple. There’s still time.”

From this part of the beach, they couldn’t see the ship lights, but there was no doubt that the traffickers were still here. Still, it seemed distant.

In that moment, at least, the only thing that seemed to matter was that they were all alive, and there was still time.

Twenty-Two

The first thing they did the next morning was start to set up a second shelter. Emma and Peter were fast at work with it, stopping only when they needed to get something to drink. Dwi lit up a fire while they worked, and then vanished into the jungle.

Peter said, “don’t worry. I’m sure she’ll be back.”

And they went back to it.

This shelter wasn’t nearly as large as theirs, but it didn’t need to be. It was only going to house one person – and possibly a dog. Emma didn’t *want* to give up Cozzie as her bunk partner, but there was no denying that the pup helped put Dwi at ease.

Emma figured they could share the pup, for a little while.

It was Cozzie who alerted them of Dwi’s return. She came carrying a bunch of banana’s and several large jack fruit. She said something to them in her own language, and then repeated it in halting English, “food...for dinner?”

“Oh! Thank you!” Emma rushed over, making to help prepare their meal while Peter continued finishing the shelter. The jack fruit was cubed and placed in a metal can, so they could cook it over the fire. They munched on bananas while they waited.

Despite the language barrier, the two girls made great efforts to chat with each other. Emma did her best to try and pick up a few words from Dwi, so they were on even grounds.

It turned out that Dwi was from Indonesia, from the island of Sumatra. She had been picking English up from several of the other young women that the

traffickers had picked up – women, Dwi explained, that hailed from the Philippines, to the coastal regions of Australia.

Conveying things wasn't always easy. Their conversations were often filled with hand waving and attempting to charade out certain words, when it appeared that they had lost each other. But it was still good, Emma felt, to speak with someone that was *almost* her own age.

Dwi fell quiet often, mostly when Peter came over to sit with them. Emma spoke in hushed tones, telling Dwi that Peter was safe, that Cozzie wouldn't let anyone *bad* near her. But those first two days, the reassurances meant very little.

On the dawn of the third day with their new addition to their rag-tag group, Emma was thrilled to announce that Cozzie was out of the danger zone.

“He really wants off that stake,” said Peter.

Emma snorted. “Well, I really want a cheeseburger. But that's not going to happen, now is it?”

Peter laughed. “When did you get so sarcastic?”

“I've *been* sarcastic. Not my fault you weren't around to see it,” quipped Emma. “I'm gonna go check the tide pools. Cozzie deserves some *real* food today.”

Peter asked, “for what?”

“For being himself,” answered Emma.

She was partway down the beach before Peter called her name, jogging out through the dunes to meet her. “Wait! Do you think – maybe I should check for fish.”

Emma stared at him, frowning. “Please tell me we aren't going to have this conversation again.”

“No, no! I just – do you think I should stay at camp with her? That – she's *scared* of me, Emma. That might not be a good idea.”

“She's sleeping. It'll be fine.”

“And if she wakes up?”

“Dad. Chill out. Just talk to her the way you talk to me. It’ll be fine.” And then she turned on her heel, and continued down the beach.

Much to Emma’s pleasure, there were several small fish in the waters. Emma didn’t know what type they were; she wasn’t very *good* with fish. But they were small, and they would be impossible to scoop out without her lime-netting.

A single whack from Emma’s trusty bean killed them, and then she was able to carry on, checking the other tide pools.

When she got back to camp, Dwi was up. She sat just outside of her shelter, Cozzie in her lap. She was singing softly to the dog, talking to him in her own language. Cozzie looked up at her with his big, loving eyes, as if he could understand.

Maybe he did.

Dogs were far smarter than humans, after all. And if they could overcome one language barrier, why not be able to leap through them all?

It was such a nice scene, Emma almost felt bad for interrupting it.

She held up her prize, though. Seven fish, bundled up in her lime-netting. “Who wants dinner?”

It turned out that Peter, having spent many weekends out on a boat with his buddies, Johnnie and Vinny, *actually* knew how to properly scale a fish. He was pretty good at cooking it, too. Dwi showed Emma where the jack fruit were growing, and they had their own little feast, just the four of them.

Emma held up her cracked open coconut, careful not to spill any of the water inside. “To us. For surviving another day. For finding each other. And for healing old wounds.”

“To us,” echoed Dwi and Peter, lifting up their own drinks.

Dwi laughed a little before taking a drink from her coconut. Cozzie stayed close to her, sensing that the girl needed that added boost of confidence.

Who would dare make a move on Dwi when Cozzie was there, after all.

Only a real idiot.

And, sure. They couldn't ignore the traffickers forever. They couldn't stay hidden here, not trying to get free from the island.

But for the moment, they could relish in the little victories of life. Just as the coffee had reminded Emma of her humanity, so too does this; sitting by the fire, eating roasted fish and jack fruit, knowing that Cozzie was well into the stages of healing from his injury, that her father was alive, and that they had managed to find Dwi.

Twilight painted the sky above, purples and blues that dripped into each other. The very first few stars were starting to blink into existence. High tide was rolling in, once more flooding the tide pools with ocean life. They had water and food. They had shelter and fire. They had the beaches, the ravine, and the salty ocean air.

It wasn't freedom.

But for the moment, it was close enough.

Early the following morning, while everyone was still trying to wake themselves up, Dwi announced, "look! Cozzie!"

Cozzie was rubbing viciously at one ear with his paw. He was whining while he did it.

Peter suggested, "an ear infection, maybe?"

"Come here, Cozzie boi," said Emma. She called the dog over to where she was sitting. Peter and Dwi crowded around. Carefully, Emma folded Cozzie's ear back, so she could look in it. A large, bulbous tick was clinging to the inside fold of Cozzie's ear.

"Gross," said Peter.

Dwi said, "I will get it!"

While Emma held Cozzie still, Dwi reached over and pinched the very head of the tick. She had to be careful not to pop it between her fingers, and to make sure the entire tick was removed. When she tugged it off, Cozzie yelped. A bright red sore was left in its wake.

Dwi used a stone to crush the tick. Emma asked, “do you guys think he has more?”

“One tick means many ticks,” said Dwi. She reached out, using both hands to start petting through Cozzie’s fur. Together, she and Emma located and removed the rest of the ticks hidden in his fur. There were fifteen of them in total. The ones between Cozzie’s toes were the hardest to remove.

Emma said, “we’ll have to check him for ticks more often. I didn’t even think about it!”

“More heads, more thoughts,” said Dwi, smiling. She gave Emma reassuring pat on the shoulder. Even without words, it was clear that she was promising to help Emma take care of Cozzie.

Twenty-Three

The sun was almost half its way to high noon. The mid-morning sun was white hot, and with each passing second, each caw of the gull and crash of the waves, it promised to get even hotter. This was the sort of day where you moved very, very little.

Sweat ran in rivulets down the curve of Emma's neck. Even though she knew that the reflection of the sun hitting the waves would likely leave her with sunburn once more, Emma couldn't drag herself out of the shallows of the ocean.

The water was cool. Each time a wave crashed up over Emma, it brought with it a breath of relief.

Suddenly, a shadow fell over her. Emma cracked open her eyes, staring up at her father. He held out a coconut-bowl full of cut up fruit, and the leftover fish from the night before. "Here. You should come back to the shelters."

"It's too hot," said Emma. "I can't."

"You're already sun burnt. You stay out here a lot longer, you'll blister." Peter crouched down next to his daughter. He held the bowl aloft, just out of her reach. "Come on."

Emma hummed. She didn't move. "I think we should patch the dinghy, and sail away with it."

Peter stared at her. "I think you've been in the sun too long, Emma."

"No, really! It's split, but the split is on the side. If we could patch it - "

"With what?"

"Some of the sap here is sticky, like glue. And there's bark. The trees in the

thick muck, where we found Dwi. It was just peeling off in rolls. Or we could try some of the little trees. If we can knock them down, some of them – which ones were they? The poplar trees? The thin skinny ones? We could use them to build a bottom, and put the dinghy on it. They float.”

Peter said, “you’ve been thinking about this for a while, haven’t you?”

“I just think it’s time we try something new,” said Emma. “Especially if the traffickers are back. They’re probably looking for her, don’t you think?”

Peter nodded, looking out at the ocean, thoughtfully. Rather than answer her, he asked, “why am I stupid?”

It seemed like the set-up to a bad joke.

Haltingly, Emma said, “I...don’t know?”

“No, seriously. The other night, you said that I was *so stupid*. Because of your aunt. Just...because I had an affair? I’ve been thinking on it, but...that didn’t feel right.”

“Oh,” said Emma. She sat up. Water dripped down her shoulder blades, the line of her back. “No. Because you had one with Aunt Sheila. Did you...did you seriously not know about what was happening? With – Vinny? And Roberta?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Give me the fruit, and I’ll tell you.”

“You should just tell me,” said Peter. But he gave her the fruit all the same.

Emma said, “yeah, okay. But you should sit down. It’s a long story. And I have a question for you after it, too.”

“That sounds daunting,” said Peter, but he sat down beside his daughter in the shallows all the same. “Okay. Hit me with it. What don’t I know?”

In her most serious voice, Emma said, “a lot.”

Twenty-Four

Emma could hear them. They were in a backroom, talking. Roberta and Vinnie. The thwack of a dart hitting something solid. Vinnie's voice, loud, rolling, "you're crazy."

"If you don't," warned Roberta, "I can find someone who will."

"Good," said Vinnie. "Find someone else."

Roberta laughed. "Of course...there is one other thing."

Vinnie, unimpressed, told her, "look, Peter asked me to front him ten kilos of weed. Normally, he would just bring it to me, but he knew that he could double his money if he took it up to Queensland. Said he needed parts for his gold mining operation. He didn't have any weed to sell, so he got some from me. He's lucky I trust him. No matter what happens, he'll make things right between us. It's a soldier's code not to steal from your buddy. So before I would even consider doing *anything* for *anyone*, I want my money back. It's that simple."

"I have something on you. If you don't help me, I'll - ""

"You want to strong arm me? Lady, I don't work for anybody who tries to force me to do anything. Know why? Because I know from experience that they'll throw me under the bus when push comes to shove. I don't work for people like that. Besides, killing my partners ain't gonna look good for my reputation."

The words sunk cold into Emma's heart. She stayed very still, crouched down on the outside of the window. She had only gotten out of the car because she was curious – she had assumed Roberta was trying to pull one over on her father.

Peter had cheated on Roberta, so Roberta would cheat on him.

But – was Roberta *really* trying to have Peter *killed*?

The thought was baffling. Emma couldn't imagine ever being that angry with someone, least of all with the person you had chosen to marry – with the person you had spent seventeen years with.

But here they were, discussing exactly that.

Emma's stomach churned. She regretted leaving the car, now.

Through the window, she could see that Roberta was standing in front of Vinnie. Back to the window, blocking Emma from being seen. She had an envelope in her hand. She waved it at Vinnie. "I can pay you more than what I brought."

Vinnie said, "that weed's worth more than two thousand a pound. Ten kilos of it. That's *fifty five thousand*. I don't need to count to know you don't have that much in there. Might as well leave now. You're just wasting my time."

Neither of them said anything.

Roberta said, "this is just the start of it. Just an incentive. I've got more."

"How much more? Because it'd have to be a *lot* to get me to turn on my old pal."

Footsteps. Someone coming around the end of the house. Emma flung herself to her feet and took off, barely making it into the car before one of Vinnie's work associates showed up. He leaned against the wall, lighting up a cigar.

Chest heaving with terror, Emma settled down into her seat. She stared at her phone, trying to act like she'd been here the entire time.

It seemed like forever before Roberta showed back up, sliding into the driver's seat. She started the car without saying anything, ripping out onto the street. The sharp turn knocked her purse against Emma's leg.

Emma risked a glance down.

The envelope was gone.

On the island, Emma finished eating her fruit, and set about rinsing out the shell while she sat there. “And then – and I *cannot* stress this enough, seriously – then she was really loud when she made a phone call. She was trying to find out where your gold claim was. The one on Kangaroo Island.”

“Holy shit,” said Peter.

“*That’s* who you were going to leave me with,” said Emma. And then, because she didn’t want the topic to stray into a fight, she added, “but it’s my turn now.”

“Your turn? I’m *hardly* done with this topic.”

“Doesn’t matter. I told you what happened. You let Sheila get arrested with Vinnie’s weed, and you never paid him back. Then you pissed Roberta off, and she *knew* that Vinnie was pissed at you for not paying him back, and she took advantage of it. My turn to ask the questions.”

Peter looked like he was thinking about arguing but finally relented. “Okay.”

Emma demanded, “what aren’t you telling me about the gold?”

“I told you -”

“Bullshit. We don’t lie to each other. That goes hand in hand with the rules. Don’t make me start numbering them again.”

Peter was silent for a very, very long moment. The sound of Dwi and Cozzie playing together drifted down to the ocean. Gulls cried out. The waves crashed and pulled back away.

Emma said, “I want to know about the gold, and I want to know why Johnnie tried to kill you on the boat.”

“Fine,” said Peter, after a long moment. “Okay. But you just – have to listen. No interrupting.”

Emma pursed her lips together. She debated the odd request, before finally relenting, “alright. Deal.”

The backhoe roared. Peter had headphones on, blaring classic rock loud enough to drown out the machinery. How long had he been out here working? He didn’t

know. But it was hot, the sun up at the highest peak of its travel.

He shut off the backhoe, parking it out of direct sunlight. Wiped sweat off his brow, dirt smearing across his forehead, and started trying to find Johnnie. It took a while to locate the man, who had settled down in the shade trees by camp for a nap.

Fury filled Peter.

This wasn't the first time it had happened over the last few days of work. He ripped his headphones off, tossing them into a gym bag next to the seat. He jumped down out of the cab, stretched, and pondered the mound of dirt resting near the idle trammel. He pulled off his hat, tossing it onto the seat of the cab, and then made his way to where his partner was lounging.

Johnnie was playing on his phone. He barely looked up when Peter came over, tossed out a lazy sounding drawl of, "the trammel is working great now."

Peter frowned at the machine. "It is?"

"Yup. You were right. It was the whole bracket."

"How do you know?"

"Because the bracket went—" Johnnie started.

Peter interrupted him, "no. How do you know it's running well?"

"I started it up earlier. You saw me."

"I see."

"Look... you aren't my boss," said Johnnie, tartly. He shoved his phone into the front pocket of his shirt and sat up.

"Nope," said Peter. "I'm not."

"We're partners," insisted Johnnie. "*Equal* partners on this claim, you told me."

"Yep," said Peter. "We sure are. Might do you good if you did an equal share of the *work*, though. I've got some spoil over there, ready to separate."

Johnnie said, "yeah. Yeah, alright."

"I'll help you feed the trammel," said Peter. "But you have to run it."

Not even ten minutes later, the backhoe roared and sputtered and roared

again. The sun made everything seem pale. Peter glared out at each bucket of dirt that was dumped. Once more, Johnnie had stopped working. This time though, Peter had about had enough of it.

He jumped out of the cab and stormed over to Johnnie, a plan already forming. Johnnie was leaning on a shovel, smiling down at his phone. Peter grabbed the shovel, nearly knocking Johnnie over. "You're in the cab now."

Johnnie gave him a nasty look. "*Fine.*"

Once more, the engine sputtered to life.

The two men fed the trammel. They watched the machine turn. Most of the dirt was separated and fell through the perforated drum that spun and filtered away the dry dust and dirt from the heavier thicker spoil. The bigger pieces, mostly rocks and sticks, rattled down through the drum and out to a water basin they had rigged up.

Johnnie caught sight of something in the drum and yelled over the trammel's motor, "Hey!" He pointed down to the water basin. "Check it out!"

Peter scooted down to the end of the drum and looked down into the basin. He looked back up, making sure it was safe, before he stuck his hands in and started to fish around. He pulled up matted weeds and roots, throwing them out. He dug around again, pulling out even more rocks.

Peter glanced up, but Johnnie nodded at the basin again.

Once more, Peter dug his hand in, pulling out the debris. Then he stood up, grinning, and held up a shiny nugget the size of a walnut.

Johnnie raised his voice over the trammel's hum, "that's from the edge you worked over there!" Johnnie jerked his head toward the backhoe excavation site. "You should work that more maybe!"

Peter scoffed at Johnnie, who had put forth hardly any work since he started over at this site. Still, he tossed the nugget up to Johnnie. Johnnie let go of the trammel's hopper and dropped a fistful of rocky dirt. He caught the little gold nugget and held it up, twisting it in the sunlight.

Peter told him, "just keep feeding this baby, awright?"

“Okay mate.” Johnnie was clearly captivated by the gold.

He probably wouldn’t do any more work.

Lazy bastard.

Peter walked across the dig site, all the same. The sun beat down, sweat dripping from his face. When he got near the back hoe, he reached into his pocket, made sure the little lump was still there, and then climbed in.

Once more, he pulled his headphones from the gym bag and started the backhoe. The huge machine started puffing and sputtering, lumbering back over to the edge where Johnnie indicated.

Now that he was out of sight, Peter reached into his pocket and pulled out the plum sized lump of gold. He double checked that Johnnie wasn’t looking – that no one could see – and then put it into the gym bag next to his seat.

The backhoe huffed. The lumbering arm swung around, the motor roared, and the bucket’s teeth chewed into the red dirt.

Over by the truck, two kangaroo’s jumped between trees. The sun closed down toward the horizon, and the deer went to descend for a drink before bedding down for the night. The day crept to a close, with both a little and a lot to show for it.

Still, Johnnie and Peter kept working.

There was gold to be found.

And by the graces of all, Peter was going to get his share of it.

“So you stole from him,” concluded Emma, when her father was done with the story.

Peter looked away. “He was a lazy git. I gave him the share he deserved.”

“...and he found out.”

“And he found out.”

Emma frowned. She didn’t really know what to say about that. She would need to think on it. Gold seemed like a stupid thing to fight over these days. And partners were meant to be partners.

But then again, partners were meant to do their share of the work, too.

Peter asked, “do you think I’m a bad person? Lying and cheating on everyone.”

“I don’t know,” said Emma, finally. She stood up, stretching. The heat had reached a point of being unbearable. It was impossible to look out at the ocean for long, the waves catching the light and reflecting it back ten fold, like the sun had fallen to earth in liquid form.

She squinted at the horizon.

How far away from safety were they?

How far out from storm season?

“I think there are a lot more pressing things to worry about,” is what Emma finally settled on. “What does it matter out here, right?”

Peter stood up too, but he didn’t look like the answer had settled his worries, any. “So you’re saying yes, then.”

“I’m saying that we’re stranded on an island, with people who want us dead or worse. I don’t think it matters much.”

“Then why did you want to know so bad?”

“Because we’re stranded on this island *together*. You shouldn’t lie to me.”

“I didn’t lie,” protested Peter.

Emma said, “you didn’t tell me the whole story, either.”

Peter ducked his head, looking down at the dunes as they hiked back up towards the shelter. “That’s fair enough, I suppose. Awright. I won’t do that any more. If you ask me a question, I’ll give you the truth of the matter.”

“Good,” said Emma. “I’m going to ask you a question, then.”

“Awright.”

“If we find a few light logs and haul them back to camp, do you think we can rig up a raft? Something that can hold the dinghy?”

“Maybe,” said Peter. “Would be better if we could trim them up small.”

Dwi came into view. She was lounging in the shade of a coconut tree, Cozzie curled up panting in her lap. When they drew close, Dwi’s eyes opened. She

gave them a little wave.

Emma waved back. “But we don’t. So can we do it anyway?”

“Maybe,” said Peter. “I suppose it’s worth a shot. It’s not like we don’t have endless time on our hands these days. Just...not today. With this heat – and I’m sure the jungle’s even worse.”

Emma was happy enough to agree to that. She wanted to spend time with Cozzie, anyway. She had been missing him an awful lot, since he’d taken up sleeping just in front of the entrance to Dwi’s shelter.

He was a smart boi. He knew who needed him.

When Emma sat down, she patted her lap. Cozzie came over, laying down in it, rolling so his belly was up. Emma was quick to pet him, using that as another opportunity to check him over for ticks. She found one under his front right foreleg, and a second one on the side of his face.

Now that she knew it was a problem, Emma had promised that she would never let so many of them bite Cozzie again! He had even started to like the process, wagging his tail at all the attention a tick check brought him.

He was such a good boi!

Twenty-Five

The sun somehow turned hotter.

Emma was aware it must have been the season. That didn't make her feel any better. They put off venturing out into the jungle for another three days, before Emma stood up one morning, early, before the sun had even started to rise.

"That's it," she announced. "I'm going to look for the trees."

Peter asked, "what happened to waiting for the heat to break?"

"It's clearly not going to break any time soon. And I can't just keep sitting here all day, doing nothing."

"You'll get heat stroke if you try working in this weather."

"They're here," said Emma. "We all know that."

Dwi looked away, staring out at the ocean. Any mention of the traffickers made her get antsy and quiet.

Emma couldn't help herself. It was the heat, making her short-tempered. The heat and the vast empty stillness that her days had become.

"They're here," said Emma, again. "And they're probably scouring the island, every day, looking for Dwi – and for us."

Peter argued, "they're probably waiting for the heat to break, too."

"Bullshit," spat Emma. "And I didn't say *you* had to come. But I'm going."

And she turned on her heel, filling her backpack up with supplies.

Much to her surprise, it wasn't Peter that joined her – but Dwi. They packed enough food and water for two, took the knife, and went out. The jungle might have offered shade from the blazing sun, but the heaviness in the air was stifling.

The bugs were horrible, too.

But Emma found that just being out of the camp lifted her mood some. She felt like it must have been the same for Dwi, as the young woman kept stopping, collecting hibiscus flowers from this bush and that one.

They walked on game trails, for the most part; tracks worn into the ground from countless animals passing through them. Game trails were made when generations of animals used the same paths for hunting or gathering. It was far easier to walk on them than it was to

It took a lot of searching to find even one tree that they could use. It had to be something light weight, that would float, and also had to already have been knocked down in one of the previous storms.

By that point, Dwi had made hibiscus flower chains for the both of them. They chatted, teaching each other words in both languages, as they went.

Emma was thrilled with her find. The tree was small, a young one, and light enough that the two of them could probably haul it back to the camp. It would take a long time, though. They had to keep stopping to catch their breaths and re-hydrate.

On one of these breaks, there was a sound. Crackling, crunching, brush being moved – and then the deep voice of a man, speaking another language.

Dwi froze up, like a deer in headlights.

They both fell quiet.

Clearly, it was the traffickers. Emma had been right. They're searching the jungle.

In a low whisper, Emma said, "we have to go back to camp. To Cozzie."

Dwi nodded. Slowly, they lowered their bodies, crouching so they were beneath the thick brush, and started to creep back across the jungle floor. If they could get to the ravine, it would be an easy escape.

They stayed half crouched and hushed, tripping their way through the thick under brush. It didn't seem like they'd been spotted, and Emma wanted to keep it that way. One of the game trails led straight to the ravine, the high brush on

either side of the hollow keeping them concealed from sight. The ground there was wet and marshy, damp from the storms and from a nearby lake that held the rain.

The water spilled out into the game trail, flooding it. Emma said, “it looks shallow enough to cross.”

Dwi nodded, and the two hurried on. The water came up to their shins, but no higher. It was warm. Mud and algae sloshed over their feet. Something stung and pricked at Emma’s legs, but she assumed they were thorny plants and kept going.

For once, it seemed like luck was on their side.

They made it to the ravine. Dwi and Emma broke out into a run, charging forward – and nearly slamming into Peter, who had brought Cozzie along with him.

“Alright,” said Peter. “You were right. We should be - “

“They’re here,” pants Emma. “The men are here! We heard them!”

“Coming,” says Dwi. “Coming here! We must go, fast, fast!”

Peter looked baffled. He swung a hand over his shoulder, jabbing a thumb towards the camp. “Back there?”

“No, we can’t do that. We can’t – they can’t find the camp. And they’re moving this way, too. We’ve got to go - “Emma’s gaze swung towards the direction she knew the volcano to be in. “High ground. We’ve got to go, now.”

Peter said, “well, hang on, Em! You’re bleeding! Dwi is, too!”

“It’s just from the thorns,” said Emma, trying to brush it aside.

Dwi looked down at their legs. She startled, “leeches!”

“Leeches?” Emma looked down. There were, indeed, fat, bulbous leeches clinging to her legs, from the shins down. The pricks she had felt while wading through the water had been the creatures biting her. Dwi’s legs weren’t in any better shape. Blood dripped down their damp, grimy skin.

“I’ll get them off,” said Peter. “It’ll just take a hot second.”

He crouched down, carefully pinching at the heads of one leech. They held

on, like a tick but with even more teeth. He had to pull hard to get it to let go. Emma couldn't help but yelp.

Peter mumbled, "sorry," and moved onto the next one.

Once each leech was removed, Peter set about doing the same to Dwi. Large, circular wounds were left in their wake; each one the size of a nickle.

Peter told them, "we'll need to try and clean those later, so they don't get infected."

"Later," agreed Emma. "Right now, we have to move."

It hurt, leaving everything that they had worked for behind. That was the only option they had, though.

They had to put as much space between the traffickers and themselves as possible. And Emma knew this part of the island.

She knew it well.

With the ravine behind them, they wove through the trees. Fear gave them speed. Emma braved the Boar Stream, just this one last time. The three drank greedily from the water, and slept there in shifts, each one getting a few hours of sleep.

When they woke, long before the sun rose, they were met with an awful fate. The night before, they hadn't taken the time to boil the water. Now, they were faced with stomach cramps of the worst sort!

"We can't skip that step again," groaned Peter.

Emma agreed, "I feel *miserable!*"

But there was no time to rest and wait for the cramps to pass. They had to move on.

Back to the Mountain Base. From the bay, they could see that the ship had, indeed, taken up the same spot as before. But there wasn't time to waste. They refilled the backpack with fruit and coconuts, and then they started to climb.

Emma led the way, showing Dwi and Peter where to put their hands, their feet. Up and up they went, pausing once they had gotten to the ledge where

Emma's reflection device had once sat.

Peter asked, "what are we doing?"

"Going up," said Emma. "We need to be able to see where they are."

Dwi looked down, over the ledge. "Men, coming."

And, yes, they were. Their voices drifting on the wind.

Emma swore. "Do you think they saw us from across the bay?"

Peter shook his head. "I don't think so. They probably have more than one group out looking. Fuck, the weather's been on our side. They *had* to have been hoping for the heat to pass and just – given up on that. It's just been sheer dumb luck we haven't been found so far."

"We just have to keep climbing," said Emma. "Come on."

Two hours later, they had traveled thousands of feet. They were almost to the top of the volcano. Emma had made this trip more than once. The other expedition was visible now, climbing up a different route. There were four of them, all unfamiliar faces. But they were *clearly* part of the trafficking group.

Peter was right, though.

It didn't seem like they *knew* Emma and her group were up here.

They also weren't moving anywhere near as fast as their group. The men moved far more slowly, and the path they had taken was more difficult, too. Emma ventured, "it should be safe to take a break. A short one, just long enough to get a drink?"

The other two eyeballed the group below them. Peter eventually relented. They cracked open two coconuts, splitting the liquid inside. Cozzie, who been alternatively carried under Peter's arm and passed along from ledge to ledge in a sort of carry-chain, whined and lapped up his share of the water.

They were careful to put the coconut shells back in the bag, so it wouldn't give away their position. And then they climbed again, moving upwards until the sky started to set. Cozzie was whining and whimpering at each pass by now, and the wound on his leg had started to spot blood again.

“They’re going to have to stop,” said Emma. “They won’t risk hiking at night.”

Peter pointed out, “we shouldn’t do that either.”

“Another hour, and we’ll be at the summit.”

“There are snakes! And – Dwi and I have never been up here, Emma.”

“I can lead us,” said Emma. “We can do this. If we reach the summit first, I *promise*, we can do this.”

And so they kept climbing. The hibiscus flowers around Emma’s neck had started to wilt, but she didn’t have the strength to pause and throw them out. Every time Cozzie whimpered, it was like a stab to the heart. Dusk set around them. The men seemed to have stopped – they were at least no longer in sight.

The island looked different from up here. The added height gave a stunning sight: the sun, melting into the ocean. The sky darkening, the tops of the trees spread out in all directions. This was a sight that spoke to the heart.

Emma had clung to it, in her early days of exploring the island. It had been like a balm. She could come up here to the summit, and see the entire world. Back then, Cozzie had jumped and leaped from ledge to ledge behind her, like there was goat in him.

Now, though, each step was jarring. The blood was once more matting her fur. His tail was down between his legs, and he spent more time in one of their arms than he did walking.

All the hard work at getting better, gone.

Just like that.

But they couldn’t stop.

Not until they reached the summit.

They opted not to light a fire, even though it was colder at the top of the volcano than it had been down in the jungle. The summit was dangerous. But it was something, a glint of hope. They sat close together, Cozzie in Emma’s lap and Dwi leaning against her shoulder; Peter, just a few feet away, using his knife to

cut up their last mango.

Emma split her share with Cozzie, hand feeding it to him. Cozzie swallowed them all whole. She fussed over his wound, but there was nothing up here to try and patch it with, and they didn't have any water to spare for cleaning it.

"Silly Cozzie," cooed Emma. "Chew it, boi. It's better that way."

Cozzie's tail thumped, just twice.

He ate another sliver of mango. The last one. He begged for more.

"I'm sorry, boi. That's it. That's all we have," said Emma. "Tomorrow, you'll eat better tomorrow. I promise."

But Dwi reached over, feeding Cozzie a piece of her mango. "Good boy, Cozzie."

Emma gave her a grateful smile. "Thank you."

After a moment, Peter fed the dog, too. And around them, the night drifted on.

Emma didn't know what time it was. Just that it was late, and Cozzie was in pain. His whining had woken her up.

"Shush, boi, it's okay," cooed Emma. She hugged Cozzie close against her chest, stroking his back and his side. "It's okay. It's okay, boi."

A strong breeze had started up. There was nothing to block it up here. No trees, no shelter. The wind carried dirt and ash with it, a flurry of grit. Peter grumbled something in his sleep, his back to Emma.

Dwi, pressed up against Emma's back. The moon was starting to wane. Emma stared out at the island and wondered: *how much more can go wrong?*

She hoped it was a question that would be left unanswered. Emma was tired. Her strong drive was starting to fade.

Too much more, and Emma wasn't sure that she would be able to handle it. Even now, the thought of the new day was something that she dreaded. Once more, they would have to face their grim reality.

They were on the top of the volcano, with no food and no water. The

traffickers were fast rising up after them. They had nothing – a single knife, a back pack, and coconut shells. Cozzie was hurt, and Emma was worried he couldn't take much more.

These thoughts haunted her, keeping her awake the rest of the night. Even the sight of the sun rising over the island couldn't quell her sorrows.

The gulls screeched with the dawn of the new day. The sound of the ocean waves crashing was a distant thing, like slow, steady drumbeats.

Carefully, Emma put Cozzie down and stood up.

She couldn't see the traffickers. That was definitely a *bad* thing.

Emma woke the others up. "We need to go."

"What?" Peter rubbed at his face, groggy.

"We need to start down the other side," said Emma. "Before the sun rises and it gets too hot. It'll be easier than the trip up."

Dwi shuffled to the edge of the cliff, bracing both hands on the stone and peering down it. "Men...gone?"

"I can't see them. I have no idea where they are," said Emma.

Peter suggested, "maybe they went back down."

"There's no way that happened," said Emma.

"We need a plan," insisted Peter. "We can't keep running around with no goal."

Emma said, "the plan is we get down on the other side. I bet you anything they searched this section first. That's why they're climbing, now. They couldn't find us. So we get down the volcano, and we get something to drink, and I patch up Cozzie."

"And *then* what?"

"And then we find one of their skiffs, and we take it."

Peter stared at her.

Emma stared back.

"The heat's gotten to your head," said Peter. "You *can't* be suggesting we attack the men that are trying to kill us and *take* Dwi!"

“We need to get off this island,” said Emma. “And this is the only way I can come up with. So unless you have a better idea, we start down the volcano, *now.*”

They did not make it down the volcano.

In fact, they had barely started the climb down the summit when it became clear *why* they couldn't see the traffickers. Whatever path the men had taken, it led them in a twisting spiral – so as Emma and her group went *down* the west side...the men came *up* the west side.

“There,” bellowed the clear leader of the group. He pointed up.

“Shit!” Emma passed Cozzie back up to her father. “Go! Go! Back to the summit!”

And the chase began – only Emma's group were at a clear disadvantage. Passing Cozzie between them slowed them down. Peter and the dog hit the summit. Then Dwi. Emma hooked her hand around the ledge and had herself halfway hauled up when a hand grabbed her by the ankle, wrenching her backwards.

“Emma,” shouted Peter. He hit the ground, grabbing Emma by the hand and pulling.

Emma kicked out. She caught the leader in the face with her stolen boots, kicking and kicking. There was a wet pop as Leader's nose broke. He let go of Emma, and Peter pulled her up onto solid ground. They scrambled away from the ledge, and the other men swarmed up onto the summit.

“Found you,” snarled the leader.

At his side, there were two other men. One broad shouldered, with a thick black beard. The other small and squat, carrying what was clearly a loaded pistol. They were sweaty and dirty, all of them looking like the trek up the volcano had nearly done them in.

“Get back,” warned Peter, putting himself between the men and the two young woman. Cozzie, at Peter's feet, snarled.

The leader said something in his native tongue, and then he fired off a shot, and it hit Peter right in the shoulder. Peter went down down on his ass, grunting in pain as he pressed a hand to the wound. In the same moment, Cozzie, hero that he was, charged. He bit the man with the gun right on the leg, snarling and shaking his head.

Clearly, no one had warned them about the dog. The leader dropped the gun, staggered backwards – and vanished over the ledge.

It was a flurry, after that. The men had machetes and they charged forward. Someone kicked Cozzie in the side; the dog giving a high yelp. Peter pulled out his own knife, trying to swipe it at the men. Dwi grabbed Cozzie and started down the mountain.

Peter shouted, “go! Emma, go!”

“Dad! I’m not leaving you,” wailed Emma.

“It’s not up for debate,” shouted Peter. And then, evidently figuring that Emma would have more luck surviving a broken neck than she would be chopped up, he pushed her backwards, down the ledge.

Twenty-Six

“Well well...”

Emma startled awake. Everything hurt. There was dried blood, matted to the side of her head, coating one arm. It felt like she'd been thrown in the dryer and left to tumble.

“If it isn't girl,” said the leader, voice a low drawl. “The *smart* girl.”

Emma groaned. She thought that she might vomit, but when she went to sit up, a boot nailed her in the chest and knocked her back down.

“See what in my hand?” The leader wiggled the gun he was holding. His arms were covered in faded tattoo's. Hooks, anchors, and other nautical images coated his skin. “No one here to help you. Your friends gone. Just you.”

What had happened?

Emma could barely remember.

She had been on the mountain. The men had shown up. Her father, he'd been shot. Dwi and Cozzie – what had happened to them?

Emma couldn't recall. Trying to think make her head hurt. When Leader pulled his foot back, Emma held her hand up and pressed the tips of her fingers to her head. She'd split it open on the rocks, at some point.

“Up,” barked the leader.

Emma stood, her knees weak. The world swayed around her. She groaned again. Everything hurt. A shallow row of fog had rolled in from the bay. The fog spread a soft benediction over the jungle floor where they stood.

The air felt wrong. Was a storm coming in?

Maybe.

She couldn't tell from here. She didn't have time to try and figure it out. The leader stabbed the gun between Emma's shoulder blades. "To beach, girl."

The two hiked together, Emma ahead, the leader two feet behind. They didn't take the ravine. Emma suspected the man didn't know about it.

She hoped that her father and Dwi were okay. She hoped that they were taking good care of Cozzie.

"You should have left the whore," said the leader. "Would have left you to rot on the island. You, too much work. Her, worth very much."

Emma stumbled over an up-turned root. "The only *whore* I know here is you. You've sold your soul!"

The leader laughed. "I have sold everything! Very rich man. Soon to be more rich."

Emma grit her teeth. She knew that fighting would only make things worse. She had to be smart about this.

The leader was taunting her, though. He goaded, "lost girl, already sold. Buyer very good. Cannot lose his business. Needed her back, so we stay. You? No one need you. I sell your organs to a hospital. Top dollar!"

He was just trying to get under her skin.

Emma knew that.

He was *trying* to upset her.

To trip her up.

The leader said, "we could sell you. White girls, they not as popular. Sell for less."

Emma focused on where she was putting her feet. The mosquitoes swarmed around her, and the heat crashed into them. It was like the air had turned into taffy, stretching around Emma instead of letting her walk through it peacefully.

"Might keep you," said the leader. "Might keep you as ship-girl."

Emma couldn't cry.

She *wouldn't* cry.

"That a good idea," said the leader. He jabbed her with the gun again, hard

enough Emma almost over balanced. “You think?”

“Rot in Hell,” spat Emma.

The insult earned her a crack of the pistol against her shoulder. She cried out, falling down. Her hand got caught in the hibiscus necklace, snapping it. The wilting flowers scattered, lost in the fog.

Tears spilled hot over Emma’s cheeks. She didn’t want to cry, but she couldn’t help it. She was scared and in pain. She missed her dad and Dwi. She missed *Cozzie*.

And Emma was just as afraid for them as she was for herself.

Some would say that Emma did not have good luck.

After hiking through the jungle for hours at gun point – after everything that had happened so far – Emma would *almost* agree with them.

Except that they were closer to the shore. Emma recognized this part. They were only a few miles from the fruit grove, where she had first made camp. She could hear the waves crashing against the shore in the distance.

And she saw, by freak chance, by pure dumb luck, her key to freedom.

It was just five feet away, on a low hanging, springy looking branch. A tiger snake, basking in the mid-day sun.

Emma swallowed, hard. She would only have one shot at this. It could get her killed. But she would die if she didn’t do anything, too.

So – she took her chance.

Swiftly, Emma spun around, making a grab for the gun. It went off. The sound of the shot seemed muted. She shoved, and the leader stumbled.

His back hit the tree. The snake fell from the branch, landing on him. And in his terror, swinging around, trying to get it off him – the snake bit him.

Emma ran.

She had to find Dwi, Cozzie and Peter. They would be okay. They *would be*. The words echoed in her head, and endless loop.

A psalm. A gospel. A reassurance.

They would *all* be okay. The four of them were family now, and that was the first rule. Don't leave your family behind.

Adrenalin made quick work of the distance to the beach. She came out just below the grove, like she'd thought. A heavy fog lingered on the bay. It blocked out most of the shore.

Were there skiffs anchored there?

Emma couldn't tell.

Where was she supposed to look?

Would they have gone back to their camp? Were they still on the mountain?

Fear gripped her. It was getting harder and harder to breathe. The migraine throbbed behind her eyes, as if trying to match the same beat as the waves.

In the distance, a gun shot went off. How close was that? Were they shooting at her?

It was impossible to tell.

Emma pushed onward, into the fog. Following the very edge of the shore, trudging through the thick, wet sand.

There!

In the distance!

A skiff!

It bobbed in the waves, only barely visible through the fog. A way off the island! A way to safety, to help, to *home*! Only – Emma couldn't leave yet. She needed Dwi, Peter, and Cozzie. It was like her brain was stuck in this endless loop, trying to push together pieces of three puzzles that had gotten mixed up with each other.

Shouting split through the air. Another gun shot, this time closer. They *are* being aimed at her. There was no option. She had to go forward.

Emma threw herself into the water. It felt like she was trying to wade through molasses. Suddenly, it was very clear how thirsty she was. How hungry, and hot, and tired.

Those few steps seemed to take a year, all on their own. Everything felt

numb and hot. She hurt, so badly. And she was so, so scared.

She pulled herself up into the boat and yanked up the anchor line. Emma grabbed the oars, making to push away from the island – and realized, for the first time, that she had been shot. Blood wept openly from her hand, but it was like looking at a picture. Knowing it was there but being unable to feel it.

Emma started to paddle. Away from the ship, from the shooting, from the screaming. Out, along the shore, along the crest of the bay – towards the volcano.

Her father had been shot. There was no way that he had gone far. And if Dwi was smart, she would have found the remnants of the Mountain Base, and been able to hole up there with Cozzie. Maybe they were together. Maybe they were okay.

Maybe's were worth clinging too.

Later, Emma would look back on this moment and not be sure how she managed it. Getting the skiff to the other side of the bay, and pulling it on shore. She hid it in brush, in palm leaves and banana leaves, and staggered past the rotting forms of the traffickers, ravaged by animals, and towards her base.

At first, it didn't look like anyone else was there.

That last glint of hope vanished. Emma's stomach dropped. She had never felt this bad in her life. Even first washing up onto the island hadn't been this terrible. She was hot and cold all at once. It felt like her skin was crawling. She could both eat an entire buffet and never eat again.

And the camp was empty.

The ruined base was still ruined. The island was still quiet. Emma was still alone. With a wrecked sob, she sunk to the ground. Shoulders shaking, she wept.

Emma was so busy weeping, she didn't notice the movement in the shadows, the parting of the brush out near the jungle's edge.

A voice, "Emma?"

Emma jumped, suffocating on her own tears. "D-Dwi? Dwi, it *is* you!"

She tried to get up, but fell. Her legs were so weak, everything felt too much. It was only the excited yapping of Cozzie that gave Emma the strength to stand up on her second try.

“Emma, hurry. Peter! He on the boat!” Dwi was clutching Cozzie against his chest. The dog’s tail wagged, just twice. There was blood on Dwi’s arm, dripping down from his black fur.

“You have Cozzie,” sobbed Emma. She was too gone to control herself now. “You have him! My boi! My boi is here!”

“We hurry,” said Dwi. “Come!”

She meant to go into the jungle. Emma almost followed her, getting several steps forward before remembering - “wait! I have a boat! This way!”

Confused, Dwi followed. They went back to the boat, and Dwi helped Emma uncover it. Together, the two young women pushed it back into the water.

Emma said, “I don’t know if I can row.”

Dwi gave her a reassuring smile. “It is okay. I row.”

Cozzie drug himself across the bottom of the skiff, so he could collapse against one of Emma’s legs.

She reached down with her good handing, giving him an absent pet. “Almost,” she promised. “We’re almost there, Cozzie boi. Almost there.”

Dwi nodded. “Cozzie be okay. You be okay. I will row. You look for ship, Help guide.”

“I can do that,” said Emma. But already, it was hard to focus. She could only hope her promises to Cozzie wouldn’t end up being lies.

It took nearly an hour to row even half the distance to the ship. The fog began lifting. A sharp edge of a hull cut through the fog. Then the pewter ship materialized, ghostly, as big and gray as a mountainside. Emma murmured, “just like on TV.”

“What you say?” Dwi looked exhausted. She had done almost all of the rowing. There was sweat and sea water in equal amounts drenching her.

“This is a *huge* ship,” said Emma, eyeing the vessel. From shore, it had looked so compact. But up close, it was clearly more than that. The words *Your World* were printed on the ship’s hull.

Cozzie whined.

From up on the ship, a great shouting commenced. Someone spider crawled down the ship’s side. It was Peter. He jumped into a second boat and paddled out. He arrived at the boat, talking. He was talking, but Emma couldn’t hear him.

Or she could hear him, but the words didn’t make sense.

Cozzie was whimpering louder, now. He kept nudging at Emma’s bloodied hand.

“Need help,” said Dwi.

“What?” Peter yelled. The crashing waters threatened to swallow all other sound. “Dwi, what?”

“Need help,” repeated Dwi.

“I’m here to help, don’t worry!” Peter grabbed at a tow line, hooked it with one arm, and swung it out to Dwi.

Dwi caught the line, and said, “hurry now. Go fast. Need help.

“Tie off the line,” instructed Peter. “And then get in this boat.”

Dwi struggled to listen. She tied off the line, and then passed Cozzie to Peter. The dog wailed in pain. His hind leg was once more soaked in blood, the bullet wound having been ripped open.

Getting Emma across was harder. There were screams and shouts and gun shots ringing out on shore. Emma staggered, blood loss, dehydration, and exhaustion hitting her all at once.

Peter helped Emma into the boat, and then helped Dwi into it. There was a crack of a gun being fired – but they were lucky. The bullet missed them, hitting the hull of the ship instead.

“Cozzie,” groaned Emma. “We have to help him.”

“Cozzie okay,” said Dwi, trying to be soothing. She dipped her hand in the ocean, cupping some water, and patting it onto Emma’s forehead. Not far from

them, a dorsal fin broke through the water. It belonged to a large tiger shark, come to investigate the blood. There were many dangers in the ocean, and not all of them were men. If they went over board now, they would surely be devoured.

“He needs me. He’s hurt, he’s hurt, I have to help —”

“Cozzie okay,” repeated Dwi. “Cozzie here. We all here.”

Peter promised, “we’re going to get you home safe.”

* (start of serious edit; include a flare gun)

The men still aboard the ship hauled the skiff up. They weren’t traffickers. Just men hired to man the ship, paid a lot of money and in over their heads.

As soon as the ship was tied off at the side, Dwi ripped off her hibiscus necklace. She stuck the dozen flowers in her mouth, one by one, chewed them, spit them into her hands, and packed the moist pulp into the gunshot wound on Emma’s hand.

“Cozzie,” she whined.

Cozzie licked Emma on the side of the face.

Dwi promised, “Cozzie okay. He here. We all here.”

Men helped pull Emma out of the boat. Dwi passed Cozzie to Peter, telling him, “careful. Not enough. Only flowers for Emma.” She lowered her voice, as if Emma could understand her in a fever stricken state, “Cozzie not okay. Cozzie hurt. Help. Need help.”

Emma was laid down on the deck of the ship.

Cozzie wiggled, whining, barking until Peter put him down. The dog hobbled over, collapsing in a heap against Emma’s side. He rested his muzzle on her stomach, head bobbing with each ragged breath that Emma took.

They were both breathing hard.

Shock. Blood loss. The start of infection. Hunger. Thirst.

So much happening in such a short amount of time.

People had crowded up onto the deck. Girls. Young woman. Ages ranging from younger than seven to barely as old as Dwi. Men on board, too.

One girl pushed her way forward. She called out, “adhine?”

Dwi's head snapped up, fast enough it had to hurt her neck.

"Adhine," called the girl, again.

Dwi sprung to her feet. She flung herself at the other girl, sobbing. They both hugged each other, not letting go.

Peter looked at Emma, and then started scanning the crowd. There! The man he was looking for!

"Hey!" Peter shouldered forward.

A man in the back of the crowd tilted his head in question.

"Yeah, you," Peter said, his tone dry, insistent.

The man stepped forward. "Try and use some respect, why don't you?"

He had a heavy Australian accent. Clearly, the captain of the ship.

"Respect?" Peter snorted. "Pull anchor. We need to go."

"I am the captain of this vessel," the captain said. "I have an obligation—"

Peter waved a hand at crowd of malnourished girls. With the confrontation brewing, the few older girls had started to rush the youngest ones back under deck. "Look, mate, you just get that anchor hoisted and move us out. We're establishing radio connections with the nearest port. I'm sure -" Peter paused. He hoped diplomacy would be the way out, and offered, "I'm sure you just got tangled up in this mess on mistake, but you don't want a dead girl on your hands on top of all this. Specially not when she's my daughter."

The captain told him, "I'm just a free-for-hire boat captain. This is my crew. Those men..." He looks toward the island and the men they left ashore, "They are my passengers. Paying me good money to chart their course and even better money to not ask questions."

More than likely, that was a lie. No one could see something like this and just be *fine* with it...unless they were involved, of course. But Peter knew that risk when he got onto the ship. Getting his daughter off this island was the most important thing. He'd fight through Hell twice over to do that.

These men, cowardly as they were, wouldn't stop him.

Peter stepped toward the captain. He held one arm at an odd angle. The

bullet wound had quit bleeding, but it ached. “I call that bullshit!”

The crowd had cleared away almost completely. Many of the girls had been ushered away by the younger members of the crew; the men with soft faces, who might have ended up here without meaning it. They had a different look about them than the Captain did.

Dwi had pulled Emma’s head into her lap, fretfully petting her hair. Cozzie growled from where he lay beside his owner, but was too weak to do much more than that.

One of the captain’s mate stepped in from the bridge, smoothed out the side of his shirt, and wrapped his hand around the grip of a holstered pistol. The captain stepped toward Peter, saying, “I have an obligation to all passengers. Specifically to the ones that hired me.”

“Well, those - “Peter jerked his head toward shore. “They aren’t passengers now, mate.”

Peter eased his good hand behind his back.

“I’m not your mate,” the captain said. “I am the captain of this ship.” He looked over his shoulder, briefly taking his eyes off Peter. “First Mate Sims, take this man into custody.”

Sims pulled the pistol and pointed the weapon at Peter’s head. It seemed like the air was turned to ice.

Everyone went very still.

Dwi started to sob.

Emma was crying, too, though it was hard to tell if it was from the pain, the feverish delusions, or if she was aware enough to be afraid of what was happening.

“Please,” begged Dwi. “Please, please.”

Then she broke off, frantically talking in her own language.

Cozzie, roused by the tension, tried to struggle to his paws. His back leg wouldn’t hold him. He fell back down with a yelp.

Peter took a deep breath.

“Fine,” he said. “Fine. Just - “

Very slowly, Peter stretched his arms into the air. There was a clatter of motion behind them. Dwi lurched half into the small dinghy that she and Emma had been floating in, and came back out with a flare gun held in her shaking hands.

“Stop,” warned Dwi.

When the first mate made to turn the gun on her, Dwi pulled the trigger. There was a burst of immense light, the red arc of the flare rocketing across the deck, and then a pained scream as it lodged into the first mate’s stomach. There was a crackle of light, red and white, and blood. A wet, sucking sound filled the air.

Peter took his chance and lurched forward. With a wail, he slammed his wounded shoulder into the first mate’s chest, twisting the gun from his hand, and then brought the hilt of the gun down onto the temple of the man. Dwi *screamed*. It was a sound taken up by the few girls still lingering on the deck.

Heaving, fighting against pain and exhaustion, sweat pouring down his face, Peter stepped away. The first mate fell to the floor, dead. Blood seeped out across the deck.

Peter swung, turning the gun to the captain.

“I’ll do it,” said Peter.

The captain froze.

The air was so thick, you could choke on it. The ship was so quiet, even the sound of the sea seemed to be distant.

“By God, I will kill you, and I’ll hoist anchor myself,” warned Peter. “You’ve got one chance left.”

It was a stand off.

The screaming had calmed. All but two girls had fled under the deck, terrified that the anger of the men would be taken out on them.

Finally, the captain, unable to swallow the frog in his throat, said, “okay, okay.”

He raised his hands, half-stepping away from Peter.

“Let’s just take a breath,” tried the captain.

“No,” said Peter.

“You have to let me talk,” the captain reasoned.

Peter countered, “you have a ship full of stolen children. I don’t have to let you do anything. I’m the one with the gun, in case you haven’t noticed.”

The captain went quiet.

Very, very quiet.

Then, as if finally realizing that he had no foot to stand on, he said, “alright. Sims, go see that the anchor is hoisted. Fire the engines and ready to navigate to sea.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” said Sims.

Peter turned the gun on Sims, instead. “Don’t get on the radio until we are out in international waters.”

“I will see to that myself,” the captain told him, smoothing out his ivory uniform. He was clearly struggling to keep him composure.

“And him...” Peter lowered his arm. The pain was staggering. It felt like there was fire in his bones. He looked over to Dwi and Emma, then to the dead body on the floor. “Let’s get him thrown over board. Come on now, get at it.”

Two other members of the crew stepped forward. One took the first mate by the shoulders, the other by the ankles. Together, they hefted him over the side of the ship. There was a great splash as he was dropped into the ocean. The sharks would have a meal of him, for certain.

“I don’t have anything to do with -” The captain cleared his throat. “I had no part in this. In the girls. That’s not me. That *wasn’t* my doing.

“Yeah. I’m sure you had all these stowaways without knowing.”

“I’m not a -”

“You can explain it to the authorities,” Peter said. “While, *hopefully*, I tell them how you helped us by getting us out of here by radioing for help.” Peter paused. The captain stared at him. “You get us out of here, and I’ll make sure

they hear all about it. How you graciously let us board. How you did everything you could to get us out of here.”

The captain debated for a moment. Then, finally, nodded. “We’ll get you to international waters. I’ll make certain of it.”

“Good,” said Peter. He was starting to sway, now. “Good. You do that. You – you do that.”

And then, when both captain and first mate had vanished from sight, Peter staggered across the deck. He all but collapsed on the ground beside his daughter.

Peter reached for Emma’s hand. Dwi had dressed the wound so well, the bleeding had stopped and healthy color returned. One of the other girls had placed a cold cloth on Emma’s forehead.

“It’s okay,” said Peter, more to himself than to Dwi. “She’ll be okay. It was – this wound’s not that bad. Not that big. She’ll be fine.”

Dwi reached over, taking his hand and moving it away from Emma’s injury. “Okay now,” she said, with a sniffle. “She heal. Flowers good. Emma strong.”

“Yeah. Yeah, she is.”

“Cozzie, very bad. Very hurt.”

Peter looked at the dog. His eyes were half-closed, and he peered up at Peter expectantly.

What was he expecting?

Peter wasn’t sure.

For all that the dog had turned into a hero, Peter hadn’t spent much time with it before now.

Behind them, the whole bay and island lit up like a glorious mansion in the distance. The expansive sight of a tropical paradise, beguiling. It looked like it came from a post card. Like it was advertising a resort.

It didn’t look like the Hell it was. It didn’t look like it had been the most terrible experience of Peter’s life.

A grind from the ship’s bow screeched out. Peter looked towards the sound.

The ship's anchor cranked and crawled upwards, as it was slowly hoisted out of the water.

A rumbling bellowed from deep within the ship. The ship turned away from the bay and headed out to sea. The cove dimmed slowly out of view. The cove where Emma revived and cared for Peter; the cove where Peter and Emma reestablished trust; the cove where Cozzie saved them all; the moment seemed to stand there an eternity.

Maybe it hadn't all been Hell.

Maybe, wild as it seemed, there really had been some highlights to being stranded. If not, Peter never would have been able to reconnect with his daughter.

He would be – where?

If Emma hadn't been on the ship, where would *he* be?

Dead, no doubt.

And without Dwi, Cozzie would have been lost to the volcano. Without Dwi, his daughter would never have been able to get the skiff out to sea. The rifle fire still cracking through the air from shore was just one more reminder of how close they had all come to death.

“Thank you, Dwi,” Peter said, voice choked.

Dwi looked up at him, eyes still brimming with tears. “No. Thank you, Peter. Needed help. Peter helped. Emma helped. Thank you.”

Peter sniffed, taking a moment to gather himself. Then he stood up, hunting around until he was able to make his way to the bridge. Dwi stayed with Emma and Cozzie, unwilling to leave either of them.

In the bridge, the captain was making calls into the radio. He looked up as Peter walked in.

Exhausted, Peter slouched against one of the walls. His shoulder had started to bleed again.

The captain went back to the radio. “*Your World* calling in. Mayday, mayday...”

“You can’t get anyone?”

The captain shook his head. “No.”

Peter asked, “are we in international waters?”

The captain nodded at Peter and held up a finger to silence him. “Mayday, mayday, we have passengers aboard who need medical attention.”

“*Passengers.*” Peter snarled to himself, turning to look out the windows of the bridge, the vision of the bay long dissolved by now. The captain let off the button of the radio’s mic. “

“Go to the lower decks,” said the captain.

Peter frowned. “What?”

The captain took a deep breath. “Go to the lower decks and look around.” A pause, and then, “and you remember what you said to me. You’re going to tell them I helped.”

“I will,” said Peter. “I’ll tell them. You get them on the radio, and I’ll tell them.”

The captain nodded again, and then turned back to the mic. “This is Captain Tully, aboard the vessel *Your World*. Mayday, mayday, from the Arafura Sea... we are low on fuel and need assistance. We have wounded on board numbering multiple casualties, over.”

Peter stepped out, walking towards the gangway. As he moved away, he heard a crackling voice sound out, “attention, ‘Your World’, this is the Australian Navy Vessel Hobart. We read you, five by five. What is your situation over -”

Relief filled Peter as he marched down the grated steel stairs of the decks. He stepped toward some of the staterooms and the cargo holds. The smell of urine and feces greeted him as he rounded a corner towards a set of heavy steel doors. He threw the arm lock that folded down over the door. The door creaked open.

Instantly, a rush of sound.

Peter couldn’t fathom why some of the girls were left on the upper deck and others were kept beneath. Or rather, he refused to think about the reasons for it.

Instead, he pushed the doors open wide, and held out a hand. One by one, he

helped the girls up the steps and out through the doorway.

One by one, they staggered and stumbled up the stairs and out on the deck into the daylight. The soft velvet of evening began to caress the deck of *Your World* and all upon her. Emma had been moved to one of the bunks, Cozzie with her.

This left Dwi to help Peter raid the ship's galley. They brought plates of food and jugs of juice out to everyone on the deck. The girls, dozens of them, with matted hair and dirty faces, gingerly took food and passed it around. They gathered out on the deck, looking at the evening fall and the stars, one by one, blink themselves alight.

When all were fed and watered, Peter went to find his daughter.

She was awake, but exhausted and in pain. The fever had subsided, for the most part. She held Cozzie to her chest, talking softly to him.

Peter sat down on the edge of the bed. "Hey. How are you feeling?"

"Tired," admitted Emma. "Worried."

"It's okay. You'll heal."

"No, not about me. Whatever Dwi did, it's helped - "

Peter interrupted, "you had such a fever. And it came on so fast!"

"I'm worried about Cozzie," said Emma, softly.

She ran her hands through her dog's fur. Cozzie's ears barely twitched.

Peter put a hand on his flank. "We've called for help. I'll do everything I can for him, Emma. I promise."

And for the first time ever, Emma believed him.

Twenty-Seven

Emma had longed to see land so badly before in her life. The ride back to Australia seemed like a blur. Emma drifted in and out of awareness as her fever came and went, ebbing and flowing like the waves.

She didn't much remember the Australian Naval ship arriving to escort the ship to Christmas Island, and she didn't remember being loaded into a medical bay on board of the ship. There were just flashes.

Dwi talking to her.

Her father, running his hands through her sweat damp hair.

Her headache spiking. Doctors talking, but their voices too low to make out. The darkness of unconsciousness. The blaring white of room's walls.

And then, suddenly, crashing awareness.

Emma woke to the smell of cleaner. A thin white blanket was draped over her. The ceiling overhead was faintly yellowed with age. Her hand hurt. Upon inspection, it was wrapped tightly with bandages.

She wiggled each finger, one by one. They all worked.

Slowly, she leveraged herself up. Before she could fully sit up, Peter was there, hands on her shoulders, guiding Emma back down.

"Easy," he said. "Don't move around too much, okay? God, fuck, I am so glad to see those eyes open. I'm so fucking glad to see you up, baby girl."

Peter plastered a kiss to her forehead.

Emma cleared her throat. It hurt. Talking felt like trying to push the words out from around a bundle of steel wool. "Dad?"

"I'm right here, honey, I'm right here. It's okay, Emma."

“Where...Where am I?”

“We’re on a naval ship. Australian. They showed up to escort us back to Christmas Island. It’s been – three days, honey, you’ve been out of it for three days.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in.

Emma understood them, but at the same time, she didn’t.

Christmas Island. That was where they held foreign nationals, right? And the ship– that made sense. She’d gotten hurt. She’d been shot. And her head had been hurt. And she’d had a fever.

Okay.

That made sense.

Emma remembered those things.

But the idea that it had really been three days was *baffling* to her. Emma hadn’t slept in past dawn since crashing on the island.

Suddenly, a thin paper cup was pressed into her hands. The water tasted faintly tinny, but Emma drank it greedily all the same.

Peter kept saying, “easy,” over and over again, like he was afraid Emma would move too fast and just go back to sleep.

The cup of water helped. The second cup of water helped even more. Finally, the fog started to clear. It was easier to think. Emma asked, “what happened?”

“The Australian Navy got us,” said Peter. “Fuck, you have no idea how many people I’ve spoken too. This is – this is big, Emma. That island, they’ve been docking there for years. They’ve hauled who fucking knows how many boat loads of people, *girls*, through that stretch of water. No one’s been able to find that docking point before.”

“I guess they need to thank Johnnie,” said Emma. “Or – Roberta, I guess.” Emma reached up, pressing her finger tips to her temple. The place where she’d cracked her head on the side of the mountain had been stitched up. “I can’t believe it.”

“They’re thanking *you*,” said Peter. “And Dwi.”

“She’s okay?”

“She’s more than okay. They all are, Emma. Everyone’s getting the help that they need. It’s – it’s a big fucking deal.”

And then it hit her.

Like a lightning bolt to the spine, Emma jolted upright.

Peter gasped, “what’s wrong?”

Emma reached out, clutching at her father’s arm. “Cozzie! Where’s Cozzie? Tell me – tell me he’s okay? I promised – I promised him he’d be okay!”

Peter pressed a hand to his chest. He scolded, “don’t do that! I thought you were hurt!”

“Dad,” Emma all but sobbed. “Please! What happened to Cozzie?”

“Shush, lay back down. He’s fine.”

“He is?”

“He is. He’s got a lot of healing to do. He’s on a lot of medicine, just like you are. He’s in our quarters resting. They’ve had a look at him, tool.” Peter guided Emma back down into a prone position.

Emma sobbed, relieved. “I’m so glad.” Blindly, she reached out, pulling her father in for an awkward hug. “I’m so glad!”

“I know, I know. Easy there, it’s okay.”

“We made it! I can’t believe we made it, the four of us!”

“I know,” said Peter. “We did it. Emma, *you* did it. We all would have died out there if it weren’t for you.”

Emma took in a shaking, watery breath. “Promise me.”

Peter frowned. “Promise you what?”

“Promise me you’ll never go on a boat again,” said Emma. “Promise me it’s done. The gold. Roberta. Sheila. Johnnie. All of it.”

And Peter looked at her, silent. Like he had to think about it. Or rather, like he had to think about how to say it.

“Dad,” pressed Emma. “You have to promise me.”

“Okay,” said Peter, finally. “I...I think I’m going to file for a proper divorce

against Roberta. I'll get a lawyer. It will be quick and clean."

Emma nodded. She thought that was a good idea, too. It's what Peter should have done at the start, she figured.

Peter tried to lighten the mood by saying, "guess she can't take Destiny from me now, eh?"

But Emma wasn't interested. She insisted, "and the rest of it?"

Peter frowned back at her. "Alright. I promise."

"You're done, with all of it?"

"I'm done with all of it. You'll never hear another peep out of me about gold or - "

Emma said, "no! I don't just want to not hear about it. I need you to just be done with it. Please?"

"I'm done with it," swore Peter, but he wouldn't meet her eyes when he said it.

Emma questioned, one more time, "and Cozzie's alright?"

"And Cozzie's alright," said Peter. "That one's a promise, too."

The relief that Emma felt could have been an entire ocean. She finally settled back down onto the pillows. "Okay. Good."

Peter ran a hand through her hair. "Go to sleep, Emma. I'll be right here when you wake up."

And he was.

The next three times Emma woke up were brief and fleeting. Each time, her father was there. Each time, Emma asked about Cozzie and was told *he's okay*.

Each time, she made him promise that they were done with everything. No more gold, or cheating, or lies.

Sometimes, Emma believed it when Peter said, "I promise."

Sometimes, she didn't.

She figured that for the moment, it didn't matter either way. She was stuck in a hospital bed, and Peter was stuck there with her.

At night, Emma dreamed of the island. For all that it had haunted her waking moments, it seemed to haunt her at night. Not all of the dreams were bad. Sometimes, she dreamed of wading through the shallows of the ocean, of playing fetch with Cozzie until the stars twinkled into existence, one by one, burning bright in the sky above them.

Other times, though, she dreamed of the volcano spitting out smoke, of being attacked by the boars. She would dream that there was someone, or *something*, chasing her through the dense jungle, and no matter how far or how fast she ran, it never lost her.

And then she was awake and staying awake, and suddenly there was no time for dreaming. Someone was always in her room – not just Peter, but nurses and medics, too, coming in and out of the room to check on her through the night.

It was exhausting enough that when they finally left, content that she was getting better instead of worse, Emma would fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

And then, finally, after what seemed like an eon, the medic said that Emma could leave. She was allowed to go to the quarters that Peter had been given,, and she would be able to see Cozzie again.

Finally, after long last, she would get to hold her boi in her arms once more!

Getting up was a challenge. After spending so long in bed, Emma's legs didn't want to support her. Peter hooked an arm around her waist and held her steady, telling her, “remember what they said, you have to take it easy. You can't rush things. And Cozzie needs to take it easy, too. He's a bull of a dog, but even bull's need to rest, you know.”

“I know,” said Emma. She took a deep breath. They didn't even need to go up onto the main deck. The hall outside of the med bay would take them to Peter's quarters. A guard walked quietly beside them, dressed in uniform.

It was so vastly different from the emptiness of the island. Even with just the guard beside them, it felt almost suffocating. It was strange to have walls around her again, when she's spent so long in open air.

That was just one more reason for Emma to be glad when they reached the

quarters. There was another man standing guard outside of the doors. He nodded at the man who had escorted Peter and Emma here.

“Remember,” started Peter.

“I know,” said Emma, tersely. “Take it easy. I will, I promise. Just let me see him, dad.”

Peter nodded. “He’s missed you.”

And oh, but Emma has missed him, too. Missed him and wandered, a small part of her, if her father really was telling the truth. If Cozzie really was okay.

It was something Emma had to see with her own two eyes.

Peter added, “and so has Dwi. You were so focused on Cozzie, I forgot to tell you that she’s staying in these quarters with us. Makes it easier for them to keep an eye on us, I suppose.”

She waited with baited breath while her father unlocked the door, holding it open. Emma stepped inside, slowly, cautiously looking around.

The room was simple. Two single beds. A single table shoved against one wall. And there, on the foot of one of the beds, was Cozzie. Dwi sat beside him, nervously stroking the dog’s fur.

Emma’s heart leaped into her throat. She was so overcome with emotion, she couldn’t say anything, lurching over to the bed and collapsing on the floor beside it, throwing her arms around the small dog and burying her face in his fur.

“Cozzie,” she sobbed. “You really *are* okay! Cozzie, my Cozzie boi!”

Cozzie’s tail thumped slowly against the mattress. He twisted, just enough that he could plaster Emma’s face with messy, wet kisses. It seemed that Cozzie was just as over come at their re-meeting as Emma was.

Dwi said, “he has missed you very much.”

“And you!” Emma grabbed Dwi, pulling her into a hug. “I’m so glad you’re okay, too!”

Laughing, Dwi returned the hug. “Have been worried for you!”

Peter chuckled. He put the hotel keys in an ash tray next to the bed, and said, “I told you he was okay. Don’t tell we’re back to you not believing me?”

“I believed you,” hiccuped Emma. “It’s not that! I just – I didn’t dare hope, I – I had to see him for myself!”

“I’m teasing you,” said Peter. He sat down on the other bed. “It’s okay. I get it.”

Emma pressed her face back into Cozzie’s fur. For all that she had promised the dog they would make it home again, there had been points when Emma hadn’t believed it. When the words were just hollow things.

To know that she hadn’t been a liar – to know that, despite all odds, they had made it off the island – sometimes, the thought was overwhelming. It was all Emma could do to look at her dog and know he was safe.

Peter said, “when we dock, we’ll be here for a while. There’s a lot that has to be sorted out, and they’ll probably want to put Cozzie in quarantine.

Emma sniffed. Carefully, she pulled herself up onto the bed. “Quarantine?.” She pulled Cozzie up into her lap. The dog settled down with a content sigh. “Why? They looked at him already!”

“To make sure that he doesn’t have anything that might transfer to other animals” said Peter. “They fixed up his physical injuries, but we’ve been around a lot of bugs and nasty things.”

“So have we!.”

“It’s procedure. That’s just how it is, Em. Let’s just focus on the positives for the moment, alright? We’re all here, and alive, and we’re going home. Oh...And also one other thing.” Peter stood up. He walked over to the table that was shoved against the opposite wall. There was a little basket piled full of tiny plastic pods and thin baggies.

Peter held it up.

Emma frowned. “What are they?”

“These,” said Peter, sitting the bowl back down. “Are packets of coffee.” He stepped aside, finally revealing a dingy looking machine. “And I’m going to make us some coffee, if I’m allowed. If not, maybe I can convince one of the men outside to do it for us..”

And Emma laughed, an uncontrollable sound. It was the first time she had laughed since waking up. Now that she had started laughing, it seemed impossible to laugh. Emma laughed, and then Peter was laughing too, and so was Dwi, and then they were all crying, and no one could explain quite *why* they were crying. Just that all of a sudden, all at the same time, it became too much.

They fell apart there, Emma and Peter and Dwi, with Cozzie jumping between them, in a little bunk, on an Australian Navy ship, bound for Christmas Island. But they fell apart together. And when they finished crying, sniffing, and wiping away their tears, Peter went to ask about putting on a pot of coffee, and Dwi pulled Cozzie into her lap. Emma sat down beside her.

And for the moment, at least, it seemed alright.

When the ship took the crew and the people that they had rescued to Christmas Island, Dwi was among the many to be put through rigorous questions. Emma wished her good luck, and they were both overjoyed by the end of it, when Dwi was allowed to apply for refugee status.

Peter made a point to hunt down the Navy Captain and thank him. Emma made a point to thank him, too, and to thank the men that were posted as guards outside of her room. Everything happened in a flash, after that.

It was a whirlwind.

Emma found that she seldom had a moment to herself. Everyone wanted to know what happened. It was hard, at first, but then it was routine. Emma could recite the story in her sleep. And each time, she made sure that they knew how brave Cozzie was.

When someone wanted a picture of Emma, she insisted that Cozzie was in it. Mostly, they agreed, but sometimes, they tried to go, *no, no, just the girl*, and then Emma would talk about not doing the interview at all, and Peter would have to intervene.

And eventually, they were allowed to go home, and then Emma found that she had to do it all over again with the Kangaroo Island press, and the local

organizations, and she told the same story, and took the same pictures, and Peter promised her, “you’re doing a good job, Emma. We’re getting there. Things are getting better.”

“I know,” said Emma, each time. And she had the living proof right there at her feet, as Cozzie slowly began to move around more, as the medication he had to be on was cut back, pill by pill, dose by dose.

Peter spent hours on the phone every day with his lawyers. Sometimes, he would pick up the phone, thinking it was a call from them, and then go sheet white, and he would say something quietly into the receiver and then hang up.

Emma assumed that it was Roberta calling him in person, but she didn’t have the proof to go with it, and she didn’t have the time to spare for thinking on it. Her father had said he was done with everything -the boats, the gold, Vinnie, and Sheila. And when the divorce was finally officially finalized, he would be done with Roberta, too.

And Emma trusted him.

Honestly, she did. So when those calls came in, she would politely turn to fussing with Cozzie, and he would lower his voice, and then eventually, months after being home -their home, a new one, bought with *the last of the gold*, Peter said – the calls quit coming in, and Emma quickly forgot about them entirely.

She knew that there would be months and years of this to come, still. And Emma was okay with that, because she knew that it wouldn’t be faced alone. It would be her and Peter, it would be her and Cozzie.

They could make a difference, bigger than they already had.

Emma thought that was pretty grand of them, so she buckled down, and she got to work. She hoped that Dwi would be processed quickly as a victim of human trafficking, and allowed to stay in Australia. Than they could all get a happy ending.

Twenty-Eight

A degree hung on the wall, framed. Beside it, a photo of a black kelpie dog. A red heart had been drawn onto the photo. The dog was sitting on a fluffy white bed, in a white room. Emma glanced up from her work to look at the photo, smiled, and then went back to typing. Her fingers flew across the keyboard, the words lining the page like gnats on an old mango peel.

“Come on,” Peter urged, from the next room over.

Emma called back, “Hang on! I’m almost done!”

“We’re gonna be late!”

“Hang on!” Emma typed out the last few words, and then banged on the print button. “I just have to print this out first!”

The printer next to the desk lit up. It made a ragged sound as it started up, sucking two pages into it and shooting them out at the bottom.

Peter stuck his head into the room. “I can’t believe you’d wait until an hour before to write this.”

Emma rolled her eyes, grabbing her jacket with one hand and the paper with her other. “I don’t know what to tell you. Inspiration hadn’t hit yet.”

“You were never like this with your school work.” Peter offered her a protein bar. “Cab’s here. He’s got the meter running.”

Emma ripped open the plastic wrapper. “I know, I know. I’m coming.”

“Last time you did this, you missed your flight.”

“Okay, okay.”

“So – let’s go?”

“I’m coming,” laughed Emma. She ducked around her father, calling over

her shoulder, “now who’s getting there second?”

When she hit the foyer, she grabbed the leash, and called, “Cozzie! Come here, Cozzie boi!”

The little dog came hobbling out from under the table where he’d been sleeping, wagging his tail. He still walked with a limp. The vets said he likely always would.

Emma hooked the leash to his collar, and then rushed outside, sliding into the back seat of the cab and pulling Cozzie into her lap. Peter followed her out, their luggage already loaded in, their destination already given.

Flying with Cozzie was always stressful. For Emma, at least. She hated loading him up into a crate, and knowing that she wouldn’t be able to see him until they had landed. Emma made sure to give him a hug and kiss before he was loaded up.

Peter gave her shoulder a squeeze. “He’ll be fine.”

“I know,” said Emma. “A little flight can’t take him down.”

Cairns Airport was crowded. They had to wait nearly forty minutes to collect their luggage, and then another twenty minutes on top of that to get Cozzie. Emma was quick to love all over him, scooping him up while her father went out and hailed them a cab.

Peter got in first, “The Hilton Cairns, please.”

Emma added, “quick as can be, if you don’t mind. We’re running late.”

The driver had bushy brown hair peeking out from under his cap. He said, “Yes, of course miss.”

The drive out was very quiet. Peter played on his phone, and Emma bounced back and forth between loving on Cozzie, and reading over the papers that she’d brought with her. The traffic was horrible. Every few minutes, the cab sputtered out to a stop, and then rattled back forward.

It made Emma’s chest hurt, the stress of it all. She kept looking at the time, and then craning her neck to peer at the traffic. “Sir? Is there any way we can get

there faster?”

“It’s a very popular hotel. You here for vacation?” asked the cabby. “Popular spot for a vacation.” He chuckled, then added, “my car does not fly, but I will get you there safe.”

Peter said, “we’re here for a conference.”

“Lot of conference rooms there,” agreed the cabby. “Nice ones, too.”

With a low sigh, Emma returned to the speech she had written. The words swam over the page. It felt like a jumbled mess, even though she had been happy with it only hours ago.

Could she really use this?

Was it too late to make changes?

Emma used her finger to run along each line, reading it off in her mind, trying to make sense of the words.

Peter was right.

She shouldn’t have waited so long to get this put together.

*An ocean of honor pours from my heart... A sea! A sea of gratitude....
It is with great honor that I accept... no... humility. No... honor... with great
honor?*

Were it not for the love of family... or my father?... wait! Shoot...

Emma scrawled something on the paper, using a bright pink gel pen to highlight the differences.

*Human trafficking, regardless of skin color, beyond socio-economical...
economical? Huh?*

Many gave their support and love and for that....

The cabby cut a hard left and then nailed the gas, the Toyota compact sounding like a chainsaw and ripping through alleys and back ways and side

streets. They flew past the International Court of Justice, Emma's head still down. A banner ruffled out front that read:

Judicial Commission of Inquiry Into Human Trafficking
Hearing On Child Abuse and Sex Trade:
DWI D'JURI
Guest Speaker

A few cobblestone blocks and chainsaw buzzes later, the car jerked to a halt, thrusting Emma forward.

“Here, miss! Your stop,” said the cabby, gesturing at the building.

“Thank you,” chirped Emma, jumping out of the cab. Once more, she scooped up Cozzie, hauling him against her chest.

Peter paid the cabby, giving him a hefty tip. Around them, the night sprawled out, soft and enchanting.

Emma took a deep breath and started up the stairs to the university, Peter fast behind her. They passed by a marquee, announcing:

International Peace Conference 2020
Keynote by Emma Hanson

As soon as they got there, Emma found herself and Cozzie hustled off into a back room. Peter had to argue to be allowed back with her. The nerves hit Emma hard. She turned to Peter, “can I really do this?”

Peter took Emma's face between his hands and said, “yes. You can do this.”

An assistant told her, “alright, Miss Hanson. It's your turn.”

And then Emma was being led out on stage, Cozzie at her side.

The speech went better than Emma ever could have imagined. Both Cozzie and Emma received standing ovation. Peter left in search of somewhere to get them a

take-out dinner. Emma stayed behind to speak with the various delegates and politicians and lawyers that came for the speech. This was her least favorite part of it, playing at being in the spotlight.

A year ago, a talk-show host had called her an *ambassador for gender liberation* and the title had stuck. And – Emma was both glad and resentful for it. She wanted to bring a spotlight onto the problem, of course, but sometimes she wanted to be able to just slip away into the background. To fade into the walls and spend her days with Cozzie, left to do her own bidding.

Instead, everyone wanted to shake her hand. They wanted to pet Cozzie, offering him treats that had been brought just for him. He had grown portly the last few months, over loaded with treats and less active with his limp.

They moved around her like droner bees, all saying the same thing and asking the same questions. When she was finally able to slip away without looking rude (off to take Cozzie to do his *business*; he was always a good excuse to leave) the lack of people around her felt like a blessing.

Sometimes, it was all just too much.

The isolation of the island had settled in her bones. It felt like she would never truly be able to handle a crowd again.

Emma hadn't been in the hallway for long before Cozzie started tugging and pulling at his leash. Caught off guard by his sudden determination, Emma followed him, letting Cozzie lead her down the hall and out towards the front entrance of the building.

Cozzie pulled harder. Emma lost her grip on his leash.

“Cozzie,” she shouted, but the dog paid her no heed.

He ran like a bullet loosed from its chamber, charging at the woman in the lobby. Cozzie yipped and yapped, prancing a circle around the woman before throwing himself up onto his hind legs, pressing his paws into the woman's thighs and plastering her hands with kisses.

“Cozzie,” she said, and her voice was so achingly familiar.

Could it really be, after all this time apart?

Emma called out, “Dwi?”

The woman looked up and smiled. It was impossible to mistake her for anyone else – it *was* Dwi!

The young woman had filled out since their rescue, her cheeks soft and her eyes bright. She gently pushed Cozzie down. “Emma!”

The two ran at each other, meeting halfway, in the middle of the lobby. Emma flung her arms around Dwi’s shoulders and held her tight. The grip was returned, just as tight.

“I’ve missed you,” said Emma, choked up. She had *tried* to get in touch with Dwi, but it seemed impossible. Every attempt had been thwarted. And so much had been going on, everything happening so fast – eventually, Emma had just quit trying.

It had been three years.

Three years.

Dwi had to be close to eighteen now. She looked happier, and healthier. “I have been looking for you!” Her English had gotten better over the years, but her accent was just as heavy and lovely as ever. “I heard you would be here also. I was very excited!

Emma said, “you must have been who the cabby was talking about!”

“Here,” said Dwi. “I have little time. But – this is for you!”

A piece of paper was put into Emma’s hands. Messy numbers had been scrawled over it, and messy letters beneath that.

A phone number, and an email address.

Dwi said, “this time, we do not lose touch. I am living in New South Wales, now.”

Emma’s heart soared. Tears pricked at her eyes. She reached out, taking Dwi’s hand in her own. Her voice heavy with emotion, she said, “okay.”

“Family stay together,” said Dwi, reaching down with her free hand to scratch Cozzie behind the ears. “No matter how far apart we are.”

And Emma found that she couldn’t agree with the sentiment more.

Neither young woman knew what the future would hold, but they did know this: it would be faced head on, eyes open, and with a support system that was worth *more* than their weight in gold.

Dwi explained, “I have been given Australian residency. I will be going to school, learning better English.”

Emma asked, “what about your parents?”

“They are still in Jakarta,” said Dwi. “There are more – opportunities here. Better for me, if I stay.”

“That’s amazing,” said Emma. She hugged Dwi again, thrilled that they were both here, together.

Thrilled that they were both getting a new lease on life.

Reality Check

For more information on child trafficking please research the following testimonials included below. Former victims who managed to survive this horrible reality are in them. Know this dear friend, elite groups of people in banking and in other places use children in rituals. That is not a lie or a conspiracy theory. Slavery is increasing around the world – not decreasing. They do it for power and for proving their loyalty to one another. Exposing this terrible behavior and stopping those who are stealing and selling children for sacrifice and also adrenochrome harvesting, must be stopped. You being aware that these things are really happening is your first step to helping break down these rings of traffickers, and customers, which are worldwide.

Fiona Barnett - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RT3NkHaNfMY>

Ronald Bernard - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09BUifUK-Jg>

David Blessing - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHRwuBX5k0E>

Anneke Lucas - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jrLFzGb2tM>

Richard Kerr - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rt4a9ie5MGk>

Rachel Vaughen - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9W0aLPw1ZBk>

Kristy Allen - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixHC8lm82Qg>

Jay Parker - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRq9mEc02gc>

INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL FOR NATURAL JUSTICE

<https://www.itnj.org/>

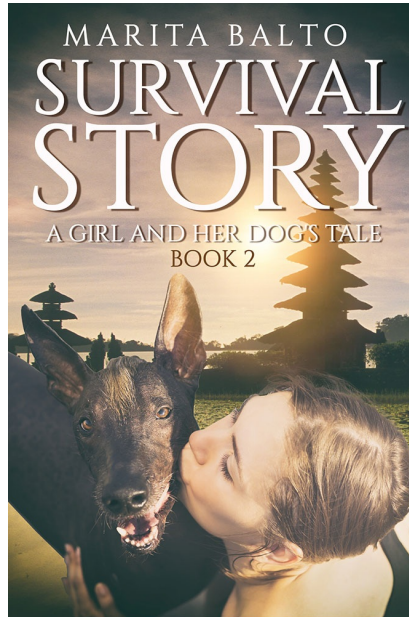
Created in 2018. A voice for trafficked children. More testimonials are available there.

Consider putting up a review for us please

If you'd like to help us out please go back to where you ordered the book from and put up your review with your comments. Let us know your thoughts. We'd appreciate this massively and we look forward to reading your review. Thank you for considering this request that we have made.

Should you be interested in other kinds of stories that we have published please feel free to drop by our main website where our work is showcased. The second book in this series is also available at all participating online bookstores. Note that we're going to have a third story out for you soon. We hope you enjoy the series!

www.whiskey-jackpeters.com



Just a few short months after being rescued from a deserted island, Emma, Peter, and Cozzie have turned their attention to hunting gold out on Kangaroo Island. When her father suddenly leaves for a boating trip, Emma has no choice but to stay with some family friends. She thinks her life is crazy enough, between a drunk mother, a recovering aunt, and a gold-sniffing dog...but it gets even more twisted when her best friend is kidnapped. Can Emma hold everyone together through their roughest challenge yet? Or will the secrets they uncover be her downfall?