Between The Devil and The Deep Blue Sea

by Anonymous

Summary

Marooned on an Edenic deserted island in the South Pacific, 15-year-old cousins Ben and Rey are forced to survive and make a life together on their own.

"The Blue Lagoon" AU
chapter one

The S.S. Raddus is like something from a dream, constructed of solid ancient oak, with white sails that blossom in the wind like flower petals. Seven-year-old Rey stands on the weathered deck and takes in the fragrance of the open sea, a salty breath on her face, warm and poignant.

Her cousin, Ben, has ventured onto the bowsprit. His legs dangle on either side of the long wooden spar that extends over the water, the breeze turns his obsidian hair to fronds and whips them around his face like lashes.

“Careful Ben!” Rey urges. The sea is choppy and wild several feet below, but he is unbothered. He has spent his seven years of life with the ocean just steps away, while Rey has spent hers in the arid Jakku desert. Unlike her, he has no fear of water.

He turns to her with a look both smug and irritantly gleeful. “What’s the matter, Rey?” He asks, challenging. “Are you a scaredy cat?”

His teasing needles her, and she narrows her eyes, her little hands clenching into fists. Ever since she came to live with the Solo’s four months ago, Ben has done nothing but behave like a jealous child, always competing and trying to prove himself better, finding countless ways to be a thorn in her side.

“I have no desire to fall into the ocean and drown,” she answers him coolly. “I am not a fool, unlike you.”

Predictably, Ben does not take well to being insulted for something he’d clearly hoped would be impressive. His pale face pinches in a sour expression, his jaw works for a moment as if chewing on his tongue. Then, his eyes flicker with a mischief that she’s come to know preludes trouble.

“Better a fool than a coward,” he taunts.

“I am not a coward.” She stomps her foot, blood pumping hot with indignation.

Ben only smirks. “Prove it then.”

“I don’t have to prove anything to you.”

“That sounds like something a coward would say.”

Rey huffs, unable to back down, and steps carefully off the prow. “I’ll show you a coward.”

She does her best to ignore the churning sea, though the fear of falling into the dark water makes her movements more careful, more deliberate than Ben’s. She kneels and straddles the bowsprit, clinging to it like a tree branch. Her lemon colored apron dress blows wildly as she slowly slides herself forward, inching her way to where he is with a determined frown.

The wind and sea are like a roar in her ears, and she doesn’t hear her aunt approaching until it’s too late.

“Benjamin! Rey!”

Both children cringe as their names are shouted. Aunt Leia does not sound pleased to find them this way. She bustles towards them, horrified. “Get down from there right now!”
Relief washes over Rey, happy to be excused from having to go further out onto the bowsprit. She hastens back to the safety of the deck, while Ben groans a protest. “We’re fine mother. We were being careful!”

“Careful is staying on the deck and looking out for each other,” aunt Leia scolds. “I would very much like it if we could all make it to Naboo in one piece! Grandma Paddy is very excited to see you both alive.”

Ben ducks his head, returning to the deck, sheepish. “Sorry mother,” he mumbles, echoed by Rey’s own contrite apology, her relief washing away in the face of her aunt’s displeasure. Guilt sinks heavy in her stomach like an anchor. She hates being a disappointment.

Leia studies them both for a long, quiet moment, her deep brown eyes fixed and stern. It feels eternal to seven-year-old Rey, awaiting her fate on the sun-bleached deck like a captured enemy. She squirms uncomfortably, imagines that aunt Leia is mentally sorting through a catalog of punishments, as her Uncle Plutt had done when she’d been his ward, trying to pick the worst in order to make the lesson stick.

Rey braces herself for a severe discipline, and her imagination runs off with her to envision it. She swallows her nerves when she thinks that aunt Leia might decide she’s too much trouble, that she will not want to keep her any longer.

Instead, she finds that when she is brave enough to look up from her shoes, aunt Leia’s eyes have softened. There is no malice to be found in them, no flash of fury or sadistic joy. “Dinner will be ready soon,” she says kindly. “Go wash up.”

The anxiety turning in her stomach dissipates, replaced with an instant excitement, and she and Ben have a race to see who can get to their quarters below deck first.

It ends with a tie (though Ben unfairly claims victory), and when both are finished washing up, Rey stops to watch the passing waves from a port window.

“How does the ship stay above the water?” She asks Ben, “It’s so big and heavy.”

Her cousin is very smart. Smarter than her, even if she’ll never admit it, but sometimes she wonders if he just makes up answers when he doesn’t know them. “The salt in the water makes it float,” He says with a shrug, but Rey is unconvinced. If that were true, why doesn’t the salt make her float too? The handful of times she’s tried to learn swimming have all ended with her sinking helplessly beneath the surface.

She frowns, still puzzling over it, when the ringing of bells startles her.

It isn’t uncommon to hear them; they ring every four hours and again at meal times. But after two days on the ship, Rey has never heard them ringing like this. Urgent and shrill, accompanied by shouting.

She and Ben both freeze, eyes wide as they try to make sense of the words.

“Fire! Fire! Man the pumps!”

Ben grabs her hand as they set off at a run, and now Rey can smell it, the acrid flames of burning wood.

As if it were chasing them, smoke begins to billow in dark ominous clouds inside of the corridor, coming from the direction of the kitchens. They both choke on it as they struggle to reach the deck,
eyes and lungs burning.

Above there is only chaos. Smoke boils up from the ship's grates and clouds everything in smog, crewmen scramble in every direction, shouting and carrying buckets of water.

She and Ben both begin calling for Uncle Han and Aunt Leia, but their voices are lost in the cacophony.

Ben pulls her along, but her focus settles on a few of the men she can see through the haze. Some have been knocked over in the rush to get to life boats, others are stepping and stomping carelessly over them.

And then she is pushed over too.

“Rey!” Ben yells, trying to help her back to her feet before she’s trampled, but strong arms wrap around both of them, and they’re being hoisted up like a rag dolls.

“Chewie, take the children to one of the life boats and row them away from the ship!” She hears Captain Ackbar shout, “Hurry! There is gun powder in the hold, we don’t have much time!”

Chewie grunts and sets off at a run, both her and Ben bouncing in his hairy arms. She can hear uncle Han shouting from the port side; “I’m not leaving without my children!”

“I have them!” Chewie hollers from the starboard. “I assure you they are safe!”

She hears aunt Leia calling after them not to worry, that she loves them and will see them soon.

The words echo others that she was told by her father long ago, before he and her mother left her with Uncle Plutt and disappeared. "I’ll come back for you, sweetheart. I promise."

Like then, she clings to these words as if they are a lifeline.

The last boat is already full when they reach it, and for a brief moment Rey worries that they will not be able to leave, but Chewie makes quick work of its inhabitants by picking them up and unceremoniously throwing them overboard.

They waste no time climbing in, and with the life boat now empty save for the three of them, Chewie lowers the ropes.

Rey’s stomach is in her throat as they settle on the water, and she watches in horror as all around, men are swimming towards the boats and trying to climb aboard, shouting for help, begging them to stop.

No one does.

“Don’t explode yet,” she hears Chewie growling urgency to himself, rowing fast. “Please don’t explode yet.”

Rey closes her eyes, burying her face in Ben’s neck. He smells like salt and smoke, but something undeniably familiar that lays beneath it all, something like home. It’s an anchor in the madness, and he doesn’t push her away, wrapping his trembling arms around her instead.

Many moments pass in a daze of fear and shock. Her heart is pounding, her thoughts racing, breaths coming ragged and hard.

Then, a loud explosion rocks the sea.
“Take cover!” Chewie shouts, throwing himself over them. It sounds like fireworks being let off, and yellow flames and fiery debris are thrown outwards in every direction. Rey screams as pieces of the ship splash heavily into the water around them, their heat so close it stings her skin.

The men in the water have gone silent.

“Ben! Rey!” Uncle Han’s voice booms through the imperceptible columns of smoke that now separate them. He sounds far away, and Rey can’t see him or Aunt Leia at all.

“We’re here!” Ben calls back.

“Ben! Rey! Are you alright?”

“Yes, we’re okay!” Rey shouts, but uncle Han doesn’t seem to hear her. His voice is drifting farther as he shouts, “Ben!”

“Father!”

“Ben! Rey!” Rey can barely hear him now.

“Longboat ahoy!” Chewie calls, his hands cupped around his mouth, his voice carrying farther than their own, “Where are you?”

There is no answer.

“LONGBOAT AHoy!” Chewie shouts once more, “HELLO?”

Nothing, only the sound of the water.

“They’re gone,” he rumbles, crumpling onto the bench, defeated. “Maker help us. They could be anywhere.”

Ben wraps his arms around Rey again and sniffs into her hair. Their boat rocks gently on the waves, lost in obscurity on the endless, lonely sea.

Nothing will ever be the same.
The sun is veiled behind a blanket of smoke and impenetrable fog, and Rey shivers in Ben’s arms, her tears cold on her cheeks. Chewie alternates between rowing and shouting fruitlessly into the void; “Longboat ahoy! Longboat, where are you?”

There is no answering voice, only the creaking sound of the oars rotating through the dark water. Soft waves rock their wayward boat along the surface, indifferent to their misfortune. They drift deeper into the thick white of nothingness, farther into the dangerous unknown.

“What now?” Ben asks, his voice small and clogged with tears.

“We keep going,” Chewie answers gruffly, “We’re just in a fog, that’s all. Must be a bank rolling in from the cape. It’ll clear off by morning and we’ll be able to find our way. Don’t be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid,” but the rapid beating of his heart against Rey’s ear betrays his lie.

The older man grunts. “Nothing wrong with it, if you were. Even the bravest men get scared sometimes. It’s a fool who says otherwise.”

Ben studies their unwitting companion through the fog. He is sitting close enough that he can make out dark tanned skin, roughened from decades of sun exposure. His arms are covered in a thick layer of hair, and a touch of grey streaks through his wiry beard, the length of which hangs from his chin like moss. He wears a sailor’s hat over a long unkempt mane, and a pipe dangles between his teeth, unlit.

“Are you scared, Mr. Chewie?” Rey wonders nervously.

Neither of the children can see the dark look that passes over his features, fleeting in the space of a blink. “Don’t go worrying your mind about that. Belay your questions and help me look for debris in the water. Must be something out here we can make use of.”

Their search turns up a piece of the figurehead from the bow of the ship, a soggy piece of a Chandrilla newspaper, a woven fruit basket and a heavy wooden trunk.

Chewie secures the trunk to the boat, and Rey and Ben gather closer to peek at the contents inside.

They find wedding clothes, a music box, a few books, and a stereo-optic viewer with various pictures of weddings and domesticated home life.

"Useless," Chewie grumbles, "No food. No water. No tobacco."

Rey and Ben delight in the distraction none the less, pulling out the top hat and feather boa to play dress up, taking turns looking at the pictures through the viewer.

The older man observes them for a while in thoughtful silence. They are too young to understand the gravity of their situation, resilient in the face of tragedy. He only hopes they can remain that way a little longer.
Even if they will soon be facing death.

Chewie knows that storms pushed the ship off of its due course before the fire broke out, and Captain Ackbar had intended to use the night's celestials to find another way. According to every calculation, they were hundreds of miles from charted land. It is unlikely that any of them will survive long enough to reach it.

But he can't bring himself to rob the children of their hope, so he keeps his worries hidden.

The temperature starts to fall as darkness nears. He offers his long coat to the children, and they huddle under its tobacco scented warmth like a blanket.

"I'm thirsty," Ben complains.

To Rey, it seems a silly thing to whine about.

"But we're surrounded by water," she gestures at the sea. "I know it tastes yucky, but it's better than nothing."

"You can't drink seawater," Ben says knowingly, "It'll make you sick."

Rey frowns. "I swallowed some before when learning to swim," she argues, "Look I'll show you."

"The boy is right," Chewie interjects, pipe smoke curling into the fog around him. "Seawater will dry you out from the inside. Best leave it be."

"What an awful waste then," the girl huffs. All of this water at their fingertips and yet cursed to be so thirsty...

Not even the Jakku desert was this cruel.

"I wish we had some lemonade," Ben groused, "Or a root beer."

"Nursery tea would be nice," Rey agrees, "With biscuits."

"The shortbread kind filled with strawberry jam," The boy says dreamily.

The girl nods, "I like the ones with apricot."

Chewie shushes them before they make themselves any hungrier and sits up, pretending to be suddenly alert. He takes his cap off and cups a hand behind his ear, "Listen!"

Rey and Ben both go still, ears straining to make out any sound. All is mostly quiet, save for their breathing. "Did you hear that?"

Rey shakes her head.

"What is it?" Ben asks.

"It's the sound of the sun going down. It hisses when it sinks into the water. Can you hear it?"

"I think so," the boy answers, cupping a hand behind his own ear.

Rey cups one behind hers too. "I don't hear anything."
"Well listen harder," Chewie insists, "It must be fairly boiling by now."

"I hear it!" Ben says excitedly, "Don't you hear it now, Rey?"

Rey closes her eyes and imagines that she can. It comes easy enough to her, a second nature by now. At uncle Plutt’s, she’d filled hours by imagining all sorts of wonderful things, dreaming up a different life to escape the bleak reality of her own.

This is not so different.

“Yes,” she answers with a small smile, “I can hear it.”

Talk of biscuits and thirst is soon forgotten as the children search the stars for constellations they can recognize, and when their eyes begin to grow heavy, they sleep fitfully on the wooden floor of the boat.

Chewie sings a lullaby in his native tongue as they slip into dreamland.

" Shoheen , shoheen , shoheen , shoheen .
Sho—hu—lo, sho —hu—lo.
Shoheen , shoheen , shoheen , shoheen.
Hush a bye the babby O."

Then, his own eyes close under the weight of sleep.

........OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO......

It feels as if it should all have been a dream, but the morning sun illuminates the nightmare; they are still hopelessly lost.

Land is nowhere in sight, and now the children begin to worry in earnest. Chewie tries to keep them distracted as best he can, telling stories about his homeland of Kashyyk, of the fairies the people believed in there, of the merrows who made a home in the water.

It holds their interest for a while, but as the day wears on under the unblinking eye of the sun, they become more miserable.

And complain ceas e lessly .

“I’m thirsty.”

“I’m hungry.”

“I miss mother.”

“I miss uncle Han.”

“I’m hot.”

Ben’s usually pale skin is now tinted a splotchy red. He removes his shirt and dips it into the water, using it to cool himself before offering it to Rey.
Sweat glistens on their faces, their energy ebbing away in the oppressive heat. Soon, it becomes too much effort to do anything but lay on the floor of the boat.

Even Chewie ceases rowing, and they spend most of the afternoon dropping in and out of fevered sleep.

That evening, neither child pretends to hear the sizzle of the sun melting into the water.

Ben curls in on himself, and Rey cries quietly in the dark.

“Do you think we’ll ever see them again?” He whispers worriedly. Rey hesitates for a while before she answers, “I don’t know.”

They hold each other's hands until they drift off, and Chewie is haunted by dark thoughts.

How much longer before they have to watch each other die?

They are helpless when they wake the next morning, weak and aching. Ben feels like his skin is on fire, blistered now and angry red.

The sun is unforgiving, and the cerulean sky offers neither rain nor a single wisp of cloud in reprieve.

Rey watches him with a dazed expression, her eyes bloodshot and her skin as blistered as his own. She looks ill and it scares him. When she speaks, her words are nonsense.

“My parents are there,” she slurs, pointing weakly at the water. “I told you they’d come back, Ben. They brought a boat. They’re going to save us.”

“No one is there,” Ben tells her, but Chewie nudges him with his foot and puts a finger to his lips, signaling him to be quiet. “She’s just dreaming,” the older man says, even if Rey looks to be awake.

Ben swallows, his throat dry and sore. “Will she be alright?”

Chewie nods his grizzled head. “It’s the heat,” he explains, “It plays tricks with your mind, makes you see things that aren’t really there. She’ll be better soon.”

Though whether by rescue or by death is still uncertain.

The older man has heard that some can go as many as ten days without water, but he is unsure about the children.

They are roasting like pigs in this cursed heat, and he soaks a shawl from the trunk and lays it over them, rigging his jacket into a sort of tent to keep them shaded. He leans against the side of the boat and closes his eyes against the pounding in his skull.

If he never wakes up again, he’ll be thankful.

Ben shivers under the coat as day bleeds into night once more. He feels chills along his sun-damaged skin, and he can’t get warm no matter how hard he tries.
Rey has passed between waking and sleeping all day. She hasn’t spoken much since this morning, and his worry for her adds itself to the nauseous feeling churning in his stomach.

He torments himself with memories of all the times he’s been cruel to her, and clings to her in the dark, afraid that he may wake up tomorrow to find her stiff and cold.

Despite how jealous he has felt of her since his parents brought her home, he has grudgingly come to love her.

And now, she may be the only family he has left.

He tries not to think of his parents, but when he closes his eyes, he dreams of them and is left feeling empty when he wakes.

Chewie assures him that they are safe, that they will be together again soon, but it’s hard to trust his words when things feel so utterly hopeless, and he can’t help wondering what fresh hell tomorrow may bring.

The pale-yellow light of early morning sun peeks over the boat, and Rey stirs at the cool breeze that flutters with it.

“I smell flowers,” she says to no one, her voice a hoarse whisper.

She draws in a ragged breath of the perfumed air, and weakly nudges Ben awake. “I smell flowers,” she says again. “Can you smell them?”

He blinks groggily at her. “Flowers?” He croaks, “It’s just your mind playing tricks on you.”

“No, it isn’t,” she insists, “It smells just like jasmine and...and vanilla.”

Ben frowns and breathes deeply, his eyes widening. “I smell it too.”

Both sit up in their makeshift bed, eyes casting about for something to explain the scented air.

And then Rey sees it, on the starboard side of the dinghy. Hilly and green, white foam waves breaking on a barrier reef. “An island! Ben! Look!”

Her shouting wrestles Chewie from his slumber, and as his eyes fall on the distant answer to his prayers, a wan smile spreads across his face.

“Land-ho!”

It will still take some hours yet to reach the shore, but with the promise of salvation so near, it’s impossible to feel desolate any longer.
chapter three

Chapter Notes

there are some trigger warnings for this chapter that i didn't add to the tags b/c they are mostly brief:

-mention of child labor (which was legal in the era this story is set in)

-child loss (this is mentioned very briefly and vaguely after Chewie explains what "buried" means)

also, i've made Chewie Irish like his counterpart Paddy was, so he will be discussing his supernatural beliefs in this chapter that are based on Irish lore.

As they draw near the island, the sea becomes a savage thing, wild and unforgiving. It thunders as it breaks fiercely over the coral barrier, lifts the dinghy boat on its swells and tosses it roughly over waves like a child in the throes of a tantrum.

Chewie unships the tiller, raises the mast and begins to row vigorously, benefiting from a frenzied cocktail of equal parts adrenaline and desperation. Rey closes her eyes tightly and clings to Ben as they are violently rocked and swayed on the surf.

When at last the dinghy passes over the barrier and spills into the lagoon, everything becomes suddenly less, as if they’ve been poured out into another world. The sea is quieter here, their boat floats softly on calm water.

Rey opens her eyes and sees paradise.

The water is as blue as sapphire in the deeper parts of the lagoon below them, and aqua marine in the shallows. Leaning over the side of the boat, she can see all the way down into the fathoms, can see the corals and the fish, and the dark shadow of their boat.

Ben is watching from beside her, and they share a smile, unspoken relief and a renewed sense of hope passing between them.

Ahead, crystal water rushes towards a white powder beach, kissing the shoreline before retreating again. Coconut trees line both sides of the broad coast and beyond, intermixing with wild vines and tropical palms.

The sweet smell of plumeria and jasmine perfumes the air, complimented by hibiscus and passion fruit.

It is a punch to the senses after days on a boat with only the briny smell of the sea , and the stale odor of sweat on their skin.

Even the light here is different. At sea, it had been blinding and cruel, making them the focus of its relentless torment. But here, in this hallowed place, it casts its brilliant glow on the reef and palms, the cyan water and the colorful coral beneath it, softly highlighting beauty as if in apology for all of the suffering it has caused.
Chewie steps out of the boat carefully, up to his knees in the turquoise water, and pulls the m onto shore.

“Where are we?” Rey wonders, clinging to his arm as he lifts her out of the boat and places her in the sand on unsteady legs.

“Nirvana, that’s where. No more breaking my back over a stinkin’ stove all day. No more yessir or no sir for me!”

Ben steps slowly out of the boat to join them, his body weak from disuse. “Will father and mother be able to find us here?”

The older man’s eyes scan the vegetation ahead, concern furrowing his brows. He doesn’t give an answer.

“Come on,” he says instead, “let’s have a look around.”

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Away from the shore, the island becomes an untamed tangle of breadfruit and coconut trees, tall palms and heavy ropes of thick creeping vines. Orchids and scarlet hibiscus color the wild growth, and birds sing exotic songs in the pale green roof above them.

Rey’s legs feel like jelly, and there is a familiar pain in her stomach, accompanied by a scratchy feeling in her throat that reminds her of years spent with uncle Plutt.

She had been no stranger to hunger then, nor thirst. Even at her tender age, she’d had to work for her meager portions by slaving in the dark mines, pushing tubs full of coal through tunnels too narrow and dangerous for men.

Those days had ended with the arrival of the Solo’s, but her fear of starvation stirs now with the gnawing ache in her stomach.

This island, with its sweet smells and delicious looking vegetation, is like a slice of heaven to her hungry eyes.

She stops for a moment to pick a cluster of scarlet berries that are growing on a thorny bush. They don’t look like any berry she’s ever seen, nor do they have any scent beyond the earthy smell permeating the trees.

She puts a few into her mouth to try the taste and holds the rest of them up for inspection. “Mr. Chewie, what are these called?”

They are bitter when she bites into them, their flavor horribly acrid.

“Don’t you dare swallow those!” Chewie shouts at her, his eyes wide with panic. Unceremoniously, he shoves his finger into her mouth to scoop the berries out. “Spit them out!” He demands, giving her a shake. “Spit them out now!”

His booming voice and sudden roughness make Rey cower and instinctively cover her head with her hands.

“Stop it! Leave her alone!” Ben pleads, and Chewie backs away from the girl, contrite.

“I’m sorry.” His panic is waning now with the offending berries clutched in his trembling hand. He
heaves a heavy sigh of relief. “I didn’t mean to scare you, but these berries are deadly. They’re called never-wake-up-berries, and if you eat them, you’ll go to sleep and never wake up again. You have to promise to leave them alone.”

Rey nods, sniffing. “Yessir. I p-promise.”

“Well don’t cry now, I’m not mad.” He pats her head awkwardly and frowns. In all of his many years of traveling the seas, he’s learned a lot of useful things. Unfortunately, caring for children has never been one of them.

Until now.

He finds the weight of this new responsibility to be suddenly heavy and absolute. They’ve done nothing but teeter on the verge of death since they’ve come under his care.

It doesn’t bode well for the indefinite amount of time they will be stuck here.

“I had a cat that went to sleep and never woke up,” Ben says solemnly as they continue their walk. He’s undoubtedly trying to project a sense of normalcy, but whether it’s for his own benefit or for Rey’s is yet to be known. “I asked uncle Lando where it went when it died and he said that he hoped it went to hell because it scratched his leather shoes up. Then he told me not to tell mother he’d said that because it was a swear word.”

“Do you think your cat ate some of those berries?” Rey wonders, wiping her tears on the sleeve of her filth covered dress.

“Could be. Father said it was *berried*.”

“Buried,” Chewie corrects, “Like when something dies and they cover it with dirt.”

Rey nods her understanding. “Like Mrs. D’acy’s baby. Remember, Ben?”

“I remember. The doctor dug it out of the cabbage patch, and then he took it back and planted it again.”

“He said it would turn into an angel,” Rey recalls, “But I never saw it.”

“Me either. Father dug up our cabbage patch one year but there weren’t any babies in it, or angels. Just worms.”

Chewie listens to their innocent prattle, both warmed and saddened by their naivety. The mind of a child is so simple a thing and so very straightforward. They haven’t yet understood the hopelessness of their situation, or the finality of it.

He decides then that he will bear the burden of the unknown and allow them their youth, for as long as he can help it.

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In a grass-grown glade half a mile from the shore, they find a small waterfall cascading over black polished stone. It is surrounded by ferns and wild flowers and pours into a clear pool. The water is fresh, not salty, and the children drink their fill as Chewie climbs the rock to gather bananas from a tree overhead.

“Ho down there! Look out below!” A bunch of bananas come spilling down the fall, and in the
next moment, Chewie comes spilling down with them.

The children laugh as they watch, and join him in the pool, fatigue soon forgotten in the excitement of discovery.

They gorge themselves on wild bananas and soothe their blistered skin in the glittering silver-blue water.

Chewie smokes the last of his tobacco as he lazes on the bank, reveling in the peace of hard-won freedom. Sweltering days and miserable nights spent suffering at the mercy of the sea are over now. Uncertain days lay ahead, but those are tomorrows worries.

At present, he longs only to soak in his reprieve.

The children seem to be of a different mind. With their bellies full and their spirits high, they become restless with the urge to see what other treasures they can uncover. Chewie lets them wander, wishing he could possess but half of their resilience. It was only mere hours ago that they were lying half dead and withered at the bottom of the dinghy boat.

The toll on his own body has lessened considerably, though he still finds himself given to lethargy. If he were allowed, he would sleep right here in the soft grass until the sun had set and risen again.

Instead, he is gifted only a few moments of contemplative silence before one of the children calls for him, eager to share their findings.

“Mr. Chewie!” It’s the girl. Her once yellow apron dress is still soaked from her swim and is covered in as much filth as the rest of her. She appears as the very epitome of improper for a young lady of her age and status—of which he can only assume is high born. But there is no need for customs here, in the absence of civilization.

It is a striking thought.

“I found a barrel!” She exclaims, “Come see!”

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The barrel sits between the trunks of two trees, green and lichen-covered. It appears to have been there for a long while, untouched.

“Do you think it belongs to anyone?” The girl asks excitedly, with the air of someone who has just uncovered a rare artifact. “Could there be others here?”

They haven’t inspected the entire island yet, it’s not impossible that they aren’t alone.

It isn’t comforting, either. Chewie can’t be sure of who—or what—innhabitsthis island. If they be friend or foe.

One thing he is sure of is that whoever left the barrel here is gone, and has been for quite some time.

“A ship must have been weathering here and forgotten it,” He assumes, wiping the sweat from his brow as he kneels to get a better look.

The girl watches his inspection in thoughtful silence, working something out in her little mind.
After a moment, she asks in an innocently hopeful way, as only a child can, “If ships have been here before, then they will come again. Won’t they, Mr. Chewie?”

He finds himself to be quite the pessimist on most occasions, but he forces a smile. “Aye, I suppose so.”

Her smile is rewarding, dimpled cheeks and sun-reddened skin, hazel eyes that shine as bright as pebbles washed by waves.

He’s developed a soft spot for her already.

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The boy returns not long after, stripped down to all but his britches and covered head to toe in mud. “I’ve found a funny stone,” he announces, cradling something green in his filthy covered arms. “It’s big but not heavy, and it’s got holes in it. See?”

He holds it out to Chewie, who takes it gingerly in his hands for a closer look.

His stomach turns violently at the realization of what he’s holding.

It isn’t a stone.

It’s a skull.

A human skull to be precise, with a dent in the back of it, as if it had been cloven at some point by a sharp weapon. He throws it as hard as he can muster, deeper into the trees.

“Hey!” The boy protests at once, indignant. “What’d you go and do that for?”

The girl, half astonished and half frightened by his sudden change in mood, asks nervously, “What was it, Mr. Chewie?”

“It was nothing good,” he answers vaguely, and decides to leave it at that.

The boy glowers at him and grumbles, “There were two others. I wanted to fetch them, too.”

“You leave them lay. Let’s get back to the shore now. I’ll fix us up a supper while the two of you wash up.”

-------

Rey is bubbling with questions about the mysterious stone that Ben found, and what it was that made Chewie so frightened of it. Getting answers out of him is like trying to shake coconuts out of a tree, though.

He doesn’t budge.

“That’s enough talking,” he says instead, “Hush up now, or the Cluricaunes will be after us.”

“What’s cluricaunes?” Ben is eager to know.

“Little men no bigger than your thumb. They make the brogues for the Good People.”

Rey’s eyes widen, her interest captured. “Who’s the good people?”
“Fairies, of course. I’ll tell you all about them over supper.”

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Supper is fire roasted coconut, and neither Ben nor Rey complain, though it’s far from their usual fare. On the ship, Chewie had made them six-course meals with soups and roasted meats, jellies and jams and chocolate cake for dessert.

He isn’t certain if this means they are adjusting well. Their excitement over finding land has not yet waned. What will become of them when the novelty has faded?

The girl interrupts his thoughts, smacking her lips as she licks her fingers clean. She’s a loud and messy eater, animalistic and as feral as the island they’ve found themselves up on. It surprises him how improper she manages to be, despite her good upbringing.

“Slow down girl, it’s not getting away from you. Where have your manners gone?”

She looks at him then as if scolded, big doe eyes watering with shame. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“Rey wasn’t taught any manners,” the boy says. Chewie has half a mind to scold him about his negging, but his soft tone suggests he’s being honest. He’s defending the girl, not teasing her.

He furrows his brow, confused. “I saw your aunt and uncle on that ship, they were high-society folk. How come they didn’t teach you any manners?”

“I’ve only lived with them for a few months,” she confesses. “My aunt Leia had started teaching me table etiquette, but....” The rest of her sentence hangs heavy in the air above them.

“I lived with my uncle before, and he made me work in the mines. There isn’t much use for decorum down there.”

Chewie nods his understanding, remembering the stories he’s heard. Men, women, and children tunneling under dirt like worms, being paid in peanuts. It’s hard to imagine this bony scrap of girl lifting rocks and moving earth.

“Well there isn’t much use for decorum here either,” he concedes fairly, wishing he’d never mentioned it at all. “You go on and eat however you like.”

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As darkness settles over the island, so too does the quiet sorrow that had been ever-present during their long nights at sea.

Ben and Rey help Chewie with the makeshift tent, pitching it in the center of the beach, a safe distance from the coconut trees. They don’t speak much, but their crestfallen faces say what their words do not: They miss their home, and their family.

The tent they’ve cobbled together from the dinghy’s two oars and stay-sail is no Gothic Revival style mansion, but it will do for the night, and no one seems fit to criticize it.

The children settle wearily on their bed of palm fronds and cling tightly to one another as they chase an elusive sleep.

Even Chewie cannot quiet his mind, and he hasn’t had anything to ache for in quite a long while. He listens to the waves rushing the shore, as lost in their rhythmic percussion as he is in his
thoughts. Being so far removed from the familiarity of his life leaves him feeling more hollow than
he’d expected, and he thinks he understands now, why men spiral into madness when left alone.

There is wet sniffling nearby, what he assumes must be the children’s silent crying, and then he
hears the boy ask in a very small voice, “Would you please tell us about the Good People, Mr.
Chewie?”

And so he does, because they could all use something good to believe in now.

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The longboat had lay adrift for four days, and Han held Leia tightly as she wept in intervals against
his chest, until she’d drained herself of water and dehydrated under the glaring sun.

There were no reassurances to be offered, no hope to be had. Everything had become a nightmare
for them in the days that had followed the explosion of the S.S. Raddus, and things had only
become bleaker the longer they remained lost at sea.

In his moments of madness, he had sometimes heard Ben’s voice calling out to him from just
beyond his reach, begging for help like a cruel phantom. But when he had been returned to his
senses, it was only the shouts of men from the other boat that called to him, pleading for water and
mercy like the prayers one might hear in hell.

It was hell, as far as Han was concerned. Those half-delirious creatures refusing to believe that
their comrades were not withholding from them. Had they been allowed to catch up to the long-
boat, Han had no doubts that he and Leia would have both been thrown to the sea.

When at last the Ninka, a whaleboat from somewhere far south of Naboo, sighted them, the crew
of long-boat were still alive, though three of them were raving madmen.

Of the other boat, not one had survived.

And of the children’s boat, there had been no news at all, but Han and Leia were not so easily
defeated. Once they’d planted their feet on the shore of Chandrilla, they’d begun a campaign to
recover their lost children, no matter the cost, or the time it took to find them.
Ben watches as Rey carves a small line into the diamond checkered trunk of an artu tree, marking the passing of another day. There are fourteen other marks just like it, totaling only a fortnight so far, but for him it feels far longer.

Unlike Rey, he isn’t much good at waiting.

Her acclimation to the island has been seamless. She no longer fears the water and spends most of her days swimming and exploring the lagoon. She makes flower crowns and pretends to be a mother to the docile lizards she catches. She learns how to weave baskets and catch fish with her hands, and she discovers the keen joy of doing all of these things while being mostly nude.

Her apron dress had proven cumbersome for the climate, and ripped and tore when she tried to climb trees or race Ben to the top of the island.

She wears only her bloomers now (much to Chewie's protesting), and has shed civilization as easily as her dress, never a creature meant for domestication at all. She has made herself at home, and thrives in the absence of expectation and routine.

But Ben is of a different stock, spoiled and pampered. He’s lived a comfortable life, predictable and busy.

Days feel so slow and lazy here that he finds himself with an overabundance of restless energy, and because he doesn’t know where to put it, he pours it into fits of anger and self-pity.

And most recently, finding ways to annoy Rey.

Despite how he cares for her, he finds her optimistic nature infinitely irritating. She is the opposite of him in every way, bright and cheerful where he is dark and brooding, loud and obnoxious where he is quiet and pensive. She is goofy and he is serious, she’s playful and he’s bookish. She adjusts well to change, rolls with life's punches the way she rolls with the churning sea.

She feels like an anchor, when most days he feels like a storm.

Nothing seems to shake her, and he envies her for that.

It’s why he teases her. There is a certain thrill in making her angry, a comfort in cracking open her
resilient façade to expose her imperfections. She is the inverse of himself, but in this way, they are
the same. She is capable of rage and wrath, of sadness and fear, and he likes bringing them out of
her.

If only to prove to himself that he isn’t as lonely in all of this as he feels.

-----

A month passes on the island, with not a single sign of a ship or other inhabitants.

In the absence of hope for a quick rescue, the boy becomes an absolute menace, ill-equipped for
this new life of semi-savagery.

When he isn’t getting scolded for his bullying, he’s off alone in the woods, or at the grassy top of
the island, watching for passing ships.

The girl, however, seldom allows him to be gone from her for long. Despite how he torments her,
she seems to have some sense of obligation to take care of him.

And the boy, for all of his attempts to make the girl an equal partner in his misery, allows himself
to be cared for by her in turn.

Chewie reckons that they might benefit from something more to do, so he puts them to work
helping to collect bamboo to build a stronger shelter. He hasn’t the foggiest idea where the island
is on a map, but he knows that it’s somewhere in the Pacific Ocean.

If he’s learned anything from his years at sea, it’s that most islands in the Pacific have a wet season
that begins in November.

It had been mid-September when the ship went down, and judging by the warm temperature of the
water, a rainy season seems inevitable.

So, they set to work, notching the bamboo and piecing it together, using palm leaves for the roof
and flattened bamboo for the floor. It takes three days to complete, and in the end, they are left
with a rough sort of wigwam big enough to fit the three of them and sturdy enough to keep out the
rain.

With a proper shelter now, the boy seems to find some semblance of home that soothes his hostile
disposition. Perhaps all he needed was to feel safe, or to know that they aren’t entirely helpless.

Because of this, Chewie decides to impart more of his survivalist wisdom, and finds the boy to be
an avid learner.

As several more weeks pass, both children become well practiced in cleaning fish and making
fires, foraging for wild plants and diving for oysters. Chewie builds a signal fire on top of the island
and shows them how to signal any ships that may pass, and when the first rains start blowing in, he
teaches them how to cook indoors.

During the dry hours of the day, in between torrential showers that are followed by short bursts of
sunshine, Chewie and the children venture out with cups they’d made from seashells, to gather
fresh water from the waterfall.

The boy can’t resist having a swim to cool himself, but the girl lays on the edge of the pool, her
tiny body stretched in the grass, soaking up the sun before it disappears behind the late afternoon
storms. She is as brown as a gypsy now, and reminds him of his beloved Maz, small in stature but
no less fierce.

Her lack of clothing had been something of a vexation to him at first, but he now accepts it as something as natural as everything else about the island. The climate here feels as heavy as a suit of clothes in its own self sometimes, like an eternal oppressive summer. Somedays he wishes he could shed his own clothes and be done with it.

“You know, we should find that old barrel and bring it back to the hut,” the girl suggests, “Then we could use it to catch all the rain and not have to wait between storms to get water.”

Chewie admires her inventiveness. It must be a product of her years living in squalor that help make her so resourceful.

“Aye, that’s a fine idea,” he agrees, so he sends the children off to look for the barrel while he has a quick wash.

When they return twenty minutes later, it’s with a breathless excitement. “There was something foul inside of it,” the boy informs him, his face flushed from running.

“It smelled like the captain's breath,” the girl agrees with a giggle.

Chewie frowns. “The captain’s breath?”

“Yes, sir. The one from the ship. Captain Ackbar.”

There is only one smell that comes to mind when he recalls Gial Ackbar’s breath, and if that is what’s inside of the barrel...well, “I suppose it’s worth taking a look at.”

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The barrel still lays where the girl had found it months ago, green colored and nearly camouflage.

Chewie taps it with the butt-end of a seashell, and finds it nearly full of liquid. There is a cork in the bottom, and when he pulls it out, something far more precious than water flows from it.

“Oh, glory be to God!” He exclaims. “Here I’ve been, in want of a drink, and it’s been here all the while!”

“What is it Chewie?” The boy asks, wrinkling his nose at the smell.

“It’s rum, it is!” He catches some of the liquid in his shell, and swallows it down with an exaggerated smack of his lips before passing it on to the boy. “Go on and try a swallow lad, it’ll put some hair on your chest!”

The boy does as he’s told, but spits it out almost the second it touches his tongue, his face sour.

The girl, not taking kindly to being left out, protests at once. “That’s no fair! I want hair on my chest too!”

“Well, have a go then mavourneen,” Chewie offers with a chuckle, using a term of endearment that he’s come to call her lately. In his language, it means darling or sweetheart, and there is no word in any other language to describe her better.

He passes her the shell, and though she makes a valiant effort to upstage the boy, it isn’t long before she’s sputtering and gagging. “This taste worse than Godfrey’s Cordial!”
Chewie gives a roaring laugh. “It’s a nectar straight from heaven I tell you! Good rum to a sailor is a sacred thing. We’ll roll it down to the beach,” he decides, “And perhaps we can find another barrel that’s already empty to use for water.”

---------

The rains come again that evening, a wall of water and wind falling over their little shelter. It holds, even as fat drops of rain hiss and crackle on the palm frond roof like muffled radio static.

Rey holds the music box in her lap, the one they’d found inside of the trunk that had survived the ships explosion. It plays Chopin’s nocturn nine, and reminds her of her aunt Leia who used to play it on the piano.

She misses her, and uncle Han, though she tries to keep a brave face and not show it. She knows Ben misses them too, because he is less good at hiding it and puts as much distance between her and the music box as he can. He doesn’t want to be reminded of his mother, it only makes him ache for her more, but Rey has carried the ache for an absent mother for nearly four years now, and so, instead of making her feel the weight of the distance that separates her from her family, the music makes her feel closer to them.

She likes to imagine that aunt Leia is sitting at the grand piano in the great room right now, uncle Han smiling over her shoulder with a glass of whiskey in his hand. She can see the heavy curtains that frame the bay window in dark navy and gold, the wood stove burning to fight the chill in the late November air.

But she knows they aren’t at home. Somewhere in the vast expanse of sea that stretches beyond their hut, her aunt and uncle are on a ship, looking for them.

“What’s in those pictures?” Mr. Chewie asks Ben, who is using the stereo-optic viewer.

“It’s a funny story about people who get married,” he answers, “There is a saying under each one.”

He loads the viewer and hands it to Chewie, who grunts as he switches through them.

Rey shuts the music box and joins them. “Were you ever married, Mr. Chewie?”

“No, but I got close once. There was a woman by the name of Maz. I met her in India during some of my travels when I was young...” he trails off, a sad look crumpling his face, and he passes the optic viewer back to Ben.

The children know better than to needle him for more information. He has always been an unyielding guardian of his secrets. If he doesn’t want to talk about something, he won’t, and no amount of wheedling ever changes it.

They fall to silence, with only the sound of the storm. Ben looks through the viewer again, and after a long moment of reading the captions under each picture asks, “What is subjugation?”

Chewie gives a humorless snort, “Something I’ve been trying to avoid all my life.”

---------

A year passes, with many changes to both the hut and its occupants.

They find another barrel to collect water, and the hut becomes bigger with a loft room and a ladder
to climb. For Christmas, Chewie uses the old sail to make the children a hammock swing, and the veil of the wedding dress from the trunk becomes a bug net around their bed, to keep the biting insects away while they sleep.

The boy has grown several inches, already the size of a twelve-year-old and just as impudent.

He wears his raven hair just past his ears and shaggy, and won’t let Chewie anywhere near it with his sheath knife. He can only be glad that the children haven’t become so untamed so as not to use the comb they’d found in the old trunk, otherwise he’d have to shave them both bald.

The girl has grown some too, with auburn sun-bleached hair that reaches her hips. The year has taken none of her optimism, but has made her mature beyond her eight years of life. She has the wisdom of an old soul, but the temperament of a mongoose.

She has taken to using bamboo reeds to spar with the boy lately, and while he is the physically stronger of the two, she is far quicker and doesn’t fight clean.

They wear themselves out this way, so Chewie doesn’t complain. They nap together in the hammock for at least an hour after their duels, and he usually spends that hour washing and preparing dinner.

On this particular day, he decides to explore the island for a while to look for new banana trees. He’s never gone farther than a mile in any direction, but today he wanders deeper into the woods, where the trees become so thick that the sun can barely pierce them.

It’s here that he discovers something that fills him with undefined dread.

There is a clearing in the shape of a circle, carpeted by ferns, with huge blocks of stones built up in terraces. At their base, a stone figure head standing at least thirty feet tall, is titled forward slightly as if it had been sinking with the years.

It has the face of a man, though the features are exaggerated. A long nose and ears, thin lips and a prominent forehead—a desolate god of a people long lost.

A supernatural silence blankets the place, and it sends a shiver up Chewie’s spine. He needs to see no more to understand the implications. This was a place of sacrifice, and the dark stain of bloodshed still seems to mark the temple, unseen but poignantly felt.

He can endure it for only a moment, before he turns and runs.

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When he returns to the children, they are dressed in clothes from the trunk, the girl in a vest and top-hat, the boy in a dress and shawl. His knees are drawn up underneath to look like breasts, and they both giggle at it.

“What is it Mr. Chewie?” Asks the girl when she sees him, her cheerful expression falling into one of concern.

He settles into the hammock swing, face in his hands as he recovers his spent breath.

“I want you both to promise me something,” he implores. “Promise me that you will never, ever go to the other side of the island.”
The boy, ever curious, wonders “Why?”

“Because I tell you, that’s why! There is something evil there, something sinister that you need to stay away from.”

He can hear the edge of nerves in the girl’s voice, “Like what, mister?”

He doesn’t make it a point to lie to the children, but he can’t explain what he has seen in a way they will easily understand. So, he exaggerates. “It’s where the boogey man lives.”

“The boogey man?” The boy sounds nervous now, too. Chewie nods.

“That’s right, and do you know what the boogey man does when he gets his hands on little children like you? He gobbles them up, bones and all. Pops them in his mouth like candy.”

The girl gasps and covers her mouth. “Will he come here?”

He hates to see them scared, but he finds this to be a matter of life or death. A little fear to get his point across will be good for them in the long run.

“No,” he assures her, “And we won’t go to him either. Do you know what law is?”

The girl nods tearfully. The boy shrugs.

“I think so. My mother said that it’s a weapon used against women and it should be reformed.”

“Well that may be the truth,” Chewie concedes fairly, “But from now on, the law on this island is that you never go to the other side. Do you promise?”

“We promise,” they say in unison, and he gives them both a pat on the head. “Good, now come help me with the supper.”

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As the weeks stretch on, Rey tries not to think of the terrible creature that lurks on the other side of the island, one that occasionally haunts her dreams. For her, it is a shapeless horror.

But she will see it's true face soon enough.

Night falls over the island, and a fire burns with a tangerine hue on the beach. The children laugh at Chewie as he stumbles out of their hut, dressed in women’s clothes, pink boa and all.

He does a hula dance around the fire, much to their amusement.

“You’re funny when you drink from that barrel,” Rey tells him. Uncle Plutt had become a madman when he was drunk, suffering from delusions that he often took out on her.

But Chewie is a gentle giant of a man, and his drunken joy is infectious.

“Hush now,” he says, “This is a serious dance mavourneen.”

“Chewie, sing the one about the hootchie-cootchie girls!” Ben begs.

“Well come on then,” he tells them, motioning them over.

They link arms and kick their legs in a poor imitation of a can-can dance, while Chewie belts:
“Have ya seen the way they shake it? Have ya seen the way they sway? There ain’t a man among us who could throw that dish away, hey! I’ve been to London, I’ve been to France. I swear by the buttons upon me pants, I never saw a woman daaaaaaance...Like the hootchie-cootchie girls of old Bombay! Ha!”

The children dissolve into giggles, and Chewie falls into the sand, unconscious.

This is nothing unusual to them now. With a sad sigh that their fun is now over, they return to the hut and go to bed.

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Chewie wakes hours later with his mind muddled but still pleasantly inebriated. In this intoxicated bliss, he is struck with a sudden idea.

So, he does something he’s never attempted to do before: he swims the lagoon.

In this state he feels as if he could swim the whole length of the sea.

There is no rhyme or reason to this delusion, only the musings of a man bereft of his logic, who wants to feel alive again.

And in the end, it is this choice that kills him.

His limbs tire out, and he slips beneath the surface of the water where he is swallowed by the dark. With his lungs full of seawater, he drifts into his death the same way he’d drifted onto the island; with a relieved sense of finally being free.

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When the children wake, Chewie is gone, and he doesn’t answer their shouts for him.

Rey is certain that he will come back soon, that maybe he’s just gone to collect coconuts for their breakfast, but Ben has his misgivings.

Chewie usually relies on him to climb the coconut trees, and he usually isn’t up and about so early after a night of drinking. Most times he’s still laying on the beach where they left him, sleeping off a hangover until midafternoon.

At the very least, he’s always within shouting distance.

“Let’s go to the top of the island,” Ben suggests, “Maybe we will be able to see him from there.”

The morning breeze is blowing as they climb, the sea sparkling beneath them. As they reach the summit and scan the water, a figure lying on the shore of a small neighboring island washes them both in relief.

“There he is,” Ben says, pointing towards it. “He must have swam over there and gone to sleep. Come on, we’ll go and wake him up.”

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Aboard the dinghy, Ben rows them to the smaller island, while Rey makes a necklace with flower’s she’d gathered.

“What are you doing that for?” Ben wonders as he glances behind him.
Rey grins, “I’m going to put it on Chewie’s head, so that when you say *boo* into his ear, he’ll wake up with it on.”

Ben’s face lights up at the idea of a practical joke, and two of them share a giddiness over it as they bring the boat on shore, quietly so as not to wake Chewie before they can carry out their mischievous plan.

He is laying on his right side, his face buried in the crook of his arm. The hat he usually wears is gone, and the wind stirs his grizzled hair.

They sneak over to him, and Rey tosses the flower crown onto his head, suppressing a laugh.

Ben settles on his knees next to Chewie and, after counting to three with his fingers, shouts “Boo!” straight into the old man’s ear.

But he doesn’t stir. He doesn’t even flinch.

“Chewie!” Ben yells again, but it goes unheard.

Worriedly, he grabs the figure by the wrist and turns him onto his back.

Chewie’s eyes are wide open, but he stares unblinking and sightless into the great blue sky. His mouth lays open too, slack jawed and full of sand. A little crab darts from it, scuttling over his chin and into his long, wiry beard.

It is this that finally breaks Rey.

She faints, and Ben catches her in his arms before she hits the sand.

He carries her back to the boat, and in a wild terror, flees to the other island as quickly as he can.

Chapter End Notes

time skip next chapter!
The fear that had followed their discovery of Chewie’s body didn’t wane in the hours that came after, but both children kept to themselves and their own distractions with a quiet determination not to think about it. Rey collected fish from the bamboo traps they’d set the night before, while Ben whittled away at a piece of wood he’d taken from a banyan tree.

They let the matter of their uncertain future lay festering between them like the corpse on the neighboring island. Addressing it felt too concrete, as if it were still something in flux and not yet decided, and naming it would solidify it in their reality. It was easier to pretend that they’d only seen a mirage than to acknowledge that they’d lost yet another caregiver. That they were well and truly on their own now.

They avoided the hut all day, and when it was time for lunch, neither Ben nor Rey had the appetite to eat. The lion fish they’d caught lay dead in the trap, but the stiff bodies and lifeless eyes recalled the obscene, unspeakable thing they were trying so desperately to forget.

Finally, the late afternoon sky became stained with caliginous clouds, and a wailing wind whipped the sea into a violent fury. Waves pounded the shore as a sheet of rain fell, and Ben and Rey were forced to return to the shelter of the hut.

Chewie’s belongings were scattered like landmines inside. His sheath knife, the wooden dolls he’d carved Rey for her first birthday on the island, his linen shirt, his pipe, the barrel of rum. These reminders of him made her chest ache, and she buried her face in her hands to spare herself from looking at them. She couldn’t escape them, though, any more than she could escape the image of him now seared into her mind forever; a lifeless body on the sand, a mouth that had once spoken so kindly to her, hanging wide-open, speaking only crabs.

In the stuffy confines of the hut, the memory was too oppressive and too real. Her body shook with the desolate sobs of hopelessness and grief. Chewie had been like a father to her, more so even than Han, because she’d been with him for far longer.

An arm wrapped itself around her shoulders, and she found herself pulled tightly against Ben. “Don’t worry Rey,” he murmured, his own voice thick with tears. “We’ll be alright.” “I’ve never felt so alone,” she confessed. The island had never felt as truly isolated as it did then. “You’re not alone.” Ben’s tone was resolute, undaunted.

She sniffled into his chest, wrapping her arms around him. “Neither are you.” Something fiercely protective had developed in him then, and he found himself with a sense of maturity that he didn’t have before. Like a plant under extraordinary circumstances, forced to bloom early.

It was time to grow up.

“I’ll take care of you,” he promised solemnly, “I’ll never let anything happen to you.”

They had no other comfort in the universe except for each other, but in those dark hours, it was all they needed.
The first night without Chewie was dreadful. Rey lay awake for half of the night listening to the rain falling heavily against the palm frond roof. She kept imagining that she heard someone outside, kept fearing that it was the corpse of their old friend, there to darken the doorway once again to ask to come in out of the rain.

Guilt ate away at her as she tried not to think of his body, all alone on that island, unburied and exposed to the storm. Worried thoughts stirred in her mind like the tempestuous sea. What happened to him? Was it the boogey-man? Were they next?

When at last exhaustion finally claimed her, her dreams were as troubled as her waking thoughts.

Ben didn’t seem to sleep at all, but instead kept vigil through the night, like a silent protector or a frightened boy, afraid to see what was in his own mind.

The following morning, he and Rey stepped out of the hut to find that, even if everything about their world had changed, nothing looked different.

The sun still rose over the sea-line as it’d always done, its golden rays reflected like fire over the water. The coconut trees whispered in the wind, dripping rain from the previous night’s storms. The air smelled clean and fresh, heavily imbued by the sweet scent of blooming flowers.

And all of it seemed to mock them now, as if it concealed a lie. Like the sirens in the stories Chewie had told them, the island had made itself a seductress, a false paradise where nothing bad could ever happen.

Now they knew the truth. Behind the beauty of it lurked a frown.

“I want to get away from this place,” Rey confessed over breakfast, breaking the despondent silence that had settled over them as they took half-hearted bites of mango fruit. “Let’s start over somewhere different. Somewhere further down the island.”

What she really wanted was to leave the painful reminders, and the ghost of Chewie that would surely haunt them if they were to stay. She didn’t need to say any of that though. Ben already understood it.

After breakfast, they’d gathered all of their things into the dinghy boat, and with a last long look at the place they’d called home for over a year, left the past behind them.

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--Seven Years Later--

The place where they now live is a beautiful but hopeless one, at least where help from civilization is concerned. In the eight years they’ve spent marooned on this island, there has never been a single sign of a ship.

And it is all just as well to Ben.

He has long since learned not to expect one, and made his peace with the knowledge that he will die here. Hopefully after he’s grown old and shriveled.

That is to say, the island has been his home for longer than civilization had ever been, and there is no longer an appeal for him in society. He no longer wonders what he’s missing, no longer cares
about advancements being made in some far away world he isn’t a part of anymore.

This island is so far removed from that that it may as well be a different planet entirely, and Ben no longer feels a connection to anything that isn’t the life he’s made here, with Rey.

He still misses his parents, but it is only in the abstract way that he misses Chewie. He knows he will never see any of them again, and so he keeps their memories treasured but the longing to be with them has lessened over time.

For Rey, the expectation of rescue has never been extinguished. She still goes to the top of the island each day to watch the sea for passing ships, and is never disappointed to find there are none. She just keeps hoping, keeps believing in the impossible, keeps hiding the truth from herself.

Ben has given up trying to convince her otherwise. She’s always been too stubborn to listen to what he says, and that has never changed. In fact, the only thing that has changed about her over the years is her appearance.

Within the last few months especially, she has become someone else. She no longer carries the look he remembers from their childhood, when she was all knobby kneed and sharp edges. She is softer now, with curves like the women in the pictures he sometimes looks at through the stereoptical viewer.

And she is beautiful.

He can’t explain it, except that it feels like a stranger has come to the island and taken the place of the Rey he’s always known. This new Rey makes his heart beat faster when he looks at her, makes him take in details of her he never thought to examine before. He likes her long legs. Her golden skin. The flat planes of her stomach and the curves of her hips. He’s even found himself staring at her ass, the way it isn’t quite covered by the scrap of linen she wears tied around it when she bends.

She wears another scrap wrapped around her chest, but it hides nothing when it’s wet and he’s seen her breast’s underneath, smaller than the women in the pictures, but fascinating none the less.

He’s wondered what it would be like to kiss her, to taste the salt on her skin...but he keeps his appreciation of her body and his musings to himself.

Or, at least he tries.

It’s impossible to hide the reaction his body has to her, especially when all he wears are the cotton trousers from the trunk. They were made for a full-grown man, but even at fifteen, they are already growing too tight for Ben.

And they conceal nothing about the way his cock springs to life whenever she’s around.

He could swear he sometimes sees Rey looking a little too closely at it, but it’s almost as if it’s a puzzle she’s trying to work out, a mystery she’s trying to understand. She’s asked him why it happens, but he has never had an answer to give her. It just...does, like a physical manifestation of some as yet unnamed excitement he feels when he looks at her. When he imagines touching her.

Nudity had long ceased to be a cause of shame between them, but now it has taken on a different sort of meaning.

He understands it only in a primal sort of way. He was never given a formal education about the birds and the bee’s, but he has watched them, studied their behaviors. He knows that Rey’s body
has become mesmerizing to him in the same way that a bird uses its feathers to attract a mate.

And like the male parrots he’s observed during mating season so far, he finds himself restless, longing for something that he can’t name.

He’s learned to bring himself some relief with his hand, but its only temporary. The feeling never really goes away, and it’s for that reason that he often finds himself moody and short tempered.

If Rey ever struggles with the same afflictions, he wouldn’t know. She has taken to doing things without him lately, and that has been another contribution to his sour mood.

She’s been bathing by herself, sleeping by herself, exploring the island by herself...She has even taken the dinghy boat out sailing by herself. It’s as if she wants to be away from him, as if she’s hiding something. He can’t fathom what it might be, but it infuriates and wounds him both at once.

She’s always been the sun in his world, and he has always been her shadow.

Now he isn’t sure where he stands.

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Rey counts fifty-two big marks on the trunk of the artu tree, which means that, if her counts are correct, it’s Christmas eve.

The magic of the holiday has long worn off. Chewie had kept it going for them when he was around, but after... it didn’t take them long to realize that Santa couldn’t find them any better than anyone else could.

Still, Rey had never really had a real Christmas until they came to the island, and it feels like something important to celebrate, something of a connection to the outside world.

She imagines that uncle Han and aunt Leia still celebrate it too, and it’s comforting for her, to feel some sense of closeness to them.

She goes looking for Ben, to tell him what day it is, even if she knows he doesn’t share her sentimental streak.

He still humors her anyway.

Most of the time.

She finds him dragging two canes of bamboo towards the shore. When he stops to wipe some sweat from his brow with his naked arm, she stops to watch.

It’s a strong arm, no longer long and lanky as it’d been when he was a boy. It hasn't escaped her notice that he’s growing into his limbs now and filling out with muscle, no more than any of the other changes his body has undergone.

She’s admired him from afar like this far more often than she’ll ever admit.

He is well worth looking at, even when surrounded by the splendor of the island. Some days, she enjoys watching him more than anything else.

It gives her a funny feeling in her stomach, especially when she can feel the heat of his own gaze on her skin. His dark eyes can burn like fire sometimes, and she wonders what he thinks of, if it’s
anything like the strange desires that play out inside of her own mind.

“What are you making?” She asks him, sitting down beside him in the sand. He rests one of the canes across his knee, his dark hair falling in his face as he uses Chewie’s old knife to start carving.

“Fish-spear,” he grunts. She can sense his irritation like a coiled-up snake ready to strike. He doesn’t like it that she’s been away for most of the afternoon, that she’s been spending so much time on her own.

She doesn’t expect him to understand her reasons for it when even she doesn’t entirely understand them. She has thoughts about him...about them. She imagines them like the people in the pictures from the trunk, happy together, in love.

She’s certain that she loves him the same way the bride in those pictures loves her groom. It feels intense though, and terrifying, like diving into the dark water outside of the lagoon without being able to see what lurks beneath.

It’s both why she goes off on her own, and why she can never stay gone from him for long.

She watches as he draws the knife against the smooth surface of the bamboo, shaving away the outside. Finally, he asks the question that she knows has been eating at him all day.

“Where have you been?” His tone is pointed and accusing.

“Oh here and there,” she sighs happily. She can see his jaw working like it does when he’s angry, like he’s chewing on his words. It thrills her to watch him roll his shoulders, and huff an irritated breath through his nose.

She knows she shouldn’t tease him, but he’s so handsome when he’s pouting.

“I was just making you a present,” she elaborates. It isn’t a lie, when she learned what day it was, she’d started collecting small shells to make him a necklace. She pushes some of his hair—chin length now that he’s finally letting her cut it—behind his adorably large ear. “It’s Christmas Eve, you know.”

He lifts his head to look at her then, eyes narrowed in a glare. “Too bad I’m not making you anything.”

She gasps, and pokes him hard in the shoulder. “You’d better!”

“Or what?” He wonders, goading her. Sometimes she can still see glimpses of the boy he used to be, picking a fight with her because he’s miserable and doesn’t know what to do about it.

“Or I’ll put the never wake up berries in your food!”

“I bet you’d like that,” he murmurs darkly, returning back to his carving. “You’d like it if I were dead.”

Rey shakes her head, running her hand along the smooth, warm skin of his back. He has never quite tanned like she does, his skin as sensitive as the rest of him, but he generates enough heat that it almost seems as if he stores the sun’s ray’s inside of himself, rather than wearing its mark on his skin.

Despite that, she can feel him shiver under her fingers when she traces them down his spine, as if
he’s gotten a chill.

“That isn’t true,” she whispers, leaning her head against his bare shoulder. “You know it isn’t.”

His shoulder rises and falls under her cheek as he shrugs, then he gets to his feet.

“I don’t know anything anymore,” he grumbles.

And then he’s stomping away.

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She finds him that evening sitting on a large rock in the water, looking out at the setting sun. His expression is pensive, as it often is. Even in the absence of books and school, he is always studying.

He learns the nature of everything, absorbs it all like a sea sponge. He knows the woods like the back of his hand, and every pool on the reef for two miles in either direction. He knows their inhabitants too, despite that he can’t name them, he’s made a profound study of their habits.

But he doesn’t know her true nature, the way she longs for him, even as she seeks her own independence. She worries that if he did, he might spurn her, and she’d have to live with him and that rejection for the rest of their time on the island.

Who knows how long that will be?

It’s better to try and find peace with the way things are now.

Still, she can’t stop herself from going to him.

“Do you ever hear it when it touches the water?” She wonders, nodding towards the sinking sun as she joins him on the rock. He slides over to make room for her, shaking his head.

“No. Do you?”

“Sometimes I think I do,” she admits softly, “I’m not sure.”

“I don’t think Chewie always told us the truth,” he mutters. “He said there was a pot of gold at the end of every rainbow, and that if you dug deep enough, you’d reach China.”

“And I’ve never seen any Cluricaunes,” Rey agrees. “Or merfolk.”

Ben tosses a small rock into the sea. “I think he was pulling one over on us.”

“But what about the boogey-man?” She asks in a half-whisper, as if speaking his name aloud might suddenly make him appear. They haven’t talked about him in quite a long time, but true to their promise to Chewie, neither of them has ever ventured to the other side of the island. “Do you think he lied about that too?”


She does quite often, but it makes her stomach tie itself into knots every time she does. She can’t bear to imagine it, can’t bear to think of it happening to Ben.

She draws her knees to herself, swallowing the lump in her throat. “I don’t want to know.”
They are silent for a moment, before Ben—mercifully-- changes the subject.

“Let’s go decorate for Christmas,” he suggests, standing and reaching out his hand to help her up. “I found a good piece of driftwood we can use for the tree.”

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Later, when the driftwood is brightly decorated with fresh flowers and shells, and dinner has been caught and eaten, Rey sleeps quietly in her hammock.

Alone.

Ben watches her for a while, aching to lay next to her but knowing she doesn’t want him to.

It shouldn’t be so painful, but it’s an acute sort of sorrow, to know the ins and outs of every creature on the island and still not understand the thing that has changed between him and Rey, or how to fix it. Perhaps she is the one creature he is doomed to never know, no matter how badly he wants to.

No matter how well he did know her, once.

He wraps his gift for her in a red handkerchief from the trunk, and places it alongside the gift she’d put inside of an empty coconut for him.

He’d only half lied when he told her he wouldn’t make her anything. He’d been collecting pearls for her over the last few weeks, using his overabundance of alone time to gather oysters at low tide and pry them open on the rocks. He couldn’t make her anything with them, but he hopes she’ll appreciate the effort all the same, and that maybe it will be enough to make her happy with him again.

If Christmas miracles ever really do occur, that is the one he wishes for the most.

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