Return to Xanadu

by stefanie_bean

Summary

Sequel to LOST. New protector Hurley heals and rebuilds the Island, while Claire, Kate, and Sawyer head back to our world. But when it comes to love, the Island gets you where you need to be. (Strong fantasy elements, think "American Gods" on the Island.)
The New Jacob

*If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.*

That's exactly what Ben Linus had done to Jacob, with a knife straight to the chest. Despite that, Hugo had still invited him to help run the Island in his role as the new Jacob. There had to be a catch. There always was.

Ben wouldn't have blamed Hugo if Hugo had decided to kill him outright. But Hugo didn't seem to notice Ben at all, or Desmond either, who still lay unconscious by the river's edge. Instead, Hugo stared unmoving into the glowing Heart of the Island, tears running down his face. If Ben had to guess, Hugo was hoping that through some improbable magic, Jack would appear and take the weight of responsibility off Hugo's broad shoulders.

On the other hand, Ben had no idea what this new Jacob could or couldn't do. Hugo might pick up his newly-won powers, walk away, and save himself. After all, that's what Ben would have done. What he had done, many a time.

Ben very badly did not want that to happen, though. John Locke had once said that the Island was a place where miracles happened, and Ben still drew breath, so it might even be true. The locked door of his heart opened a crack. Perhaps Jack Shephard had been wrong. Perhaps there were do-overs, second chances. Perhaps there was even one for him.

The stream changed from dirty grey-brown to clear, and the air swirled with fresh, clean breezes. The earth still shook, though, sending little rocks tumbling into the golden water.

“I thought we were over this,” Ben said, a bit fretful.

Hugo shrugged, and some of the tears had gone from his voice. “You live in L.A., you get used to it. Aftershocks.”

“Then I guess we should stay put until they're over.”

“They can go on a long time, man. Hey, you think he's still all right?”

Desmond's chest barely rose and fell with breathing, although his face was ruddy and his skin warm. When Ben shook him gently, Desmond gave a faint smile. “Maybe he just has to sleep it off.”

Suddenly the earth gave a hard shudder, and the sky opened in a rushing downpour. “We got to get him out of here,” Hugo said.

They pulled Desmond out of reach of the rising water, and he lolled between them limp as a rag doll. Halfway up a rocky slope, Desmond started to stir. By the time they reached the small papaya grove at the top, he could almost stand on his own. The leafy canopy shut out most of the rain as Hugo and Ben pulled together a lean-to of branches. They rolled Desmond inside, and Ben crawled in after him.

Desmond muttered, “I'm not supposed to be here. This wasn't supposed to happen.” Then he sank back into a stupor.

“Ask him about Jack,” Hugo said. “Maybe he'll tell us what happened.”

Ben shook his head. “He's out again.”
The earth settled, and the relentless rain slowed to a trickle. Hugo said, “I'm gonna stretch my legs. Have a look around.”

“Good idea. Bring back some palm leaves. Maybe they'll keep us drier.”

After Hugo left, the jungle was quiet except for the occasional cheep of a frog, or the drip of rain off leaves. A few minutes passed, then more. When Hugo didn't return, Ben suppressed a small surge of panic. If something had happened to Hugo, Ben didn't know what he'd do with Desmond. He certainly couldn't move him by himself. Carrying him up here had been rough enough.

Most likely Hugo had gone back to the Heart, to search for Jack. For now, all Ben could do was wait. He reached for his shoulder bag and took out a book whose cover read, *Thomas Traherne: Selected Poems*.

He fumbled in his front pocket for his reading glasses, but they weren't there. Panicked, Ben scrabbled through his bag and trouser pockets. Nothing.

Where in the hell had he lost them? Probably during the first earthquake, when Hugo had dragged him from beneath that fallen log. If so, the glasses had long since washed away.

Despair seized Ben. He had been so careful. Even as he drove the knife into Jacob's chest, as he felt it hit bone and then pass through to the soft organs beneath, Ben took care that the glasses didn't fall to the hard earthen floor of Jacob's room.

He gave a small, bitter laugh, thinking that this would be a fitting punishment. He stroked the page as if touch would bring the well-loved verses to life. Then his heart almost stopped in his chest, because even in the dim light, even to the naked eye, words appeared on the page sharp and clear.

*You never enjoy the world aright,  
Till the sea itself floweth  
In your veins,  
Till you are clothed  
With the heavens,  
And crowned with the stars...*

It wasn't possible. He shouldn't have been able to read this at all. The page should have been an incomprehensible blur.

He held out his hand, which had caressed and loved and murdered. There in crisp detail appeared the cuts, the scratches, the overgrown cuticles, all clear as the prose.

Ben saw.

He felt like weeping. True, it wasn't as impressive as a man who rose from a wheelchair and walked. But sometimes the small gestures were more touching than the grand ones. Very well. He would take what was offered, and not complain.

A rumble like a freight train shook the ground. Along the western horizon, a plume of black smoke rose from a tall mountain, while red ribbons threaded their way down its sides.

*Vision would be the least of Ben's worries if the top blew off that volcano. The monster who had worn Locke's face might still get his wish to take down the Island with him.*

Jack had failed. They all had.
This wasn't supposed to happen. Whatever Jack had done down there, whatever Jack had died for, it was apparently for nothing. Resigned to his fate, Ben crawled back into the shelter with the still-sleeping Desmond. If lava rained down on them all, Ben was helpless to do anything about it. But at least he wouldn't be alone.

* * * * * * * *

Hugo heaved his round, bulky body up a narrow trail towards a hilltop clearing. Stumbling on the uneven ground, he thought about his situation.

Jack had passed one hell of a ball to him, and what he was supposed to do with it, he had no idea. He couldn't carry it, couldn't dribble it, and no long free throw would get rid of it for him. Hugo hadn't given up on Jack for good, but if Jack was really dead and gone, he was screwed. Because then there would be no passing this burden back to Jack. It would be his for good.

Earlier, when he and Ben had hauled Desmond out of the Island's Heart, Hugo had packed all his anguish into one long howl when Desmond was tied to that rope instead of Jack. Life was life, though, wasn't it? Had he been forced to choose, would he have picked Jack over Desmond?

Yes, Hugo had to admit, he would have. And oh Jack, stupid Jack, why had he done it? Jack had to have known it would be suicide. Hadn't Jack said that he was already dead?

Too late now.

Breathing heavily, Hugo reached the summit, where a stunning vista spread out before him. The setting sun looked like it would sink directly into the bubbling, erupting volcano. Wherever the thick lava hit the sea, huge clouds of steam churned up as the waves boiled away.

It was one of the most beautiful things Hugo had ever seen.

To the east, the calm sea hugged the green cliffs with their streaks of purple shadows. Far away, a tiny metal bird moved across the sky, glittering as it went.

Ajira 316.

The plane circled around the Island in a few long arcs before heading on its final eastward course.

Suddenly, with a heart-stopping motion, the plane lost altitude and plummeted towards the waves. Panicked, Hugo whispered, “Mother of God, help them.” The plane banked up sharply, as if some unseen hand had pulled it out of its stall. Its silhouette shrank to a dark spot against the distant haze, and then it disappeared into the blue.

“Dude,” he whispered.

They were really gone now: Kate, Sawyer, and maybe even Claire. Poor Claire. He hoped she wasn't still trapped on Hydra Island, and that Kate had managed to get her on board the plane after all. He'd last seen Claire on the Hydra Island dock, taking cover behind some barrels, firing carefully-aimed shots at Widmore's men. As Hugo struggled down the submarine ladder, he wondered where she had learned to shoot like that.

It crossed Hugo's mind that Sawyer might not have let Claire get on the plane, but he quickly pushed the thought down. Kate would have never stood for that, though. She had already stood up to Sawyer once, when they had found Desmond's old yacht. Claire had slipped out of the jungle like a ninja and waved her rifle around, but Kate talked everyone in to letting her on board anyway. If Kate had gotten her way with Sawyer then, she could probably do it again.
He was going to miss Miles too, as sarcastic as Miles could be sometimes. He barely knew the scruffy pilot Frank Lapidus, but he seemed cool. Just their luck they had a pilot.

Although maybe it wasn't all luck.

Hugo waved at the space of sky where the silver plane had been. “Bye, guys. Go with God.”

If they made it back to Los Angeles, hopefully they'd tell his parents that he was alive. Someone would think of it. Kate would, for sure. They had to make it back, right? Why else would they have gotten as far as they had?

Don't jinx it, Hugo told himself as he stared into the east, almost expecting the plane to turn around and come back. So many people had thought they were going to leave the Island, but didn't. So many people thought they were going to stay away, and then they came back.

What it boiled down to was this. When the Island said you could leave, you could. And if it wanted you to return, then it would reach across oceans and even time itself to bring you back.

Or was it really just up to the Island? If Ben was right, Jacob's rules didn't have to be Hugo's. How was he going to set rules, though? What did you do, just walk up to the Island and announce that there were new ones? What made Ben think the Island would even listen?

Too many questions. Anyway, he had to get back to Ben and Desmond, to make sure they were still all right after the aftershocks. Also, hope beyond hope, Jack could still be down there in that mysterious hole full of light. Or maybe there were other escape routes, and Jack had found one by now.

“Now you're like me,” Jack had said. Whatever it was Jack had done to him, Hugo didn't feel any different. He was supposed to protect the Island, but from what, it wasn't clear. Take care of people, as Ben said, but that went without saying.

Maybe the Island still needed protecting from Locke, the fake one. Hugo had seen that pathetic, broken body at the base of the cliff, but Hugo knew better than to assume that dead things always stayed dead. For all he knew, the monster could have hissed out of Locke's body like steam from a frying pan and flown into the air, looking for another host.

Hugo shuddered. If it came after him, he was done for. Funny thing, though, the smoke monster had never had bothered him, even all those times he'd been in the jungle alone. Not even when he'd confronted him face to face.

On the other hand, maybe Jack really had fixed things. Hugo swayed under the force of another tremor, but a deep-down sense told him that this aftershock would be the Island's last. The Island didn't feel like it was going to break apart anymore. The rotten-egg smell was already leaving the air. The wind felt alive and fresh, breathing new life with every gust.

Sweet winds, which could wash away even the smell of death.

Not that the Island's sweetness had done anything to help Sun and Jin, drowned before they got to spend even a single day together. Sayid was gone, too, giving his life to keep everyone on board the submarine from sharing Sun and Jin's fate.

A pang of loneliness and fear stabbed through Hugo. What if he were left alone here? That would be the worst ever. For a second Hugo wished he'd gone back with Claire and the others on Ajira 316.

To be alone here, truly alone, that would be too much. Hugo broke into a near-run away from the
sea, back into the jungle, not paying attention where he was going as he careened downhill.

All he could think of was finding Ben and Desmond and anyone who was left alive. Maybe even (oh please, let it happen) Jack.

A loud noise startled him, and he stopped in his track.

A large green bird flew up from a stand of trees, cawing and squawking as it circled overhead. As it spread out its tail feathers it called out, “Hurr-leee! Hurr-leee!”

Holy crap, it really was saying his name. When he saw it before, he'd wondered. Now he was sure. A few more like it picked up the call and answered, “Hurr-leee! Hurr-leee! Hurr-leee!”

Hugo looked around, but the path downhill had vanished. Wasn't that just like him to get distracted, get lost in the jungle? Before he knew it, he'd screw up, and people would start dying. He forced himself to calm down with a few deep breaths. If worst came to worst, he could keep heading downhill until he hit the stream, then back-track his way to the papaya grove. Hopefully.

The jungle seemed to be waiting for something. The canopy here seemed thicker, the undergrowth darker and more dense. Orange late-afternoon sun flickered through the trees, and the eerie song of the wind sounded almost like voices. The big green birds still circled around him, their squawks mixed in with the chirps and cheeps of the smaller birds which had joined them.

Then, like turning off a radio, the birds stopped with a silence so abrupt that it almost hurt Hugo's ears. Up ahead, in a little clearing there stood a tree, and every branch sagged with the weight of dozens of birds. None of them made a peep. All Hugo could hear were little rustles as they ruffled their wings.

The largest of the green ones spoke, and he could swear it sounded like a question. “Hurr-leee?”

When he came closer, it didn't fly away, but just sat preening green feathers dusted with gold. Then it cocked its head and fixed its eye on him, as if it had something very important to tell him.

Hugo wished he had a piece of fruit to offer it, but his pockets were empty. Maybe if he stuck out his arm it might perch there, just like his Grandma Titi's parakeet used to hop onto his finger.

He was about to take the chance when a loud bark rang out from the forest. All at once the tree exploded into a flurry of rustling feathers and chirps, caws, and whistles. In a rainbow swirl the birds all rose up to the canopy: small brown ones, bright red ones that looked like parrots, a few fuzzy gray ones, as well as the great green birds.

More barks. More caws. A thick-bodied Labrador retriever bounded through the brush, his yellowish fur almost grey in the shadows. At the sight of him, the birds spread in every direction and disappeared in a flutter of wings.

“Aw, Vincent. Am I glad to see you.” Hugo ruffled the dog's fur as Vincent licked his face. Then he darted away towards the jungle and barked again.

“You got something to show me? At least you're not carrying somebody's arm this time.” Hugo felt a pang of guilt for saying that, because it had been Ben's dad's arm which Vincent had carried out of the jungle. Even if Roger had been a massive douche, you still had to respect the dead. “Hey, boy, you know where Ben is? Can you take me to Ben?”

Vincent barked, then darted into the undergrowth and was gone. “Here we go again,” Hugo said to no one in particular, as he waded through the bushes in Vincent's direction.
Roses in December

Hugo was still gone, so Ben kept reading, all the while listening for any changes in Desmond's breathing. When Desmond finally opened his eyes, he grabbed his forehead like someone who was paying the consequences for a long evening spent in a Glasgow pub.

“Can you sit up?” Ben said.

Desmond started to raise himself on his elbows, but thought better of it. “The world's all tilt-a-whirl.”

“Better not, then. Let me give you a drink.”

“Do I dare ask what's happened?”

“Hugo's been off in the jungle for over an hour, and I didn't want to leave you alone.”

“I appreciate that.” Desmond crawled out of the lean-to and pulled himself to his feet.

Ben followed, squinting in the sunlight. “You look none the worse for wear.”

“Aye, once I got over the disappointment.”

“Disappointment?”

“I was so sure, mate. So sure that I'd find myself on my boat, the coffee on to boil and Charlie making a running leap for the bunk, crying out that it was time for Daddy to wake up.”

“It's not that easy to get off this Island.”

“Don't I know it.”

“So, Desmond, if you don't mind me asking, what was it like down there?”

Desmond rubbed his head again. “I don't know. It's all kind of a jumble. There was Jack with the rope, blood all over him. A hole in the ground which opened to hell itself. And flashes, so many flashes, like a dozen films in my head playing all at once. Now it's all fading, like some strange dream.” Desmond scanned the jungle, as if looking for someone. “So where's Jack, then? Did you and Hurley haul him up too?”

Before Ben could answer, sounds of shaking branches and footfalls rang out from the forest. His heart gave a terrified leap at the thought that some of Charles Widmore's men could still be running around the jungle. Instead, Vincent shoved his way through the underbrush, followed by Hugo.

Desmond said, “Hurley?”

Vincent ran from one man to the other, wriggling and wagging, trying to get in as many licks as he could.

“Yeah, it's me,” Hugo said. “Hey, guys, I saw the plane. Over the ridge.”

Desmond squatted down to ruffle Vincent's fur. “The plane that brought you here, eh?”

“They took off. With Kate and Sawyer and everybody. They're going back.”
“Well, I guess the rules can change after all,” Ben whispered to himself, not really believing it until now.

“You see anyone else in the jungle, brother?” Desmond said. “Like, the ones who kidnapped me?”

“You know, I think the smoke thing ate them all,” Hugo said.

Ben knew there were two that the smoke monster didn't get, but he kept quiet.

Hugo said to Desmond, “Jack's still down there, isn't he? In that cave?”

“I was hoping he was with you, brother.”

“Is there any chance? Any chance he could be alive?”

“There's maybe a wee one. With this Island, who knows?”

“That's all very well,” said Ben. “But we could have a lot worse problem on our hands if Widmore's men are still out there.”

“I don't think that's gonna be an issue,” Hugo said.

“What about Charles Widmore?” Desmond asked. “You think the smoke thing got him, too?”

“Charles Widmore is the least of your worries, Desmond,” Ben said in a cold voice.

Hugo frowned. “Ben, what did you do?”

“What I had to. Anyway, Desmond, I didn't think you cared.”

“He was my son's grandfather. And my wife's father.”

Vincent pressed his nose against Hugo's leg and started to whimper. Hugo said, “If there's even a chance for Jack, I got to know for sure.”

“I'll come with you, mate.”

“Are you sure you can walk, Des?” Hugo said.

“I've got my sea-legs back. Just as well that there are no more aftershocks.”

The earth was completely still now. Soft breezes whistled through the trees in time with the swish of Vincent's tail on the leafy ground.

Ben said to Hugo, “Do you think you can find it again?”

“I'll have to. Des, you went down there before. Do you think you could, uh—”

Desmond shuddered as though the prospect shook him to the core. “Of course, Hurley. If there's any chance, we should take it.”

The three of them set out for the bamboo grove, Vincent loping along behind. When they reached the outskirts, it was clear they had no reason to go any further.

Jack lay underneath the green bamboo stalks as if he was sleeping. Blood stained his entire right side a deep brownish-black. Vincent trotted over to Jack's body and snuggled against on his chest.
Hugo started shaking the body. “Are you okay? Are you with us?”

Vincent glanced at Hugo, and his expression said, Don’t be silly.

Desmond put his hand on Hugo's shoulder. “Brother, I think that's it for him.”

From deeper in the bamboo thicket, Ben called out, “There's a trail of blood over here. He must have walked all the way from the Heart. I can't imagine how he pulled himself out.”

“I knew he was alive down there. I just knew it.” Hugo sank down and drew Jack's body into his arms, cradling it against his chest.

Vincent plopped in Jack's lap, and Hugo embraced them both. Never had Ben seen a more improbable Pietà.

“We need to cover him with something,” Desmond said.

“We need to bury him,” countered Ben.

Hugo's mouth was drawn down in sorrow. “We need Rose and Bernard.”

In a dry voice Ben said, “If they're even still alive.”

“They're alive,” said Hugo. “So many people aren't, though. Sun, Jin, Sayid, Juliet—”

Ben's heart skipped a beat. “Juliet?”

Hugo shook his head, staring down at Jack's body. “Yeah, last week or something, when that bomb blew us back to the future. Which is now. Man, time travel sucks.”

Ben bit his lip, afraid to speak.

Hugo went on, “Sawyer buried her up by what used to be our Hatch. They lived together back when you were a kid. You don't remember her from then, do you?”

Sawyer and Juliet, well. He couldn't have predicted that. After all, Juliet had preferred doctors, hadn't she? Her ex-husband had been one. She had certainly wasted no time taking Dr. Goodwin Stanhope for a lover, either, until Ben sent him off to die.

Something collapsed inside Ben, another tiny surrender. Juliet's blood was on his hands, and he had no idea how to wash it off.

“Yeah, you were pretty sick, from what Kate said.” Hugo fixed Ben with an intent stare, pointing to Jack, the jungle, maybe the Island itself. “Ben, all this has gotta stop. All this killing, things blowing up, innocent people dying. It's over, Ben. It's not happening. Least not on my watch.”

Ben had gotten his first look at Hugo when he knelt on the Pala Ferry dock, bound and gagged. Back then, Ben had figured him for a big, dumb ox. Now the dumb ox looked more like a bull.

Desmond broke the tension. “Let's take him to your beach camp. Then I'll go get Rose and Bernard, and be back quick as a whistle. Ben, it's probably best you don't go with me.”

“And just why is that?”

“Because just this very morning you stood beside Locke when he threatened to carve up Rose, so they might be rather upset to see you.”
Hugo said, “Rose won't be that mad. Or if she is, it won't last long.”

“Are you sure you want to do it this way, Hugo?” Ben protested. “Even if Rose and Bernard don't send us on our way, the soonest we could get back to the beach would be tomorrow. No disrespect intended, but if we don't work quickly, he's going to start to smell.”

Hugo brushed Vincent off Jack's lap, then pulled Ben close to the body. “Does he smell bad to you?”

Ben wrinkled his nose, pulling back. “Hugo, is this really necessary?”

Desmond's eyes shone with delight. “Take a breath, Ben.”

Ben hesitated before bending down to the dirt- and blood-covered body, as if it might grab him.

“Closer,” Hugo said.

Ben breathed in a fragrance distilled from every rose he had ever smelled. The climbing roses which had covered his grandmother's back porch. The floribunda bushes which Annie's father had planted in front of their house. The Portland Rose Garden in full June bloom.

That scent's power lay not in its intensity but in its purity, which now rested over the mortal remains of Jack Shephard.

“I don't think he's going to rot on us anytime soon,” said Hugo.

“Can you carry him alone?” Desmond asked Hugo. “It's a good two klicks from here to your beach.”

“I can manage it.”

Ben picked up his pack and traipsed through the bamboo after Desmond, unsure about this new arrangement where Hugo led and everyone else followed.

* * * * * * * *

Hugo cradled Jack's body in his lap as wind rustled through the bamboo. As shadows lengthened across Jack's face, Hugo kicked himself for not staying by the pool, for not waiting. Jack had probably climbed out after they'd headed for high ground, which meant that no one had been there for him.

He couldn't even be trusted with a goldfish or a box turtle, much less Mystery Island. Was he really the best the Island could do? Well, the Island would just have to manage.

Aloud he said, “Jack, I'm sorry. So sorry. I really wish you could tell me what to do. I know you weren't Protector for very long, but you had to learn something, right?”

The whispering chorus in the tree-tops grew louder. Hugo's forearms prickled as if lightning was building up in the air, and he had the creepy sensation that a door had opened behind his back.

A tall, slender man in a dark suit walked into the clearing on silent, bare feet. “Hello, Hugo.”

This kind of thing had happened for the past two years at the Santa Rosa hospital, and Hugo didn't even flinch. “Dude, do I know you?”

The man squatted down to Hugo's level. “Not exactly.”
"You're dead, right? I was hoping for Jack."

"Sorry, you're stuck with me."

"That sucks, because I could use some advice."

"I'll try to help."

"So, who are you?"

"I'm Christian. Christian Shephard. I'm Jack's father."

"You should be proud. He saved us. He saved us all."

"I am proud." Christian reached out and stroked his lifeless son's hair. "You had what it takes, kiddo."

"So, you were Claire's dad."

"By a liaison of which I'm not too proud. What am I saying, liaison?" Christian laughed a little, but in a shamefaced way. "Claire's mother was my other family. I ruined everything for her. She never wanted anyone after me."

"Nothing to brag about, man."

"The first thing they teach you here is not to hide from the facts. I'm not bragging, just stating what happened. Out of the bitter came the sweet, and that was Claire."

A blush covered Hugo's face like sunburn. Like Christian said, only the facts. Smokey-Locke had snatched Claire, but Hugo was willing to bet that under the pain, the anger, the wildcat appearance, Claire's old sweetness remained.

Besides, you couldn't hide a single solitary thing from dead people.

Christian wore a wry half-smile. "This much I can tell you. They're headed to Tarawa Atoll."

Hugo hadn't the faintest idea where that was, but this was even better than hope. This was assurance. "Awesome. No, it's beyond awesome. Thank you so much." He wanted to reach for Christian's hand or even hug him, but Jack's heavy, inert weight lay in his lap, and hugging a ghost might be not the best idea, anyway.

The undergrowth rustled as Vincent ran over to Christian, who knelt down to pat him. "Hey, boy, you did everything I asked. Everything and more."

Vincent's tail wagged so fiercely that his whole body shook.

"You two know each other?" Hugo was only half-joking.

Christian didn't take it as a joke, though. "We go back awhile, don't we, boy?"

The dog just wriggled some more.

"Awhile, huh." Then, tentatively, as if asking about an indiscretion, Hugo said, "Are you, um, stuck here?"

Slanted light shone through Christian as if he were a smudged window. "No. I don't have to stay
“So why are you here, then?”

“To help my son. And to help you.”

Hugo glanced down at Jack. When he looked back up, Christian was gone.

Jack still looked as he were sunk into a light sleep, and the odor of roses had returned. With a long breath, Hugo hoisted Jack across his shoulders. The body was surprisingly loose-limbed, not anywhere near as heavy as he expected. Or maybe he wasn't as tired as he thought. Either way, if he made tracks, he'd get to the beach by evening. So off he set, Vincent trotting along behind.

* * * * * * * *

Twilight was fast approaching as Ben and Desmond made tracks for Rose and Bernard's house. All at once, the stream they had been following ended in a jagged waterfall at least thirty feet high. Fallen trees surrounded the banks, with more trees and rock debris strewn at the bottom.

“This isn't a good sign,” said Ben.

Desmond looked equally worried. The two men picked their way around boulders and broken logs until they reached the small clearing where Rose and Bernard made their house. Or where their house had once stood. The tall peaked structure, thatched with palm fronds and decorated with shells and bits of colored glass, now stood in a collapsed heap. A collapsed wall had smashed the vegetable garden. There would be no harvest now.

Bernard was picking through rubble, while Rose crouched on a camp stool with her face in her hands.

“Rose! Bernard! It's me, Desmond!”

Bernard waved, but Rose just sat.

“Thank God you two are all right,” Desmond said.

Bernard gave Ben an unfriendly up-and-down look. “Hello, Benjamin.”

Ben tried to not let the cold reception bother him. “It looks like you could use some help.”

Rose snapped, “We don't need anything from you.”

“Sweetheart—” Bernard started to say.

“This is all their fault. We just wanted a peaceful life. We minded our own business.”

“I know,” Desmond broke in. “But we are all on this Island together.”

“What's left of it,” Rose said.

Bernard put his hand on her shoulder. “Rose, it's just a house. We can build a new house.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist, her body shaking with sobs. Over her bowed head Bernard said to Ben and Desmond, “Would you like some tea?”
“I'll collect the wood,” Ben volunteered, even though there was a large pile right next to the wreckage. He was anxious to be away from the two of them.

Rose said, “You stay put, Benjamin. I don't want you out of my sight.”

“I'll get the tea on,” said Bernard.

Rose whirled on Desmond. “How could you bring him here?”

“Everything's changed,” Desmond said. “He's with us now. He's with Hurley.”

“All this drama. Next thing you're going to tell me, Jack went off and got himself killed after all.”

Desmond took a deep breath. “Aye, that's exactly what I'm going to tell you. Rose, you have to trust me on this. We all have our flaws, and God knows I have mine. There aren't many of us left, though, and we're going to have to pull together.”

Ben stood silent, watching.

Finally, Rose threw her hands into the air, then headed for the remains of their kitchen.

Bernard wouldn't meet Ben's eyes. “Plenty of rain-water in the past few hours. That's one good thing, at least.”

“I'm sorry for what happened this morning—” Ben started to say.

Bernard wouldn't let him finish. “Just tell me that Locke, or whatever that was, is gone.”

“He is. I saw his body.”

Bernard threw dried brown rose pods into the tea-kettle. “Rose hips are the house special around Chez Nadler. Which reminds me, what about that young woman, the blonde? Juliet, I think her name was. She, Sawyer, Kate, they all came by a week, week and a half ago.”

“Juliet didn’t make it, Bernard.”

“Guess that bomb idea didn't work out so well, did it?”

“I guess that's a matter of interpretation,” Ben said. "You're not in 1977 anymore.”

“Not that it matters a damn to Rose or I. Or poor Juliet.”

Ben tried to ignore this thrust, but it hurt. “Also, Sawyer, Kate, and Claire have left the Island.”

“We saw the plane. So that's what that was.”

Eventually the tea kettle whistled, an ordinary sound after earthquake and chaos. Rose poured tea into cups, saying, “You men might as well parlay, while I bring you some supper.” She shot a firm look at Bernard. “I'm not doing this for us. I'm doing it for Hurley. That poor boy's been through enough.”

As they ate, Desmond said, “The tea's fine, Rose. Not Earl Grey, but then again, what is?”

“Don't try to sweet-talk me, young man. My house is broken. Our stream is full of boulders. Bernard can't even fish because there's a cliff instead of a path. It's all fallen down around our ears and I for one want to know why.”
“Aye, then.” Desmond's voice took on a sing-song tone, as if he were telling a very old story. “You know that this Island is a special place. Well, it's more than that, because there are many special places in the world.”

“Like Uluru,” Bernard said to Rose. “Remember?”

“But that was nonsense. We traveled all the way to Australia, and that man turned out to be a fake. I bet he bought all those crutches and stuck them up on his wall himself.”

“Aye, there are a lot of fakes out there,” Desmond continued. “But the places themselves, Uluru, Glastonbury, Mount Shasta in America, they're all on a great necklace which stretches across the throat of the world. The clasp which holds the whole thing together is the Island. And the Island has a center, a Heart. The most special place of all. Locke wanted to unclasp it and cut the string so that all those pearls would fall, and none of it would hold together anymore.”

Ben recited in a low voice, “Things fall apart. The center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned.”

Bernard got it at once. “You would almost think Yeats had visited this Island.”

“There was a man whom I served all of my adult life,” Ben said. “His name was Jacob, and he ruled everything here. It wasn't until recently that I actually met him, and when I did, I hated him.” Ben didn't want to mention the part about killing him. Not here, not now.

Sharp anger flared in Rose's voice. “So this Jacob let all these things happen? He ruled this Island, but he couldn't fight Locke? He let all those people die?” She stood up, furious now. “What kind of a monster is he?”

“Was,” Ben said. “Jacob's dead.”

In a quiet voice, Desmond said to Ben, “No more lies, brother.”

“All right. He didn't die. I killed him.”

“How do you kill a god?” Bernard asked. “Which is what he sounded like.”

“Oh, there are ways.” Some of the old chill came back into Ben's voice. Despite his hope, the ice in his soul was still there.

Desmond broke the silence. “He wasn't a god. When I was down in the Heart, that pool at the Island's center, I had a little flash of him. He was born on this Island, a person like us. This great power was given to him, and in turn he gave it to Jack.”

“So, Jack was supposed to save the Island from Locke?” Rose said.

“Aye, that's right. But I had to be the one to actually go down to the bottom of that well and pull the plug, so to speak. Even so, it was too much for me, and I couldn't fix it. So the Island started to break up.”

“That's where Jack came in,” Ben added. “The ceremony of innocence wasn't drowned after all. Jack passed his power on to Hugo, and then climbed down into the well. Whatever he did down there put everything to rights.”

Rose turned to Desmond. “But you said that Jack got himself killed.”
“That he did, God rest him.”

“Where's Jack now?” Bernard asked, his face gentle and sad.

Ben said, “With Hugo. He's taking him to the beach camp, your old one.”

“To lay him to rest,” Desmond added. “Isn't that where your cemetery was?”

“Hurley's all alone down there with a body?” Rose said. “We can't leave him like that. We've got to go down and—”

Bernard interrupted her. “Rose, night's going to fall in about thirty minutes. We're not tramping through the jungle in the pitch dark.”

“Well, we can at least do a little packing while it's still light. Then we'll go down to the beach first thing in the morning. You two, get with Bernard and root through this mess, find what we need. Bernard, you remember that big shawl we bought in Bali, the one we thought was too pretty to use? It's in that blue suitcase over there, where our east wall used to be. We'll want that. And don't forget the tea kettle.”

“Are we moving in?” Bernard said.

“Well, we can't stay here.”

Bernard shrugged. “That's what I've been trying to tell you.”

(continued)
Flight of the Phoenix

Every time a plane takes off, it feels like a miracle.

Sure, the computer-wielding pencil-necked boys in the short-sleeve shirts can calculate every inch of wingspan, every yard of runway, every kilogram of mass, every pound of jet fuel required to make the magic happen. But whether it's the first flight or the thousandth, there's nothing in life, and maybe not even in death either, to compare with how the heart soars when those wheels finally leave the runway, when tons of metal defy the bonds of gravity, and claim a place among the birds and the angels.

So thought Frank Lapidus, hand on full throttle as Ajira 316 thundered off the cracked and broken Hydra Island runway to become airborne. And while he knew in his head that gravity still ruled, and any pilot who forgot that was a dead one, in his heart he rejoiced and was glad, because he was damned sure that this flight was the exception.

* * * * * * * *

Kate sat back in her wide, comfortable leather seat, feeling the sharp, oddly high-pitched whine of the 737's engines. She had to admit, this was a hell of a way to get into first-class.

Frank started to circle around the Island, and Kate gripped Claire's hand even tighter. High jungle-covered cliffs swung terrifyingly close to the plane. Lava from the erupting volcano hit the ocean and billowed up into clouds of steam. A huge chunk of cliff-side broke off easily as a chunk of cake, then fell into the sea in several pieces.

What the hell was Frank doing with all this circling? Across the aisle from Kate, Miles sat with eyes closed and a self-satisfied grin. She strained to get a glimpse of Sawyer, but couldn't see him. The first-class seats were wide, and she didn't want to let go of Claire's hand.

Both she and Claire jumped when Frank bellowed into the intercom, “Miles! Get your ass up here, now!” Then Frank changed to a more typical, lazy pilot's tone. “Nothing to worry about, folks. I just need another pair of eyes.”

Miles seemed to wake up, but didn't move at first.

Kate gave him a sharp poke. “You heard him. Get on up there.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Miles said with a smirk. When he got to the cockpit Kate heard him exclaim, “Holy crap,” but Frank shushed him. Whatever it was, she sure as hell couldn't do anything about it.

“He saw something, didn't he?” Claire said to Kate.

“Well, whatever it was, we're still flying. I guess that's what matters.”

Sawyer scooted into Miles's empty seat. “I think ol' Chesty just wants some company up there. Maybe one of you ladies could tie on your stewardess apron and bring him a tall cold drink. I sure know I could use one.” He grinned, flashing his dimples and trying to project relaxed charm, but his voice shook and his eyes were wet.

Kate rolled her eyes, thought about getting indignant, then just shook her head. “Sawyer, you never stop, do you?”
“Never, Shortcake.” Now he sounded better, farther from tears than before.

Suddenly the plane dropped a few feet, sending Kate's stomach up to the roof of her mouth. Then the plane plummeted again, and the engine whine grew louder. Frank said something over the intercom, but it was lost in the roar of engine noise. If whatever he said was meant to be reassuring, it wasn't.

Outside, dark clouds surrounded the plane in a thick cocoon. Lighting flashes played off the distant clouds, teasing the plane with occasional sparks. The cabin lights were off, and grey gloom covered everything.

Then the engines cut out.

For a fraction of a second, the deafening silence held them all suspended. No more choppy vibrations of the fuselage, no more engine whines and rattles, no more whoosh of wind against wings. It wasn't until Ajira 316 was blanketed in complete and total silence that Kate realized how noisy the plane had been.

She didn't reflect for very long, because the plane went into a nosedive.

It was worse than any state fair roller-coaster, and worse even than the Oceanic 815 crash. She braced herself against the spiraling fall, the pressure of gravity so hard she could scarcely breathe. Claire gripped her so tightly that her hand went numb. Kate was sure these were the last few seconds of her life.

Oh my God this is it, bye Aaron baby, Mom, I'm sorry, so sorry for all of it.

She hoped that someone out there could hear her. If she was lucky, death would just come quick and get it over with.

All at once, airplane sounds broke over them like waves as the engines cut back in. Kate and Claire both screamed, but the plane was louder. Then, just like a roller-coaster when it hits its lowest point and rises once again, the plane's nose lifted.

The plane continued to climb, flung about like a child's toy. The inside of the cabin was black, except for the faint glow of a few running-lights. Out of the corner of her eye, Kate saw Claire with with head back and eyes screwed shut, as tears ran down her cheeks.

Gradually the clanking, crashing noises stopped, and the plane evened out. The clouds outside brightened up from dark grey to whitish streaks. Kate relaxed her death-grip on Claire and the armrest. Across the aisle, Sawyer sat white and shaking. Kate reached across the aisle to take his hand, too.

"Thought we just about bought the farm," Sawyer muttered, clinging to Kate's hand.

From the cockpit Frank said, "Everybody okay back there?" He must have forgotten to switch off the intercom, for he added in a low voice, "Son of a bitch, Miles, that was a damn miracle. We should have hit the drink by now." Then, in his pilot's voice, he said, "Looks like smooth sailing for the next three, four hours from here till Fiji. Can't give you folks an ETA 'cause I don't really know what time it is." His laugh had the jagged tone of borderline hysteria. Then the intercom squealed once more and fell silent.

The plane flew on smoothly and evenly now, as if held aloft on a cushion of air. Sun poured through the windows and outside everything shone with a pure, seamless blue. Claire had leaned back in her seat with closed eyes, although Kate didn't see how she could sleep. Kate stretched over Claire and stared at the tiny white ripples sprinkled across the vast ocean, where a ship like a miniature toy cut a
thin white-threaded path across the surface of the blue sea.

For the first time since they'd climbed aboard Ajira 316, Kate thought she was actually going to live. She looked around the cabin, taking long deep breaths. It wasn't Claire's fault, but she really was a bit ripe. Her tattered plaid shirt and dark jeans weren't just mud-streaked; they were so stiff with dirt that it might have been woven into the fabric.

Kate knew she was no prize either, with her soggy jeans, and t-shirt still saturated with her own blood. Maybe she should look through the carry-on luggage, find something clean for herself and Claire both.

As Kate stepped into the aisle, Sawyer raised his eyebrows in a question.

"Ladies' room," Kate answered.

Sawyer looked over at Claire. "She okay?"

"I think so."

"She's probably really pissed at me," he said, rueful.

"We'll find out, won't we? She came with us at least. That's something."

In the middle-section lavatory, Kate found that there was no water in the tap and the toilet wouldn't flush. Wrinkling her nose at the smell, Kate searched through one bag after another until she found what she was looking for.

As she pulled off her wet, bloodstained tee, her wound started to itch. She braced herself to look.

There it was between her left collarbone and shoulder, a thin red line of healed skin, with eight tiny thread loops hanging, useless. Jack had sewn her up, explaining in a calm, compassionate voice, "I have to do this, or it'll get infected," as the needle had burned through her skin.

"Oh, my God," Kate said. She touched the well-healed scar experimentally, ready to snatch her hand back at the slightest twinge, but there was nothing except a faint itch where the threads dangled.

Suddenly Sawyer loomed behind her, his tall frame filling the tiny bathroom's mirror. She was so flummoxed about her wound that she didn't even yell at him for sneaking up on her. To her surprise, he didn't make any wisecracks about her standing there in her bra in front of the mirror.

Instead, he stared at the scar. "Yesterday that was quite a hole, as I recall."

"I know. How can this be?"

Sawyer was all concern now. "How's your arm? You sure were favorin' it earlier."

She rolled her left shoulder forward and back, extended her arm outward and in. There was no pain at all. "It's fine. Like it never happened."

He pointed to her stitches. "Cept for the souvenirs. Want me to take 'em out? 'Course, maybe you'd rather do the honors yourself."

Kate stared at the dangling black threads and reeled, suddenly lightheaded. Shaking, she leaned up against the tiny sink and tried not to faint, but stumbled anyway.

Sawyer steered her to a row of seats where she flopped back, eyes closed, body shaking. The
irrational thought seized her that these tiny thread-loops were all that connected her to her old life with Jack, and that when they were cut, everything would be severed for good.

But not entirely, because she had the living proof of his final gift to her. “Now you're like me,” Jacob had said to Jack, and that had made no sense at the time. But somehow, maybe when Jack had touched her hand, or maybe during that final cliff-side kiss (it had to be during that kiss, like no other kiss she'd ever shared with Jack before, like holding wind and fire and light in her arms all at once) it had happened.

How else would she have been able to leap off that high rugged cliff, swim like a seal through rough surf, pull herself hand-over-hand up the Elizabeth's tow rope, then swim to Hydra Island's shore?

She'd wanted him to give it back, to just let the Island sink. How wrong she was. As soon as Sawyer sat down beside her with a small pair of surgical scissors in hand, she started to cry.

“Hey, relax, I ain't even touched you yet.” Sawyer handed her a large piece of gauze, and she blew her nose noisily.

“Jack did this, you know.”

“I know, Freckles. I watched him stitch you up.”

“No, not those. It was only yesterday morning. Now look at it.”

Sawyer hung back for a few heartbeats, staring at the healed scar as if suddenly afraid to touch it.

“That's some mojo.” Then, with a pain-wracked face he said, “If the doc was able to do that, maybe he could, y'know, fix himself.”

She hadn't even dared to think it, but Sawyer saying it made it almost feel real. In a small voice she said, “Maybe.”

“So can I start now?”

“Uh, huh.” The antiseptic wet her bra, but she didn't care.

When Sawyer inserted the tiny scissor blade into the first loop, then gently drew the thread out with tweezers, she sobbed again.

“Damn it, Freckles, did I hurt you?”

“No,” she sniffled. “I barely felt it.”

“Don't scare me like that again. I ain't exactly an expert.”

She sat quiet, still grieving inside as Sawyer drew the remaining seven loops from her skin, and each one seemed to pull directly out of her heart.

* * * * * * * *

As Kate headed back to her seat, she saw Richard deep in conversation with Lapidus. With a timid smile, Claire handed her an Ajira water bottle.

Sawyer had already guzzled his, but he lifted the empty bottle in a kind of toast. “Somebody around here knows how to strap on a pair of stewardess pumps.”

“Thanks, Claire,” Kate said, suddenly aware of how thirsty she was. “And you're showing your age,
Sawyer. They're flight attendants now, and they haven't worn high heels in years.”

Claire headed towards the aisle. “Don't sit, Kate. I'm headed for the lav.”

“Good, I'll go with you. I found some clothes you might like.”

When Kate showed Claire the blue jeans, navy tank, and grey button-down shirt, Claire backed away, clutching her own ragged shirt tightly across her chest. Her face was blank, and she avoided Kate's glance. “No thanks.”

“Oh, sorry, if you wanted something else. I didn't mean to pick for you.” Kate was about to say that was her operating mode now, because if she let a three-year old choose his outfits, they'd never get out the door on time. Then she realized how bad that would sound, on so many levels, rubbing it in that Kate had raised Aaron, and Claire hadn't. So all Kate said was, “Look, that black wheel-y suitcase over there's full of stuff in our size. Just take what you want.”

But Claire still planted herself like a stubborn statue in the aisle. “I'm fine, really.”

Kate had little time to argue with her, because Richard and Sawyer joined them in the aisle, their faces long and serious.

“This is the situation, ladies,” Richard said in a tight, tense voice. “We're losing fuel. We're not going to make it to Fiji.”

“Here we go again,” said Sawyer.

Kate leaned up against a seat, reeling against a flood of thoughts. They were going to die. Or they weren't going to die right away, but when they broke through that puffy sea of white clouds, below them would be the Island, and this time it would suck them in like a vortex. Death in the ocean, death in the jungle, take your pick.

She managed to squeak out, “My God, Richard, how long?”

“About thirty minutes, maybe an hour if Frank Lapidus is as good a pilot as he says he is. But we've got to buckle in before he reduces altitude.”

“What about sending some kind of distress call?”

“Radio's down, Freckles. And navigational instruments, too. Frank's doin' it the old-fashioned way, with eyeballs and the sun.”

Claire perched on the opposite seat's armrest, a faint smile on her face. “So, he got what he wanted after all. He always does.”

Her face twisted in fear, sorrow, Kate couldn't tell which.

“Well, third time's a charm,” Sawyer said. “But we got a more immediate problem here than a dead
Richard said, “Frank's trying to find someplace for us to land. So we get back to our seats, strap in, and pray.” In afterthought he said, “And we keep our mouths shut, because there are going to be questions. A lot of them, but there's only one answer.”

“I've gotta talk to my lawyer,” Sawyer volunteered.

“That's right. If we get out of this,” said Richard.

“Why are you telling us this now, Richard?” Kate asked.

“Because I don't know what's going to happen in the next half-hour. We could crash. We could get split up. And if we do, there's only one sentence that comes out of your mouth, and that's I want to talk to Daniel Norton, of Agostino and Norton, Los Angeles.”

“Good Lord,” Kate said. “I know him.”

“We got it, Richard,” Sawyer said. “Name, rank, and serial number. Come on, gals, let's pack it in.”

But Sawyer didn't go back to first class. Instead, he slid into a middle section row, right up to the window. “If I'm gonna smack down in the ocean, I want to see its face before I go.”

Kate waited for Richard to protest, but he only said, “I'm going back up to the cockpit, to the jump seat. Frank's going to need all the eyes he can get up there.”

Claire slid right in next to Sawyer, taking the middle seat. So there was nothing left for Kate to do but join them. Both Kate and Sawyer each took one of Claire's hands, and then reached around her to grasp each others' as well, forming a circle with Claire at the center. The plane was noisier back in coach, and as Frank descended further into the thick cloud cover, it started to jiggle around, then bounce.

No one spoke for what felt like a long time, and no one let go of the other's hand. Then the cloud cover finally broke, and the plane headed out into clear skies again. Kate peered over Sawyer and the blue ocean looked awfully close this time.

All at once, the plane swooped down in one of those banking maneuvers pilots use when they approach an airport. It swung around once, then again. As it settled into its low approach, a small bit of land appeared in the window. An island, yes, but a strange-looking one, long and drawn out, curved almost like a fish-hook.

The intercom crackled, and the joy in Frank's voice came through the static. “Something, or someone just saved our bacon.”

Claire, Kate, and Sawyer peered as close to the window as possible, staring at a tiny pale-brown airstrip set right where the curve of the fish-hook would be.

“Stay buckled in, folks, ’cause we're swinging around a few times, just to let them know we're here,” Frank said. “Still no radio. But I see a control tower.”

“Oh, God,” Kate said, “I don't believe it.”

The grin in Frank's voice was unmistakable. “Welcome, friends, to Bonriki International Airport on the Tarawa Atoll, in the Republic of Kiribati.”
“Kir-i-bass?” Sawyer repeated, staring at Claire and Kate. “Where the hell's that?”

“I don't know,” Kate said. “And I don't care. Because anyplace is better than going down into the ocean.”

Sawyer looked up, a touch of grimness around the corners of his smile. “Just remember, Freckles, and you too, Claire. Name, rank, and serial number.”

(continued)
Welcome to Tarawa

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Ajira 316 circled above the Tarawa Atoll, a thin spit of land curved like a fish hook, Miles said, “What the hell you doing, Frank?”

“We got no radio, so we're giving them a chance to know we're here before we land.”

“What, on that?” Miles pointed at Bonriki Airport's single runway.

“Piece of cake,” Frank said. Inside he told himself that the numbers were on his side, that Bonriki was rated for his ship and that here on Tarawa Atoll, physics still worked. Or so he hoped.

A Combi van rolled across the airstrip, while further down, a few people sauntered across on foot. Frank cursed under his breath, stomach twisting with anxiety. Three small planes were parked at odd angles on the edge of the runway, which did nothing for his nerves, either. He pulled the 737 out of its approach and circled for one final time.

Sometimes Lady Luck was like a one-hour stand you picked up at a truck stop, but sometimes she stayed the whole night and even made you breakfast the next morning. This was one of those times. Frank lowered the flaps and aimed the 737's nose right where it needed to be. The plane neatly touched down on the pothole-laden runway with only a tiny skid. A few people watching from the sidelines cheered when Frank stopped the plane right where the asphalt ended. Beyond that there was only a thin strip of sand, and then the blue ocean.

A battered police cruiser with flashing lights and a couple of pickup trucks barreled towards the plane. Men with flashlights jumped out, signaling for the 737 to stop.

“How sweet,” said Miles. “They sent the welcome wagon.”

Frank cut the engines, leaving only the low hum of the air conditioning. “Here goes nothing.” He opened the front fuselage door and stuck his head out, hands raised high above his head. “Ajira 316, destination GUM. Emergency, emergency, May Day.”

One of the men yelled something back at Frank. Frank shouted, “No slides. No slides. Slides don't work.”

Over his shoulder, he explained to Miles and the rest, “They want us to stay here and wait. I'll keep the AC on as long as I can. Since we can't use the evacuation slide, my guess is they're going to tow in some stairs.”

* * * * * * * *

The Ajira survivors were crowded like sardines into the back of an old pickup truck, guarded by an old man with a pistol. It was the only gun in sight. At the Bonriki terminal, they were escorted past a hand-lettered sign which read, “Customs and Immigration,” to a fenced-off area, where they were told to sit and wait. It was hot and very humid.

The outdoor terminal reminded Claire of a huge picnic shelter. Little cheeping birds flew to and fro between the rafters of the steep thatched roof. The picnic tables were decorated with spatters of bird droppings.
Kate said to Frank, “That was great. You got us down safe.”

In an aw-shucks voice Frank answered, “That was nothing. ’Bout five years ago, a buddy of mine lost an engine, had to bring a 747 down here. He misjudged how wet the runway was and wound up half in the ocean. Had about fifty passengers on board but everybody made it to shore. Didn't want to mention it while we were getting ready to land.”

Sawyer perched on the corner of a picnic table, stretching his legs. “We mightily appreciate that, Cap’n.”

“My buddy said they were good people here.”

Miles paced around the fenced enclosure, then sidled up to Frank and Sawyer. “Nobody's guarding us. And that old jabronie on the truck, his gun was from like World War II or something. I bet there weren't even any bullets in it. What do you say, we grab one of those puddle jumpers over there and fly right out of here?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Frank said.

Before Miles got a chance to answer, two large men from the police cruiser ambled up, both wearing khaki uniforms. The older one introduced himself as Chief Biribo, then wrote down their names and countries of origin in a spiral note-pad. The younger one was fat, and his crinkled black hair and genial expression reminded Claire of Hurley. He was Officer Nariki, he said. He politely took Kate’s suitcase and set it aside.

The heart-stopping moment came when Chief Biribo asked for their passports.

Frank handed his over. It was stuck together from weeks of Island sand and damp, but Chief Biribo carefully pulled it apart. He frowned when neither Sawyer, Miles, nor Richard had one.

“We're Americans,” Sawyer said. “You speaka the English? I want the American embassy, you know, the US ambassador.”

“Americans,” Officer Nariki said to Chief Biribo, rolling his eyes.

Biribo said, “All of you lost your passports? What, you get mugged in a bar in Agana or something?”

“We were headed for Guam,” Frank put in. “We never made it to Agana to get mugged.”

Biribo nodded, then said to Nariki, “We're gonna have to call Suva.” He made it sound as much fun as cleaning out a septic tank.

Under his breath, Sawyer said to Frank, “Who's Suva?”

“Not who. It's where the US embassy is. In Fiji.”

Then it was Claire's turn. “I'm Australian.”

At that, Nariki gave her a warm, wide smile. She beamed back, and suddenly everyone in the area relaxed a bit.

The grin on Nariki’s face was beginning to look silly. “You a tourist? We get lots of Aussies here.”

“Sort of,” she answered. “Look, I'm going to get my passport out now. It's okay.” She unbuttoned her ratty top shirt, and Nariki sidled in for a better look. Biribo tensed up, though, as if she was trying
to pull something.

From an inside pocket Claire pulled out a plastic baggie and handed it to Nariki, along with another charming smile. As he took in the sight of Claire in her tank top, she handed him her most prized possession: an M-series holographic Australian passport, not that much the worse for wear.

“Son of a bitch,” Sawyer said under his breath to Kate.

“Well, I'll be. It's why she didn't want to change her shirt.”

The two policemen examined Frank's and Claire's documents, exchanged interested glances, then spoke to one another in their own language. Not completely, though, because more than once Claire heard the chilling phrase, “Homeland Security.”

“Smells like trouble,” Miles said to Richard.

“Miles, the only trouble here so far has been you.”

“Hey, that's not fair,” Miles protested.

“Yeah, Ricky Ricardo, give the man a break,” Sawyer said.

“We got to search you now.” Biribo sounded genuinely sorry about it.

“We'll look over the plane later,” Nariki added helpfully. “Maybe tomorrow.”

Claire's stomach clenched. She had watched people get pulled out of lines at the Sydney airport, and those selected for special treatment generally didn't have a good time of it. She was especially sorry she'd smiled in such a friendly way at Officer Nariki. But his round face showed nothing but sympathy.

“Take the ladies to the VIP lounge,” Biribo said to Nariki. He handed Claire's passport back to her, and she slid it into her trouser pocket.

When Biribo led the men away, panic crossed Kate's face. “Do we have to split up?”

Claire gave Kate's hand a little squeeze of reassurance. Sawyer was protesting their separation too, while Richard tried to calm him down.

Nariki guided them down a breezeway around the back of the terminal building, to a large room. It held a couple of chairs which had seen better days, and an old couch whose cracked upholstery was mended with duct tape.

“You wait here,” Nariki said. The door slid shut behind him, unlocked.

Claire curled up on one end of the couch, while Kate settled herself in a wingback chair and rolled her eyes. “This is the VIP lounge?”

Above them, a rusted fan beat out the minutes with an irregular whump-whump.

Finally Kate said, “Didn't see that one coming, with your passport.”

“I've always had it, ever since the crash. I found my purse that first day, remember? No hairbrush, but I had all my papers. I never let go of it, not even when I went to live with my friend. Finally I sewed it into my shirt.”
“Why?”

“Aaron was gone. All of you were gone. It let me remember who I was, that I hadn't always been… like this. Crazy.”

“I don't think you're crazy. I've been to places where— Let's just say that I've seen some really crazy people, and you're not it.”

“Look, I jumped you, didn't I?” There, she'd said it, and it was out in the open. “Put a knife to your throat.”

“You thought I had Aaron.”

“That was stupid, right? I mean, somebody had to take him. He'd have died out there, wouldn't he?”

Kate nodded, then walked over to the big open window with its torn, dirty screen. “Look at this place. We could be out of here and gone in five seconds.”

“Gone where? Kate, we're on an island.”

Kate sighed. They both gazed out the window at the friendly, chatting people gathered outside. A few women took food out of shopping bags and passed it around, while their young children jumped about on the shaggy grass. Officer Nariki accepted a bottle of beer from one of the women, and finished it off in a few gulps.

Kate rested her head against the screen. “Yeah, good point.”

The palm trees here weren't like those on the Island, Claire noticed. These looked more like upright feather dusters that hadn't been beaten clean in a long while. Out past the runway, the land was flat as a dinner plate and directly level with the calm blue ocean. A two-lane road ran smack-dab up alongside it.

“You want to talk about crazy,” Claire said. “That would be Miles, thinking that he could nick one of those little planes.”

“God, I just hope he doesn't do something stupid. What do you think they're—”

The door opened slowly, and a tall, fat Kiribati woman entered. She had crinkly grey hair pulled into a tight bun, and carried a beaten-up duffel bag.

“I'm Auntie Merey,” she said with a friendly smile.

Claire said hesitantly, “Are you a police-woman?”

“Hoo, no, I'm the midwife round here. The police, they call me if there's ladies to search. Chief Biribo and Officer Nariki, they're taking care of your men.” From her bag she pulled out two bottles of fizzy drinks and a large package of Scotch fingers. “You two look hungry.”

The lemon soda was almost as warm as the room, but the sugar rushed straight to Claire's head. She hadn't had anything as sweet in three years. Suddenly light-headed, she plopped onto a chair, knees buckling. She'd had her last meal three days before, when she and Hurley had wolfed down stale crackers and tins of cold soup in the Elizabeth's galley.

“Have some biscuits,” Auntie Merey said. Claire gobbled down a handful, unable to resist. When she licked the crumbs from her fingers, Auntie Merey handed her a few more. Even stale and damp, they were delicious. Soon Claire felt alert, better than she had in days, and best of all, calm.
Auntie Merey said in a conversational tone, “Okay, who wants to go first?”

Kate stepped forward. “I'll go first, Claire. I know the drill.”

Claire nodded. Kate had been in prison before.

“You both look like nice girls,” Auntie Merey said. “How about you just go down to your knickers and we'll call it done? The men don't need to know.”

Relieved, Kate quickly stripped to her underthings. Auntie Merey looked with interest at Kate's scar. “That healed up good.”

Kate just nodded, noncommittal. As she dressed, Auntie Merey said, “So, I hear you're engaged. When's the wedding?”

Kate looked up from zipping her jeans, shocked. “What?”

“That's what the little fellow told us, the one who gave the officers some sass about being searched. Like we were going to steal his family jewels or something. And the tall bloke who sounds like a cowboy, he said he was hers.” Auntie Merey gave a nod to Claire.

“He said that? Really?” Kate sounded totally indignant now.

“It's a secret, then? Hey, I get that. Some of the girls 'round here, they don't want their parents to know right away, either. Don't worry, I got more secrets in me than the ocean has fish. Yours is safe with me.”

As peeved as Kate was, Claire figured that if Miles and Sawyer had said they were engaged, there had to be a reason.

Then it was Claire's turn. Flushing, she told Auntie Merey, “I've, um, kind of been going commando.”

Auntie Merey just nodded as if this was the most normal thing in the world. From her bag she took a large blue sheet and draped it over Claire's shoulders like a mantle. If she noticed the dirt or the smell, she didn't react. Claire stood there bare and mud-streaked as Auntie Merey went straight to the large scar on Claire's upper left arm.

“Nasty burn.” Then Auntie Merey's attention shifted down to Claire's thigh. “Oh, honey, what happened there? That looks like it hurt.” The gunshot wound had long since healed, but big stitch-marks still remained. When Claire had tried to sew it shut, she had pulled too tight on one side, too loose on the other.

Claire's heart started to race. That particular wound had almost killed her with fever. One morning, though, she just sat right up, still soaked with sweat but suddenly better, the hole in her thigh no longer red or even open. All her friend had said was that she was a nuisance for getting herself shot. Worse, fixing her up meant that he now owed someone a favor.

Finally, Auntie Merey gently ran her fingers along Claire's silvery stretch-marks. “So, you had a baby. What, three, four years ago?”

For an instant, Claire thought about lying. But Auntie Merey was a midwife, and she'd be able to tell. So Claire swallowed hard and took the plunge. “Yeah, that's right. He's three and a half.”

Behind her, Kate gasped.
“Your mama and papa, I guess they were pretty mad, huh? You not being married and all.”

Tears collected in Claire's eyes. She didn't trust herself to speak.

“So where's your little one now? 'Cause if you don't mind me saying, honey, you look like you been out in the bush for awhile.”

Claire hadn't the faintest idea where Aaron was. And there had been no time to ask.

As Claire quickly dressed, Kate filled in the awkward silence. “He's with her mom.”

“Guess Mama wasn't so mad after all. Bet you can't wait to get back to him.” From the sideways glance Auntie Merey gave Claire, she knew something was off.

When Claire didn't answer, Auntie Merey's smile grew cold, and she fixed Kate with a hard stare. “Me and Nei Claire here are gonna have a little chat. I trust you'll stay put and not give me any trouble.”

Oh, crap, what now? Claire thought.

Auntie Merey led her outside into the breezeway, then placed her big body square in front of the closed door. Her face softened into pure compassion. “I want you to tell me what's going on, honey. And if you lie, I'll know. Mother Mary gives each one of us gifts, and mine's catching the truth along with the babies.

“You got some hard miles on you for a girl your age, and I'm gonna ask you this right out. Did somebody make you come here, like Nei Kate maybe, or one of those men you came in with? 'Cause if they did, you just say the word and I'll find a safe place for you. And then some heads are gonna roll, 'cause unlike some around here, I don't look the other way with that stuff.”

A tide of relief swept over Claire. “Oh, no. No way. Kate's my friend, she helped me.”

“Helped you with what, honey?”

The simplest explanation was the best. “There was this guy I was living with, in the bush. He was a jerk. Kate helped me get away from him.”

“And your child?”

“His dad left me flat a long time ago, wouldn't marry me.” She had just blurted out the two biggest unspoken secrets of her adult life, and there was no calling them back.

“Okay, honey. I just had to ask.”

Back in the room, Kate hadn't climbed out the window or anything. Instead she sat on the couch under the thumping fan, munching a biscuit and looking cool as you please. “Everything all right?”

“She wanted to know if you were holding me for sex trafficking.”

“Oh my God, she said that?”

“Not in so many words. But Kate, you've got to tell me, and I promise I won't get mad. That bit about my mum, that can't be true. Who's Aaron really with now?”

“I told you, your mom.”
Claire choked back her anger. She'd already accused Kate of lying once, and look how that had turned out. Through gritted teeth she said, “Mum's been in a nursing home in Sydney for years.”

“I saw her in LA in summer of 2005, and then again last month. I left Aaron with her.”

Reeling, Claire flopped down on the couch. It was like a dream: Mum not only awake, but well enough to travel, to take care of Aaron. “How can that be? She was in a coma from a traffic accident. I should know, I drove right into the truck that put her there.”

“You never told me that.”

“There was a lot you didn't tell me about yourself, either.”

“Yeah, well— Look, Claire, she seemed fine. Great, in fact. She even yelled at Jack.”

“That sounds like Mum.” An overwhelming feeling as big as that truck hit Claire, and she began to cry. It was too much, too soon. “She never even knew I had the baby.”

“Well, she sure found that out.” Kate's eyes were wet, too, and soon they were crying together.

They didn't even hear Auntie Merey come back into the room. It wasn't until she stood right in front of them that they even noticed she was there.

“You two were making such a racket, I could hear it outside.” Her tone implied that they were attracting attention, and they didn't want to do that.

“Sorry,” Claire said through sniffles. “My friend here just gave me some family news.”

“These are happy tears, really,” Kate added.

“Listen up, you two. I told Chief Biribo that you checked out just fine, that you were good girls and weren't gonna cause any trouble, so don't make me a liar. You got to wipe your faces and pull yourselves together, 'cause they're gonna take you someplace to stay. Till someone comes to get you.”

After the door swung shut again, Claire said, “I'm glad we talked to her. But Richard's going to kill us.”

“Don't worry,” Kate said. “I can handle Richard.”

*(continued)*

Chapter End Notes

There are some notes for Chapters 1-4 on my Dreamwidth.
Hugo stumbled into the beach camp and looked for a place to lay Jack's body. An unimpressed Vincent sniffed around, then veered off into the jungle. He'd show up again, Hugo told himself. He always did.

The food tent. That's where Jack could go.

The food tent's orange nylon canopy lay nearby in a crumpled heap. After Hugo set Jack's body down, he surveyed the camp site for something to cover Jack with. Most of the tarps on the ground were caked with mud and coated with dried leaves.

He finally found a clean one, in Sayid's old shelter. Sayid wouldn't need it anymore, would he? Hugo had cried hard for Sayid once already, but tears had a way of sneaking up on you and pouncing when you least expected it. He blinked back a few stray ones, and soon Jack was covered.

As the afternoon wore on, the beach got lonelier. Hugo wanted Jack to have some lights, because there was no way he was going to leave a body overnight in the dark. He'd already made a roaring fire, but it wasn't the same. It wasn't enough.

There were plenty of torches left on the beach, stout sticks wrapped in strips of cloth. Hugo lit two and stuck them in the sand, one at Jack's head, one at his feet. He then headed down to the sea-side, where the sunset blazed in pink and violet swirls. In half an hour it would be dark, so if he wanted any supper, he'd have to book.

Vincent ambled up, licking a little trace of blood off his muzzle.

“Glad you got your dinner, buddy. Looks like I'm going to have to hunt mine.” This didn't worry Hugo much, but the sun went down fast on the Island, and he didn't want to poke around in the surf after dark.

In the old days on the beach, Jin had taught Hugo a few tricks of the fishing trade, and once Hugo got the hang of it, he rarely went hungry. Maybe there was some tackle left in Jin and Sun's old tent.

Hugo stuck his head in, even though it felt wrong. This was their house, after all, even if neither of them were alive to claim it.

Poor Sun and Jin. They had been separated by years, by time travel, even. Then within a day of finding each other, they died. Poor little Ji Yeon, too, who had to be what, three now? Hugo had held her small cooing form in his arms, while Jin had never got to. It felt almost too intimate, with all the weight of adultery despite its innocence.

He made the sign of the cross before rummaging through Sun and Jin's things, but there weren't any fish-hooks or tackle.

Maybe he could score some eggs from the rocky southwestern shore. Claire had been the best egg hunter of them all, because she always scoped out where the birds hid their nests. Once she joked that it was like Easter-egg hunting, even if the gull eggs were speckled brown.

The red ball of the sun almost touched the horizon, meaning there was no time to find eggs and get
back before dark. There was one other possibility, though.

Land crabs came out when the sun went down. Hugo knew just where they liked to hang out, too: at the coconut grove a tad west of the beach camp. They gathered around the bases of the palms and clambered over the coconuts, piercing them with their sharp claws to get to the meat inside.

Land crabs didn't grow their own shells, but instead hitch-hiked in those left behind by other sea animals. When a crab grew too big for one, it crawled out and looked for another. It was kind of gross when they squirmed naked along the sand, looking for a new home. The really big ones were too tough-bodied to need shells, and their claws could take off a finger or a toe if you weren't careful.

There they were this evening, about twenty of them. Hugo took a long, straight piece of driftwood, thinking to roll out some coconuts from under the trees. If they were already broken by the crabs, even better.

When he reached the palm grove, he let the stick fall to his side. The smaller crabs all stopped what they were doing, and started to crawl towards him.

He took a few steps backwards. “Oh, man, it's the freaking attack of the Crab People.”

The big crabs ignored him, while the smaller ones moved towards him in a pack. Hugo stared in horrified fascination as they slowly approached.

When they raised their claws all at once, Hugo muttered, “Holy crap,” and started to back away. This wasn't funny anymore. In fact, it was downright scary. Just as he was about to turn and run, the crabs stopped.

Hugo stopped too. Like soldiers on parade standing at ease, the land crabs all slipped out of their shells. They dragged their soft, pale bodies across the sand and lay down at Hugo's feet, their claws limp and no longer threatening.

Offering themselves up.

Hugo picked one up, bracing himself for the nip which never came. The crab lay limp in his palm, a good quarter-pound of meat for the taking. Beady black eyes on short stalks stared at him. The little creature had a large claw for gripping, and a smaller one for putting food into its mouth. The big claw was the one you had to fear. The little one quivered, as the feelers around its mouth. Otherwise it was still.

He couldn't do it. It was one thing to dig crabs out of the sand, or to spear a fish. That seemed like a fair contest, even if Hugo usually won. But this offering he didn't understand. It didn't seem right. There were other things he could eat.

Hugo set the crab down on the sand. “Go back to your supper, little guys.” As the rest of the crabs crawled back into their shells, he jogged around them and grabbed an armful of coconuts. The big crabs kept right on chewing.

His hands shook as he dumped his booty by the fireside. Rummaging underneath the food table, he found a real prize, some Dharma Spam. While the Spam heated in its can, he stared into the flames, wondering what the hell had just happened.

Chunks of Spam stirred into jellied coconut tasted surprisingly good. As Vincent licked the can clean, Hugo wondered what else he could do now, and how he would find that out.

* * * * * *
As twilight turned to star-streaked night, Hugo surveyed the ruins of his collapsed shelter. At least his suitcase was still there, although he hated the idea of putting clean clothes onto his grimy, sweaty body. The rain traps were full of water, but he needed one more thing.

Soap, and he had an idea where to get some.

At the farthest northwest corner of the beach camp, a cluster of tents stood under the dappled shade. Most of the shelters had fallen down, but the few which ringed the fire-pit stood intact.

The survivors who had set up this camp at the jungle's edge wanted to get way from the sun and activity of the beach. Seven or eight women had lived here, along with a handful of men. Shannon used to hang out with them, and Claire too for awhile.

Their names eluded him at first, even if their faces didn't. The largest tent belonged to an older, heavy-set whose blonde hair was going grey. Karen, was it? No, Kathy. She shared it with Shana, a dark-skinned woman who used to give Hugo roasted octopus. The cute Indonesian chick with long black hair was called Sirrah, with her Chinese boyfriend Chen. Faith and Craig were a movie-star-gorgeous couple with Southern accents. And a shy blonde woman in her late thirties was Meredith, with a few others besides.

Kathy and Shana used to make soap from fire-ash, boar fat, and mashed-up jungle plants. They traded their soap for scissors, razor blades; everything Sawyer used to hoard. Hugo could never figure out why Sawyer didn't like them.

After a bit of rummaging, Hugo found a coconut shell almost full of the gray sticky stuff. Fragrant with ginger and coconut, it wasn't even moldy. He held the shell carefully as a chalice, still embarrassed to take things out of people's tents, although Kathy probably wouldn't mind. She and her friends were long gone, anyway.

Given how crazy things had gotten later, Hugo couldn't exactly blame them. Right after Libby's funeral, the whole group had disappeared, poof, just like that. Then things got crazy with Desmond's return, with everybody running from the Others, and finally Jack's kidnapping. Nobody even noticed that the north-camp beaches were gone.

Back at his ruined shelter, Hugo eased himself out of his wet and stinking clothes and cleaned up. He felt weirdly exposed, as if someone or something on the beach were watching him.

Stumbling around in the dark, looking for bedding, he crashed into Claire's shelter and pulverized Aaron's old cradle. He brushed bamboo splinters off the baby's blanket, then clutched it to his chest. It would make a good pillow.

Rolled up in an airline blanket in front of his fire, Hugo fished for sleep, but caught none. Instead, he lost himself in memory.

Two nights earlier, Charles Widmore had locked all of them in a cage on Hydra Island. While Sun and Jin held each other and talked in low, urgent voices, Kate, Sawyer, and Frank tested the bars, looking for a way out. Claire, though, crept up to him and slid her rough, calloused hand into his.

Sawyer had cautiously looked Claire over, but Hugo's small nod told him that everything was cool. Claire wasn't going to try anything, not anymore.

She had leaned her head against his shoulder and rubbed her face against it like a sleepy cat. When she fell asleep, it was like a small animal dozing, and every time Widmore's guards tromped by, she jerked awake.
After Jack broke them out of the cage, after Smokey had tossed Widmore's men about like toys, everyone headed for the Ajira plane that was supposed to take them off the Island. Claire had hung back with Hugo on the trail, sending him small smiles, each one a token of hope to prove Sawyer wrong, showing that much of the old Claire was still there.

In the first light of morning, Sayid popped out of the jungle, and everything changed. Claire pushed on ahead of Hugo, who was already tired from the frantic march, already bringing up the rear. As he struggled to keep pace with Claire and Sayid, he saw Claire take Sayid's hand in hers. Hugo fell back, telling himself that he was an idiot.

Of course. What had he been thinking? Even in Locke's camp, when Hugo had first laid eyes on her, Claire and Sayid had stood pressed together, their silent, emotionless faces peering from the shadows just outside the camp-fire's reach.

It hurt like a hard slap.

Sayid and Claire moved together like two wild cats on the hunt, panther and mountain lion in unison, even though Claire was the one who took Sayid's hand, not the other way around. Claire clung to Sayid, but his eyes were cold and blank, and he didn't look back at her.

At least now, Hugo pondered, Claire was alive and on the wing. But what if he could stretch his mind across seas and continents, and slip thoughts of himself into her heart?

His own heart pounding, Hugo couldn't bear to lie there anymore. He tossed aside the blanket and sprang to his feet, kicking sand into the camp-fire. He didn't pretend to know Jacob's rules, even though Ben seemed to think there were some he could change. Even the one about how “people can't leave the Island” had more holes in it than his old Ford Pinto's rusted undercarriage. Jacob probably made up those rules as he went along, anyway.

Torn from all sides, Hugo paced the sea-strand, the waves black and white in the moonlight.

What if you could change all the rules all at once?

Sometimes when you didn't know where you were going, all you could do was put down one foot, then another. Even as a kid, back before he'd gotten so fat, he identified more with the tortoise than the hare. Slow and steady wins the race, and all that. For example, whatever Jacob or Jack could have done, whatever he himself might do if he could just figure it out, the earth still went around the sun. Time still passed, people got old, shit happened, people died.

Or did they? If Jacob and Richard Alpert were any indicators, Hugo wasn't going to. Not for a long time, anyway. But Sayid, Sun, Jin rested in fragments on the ocean floor, while small bottom-creatures cleaned their bones.

What if he could reach into the ocean and reassemble Sayid's exploded pieces? Hugo had already promised Ben something like the job of prime minister. But he could use a general, too: a smart one who knew about tech, who could sneak like a ninja and make war plans. It was a big jungle. There could still be enemies, and Sayid in action was was fearsome. Securing someone like that was also part of protecting the Island too, of defending it, keeping it safe.

And if Hugo could do that (not saying he could, but just maybe, what if), how hard would it be to do the same for Sun and Jin: pull them out of the sunken submarine, put them back together too? Then they could go home to their little girl and their life in Seoul.

What if Sawyer could have Juliet back, blood wiped away, life in her eyes? What a surprise for
Sawyer if Juliet could go back home with Desmond, Sun, and Jin.

He took a deep breath. What if he could reach out his hand and bring back Jack?

Hugo plodded back to the camp and stood before Jack's covered body. When he unpeeled the tarp, Jack's face still held the gentle hint of a smile. Hugo had grown up with bodies laid out at home, like his Grandma Titi, and he knew they didn't smile like Jack, no way. After awhile, dead faces twisted into a grin, like they were laughing at some sick joke only they could understand.

Jack was different, though. Hugo had seen Jack in just about every state: relaxed and competitive on the golf course. Puckish when he thought he was being clever. Tender when he looked at Kate, but sometimes fighting the tenderness, too. Screaming with fury when Jacob hadn't appeared at the Lighthouse.

This relaxed expression was a new one, almost beautiful. Jack looked as if he were listening to delightful music.

Best of all, Jack looked there, like he wasn't completely checked out yet. After Jacob had died, he'd hung around to give Hugo some much-needed direction. Even while dead, Jacob had been able to make Jack the protector. Maybe there was enough of Jack still around to—

Could he? And if he could, would he do it?

If Hugo did this thing, it wouldn't be for himself. He'd only do it so that Jack could fulfill his promise to let Hugo "give it back." Then, like that old giant dude Atlas, Jack could take up the Island's weight once more, and lift it off Hugo's shoulders.

Wasn't it always supposed to have been Jack? That's what Sayid had said on the sub before it blew up. Even Kate couldn't drag Jack away from that burden. Only getting stabbed by the smoke monster had stopped him.

But all the old stories told you one thing clear as day. Dead was dead. No one person, not even the Island's protector, could know how all the stories were supposed to end, not in the long run. It was too much for one person to decide like that. The temptations were too great.

Three years ago Jack had crashed on this shore, left it once, then returned. Now he was going to be laid to rest here. There was nothing to decide. Somehow, paradoxically, that seemed to lighten Hugo's load just a bit.

Hugo covered Jack's face once more. Back at his own fire, he wrapped himself up, and with Vincent nestled down at his side, thumping his tail, he fell asleep almost at once.

* * * * * * *

In the hollow of the night, Hugo had a dream.

He walked along the sea-strand under a huge moon whose crooked face seemed to say, "You ain't seen nothin' yet." As ocean breezes ruffled his long hair, something stirred in the waves out to sea.

The ocean split apart, and a gigantic face pushed up through the water. It gleamed like lustrous blue metal, with huge round eyes, Mr. Spock ears, and a goatee snaked across its wide jaw. The face twisted out wild and crazy, like it was being stretched.

The face was followed by a huge blue body which didn't rise from the ocean so much as ooze out of it. The swollen form floated above the surf for an instant, then slowly floated towards Hugo. Its
snakelike tail whipped back and forth, churning the waves to a froth.

Weirdly enough, Hugo didn't feel any fear. “Hey, genie.”

The genie stuck its face right up to Hugo's, fixing him with a wicked grin. Then it puffed something out of its mouth, the way a child spits out a seed. The small, shiny thing dropped at Hugo's feet.

It was a walnut-sized white stone, which fit right in the palm of his hand. In the moonlight he could make out something written on it.

Normally in Hugo's dreams, words just looked like random squiggles. Not this time, though. There was a name written there: and not Hugo Emiliano Salazar Reyes, either. This strange word was his true name, given to him before his birth, before he came into being, even.

The genie twisted itself into a pretzel shape. “You're the boss, the king, the shah. Just don't forget the three rules of the lamp. And hide that rock, boy. Keep it good and safe.”

There was no way Hugo could argue with a twenty-foot high floating genie, so he just gave a nod. The genie didn't exactly disappear, but rather melted into the foaming water, and was gone.

Still lost in his echo of his dream, Hugo didn't want to open his eyes. At first he couldn't remember what the rules of the lamp were. Then he did.

The genie from *Aladdin* had been ready to give Aladdin anything he wanted. There were rules, though: things Aladdin could and couldn't do with the power of the lamp.

*You can't wish yourself more wishes.*

*You can't make anybody fall in love with you.*

*You can't bring anybody back from the dead.*

Even if Hugo could do those things, that didn't mean they were a good idea. Not that he was about to test them, anyway.

Vincent shoved his muzzle into Hugo's face and covered it with doggie kisses. His breath was gamey, and Hugo winced. “Ugh, gross. Whatever you had for breakfast, I don't want any.” Vincent didn't care if his meat was fresh or not. He even seemed to prefer it a little ripe.

As Hugo lifted his hand to scoot the dog aside, something fell into the sand.

Vincent backed away, barking the way a dog does when he thinks it's critically important that you listen to him.

Hugo stared at the plain white stone. Unlike the one in his dream, this one had no weird letters written on it. Not that he could remember what they had said, anyway. Keep it safe, though. That much he did remember.

Softly Hugo muttered, “Dude,” as he slipped it into his cargo pocket.

Voices called out to him from across the beach. “Hurley!” “Hugo!”

Rose and Bernard approached from the direction of the coconut grove, and between them they carried a thick stick strung with a dozen or so reddish-brown fish. Ben added branches to the fire,
while Desmond stuffed dried leaves into the teapot hanging over it.

Hugo staggered to his feet. From the look of the sun, it was mid-morning.

Rose handed the fish to Bernard before giving Hugo a warm hug. “Hey, sleepyhead. We thought you were going to stay rolled up there all day.”

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

There are notes on Chapter 5 on my Dreamwidth.
Three of Bernard's big red fish served as breakfast for everyone. After Bernard hung the rest to dry on a wooden frame, he stated what was on all their minds, especially Hugo's. “Time to get to it, I guess.”

“There's a grave already dug,” Ben offered.

Hugo looked over in surprise. “What? Where?”

“Over at your cemetery. It was supposed to be for me, but Jack can have it. Ilana made me dig it, because I killed Jacob.”

“You don't have to act so nonchalant about it,” said Rose.

Desmond said, “Who's Ilana? And where is she now?”

“Dead,” Hugo answered. “She was one of Jacob's ninja fighters. She was supposed to protect us, but she dropped some bad dynamite and got blown up instead.”

“Sounds like she believed in steps of the courthouse justice,” said Rose.

“Which is no justice at all,” Bernard added.

Probably true on both counts, Hugo thought. “Yeah, rest in peace, Ilana.”

The torches at the head and foot of Jack's bier had been burning since sundown of the night before, but Hugo decided not to say anything about it.

Rose folded down the tarp with slow reverence, then took a deep breath. “He looks so peaceful. And Desmond, you were right, it's like the Botanical Garden with that rosy perfume. But we can't bury him all covered in dirt and blood, clothes torn to pieces.” She turned to Ben. “Nobody's going to be using all the stuff around here. Go look through some of those suitcases. It doesn't have to be fancy, just clean and presentable.”

As she tied cloth around her waist for an apron, she continued to give orders. “That big galvanized can over there, fill it with water and set it to heating on the fire. Poor Jack, he won't care if the water's warm or not, but it'll help clean him off. Then we'll get him fixed up good and proper.”

“Rose?” Hugo said in a small voice. “I'm really glad you came.”

“Oh, honey, don't even think about it. On the way down here, Ben told us about that 'Protector' business. It doesn't make much sense to me, but I believe in you. I also believe that you have a cross laid on your back so big you don't even know it's there yet.”

She and Hugo undressed Jack. His limbs were supple, and the fresh rosy scent filled the area around him. He still looked peacefully asleep.

"It humbles you, doesn't it?” Rose said as they sponged away the dirt and blood, letting the pink water fall through the table cracks to the sand below. Jack looked pale and vulnerable. Never had Hugo seen anything so pathetic, so defenseless. Blood from Jack's wound had run down his side into
his groin and down his thighs.

When Hugo hesitated, Rose said, "You want me to do that, honey?"

"Nah, it's okay."

"You don't have to be shy. I laid out my daddy and my great-aunt Oleatha both. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus did it for our Lord. It's respectful work that we do."

Jack's legs parted easily, and soon all the dried, clotted blood ran into the sand. As Rose and Hugo patted Jack's body dry, late morning sunlight filtered through the nylon canopy and gave his skin a golden glow. Bernard brought gray slacks and a blue button-down shirt.

Before Rose could dress Jack, Bernard insisted on running skilled fingers over his torso, touching the deep stab wound on his side. "This must have been what did him in."

The wound had puckered closed, but Bernard pried the skin apart. As he separated the flaps, an especially rosy smell filled the tent. "Acetone," Bernard remarked, although no one had asked. "Product of decomposition. Oh, take a look here," though neither Rose nor Hugo wanted to. "It's one entry point, but the knife was really twisted around. As if whoever did it wanted to inflict the maximum damage."

Rose had enough. "Okay, Bernard, you're done." To Hugo she said, "The LA County coroner asked him to help with a case that had no dental records. Now he thinks he's Columbo."

Rose pulled aside the canopy to let in Ben and Desmond, while Hugo buttoned and adjusted clothing. "You know, Bernard, I thought he'd be, well, stiffer."

Bernard leaned in closer to Jack's body, clearly glad to be asked. "Rigor mortis only lasts about eight hours. He died early yesterday, so this is normal."

"Hurley, don't encourage him," said Rose.

"Uh, Bernard, he never got stiff at all."

"That's not possible. It's a chemical reaction inside the muscles."

"Bernard, I'm not kidding you. I was with him. There wasn't enough time."

Bernard gave Ben a long look, as if asking for confirmation.

It was obvious that Ben didn't want to get drawn into this. "There was that huge storm, and several earthquakes. Desmond was unconscious for a lot of it. Hugo and I got separated before we found Jack's body. So I don't think any of us really knows how long it was between when Jack actually died, and when we found him."

Rose just stood there, arms folded, watching.

Hugo didn't get angry often, but when he did, emotion moved through him like a column of lava up a volcano's throat. Usually he could short-circuit it, but once the lava reached a critical point, out it would spew. Dr. Curtis at the Santa Rosa mental hospital had taught him to imagine little channels spreading on all sides, letting off steam and pressure along the way. Usually it worked.

Bernard adopted the professional tone which usually came with offers of tranquilizers. "Hurley, I understand what you're trying to say. I agree that what we're seeing here isn't quite... usual, even
though that floral smell can be explained by bacterial fermentation. And it's true that despite this heat, there's no sign of decay. And the wounds on his side and neck seem to be closing, even more so than what we'd expect twenty-four to thirty-six hours post-mortem—"

Red-faced, Hugo breathed deeply, consciously relaxing his fists. “This isn't a specimen. This is Jack. This is Jack you're talking about. And it's Hugo, not Hurley.”

Bernard went on in the same saccharine tone. “What I'm trying to say, Hugo, is that Jack's dead.”

Hugo sighed, more exasperated than angry. “I know he's dead. I'm not crazy.” He burst into laughter at the absurdity of it all. In the past two days he'd been put in charge of the weirdest place on earth. The people who meant the most to him were either dead, or on the other side of the planet. A gigantic blue genie had risen out of the ocean and spit a white rock at him.

And now he was pissed off that Bernard was suggesting he was crazy.

It was so ridiculous. He doubled over, still laughing, while the other four gaped. Finally Rose said, “Honey, don't worry about Bernard's idle speculations. Let's just get ready to toss that first shovel of earth.”

“Hugo, she's right,” said Desmond. “If a grave's already dug, so much the better.”

After the anger and the laughter, Hugo felt light and clear-headed. “It doesn't seem right. It's not what we're supposed to do.”

“It's exactly what we have to do, brother.”

“I know that, Des. But not here.”

“If not here, then where?”

After a few seconds' thought, Hugo said, “The caves. We'll take him to the caves.”

Ben frowned. “Why the caves?”

“There was supposed to be a cave-in,” Bernard objected.

“They're fine. The cave-in, that was around the other side.”

Rose said, “I never liked those caves. I never trusted them.”

“Rose—” Hugo said.

All those years of loss poured out in her voice. “Down here is where our people are, the ones we loved and cared about. Hugo, you of all people should know that.”

“She has a point,” Ben put in.

Rose whirled around to Ben, her eyes flashing. “And the first one we laid to rest there was murdered by one of yours. So I don't see as you have much say in it.”

“Rose, please. This is Jack. You're fighting in front of Jack.” Now everyone was staring at Hugo like he was indeed crazy.

Bernard put on his conciliatory tone again. “Hugo, don't you think Jack would want to be down here with everybody else?”
At first Hugo couldn't answer. It was like trying to describe a brand-new color, or a place you had visited to people who had never heard of it. All he knew was that Jack had never been completely happy on the beach, not really. Less than a week after they had crashed, Jack was like a compass needle drawn to the caves' magnetic north, whether he wanted to or not.

If nothing else, Hugo wasn't going to place Jack in the grave which Ilana had dug for Ben.

Since four pairs of eyes bored into him, Hugo had to give some kind of reason. “It's, um, kind of a Protector thing.”

Still angry, Rose rolled her eyes.

In a soft voice Ben said, “The tomb of the kings.”

It was true. After the crash, the survivors could never have lived in the caves, no matter how much Jack had wanted them to, no matter how hard he argued. The caves weren't for them. They were never meant to be. All Hugo said was, “Ben's right. Look, we can wrap Jack in a tarp, and I can carry him up there.”

Rose gave an impatient shrug. “All right, Hugo, you win, but we're not using some old tarp. We need something better to lay him to rest in. That's why I brought this.”

The silky batik cloth was the size of a large bedspread, its deep green background decorated with gold spirals, shot through with bright pink tropical flowers. Hugo wrapped Jack's body in it, and Rose tucked the excess neatly around Jack's head and feet. They laid him on the makeshift canvas stretcher, then set off for the caves.

* * * * * * * *

So began the long march of Jack Shephard to his final home, the stretcher borne by Desmond in front, Hugo behind. Rose led the procession with one of the torches, while Ben brought up the rear with the other. Alongside him walked Bernard.

These torches had been burning for almost a night and a day now, with no sign of sputtering or winding down.

Picking their way through thick jungle made for slow progress. An hour later they came to the caves, where a cool waterfall dropped its music into a wide, shallow pool, and the earth smelled moist and green.

They crowded into the cave, where Ben cleared away the splintered remains of the coffin lid and smoothed its white silk interior. “Whose was this?”

“Jack's dad's.”

“It seems fitting,” Ben answered.

Into the coffin Hugo and Desmond gently lowered the mortal remains of Christian Shephard's only son.

The torches burned with a clear golden flame which never sputtered. Everyone looked at Hugo, expecting him to say something, but his throat was too choked with emotion. “Rose, could you? I need a minute.”

The uncanny torchlight, the close quarters, and the strong odor of roses seemed to take Rose out of
herself. “There's something I remember. Something that fits.”

Hugo nodded for her to go on.

In a sing-song voice, swaying a little, she said,

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?

Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths wide against me.

You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!

For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of his afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.”

She leaned against Bernard as if exhausted. “That's all I can remember.”

Hugo stepped forward. The part about the “bulls of Bashan” made his flesh creep, and "descendants of Jacob” sounded a little too close for comfort. He cleared his throat, hoping he wouldn't mess this up. “Jack, amigo, you came to see me when I was at Santa Rosa, and when I told you 'It wants us to go back,’ you said you didn't want to, that you never would. Never say never, right?

“Then, just before you fought Locke, I asked you why you came back. You said that it was because you were broken, and crazy enough to think that this Island could fix you. Maybe you thought you were a fool to think that, but you weren't. We're all broken, sure, but the Island fixed you in ways you didn't even know. I love you, man. I love you, and we're all gonna miss you.

“Kate's gonna miss you, too. And Claire. Man, it sucks that you didn't get to know your sister better. But she'll be okay, 'cause Kate and Sawyer and her are all on their way to Tarawara, someplace like that. Wherever that is. They can't be here to say good-bye to you, though, so I'm saying it for them.”

Stinging tears clouded Hugo's eyes. He wiped his face, then looked at everyone assembled around the coffin. “That's all I got.”

Desmond rested a close and comforting arm on Hugo's shoulder, and gazed at Jack. “When I went down into that pool, brother, I never thought it would be me standing here instead of you. But I'll see you someday, in a better place.”

Rose sobbed, and Bernard put his arm around her.

After everyone else filtered out of the cave, Hugo knelt by the coffin and placed his hand on Jack's chest. “It should have been you doing this protector thing, not me. But I'll try not to let you down.”

He untucked the shroud and slipped the small white stone into Jack's front shirt pocket. “I figure this is yours as well as mine.”

When Hugo emerged, Ben said, “Maybe we should be concerned about animals.”
Hugo shuddered. In the first few days after the Oceanic 815 crash, wild boar had invaded the plane's wreckage and gone after the bodies. But with a confidence he didn't understand, Hugo said, “No. Nothing's gonna come here.”

"You mean we're just going to leave it open?"

"Yeah, Ben, that's just what we're gonna do."

Ben began to protest, but Bernard shook his head for him to be quiet.

“Here, give me those torches,” Hugo said. He jammed them into cracks on either side of the cave entrance, where their clear gold radiance seemed to draw the light out of the cave itself, leaving the interior full of dim shadows. Despite the dead inside, the quiet cave interior seemed full of life.

Everyone kept silence on the trek to the beach camp. Desmond carried the rolled-up stretcher over his shoulder, walking on ahead as if his journey home had already begun.

They turned onto the well-worn, sandy path, where tiny glimpses of the sea peeked out from between tall, arched cedars. Hanging behind the others, Bernard pulled Hugo aside. “I'm sorry for what I said earlier.”

“Huh? For what?”

“I've never had a torch last much more than a couple of hours. And you were right about Jack's body. As Rose never fails to remind me, dental school isn't medical school, but that was unusual.”

The beach spread out before them with its glittering waves. Hugo put his arm around Bernard and said, “We're cool, dude. It's not like this is any weirder than everything else that's happened.”

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth.
The Monster in the Mirror

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

On the morning when her brother lay decked out for burial, Claire awoke to the rat-a-tat rhythm of heavy rain. Pre-dawn light fought its way into the motel room through grimy, colorless curtains. Claire stretched like a cat, stiff from sleeping on the floor on the thick pandamus mat with only her wadded-up outer shirt as a pillow. In the queen-sized bed, Kate slept under a sheet worn thin from many washings.

Claire let herself be hypnotized by the rotating ceiling fan. Rain splashed against the windows, and above every other sound throbbed the relentless, bass hum of the ocean.

The mat hadn't been that great to sleep on, but it beat a damp pile of blankets in the middle of the jungle, or crawling stained and filthy into bed next to Kate. Claire didn't need Kate's badly hidden, appalled glances to tell her what terrible shape she was in. She almost hated Kate's clear skin; her soft and glossy hair which Island weather hadn't managed to frizz; the way she moved, full of health and well-being. Of course Claire wasn't going to climb into that bed, even if it was the only one in the room. She wasn't that crazy.

Claire skirted around to the lavatory and relieved herself in darkness. Soon it would be impossible to hide in the dark, because daylight was already starting to fill the bathroom. And from groping around blindly, Claire knew that there was a mirror over the sink.

Back on the mat, Claire shivered, more terrified of that mirror than almost anything of the past three years.

Yesterday evening, she and Kate had been given a corner room at the Bikenibeu Lodge, a motel a few kilometers west of Bonriki International Airport.

The hour-long drive to the motel had led through the strangest landscape Claire had ever seen. The narrow strip of road sat close to the ocean, with scrubby bushes, slender palms and mangroves, as well as cinder-block houses and shabby shops. The land was so flat that sea-winds rocked the van every time they drove through a clearing. The ocean gleamed like a pale blue plate on either side of the narrow atoll.

The drive took a long time because people, carts, goats, children, and chickens all meandered back and forth across the road, oblivious to vehicles. Every few minutes the driver stopped, then leaned out the window to chat with someone in the I-Kiribati language.

In the back of the van with them sat the fat young policeman, Officer Nariki, who never stopped smiling. He treated the trip as if it were one of the greatest adventures he'd ever had, and maybe it was. At the motel, he offered his arm to Kate and Claire as they climbed out of the van, while Sawyer and the others sat stone-faced.

Nariki first showed the women to their room, then opened the adjacent door, gesturing to Sawyer and the men. “You fellows get the bridal suite,” he said, still smiling, and it was hard to tell if he was teasing or not. Even Kate was too weary to crack a joke at Sawyer's expense.

Now, the hot morning sun practically leapt into the sky. Claire positioned herself by the motel door, listening to people moving about and talking in soft tones. When she cracked the door, an elderly
couple were carrying trays of food towards a picnic shelter on the far end of the motel patio. The woman said, “You have to stay in your room till breakfast is ready.”

The man said, “You're our guests. But you stay put now.”

Near the road, Chief Biribo was talking to a group of older I-Kiribati men in wrinkled suits. When they stared over at Claire, she ducked inside and quickly shut the door.

“Morning,” Kate said in a sleepy voice. “What's up?”

“I dunno. Four, five blokes are having a convo outside, probably about us.”

“Wonder what they're going to do with us?”

“Feed us, I hope. Smell the tea?”

Kate pulled on her jeans and shirt. “It's driving me crazy. Let's go get some.”

“I, um, think they—”

But Kate had already dashed across the room, boots and socks in hand. She opened the door just as the older woman was about to knock.

“Time for breakfast,” the woman said.

Claire and Kate peeked into the men's motel room, which was far larger than theirs. Its small living room sported a narrow couch as well as a pandamus mat, and they had a larger bedroom with two queen-sized beds. From the look of the piled-up cushions and blankets in the living room, at least two men had camped out there.

“I'm Maleaua,” the man said. “Welcome to our hotel. And this is my wife.”

“We had to ask the other guests to move out, so it's just your group,” Mrs. Maleaua explained. “Orders from the government.”

“But they're paying us for the whole hotel anyway,” Mr. Maleaua added, clearly happy with the situation.

Sawyer slid next to Kate and said, “Guess they think we're still dangerous.”

Claire scrutinized Sawyer as he walked over to a table covered with warming trays. She had a sneaking suspicion that something terrible had happened to him, something which he hadn't talked about to anyone. Not while they were in the Hydra Island cage, not while he piloted the Elizabeth like a sailing pro through choppy waters. Certainly not now, as he tried hard to look brave. But there was something there, and Claire would bet that Kate knew what it was, too.

Kate kept darting glances over at Sawyer when she thought he wasn't looking, the way Claire herself did if she thought her friend might descend on her from the highest tree-tops.

The pitch-black tea was hot and strong, and Claire burnt her tongue when she gulped it down. It beat boiled herbs, for sure. Mrs. Maleaua broke a raw egg on each of their scoops of rice, and Claire ate this first, pushing aside the pickled fish and vegetables.

It wasn't until the Maleauas had ducked out of sight, Biribo got into his police cruiser, and the other men had driven away in a Toyota van, that everyone felt free to speak.
“So, you got a phone in your room?” Sawyer said to Kate.

“Nope.”

“Us neither. We got a jack, one of those old-fashioned kinds, but no phone.”

Frank spoke up. “They're probably still checking us out, calling embassies. And from the looks of it earlier, there are differing opinions what to do with us.”

“That's what I'm afraid of,” said Kate.

Miles blotted the last few rice-grains with his finger. “Well, I don't know about you, but I'm settling in to enjoy a nice tropical vacation. Of course, a few more congenial room-mates might be in order.”

Richard gave a half-laugh, half-snort.

Kate fixed both Sawyer and Miles with a steely glare. “Speaking of which, what was that nonsense yesterday about us being 'engaged’?”

Frank poured himself some more tea and added a few spoonfuls of sugar. “Don't blame them, Kate. It was my idea. This isn't Hawai'i or Tahiti, if you hadn't noticed. Folks here are pretty conservative. You see that big Catholic church we passed on our way in?”

Kate's tone was pure ice. “No, I can't say that I did.”

“I just thought it might make things go better.”

“Well, the next time you get a bright idea like that, Frank, run it by me first.”

Sawyer laughed, even if his eyes weren't amused. “Freckles, you're just mad 'cause I got Missy Claire here, and you're stuck with Miles.”

“Hey, I'll swap anytime,” Miles said.

Nobody laughed, and Claire ignored him. She pointed to Sawyer's plate, with its rice and egg untouched. “You mind? I'll trade you.”

He handed her his plate with a grimace, and she passed him her fish and vegetables.

As she slurped down the egg, Frank said, “You know, Claire, you can get pretty sick from those. And that reminds me, don't drink the water, either.”

Claire stared at him blankly. “Frank, if I'd worried about bad water or raw eggs, I'd have been dead three years ago.” Her companions felt like they sat on the other side of the world, rather than just across a table. Even if Miles and Sawyer had lived on the Island for three years in the 1970s, they still seemed pampered and spoiled.

Which reminded Claire of something else. “By the way, did Sayid decide not to come along with you?” She wanted to ask if they'd ditched him as they had her, but thought better of it.

The long look between Sawyer and Kate told Claire all she needed to know. “He didn't make it, did he?”

Sawyer was the first to speak. “Your friend there blew up our sub. Sayid was the only reason we got out alive. Some of us, at least.”
“Claire, I'm sorry,” Kate said. “I know you were close—”

“We weren't close. He wasn't close to anybody.” In her mind, Claire ran down the list of everyone who had gotten onto that doomed ship. “Sun and Jin too, I guess?”

Kate just shook her head.

At first Claire didn’t even want to speak the final name. When Kate talked Sawyer into letting her climb on board the Elizabeth, Claire had crossed the deck to sit by Hurley, as a kind of challenge. Sure, it hurt when everyone ran away from her, leaving her behind in the bush. But that he could leave her too, that was almost too much to bear. Claire knew whose idea it had been, and it wasn't his. Still, he'd gone along with it, hadn't he?

So even before the Elizabeth’s anchor was raised, Claire had squatted down by him as a kind of challenge, and just glowered, waiting. She had no idea what she had specifically in mind. She just wanted him to see her, and maybe tell her why.

She had expected him to just get up and move away, but he didn't. The two of them sat like guardians on either side of the door which led below-deck. His eyes were big and sad. Finally he said in a low voice that he was sorry, they should have never left without her and Sayid. It wasn't okay, not really, but she told him that it was, because the gentleness in his tone broke her resistance. For three years she had heard sweet seductiveness and clever lies, harsh shouts, curses and foul names.

But never tenderness. No tenderness, for three long years.

Then, when they had gotten locked in the Hydra Island cage, she didn't know what to do with herself. Except for Hurley, everyone stared at her like she was a bomb ready to go off. She crouched in a corner and tried to ignore the stench of urine and mold.

He filled their end of the cage with heavy, stolid assurance. When she approached him, still full of challenge, he invited her to sit and it about broke her heart. Before she knew it, she had taken his hand, and he didn't shrug it off. Instead, he just let her rest her head on his soft shoulder.

When her trembling stopped, he asked her what had happened. She blinked back tears as she told him tiny bits and pieces, waiting for him to turn his head, push her away. But he stayed.

The last glimpse she'd had of him was when he beat a clumsy retreat from the gunmen into the submarine. When her friend rushed the sub, Sawyer shut the hatch door, and the sub slipped away from the dock as easily as her hopes.

Screwing up every bit of courage she had, Claire looked Sawyer full in the face and said, “What about Hurley?”

The dead look in Sawyer's eyes vanished, and the small crinkle around the edges of his mouth told her all that she needed to know.

Kate was the one whose words brought hope to life. “Hurley was with Jack. He and Ben. They were taking Jack somewhere, I don't know. So they could keep the Island from breaking apart.” Kate drew in a deep breath like a sob. “Jack was wounded, bleeding. I'm hoping—”

Claire couldn't hold back. “I just found a brother, OK? I don't want to lose him just yet.”

That might not be all she'd lost. She suddenly, desperately wanted to believe that Hurley was alive.
and well on the Island, even if she was traveling in the opposite direction.

Kate gave Claire a small, encouraging smile. “We can hope together.” But that didn't wipe out the haunted look in Sawyer's eyes.

* * * * * *

Later that day, in the motel room, Kate went through the suitcase she'd brought from the plane. “They must have rifled through it, but everything's here. It's just a mess.” She began to lay clothes out on the bed. “Want to help?”

“I'll pass.” There was still something Claire had to do, something she'd been struggling with since the night before, even as she helped Mrs. Maleaua clear away the breakfast dishes, even as Frank, Miles and Richard had talked away the morning with their stories. Sawyer, though, had sat in silence, saying nothing of himself.

These distractions did nothing to get rid of the monster who lurked in the bathroom. Now it was time for the showdown. It had to be done in just the right way, though. If Claire darted her eyes in the wrong direction, or looked up at the wrong angle, it would catch her between its toothy jaws, crunch her into pieces, and break her beyond repair.

She'd managed to hide from the monster in the airplane lav by keeping her eyes scrunched tight, sightlessly feeling her way around in the tiny stall. Like all creatures of the shadows, the monster couldn't come out into the light. Claire would have to drag it out into the bright mid-day, force it into the sun, and maybe then, just maybe, if it didn't destroy her first, it would melt away, and she might actually remain.

Time to do battle, then. She scrunched up her courage and backed into the small bathroom, pulling the door shut.

Claire screwed her eyes shut and felt for the sink. She bowed her head, supporting herself with her hands in case she fell over. If she didn't do it now, she never would. Slowly she opened her eyes and stared into the cracked sink with its rust-streaked drain. She then raised her eyes to face the monster, which stared back at her from the mirror.

For the first time in three years, Claire saw her own face.

By feel she knew how sharp her cheekbones were, that her hair was a rat-tailed wreck, that the bones poked through her hips and chest. In her mind, though, she always saw herself as she was that last morning in the Barracks before her house blew up, when Hurley reached for Aaron and said, “Get some more sleep, Claire. I've got this.”

It was the last clear memory of herself, her old self, and she clung to it as tightly as she had clung to her passport.

The pale, washed-out witch who stared back at her was almost unrecognizable. She lightly slapped her rough, chapped cheeks. It hurt when she pulled the shaggy hair, which meant that it must be hers. Haunted blue eyes with puffy bags stared back at her. Tiny lines etched their way across pale, fragile skin. In her temple a blue vein pulsed, and her left eye twitched.

She had a mad, violent thought. This wasn't her face, not the one she remembered. This wasn't the same cheek on which Hurley had planted a small, shy kiss right before taking Aaron into his arms. On that day of the explosion, nestled against a cool linen pillowcase, her old face had flushed when she touched the spot he had kissed.
He had done this to her, the one who called himself her friend, the one whose name she refused to speak even now. He had somehow glued this cheap Halloween mask over her true face. All she needed to do was tear it off with her ragged nails, toss it to the cracked linoleum floor and kick the pieces aside like garbage. Then her true face would shine once more. Because this wasn't her, it couldn't be.

She stuck her nails into her cheeks, hard, and the sudden shock of pain made her halt. This was no mask, no trick, no illusion. What had started out as a scratch turned into a stroke as her hands traveled down over her cheeks, slid past her chin to her scrawny neck and prominent collar bones, to the torn, filthy layers of shirts below. This was her, all of her, what Aaron and her mum would see (how was that possible, she still couldn't wrap her mind around it), what Kate and Hurley had seen.

Claire first began to cry, and then to sob.

* * * * * * * *

At first Kate ignored the torn, wrenching sounds in the background. South Tarawa was loud, with the constant hammering sea-wind, the rumble of vehicles, the yapping dogs. In the next house over, some men were having a loud argument in I-Kiribati. Children laughed and shouted as they played soccer in the roadway. Between all that and the clattering ceiling fan, it took a moment for Kate to recognize the choked sobs as Claire's.

She ran in to find Claire lying in a tight heap on the smeared linoleum. As she rocked back and forth, face buried in her hands, panic surged through Kate. Was Claire sick? Worse, had she tried to hurt herself?

She shook Claire's shoulder gently. “Claire? Honey, what's the matter?”

“It's me, oh God, it's me, it's really me, what am I going to do?”

“Come on, let's sit down.” She pulled Claire to her feet and lowered her onto the pandamus mat in the living room.

Kate had soothed many skittish horses in her time, including one mare in labor which her father was convinced was going to panic and maybe even break a leg. Back then, Kate had let her mind go blank as she placed her hand on the mare's side. In that dim space without words or thought, she sent pure comfort through her to the terrified horse's body. An hour later the foal was born.

Now Kate did the same for Claire. She sat there with no words, no thoughts; didn't tell Claire to relax, or that it would be okay. She gave Claire nothing but a firm, comforting hand on her shoulder until the sobs stopped.

Still sniffling, Claire wiped her nose across the back of her hand. “Look at me, Kate. Look what he did to me.”

Running her hand through the shaggy mat of Claire's hair, Kate said, “Claire, listen. I already tried the shower. It's not great, but there's not a lot that warm water can't fix. Come on, I'll help you.”

With practiced hands used to giving a child his nightly bath, Kate helped Claire out of her clothes. She got a good look at what Auntie Merey had already seen: the gunshot scar, the brand, the whole host of smaller ones spread over Claire's body like faint pink tattoos.

The water pressure was lower than earlier, but thank God something still sputtered out of the rusted old shower head. Claire closed her eyes as brackish, smelly water ran over her face, while Kate grabbed a tiny bottle of two-in-one shampoo and conditioner. She washed Claire's hair, and like a
child Claire let Kate wash her face, neck, and the rest of her. Brownish-grey water streamed down over Claire's bony body into the drain below.

“Feels good, doesn't it?” Kate said.

Claire grinned at the warm, slow baptism of running water. Towed off and fresh for the first time in years, she sat on the bed while Kate pulled a styling comb from the suitcase.

Tentatively, Kate picked the comb through Claire's hair, but it was a rough go. Finally Kate said, “There are scissors, too. You know, it might be easier to—”

“Cut it off, all of it. I don't want to see it any longer.”

“You sure?”

Claire nodded. So, instead of trying to comb through the mat, Kate cut away at it. Great clumps snarled beyond redemption fell to the linoleum floor, until nothing was left but a fluffy bob which fell right below Claire's ears.

Putting her hands to her head, Claire said, “It feels so light, like a huge weight's come off.” Then she gave the pile of discarded hair a little kick. “I wish we could burn it. And those old clothes, too.”

“We can. There's a rubbish fire going out back.”

“I want to see my new haircut, what it looks like.”

“Let's get you dressed first. And I've found something else in the luggage.”

The woman's cosmetics bag was zipped full to bursting. Kate and Claire spread out the little bottles, tubes, compacts, and brushes all across the bed, like a couple of young girls exploring make-up for the first time.

Claire frowned at the olive and coral hues. “These are more your colors than mine. I always fancied the pinks and light blues.” But she let Kate paint her face, then lightly powder it, and to Kate it seemed that with every daub and stroke, Claire brightened.

“OK, now you can look.”

The change was remarkable. Claire still wore a haunted expression, but her face had softened around the edges as much as her hair. “You probably think I'm silly and vain,” she said.

“No, I don't. I can't begin to imagine what you've been through.”

The back of the motel was a disaster, strewn about with empty bottles, corroded barrels and scraps of tin roofing. Only the sea shone pure and beautiful, after the driving rain. One of the Maleauas must have started the fire recently, because it still put out an oily black smoke.

Claire got as close as she dared, then tossed in the filthy bundle of hair and clothes. As it caught fire, the air filled with a burning chicken-feather smell, and some loose hair got caught in the updraft.

As she watched the mess burn, she said to the fire, “That's the last of him.” Then she turned to Kate. “He was going to make me his moll.”

“His what?”

“You know. Girlfriend, mistress. When he got his body. I mean, Locke's body.”
“Oh, my God, Claire. Did he—”

“No, actually he didn't, in the end. I have no idea why. It was all he talked about, before. After that, nothing. Like he'd lost interest or something.”

“Thank God.”

“Yes,” Claire said.

Back in the room, they tidied up while Kate waited for the real questions to begin, the big ones which hadn’t come up before now. They were going to cool their heels here in Tarawa for what might be a long time, and there wouldn’t be much else to do but talk. By the time Claire settled herself on the mat and leaned over to Kate, Kate was ready.

“Okay,” Claire said. “Tell me about Aaron.”

So Kate did, all of it.

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

There are some notes on Chapter 7 on my Dreamwidth.
The Lighthouse

The next day after Jack's burial, Hugo awoke to out-of-tune singing.

Bernard walked past with a sack in one hand and a sharp knife in the other. "Ah, awake at last. You can fish, help Rose, or you can help me."

Hugo glanced over to Rose, who already had a pot of water on the boil. "Aw, come on, Bernard, I told you I like to sleep in."

Bernard just laughed, so Hugo rolled out of his blankets anyway.

Going fishing was a no-brainer. Bernard probably liked mussel-hunting because it reminded him of all the time spent scraping goo off people's teeth. To Hugo, mussels always seemed like more trouble than they were worth. There were easier ways to get your breakfast.

Behind the wreck of his tent, Hugo unearthed his old spears, tipped with still-sharp points made from old soda cans.

Right after the crash, people had tossed their trash every which way. Hugo had gathered it up, ignoring the annoyed looks, especially Sawyer's. Mostly Hugo scavenged alone, but sometimes Claire joined him. She couldn't bend over much with a belly full of baby, but she held the canvas travel bag as he filled it with cans, bits of plastic, and fragments of aluminum foil.

That was forever ago. With a small sigh, Hugo headed down to the sea-strand. He stood knee-deep in the surf while shadowy dark forms drifted back and forth in the shallows.

The fish had sure gotten brave, hadn't they? His first stab missed, but soon he speared a fat wriggling shape, two or three pounds at least. "Sorry, fish," he apologized, as it thrashed on the end of the spear. Then he caught two more. In the past, he'd fish for an hour before getting a catch like this.

Hugo filleted the fish, then seared the slices on flat stones placed over the fire. The fatty fish sizzled, sending up a delightful smell.

Bernard returned, and dumped his sack of mussels straight into the pot.

"These mussels are beautiful," Rose said. She stirred them around in the boiling water with handfuls of sliced lemons. Soon the mussel shells opened, revealing their pale, plump insides.

"This is a feast, Rose," Desmond said.

"Magnificent," Ben added.

Rose dished out lemony mussels and fried fish, then said, "Good fish, good meat, good God, let's eat."

Afterwards, Bernard collected the bones and shells in the pot. Rose said, "Have to dig a trash pit real soon."

"Umm, digging," Hugo said. "Can it wait? You know, digestion and all."

"That's right," Bernard said. "Also, we have a few things to decide."

Rose was busy feeding Vincent fish scraps and shooing him away from the loose bones. "So, what's
the number one thing to do? The most important?"

Desmond spoke up. "There could be people from the Ajira plane up on Hydra Island."

Hugo’s face fell. “Sorry, dude, there aren't. After Jack busted us out of those cages, we made tracks to the plane fast as we could. We stumbled on a pile of bodies. Guess the smoke monster got them.”

"I seriously doubt that," Ben said. “There was a reason the Dharma Initiative did research on Hydra Island. It was the one place that the monster couldn't go. And it wouldn't have left bodies stacked in a neat pile.”

Rose looked up. “I guess you'd know, wouldn't you?”

“Rose—” Hugo said, trying to forestall an argument.

Bernard interrupted him. “Maybe some got away.”

"Charles Widmore's men were probably very thorough,” Ben said with a small sigh.

“How do you know that?” Bernard asked.

Ben gave him a cool look. “Because I trained some of them, back in the days before Charles and I had our falling-out.”

Hugo wasn't convinced. “Why would Widmore kill all those people, Ben? His story was that Jacob sent him here.”

“I don't know. Maybe Charles and Jacob had similar views on collateral damage.”

Collateral damage, that's what they called it. No more, Hugo said to himself. Not on his watch.

Desmond said, “I do want to go home, Hurley. Tell me how I do that?”

“I dunno, Des. And I don't know anything about boats, or— Hey, wait a minute. What about Locke's sailboat? We sailed it to Hydra Island, to get to the plane.”

“A sailboat? There was a sailboat?” Desmond's voice rose with emotion.

“Some kind of yacht. Sawyer called it the Elizabeth.”

Desmond shook his head in slow amazement. “Brother, that wasn't Locke's. It was mine. She was a beautiful ship, a Swan 57. The Others nicked her three years ago, and I figured those bastards had just sunk her or something. No offense, Ben.”

“None taken.”

“So where is she, then?” said Desmond.

Hugo shrugged. “Probably over by Hydra Island, where the plane took off from.

“‘Aye. So you think it really would be that easy, just sail the Elizabeth right out of here? I tried that before, if you recall, and ended up right back where I started.”

“Yeah, but that was with Jacob.”

“Are you sure? How do you know it was Jacob, and not the Island itself?”
“I don't. But if you want to go home, we got to get the boat.”

“It's worth a shot,” Desmond said. “But it depends on a lot of things. Is she seaworthy, is she provisioned, and most important, will the Island let me go?”

“Can you build a raft to get over to Hydra Island?” Bernard asked.

Desmond shook his head. "The currents are strange up by the Looking Glass. I don't trust a makeshift raft to get through. An outrigger canoe could make it, but not a raft.”

“Too bad we don't have an outrigger,” Hugo said.

“Oh, but we do,” said Ben. “One washed up half a mile down the beach.”

Hugo stared at Ben. “That could of come a little sooner. When did you find this out?”

“Instead of sleeping, I went walking just before sunrise. It clears my head.”

“Sounds like it's settled, then,” said Hugo, ignoring the jibe. “Let's go find the Elizabeth, Ben. You, Des, and me.”

Ben hesitated. “I'm not the sea-faring type. Anyway, I have an errand of my own to run.”

Rose gave Ben a sharp look. “What errand?”

Ben stared back with practiced coolness. “Restitution.” He didn't elaborate.

Bernard said, “I'm not keen on us splitting up.”

Rose gave a little scoff. "Bernard, we'll be fine. We managed three years on our own, even in the middle of all that time-jump craziness." She waved at the beach camp as if its disorder offended her personally. "This place needs some organizing. It looks like a hurricane swept through here. Stuff's been blown up, tossed around, messed up—"

Hugo leaned over to Bernard. "It'll be okay. If Desmond's boat isn't up there, we'll come straight back."

"Right," Bernard said, but he sounded dubious.

Desmond pulled himself to his feet. “So, mate, if we're heading up east, it's time to raise anchor.”

* * * * * * * *

The day turned clear and bright as Hugo and Desmond paddled northward around the Island's east coast, helped by a strong current.

Hugo trailed his hand through the eternal back-and-forth of the sea. “Kinda weird, not having to run anywhere, to do something we don't understand. This job's easy: find the boat, bring it back.”

Desmond laughed.

“'Course, not that I understand any of this anyway.”

“Sometimes you don't have to understand it. You just live it.” Desmond put his own paddle down, letting the current carry them along. “I wanted to be a monk, you know.”
“You were a monk? You didn't drink like a monk. You cursed pretty good, too.”

“Oh, believe me, monks know how to drink. And they're even better than sailors at cursing. I was just a monk-in-training, though. They didn't think I had what it took. But it worked out for the best, because then I met Penny.”

“I bet she's really worried about you.”

“Aye. It's strange, though. Over the years, I've probably been missing Penny longer than I've been with her, if you add it up time-wise. Finally we got married, little Charlie was born, and this Island seemed almost like a dream. Then Widmore's boyos nabbed me from the hospital, and I woke up here. Believe me, I made them pay. I'd been a soldier in the Royal Scots Regiment, and I knew how to hurt people. If I'd had half a chance, I'd have killed them all right then and there.”

“Yeah, you were scary sometimes.”

“Am I still?”

“No, you're pretty chill.” Hugo swallowed. This would be hard to say. “I am gonna miss you. No joke. But I understand, you gotta do what you gotta do.”

“Indeed.”

They paddled on as the coast turned sharply northward. As the sun rose to the highest point in the sky, they passed a steep, rocky promontory which jutted out over the ocean.

“What in bloody hell is that?” Desmond said, astonished.

A tall brick structure stood on the highest point of the rocky hillside.


Desmond gave him an odd look. "I can see that for myself. What I can't see is how I sailed in circles around this Island a hundred times, yet never saw it.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, nobody else did, either, till Jacob told me to take Jack there.”

“And for what?”

Hugo shifted, a little uncomfortable. “Um, turned out Jacob was the one who brought Widmore here. And you, too.”

“Bloody hell he did.”

“Sorry, dude.”

Desmond shook his head again, as if he couldn't believe his eyes. “So, let's go have a look at Jacob's mysterious lighthouse, eh?”

Hugo peered over the cliff-side with a dubious eye. “Steep climb, Des.”

“We can take it slow. We should almost be to Hydra Island anyway.”

They beached the outrigger on a narrow strip of pebbled sand. About halfway up the rocky hill, the wind changed, bringing in white, salty sea-fog. By the time Desmond and Hugo reached the highest point, the lighthouse's top was barely visible. It was impossible to see anything out to sea.
The door was half off its hinges, where Jack had kicked it in. They thumped up the heavy wooden stairs, the lighthouse’s interior dim from so little sunlight. Hugo panted a bit and let Desmond go on ahead. Even so, when they reached the top, the chest-bursting, heart-pounding exhaustion he had suffered when climbing up with Jack was gone.

Desmond looked around, careful not to step on splintered glass. “This is amazing.”

“You should of seen it before Jack went postal.”

“And here's the smoking gun.” Desmond picked up the long, battered brass instrument that Jack used to smash the lighthouse's triple-paned mirror.

“What's that, some kind of telescope?”

Desmond turned it over several times, then peered through it. “Don't think so.” He walked over to the brass frame where the scope had rested. “Well, look at this. You ever do any surveying, brother?”

“Can't say that I have.”

“If I'm not mistaken, it's some kind of theodolite. Look, here's some more of it.”

“Theodo-what?” Hugo scratched his head, clearly baffled.

Desmond continued to putter with the brass tube, trying to reposition it on its stand, cursing a little when it wouldn't fit. Bored, Hugo examined the large gear wheel covered with pencil-scrawled names. He found his, “Reyes,” next to the number 8. On a whim, he pulled the heavy chain. The gears made a low, scraping noise as the pointer came to rest at his name. “So, what you think this was for, Des?”

Desmond examined the brass frame. “This gadget here, if I'm not mistaken, lets you determine what time of year it is from the sun's position when it rises. Like at Maeshowe, in Scotland.”

“May-who?”

“Stonehenge, then. You've heard of Stonehenge?”

“Who hasn't heard of Stonehenge?”

“When the sun rose at just the right point, its light pointed to one exact spot. In Maeshowe it lit up a room. At Stonehenge, the light hit a certain stone. That let you know it was the day of the winter solstice.”

“What's a solstice?”

Desmond sighed, clearly not in the mood to give an astronomy lesson. “You know how the days are long in the summer and short in the winter?”

“Not in Australia. Claire told me it was the other way around.”

“Let's just worry about Scotland and LA right now. The winter solstice is the shortest day of the year, while the summer solstice is the longest. Then you have the spring and fall equinoxes in between, when the days and the nights are roughly of equal length. Then in between each solstice and equinox is a cross-quarter day.”

“Dude, how do you know all this? And worse, how do you remember it?”
“Sailors used to navigate by the sun, the moon, and the stars. Look here, this was set up to show all of them. Each solstice, each equinox, and the days in between.” Then Desmond frowned. “Thing is, it would have to be adjusted for latitude, especially if the Island moved.”

Hugo threw up his hands in frustration. “Des, what does this have to do with the big wheel with our names written on it?”

Desmond set down the theodolite and glanced at the gear wheel, as if seeing it for the first time. “That contraption? Haven't the foggiest.” He came closer, in order to read the names. “Mine's not here. Why'd Jack break it, anyway?”

“It's gonna sound kind of crazy.”

“Try me.”

“Jacob gave me a whole bunch of complicated instructions, how to turn the wheel, twiddle the mirrors, stuff like that. But Jack started playing around with the wheel, made it point to his name. When he saw his house in the mirror, the one from when he was a kid, he freaked.” It had been terrible when Jack had screamed at him, and he winced at the memory.

“So it was a kind of panopticon, then.”

Hugo had given up on all Desmond's strange references. Then something occurred to him. “It might still work. Let's see if we can find a big piece of mirror.”

They found a section about a foot across. Desmond held it up, so that it was surrounded by the big rectangular brass frame which wrapped around the gear wheel. Hugo said, “Hey, who knows. Maybe I can see my mom.”

“And anything there?” Desmond said.

“Just a bunch of fog. Move it around a bit.”

But no matter how Desmond positioned the mirror segment, it showed nothing but cloudy grey.

“I guess Jack busted it for sure.”

“Well, we'll never know, will we?”

* * * * * * * *

Desmond didn't say anything all the way back down the steep cliff. When they got to the shoreline, he shoved the outrigger into the surf a bit harder than necessary, then launched himself in without looking at Hugo. Hugo clambered in after him, afraid he'd tip the boat over, but it held steady.

Only once did Hugo ask, “Why the long face, Des?”

Desmond didn't answer, just stared ahead in silence.

Paddling was harder work now. They had to pull together rhythmically with no wasted movements, while tricky cross-currents swept them back and forth on the rough surf.

Hugo pointed out over to the east. "Are we lost, Des?"

Desmond gave a small shake of irritation. "How do you get lost paddling around a shoreline?"
"It's just that, uh, Hydra Island's pretty big, right? I mean, it has a runway you can land a plane on."

"That's right."

"Well, either we got a long way to go, or we're lost. Because shouldn't it be out there?"

Desmond stared out at the eastern ocean. "It's still pretty foggy."

"So how far away is Hydra Island supposed to be from the main Island?"

"About three klicks."

"In miles, man."

"I'm supposed to know miles, but you don't know kilometers? Very well, then. A little under two miles."

"Desmondo, there's nothing there."

"Let's keep on heading up along the coast, and hope the visibility clears. Maybe it's around the next bend.” But Desmond sounded unsure.

As they paddled around the peninsula, the beach along the coastline disappeared. Sea birds screamed at the canoe as it rounded the tip. Desmond paddled like a machine, tense and unspeaking.

Finally Hugo broke the silence. “Des, I know you're down about the lighthouse being broken. But maybe you don't need it to get home after all.”

Desmond’s shoulders relaxed. “Aye, that'd be grand, wouldn't it?”

The coastline made a ninety-degree dog-leg towards the west, and all at once two great fronts of water swept into each other. A huge wave lifted the canoe about ten feet, then dropped it almost as suddenly. Another swell bore them up, while a cross-wave keeled the canoe to one side, but the outrigger kept it steady.

“Pull!” Desmond called out, and they both paddled hard, struggling to stay atop the surging waves. Finally they cleared the peninsula and drew in closer to the shore, where the waves were gentler.

Up ahead, the fog cleared. They drifted for a few moments, panting and exhausted. Desmond said, “Brother, that was some luck. I thought we were sunk.”

Hugo was the first to see the boat. "Des, look over there!"

The Elizabeth rested in a rocky inlet a couple hundred feet from the huge, jumbled rocks which passed for a shoreline. There was no beach whatever, just a solid face of steep green and brown cliffs. An obstacle course of sharp boulders surrounded her, as the ocean twisted and turned between them.

Desmond said, “I ran this channel between the shore and Hydra Island. So where the hell is it?”

“Um, gone.”

“And where'd it go, then?”

“I dunno. Sank, I guess?"
Both men stared out to sea, as if their attention could somehow magically make the island reappear. The *Elizabeth* bobbed in the waves.

Desmond grumbled, "Looks like they let her run aground. She doesn't seem to be anchored."

Around the *Elizabeth's* seaward side, two fins moved in a lazy criss-cross. The word rested on both men's lips: sharks.

"Got any cuts on you, brother?" Desmond asked.

"Cuts? We got to swim out in that? Because that's totally crazy."

"Unless you can sprout wings and fly, I only know one way. Look, sharks are cowards. I've been in the water with them before. You just can't be afraid of them. They can smell fear."

"Dude, that's dogs, not sharks."

"Look, I'll bring us in as close to her as I can. You stay on the canoe and hold it steady. Once on board the *Elizabeth*, I'll toss you a tow rope. But you'll still have to get in the water."

"Crap."

"If you don't thrash about too much, most times they'll leave you alone. If one gets too near or bumps you, just give it a good smack across the chops."

"Right," Hugo said, his confidence suddenly flagging. Looking out to sea, he said under his breath, "Hey, sharks, give us a break, all right?"

Desmond just shrugged, then removed his shoes. He slipped into the choppy surf as quietly as possible, then headed for the *Elizabeth* with short, controlled strokes. In no time he reached the yacht. He climbed hand-over-hand up the dangling tow-rope, then tossed it to Hugo.

Hugo missed the rope on the first try. On the second, it practically knocked him over, as it was long and heavy with water. He looped it around a ring at the front of the canoe, hoping his knot would hold.

"Is she secured? Well, come on, then." Desmond tossed the rope ladder over the side and waved Hugo on.

Hugo unlaced his boots, while sharks swam about fifty feet from the *Elizabeth*. The rough waters looked dark and deep. If he waited any longer, he'd lose his nerve altogether, so out he tumbled with a loud splash.

One good thing about being as fat as he was, he bobbed up buoyant as a cork. The light surf pushed him around a bit, but he kicked against it, amazed that he moved forward at all. A wave smacked him in the face, leaving him gasping. Then he body-surfed on the next wave as it peaked.

With a few strong pulls he managed to get close to the *Elizabeth*, and almost forgot to close his mouth when another swell broke over his head. Once more Hugo bobbed up, managing to grab hold of the ladder. It sagged under his weight but held. It wasn't as hard to pull himself up as he thought, either.

As Hugo stood dripping on the deck, Desmond threw him a damp towel. "Welcome aboard, brother."
He tossed the smelly towel back to Desmond. "What'd you do, wrap fish with that? I'm not using it on my hair."

Desmond grabbed a strand of Hugo's hair and tossed it about, teasing. "Sorry we don't have full beautician services on board. This is the bargain-rate tour." Then Desmond scratched his head, contemplative. "Sawyer took her over to Hydra, you said, but it looks like he never dropped anchor. What I don't get is, why didn't she just wash out to sea? Or crash into these rocks, or get sucked into a sandbar? I mean, anything big enough to sink Hydra Island—"

"Maybe something kinda pushed her to shore."

"And what would do that, brother?"

"Umm, a storm, maybe?"

"Which explains why the Elizabeth wasn't just dashed to driftwood on those rocks there."

"You're the sailor, not me." Hugo leaned over the starboard side, where the sharks still made their slow circles. "Thanks, guys, for not eating me."

"And further, what's holding her here? She can't have run aground on a sandbar, or she wouldn't bob about like this."

"Maybe you could just, like, steer her out, see how that goes?"

"There's virtually no petrol left. Guess the Others who stole her never resupplied her. I doubt she'll start."

"Come on, Desmond, have a little faith. Just give it a shot."

After a few coughs, the motor rumbled to life. Desmond laughed and slapped his forehead, then gave Hugo's arm a small punch, grinning wide enough to split his face. "Don't know how long that will last, but at least there's a good tail wind coming up."

"I just wish I had my boots," Hugo said.

"You want to swim back to the outrigger and get them? Didn't think so. Anyway, it's better to feel her deck beneath your feet. Would you wear shoes with a woman in bed?"

Hugo turned away, flushed. To cover his embarrassment, he studied the wide blue space where Hydra Island used to be.

Desmond prepared to raise the main sail. "You ever sail a boat, brother? No? It's not hard. You're gonna love it."

(continued)
After Hugo and Desmond set out for Hydra Island, Ben left the beach camp. Along the rocky western shore, he picked up an old boar trail which led to the great ridge which divided the Island right down the center. As Ben climbed out of the forest, the boar-trail became a foot path well-worn over the years by Jacob's people.

The last part of his trek was mostly downhill. He side-winded along a broken ridge-face and soon reached the western beach.

Ben searched up and down the seashore for gear or anything else left by Ilana's team, but there was nothing except for a wooden outrigger canoe. It would come in useful, though, so he dragged it up past the tide-line and covered it with leafy branches.

Continuing along the shoreline, he soon came to a giant stone foot, all that remained of an enormous statue. He crept around the great, squat form until he found a rectangular opening cut into the stone. At least the stone door was open, because otherwise he wouldn't have able to move it. The day before yesterday, Locke had given it barely a push, and it slid back with little effort. In retrospect, it made sense. Perhaps to open the god's chamber, you had to be a god yourself.

Taking a deep breath, Ben entered. The dark, narrow corridor was lit only by small slivers of sunlight at either end, and for a second he had the crazy thought that the stone door was going to close behind him. He steeled himself and went on.

The bodies of the three men that Locke had killed were right where he had left them, although there was no smell of death. Ben hadn't expected any.

Well, might as well do what he came to do. He hauled the three corpses to the central fire pit and pushed them in, one after the other. The last one, Bram, was almost as big as Hugo, but with more muscle, and Ben had to rest before going on. Then this one, he had to be six and a half feet tall, so Ben had to fold his legs into a kind of crouch. Ilana certainly didn't travel with lightweights.

Sweat poured from Ben's face as he piled the bodies into the center of the fire ring. Sunlight poured through the hole in the stone ceiling and burned the back of his neck. He would have to gather wood, a lot of it. Suddenly a great weariness seized him. What had he gotten himself in for? It would take all day and half the night to gather enough wood to make work of this crew. Maybe he should drag them down to the beach and bury them above the tide-line. Not that that would be any easier.

Against the far wall stood a broken loom with a partially-strung warp on it: Jacob's latest work, interrupted forever. In its rage the smoke creature had flung one of the men against the loom, dashing it to splinters. It might as well serve for kindling, as the loom was broken beyond repair. So Ben gathered the whole mess in his arms and tossed it into the fire pit too.

All at once, without tinder or anything to start the fire, flames flared up, high enough to leap through the skylight.

“What the hell?” Ben cried out. The sunlight pouring through the ceiling opening got so bright that
Ben could no longer look at it. As he stepped back, the corpses began to smoke. Light flooded the whole room, as if the aperture were a gigantic magnifying glass. The walls of Jacob's room glowed white with the brightness of a dozen floodlights.

Ben fled to the shadows, and cowered behind a thick stone pillar. In the fire ring, fat crackled and hissed with the smell of hell's own barbecue. As he backed away from the heat and light, he kicked something.

It was a knife, the very one which Locke had handed to Ben. The one Ben had used to kill a god.

As Ben tested the knife's weight in his hand, he remembered how effortlessly it had slid between Jacob's ribs. How easily Jacob had succumbed, lying relaxed and unresistant in Ben's arms like a lover. Just like what the French called le petit mort, the little death. The moment of complete surrender.

Miles had said that Jacob didn't want to die, but Ben wasn't so sure. Jacob certainly hadn't acted like someone desperate to save his own life. Just because Jacob had wanted to be wrong about Ben, didn't rule out that Jacob had finally given up.

How old had Jacob been when he died, anyway?

That Jacob had died was a known fact. So would any knife work if wielded by a determined hand and plunged into a willing heart, or must it be this one in particular? Ben once again weighed it back and forth, brooding.

Who had more power, the god, or the one who could kill the god?

Bright and hot as an arc lamp, the flames consumed the bodies at a frightening rate. Ben was just about to stow the knife in his pack when old stories came back to him. Axes with minds of their own cut off the woodsman's limbs, instead of the tree's. Arrows were let fly, then returned to pierce the archer to the heart.

Quickly, before Ben could change his mind, he tossed the knife into the fire.

The fire slowly burned itself out. Thick grayish ash dusted the fire pit, all that remained of the men who had followed Jacob to their deaths.

Ben trembled a little in the cooling, darkening room. Fresh, light breezes blew about, taking with them the greasy, burning smell. He found a red clay amphora with wide, high handles, and into it he shoveled the men's ashes. They had burned down to virtually nothing, and the three of them barely filled the amphora. There were no bone fragments, no dental fillings. Nor was there any trace of the knife, not a single sliver of metal.

Time to leave this place to the dust and to the dead.

Ben struggled out the door, weighed down with his own pack and the amphora full of ash. He dragged the clay jar to the shoreline, poured its contents into the surf, and rinsed out the amphora with sea water. As the ash floated away, he said, “Rest in peace, you poor bastards.”

The now-empty amphora was large and awkward, so Ben headed back to the statue to return it to Jacob's rooms. Right outside the black opening, dread washed over him. Maybe it was irrational, but he was sure that if he went back in, that stone door would close and entomb him.

That was a chance he wasn't willing to take. He set the jar down by a large, flat stone near the entrance, then couldn't resist peering into the blackness one last time.
The door started to move with a low scraping sound, all on its own. Ben jumped back, heart pounding. The huge stone block ground on until it came to rest in its original closed position.

Ben was very glad that it hadn't done that when he was inside.

It was time to get the hell out of there. Hoisting his pack, he clambered up to the back of the giant foot. Even in its broken state, the foot still cast a deep, dark shadow. Into the shadow Ben crept, out of the reach of the bright afternoon sun.

When intact, the statue must have been seventy, eighty feet tall. Now that Ben got a better look, it was clear that the statue's placement wasn't random. It had been positioned midpoint in latitude across the whole Island, at the place where north and south met. Right before sunset, the statue's vast shadow would have stretched all the way to the base of the distant cliffs.

“What lies in the shadow of the statue?” went the old question. Maybe the true answer was the Island itself, stretched out like a woman who waits for her lover to come to bed. The protector, and the protected. The Island and everyone on it lay in the statue's shadow.

Or would have, if something hadn't broken it.

Ben walked in the statue's shade as long as he could. His next stop was the Tempest Station, and if he made good time, he could reach it in little over an hour. Even though Daniel Faraday had managed to short-circuit the gas-dispersal system, there were backup auxiliary systems with duplicate reservoirs. Ben wanted to make sure that everything was disabled completely.

Ironic, though, how he was exchanging one charnel house for another. As Ben walked uphill, away from the sea, he wondered if there was anyplace on this Island where he had not done murder.

* * * * * * * *

When Ben made it to the side of the mountain where the Tempest Station was supposed to stand, he searched around for its slab-like bunker door, but found nothing except tumbled boulders. Had he gotten lost, climbed the wrong hill? It wasn't until he'd circled the plateau a few times that he realized that the massive chunks of rubble were actually the station's shattered remains.

It had to have been the earthquakes, which had buried the Tempest under hundreds of thousands of tons of rock. It was gone, utterly, completely.

Ben felt more alone than he could remember, even more so than when he was a boy.

Ah, no matter. There was nothing more he could do here. He was about to turn and hike back down the cliff when a rustling rose up behind him, followed by soft breathing. He dared not turn around.

“You can't get in there anymore,” a sweet, young voice said. Ben trembled hard, and wished the mountain had buried him as well as the Tempest.

The voice gave a little sigh. “Ben, why won't you look at me?”

It couldn't be. He whirled around, an expression of terror on his face. “Annie?”

She wore a simple blue shift, and her long pale hair glittered golden in the sunlight. As she walked towards him, her bare toes left no marks in the short grass. She stopped just out of arm's reach and
said in a conversational tone, “You got old.”

Ben struggled to keep a tremor out of his voice. “You didn't. You're still twenty.”

She smiled.

Through her body, Ben could see high, sun-bleached grass. He felt lost and pointless. “I'm so old.”

She drew her thin shoulders up, as if she'd rehearsed a speech for some time and was now ready to deliver it. “I just came to tell you that things are going to be all right.”

“Annie, I'm so sorry. For all of it.”

“It wasn't your fault. It wasn't just us. Nobody could have babies. But I forgive you, if that helps.”

Message delivered, she turned as if to go.

“Please, wait.”

“I can't. Do you still have my doll?”

In the bottom of his backpack he still carried a child's carving, the image of a little girl. Annie had made it for him for his ninth birthday, the only present he got that year. “I always have.” In afterthought he said, “We buried yours with you. You and the baby.”

“Thanks.” She turned to go, this time for good.

“Wait!” he called out, starting to follow after her.

The warning in her voice rang out, loud and clear. “No! You can't chase after me!”

In the shadows where the harsh sunlight didn't reach, unseen things stirred. Something glimmered, perhaps an eye or a horn, maybe even a long glittering tooth. Ben stopped.

By the time Annie reached the outskirts of the jungle, she had faded out altogether. Nothing was left but the soft “Good-bye, Ben,” which drifted across the grass.

Ben stood there, bereft. He had killed the only people he had ever loved. His mother. Juliet, who was a dead woman walking from the first moment she set foot on the Island. And Annie.

Ben fell to his knees and wept.

* * * * * * * *

When Ben finally made it back down to shoreline, the late afternoon tide was already trying to pull the canoe out to sea. He paddled hard southwards, under the fierce red eye of a sun which glowered like judgment itself.

Tiny campfire-flickers stood out along the beach like golden gems against a black velvet setting. They called to mind hot tea and warm food in front of a blazing fire. You could bear the darkness at your back if a welcoming fire warmed your front. The surf pushed him into the shoreline of the only home he had right now.

“Hello!” Ben shouted out. People ran up to him, Hugo at the head of the pack, kicking up sand as he went. Ben had barely managed to drag the outrigger onto the shore when he was slammed by a tsunami of flesh, picked up, twirled around like a rag doll, and practically dropped onto the sand.
“We got back hours ago,” Hugo said. “I wanted to go out looking for you but Desmondo here said no, to wait till tomorrow.”

Bernard said, “Told you he'd show up for supper.”

“As you can see, I'm fine,” said Ben.

“See, no need for worry,” Desmond said.

Off-shore, the Elizabeth glinted in the sunset like a small white toy. “What a beautiful ship they brought back,” said Bernard.

Rose said, “Perfect timing, Ben. Instead of my cooking tonight, you get to enjoy Bernard's.”

As they dug into fish stew with savory broth, Desmond started. "Biggest news first, I guess. I don't think we have to worry much about Hydra Island, as there isn't one any longer. It's gone."

"Gone?" Ben said, face turning pale. "What do you mean, it's gone?"

"Sunk, bro," said Hugo. "Or blown up. We couldn't tell. But there's just a big wide piece of ocean where it used to be. And sharks. Lotta sharks."

"I wonder if any of Widmore's people got off first," said Ben.

Rose said in a nervous voice, "I guess we'll find out."

"I don't think so," Hugo said. He seemed awfully certain about it.

"Half my life was on that island," Ben mused.

"What, you mean the room with the big machine, where they strapped me and zapped me?" Desmond said with an edge to his voice.

Hugo said, “Which reminds me. Why were all those cages there, Ben?”

Ben swallowed hard. "Research. Dharma started it, and we picked it up."

"Dharma didn't start it," Desmond broke in. "That whole compound was far older than the Dharma Initiative. Early Cold War era, 1950s, I'd say. Back in the days of atomic testing in the Pacific. My hunch is that the cages were used for radiation experiments."

Vincent had come up to beg for scraps, and Hugo gave him a pat. "Experiments? On animals?"

"I don't know, brother," Desmond said, scowling at Ben. "All I know is, it was a place of horrors."

"What else did they do there?" Bernard asked Ben. "Besides zapping Desmond, I mean."

"Bernard, leave it be," Rose said. "It's gone now, and good riddance." She turned to Hugo. "So you didn't see anybody else up there? No people?"

"Nada, zip," Hugo said.

"Well, I'm just glad you all got back okay," Rose said.

“We made a stop at the lighthouse, too,” Hugo added.

"I dunno, a brick one? Jacob sent me and Jack there last week. Jacob gave me some numbers to program into it."

Bernard looked puzzled. “Program? What was it, some kind of computer?”

“Maybe,” Hugo said. “An old-fashioned kind, all made of brass and mirrors and gears. Guess Jacob believed in no school like the old school. When you turned the brass wheel to the right numbers, you could see stuff in the mirrors, like our houses back home. That freaked Jack out, man. He just busted everything up and then went off to stare out at the ocean. Never did figure out what that was about. It was like in Tommy. He smashed those mirrors to pieces.”


“Who’s on first?” Bernard said with a small grin.

Rose said, “Oh, be quiet and let the man talk.”

“Then after that, Jack got all depressed. Jacob snuck up on me and said it wasn't important anyway.” Hugo fell quiet for a second, as if weighted by Jacob's responsibility. “Man, I hope I don't get like that.”

“Like what?” said Bernard.

“You know, all Yoda-like. Where nobody knows what I'm talking about.”

Rose patted Hugo's arm. “I don't think you will, sweetie. From what we've heard, Jacob was playing a lot of games, pushing people around like pawns on the chessboard.”

Hugo said, “Well, I did have to lie to Jack once in awhile, to get him to do stuff Jacob wanted him to.”

Ever since the lighthouse was mentioned, cold anxiety had clotted in Ben's stomach. “I thought I was doing what Jacob wanted, too. Look how well that turned out for me.”

“It didn't turn out too well for Jacob, either,” Hugo said in a flat voice. “By the time I talked to him here on the Island, he was kinda dead.”

Everyone else was very quiet now, as the two men locked eyes. Ben looked away first, with a stricken face.

Hugo said, “Hey, we all know what happened. It's over. Don't worry, dude. I don't think he held it against you.”

Desmond fixed Ben with a hard glance. “It wouldn't be the first time in the history of the world, somebody killed someone because they thought God wanted them to. But it's the dawn of a new day, brother.”

"Amen," said Rose. “So, Ben, we haven't heard your story.”

Ben swallowed, not wanting to speak at first, even though the faces around the fire which waited, quiet, were friendly now. Or if not friendly, at least open. No one was tying him up or punching him out. He still had to remind himself that they were all on the same side. Still, he braced himself for blows. "I walked up to the remains of the statue, up on the west coast. I laid to rest the men that the
Monster killed. He didn't mention the knife he'd thrown into the fire. "Then I went to the Dharma station called the Tempest, just to make sure everything up there was completely inactiv—"

Hugo broke in, "Dude, that was the place full of poison gas, right?"

"What?" Rose said, staring at Ben. "What the hell were you people doing here?"

Ben held his face perfectly composed, the fruit of years of practice. "Well, Rose, you'll be glad to know that like Hydra Island, the Tempest was gone, too. Half a mountain fell on it, it looked like."

"Well, thank God for small miracles."

"So, that's it?" Hugo said.

"Yes, Hugo, that's it. Ilana's people left an outrigger, so I helped myself and paddled straight back here."

"And you didn't see nobody or nothing."

"Not a soul. If there had been someone following me, or someone around, believe me, I'd know."

Hugo looked at him crosswise, and Ben's heart started to pound. It was obvious that Hugo didn't believe him.

All Hugo said was, "Well, Kate caught your people out in the woods more than once."

Bernard tried to change the subject. "What do you think should happen now, Hugo?"

"I told Desmond that we'd get him on his way home. But after that, I dunno. Ben is the one who knows the Island." As Hugo waited, Ben realized he was being asked to speak.

Rose jumped in, still angry. "I should say he does. My God. Electrocuttion chambers. Poison gas. Animals in radiation experiments. Sounds like we need to grab a mop and broom and sweep this place clean."

"Rose, just let the man talk," Bernard said.

Ben cleared his throat. It was a very good thing she didn't know about Room 23. Maybe the sinking of Hydra Island wasn't such a catastrophe after all. "As I see it, there are a couple of things. We don't know who's still alive. There could be some of my people up in the jungle by the Temple." He stopped short, nodding to Hugo, "I mean, your people. They're your people now. They could have gone to the camp near the old Pala Ferry dock."

"Yeah, I remember that place. Fun times." Hugo's tone said the opposite.

"Sorry," Ben said, lowering his head before going on. "Some might have even gone back to the Barracks."

"I know our people are now your people. But some of them, we go back a long time. I feel responsible."

Hugo stood up, and at once everyone had a sense of how large he was. His big body blocked out the setting sun, so that they all sat in his shadow. He flung his arms open wide and in a loud voice said to Ben, "It's not my people or your people, good or bad ones, candidates or whatever. It's Just. Plain. People. So I'm supposed to protect this Island, right? Well, the people who are on it, they're part of the Island too."

"Some of them might not know that the war is over."
“Then it's gonna be our job to tell them that it is.”

“That's a good point,” Bernard said. “Other than us, who even knows that there's a new protector?”

Hugo said, “Guys, I got an idea. Let's all go to the Other's village, okay? There's a dock up by the boathouse. Desmond can sail the Elizabeth right up to it. And he could use help to get ready. Plus, there might be people up there.”

“That's what we're afraid of,” Rose said.

“He's right, Rose,” said Bernard. "Look, we've had our vacation. I admit, there were reasons to hide out. But things are different now, can't you feel it? You know I don't believe in God, but I am the first to admit that there's more at work here than blind chance. You haven't been sick a day since the crash. Your doctors gave you six months, maybe, and not great ones, either. Yet here you are. Then, we were apart for almost two months, but I came back.”

Rose's eyes glittered, but she didn't cry. “Yes, honey, you did.”

Bernard went on, “Then the sky turned purple, but we didn't die. And that's just a few of the crazy things, not the least of which was Jack's body. So I think we should go up to the Barracks. Yes, I'm no doctor, but from what I've heard, there's an infirmary up there, and equipment, and possibly even books. I could learn. And there might be people who need my help. We can do this, Rose. The Island has given us a lot. Let's give some back.”

Rose's eyes shone openly with tears now. “It's a long way.”

“Hey,” Hugo said. “If we're lucky, maybe we can cop a ride.”

Rose wiped her eyes. "What, you got a taxi service?"

Bernard gave a low whistle. "Hugo's blue tank."

“I heard about that tank,” she said. “You were quite the hero.”

As Hugo turned away, blushing, Ben relaxed inside. Maybe this was going to work out after all.

As Hugo turned to go, he stepped out of the sun's light and looked like himself again, shambling, ungainly, a bit awkward. “Guys, I'm gonna fix up my tent now. I'll check out the van in the morning. And this time I get to sleep in.”

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

Some notes on Chapter 9 can be found on my Dreamwidth.
On the second day of the Ajira survivors' stay in Tarawa, Officer Nariki bicycled up to the Bikenibeu Lodge. Under his arm he carried some Australian newspapers, a couple of weeks old.

“Nei Claire might like to see them. They're pretty new.” Nariki looked around the hotel's patio without hope. No one but Frank, Richard, and Sawyer were out and about.

Sawyer gave Nariki the once-over, trying not to grin. The guy had it bad, didn't he? “I'll give them to her,” Sawyer said, taking the newspapers from Nariki's hands. “Me being her fiance and all.”

Frank rolled his eyes, and quickly asked the crestfallen Nariki if he could get them a pack of playing cards. “Just to pass the time, you understand.”

Much to Sawyer's surprise, Nariki pulled from his pocket a greasy, dirty set, worn thin from thousands of games. He handed it to Frank and said, “We have another pack at the station. Not in such good shape, but they will do.” Then he looked around again, still hopeful. “Are Nei Claire and Nei Kate out back or something?”

Sawyer shot a “look what you started” glare over to Frank, then growled at Nariki, “Probably taking a siesta. It's damned hot enough.” Then an inspiration seized him, and his tone grew light and friendly. “You maybe wanna play a few rounds?”

Nariki broke into a broad, sunny smile. "Sure."

“You in, Rickey?” Frank asked.

At first Richard protested, but soon he, Sawyer, Frank and Nariki sat in the shade of the concrete breezeway, as Sawyer dealt out cards for twenty-one.

Nariki might have looked gentle, and foolish, but his card-counting abilities were better than Sawyer expected. Soon Sawyer was down the last tiny bottle of shampoo that he'd cadged from Kate the day before. Finally, bluffing his way through a desperate six and queen of hearts, Sawyer managed to get Nariki to bust.

“OK, I'm out. What do you want?”

“Since none of us got no money, how about a favor?”

“What kind of favor?” Nariki asked, a little suspicious.

“A couple suitcases from the plane.” Sawyer winced inside, glad Kate wasn't there to tease him about how he should have grabbed some when the getting was good, like she had. “Any two, don't matter whose they were. They all got stuff we could use.”

Nariki nodded knowingly. “Chief Biribo and I, we'll go later this afternoon. Maybe there will be some luggage left. I'll look for something nice for the ladies, too.”

Sawyer was about to protest, when Frank jabbed him, hard. After Nariki left, he complained, “What the hell was that about, Burt?”

“The less that's on that plane, the better it's going to go for us. You really want Ajira or better yet, the Feds, to find all those wires Widmore ran? Or the C-4?” Frank gave a chuckle. “By the time the team
from Ajira gets here, there won't be a seat cushion left."

He pointed to the pink cinder-block house across the road, where a three-abreast row of airplane seats sat in the front yard. The seat cushions were too fresh and unfaded to have been there very long.

“They share things here,” Frank went on. “The big men get their cut, and then everything else gets parceled out.”

Richard said, “Well, what they really need to share with us is a phone.”

“I think we're in a no-coverage zone,” Sawyer remarked.

“I mean, a sat-phone. We've really got to get our hands on a phone, before it's too late.”

“Before what's too late?” said Frank.

“Before whoever's coming for us from Suva gets off the ground. There are some people I really need to talk to first, and the sooner the better.” He nodded towards the roadway, as if making a point.

A few boys walked by, wearing around their thin waists lava-lavas cut from old t-shirts. They waved and smiled, pointing at the visitors. One boy's lava-lava read in bright white letters against a dark blue background, “Adelaide United.”

Sawyer got it at once. In a place where even an old pack of playing cards was a phenomenal gift, what could you get with something really valuable? “Where the hell is Miles?”

“Hopefully back inside the room, unless he decided to wander off,” said Richard.

“Goddamn, he better not have,” said Sawyer, as the three men headed for their rooms.

Miles lay sprawled out on the sofa, reading a paperback Western of World War II vintage. When Sawyer was done explaining, he stared, incredulous. “You want me to do what? No way. I had to go through hell to get those diamonds. You got any idea how bad that grave smelled?”

Frank used the authoritative tone airline pilots save for coaxing reluctant passengers out of burning wreckage. “Look, Miles, they know you have those diamonds. And why they didn't just confiscate them, I'll never understand. But—”

Richard interrupted, “Like you said, Frank, the I-Kiribati are good people. They're not going to just take Miles's diamonds away from him.”

“That's right,” said Sawyer. “The game is to trade for them.”

Frank added, “I hate to be the one to break it to you, Miles, but when the State Department and whoever the hell else gets here, you think you're going to hang on to those diamonds?”

“Yeah, buddy,” Sawyer drawled. “Ever hear of asset forfeiture?”

Before Miles could answer, the thumping fan crawled to a halt, and the lights went out.

“What the hell?” Richard said.

“Blackouts,” Frank answered. “They have them around here all the time.”

“Gonna get hot as hell in here in about ten minutes,” Sawyer remarked. “So, Miles, you might as
well haul ass out to the breezeway for some more cards. I don't want you doing any betting, though. You're just gonna sit there, watch, and keep your mouth shut till I need you.”

“Sure, boss,” Miles answered.

Sawyer just sighed.

* * * * * * * *

Claire and Kate watched on the sidelines as the men put together another card game. When Sawyer made it clear that he wasn't going to play any more damned blackjack, at least not without a card-dealing machine and eight decks, Kate gave a disgusted snort. Claire looked at her anxiously, worried about Kate's growing impatience.

“You might have snookered me once, son,” Sawyer said to Nariki, “but that's the only chance you're gonna get.”

Chief Biribo chuckled at Sawyer's complaints. He was as avid a gambler as his protégé, and better yet, he brought beer. Lots of beer, a whole cooler's worth, and cold, too.

“About the only thing on this damn atoll that is,” Sawyer grumbled to Kate.

Nariki had made good on his promise to bring “something nice for the ladies:” a garish jeweled hand-mirror for Kate and a fine peach silk shirt for Claire. Just as he was about to give them out, Sawyer fixed him with a hard stare and held out his hand.

Claire thought that it was quite courageous, actually, because as friendly as the I-Kiribati were, she and Kate were technically prisoners in a foreign country, and these were the police after all.

“What part about Nei Claire being my fiancée don't you get?” Sawyer growled. “No one gives her gifts but me. Right, Miles?”

Miles shrugged, indifferent. “Just keeping my mouth shut, boss, like you said.”

Nariki wasn't one to miss an opportunity. Pointing to Kate, he said, “So, look, Mr. Miles, if you don't want her—”

Kate flushed red and livid. Claire could feel her coiled anger, how she was ready to spring to her feet, but Sawyer stood up first. He was almost equal in height to Nariki, but Nariki was considerably wider. Nonetheless, Sawyer kept up the challenge. “Maybe I'll just take 'em both.”

“James, if you think for a minute—” Kate said, unable to contain herself any longer.

Claire leaned in close to Kate and whispered, “Kate, don't you see? It's a ploy.”

Kate just steamed, livid and red-faced.

Biribo decided to put an end to it. He forced his weight in between the two of them, glaring at Sawyer. “We aren't savages here, so don't talk to us that way. You can't have two women at one time in your own country. What makes you think you can do that in ours?” To Nariki he said, “Stop embarrassing yourself. Are we here to play cards, or what?”

Ignoring Kate's fierce expression, Sawyer sidled over to her and Claire. “You gals best stay in your room tonight. I gotta feeling it's gonna get drunken and a bit rough out here.”

“What, you think I need a white knight to keep me safe from the menfolk?” Kate snapped.
Claire tugged at her sleeve. “Come on, Kate.” She knew exactly what Sawyer meant.

As they crossed the courtyard, they ran into Mrs. Maleaua, whose husband had settled among the card players. She drew Kate and Claire aside and said, “The ship from Melbourne came in the day before you got here. Look what I picked up, some sticky buns. I've been saving them for something special. I'll put on some tea and we'll have a little party of our own.”

Claire said, “Hey, Kate, it'll be fun, like watching a game of footie.”

Hidden in the shadows, the women watched. Kate folded her arms, still steaming.

The word must have gone out through the neighborhood that the strange foreigners from the mysterious plane were going to face off against the South Tarawa police in a game of poker. Before long, a dozen men crowded into the patio. The few women hung back, trying to keep the children out, but a few braver ones climbed over the fence when they thought the adults weren't watching.

Before long, people brought their own coolers of beer, and the party slowly spread out onto the main road. It was early evening and there wasn't much traffic, but anytime one of the vans or pick-up trucks rumbled by, they parked for awhile mid-road for a beer and quick conversation.

Claire and Kate brushed away clouds of mosquitoes, licked sticky bun sugar from their fingers, and drank cup after cup of tea as they strained to hear what Sawyer and Frank were wagering. Whatever it was kept them in the game, which went on long into the night. Beer flowed freely along with laughter, curses, and what sounded like long-standing arguments in I-Kiribati. They even managed to drown out the ever-pounding ocean.

When two men got into a fight, Mr. Maleaua threw them out onto the center of the roadway. A rusted old Datsun waited patiently for them to finish throwing punches, before driving on.

Only once did Claire and Kate think about fleeing back to their room, although the light plywood door wouldn't have stopped anyone.

Some of the I-Kiribati men not in the game had started betting on the outcome of each hand. They groaned loudly whenever their favorites lost a round. One of the men said something rude, first in I-Kiribati and then in English. Some other men laughed, but not without a few wary glances towards Sawyer. When Claire's name was mentioned, Sawyer leaped to his feet, scattering the cards.

“I hear that again, I'll cut off your goddamned ear,” Sawyer shouted. The offender clambered to his feet too, and his friends gave him room. Everyone was very quiet now, waiting to see what would happen. Both Kate and Claire looked over at Mrs. Maleaua, who sat with a blank expression, silent.

Then the young I-Kiribati man laughed and sat back down again. “Just playin' with you, bro.”

Sawyer swung around, hair and sweat flying. “Anybody else got anything to say about it?” When nobody moved, he picked up the fallen cards and dealt out another hand. “Come on, then, let's play some damn poker.”

Claire stood up. “I've had enough.”

In their room, they drew the only mosquito net around their bed. Both climbed in, but neither one slept as the noises from the breezeway rumbled through the night. At one point Miles started yelling at Sawyer about something, while Richard tried to calm them both down.

The crowd eventually got quiet enough that Claire could once more hear the roar of the sea. She was just about to drift off to the drone of mosquitoes and the relentless ocean-hum, when someone tapped
lightly on their door.

Kate leaped up, groping at the back waistband of her jeans for the pistol that was no longer there. “What the hell? Wait here, Claire.”

But it was only Richard and Frank, both wearing grins wide enough to split their faces in half. It was clear that Richard was stone-cold sober, unlike Frank.

Richard said, “Sawyer did it. I swear to God that man is crazy, but he did it. He and Frank both. They got us our phone.”

Claire lit the small kerosene lamp kept for blackouts. It made the room look like a weird weird camping trip, with the four of them crouched like children around a campfire, waiting to hear a story.

“That police chief, Biribo?” Frank said, trying not to slur his words. “He's the cousin of the direct assistant to the Kiribati President. The cousin's a high muckety-muck, in other words, who just happened to stop by our little get-together.”

“Just walking up and down, looking for a party to crash?” Kate said.

“You've never lived by the beach in Sydney,” Claire remarked.

Frank went on, still grinning. “So the President's assistant's son is getting married. We thought Miles should do the kind and neighborly thing, give him a little gift. Through Chief Biribo, of course.”

Kate stared at Frank. “You bribed the chief of police?”

“Not me. Sawyer.”

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Kate said, rolling her eyes. “As if we're not in enough trouble already.”

“Look, Kate, let them talk.” Claire had to fight the rising desire to laugh. Not just at Kate, but at the whole situation. Kate's disgusted expression reminded her of so many evenings on their old beach after the crash, when the sun had set but it was too early to turn in. Kate and Sawyer would spar, Kate appearing annoyed but secretly delighted, the whole game going back and forth like tennis.

Claire struggled for a few seconds to identify the feeling which bubbled up inside her, so seemingly at odd with their dire circumstances. Happiness, for one thing. For another, the irrational and completely crazy sense that somehow, in some way, this might actually all work out.

Richard said, “Another diamond went to Biribo's wife, too.”

“Then there was the one for his girlfriend,” added Frank. “But that one wasn't as nice.”

“Then Sawyer suggested that Miles give one to Nariki too, for when he got married. Whenever that would be.”

Frank added, “The sooner the better. What a horn-dog. He reminds me of me at that age.”

“I don't believe I'm hearing this,” said Kate.

“So you didn't wager for them?” Claire asked.

“Absolutely not,” said Richard.

“Sawyer did win a couple pints of whiskey,” Frank said. “But the diamonds, no. The poker game
was long over by then. We were just finishing up the beer and getting better acquainted.”

“They didn't just promise the sat-phone, either,” Richard said. “Biribo actually sent Nariki down to
the station to get it.”

“Plus the charger,” said Frank.

“Nariki wasn't in much shape to get up on a bicycle. In fact, he fell off on the first try, and—”

“So now what?” Kate interrupted.

Richard said, “Frank here is going to go sleep it off—”

“I'm not drunk. Perfectly fine. Never better.”

“Frank, get lost,” said Richard. “You were masterful earlier. Now it's time to let me do what I do
best.”

Frank grumbled, but headed for the door, giving everyone an imaginary hat-tip on his way out.

“You sure you want us around?” Kate said. “It being a man's world and all.”

Richard ignored her as he examined the sat-phone controls. “Thank God it's mostly charged. The
power around here probably won't come on till mid-morning at the earliest. And every second
counts.”

“Why?” said Claire. “I mean, we're not going anywhere anytime soon, are we?”

“Maybe not,” Richard said, still scrolling through menus on the phone's controls. “Somehow, Chief
Biribo hasn't yet worked up the effort to call the US Embassy, much less the Australian one. He
apologized, but I told him, 'No rush.' He looked distinctly relieved. Then Miles gave him another
diamond.”

It was clear to Claire that Kate wasn't sympathetic. “Poor Miles. What does that leave him with, a
whole handful?”

“I told him Mittelos would reimburse him, but that could never happen if I didn't get to make some
calls. It settled him down a bit.”

From the next room, Claire could hear Sawyer and Miles still arguing in drunken tones, although it
sounded like they were starting to run out of steam.

Richard went on, “Biribo did manage to contact Ajira headquarters in Mumbai. They're sending a
team out later in the week to retrieve the plane.”

Kate said, “Don't planes have, you know, these things that record everywhere they've been, all their
maneuvers and such?”

“You mean the black box?”

Kate nodded. “Ajira's is going to be interesting.”

Richard shook his head like a man who has had a very long evening, is tired to the bone, and still has
a great deal of hard work ahead of him. “I can't worry about that now, Kate. One step at a time.”

In the circle of lamplight, Richard's sharp, carved profile reminded Claire of some hawk-like
Renaissance man from a painting. It took no effort to believe that he was very old, and that the slow tick of his life's clock only started up again now that Jacob was dead. She laid her hand on his shoulder, trying to put as much warmth into the gesture as she could. “Thanks, Richard. For everything.”

“Don't thank me yet. I'm still not sure how we're going to get out of here.” He must have found the screen he was looking for, because he started to key in numbers.

“What time do you think it is in the USA?” Kate whispered to Claire.

“I don't think it matters. My guess is that there's always someone awake at that switch.”

Frank had left the door open, so that the refreshing breeze was joined by clouds of moths and mosquitoes. Claire and Kate retreated behind the netting, but no matter how tightly they tied it down, mosquitoes always managed to squeeze in anyway. Claire slapped at a few, grumbling that she would have to get used to mosquitoes all over again. “We never did get bit on the Island, did we?”

After awhile both of them stopped slapping and didn’t bother, as they were more interested in listening to Richard.

Most of what Richard said didn't make a lot of sense. He gabbled on about the new operations manager who had just taken over the Pacific division, and was expected to work out splendidly. He spewed strings of numbers and technical jargon, then mentioned that the botanical research team had gotten stranded on a small island near Tuvalu and needed extraction. Yes, so far the samples were intact, although he couldn't guarantee how long they would last. Time was of the essence if they wanted to get these critical new extracts back to the home office laboratories.

“It must be a code,” Claire said under her voice to Kate.

“Richard said that Mittelos made pharmaceuticals,” Kate whispered back. “In case anybody's spying, it sounds like they're discussing an expedition.”

Finally, Richard wrapped up. “No, I'll contact Norton myself. It's after 9 AM in LA, so he should be there.” He fiddled with the phone some more, complaining under his breath. “Damn, only about fifteen minutes left.” The charger sat at his feet, useless in the blackout.

Richard drummed his fingers anxiously, waiting for someone to pick up. Finally they did. “Deirdre, it's Richard... Yes, you too, sweetheart. Look, I need to speak with Dan right now. It's about the botanical team.” There was a long pause, and Richard began to pace. “I understand that he's headed to court. But Deirdre, these are critical assets we're talking about. Critical and perishable. Yes, I'll hold.”

Again, drawn-out silence filled the room. Richard's anxiety was contagious, and the two women put their arms around each other like children afraid of the dark. After repeating much of the long, obtuse message, Richard said, “Dan, thanks. I haven't got much time. The situation here is delicate but still manageable.”

Richard listened to the last intense silence, then wrapped it up. “Okay, Dan. Our resources are limited and you won't be able to call me for another twelve hours or so... Great, I'll be looking forward to that. You're why we hired you, Dan... Good-day to you as well.”

Richard let the sat-phone fall with a thud. It rocked for a few seconds on the pandamus mat like a small box full of multi-colored jewels, then went dead. The only light left in the room came from the kerosene lamp. As Richard turned it off, he said in an abstracted tone, “This is actually a good way
to asphyxiate. We lost someone that way in a tent last year.” Then he rolled onto his side on the mat, hands over his head.

“Richard, are you okay?” Claire said.

“Look, can I just lie here for awhile? It's quiet in your room. And clean. I just need some time, and a little peace.”

“Are you sure that's a good idea?” Kate said. “I mean, considering how old-school they are around here.”

“I'll tell them I'm a eunuch. I'll get Sawyer to distract them. Please, I just want to sleep. When Dan Norton calls tomorrow, I've got to be at my best. Please. You can kick me out first thing in the morning.”

The two women nodded. Claire said, “Take the sheet, Richard. It's too hot for it anyway.”

“Sorry there's no mosquito netting for you,” Kate added.

Claire's bites were starting to flare up into big itchy weals, and she started to scratch. “Fat lot of good the net did me. I'm covered.”

But even though the mosquitoes descended onto Richard in droves, he was already asleep.

(continued)
The next morning, Hugo lay adrift in that space between waking and sleep, feeling pretty chill for the first time in a long while. At the smell of cooking, he rolled off his cot, ran his hands through his wild mane, and pulled back the tarp.

The fragrant odor of fried onions and sweet chilies filled the beach. There was more than a hint of garlic too, and a few other scents he couldn't name.

Rose stirred something in the big frying pan. “You people really left this place a mess.”

Hugo knew from living with his mom that compliments were a great deflection. “Whatever that is for breakfast, it smells great.”

“Fried green tomatoes,” she beamed.

Desmond rubbed sleepy eyes as he peeked into the skillet. “What? You can eat those?”

“You can not only eat them, you can relish them. Can you imagine, Hurley, he's never had any?”

“More for me.” The chilies made Hugo's eyes sting. “No cornmeal to fry them in. Too bad.”

“Oh, well, you can't have everything,” said Rose.

Ben had taken over the morning tea duty. Handing a cup to Rose, he said, “There's cornmeal up at my house.”

“Your house? Where's that?”

“What you used to call 'Otherton,' and what the Dharma Initiative called the Barracks. You know, where we're heading today.”

“Oh, that place.” Rose busied herself by stirring chunks of white fish into the pan along with the vegetables.

Hugo said, “We could bread fish with cornmeal too. That'd be awesome.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Or we could be grateful for what we got.” She beat the pan with her spoon, making it ring. “Gather round, everybody, and grab a fork.”

Everyone took turns at stabbing at chunks of fish, onion, and tomato out of the skillet. Hugo noticed there were large pieces of something else in the mix too, like potatoes but crunchier. “What's this?” he asked Rose, spearing a piece.

“You know those elephant ears that Sun used to grow in her garden? They have big fat roots, and they fry up really nice.” She turned to Desmond. “What do you think?”

Desmond fanned his mouth. “Too hot.”

Hugo said, “You should taste my mom's habañero salsa.”
“All the same, some iced tea would wash it down nicely.”

“What you're eating is taro,” said Ben. “The Hawaiians thought the first taro plant was a child of the gods.”


Desmond picked around the chili peppers. “How did Sun know you could eat them?”

“No idea. I always thought of them as house plants. You know, Hurley, when you're checking out the Dharma bus, you might go up there and take a look for yourself. We could use some more of those big elephant-ear roots.” She handed him a small bamboo spade and a basket.

“I see what you did there, Rose.”

“Stop complaining. It's a beautiful day, sunshine, fresh air. And with a garden like that, it almost seems a shame to leave this beach.”

* * * * * * * *

The trees on the path to Sun's garden had grown in three years, leaving the path deep in shadow. As Hugo stepped into the clearing, he gasped in surprise.

Plants grew wildly on top of one another, like kids playing King of the Hill, to see who could get to the top first. Tomato vines wrapped around fallen trees, the tomatoes big as softballs. Peas covered everything, reaching as tall as his head. Onion and garlic surrounded Poblano pepper plants the size of small bushes. There were a lot of other plants scattered through the greenery that he didn't recognize. Elephant ear leaves spread out everywhere like giant fans, some of the leaves as wide as his body.

Sun would have loved it, to see her garden like this.

He had the peculiar sensation of being watched. Sun's presence seemed to be everywhere: in the breeze around him, in the sun-dappled vegetation, in the fat pea pods hanging off the vines, in the thick green garlic stems. The flesh along his arms began to creep, and it wouldn't have surprised him if her ghost had walked through the clearing.

The moment passed, so Hugo got to work. Digging up elephant-ear roots was hard work, because they ran deep, and he stopped every few minutes to wipe his brow or take a drink. Soon he got into the rhythm, and as he dug, he thought about his visit to Seoul some years back. Then, after he'd thought for awhile about Seoul, he rested on a fallen log and recalled what happened afterward.

* * * * * * * *

Hugo met up with Sun and her tiny daughter Ji Yeon shortly before he got locked up in Santa Rosa. At the time, Sun still thought that Jin was dead, and despite Ji Yeon being the sweetest baby Hugo had ever seen, after Aaron, the visit was a sad one.

Instead of going straight back to Los Angeles, Hugo on a whim flew to Honolulu. He spent the next few days in a beachfront hotel, but the sad white expanses of sand tied down by tourists and beach chairs depressed him. It reminded him of this cartoon he'd seen as a kid: some shipwrecked sailor got pinioned by all these little people who thought he was a giant. Oahu was like that: tied down with condominiums and beach-front hotels, the giant of the land pinned under all the trappings.

Hugo finally got sick of it. He rolled up his dress suit and tossed it into his bag with a few t-shirts and
board shorts, then split for Maui, but that was only marginally better. Desperate for a change, he went to Lahaina, where the sun-swept dock looked like something right out of Hawai‘i’s old colonial days. It was there that he caught the ferry for Moloka‘i.

Moloka‘i felt so familiar, he could have sworn he’d been there before. He paid cash for a month’s stay in a tiny, shabby cabin built from an old trailer, with a rusted tin roof and an open-air shower out back. Seven others just like it nestled in a small cove sheltered by gently sloping hills. The little resort was mostly empty, since tourists tended to avoid the former leper colony. People wanted the clubs, the night life, the glamour of Oahu or Maui. And there were way nicer places on Moloka‘i to stay than this.

Its shabbiness reminded Hugo of the beach camp on the Island, though, so it suited him just fine.

He met two retired teachers from the Big Island, who explained why most tourists didn’t come near this particular beach. Something about a shipwreck back in 1842, and how the ghosts of the sailors and their leprous passengers still haunted the shoreline. They were willing to admit that the locals might have made up the story, to keep the tourists at bay.

The old-teacher couple also invited Hugo to this diner a short ways inland, and introduced him around. He was going to like it here, they said.

The Blue Lagoon was the diner’s name, although the only thing blue about it were the streaks of shabby paint on its battered front door. It had a big, grease-spattered grill, where the fat, genial cook served up the best burgers Hugo had ever eaten. They featured fried Spam and eggs, pulled pork, or spicy chopped fish called poke, which made Hugo's eyes water.

Soon the regulars warmly greeted Hugo, who always stood for drinks, or who would drive down to Kaunakakai for ribs to load up the barbecues which simmered till dawn. The word went out that if one of the neighbors lost a job or had a car accident on the winding two-lane road which snaked around Moloka‘i, or whose daughter was having a baby, the big guy would help out with that, too. They noticed that he always threw in at least two or three twenties whenever the hat was passed. He was pretty chill for a tourist, the local men said. He had mana, the right spirit.

One afternoon Hugo sat in the Blue Lagoon, mostly empty because the regulars were either at work or resting during the hottest part of the day. He drank virgin Mai Tai s and played with the umbrellas, sneaking an occasional maraschino cherry when the woman serving behind the counter wasn’t looking. A stout older man, native Hawai‘ian by the looks of him, took the seat right next to Hugo, ordered a beer, then struck up a conversation. “You a tourist, right?”

Hugo nodded.

“Where from?”

“L.A.”

“Ah, Los Angeles. So you must like the holoholo, I bet.”

Hugo looked confused.

“Driving around.”

“Sure.”

“I got a place for you, then. You ever been up to Pala‘au?”
Hugo hadn't. So the Hawai'ian man went on, “You go up north, to the end of Kalae Highway. There's a park on the left. Wander around, find the foot path. Head up the hill to the lookout, and check out the big rock. Everybody around there knows it.”

“What kind of rock, dude? Sounds interesting.”

The old man leaned in closer to Hugo, grinning. “The wahine, the ladies, when they want a keikikane, they go up there and sit on it. It's not just for getting a baby, though. Us kane can use the help too. Makes it a lot easier to slide the waves, give the ladies a better time with a longer ride, eh?”

He gave Hugo a dig in his well-padded ribs. “If it's closed, no matter. Sometimes the park ranger up there, he gets sick of the haole and so he puts up a sign. Don't worry about it, just go in anyway.”

The next morning Hugo thought, what the hell, and headed up to Pala'au. The trail did have a “Closed for the Season: No Admittance” sign, but Hugo skirted around it, half-expecting to get wrestled to the ground by burly Hawai'ian park rangers. No one was about, though, not even any tourists. The walk up to the promontory filled him with nostalgia, because of all the Hawai'ian islands, this one felt the most like the Island itself.

The great rock formation sat in a grassy clearing surrounded by ironwood trees. It looked exactly like two enormous stone balls topped by a big erect phallus, whose stony end poked over the top of Hugo's head. Looking around to make sure no one saw, Hugo climbed up and sat in the flat space in between the balls and the phallus. From where he sat, the long stone formation thrust out between his legs.

“Yeah, in my dreams,” he said to no one in particular.

Hugo knew that the Hawaiians left gifts along the roadside, or on certain beaches, or in front of other oddly shaped rocks like this one. Some were made of food, others were decorated with feathers, shells, or flowers. Some of the gifts were neatly wrapped in banana leaves. Sometimes they'd even build a scaffold of wood or bamboo, covered with offerings and draped with leis or green wreaths.

Why not? he thought.

Hugo had sworn off candy since returning from the Island, but occasionally he treated himself to a granola bar as a compromise. Rummaging through his cargo pockets, he found one: his favorite, chocolate-chip. He placed it in the stone hollow at the base of the phallus, then snuck away and drove back down the hillside, feeling ridiculous.

That night, the full moon turned the beach sand to powdered silver. A boom box belted out seventies oldies as smoke from a dozen camp-fires hung over the beach like a veil. It wasn't Hugo's first party on that beach, but it was the most memorable.

A tall, dark-haired woman asked Hugo to dance. He hadn't seen her around the resort before, even though she strode onto the beach like she owned the place. She was on vacation, she said, and gave her name as Ka'ula-something, long and full of lilting, musical syllables.

He asked her if she was from the islands, and she nodded. When he asked which one, she tossed her glossy blue-black hair. “All of them.”

She always seemed to be laughing at some secret joke which eluded him. Even in the dim fire-light he could see that she had a powerful sunburn over her ruddy, olive-hued skin. When he asked her if her burn hurt, she just grabbed his arms, pulled them harder around her shoulders, and said, “What burn?” with a rollicking laugh in her voice.
He danced closer to her than he ever had with anyone, thinking that she must be pretty drunk to press her stocky body up against his as intimately as she did. She was so tall that her noses almost touched as they slow-danced to “Musk Rat Love.” But she wasn't drunk at all, it turned out. Like himself, only juice or water for her. In her hair, little glints of moonlight danced like white fire.

When the boom box ran out of batteries, a couple of people reached for ukuleles and guitars. The light, lyrical music drifted skyward as Hugo and the woman snuggled and kissed in front of a crackling campfire. As her hands roamed up his thighs and under his board shorts, she whispered things in his ear which made him blush to the roots of his beard.

She invited herself to his cabin, made a few exclamations of surprise at his admitted innocence, then pulled him down onto the futon mattress which practically filled the tiny room. He lay back and ran his hands through her fire-lit hair, ready for anything. She climbed atop him, and churning him like butter with her strong thighs, relieved him of his virginity.

After they slept a little, Hugo drank water from the faucet like a man dying of thirst. The room was stiflingly hot, so he cracked the windows.

“I guess that means we'll have to be more quiet,” she said, her voice peppered with laughter.

He still felt her on his body like a blush. For a heartbeat he didn't turn around, because he didn't want her to see how powerfully aroused he was.

In a low, throaty voice she said, “Come here, lover.” This time she reclined on her back, arms open wide to him.

At first he didn't want to go to her. “I'm, uh, gonna crush you.”

“Can the clouds crush the mountain?”

It was a weird thing to say, but he was past caring. In a dream of red desire he flowed rather than walked over to her, and the rock of Pala'au had nothing on him. When she breathed out, “Now,” he gave her what she wanted, falling onto and into her with his full weight.

Late the next morning, she woke Hugo from an exhausted sleep with a long, hard kiss. As he struggled into his cargo shorts, she combed her brilliant black hair in front of the cracked mirror. She was already up and dressed. Her vacation was over, she announced.

“At least let me drive you to the ferry.”

She laughed, as if that was the silliest thing she'd ever heard. “I've got my own way off the island, lover. But you're sweet to offer.”

Her parting words rang in his ears, “Just remember. What happens here in Moloka'i stays in Moloka'i.”

The resort trailers were mostly empty now, and all at once Hugo was anxious to get out of there. That evening he headed up to the Blue Lagoon, knowing at bottom that he was just another tourist who would disappear into the past, to be replaced by the next ones who'd come along. Even so, the men thumped him on the back and said “Mahalo” for all that he had done.

The night came on, and slowly the locals filtered out of the Blue Lagoon. Hugo knew that it was time for him to leave as well. The cook, the woman behind the counter, and the remaining customers said their round of alohas, with promises of future meetings.
Hugo wondered, though, if he would ever see Moloka'i again.

* * * * * * * *

Long warbling bird-song from high in the jungle canopy brought Hugo back to the present.

A cold shiver went through him, with the uncanny sense that he wasn't alone in the clearing. Suddenly a dark shape flickered past. It ran across the path, making the leaves crackle like crumpling paper. With deer-like grace, it darted between the thin trees, then disappeared into the green shadows.

"Hey!" Hugo called out, following. A few long palm fronds fluttered against the wind, then fell still. Hugo listened for whispers, or any other signs that the dead were in a talkative mood. But the only noises were typical forest ones. A few cheeping frogs called to each other. Something above in the tree canopy gave a long caw, almost like a question. Maybe he was chasing a shadow, or maybe it was just the rhythm of wind in the leaves.

Whatever he was after, it was gone.

The birds suddenly fell silent. Hugo parted a screen of leaves, and stared wide-eyed at a mysterious figure who stood stock-still in the path. At first he thought it might have been Sun's ghost, but no way.

This girl was stark naked, except for a long screen of black hair, and her skin was a deep forest green. She picked a few peas from the vine and crunched them.

Nope, no ghost. For one thing, Hugo had never seen a ghost eat before, but the green girl crammed peas into her mouth as if they were candy. When Hugo stepped on a twig, she looked up with a puzzled expression. Maybe she hadn't noticed him, or just thought he was another curious plant growing in the garden. Then she turned and bolted.

“Wait!” he shouted. All he heard was her rustling through the woods, followed by the faint echo of laughter.

She bolted off the path, but Hugo didn't let that stop him. Every so often her pert rear end flashed ahead of him. Her dark green coloring let her blend into the shadows of the underbrush, and she kept disappearing from view. She did leave a trail in the seamless tapestry of the woods, though, and he sped up as he followed it.

Hugo had never been much of a runner. Now he crashed through waist-high ferns and small shrubs, leapt over moss-covered logs, and high-stepped over small boulders. Everything on his body shook, and normally he hated that, but he didn't even care because it felt so good to run. It was like one of those dreams where you speed on with no effort, lightly skimming the ground but not quite taking off into actual flight.

The faster he went, the more it seemed like the vegetation parted to show him the way. No cramps, no shortness of breath: it was awesome. It almost didn't matter if he caught the green girl or not, so taken up with the sheer joy of moving his big body through the forest as if he were part of it.

A bird-like laugh rang out and he stopped dead, straining to see where the sound had come from. There she was, perched twenty feet off the ground in a shaggy-barked tree, her bare body half-screened by the leaves. He tried to not eat her up with his eyes, but she didn't seem at all embarrassed by her own nakedness, or by his interest, either. She peered down at him with a wide grin on her face.
“Hey,” Hugo called out, panting only a little. “Why'd you run?”

“Wasn't it fun?”

“Hell yes. Hey, who are you?”

“Don't you recognize me?” She sounded a little offended.

“No, should I?”

Instead of answering, she gave a couple of loud unmistakable cries. “Hurr-lee, Hurr-lee, Hurr-lee!”

“You,” he stammered. “But you—”

“You couldn't see me before, but it wasn't your fault. Just call me Rima.” Her long delicate toes gripped the branch the way a bird’s would.

Her name sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it. “You're not dead, are you?”

In answer, Rima tossed a lime-green fruit the size of a softball at him. Hugo ducked just in time, so that the tough-skinned ball rolled into the thicket beyond. She tossed another fruit, and this one bumped his leg, but not hard. “Do I look dead?”

“Just thought I'd ask.”

She peeled one of the green fruits and let the rind drop.

He picked up a piece, tough as a coconut shell, wondering how she'd ever gotten it apart.

Rima tossed the soft, peeled fruit down to him. “Here, catch.”

The slippery fruit dripped with juice, and he almost dropped it. He licked his fingers, hesitant at first, then broke into an amazed grin. “Man, that's good.”

Even Kate, who was the best at climbing trees, had never found any fruit like this. If they had, they wouldn't have eaten anything else, he thought, wiping his hands on his shirt. “Thanks.”

Rima climbed down, almost walking along as her clever feet gripped the bark. She picked up a long lock of Hugo’s hair and rolled it around in her fingers, as if she liked what she felt. He stepped back a little, trying not to look at her too closely, not quite succeeding.

With a small disappointed pout, she dropped the long curl. As if suddenly reminded of something, she said, “Now, down to business. I have a message, and you have to remember it.”

“Do I have to write it down on my arm?”

“Oh, Jacob was such a silly-face. Of course you don't. No message worth hearing should be that much work.”

“So, you knew Jacob?”

“We all knew Jacob, even if he didn't know us.”

“I saw him a couple times. He had a lot of messages, that guy. Crazy ones.” Hugo wasn't even staring at her anymore. Well, not much, anyway.
Rima drew herself, looking a little offended. “I don't think any message of his could compare to this one.”

“Oh, really.”

“Yes, really,” she said, mocking his tone. “I am to invite you to a party.”

It was the last thing Hugo would have expected. “A party? For who?”

“For you, silly-head.”

Sadness passed over him. “Jack didn’t get a party, did he?”

Rima shook her head. “Sorry. There wasn’t time.”

“I bet there was a real bang-up one for Jacob, though.”

She crossed her arms over her breasts and frowned. “We sent the invitation, but he never even got it. We shouted in his ear, practically dropped boulders on his thick head, but he couldn't hear us.”

“But I can hear you.” And man oh man, could he ever see her.

“Well, Jacob never could. So he didn't get a party. Too bad, because things would have gone easier for him if he had. But enough of that silly-face. Listen well, now. You're to go to the Heart of the Waters. You can get there, you know how. But don't stop there. Walk around the Heart three times, widdershins. Then you'll be there.”

"Be where?"

"Where you need to be, of course.”

Hugo was still confused. "Uh, what's ‘widdershins'?"

“Who doesn't know widdershins? You know, backwards.” Standing deliciously close, she traced a circle in the air, moving against the direction of the clock.

“I get it. You want me to go to the Heart, and walk around it three times counter-clockwise.”

When she flounced her head, her breasts shook in a delightful way. “You say counter-clockwise, I say widdershins.”

“Same thing.”

“If you say so,” Rima said, suddenly all business. “I'm not responsible for what will happen if you go the wrong way. I'm just the messenger.”

It occurred to Hugo that maybe he was supposed to go alone, even if he didn't like that idea much. “So, who's all invited to this party? There are some other people at the beach. And we were gonna make a trip today.”

“This is more important than any trip,” Rima declared. “The party’s tonight. So make sure you arrive at the Heart right before sunset. Be careful, because if the sun has disappeared completely beneath the sea, you're too late. And you do not want to be late. Your friends can come if they want, but that dog has to behave himself around the birds. Now repeat the directions to me, and hurry up, because I have to dress, and I hope not to be late myself.” This last part she delivered as if the merry chase through the woods had been his fault instead of hers.
It was almost like school, but what a strange one. Hugo strained to get it right. “Go the Heart at sunset but no later. Walk around the pool counterclockwise, three times. Then party hearty.”

But Rima had already turned away, her cute little bottom bouncing as she disappeared into the ferns.

Hugo went on his own way. It wasn't until he emerged from the thicket surrounding the beach camp that he remembered where he’d heard her name. He’d once found a few issues at his favorite comic store over in East Los Angeles. But the comic-book Rima had been blonde, and instead of being small and pert, she was a real warrior princess.

Rima. Rima the Jungle Girl.

* * * * * * * *

Back at the beach camp, Rose took Hugo's heavy basket of taro corms, Poblanos, and garlic. “Quite a haul you got there.”

Bernard said, “So, did you find the blue tank?”

“Not yet, Bernard. And dude, don't call it that.” Hugo had run someone over with the Dharma bus, and the man's face still haunted him. Even if it had saved peoples' lives, he didn't want to be reminded of it. “Ben, Desmond, you wanna hear this too. Before we head out for Dharmaville, there's someplace I have to go first. Well, we can all go, 'cause we're all invited. Vincent, too. But me, I have to go. It's a party. And we have to leave before sunset.”

Ben repeated, incredulous, “A party? You mean with pointed paper hats and tooting horns?”

Hugo shook his head. “I, um, don't think it's that kind of party.”

Rose and Bernard just looked at one another. Then Rose burst out, “Now I've heard it all. We survive a plane crash, we get blasted through time to the past and back again. That smoke devil in a John Locke costume tries to kill everybody, and Hugo gets messages from dead people. Then, in the middle of all this crazy, there's a party. With invitations. Well, I never.” She threw her hands up, then let them fall in helpless resignation.

“We can start for the Barracks tomorrow,” Desmond said. “What's one more day?”

“Are you sure, dude?” Hugo said. “It's important for you to get back. But Rima said that if I didn't go, any trip any of us made wouldn't be worth it.”

Desmond frowned. “That sounds ominous, mate.”

“Rima who?” Ben asked.

“Just Rima. The girl who invited me.”

Desmond gave Hugo a wicked grin. “You go out to work in the garden, and a girl invites you to parties. That takes some talent, brother.”

“I guess that's a partial answer to the question of who's still alive around here,” Bernard said. “Did you know this girl?”

“Never seen her before in my life. Anyway, this party's up by the bamboo forest.”

“Well, there are worse things to do to get home than go to a party,” Desmond said. “Think there'll be food?”
“You ever been to one where there wasn't?”

“I can't imagine what I'm going to wear,” said Rose, a trace of sarcasm in her voice.

“No prob, Rose. She didn't say anything about party clothes. It's, um, probably pretty chill.” Hugo didn't quite know how to tell Rose that Rima gave new meaning to the term "casual dress."

Bernard rolled his eyes. “You look fine, Rose. Look, we'll pack up today, and then we'll go to this party.”

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

Some notes on Chapter 11 can be found on my Dreamwidth.
That evening Hugo and everyone, including Vincent, entered the bamboo grove. They passed the field where Jack died into darker and denser woods. The bamboo thinned out, replaced by thick green jungle dotted with spikes of red ginger.

Closer to the Heart, the air grew fresher, tasted sharper in the mouth, and the bird songs sounded sweeter. A golden glow appeared through the dense vines, and on the other side, a scene of brilliant beauty spread out before them.

Rose and Bernard peered into the living stream into which all waters of the Island flowed. Rose recovered her voice first. “So this is where it happened.”

“Aye, pretty much most of it,” Desmond answered.

“This way,” Hugo said as he led them past that pool like liquid gold. “Maybe we should, um, hold hands or something.”

“Why?” Ben said.

Hugo balked, a massive obstacle to everyone’s progress. “You know that story where the kids go to a planet run by a giant brain called ‘It’? *Unstuck in Time* or something.”

“A Wrinkle in Time, you mean,” said Ben.

“Yeah, whatever. The kids had to hold hands or get lost forever in a spacey void.”

Rose grabbed Hugo’s hand, then her husband’s. “Lead the way, Hugo.”

Three times they went around, and each time the woods grew more full of twilight, the Heart’s waters more faint. After a rustle of green darkness and a rush of wind, they found themselves in a strange part of the jungle, under a black velvet sky without moon or stars.

“What now, Hugo?” said Ben, dropping Desmond and Bernard’s hands at once.

“I dunno. Hey, Vincent! Where are you, boy?”

A sharp bark answered from up ahead, so they pushed on.

In the distance drums throbbed, pipes twittered, strings thumped. They emerged into a bright torch-lit spectacle, where stars large as coins blazed in the violet sky. The glowing starlit balls were bright enough to cast shadows. They filled the sea with flickering light, and the smell of roasting meat hung heavily over the beach.

On the beach, people gathered around fires, danced to the tune of flutes and fiddles, or lounged under grass shelters. Well, mostly people. Funny that Rima hadn’t mentioned it was a costume party. Otherwise, it didn’t look much different from a night on the beach in Southern California, only there wasn’t any volleyball.

Hugo had to admit those were some pretty good costumes. The bird-heads looked disturbingly realistic, especially their life-like eyes. One tall fellow with a water bird’s beak strode by on heron-
thin legs. Another man's lower body gleamed with metallic blue fish scales. Some of the women’s hair flared up into spiky orange flames.

In the thickest part of the crowd Hugo blinked once, twice, not believing what he saw. Somebody had invited the polar bears. Girls as green and naked as Rima danced in a circle with bears whose fur glowed orange in the torchlight.

Vincent had stuck by Hugo's side so far, but now he growled a little, and his neck hairs stood on end. “Stay, boy,” Hugo said as he patted him. “It's cool.” An encounter between Vincent and the polar bears could turn disastrous.

“Right, boss,” Vincent answered in a gruff voice.

Hugo stared at the dog. “I did not just hear that.”


“Nah, buddy, you're cool.” What the hell had just happened?

Bernard gave a little chuckle. "So the Island has a nude beach?"

"Don't get any ideas," Rose said in no uncertain terms, then turned to Hugo. "A little warning might have been nice."

"Sorry. I, uh, didn't quite know how to bring it up." Hugo pointed to Rima, who had joined the dance. "She's the one who invited me."

Desmond said in admiration, "Nice work, brother."

As the music picked up tempo, some of the guests clapped their wings or paws to urge the dancers on. A woman wearing a big strawberry on her head offered Desmond a drink from a coconut shell, that he drank at once. Strangely, Desmond no longer wore his ratty blue shirt and beach shorts. The dark blue tunic covered with sparkling gold braid gave him the air of an old-time sea captain.

Ben said, “I've got to give you credit, Hugo. You know how to pick a party."

“Thanks. By the way, Ben, nice robe. You too, Bernard.”

Neither of them wore scruffy beach wear. Instead, they sported long silky gowns right out of Hogwarts. Ben's eggplant-dark robe was trimmed with violet fur, while Bernard's navy one bore fur of pale blue.

“Nice threads, dudes.”

“You're looking chic yourself, Hugo,” said Bernard.

Hugo ran his hands over a maroon robe trimmed with gold lace.

Rose's little pirouette made her burnt-orange skirt swirl. “Look at this, Bernard. It's lovely.”

“No, you are,” said Bernard. The two of them walked off, hand in hand, to where Desmond was trying to start up a conversation with one of the green bird-girls.

Another strawberry woman offered Ben and Hugo a choice between wine or what looked like water. He sipped it at first, then chugged it down. Everything you could ever want from water was in that draft. It was as refreshing as having a waterfall course through you.
“Ent-water,” he said to Ben.

“Whatever ent-water is, I hope that’s a compliment,” came a chirpy voice. There before them stood Rima, naked as ever, but with little white shells all woven through her long black hair.

“Nice, um, outfit,” Hugo said.

“Thanks.” She shook her head, making a pretty clink.

“Rima, hey,” Hugo said. “This is Ben. Ben Linus.”

She smiled at Ben, then gave Hugo a great squeeze of a hug. “You made it.”

At first Hugo didn't know where to put his hands, then just gave in and let his palms rest along her smooth back. He fought a chuckle at Ben's deep blush when Rima hugged him as well.

“So you're Benjamin. There's someone who wants to meet you.”

“So really? I'd be honored.”

Hugo said, “Rima, catch you later, maybe?”

“We'll see,” Rima said with a laugh in her voice. "You might get busy and forget all about me.” She blew Hugo a kiss as she steered Ben through the crowd, leaving Hugo on his own.

“Pardon me for listening in,” said a satyr with a gray beard and thickly furred legs. “I know everyone says ‘ent-water,’ but they don't know what they're talking about. It's far better.”

Hugo still felt a bit dejected that Rima had left. “Like, you know that from experience?”

“Indeed I do. Here, have some more.” The satyr refilled Hugo's cup from a clay flask.

The second drink hit Hugo even harder than the first. He'd taken a lot of meds in his time, and all they did was fog you up like a warm windshield on a cold morning. This was exactly the opposite. Colors became sharper, brighter, more real. Time slowed, but not in a groggy way. Instead, he felt alive and alert. “Hey, when you drank the ent-water, did you grow, too? Like Merry and Pippin?”

The satyr laughed, swishing his tail. “In every dimension.”

The bears had stopped dancing, and a few of the bird-girls climbed up onto their backs. Some cat-faced beings smirked, as one poured “ent-water” into a bowl for Vincent. He lapped it up, then began to chase his tail as the cat-people twitched their yellow whiskers and laughed.

The fiddles played something sweet and a little mournful, joined by what sounded like circus calliope music. Hugo wandered past a tall grass shelter with a roasting pit. That probably wasn't a pig, though, because the pit was big enough for a small mastodon.

“Almost ready, sir,” someone said as he passed.

Hugo headed towards the shore. Too bad there wasn't any volleyball. Back in LA, he always surprised people when he joined a pickup game on the beach. His own teammates would try to stay out of his way, avoiding a collision. The other side would find out that he was fast, accurate, and his spikes had the impact of cannonballs.

Just his luck, Hugo spied some tangled fish netting and a couple of stakes. He said to some of the bird-men, “Hey, give me a hand, OK?”
Soon they had erected a passable version of a volleyball net. The gathering crowd chattered in low, excited tones.

“Okay, guys, make a line.” Hugo called out odds and evens, although the two kangaroo girls were each put on a team to even things out. Now all they needed was a ball.

A pair of fat, round armadillos waddled up and volunteered. Hugo hesitated at first. “Little dudes, you're gonna get spiked. You know that, right?” They chittered at him and rolled up tightly as they could. He picked up the one closest in size to a volleyball, while the other one uncurled, disappointed.

Hugo and a kangaroo girl served as team captains, and he won rock-paper-scissors for the first shot. When he shot one of his signature cannonballs over the net, the kangaroo girl leaped a good six feet into the air and slammed it right back over with a kick of her powerful foot. That wasn't a foul, because her forearms were too short to reach over her head, after all.

They were going for best of three, with Hugo's team ahead, when the game suddenly came to a stop. The armadillo uncoiled and crawled away. The musicians fell silent, as did everyone else.

Two bird-headed men positioned themselves on either side of Hugo like an honor guard. “It's time, sir,” one said, cocking his head as birds do when they want to get a better focus on something. They lowered a robe around Hugo's shoulders, a soft garment made entirely of green and gold feathers. One of the bird-men clasped it shut across Hugo's chest.

Hugo pulled the robe around him, shaking a little. Either he had really gone around the bend now, or this was actually happening, and nothing would ever be the same again. He looked into the bird-man's beady black eye. “Thanks, dude.”

A keening chant sprung up among the crowd. Low drumbeats rolled in time with the surf and the singing people. Hugo walked forward only because everyone else was, too. He tried to hide in the thickest part of the crowd, but the creatures in front of him kept moving aside to let him pass, putting him out front.

A tall woman walked straight towards Hugo. She had looked sunburnt when he first saw her on Moloka'i, but now she glowed a deep, fiery red. Her wavy black hair fell in thick masses, shot through with threads of volcanic fire. Embroidered flames leaped around the hem of her crimson dress.

“Hey, Moloka'i,” said Hugo.

She grinned with pleasure and mischief. “Hey, East L.A.”

Hugo forgot the crowd, and pulled her into one of his signature rib-cracking bear hugs. Normally he held back with women, for fear of crushing them. Not her, though. She gave back as good as she got, and the heat from her body warmed him like noon beach sunshine. The throng fell silent, although the drums still beat their rapid rhythm in the background.

“Nice luau.” Hugo relaxed his grip but still held her in his arms, drinking in the feel of her.

“I thought you'd like it.” She straightened his robe, sliding her hands over the feathery fabric. “The bird-girls did a good job.” Then she made a wide sweeping gesture to everyone around them. “Don't all of you have some serious partying to do? East LA and I have to catch up.”

Small groups clustered all over the beach, drinking and talking. “Oh, look,” she said. “Your friends are having a good time. And Benjamin has found Pallas.”
Ben sat in the company of a tall, willowy woman who could just as easily been a beautiful young man. Pallas was so pale that her skin matched her bleached tunic and loose pants. Her white hair was cropped off, as if she'd cut it hastily with a knife. She and Ben talked earnestly, oblivious to the merry-making around them.

“Ben's gonna help me with the Island.”

“Good choice, lover. You know how to get people together for fun, and that's great. Ben knows how to make stuff happen, to stay safe, to eat. The Island makes it easy, and it'll be way easier with you at the helm. But fish don’t just jump into the net. You have to help them along, and Ben's good at that. Looks like Pallas is filling him in.”

Hugo gave her a long look. “Who are you?”

“Pele-Honua-Mea. You can call me Pele for short.”

“But you told me in Moloka‘i that your name was—”

She put her fingers to her lips and smiled. “Shhh. That was just between you and me.”

“Pele. I've heard that name.”

“They still know me in Hawai‘i. Some do, anyway.” Pele put her arm around his waist, running her hand up and down, warming his flesh under her touch. “Come on, let's take a little walk.”

Hugo gave himself a shake, like you do when you wake up from a dream but still think you're sleeping. No wonder everything on the beach looked so familiar. There was the sloped path which led to Sun's garden. At the shore, three big rocks formed the tide pool where Bernard liked to fish. The pig-roast canopy was set up on the same spot as their food tent.

Hugo turned to Pele. “It's our beach, isn't it? The one we live on.”

“The best on the whole Island. Not all the whispers you heard were the dead, lover. Sometimes it was just us, having a little fun.”

“So, um, how'd you wind up here?”

“A little bird told me about Jacob's demise. Well, a big one, actually. I was on Moloka‘i when the news came. Hawai‘i, so beautiful, but so much work to do there. And the stinking fish-head of a god who rules there is an insult to rotten chum. But that's another story. So I caught the wind and headed back as fast as I could. By the time I landed, Jack Shephard had already tasted the waters.”

“Jack was good,” Hugo said. “He killed the Locke monster. I couldn't have done that.”

"He didn't do it all on his own. Katherine, daughter of Diana, levied the fatal blow. As soon as I got here, everyone repeated her battle cry to me, 'I saved a bullet for you.' She was magnificent, she and her tall range-rider friend.”

“You mean Sawyer?”

“That one. Such a team they were. And as far as you not killing the dark creature, maybe you wouldn't have needed to.”

"I did try to go talk to him. But it didn't work.”

"Didn't it?” she said with a cryptic expression. "I guess that depends on what the real objective was.
Come on, let's see if that pig's ready."

***********

When Hugo and Pele arrived at the baking pit, Pele made a gesture of command. A young man all painted gold rushed to her side, and gave a small bow. “Lady Pele.”

Little jets of flame appeared on Pele's fingertips. “Is that pig roasted yet? Or do you need me to hurry it along?”

“I'll see to it at once.” The golden man hurried off.

“Might as well bless it now.” Pele turned to the crowd, her voice clear and piercing. “Hey, all of you. Listen up.”

When they were silent she said, “My sweet love Kamapua’a, Lord of the Boar, gave himself up for you once again. And every time he does, he always comes back bigger and better than ever. So let's hear it for Kamapua'a, especially when we sink our teeth into that fat, juicy pig flesh. Because you know that next time I see him, I will.”

At her raucous laugh, the crowd broke out into cheers, claps, hoots, chirps and caws of all sorts.

After Pele and Hugo settled under a canopied shelter, she turned to him, full of mischief. “Thanks for the granola bar, by the way. Chocolate chip is my favorite.”

“You're welcome.” He flushed, because of what that offering had led to.

“The man at the diner, the one who sent you to me? He's an old friend. He knew you needed to see me.”

“Good thing I had the kind in my pocket that you liked.”

“Oh, you had something in your pocket that I liked, all right.”

Before Hugo could recover his voice, two attendants appeared, laden down with wooden platters. They laid out pork, sliced fish with savory sauces, crispy fried taro, and some little cream-colored balls rolled in chopped nuts.

“Time to tuck in,” Pele said.

The food was delicious. Even so, he had to get out what was bothering him. “So, Kamapua’a, is he like your boyfriend? And he doesn't care that you're, uh, here with me, or that—”

Pele's tone was gentle even if her words weren't. “I don't belong to anybody, lover. Maybe the closest is Kamapua’a, when he's around. But remember what I told you: what happens on Moloka'i stays on Moloka'i. Back then, big man, that was fun. This is business. An affair of state, if you will.”

Hugo had figured that out already. Something still confused him, though. “Wasn't Kamapua’a the name of the boar we had for dinner?”

Pele laughed, a loud amused peal. “It was. Like I said, he gives himself up, and he comes back. That's a story I thought you knew.”

Hugo just shook his head. Under the shelter the night breezes blew cool, and he pulled his feather robe around him. "There's so much I don't know. Pele, how am I gonna do this?”
"East LA, you're the Protector. And a true Protector, a good one, heals the land."

"But how?"

She leaned over, her face all business. "You get a cut on your hand from a fishing line, and your hand heals itself. How? I don't want to hear your Doctor Jack's explanations. The point is, it just does it all on its own. Sure, you help it along with herbs or a bandage. But the skin knows how to knit itself. Same thing with the Island."

He still couldn't take it all in. "Really? That's all there is to it?"

"That's all there is. And you're going to have help, I promise."

"From who?"

"Well, for one, you see my sister over there, talking to your friend in the blue jacket?"

"Oh, Desmond, right. Although they're kinda doing more than talking."

"My sister Nāmaka, we don't get along so well, but I invite her because she's family. Nāmaka rules the waters all around this Island, and your friend won't get a mile offshore without her help."

"Then there's my mother, Haumea. She can make a woman have a baby when a man just looks at her, or never have one at all. And when that woman's time comes, my mother puts her hand on her belly, and that baby shoots right out like a watermelon seed. About forty years ago, Jacob's people and all those scientists pissed off my mother big-time. I don't even know what they did, 'cause I wasn't in town then. It was a mess, I do know that."

That "mess" had killed Juliet and Sun, both so desperate to escape the Island, both so doomed. But maybe things could change. "So, um, you think she's still pissed?"

"Hard to say."

"It's kinda important, Pele. Since I'm supposed to take care of the Island and everything, it would really suck to have women, like, dying all the time."

"Mom's not a great conversationalist under the best of circumstances. Tell you the truth, she was so mad about it when she told me, I didn't feel like asking a lot of questions."

"You know, Pele, if you're not too busy... When you see her, do you think you could ask your mom about the babies?"

"Yes, lover, I will. And you don't have to look so worried, either. My mother likes you. You got on her good side after your plane crashed, when you took that pregnant girl under your wing."

"Claire." Her name in his mouth tasted very sweet.

"That's the one."

Hugo swallowed hard, anxious. "Your mom, is she, um, here tonight, too?"

"Nah, she's not one much for parties. Me and Kamapua'a, we're modern, we can blend. But my mother, she's kind of old-school." Pele rose to her feet, smoothed down her fiery dress, and held out her hand. "Come on, big man, affairs of state can't wait. I have to make a speech."

"Lucky you," Hugo said. "Cause I hate making speeches."
“Well, you've made a few, and that wasn't so bad, was it?”

“I guess not. Though I hope the next one's not for a funeral.”

Creatures of all kinds gathered around Hugo and Pele, to clap and cheer. They draped him with wreaths of fragrant red frangipani flowers, or looped necklaces of tiny white shells over his head. They crowded about him: male, female, or a little of both, and kissed his cheeks or his mouth. Some just ran their noses over his, drinking in his scent. The bird-people brushed his face with the tips of their wings. Some called him kahuna, or big man, or lover of Pele.

He heard the phrase, “Thank you,” over and over again.

Ben, Rose and Bernard made it through the crowd, and he kissed and hugged them as well. Even Ben hugged back, stiff and reserved. Desmond managed to untangle himself from Nāmaka and joined them, while Vincent licked Hugo's hand.

Hugo stood in the center, unmoving, completely unaware that he appeared as a massive figure of beauty and power, glowing with green-gold glory.

Pele climbed up onto the shoulders of a huge minotaur and raised her arms, waiting for everyone to quiet down. Her long black hair streamed out behind her like a flag lifted by the ocean winds. “Give welcome to Hugo son of David, protector of the Island and the Heart of Worlds. Welcome him and all his companions who come in a spirit of peace.

“Fight alongside him, fight for him if necessary.” She grinned and made a fist, moving it back and forth with a fast rhythm. “He has a strong arm, and he knows how to use it.” The crowd erupted into raucous laughter and cheers even louder than before.

Desmond swayed at Hugo's side, three sheets to the wind, his Glaswegian accent even thicker. “You're the Island's best-kept secret, aren't you, brother?”

“Shhh! Shhh!” said some of the creatures around them. “Lady Pele still speaks.”

Pele went on, “Once he told a young friend of his that he was 'known as a warrior where he came from.' At the time he thought he was making a joke.”

She knelt on the minotaur's shoulders, gripping his horns. “But what is a warrior for, if not to protect?” Pointing to Hugo, she spoke in a voice clear as stars, hard as fate. “Hugo son of David, every being here is now pledged to help you. Don't be shy. Ask us. The sea, the sky, the winds, the land and all the creatures in it, all the green growing things, all of them love this Island and her tender beautiful center as much as they love you. Love us, and let us love you in return. You asked more than once, what am I to do? Benjamin son of Roger gave you good counsel. 'Do what you always do. Take care of people.'”

Once more, all the assembled creatures erupted into claps or the cries of their species. Rose gave Hugo's hand a firm squeeze and said, “Honey, you sure do have your work cut out for you.”

A sudden commotion spread through the group as a hugely fat man with a long beard and green skin rolled up. Goat-legged men on either side struggled to hold him up. “Komes!” people and creatures shouted. “Look, it's Komes!”

“Presents,” someone else called out. “There'll be presents!”
One of the goat-men hauled a wooden chest covered with intricate carvings. As Komos opened it he bellowed out, “Humans first. I mean, other-worlders. Oh, you know who you are.”

“That means you,” a couple of fish-scaled boys said, pointing to Desmond, Rose, Bernard, and Ben.

“You too, sir,” said a bird-headed girl to Hugo. “Go on.”

The five of them approached the massive green man as he rummaged through the carved chest. “Let's see...” He fixed his eye on Desmond. “The sailor first. I like sailors. They're good company when you want to lift a pint, eh?”

“Aye,” Desmond answered. “Although were we in Glasgow, I'd stand you a good Scotch single-malt.”

“You'll be there soon enough,” Komos said. He handed Desmond a brass compass, battered and tarnished. “Ordinary compasses point to the true north. But this one, it will always point you towards home. And one day, you'll buy me that Scotch in Glasgow town.”

Desmond took it, tears standing in his eyes. He knelt down and planted a few dramatic kisses on Komos's hand, then stepped back.

Kamos beckoned to Rose. “Lady, the Island's ground needs to be restored. Even though the Lady Sun has sailed to that other shore, the work she began here remains. Carry it on.” He handed her a small box, filled with black, sweet-smelling earth. “A single grain will cause a whole garden to bloom.”

Rose took the box with both hands, as if it was a treasure.

Kamos turned to Bernard. “I don't have to tell you, Bernard son of Gregory, that all life feeds on life, and that such feeding leads to pain. You have always wanted to ease the suffering of others.” From the chest he took a small tackle box with a row of fish-hooks neatly strung on a line. They ranged in size from a man's index finger to tiny ones smaller than a thumbnail, and each one had a barb so thin and sharp that it was almost transparent. “These hooks rarely fail. And they never cause pain.”

“Thank you,” Bernard said. “These will come in very handy.”

“One more thing,” said Komos. “Never use them for sport. Only for necessity.”

“Of course not. Thank you.”

Now it was Ben's turn, although he hung back as if afraid of the big green man. Komos said, “Benjamin son of Roger, since you were twelve years old you have done little else but weave plots within plots, schemes within schemes. Now, you get to put your powers of observation into practice. The Island has a story, a long one, and you will be the one to tell it.”

Kamos handed Ben a blue leather portfolio. Inside was a book bound in the same, as well as a pen with a single steel-colored nib, and an inkwell. "The ink will never run dry, and the pen will never dull. Not within your lifetime, anyway. Mark well that no matter how many pages you fill, there will always be enough. But hearken, son of Roger. These pages record only words which speak true. Anything else, and the ink fades at once to white." He fixed Ben with a serious look. "Do you think you can bear the weight of this gift?"

Ben swallowed, clearly taken down a peg. "I think so. I'll try."

Kamos then extended his large grip to Hugo. “I don't presume to pick for you, protector. Name what
you want. Choose.”

Hugo’s mind went blank. This was worse when his mom cornered him at Thanksgiving dinner, wanting to know precisely what he wanted for Christmas. Then it hit him. It was obvious.

He got distracted when Vincent nosed him in the leg, then flopped at his feet. Another idea sprung up, but Hugo paused. It would be greedy to ask for two things, when everyone else had gotten only one. He hated having to pick, but knew that he would have to.

Komos said, “Something’s on your mind, protector. Out with it.”

“I can’t decide between one or the other. I mean, to just pick one.”

“What are they?”

Hugo struggled to get it out. “You know, my friends are on another island, this place called Tawara in Kira-bass, something like that. But they need to get home. And I think it’s gonna be tough for them. So that’s the first thing. The other is, well…” and Hugo looked down at Vincent, who gave a few thumps of his brushy tail. A few grey hairs in the dog’s muzzle glinted in the torchlight. “Jacob did something to Richard Alpert, to make it so that he didn't get old. As long as Jacob was alive, that is. So, you know, dogs don't live that long. I thought, maybe, um, with Vincent…”

“That's not a gift which comes from me,” Komos said in a gentle voice. “You can do that for Vincent yourself.”

“I can?”

“Put your hands on him, and from the bottom of your heart, give him that gift. That's all there is to it.”

“I dunno. It didn't make Richard all that happy.” Hugo scratched Vincent behind the ears, and the dog’s tail started thumping again, hard.

“A dog doesn't have the cares of a man. A long span of years will not weigh on him. When you sail on, he will age and join you eventually on that other shore.”

Hugo knelt down and placed his hands on Vincent's stocky shoulders. “So, Vincent, you wanna do this? Instead of a few more short dog years, you're gonna go after me, not before. But it's up to you, dude.”

Vincent thumped his tail again, and his eyes shone with trust. “Whatever you say, boss.”

“It's more for us than you.” The truth was, one year of a hundred didn't matter to a dog, as long as he had his people. Vincent couldn't really say yes or no, any more than a child could. It was up to Hugo to take this momentous step for him. “We're a team, buddy. Nobody's gonna break up the A-team.”

Vincent licked Hugo's face a few times. Hugo stood up, a bit unsteady, not sure if he was supposed to feel anything or not. “So that's it? No sparks, no zaps, no magic rays?”

“It doesn't work that way,” Komos said. “Now, what is this other wish? Think hard, and state it carefully. For the greater the wisher, the more powerful the wish.”

Hugo paused. He remembered stories where a king wanted everything he touched turned to gold, then wound up his daughter as a metal statue. Or the angry farmer who wished a sausage onto his wife's nose. Wishes could go terribly wrong. Taking a deep breath, he said, “That my friends get
home. So Kate and Claire can get back to Aaron. And so that everyone else can, you know, just get on with their lives. Be where they need to be.” He didn't mention his other heart's desire, that at some point, somehow, they might come back. That he might see them again, even if it was just for a visit.

Pele stood by Komos's side. Komos gave her a long glance, then said, “That can be arranged, with some help.”

“I know exactly who to see about it,” Pele answered, though the stiff look on her face gave Hugo pause. Then Pele and Komos conferred, heads close together so that no one else could hear what they were saying. It made Hugo wonder just what he had asked for. What could make it so hard for the Ajira survivors to get back, that even Pele looked worried?

Pele laced her arm in Hugo's and gave it a squeeze. “Don’t worry about it, big man. This is between us gods.”

Hugo gave a small smile. "I guess even the gods have to reckon with Homeland Security."

"I'll handle it," she said, but the look on her face was hard.

Hints of purple dawn skirted around the treetops. The stars had already dimmed and shrunk back to their normal size. As Komos wandered among the crowd, distributing the rest of his gifts, Pele and Hugo strolled arm-in-arm to the moonlit surf. She leaned her head on his shoulder, as they listened to its endless thrumming song, and finally said, “You know, wishes come in groups of three, and you only spoke two.”

“Pele, with all you and everybody's done, I've got so much already.”

“Do you, now?”

“So you heard the last one, huh? Even though I didn't say anything.”

“Clear as a bell. Like I said, my mother likes that one, Claire. A lot.”

Hugo didn't want Pele to see the naked feeling on his face, but of course she did. Then a tiny flame of anger licked through him. “Not enough to keep the smoke thing from stealing her, though.”

Now it was Pele's turn to flush red. “It wasn't for lack of trying, big man. And who do you think helped keep her alive during those three years?”

“Sorry,” he said, anger turning to embarrassment.

“You couldn't have known. But don't worry, you can go see Claire and the rest of your friends, at least after I keep up my end and get them where they need to be.”

“How? I mean, Desmond has his boat now, but I can't just take off with him. I got stuff to do here.”

“Well, obviously. So just do what Jacob did.”

“What? What did Jacob do?”

“You saw him in your old country. Didn't you ever wonder how he got there?”

To be honest, Hugo hadn't.

“A Door on the Island leads to your old world. It will take you there and back again, swift as the wind. But remember, whenever you travel between worlds, the ferryman always demands a price.”
“What price?” Hugo said in a faint voice, trying to believe it, even though it sounded so incredible.

“You have three days on the other side,” Pele said. “That and no more. Any longer, and whatever devils plagued you before you came here will return seven-fold. You’re part of this world now, and your place is here.”

“Did that happen to Jacob?”

Pele sighed. “I don’t know, lover. As Rima told you, Jacob never knew us.”

“So Jacob was sitting on this Door all along.”

To the east, a faint pink smudge formed on the horizon. “We don’t have much time, lover. Soon as the sun’s edge appears, I’m gone. Listen to me, though. Whatever Jacob did, his time is through. What’s done is done.

“I’m going to ask one thing. Don’t think about it, just answer true. If your friend Claire came to find that her real home, her true home was back in that world you left, among her own people, and that she might choose to never return to this Island again, how would that make you feel?”

Sadness stabbed him at the thought. But answer true, Pele said, so here goes. “I want her to be happy, no matter what.”

As soon as he said it, dawn broke through the horizon on the eastern sea. Pele’s eyes glowed golden, and her hair flickered with real fire. Sparks shot from her fingertips, like at the party. “That’s a good answer, big man. The right one.”

Hiding thoughts from Pele did no good. “She might not even want to, I mean, especially if—”

Pele put a finger across his lips and smiled. “I promise, when I see my mother Haumea, I’ll ask. Meanwhile, you men on the Island, you’re just going to have to not bother the women in that one special way till we figure it out.”

“I don’t think that’s gonna be a problem.” Not for him, anyway. And Rose was too old to have a child. As for younger women on the Island, if there even were any, he’d just have to cross that bridge when he came to it. Hopefully, like another bridge years earlier, it would hold him, and the rest of the women on the Island too. “Thanks, Pele. Thanks for everything.”

She gave one last look over towards the rising sun. “Time flies, lover. How about you kiss me good-bye now?”

He pulled her towards him, and while her lips tasted more of farewell than passion, the kiss burned him all the same. Then one more thing came to him. “Pele, wait a minute. Where is this Door, anyway?”

Dawn broke, like none he had ever seen on the Island. Before Pele could answer, she vanished from his arms in a fiery burst of pink and gold. Blinded, Hugo sank to his knees as the light passed around and through him. Then, mercifully, everything faded into cool darkness.

(continued)
You can read some additional notes on Chapter 12 on my Dreamwidth.
Word of the neighborhood card party at the Bikenibeu Lodge got around, and the next evening, a few men showed up with more beer and additional sets of cards. Mr. Maleaua said they could use his patio to play, but he'd better get a cut of the winnings.

“It probably won't be enough to pay off the police,” Mr. Maleaua remarked to Sawyer. Sawyer grunted in agreement. He still stinging about being snookered, but had nothing to wager, no way to win back some of his losses.

“Eventually they'll close us down,” Mr. Maleaua went on. “But let today worry about today, and tomorrow about tomorrow.”

Since the crowds were smaller and the faces friendlier, Kate managed to get a seat at the table. Dejectedly, Sawyer joined Claire on a pandamus mat in a corner of the patio far from the poker table, and sized her up out of the corner of his eye.

To look at her, you almost couldn't believe that she had driven an ax into a man's sternum, then held a knife to Kate's throat. Her short blonde hair framed her face with a fluffy halo. Except for the somber lines around her mouth, she looked soft, kittenish almost. A kitten with claws.

“So why aren't you in?” Claire said.

“Cause I'm tapped out, sweetheart. Got nothing but this bottle of whiskey, and I ain't bettin' it.” He offered the short, flat bottle to Claire. “Want a swig?”

She scrutinized the label. “'Tasmanian Devil'? Are they kidding?”

“I don't care about the name, Goldilocks. I just drink it.”

Claire took a long swallow. “It's been over four years since I had a drink, Sawyer. It tastes pretty good.”

“Four years?”

“I fell pregnant, you know. And then, boom, the Island.”

“There was that nasty old Dharma beer Hugo found.”

“Aaron was a bit young for underage drinking.”

An awkward silence fell on them, and Sawyer's easy, confident mask started to slip. He was going to have to say it. Just a few more moments, though, because with each swig it got easier, as the liquor laid a coating of pleasurable insulation over him and gave him a little more courage.

Well, no time like the present. “Claire, I'm real sorry. 'Bout leaving you, I mean.”

She gave him an offhand look, as if she'd been expecting this for some time. “It's okay, Sawyer. I hurt Kate. You couldn't stand for that.”

“No, it's just—”

Claire leaned against the concrete wall, her shoulders hunched. “Sawyer, I killed people.”
He took another drink, then turned to her, the misery in his eyes matching her own. “I did, too. Like that Tom guy.”

“Tom?”

“Ben's right-hand man.”


Sawyer's small, bitter laugh didn't reach his eyes. “Tom was Juliet's friend, even if I didn't know it then. There he was, kneelin' on the ground right in front of me, Hugo beggin' me not to, and I shot him in cold blood.”

“You were scared. I did a lot when I was scared.”

Without the soft alcoholic cocoon, he wouldn't be able to talk about this at all. “Nah, Claire, it wasn't just that. Later, when Jules told me how close they'd been, I started feeling sorry for what I done. Juliet could sound just like a school-marm when she wanted to, but mostly she just laid it out in that calm voice, cool as her blue eyes. She had that way about her, of bringin' out the truth. She sure brought it out in me.”

Claire took the bottle from him and downed another one. “We all have things we don't tell people. And then, when we do——”

“When we do, it either breaks us to pieces, or builds us up. Juliet, she built me up. But now——”

He folded his arms over his knees, and rested his head on them. He could feel Claire watching him as he shook with silent tears. Thank God she didn't touch him, because any sign of pity would have sent him over the razor-thin edge into rage. When he raised his head, eyes wet, Claire's impassive face told him that she knew all about that kind of crying.

Over by breezeway, the poker game went on. Finally, the last players left standing were Kate, Miles, Frank and Mr. Maleaua. Frank was losing, and groaning loudly about it. He was about to throw in his cards when Mr. Maleaua said, “I got an idea, Frank. You can bet your labor. Come out fishing with me tomorrow.”

“You don't have to bet me for that,” Frank answered. “I'd go in a heartbeat. You got swordfish out here ten feet long, and I'd love to catch one of those babies.”

“What about you, Sawyer?” Miles called over. “You wanna go fishing tomorrow?”

“Why the hell not? But I'm still sitting this one out.”

Frank said, “Guess that keeps me in the game, then.”

Kate was losing one hand after another. She slid a couple tubes of mascara over to the pile of coins and Australian dollars.

“We're not going to have any make-up left,” Claire remarked.

Sawyer's blurred vision made the Tasmanian devil's teeth look sharper, and gave it a cunning expression. He took a long, deep drink, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “It was the damnedest thing, Claire.”

“What was?”
The evening was cool, but not cool enough to account for the shiver that went through him. “When she died. Dharma was building the Swan Station, our Hatch. That's where it happened. There was this chain whippin' around, and I swear to God, that thing leaped up at her mad as a snake, wrapped around her, and dragged her into that hole. It was like it had it in for her. Damn, you prob'ly think I'm drunk.”

She looked at him askance. Even so, she said, “I'd believe you even if I was sober.”

“All of us millin' and runnin' around, but she was the one it grabbed—” Sawyer's voice broke.

A thick cloud of moths and other bugs surrounded the single kerosene lamp which illuminated the card tables, but Claire and Sawyer rested in almost complete darkness.

“I'm sorry she's gone, Sawyer.”

“She's gone.”

“Me too, sweetheart.”

Now she did touch him, laying her hand on his arm. He lowered his head onto her shoulder as they took turns from the bottle, their throats raw from the spirits which went down like drain cleaner.

Finally, Claire said, “What are you going to do? I mean, if we ever get out of here.”

Sawyer straightened up, and for the first time, fear trickled through him like cold water. “Don't have a plan. Stay one step ahead of the paparazzi and the sheriff.”

“Are you, um, wanted?”

“Nope. But I bet somebody is,” and he pointed the bottle over at Kate, who had managed to win some lipstick and mascara back from Mr. Maleaua. “What about you, Mamacita?”

“I don't know. Do you have any family?”

The future yawned open, black and unknown, but he tried to sound casual. “I got people all over central Alabama. Some of 'em wrote me when I was in the joint, but that stopped before long. Then there was the plane crash. Now they prob'ly think I'm dead. Miles and Frank been talking 'bout going to Portland with Richard. That doesn't suit me on the first consideration, but I'm willin' to do just about anything to get out of here.”

It was impossible to read her expression in the dark. “So don't go to Portland. When we get back, you can live with us.”

Sawyer looked over to Kate, who had folded her cards and was out of the game. The corners of his mouth twitched. “You run that by Kate? 'Cause I'm thinking she's likely to say no.”

Claire sat silently as a cat waiting beside a mouse-hole. It was uncanny when she did that, because she just melted into the shadows in their little corner of the courtyard. Must have been all her years in the jungle.

Finally she said, “We've all had terrible blows.”

He flinched. He couldn't help it. “I don't got much left inside of me, Claire. I'm like an empty canteen, everything already poured out onto the desert sand.”

“That's exactly why we should stick together.”

Something bubbled to the surface, slowed and thickened by the drink. It was too far-fetched to even
entertain, and he didn't want to say anything at first. But like the old song said, he was drinking single, seeing double, and that tended to make his mouth run triple-time. “You puttin' the moves on me, sweetheart?”

Claire smiled, bright and beautiful.

The last time Sawyer had seen her smile like that was when she had hugged Hugo, back at Smokey-Locke's camp. No wonder Hugo had been sweet on her, and probably still was. If he was alive, that is, and all of a sudden Sawyer felt very empty. Jules and Hugo both. That would almost be too much to take.

When Claire let out a hoot of laughter. Kate and Frank glanced over to see what was what. Claire leaned in and said, “Oh, my God, Sawyer, no. No wonder you drive Kate crazy—”

“What's Kate got to do with it?” Her smile was infectious, though, and it loosened some of the tightness in his chest.

“It has to do with all of us. We all need each other. I need you, Sawyer.”

Some of the old reflexive stubbornness came back. “Well, I don't need nobody.”

Claire rolled her eyes at him, and he could almost hear them rattle like blue marbles in the ivory sockets of her skull. Only two kinds of women could give you that look. One kind was your momma or your sister. The second was the kind who had been yours for so long, that she wasn't afraid to tell you exactly what kind of idiot you were.

Sometimes Jules used to look at him in exactly that way.

Ignoring his set, stubborn face, Claire said, “Look, I know we have no idea what we're going to run into. It's more than just us living in a house together, too. We've all been through terrible things—”

“Sweetheart, we'll be lucky to stay out of jail.”

“Maybe.”

She was as bull-headed as Hugo when she wanted to be. No wonder she survived in the jungle all those years. He raised the bottle again, even though there was little comfort or courage at the bottom, and the only forgiveness you would ever find there was that which you gave yourself.

The game was over, so Kate and Richard came over to join them. Kate said to Claire, “Don't try to drink him under the table. I've tried.”

Sawyer snorted. “You didn't do nothing of the sort. You and me, we were just playing a silly game. Come on, Ricky, let's kill this one dead before calling it a night.”

“I'm good, Sawyer. Thanks anyway.”

Kate was flushed with expectation. “Richard's company, they've arranging a house for us. In Topanga Canyon. That's in L.A.”

Sawyer said to Richard, “Well, Inigo Montoya, don't you work fast.” He started to sing, slurred and off-key, “Please come to LA, but she said no—”

Claire put a firm hand on his knee. “Look, I'm going to ask her right now.”

“Ask me what?” Kate gave both Sawyer and Claire sharp looks.
“You go right ahead.” It took a good whiskey soaking to let Sawyer know how genuinely alone he was. He sure as hell wasn't going to follow Cassidy around, begging for a few scraps of time with a child who probably didn't know he was alive. His home town of Jasper felt even more remote than the Island.

The old saying went, “In vino, veritas,” but the cold reality was that whiskey truths were carved into your back in blood.

Kate, Claire, and Richard were talking softly to each other now. Sawyer let the whiskey current carry him back to his own blood truth, which he wore etched into his skin like a ragged wound.

His crime had been wanting to stay in Dharmaville, with Horace's group, and persuading Jules to do the same.

It's not like she jumped into bed with him at once, either. That had taken months, and she'd made the first move anyway. No, the real seduction had taken all of his skills and charm, honed with years of practice at getting women to do what he wanted. The “mark” in this case, though, was Horace Goodspeed.

Amy Kennedy, too. Amy was recently widowed and lonely, so it made sense for Juliet to move in with her. Juliet was kind and sympathetic, too, always ready to lend an ear or soft shoulder to cry on.

Jim, as he was known then, became friends with Amy as well. Not that he seduced Amy in the usual way or anything. Jim wasn't stupid. For one thing, Amy was like Claire, more platonic friend than a potential lover. For another, he knew better than to step in between two women who'd just started setting up house. Especially when the bull goose of the barnyard had his eye on one of them.

Also, Jim (as he began to think of himself, getting deeper into the role than for any other con he'd staged) didn't know what exactly had been going on with Horace, Paul, and Amy before Paul bought the farm from the Others. But he sure knew what he saw with his own eyes, how Horace looked around corners at Amy.

It didn't take long, either. Five months after Jim and his friends walked into the Dharma Initiative village, Horace and Amy got married, mostly due to the surreptitious urgings, double-dealing, and tale-bearing of Jim LaFleur. At that point, Jim knew that his position in the Dharma Initiative was secure.

What he hadn't counted on was how deeply Amy's marriage had devastated Juliet. At Horace and Amy's wedding reception, Juliet downed an entire bottle of Dharma white-label Chardonnay, then sobbed into Jim's chest that it was just like getting ripped away from Rachel all over again. She had so much trouble making women friends. Women hated her, they never wanted to take time to know her. Amy was the first real friend she'd had in years. And now she was gone.

Jim told her that Amy had just moved literally two doors down, from their yellow bungalow to Horace's almost-identical one. That only made Juliet sob harder.

It was that night, too, when Jim heard the story of how Juliet had arrived on the Island. And that night, they became lovers for the first time. Afterwards, the four of them just fell together naturally: Horace and Amy, Jim and Jules, famous friends all.

Horace announced that Jim's probationary period was over. Their chief of security had been lost in that unfortunate incident with the Others (but Jim saw the look in Horace's eyes; it might have been
unfortunate, yes, but Horace looked a little too self-satisfied when he said it.) Phil Condon had been coasting along in the job of Interim Head of Security, but now it was time to find someone permanent. Jim LaFleur, he's our man.

Maybe that was part of his crime, too, Sawyer thought. Because Amy had never really gotten over Paul. Worse, it wasn't really Horace who'd won her at all, and on some level Horace knew that. In fact, Horace was a lot like Hugo in that regard, at least how Hugo had been before they came back to the Island for the second time. As Sawyer recollected, he had to kind of light a bomb under Hugo, too, just to get him to move on a woman.

Sawyer sighed, eyes closed. Home, Claire had said. Where's your home? Home was a little yellow villa with a purple clematis vine snaking up the back porch, where new potatoes from the garden and roasted chicken awaited him when he came home from the security station. Where a gorgeous, graceful woman welcomed him in with the sweetest of smiles, her work uniform already washed and hanging on the line.

It was his home, or had been. That was thirty years and a death ago. No one's fault, neither. Call it fate, karma, or the wrath of God: any way you look at it, he was a long way from home, the only one he'd known for a very long time.

Sawyer snapped out of the whiskey fog when Kate said, “Well, Richard, if you think it'll help—”

“It's an excellent idea, Kate. Dan Norton already brought it up to me, that the more consolidation we have, the easier it'll be to keep things out of the tabloids.” Then Richard said to Sawyer, “Frank and Miles are coming with me to Portland. You in, or is it going to be LA?”

“LA ain't up to me, Zorro,” Sawyer said.

When Claire pulled herself to her feet, she tilted sideways, like she'd just gotten off of a carnival ride. Kate reached out to steady her. “Goddamn it, Sawyer, how much did you give her to drink?”

“What? You're blaming me? She barely had a couple shots.”

Kate held him accountable anyway, with her disgusted look. “Come on, honey, let's get you to bed.”

“I'm all right,” Claire said. “I can walk, really.”

Richard supported Claire from the other side. “Kate, it sounds like you and Sawyer need to talk. I'll take Claire to your room.”

One thing with Sawyer, Kate reflected. No matter how drunk she thought he was, he always surprised her. This time was no exception.

“Come on, Kate. I got to stretch my legs. Why don't we go have a look at the land-fill out back?”

It had rained most of the afternoon, and the night-time air smelled almost fresh. The fifth of whiskey was practically empty, but Sawyer handed it to Kate anyway. She drained it and stuck the empty into her back jeans pocket, not wanting to dump it onto the beach.

Sawyer scuffed about in the flat sand. “So, what'd you think of Missy Claire's idea?”
She looked up, taken aback by the flat despair and resignation in his voice. “She wants us to all be together, like back on the beach. I think the thought makes her feel secure. Safe. She's been alone for so long.”

“Not so alone as all that, from what I heard.”

“It's like having the ex-boyfriend from hell.”

“Who just happens to be conveniently dead.”

“That was his plan, Sawyer. To get into Locke's body, and then—”

“Did he?” Sawyer's fists were clenched. “I swear, I'll dig up that son-of-a-bitch so you can shoot him all over again, if—”

“She's says she's okay, and I believe her. He never touched her, not in that way at least.”

“Well, that's one thing.”

Since Sawyer sounded more like himself, less dejected, Kate let a bit of her own fear seep through. “I got to admit, this is going to be huge. Going back to L.A, moving Aaron to someplace new. The two of them getting re-acquainted. Sawyer, it's overwhelming. How am I going to do this?”

“How do you eat an elephant, Freckles?”

“I don't know, trunk first?”

“One bite at a time.”

That was just like him to make light, but with a kernel of wisdom buried there under the mint julep and magnolia. Suddenly Kate knew how Claire felt. Everything was upside-down, and none of them knew where they were going, or what was going to happen. All their planning was like children whistling in the dark, acting brave, trying to keep the fear at bay.

Like Jack, with his counting to five. But this wasn't screaming-monkey fear. This slow, cold anxiety made Kate feel tied down, paralyzed even. It was like being in jail all over again.

Sawyer's voice brought her back to herself. “Kate, you and Claire, you're gonna be fine. Claire's momma's gonna help you out. Hell, she's had a lot of time to bond with Aaron already.”

The moon had risen fully now. Up and down the flat beach, people had lit fires and torches. Against her will, against her better judgment, it reminded Kate of the beach on the Island, even though it looked and sounded nothing like it.

“You know, about what Claire and Richard said—”

“Kate, I get it. You didn't bring up ex-boyfriends from hell for no reason. Honestly, I got no desire to join the stag party on the Portland train. That's my problem, not yours.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“I got to admit, when Missy Claire brought it up there, it sounded like a plan. Guess I felt like I owed her, after losing her.”

“Sawyer, she wasn't a package. Anyway, if you would let me get a word in, I agree. We should stick together.” She almost laughed at Sawyer's loose, slack jaw.
“Either I ain't had enough whiskey, or I've had too much. 'Cause I just heard you say I could join the hen party in LA. Assuming the government lets us.”

The same fear would eat Kate whole, if she let it. Which wasn't often. “Look, maybe this is all of us just making up a story to not lose hope. But Richard says it's a big house on a private road, with a bunch of cabins—”

“When the hell did Richard work all this out?”

“He's been living in our room—”

“That's just 'cause he can't stand the manly smell of unwashed socks.”

Maybe it was because of the whiskey, or because they'd gotten away from the motel for awhile, but Sawyer looked more energetic. She felt a bit brighter herself, too. “That phone's practically cleaved to his ear because he's trying to help us.”

“Help himself too, don't forget.”

Oh, Sawyer could be so dense sometimes. Kate grabbed his arm and spun him around. “What do I have to do, hit you with a brick? I've been trying to tell you that I think Claire's right. All of us, we split up too much over the years.” The words caught in her throat a little. “We've already lost so much. So many people.”

He looked at her full-on now, and even though he blinked back tears, he gave her a faint smile. “When you get what you want, Freckles, stop talking.”

That flustered her. Maybe she was overstating things. Maybe she was reading something into the situation that wasn't there. Even so, she felt compelled to state it up front. “Just so you understand, it's not that kind of invitation.”

His startled expression made her flush, and she hoped he didn't see it in the moonlight. “Freckles, I get it. For you, this whole going-back-to-the-Island thing was about Claire and Aaron. Let me ask you this straight up. If this is what Claire wants, you think it's gonna help her? Is it gonna help Aaron? 'Cause if it does, I'm in. But only if you are, too.”

He suddenly sounded cold sober, full of responsibility and concern. She couldn't meet his eyes. She had thrown down an ultimatum that wasn't even necessary. “I'm all the way in, Sawyer.”

They stood an arm's-length apart, not touching, with the atoll spread out all around them. To Kate, it seemed as if they were being crushed into flatness by the overarching weight of the sky. The moment seemed to go on a long time. She felt stripped bare, not naked like she had been when they had slept together all those years ago, but stripped of everything that she had built up since.

Stripped of Jack. Of her warm, comfortable home. Of any security or assurance, as they sat here immobilized in this near-endless waiting. Stripped of everything she had been, once was.

And so was he.

Kate was saved from following this line further when Mr. Maleaua appeared from the back of the lodge. He threaded his way towards them through the scraggly palms, kicking up sand as he went. “I thought you two might have run away.”

“Where we gonna go, Zippy?” Sawyer said.
“James—” Kate said in warning.

If he got the jibe, Mr. Maleaua didn't respond. “My wife, she just put Nei Claire to bed—”

“James, see, I told you.”

“Oh, no, it's not the drink,” Mr. Maleaua said in a helpful voice. “Seems like Nei Claire might have a touch of fever. Nothing to worry about. It happens all the time around here.”

“Fever?” Kate repeated. The clay-like anxiety vanished, shoved aside by panic. By reflex, Kate began to count inside: one... two... three. She and Sawyer sprinted ahead of Mr. Maleaua as they all hurried back to the lodge.

(continued)
The morning after that strange party, Hugo woke to the sound of gulls fighting over a crab. His green-gold robe was gone, and once more he wore an old t-shirt, and cargo shorts stiff with salt and sand. Rose and Bernard sat together in front of their shelter, arms wrapped around each other. Ben had already made a fire, and sipped from a metal cup, wearing a thoughtful expression.

The bushes rustled and Desmond emerged, buttoning his jean shorts.

“How's your head, dude?” said Hugo.

“You won't believe this, mate, but it's clear as a bell.”

Ben passed out tea, and everyone clustered around Hugo.

He just had to check, to make sure. “Guys? Last night. The party, the people with animal heads. Vincent talking. The Jolly Green Giant with his box of presents. That all… happened, right? It was real?”

Rose and Bernard looked serious and nodded. Ben just gave a small smile, one which actually warmed his eyes.

Desmond, though, broke out in a guffaw. “Aye, brother, that was most definitely real.”

“You were all there, too. It wasn't just me.”

Rose stood up, her face still sober. “Look inside, Hurley. I think you can tell for yourself what's real and what's not.”

Hugo could still smell the jasmine, taste the garlic-seasoned pork, see Pele's flame-flickering hair. If being protector of the Island brought nothing else but this sweet, unshaken certainty, that would be enough. More than enough, in fact.

As they drank their tea, Hugo said to Ben, “You know the Ajira flight that Claire and Kate and everybody were on? Well, last night Pele acted like it was going to be hard for them to get back home.”

“I'm not surprised. You just don't stroll into the United States, Hugo, with no passports or identification.”

“People do all the time, dude. South of the border, anyway. And we didn't need any of that stuff when we came back on the Searcher.”

“Well, maybe it will work that way for them.”

Hugo continued to test the waters. “It's just that Pele looked worried.”

“You're forgetting, Hugo, that they have Richard with them. He's not just some colorful castaway. He's vice president of Mittelos Bioscience Corporation, a medical research think-tank which has been around for over sixty years. The big secret about Mittelos is that besides the medical doctors and scientists, there lies a core of lawyers and accountants which does nothing but keep the IRS happy and the world off our backs.”

"Penny talked about Mittelos,” said Desmond. "Her father kept trying to buy it by hook or by crook,
but never managed. So that was Richard's company."

"Not just Richard's," Ben answered. "All of ours. All of Jacob's people's. I'm not sure how we here on this Island can help them. But I know Richard, and I trust him. What we can do is focus on the task at hand here."

"Speaking of which," Bernard said. "Hugo, you think after all these years, that old van will still run?"

"No reason it shouldn't." He didn't know how he knew that unless it was his hand on the key, the VW bus wasn't going anywhere. He stretched up to his full height. "Time to catch our ride. Thanks, Ben, the tea was good. Now for some valet parking."
The blue Volkswagen microbus sat at the edge of the greenwood. Hugo crawled into the driver's seat, with no doubt in his mind that it was going to start right away. It did, on the first crank. The fuel gauge pointed to "E," but that didn't mean anything. It had probably been broken back when Dharmaville was still booming. Old VW Beetles and buses always had busted gauges.

Hugo coasted in low gear to Rose and Bernard, who stood by piles of belongings from their old house, with a few from the beach camp besides. Rose scowled at the litter of papers and beer cans which covered the van's floorboards.

"Sorry it's such a mess inside," Hugo said. "I didn't get a chance to clean it out."

Ben came over to peek in. "Rose, if you can bear the untidiness, I'd like to ask you and Hugo not to throw anything away from the bus. When we get to the Barracks, I'll take care of it. But for now, not a scrap, OK?"

"I ride in that, I'm going to have to hose myself down afterwards."

"Look," said Hugo. "We can kinda just lay our stuff on top of it." Then he turned to Ben. "This is part of your notebook thing, isn't it? You know, get all the papers together, write a history of the Island?"

"That's right, Hugo."

"Well, let's load her up then. But leave some stuff for anybody else who might come by. Because I don't think we're gonna need much, anyway."

Ben said, "That's what I tried to tell them. I was up at the Barracks just recently. The water was even on."

"Running water?" Rose said, incredulous. "Showers?"

"Worst case, you'll get a cold one. Best case, there'll still be electricity and the water heaters will work."

"So what else is up there?" Bernard asked.

Ben's small chuckle had the same quality a crab opening its claws. "There wasn't really time to do a detailed inventory."

Hugo gave Ben a long, searching look, then decided to let it pass.

"Excuse me," Ben said. "Let me get the books."
“I'll give you a hand,” Hugo said.

There were three suitcases’ worth. Ben gave a dismissive wave at the girlie magazines discarded on the tent floor. "I didn't bother with those."

Hugo turned a little pink. "Sawyer's."

"Well, James had quality taste in two things, at least. Books and women."

Rose peered around Hugo into Sawyer's old tent. "We can do a book club later. Just leave those magazines here."

Sometimes Rose really reminded Hugo of his mom. After the van was loaded, a sudden inspiration hit him. "Ben, you got a pencil and paper?"

Ben found some. Using the suitcases loaded in the van's trunk as a makeshift desk, Hugo began to write.

“What's that for?” Ben asked, looking over Hugo's shoulder.

“It's a sign, dude. For anybody else who might come by.”

"Excellent idea, Hugo. Just roll out the red carpet for any of Widmore's people that might be roaming around. I'm sure they'll be willing to return the hospitality."

"Don't worry so much, Ben,” Hugo said, still writing.

“Hurley, he has a point,” Desmond remarked, as he buckled on his life jacket.

“Widmore was here 'cause Jacob wanted him here. So I'm not gonna sweat it.” Writing finished, Hugo headed for the center of the beach camp, followed by Bernard.

Hugo fixed his sign to a piece of driftwood, then hammered it into the ground with a rock. When done, Hugo turned to Bernard with a flourish and said, “What do you think?”

The sign read:

“This is the Beach Camp. You can live in the shelters. There is fresh water a mile or so in land. Don't bother the caves though. To get there just follow the path by the big palm tree that has a little tree growing out of it. Or a tarp in a box works good for holding rain water too. Down the beach to the left there is a garden with lots of vegetables. Take what you need. The fishing is good but don't get stung by a sea urchin. Up the beach is our graveyard, we call it Boone Hill. Please respect the dead.

Good luck. - Hugo Reyes."

“That won't last a day in the wind and rain,” Bernard remarked.

“Yeah, it will.” Hugo placed his hand on the paper, brows furrowed in concentration. If it worked for Richard Alpert and Vincent, why wouldn't it work for his sign? A man or a dog got old, while a piece of paper fell apart in the weather. Hugo thought hard at it, telling it to stay fresh, so that people could read it for a long time. As with Vincent, he didn't feel anything different. The paper fluttered in the ocean breeze. It looked the same, but Hugo knew that it had changed.

Desmond stood in the surf, ready to swim out to the Elizabeth. “So, mates, see you on the other side. Of the Island, I mean.”
"Don't go to the Pala Ferry dock," Ben said. "Use the other one just to the north-east, up by the mouth of the delta. The Barracks are a mile and a half inland. Just follow the path by the river. That's where we'll be."

"And don't disappear for two weeks, either,” Hugo added.

"Aye, aye," Desmond said, shaking hands all around. “I've sailed rings around this Island so many times, I doubt I'll get lost.” He slid into the waves, and swam for the Elizabeth with strong, practiced strokes.

They watched from the shoreline until Desmond's faint, dark shape climbed on board. The Elizabeth caught a fair easterly wind, then picked up speed for her short journey around the Island.

The VW micro-bus was fully loaded now. Hugo climbed into the driver's seat, responsibility hanging over his shoulders like a mantle. Only now was he aware that he was lightly shaking.

Ben rode shotgun, with Rose and Bernard in the rear seat. Bernard leaned over to put a steadying hand on Hugo's shoulder. “You ready?”

"The bus is leaving," Hugo announced. "Everybody buckle up."

“I don't think this jalopy even has any seat belts,” said Rose.

"Where's the dog?" Bernard asked.

Everyone glanced up and down the long stretch of beach, but Vincent was nowhere to be seen. Hugo stuck his head out and called his name two, three times. Nothing.

"He'll turn up," Rose said. "He always does."

“I wonder if he'll still talk?” Hugo mused.

“I doubt it,” answered Rose.

Hugo shrugged as he tied back his long hair, then rolled up his shirt sleeves to the shoulders. After last night, nothing much would surprise him.

Once again, the bus started on the first crank. The engine sounded weird, as it vibrated with a pitch far higher than any Volkswagen engine should have. Just as parents can lay their hands across a child's forehead and know if the child has a fever, Hugo was pretty sure this would be the van's last trip. The engine had coughed out its final crank, and when the Dharma bus's journey was done, it would never move again.

Never mind. It would get them where they needed to go.

* * * * * * * *

They had been on the road for about an hour, when the Dharma van first jolted hard to the right, then twisted sharply to the left. After the wild side-to-side lurch, Rose cried out that they were going to crash if Hugo wasn't careful. Hugo dialed it down to walking speed as the thick jungle opened up onto the wide grassland known as the Mesa.

The bus rolled on past Hugo's golf course, the site of the First and Hopefully-Last Island Open, where three kerchiefs tied to poles had served as putting green flags. Bright-colored shawls raised as banners still streamed in the breeze.
“Well, well,” Bernard said. “The golf course.”

Ben said, “When we heard about this, at first we didn't believe it.”

“You mean, you didn't sneak down and play a few rounds?” said Bernard.

Ben just rolled his eyes.

Hugo brought the bus to an idle. From the back seat, Rose called out in a voice only slightly querulous, "What's the matter, honey? Don't tell me there's something wrong with this jalopy."

"Nah, it's cool. If it's OK with you, you mind if I get out for a minute? This place just has a lot of good memories."

“Indeed it does,” said Bernard, opening the rear passenger door. Ben followed, too.

Long ago, Hugo had taken soda cans from the Oceanic 815 wreckage, bent down the edges so no one would get cut, and buried the cans in the ground to serve as the holes. Well, one was still here, and amazingly enough, there was a golf ball inside it.

"So, Hugo, what was the par for this hole?" Ben asked.

"Three, but it was more like seven. Not that we ever really made a rule about it. Jack was the only one who actually kept score."

"Which surprised no one,” Bernard said in a dry tone.

Hugo walked around the sorry excuse for a fairway. He had borrowed Locke's machete to make it, swinging the machete back and forth like a scythe until the sun drenched him in sweat and his arms ached. By high noon he'd chopped out a narrow fairway. The putting green, though, well, you couldn't do much about that.

Not that anyone cared. They had no reason to be so happy then, but they were. Sure, people had died in horrible ways, but in those first few weeks, the survivors felt lucky to be alive. There was still hope of rescue. Claire hadn't been kidnapped yet. Ethan hadn't started murdering people. It had been frightening, but exhilarating, too. A "tabula rasa," Jack had called it. A blank slate. A fresh start.

The First Island Open had been fun. Jack played to win; he always had to win, no matter what. Charlie hadn't really paid attention to the game, but instead clowned around, yelled silly things from the sidelines. He played grab-ass with Hugo from behind whenever Hugo tried to tee off.

This tall guy with the coke-bottle glasses, Sullivan, who always walked around with a long face, had started laughing and telling Hugo about his job. Based in Minneapolis, he distributed what he called "adult novelties" to mall stores all across the Midwest. Forty years old, Sullivan said, and he was still embarrassed to tell his mom what he did for a living. And she was always after him to get a girlfriend.

“Are you sure we don't have the same mom?” Hugo had joked, and for the first time Sullivan cracked a wide grin.

Sullivan had been in Sydney to hook up with a girl he'd met on the Internet. When she didn't show, he moped around the poolside at his hotel for a day, then caught an early flight back to Minneapolis, connecting in LA. He had disappeared from the beach camp right about the time Kathy and her friends had.
"Penny for your thoughts?" Ben asked Hugo.

"So, you guys never played golf up in Otherton?"

"Golf wasn't exactly our sport. But there might be a set of clubs around somewhere, who knows?"

"It's fun, dude. Relaxing. Hard to believe you weren't tempted, not even once."

Ben wiped his brow in the fast-warming afternoon sun. "I seem to recall that Winston Churchill called it 'a good walk spoiled.' Not that there's a lot of walking on this course."

"Hey, give me a break. You try to cut grass with a machete. This hole's probably a whole fifty yards."

Rose stuck her head out the rear window and shouted, "You boys ready to go yet?"

"Coming," Hugo said, breaking into a half-trot.

* * * * * * * *

The travelers continued on the last leg of their journey towards the Barracks. Hugo drove the Dharma bus in silence around a vast scooped-out ring of rock that looked like a mountain, but was instead the rim of a giant volcanic crater.

Directly up ahead a huge split in the side of the mountain appeared. The western sun left the Dharma bus cruising along in deep shadow, punctuated only by one massive, bright ray which poured forth like white lava through the crack. "This is it, Hugo," Ben said.

Hugo frowned in concentration. “Gotta wind our way through these boulders, man. Looks like the mountain was trying to shake itself apart.”

“Hope we can get through the pass,” said Bernard.

“No prob,” Hugo said. “Watch the master.” He deftly steered the van around large ragged blocks of basalt whose sharp edges gleamed like black fire where the sunlight hit them. The tires crunched over smaller stones as Hugo slowed down to a crawl. Sure, it was tricky, but it would have been terrifying had they been hanging around up here a few days ago. Some of those rocks were as big as the van itself, and something had thrown them around the way a kid knocks down blocks. Here and there shards of black rock had knocked over bushes or small trees.

The gap in the caldera's rim was tantalizingly close, but it seemed that the nearer they got, the slower their progress. The boulders lay about even more thickly now, and several times Hugo had to back up and try another way.

One final swerve around the largest pile of boulders, and they were almost through. On either side of them loomed the caldera's lip, thinner here than anywhere else. One more sharp turn, and the boulders receded behind them, as if they had never been.

Hugo stopped to look around before descending into the crater itself. Sure, it was a little steep, but nothing he couldn't handle. It would be an easy drive across the flats, for the tree cover was thin. Dead-set in the crater's center shone a pale-colored patch, a tree-bare island in the midst of a wide green sea. The light-colored buildings from this distance looked like a cluster of tiny specks.

“That's where we're headed," Hugo said.
Fresh breezes swept along the hillside. The blue sky was clear as a bell, the cotton-candy clouds so bright-white that they hurt your eyes to look at them. Best of all, the winds brought with them the excellent smells of burning wood, smoke, and sizzle.

Bernard pointed to the tiny clearing where the Barracks lay. From the center rose a thin, wispy column of pale grey smoke which wavered in the wind, pointing towards the Dharma bus. “Hugo, do you see that?”

Hugo put the van into first gear and crept carefully down the slope. “I see it, dude. And better yet, I smell it.”

“Yes, but smoke means there's someone down there.”

“Oh, sweet Lord,” said Rose. “I knew it.”

Hugo said, “Everybody chill, okay? We already figured we weren't the only people left on this Island. Anyway, Desmondo probably got there first, and he's firing up the grill.”

They drove on. At the pylons which marked off the perimeter of the sonic fence, Hugo stopped the van and turned to Ben. “You got some kind of code, right?”

“What the hell is this?” Bernard asked.

“Smoke alarm,” Hugo answered.

Ben got out of the van. “I've got the code. No problem.” He walked down to the first pylon that had a keypad built into it, but then came back, shaking his head. Clearly something unexpected had happened. “The power's off.”

“So what?” Hugo said. “I mean, this was to keep Smokey out, right? And Smokey's gone.”

“No, Hugo, you don't get it. The way the electrical grid is designed, the fence power doesn't go out, no matter what. It's the highest priority. If it's out, then power's out on the whole Island, everywhere. No more electricity.”

“We lived without electricity for three years,” Rose said from the back seat.

“Yes, Rose, I get that,” said Ben. “But our backups had backups. What I'm saying is that for the power to go off here, something had to break. Something really big.”

“There goes my hot shower,” said Rose.

Hot showers were the least of Hugo's worries. “So, it's like, safe to drive across there without frying our brains?”

“Yes, Hugo, it's safe.”

Hugo hesitated for a few seconds. It wasn't that he didn't believe Ben. In fact, without quite knowing how, Hugo had complete confidence that Ben was telling God's honest truth. Some things you just knew in your gut, and for Hugo, that was no longer just a figure of speech. A little coal of warmth glowed inside his midsection, a small signal fire which said that all was well.

Problem was, what if Ben was honest but mistaken? Foaming at the mouth like a rabid dog, blood running out of your ears... that could wreck your afternoon.

Hugo got out of the van and said, “Wait here, guys.” He put his hand on the concrete pylon, trying to
feel or listen for something, anything. But the pylon was cold, and not just to the touch. Along the many miles of the sonic fence perimeter, Hugo felt nothing. No electricity moved through the sonic fence. It was kaputski.

Again, Hugo was seized by self-doubt. “I think it's turned off, guys. But I'm not sure.”

“You can tell that?” Rose said.

“I think so.” But he stood still anyway, paralyzed with indecision. All it took was one burst of over-confidence. One flash of arrogance. One careless footstep, and then people died because of him. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

Ben didn't wait for Hugo to come to a conclusion. With a quick, decisive movement he lunged towards the pylons.

“Ben!” Hugo lurched after Ben, but it was too late.

Ben darted between the pylons and stood on the other side, facing the bowl-like field which swept out in a gentle downward slope to the Dharma village. He closed his eyes as if waiting for a hammer blow of agony to descend. Nothing happened.

Ben drew in a long breath, faced the van, and raised his arms in a beckoning gesture. “Welcome to the Barracks.”

“Dude, you about gave me a coronary,” Hugo said.

“And the rest of us, too,” said Rose.

Hugo inched the van forward. “Okay, guys, here goes nothing.”

No one got zapped by lightning bolts. High clouds still drifted across the china-blue sky, and a brief burst of wind made the smell of cooking meat even stronger.

After the van rolled safely across the perimeter, Ben climbed back in. As the van ambled down the hill to the small village below, Hugo said, “The Barracks, that sounds so, you know, seventies. How about we call it 'New Otherton'?”

“I guess we're all Others on this bus,” Bernard remarked.

“You're the boss,” Ben said. "New Otherton it is.”

(continued)
What Happened to Claire

As Kate and Sawyer followed Mr. Maleaua back to the motel, Kate clung to Sawyer's hand the whole way. Together they stumbled over the sand, dodging the ever-present trash and debris strewn across the beach.

Kate hated how helpless she felt when someone got sick or injured. That was one reason why Jack had made her feel so safe, reassuring her that if someone fell ill, or had a horrible gaping wound, Jack could fix it. He thought he could fix everything, even when he couldn't. While some might call that a flaw, Kate had appreciated that about him, because it held the terror at bay.

Holding on to Sawyer was different. She was under no illusion that he could fix a single solitary thing, especially not some tropical disease. But it was good to have a hand to hold amid the fear. By the time Kate reached her and Claire's room, some of the panic had receded.

Mrs. Maleaua was by the bedside, laying cloths soaked in ice-water across Claire's forehead and wrists. Claire called out in a tired, slurred voice, “Tell her she's making a fuss, Kate.”

“Claire, honey—”

“Maybe Nei Claire gets lucky,” Mrs. Maleaua said. “Little rest, keep her temperature down, no more party-fun for a few nights. I've seen people throw it off.”

“Throw it off? Throw what off? Should we call a doctor?” Claire's forehead and wrists were cold from the icy compresses, so Kate laid her hand across Claire's chest. It felt warm, but everything around them was. Even Mrs. Maleaua's flushed face was beaded with perspiration.

“I don't suppose you all would have a thermometer.” Even though Sawyer's voice was relaxed, his shoulders were tense.

Mrs. Maleaua shook her head. “Sorry. It broke last year, and we never got a new one.”

Kate let out a long, exasperated sigh.

On the bed, Claire stirred, pushing the wet cloth off her forehead. As she rolled over, the rest slipped to the floor. She pulled the thin pillow over her head, while her legs kicked a few times, as if she were having spasms.

“Just let her sleep it off,” Mrs. Maleaua said. “Maybe she'll be better in the morning.”

After Mrs. Maleaua left, Kate slumped to the floor, head in her hands.

“Come on, Kate,” Sawyer said, low and urgent. “You got to pull it together.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Look, Claire's asleep. You want me to, um—”

“Yes,” she said. Kate couldn't explain it, but it was as if something hovered over Claire, something unpredictable and frightening. All at once, Kate very much wanted Sawyer to stay. “Just for a while, okay?”

“You got it, Freckles.” He leaned against the wall with his eyes closed, light shaggy hair falling over his eyes.
Kate went to the bed and gently took one of the pillows from under Claire's arm, when Claire started to mumble. “No, Samael, stop it... I won't do it again, really.”

“Sawyer,” Kate said, low and urgent.

At the panic in Kate's voice, Sawyer rushed to Claire's bed-side. Claire repeated “Samael” a few times, gave one more toss, then seemed to fall into a deep sleep.

“Samuel?” Kate said. “Who's that?”

Sawyer shook his head. “Who the hell knows. Maybe one of those kool-aid drinkers from the Temple who were always chasing her around. Come on, Kate, try to get some sleep. If I'm goin' fishing tomorrow, I sure got to.”

Side by side they bedded down on the pandamus mat. When Kate searched out his hand with her own, he gave it a firm squeeze, then didn't let go until she fell asleep.

* * * * * * * *

The next morning, Claire awoke to a pounding headache. Kate must have already gotten up, because she wasn't anywhere in the room.

Claire couldn't see the swelling on the back of her neck, but she could feel it, like a small insect walking across her skin. Fighting the urge to scratch only made the crawly, itchy sensation worse. The skin around the small, central wheal was puffed up, tight and hot.

She didn't want to tell anyone, because she didn't need a repeat of Kate's panic from the night before. So after breakfast, she sat with Kate and Richard on the shadiest part of the patio, while Richard and Kate batted volleys of American legalese back and forth like tennis balls over the net. It made her head hurt, or maybe that was the tropical heat, which seemed to bother her more than ever, no matter how much tea she drank.

Worse yet, the conversations made her afraid in a way that her friend never did. This fear made Richard's sharp black brows draw into a worried line, and put Kate into a kind of perpetual frown. Her friend could be cajoled, distracted, even humored, but these tricks wouldn't work on the faceless American bureaucracy. Most of their band were Americans without passports, stuck on the outside looking in, and on the other side of that glass was Aaron.

To distract herself, Claire helped Mrs. Maleaua scrub the hard crusty remains which clung to the bottom of the rice pot, trying to ignore the swimming sensation in her head. She traded some hand lotion with the neighbors for a few chicken eggs, and helped filet some of the sleek yellow-fin tuna.

The card parties seemed to have broken some invisible barrier, because no one cared if they left the property now. Frank, Miles, and Sawyer had gotten up at the crack of dawn to join Mr. Maleaua and his brother on their fishing boat. Mr. Maleaua's own sons had been working for months on the big Japanese fishing trawlers, so he had jumped at the prospect of three extra sets of hands to help with the daily catch.

Claire, limber from her long Island years in the jungle, squatted on the concrete as easily as Mrs. Maleaua did. Together they scraped the scales off bluish-gray fish which Claire didn't recognize.

“I'm gonna miss you when you go back to Australia,” Mrs. Maleaua remarked. “You get a lot done around the place.”

“I just feel like I should earn my keep.”
“Oh, no worries about that. The government's paying. I didn't mean just 'cause you work.” Mrs. Maleaua looked down, embarrassed. “I guess you got a lot of experience with fish cleaning, living out in the bush and all.”

Claire didn't want to admit that she was a complete novice. “I didn't fish much.” That was an understatement. Her friend had strictly forbidden her to go to the coast, any coast. Only once had he laid a hand on her before taking John's form, when he had caught her headed down to the old beach camp. She was too distracted to hear him rustling in the trees above her, so that before she even got within twenty meters of the place, he had caught her in his grip, lifted her five meters in the air, and shook her until her teeth rattled.

In that voice which bypassed her ears and went straight to her mind like a poisoned arrow, he had said, “Do that again, and the next time I'll bring you up here and then drop you. If you're lucky, it'll kill you. Or it could take you days to die.”

Then he had set her down, surprisingly gentle and light, and left a small, smokey caress on her cheek before disappearing into the upper canopy.

She had learned her lesson well, and never went to the old beach camp again. At that point, she didn't care if he killed her, but the thought of lingering for days was a strong discouragement. It didn't stop her from going to the coast, but only the ones where there was no tree cover for him to hide in.

Mrs. Maleaua was giving Claire the same skeptical look that her own mother used to, when Mum didn't believe a word coming out of Claire's mouth. Mum never said anything right away, because she knew that sooner or later Claire would fall right into a pit of her own making. All Claire said was, “I didn't fish much. Just mostly trapped.”

Another wave of heat and sickness hit Claire, and she lowered her filet knife.

“You don't look so good,” said Mrs. Maleaua. “Maybe you better go have a lie-down, let me finish.”

“I'll be fine,” Claire said, but she wasn't fine, not at all. This was getting old, in fact. She felt way worse than the night before.

Kate and Richard left their conversation and came over to see what was going on. Kate took Claire by one arm, while Richard supported the other.

“So she has fever after all?” Kate asked.

“Maybe,” Mrs. Maleaua answered. “Nei Claire, you didn't eat any of those big blue shrimp I warned you about, did you? The ones all full of algae?”

Claire didn't answer. The palm trees which shaded the patio danced above her head, and all voices were drowned out by the low, throbbing buzz which beat exactly in time with her heart.

Far away, as if on the other side of the lagoon, Claire heard Mrs. Maleaua say, “Kate, you go get Auntie Merey, just to look her over.”

By the time Richard carried Claire to her room, she had blacked out.

* * * * * * *

On the main road, Kate broke into a fast jog, dodging chunks of asphalt and potholes, ignoring the stares of people walking alongside. By the time she got to Auntie Merey's small, squat house, Kate was dripping sweat and about to keel over herself. Out back, under the shade of the steep-thatched
maneaba, Auntie Merey and a few older women were gathered for a chat. Some instinct told Kate to wait quietly until Auntie Merey saw her.

“Claire's sick, really sick,” Kate said. “You've got to come.”

Back at the hotel, the bedroom seemed suddenly very small, filled as it was with Kate, Richard, and three large I-Kiribati women. Besides Mrs. Maleaua, Auntie Merey had brought reinforcements: a serene, white-haired woman with a gentle smile and big capable hands called Auntie Lilona. Everyone crowded around Claire's limp form stretched out on the bed.

“Auntie Lilona is the oldest woman in South Tarawa,” Auntie Merey said as she introduced her to Kate.

“We need to get these off,” Auntie Lilona said, unbuttoning Claire's shirt.

Mrs. Maleaua took Richard in hand. “Come and help me boil water for the aunties, Richard. You don't fish with the men, I can put you to work in the kitchen, right?”

With Richard gone, Auntie Lilona undressed Claire all the way. Meanwhile, Auntie Merey pulled out a baggie full of little strips of dried seafood, which Kate didn't recognize.

Auntie Lilona motioned for Kate to help turn Claire over, and the older woman started searching over Claire's skin carefully.

“What are we looking for?” Kate wanted to know, but Auntie Lilona didn't answer. She just kept running her patient, searching fingers over Claire, muttering to herself as if loosening her tongue also loosened her thoughts.

“Ah, I knew it,” said Auntie Lilona after a time. “Look here.” She lifted the hair on the back of Claire's neck to reveal a swollen lump, its raised yellow center like a deformed nipple.

It made Kate sick to look at it. “Look, no offense, but isn't there a doctor? I mean, we drove past a hospital on the way here.”

“Believe me, you don't want Nei Claire to go there,” Auntie Merey said as she broke pieces of the dried seafood into a metal bowl. “And a couple weeks before you got here, one of the doctors had a stroke and got airlifted to Brisbane. I don't think she's coming back anytime soon. Then there's the other doctor, but he's probably down at the pub in down in Betio, the one where the Aussie tourists go for the fun they can't get up here. You don't want him around Nei Claire this late in the day, I can tell you that.”

The immense isolation hit Kate, even worse than on the Island. There, at least, sick people got better. Juliet had laid Jack's guts wide open and snipped out his swollen, reddened appendix, casually dropping it onto a plate. The next day Jack was up and walking around. Not here, though. This was the real world. When people got sick on Tarawa Atoll, they died more often than not. And Australia was an eight, ten hour flight away. “My God,” Kate muttered.

“That's a good idea,” said Auntie Lilona in the same gentle voice. “Auntie Merey and I will handle this. You pray.”

“I don't know how to pray,” Kate said in a strangled voice.

“Oh, honey, you not baptized?” asked Auntie Merey.

“Yeah, actually I was. First United Methodist of Ames, Iowa.”
“Well, that’s real good.” Auntie Lilona rummaged in her bag and handed Kate a bright blue plastic rosary. “Here you go.”

Kate stared at the rosary beads as if they might bite her. “I’m not Catholic. I don’t know how to use one of these.”

Auntie Merey smiled. “Just hold it, ask Mother Mary to help. All she wants is for us to ask.”

So Kate’s sweating hands warmed the plastic as the aunties worked. Auntie Lilona lanced the infected boil on Claire’s neck, while Auntie Merey sopped up the mess. As Auntie Lilona squeezed again and again (omigod would that stuff never stop coming out how much is in there?), she said casually to Auntie Merey, “Nei Claire, she’s really out of it, isn’t she? Usually they start hollering by now.”

Over to Kate, Auntie Merey said, “Hope you’re working hard getting Mother Mary's attention, ’cause we could sure use it.”

It was then that Kate began to be afraid, really afraid, with the fear that starts as an icy spear in the gut, works its way through the small of the back to the legs, then pours like ice water onto the ground. No more tricks of counting to five for her. She grabbed the rosary even tighter and started to think, hard. While it didn't feel to Kate like prayer, it was.

I don't know if you're even out there. This is probably stupid, and we're just living on a giant rock getting burned by a big nuclear bomb in the sky, and if Claire's body can fight off whatever's making her sick she'll live, and if she can't, oh God, no, not even going to think about that. But maybe you really are out there, and maybe you do just want to be asked.

Suddenly she thought of Hurley's gold, red and white edifice of a house, with an image of Mary in practically every room. Before Hurley went crazy again, Kate would sometimes bring Aaron over for a visit. Once, while waiting for Hurley to come downstairs, she stood before a painting of Mary with her robe open, her great bleeding heart dripping blood but encircled by flowers.

Of course Carmen had to make a bee-line over to Kate. “She's your mother too, you know.”

Carmen would have loved to have become Kate's mother as well, even though Hurley explained more than once that Kate had a boyfriend. “Some boyfriend,” Carmen scoffed. “One that doesn’t spend any time with her. That's why she's always over here, right?”

Now, Kate gripped Auntie Lilona's rosary the way a little girl clutches her mother's hand while crossing a busy, dangerous street.

Mrs. Maleaua came in to pour boiling water over herbs. When the poultices had steeped and cooled, Auntie Lilona and Auntie Merey sponged Claire all over, filling the room with a pungent, bitter scent.

Auntie Lilona mashed up a bit of the dried, meaty stuff into boiling water.

“What's that?” Kate asked.

“Sea cucumber,” said Auntie Lilona. “Most of them are good eating. This one, though, if you eat it, you die. But with a little bit, well, sometimes you need poison to get out poison.”

They sat Claire up, her head lolling, and managed to get a small amount of the watery sea cucumber paste down her throat.
Kate unflexed her hands, where the rosary beads had left small red indentations in the palms. “What now?”

Auntie Lilona crawled up onto the bed and pulled Claire onto her lap. “Now we wait.” The woman was so large, and Claire so frail, that she looked like a small doll resting in the lap of a very big girl.

Kate had never known a night so long, so full of care. A messenger came for Auntie Merey: someone in Bairiki was almost ready to have her baby, could she come? “Go on,” Auntie Lilona said. “Nei Kate and I will stay here.”

Mrs. Maleaua brought them tea. The men had long since come back from fishing, and one by one they stuck their heads through the door to see Claire. Auntie Lilona covered her with a thin sheet, then rocked her like a child and sang softly over her.

Once Kate came over to the bed to get a closer look. Claire's eyes were shut, but her face was flushed bright red, her hair matted with sweat. Her chest barely moved, and with a pang of fright Kate thought that she might not even be breathing. “What's happening to her?”

You could drown in the warmth of Auntie Lilona's smile. “This fever, it's good. Just what we want.”

Kate couldn't take it any longer, so she stepped outside. Sawyer handed her a plate of sliced raw tuna on white rice as she joined Frank, Miles, and Richard.

“Maleaua says it's touch-and-go,” said Richard.

Hearing his name, Mr. Maleaua came over, and said in a voice full of cheerful optimism said, “This happened to my nephew in Buariki. We thought he was gone, but the aunties up there helped him with the fever cure. That was the good part.”

“So... what was the bad part?” Sawyer wanted to know.

Mr. Maleaua's face fell. “The fever left him blind.”

“Oh, my God,” said Kate, turning pale.

“Come on, Kate. We're gonna get some air.” Sawyer steered Kate out the front gate, onto the roadway. They walked a short distance up to the lagoon, whose warm waters met the cooler, rougher Pacific ones. The night was unusually clear for the rainy season, and together Kate and Sawyer gazed up at the vast white band spread across the ink-black sky. One glistening star flashed, then fell in a bright white streak to the horizon.

“Make a wish,” Sawyer said. “But don't tell.”

“I don't need to. You know what it is.”

He gave a long sigh. “Damn right I do. Let's go back, see how things are going.”

Kate crept back into the bedroom, where Auntie Lilona had gotten up to stretch. “I'm kind of stiff,” Auntie Lilona said. “Maybe you can take over.”

“Sure.”

Auntie Lilona positioned Kate on the bed and adjusted the half-conscious Claire onto her lap. “She'll get better faster if you hold her.”

Kate wanted to ask what the chances were of Claire going blind or worse, but she held her tongue.
Instead, she cradled Claire the way she'd held Aaron when he was fussy from teething, or sick with an ear infection.

She must have dozed off, because at one point she thought she heard Auntie Merey come in to say that it was a boy, healthy as could be. Then the voices faded out as Kate drifted into sleep, and for Kate at least, that long frightful night came to an end.

(continued)
The VW microbus rolled down the Barracks road which led straight to what was left of the motor pool. The garages were mostly reduced to debris, crushed by falling trees.

“What a mess,” said Hugo. “So, Ben, where to? This is your turf.”

“Head for the gazebo. That's the center point. We can decide from there.”

Hugo crept around the roof of a building which splayed across the path, as he steered clear of fresh earth churned up by the recent quakes. A few other buildings to the north of the motor pool had collapsed into splintered piles. Broken tree limbs blocked the road, and Hugo slowly veered off into the long unkempt grass, trying to avoid them.

The cafeteria and rec center were both intact. Threading his way over a cracked cement roadway, Hugo came to a dead stop at the edge of a wide grassy commons. In the center stood a yellow and white-painted gazebo.

Hugo and everyone else stared at the center of the Barracks, mouths agape.

About twenty people were milling around, or standing in clumps under the gazebo itself. Out on the lawn, large chunks of meat roasted on a open barbecue pit, sending up a tantalizing smell. A few people basted it with long leafy branches like small brooms.

One by one, heads turned towards the VW bus, and the crowd fell silent. One man held a small child by the hand. A young woman carried a baby, who gave a sweet, crowing laugh.

Hugo flung open the driver's side door. “Dude, I think I recognize some of these guys. They used to live on our beach.”

“Unbelievable,” said Rose. “You're right.”

The crowd came alive and surrounded them. Those not dressed in brown homespun wore short aprons of tanned leather, and a few had hats sewn from hides. Some had dressed up their leather patchwork with ragged remnants of their old clothing. There was a girl almost a teenager, and two boys who clustered together. Some of the people wore feathers in their hair, or flowers, and their feet were bare.

There, at the center of the crowd, Hugo spied a stocky grey-blonde woman of middle age, someone he had never expected to see again.

“Kathy,” Hugo called out. When he hugged her, her hair spilled out from under her hand-stitched hat. With her were the group of a dozen or so men and women, the rest of the survivors who had lived in the back of the old beach, then so mysteriously disappeared three years before. “I didn't even recognize you guys at first.”

Kathy's answer was muffled by the bear hug. “We knew you'd be here. She said you would.”

Before Hugo could ask who “she” was, everyone else at once came into focus. The dark-haired girl with the baby was Sirrah. The tall yellow-haired woman using a crowbar to turn hunks of meat on
the fire was Faith, and near her stood her friend Craig. Or maybe now her husband, because between them a toddler poked at the fire pit with a stick long enough to keep her safe, but which still let her think she was helping.

“Hey, Hurley,” Sirrah said. She hugged him as best she could, the baby strapped around her middle in a sling. The squeezed baby let out a squawk. “This is our little boy Lee.” Next to her stood Chen, more filled out in the shoulders now, dressed in a leather tunic stitched with sinew.

“Thought you'd disappeared for good,” said Rose. “What ever happened to you?” The three of them hugged, joined by Faith and Craig.

“It's a long story,” Faith answered. “But we're here now.” She knelt by the child, pointing to the adults. “Kiya, say hello to Hurley, and Rose, and Bernard.” When the child just stared up at Hugo with wide eyes, Faith said, “She's shy.”

“No problema. How old is she?”

“Two and a half. We had her in August of '05.”

Hugo swiftly counted months and years in his head. So, how about that? Two and a half, just a little younger than Ji Yeon. Which meant that Faith must have started little Kiya right here on the Island, and the same for Sirrah's baby, Lee. They were all hale and healthy as you could want.

Once Hugo had thought he was cursed. That was nothing compared to what had happened to the women of the Dharma Initiative, and what had slopped over onto the Others as well. A real curse, laid down by Pele's mother Haumea.

Whatever the Dharma Initiative had done, it had to have been pretty bad.

Then it hit him. He had seen it with his own eyes in 1977, when the Dharma Initiative had drilled into that mine shaft, with disastrous results. Including killing Juliet. Whatever Pele's mom had fixed, she had to have done it over three years ago, because Haumea's curse hadn't touched Faith or Sirrah. These two kids were proof-positive of that.

A slender man with glasses and flyaway grey hair had barely approached, when Hugo grabbed him and swung him around. “Hey, Sullivan, you with Kathy too? How'd that happen?”

It took Sullivan a second to catch his breath. “After you split with Michael and Jack, man, things got bad at the beach. People were arguing, fighting all that next day. Everybody figured you and Jack and the rest were all dead. The next day, Locke and Charlie got into it over Claire. Kathy and company, they'd already gone, and nobody even cared.

“Something inside me just went snap. That night I put my stuff in a bag and headed out into the jungle. I wandered around for four, five days, and was I ever in a dark place. Then Meredith found me.” He pointed to a shy blonde woman who gave him an affectionate smile. “You know what's crazy? They said the birds told them where I was.”

“That's not crazy at all, dude.”

Kathy joined their circle. “So you, Rose, and Bernard, you're what's left from our old camp back at the beach, I guess.”

Before Hugo could answer, a shout came from the other end of the lawn.

Desmond loped across the leaf-strewn lawn, waving. “Hey, you made it, brother!” In his haste, he
almost collided with a tall woman accompanied by two older children, who were heading towards Hugo at the same time. “Scuse me,” Desmond said. “Don’t believe we’ve met.”

“I’m Cindy Chandler,” she said, a trace of flight attendant formality in her voice.

Hugo said to Cindy, “Long time, no see.”

“A whole week, at least.”

“Hey, kids,” Hugo said to Emma and Zach, who returned the greeting with shy smiles.

Hanging at the edge of the group stood some people who Hugo never expected to lay eyes on again, not in wildest imagination. Three years ago, four beach camp survivors had trekked up to the Barracks with Locke and Hugo. There was Sylvie, her mouse-eared hat only a little worse for wear. Jerome was missing his round coke-bottle glasses, and Janice’s once-red hair was now grey-streaked black. All three of them clustered close, their arms around one another. Only one of their group was absent: the tall, gangly guy named Doug.

“We thought you were dead,” Hugo said, giving out more of his rib-squeezing hugs.

Bernard, Ben and Desmond stood a bit apart from the crowd, watching the melee.

Ben kept darting glances over to his own house, on the other side of the gazebo. Somehow he had to slip away and take care of what was inside. How that was going to happen, with people meandering back and forth, coming up to greet him, plopping in the middle of the lawn as if it were some bizarre church picnic, was beyond Ben. In his imagination, Charles Widmore’s and Zoe’s bodies ticked like the beats of a tell-tale heart animated by guilt and grief.

“Looks like you made it, Desmond,” said Bernard.

Desmond grinned. “And there are more out in the valley, rounding up the cattle.”

“What you looking at, brother?” Desmond asked, scrutinizing Ben closely.

“Nothing.” Ben quickly tore his glance away from his house. This was going to be harder than he thought. He felt suddenly weary, as well as desperate for this to be over.

At least Cindy was glad to see him. She broke into a broad smile, and a wave of relief washed over him, that she had gotten out of the Temple alive and well. An older woman stood by Cindy’s side, also dressed in Temple homespun. With her were two children, a dark-haired girl of about twelve, and a boy Zach’s age.

“I’m Darrah,” the woman said.

To Ben’s embarrassment, he didn’t know the children’s names. “So who are you two?”

“Marian,” the girl said, a bit shyly.

The boy gave Ben a cheeky, cocky look. “Raffi.” Even as he spoke, he glanced around the Barracks, his dark eyes not missing anything. “Hey, Zach, look over there. It’s that big, fat man.”
“His name is Hugo,” Ben said to Raffi. “Zach, Emma, I'm glad to see you're all well.”

The older children’s tones were polite. “Hello, Mr. Linus.”

It hadn't surprised Ben that Cindy had left the Temple with Locke's group. Ben had spent many hours with Cindy when she first had joined Jacob's People, holding her hand while she sobbed and recounted the horrors of those first seven weeks after the Oceanic 815 crash, traveling in a forced-march under Ana Lucia's thumb.

Cindy did what she had to in order to survive. In that respect she was a lot like himself.

Hugo sidled up to Ben and Cindy, gesturing around the whole commons of the Barracks. “Isn't this awesome?”

“What?” Ben said, distracted.

“Everything. That all these people made it, especially the ones who got away from the Temple before Smokey showed up. And Kathy and those guys. They found Mikhail's cows and they herd them now, and the cattle are calving like crazy. That's why we're having barbecue tonight.”

“Hey, everybody,” said Kathy's friend Shana. “Dinner is served.”

Four picnic tables had been dragged near the pit. Great hunks of cow were hoisted onto platters, while Shana and Meredith loaded the tables with fresh fruit, bowls full of boiled breadfruit, some garden vegetables like tomatoes and carrots, and white rounds of cheese.

The group gathered slowly, as if animated by one mind. Even the younger boys didn't rush or grab. They waited, and everyone looked at Hugo.

After a second Hugo got it, and he blinked with nervousness. “I really suck at this. Ben, these were your digs. Help me out here.”

Trapped like a trap in a trap, Ben thought. The crowd moved aside, bringing him into full view. So much for slipping away. He might as well make the best of it.

He cleared his throat. His voice came out cracked and weak at first, then warmed and grew more solid. "We've all been through a lot in the past few weeks. All of us are survivors, whether we came from the Temple, or the jungle, or the beach. We survived mad things, insane situations that made no sense at the time, impossible events.” Ben looked straight at Hugo as he said this.

"Some of us have been on the Island since birth. Some, like me, grew up here. Some of us were shipwrecked. Some have lived here for only a few years. Some of us left, then returned. But all of us here, to the man or woman or child, have survived. And for that, above all, we can be truly grateful.”

He thought he was done, but Hugo nudged him to go on, so he did. “A lot of us didn't make it, though, and I want to remember them, too.” This wasn't so bad as far as speeches went. Either he was injecting just the right tone into his voice, or this was a soft audience. He could feel them warm up with each word. “We know we're surrounded by an invisible cloud of witnesses,” and here Rose nodded her head in firm agreement. Funny, in this case, it wasn't a matter of faith, but fact. “We won't ever forget them, especially the ones we love.” He saw with satisfaction that Hugo's eyes glistened with tears.

Unbidden, the childhood prayer spilled out before Ben knew it. “Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive from thy bounty. Amen.”
Hugo positioned himself at the head of the serving line. With Bernard's help, he began to pass out roasted meat.

Rose came over, wiping an eye. “That was beautiful, Ben. I knew you had it in you.”

“It was nothing.” Inside, black fear seized Ben once more. That pretty speech was just going to make it worse, when people found out what was really going on. Starting with the bodies in his house.

“You need to get yourself a plate, Ben,” Rose said. “Well, a banana leaf, I mean. You look shaky, like you've seen a ghost.”

“It's nothing. Go on, Rose. I'm fine.” Ben spied the small yellow house once more, and noticed the boards crudely nailed across the broken front window. Three years earlier, Hugo had hurled an ottoman through that window. In his arms he had gathered a half-conscious Claire, after Sawyer had rescued her from the rubble of her demolished house. The hole was there because, Ben remembered with sick embarrassment, neither he nor John Locke had planned to let Sawyer and Claire back into the house at all.

Other than the boarded-up window, Ben's house looked like every other one. The compulsion to dash over seized him again. If he didn't do something about this, he was going to lose it, and then the martyrdom he'd always expected, always had been convinced that he deserved would be upon him.

To Ben, it seemed as if Desmond could read right into his internal struggle. If anyone had a stake in this matter besides himself, it was Desmond. So Ben gave Desmond a small come-along nod, and Desmond followed him without speaking, kicking up the sticks and leaves which covered the long, uncut grass.

The two men stood in the chaotic mess of Ben's once-impeccable living-room. No longer were the books filed on the shelf by author and genre. Several pictures had been knocked off the walls, their glass lying in shards on the floor. Ben picked up one of Alex as a smiling, pretty toddler with a halo of curly dark hair.

“Your daughter?”

“When she was three.”

“Where's she now?”

“Dead at sixteen, courtesy of your father-in-law.”

Desmond ran a hand over his face, growing pale. “So she's the reason you tried to kill my wife, at the marina. When I kicked your bleeding arse.”

Ben hoped Desmond wasn't in the mood for a repeat performance. “I'm sorry. Genuinely sorry. If I can make it up to you in any way—”

Desmond's voice was flat as his expression. “Just get me home, Ben.” He waved his arm at not only the room, but the Barracks, and the entire Island. “You know, if I hadn't seen all this myself, I wouldn't have believed it. A whole town. I spent all those years on this damned Island, although not damned anymore, is it? Three years, and never knew this was here. Never saw it.”

“You're lucky. You'd have crossed the pylons and your brains would have fried like eggs on the summer pavement. But you didn't come in here to marvel at the architecture, did you?”

“I figured you had something to show me.”
Ben sighed. “Indeed I do.”

“Or maybe, brother, you just didn't want to face it alone.”

It was true. “In here.”

Inky dark filled the hidden walk-in closet. Desmond grabbed a flashlight from Ben's desk, saying, “Let's see if this torch still works.”

Ben fought for control, trying to keep Desmond from seeing his shaking hands. "This is going to be bad."

The flashlight did work, flooding the room with bright white light. Ben blinked, startled at what wasn't there. Even though Locke had cut Zoe's throat, and Ben himself had pumped a couple of rounds into Charles Widmore, there was no blood spray or splatter on the walls. Clean sweaters and shirts were still folded neatly in cubbies next to where Widmore and Zoe once stood. No stench of decay hung in the air. The desk drawer still stood open, its cash and passports undisturbed. The grey linoleum should have been coated with dried blood, but it wasn't.

Most astonishing of all, the bodies were gone.

Desmond swung the flashlight around the room, as if the two corpses might have crouched in the shadows. “My father-in-law was here, right?” The gloom made the wildness in his voice worse.

“Yes, he was.”

“Bloody hell.”

Ben reached for the flashlight. “Give me that.” He tried to open the hieroglyph-covered stone door, which he'd used to "summon the monster," but the door was wedged shut.

A nightmare vision seized Ben. What if Charles and Zoe had risen up, crusted with blood, eyes blank, and now lurked behind the summoning door, holding it shut? If Ben turned away, the corpses might jump out at them.

When the front door creaked open, Ben dropped the flashlight in terror. It went out with a small tinkle of broken glass. At once, the room grew as dark as a cave, save for the pale streak from the open bookcase-door.

“Hello? Ben? Desmond?” a woman called from the front room.

Ben felt his way out of the pitch-black room, Desmond at his heels. The evening light outlined the silhouette of a large woman, accompanied by a smaller, leaner one. He squinted, and after a few seconds made out Kathy and her friend Shana.

“We buried them,” Kathy said in a matter-of-fact voice. The way she rested her hands on her broad hips reminded Ben of his grandmother, the country one from Eastern Oregon. MawMaw could switch between wringing a chicken's neck and comforting a young boy with a warm bosomy embrace in a second. Like MawMaw, Kathy stood there in the doorway like an implacable force.

The vision of zombie Charles Widmore was hard for Ben to shake. “Thank you.”

“I was going to bring him home,” Desmond said to Kathy and Shana.

Kathy said in a casual voice, “Back in 2004, Widmore was one of the top five hundred richest men
on the planet. We've been out of touch for a few years, so who knows. Maybe by now he's made it into the top one hundred.”

“Fat lot of good it did him,” Shana added, glancing over to the spot where the bodies had been.

“We heard your story, Desmond,” Kathy went on. “About your yacht race, how you were doing it to curry Widmore's favor, how you'd gotten shipwrecked like Odysseus and fought to get back to your Penelope.”

“And you knew that how, hiding out in the woods and all?”

“The wood is full of shining eyes, the wood is full of creeping feet.”

It sounded to Ben like a quote, although he couldn't place it.

Shana laughed. “Oh, Kathy, just cut to the chase. You know as well as we do, Desmond, that some of the birds around here aren't really birds. But they see and hear a lot. And they love to talk.”

“Aye, they do indeed.”

“The birds were always tracking you,” Shana said.

“They didn't put it together completely until they heard Widmore's name mentioned,” Kathy added.

“Father-in-law, though,” said Shana. “Didn't see that one coming. Of course, if you want to, you can always dig him up. He was pretty fresh when we buried him, but my guess is that he's fairly rotten by now.”

“Desmond,” Kathy said in a conciliatory tone, “Nobody wants to hurt you, or spoil your plans. When we arrived at this village the other day, we searched all the houses for supplies. Yours was the first we visited, and it turned out to be full of surprises. It's not every day one finds a priest's hole in the middle of a bungalow. So of course we investigated, and found the two of them. We did the decent thing.”

“Thanks, ladies.” Desmond sounded only a little disgruntled.

Ben put more bitterness in his tone than he felt. “So, did you clean up the blood too?”

The two women looked surprised. Kathy said, “Blood? There was just a little on the floor, otherwise none, really.”

At Ben's silence, Shana changed tack. “So, Desmond, I hear you're leaving us.”

“Damn right I am.”

“Will you really be happy out there?” Shana persisted.

“What're you suggesting, that I stay here on this bloody rock?”

Kathy lifted her chin and looked Desmond square in the face. “If it's bloody, it's because people have made it so. What Shana is saying—”

“What happened to that man Rose and Bernard fished out of the well, who was all smiles?” Shana broke in.

“I dunno, you tell me.” Then Desmond gave a long sigh, as if the air had been suddenly let out of
Shana put her hand on his arm. “Listen, Desmond. Two days ago, we were pasturing our cattle in the North Mesa like usual, minding our own business. The Old Woman came to us, said we had to hurry to the Barracks, that you’d all be here, and we were supposed to make things ready. And here you are, just like she said. Then this morning, one of the birds told us what happened with Hurley. How you all went... There. To the Other Place. So this is what I don't get, Desmond. You've actually been There, so how you can still be so doubtful? It's as if you've seen, but not seen.”

Desmond knew exactly what Shana meant, but he pouted like an obstinate child. “ Been where?”

“You know.”

He murmured, sounding defeated, “I don't know. It seems like a dream.”

“It wasn't,” Ben said in a sharp voice. “You still have your compass.”

Desmond reached into his pocket and gazed at the tarnished brass object as if he'd never seen it before.

“Maybe the compass isn't just to get home,” Kathy said, her voice rich with tenderness. “Maybe it's to find your way back, too, if that's what you and your wife both want.”

“Aye,” Desmond said, but he sounded unsure. “Now, if you ladies will excuse me, I'm going to see if any of that good red beef is left.” He slammed the front door on his way out.

Ben suddenly felt possessive and proprietary, especially since it looked as if he wasn't going to be living in a charnel house after all. In his mind he was already cleaning up the chaos, rearranging books, sweeping up glass, replacing the contents of drawers, and re-hanging portraits. Maybe even scavenge a window, replace that board.

Ben turned to Kathy. “So whom do I have to thank for the carpentry?”

Shana shrugged. “It was there when we got here. Maybe Janice did it. She and her friends lived up here for a couple of months, after you and everybody else left.”

“Poor Janice,” Kathy remarked. “Nursing two people through gun-shot wounds, can you imagine? Sylvie and Jerome both made it, though, even if Doug didn't.”

“Poor Doug, you mean. When we found them up in the North Mesa, by the flax fields, they teamed up with us.”

“You okay, Ben?” Kathy said.

Ben nodded, mute. It wasn't until he stopped shaking that he realized how terrified he'd been. Pulling himself together, he tried to sound as nonchalant as possible, while bracing himself for one more answer. “The babies... Everything... went all right?”

“You haven't met Jane yet,” Shana said. “She's out with the herds tonight, because we have some cows ready to calve. First-timers, both of them, so Jane just wanted to be around in case she was needed. She delivered Kiya and Baby Lee, too.”

Kathy added, “Jane's a real natural. Faith had a bit of a rough time of it, though.”

Shana shrugged. “Kiya's shoulder got stuck for awhile. Jane swore the Old Woman was right at
Faith's side, helping her along, but none of us saw her.”

The Old Woman. Pele's mother Haumea, if what Hugo said was true. At this point, Ben had no reason to doubt it whatever. “But there were no problems, I mean. Neither woman got sick in the middle of their pregnancies, no symptoms, nothing?"

Shana and Kathy looked at each other, puzzled. “Why should they have gotten sick?”

“Surely at the beach camp you met Juliet—”

“Who?” Kathy said.

“She might have shown up after we left,” Shana explained to Kathy.

Then it hit Ben. Kathy and her band had abandoned the castaways before Juliet and Kate arrived, before Juliet started her mission to identify any pregnant women at the beach camp.

“I don't know what problems you're talking about, Ben,” Kathy said.

“Never mind,” Ben said in a low voice. “It's not important.”

“Well, then, I'm turning in,” Kathy said with clear relief in her voice. “There'll be plenty of time to talk things out tomorrow. You know, get organized around here. Too bad we didn't bring a conch.”

She smiled like she'd just cracked a secret joke.

Ben's laugh was small, dry, and out of practice. “You've got to be kidding me. A conch?”

“I used to teach that book to college freshmen. Makes way more sense than having middle-schoolers read it. Of course, I did have to fill them in a bit about the Cold War.”

At once Ben liked this woman's genial self-possession. Maybe settling down in New Otherton wasn't going to be so bad after all. “My daughter Alex devoured it when she was twelve, as if it was the first book she'd ever read that she could completely relate to. I knew she was ramping up her adolescent rebellion when she started going around chanting, 'Kill the pig, slit her throat.' At first it was amusing. Not so much when she started calling me 'Jack Merridew.'”

Kathy gave a belly laugh, rich and deep. “One of my students told me that the conch trick would have worked if the stranded kids had had someone like me to keep them in line.” Her grey eyes took on a faraway expression. “That remark came back to me about a hundred times in the first week after the crash.”

“I tried to keep people in line,” Ben said in a musing tone. “Look at where it got me.”

(continued)

Chapter End Notes


Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth.
The welcome-to-New-Otherton dinner was long over. Most everyone had gone back to their cabins for the night, although a few people still hung around the barbecue fire. Hugo stood by one of the water hand-pumps, where he'd just finished cleaning a few pots. Without electricity, it was too dark to work in the kitchen at night. Out on the lawn, the light from the fire shone almost as brightly as the big silver moon above.

He had to admit, it felt good to steal a few minutes of quiet. From the moment they'd arrived, people had clustered around Hugo, getting acquainted or re-acquainted, catching up on stories, telling their tales or listening to his. While he hadn't forgotten about the little chat with Ben about “the Door,” there just hadn't been much chance.

It was kind of late to go knocking on doors, checking for an empty bungalow to sleep in. Hugo was just about to lay out a blanket under a spreading tree, when Sullivan nabbed him. “What you doing, man?”

“Getting ready to turn in.”

“Well, Sylvie and me, we've been going through the houses. Some of them are pretty nasty, but we found one I think you'll like.” Sullivan stepped back, suddenly not so confident. “I mean, unless you snagged something already.”

“Nope, haven't gotten to it yet. It's been non-stop catching up since we got here.”

Encouraged, Sullivan went on. “Um, do you think I could crash with you in the spare room? I was on my own in the bush for a month before I ran into Kathy's crew. I don't really like setting up camp alone.”

Hugo laughed. “Me either. But I thought you were bunking with Sylvie and company.”

Sullivan's blush was apparent even in the moonlight. “Well, it's like this. When we were all moving around in the woods, it wasn't weird. About the privacy, I mean. Things that you don't notice become, um, more apparent when you're in a house.”

“Oh,” said Hugo.

“With Sylvie, Janice, and Jerome, let's just say that three's company, four's a crowd.”

“Four's a little tight,” Hugo echoed. “I hear you.”

“Unless, you know, you're full up with Desmond and Ben—”

“No problermo. Ben's over at his old place, and Desmond's kinda possessive about his boat. So go ahead and move your stuff in.”

“Thanks, big guy,” Sullivan said. Hugo picked up his pots and headed for the kitchen, but Sullivan still stood there in his path, moonlight filtering down on him through the branches of a great spreading tree. “Anything you need, Hurley, just ask. I'm serious.”
Hugo gave a little laugh, embarrassed. Many was the time he had wanted to shed “good old fun-time Hurley:” playground comic, class clown, cafeteria cut-up. But this deference, as if he wore a long robe and everyone wanted to pick up the train and carry it behind him: that was weird. He didn't think he'd ever get used to it, and didn't want to.

Sullivan pointed down the main sidewalk which ran through the cottages. “It’s the last house on the right over there, the one with the wind chimes on the porch. Next to that big grassy mound.”

It was the very same house that he and Sawyer had briefly lived in three years before. The “grassy mound” covered the broken, charred remains of Claire's blown-up house. Hugo gave a low whistle. “I'll be along in awhile. Thanks, dude.”

* * * * * * * *

After Ben had swept up broken glass and removed the rotten food from his refrigerator, he stood in the middle of his vastly improved living room, completely at a loss. Alex's picture had been restored to the wall, although without glass in the frame. The roof wasn't leaking, so his own books were safe, even if they were strewn all over the floor. He'd already stowed the three suitcases full of books in a corner.

He hoped “getting organized” wouldn't involve him too much, because he was looking forward to incorporating the newcomers into his library. It was close to the joy a thirsty man feels when he comes upon a stream in the midst of a waste-land. But not tonight.

Nor was he ready for sleep, or perhaps sleep hadn't yet chosen him. Instead, he closed his front door and walked around the Barracks, so radically changed from just a few days before. For one thing, he had never seen the Barracks plunged into darkness.

Broken fences still leaned over, and piles of debris still blocked some paths. The huge fire still blazed in the central pit, surrounded by a few remaining night owls. Little Kiya shrieked when her father scooped her up for bed, and Ben remembered those tiny struggles all too well. Most people had already claimed their cottages, where golden lantern-glow shone through the windows.

It wasn't the Barracks anymore, was it? New Otherton was beginning to look like home. How did Hugo do it? It was something Ben himself never seemed to manage, no matter how hard he tried.

Years ago, right after the Oceanic crash, spies from the Barracks had told Ben an almost unbelievable story. That ridiculously fat man, whose two-inch-thick manila-folder file towered over everyone else's, had made a golf course. If that wasn't enough, the rest of them left their primitive camp and hiked up to play. Every day.

When Tom Friendly heard about it, his long square face filled with rueful longing. “Maybe we could play a few holes, too, Ben. Or make some kind of course up here.”

Ben had hated the pain on Tom's face when he shot down that idea like a clay pigeon. And if, three years ago, someone would have told Ben that the same man would sit in the seat of Jacob, and that Ben would stand at his right hand, Ben would have either laughed out loud, or slit their throat. It sounded crazy, yet here Ben was, heading towards the bungalow he would always think of as Juliet Burke's.

When Juliet had first come to the Island, Ben had given her a set of wind-chimes for a house-warming gift. The night winds still teased a melody from them, but Hugo didn't seem to hear them. Chin resting on his hands, he stared over at the ruins of Claire's house. That former pile of plaster, rubble, and torn metal had become transformed into hill of living green.
Ben cleared his throat. “So, these must be your new digs. May I join you?”

Hugo nodded, so Ben settled himself down on the other bench. “Did you know that this was where Juliet lived?”

“No way. Her and Sawyer's house was over there.” Hugo pointed to a cabin three doors over, unoccupied because it was in such poor shape.

“That was the one from 1977, Hugo. This was the one I gave her, after I brought her here in 2001.”

Hugo just shook his head, disgusted. “Man, time travel sucks.” Then, as if he had been trying to puzzle it all out for a while, he said, “So, you, um, don't remember anything about Juliet at all? I mean, like, from when you were a kid?”

“She and James were just another couple of 'grups,' Hugo.”

Hugo smiled for the first time since Ben had sat down. “So you know what those are?”

“I certainly do. Alex loved original-series Star Trek. We had a lot of the episodes on VHS tape. And when you're a kid, most grown-ups just fade into the background.” Unless they were his father, and then they didn't. “Also, I don't remember anything that happened for a month or so before the accident. All of you, your visit to the past, it was wiped clean away.”

Hugo pointed over to the leafy green hill, covered with vines. “You see those plants over there?”

“Some kind of melon, it looks like.”

“Were they, um, there when you and Richard were up here a couple days ago?”

“Honestly, Hugo, I don't remember. I was kind of worried about my life.”

“That used to be Claire's house,” Hugo said in an absent voice.

“I recall that, yes.”

“You know,” and here Hugo paused, as if he were trying to force out an immensity of feeling through a very small window, “you weren't the only one to lose someone when those mercs showed up. And now she's gone back, like she had to.”

“She has Kate to help her, Hugo. And her mother.”

“Her mom? I didn't know that. That's awesome.”

Hugo looked as if he had just remembered some difficult task that he could no longer avoid. Ben waited for the shoe to drop, and it didn't take long.

Hugo said in a sepulchral voice, “Ben, there's something I got to ask you.”

“Um, hm.” The familiar childhood sensation closed in on Ben, of being blamed. Perhaps it was the eerie glow of moonlight over the grave of Claire's house, or how much Hugo seemed like a sleeping giant ready to awaken. Or maybe it was from sitting on Juliet's front porch, even though he hadn't seen her in three years. He'd walked over this way on purpose, thinking to revisit her presence one more time. And now this.

“At the party last night, Pele told me there was a way to get on and off the Island. She called it 'the Door.' My guess is you know something about that.”
Ben swallowed hard, throat suddenly sandpaper-dry. A swarm of lies flew through his head, but he brushed them away. “Yes, I do.”

Hugo could give new meaning to the term “flatness of affect.” His tone was totally devoid of emotion, as if he were trying to stopper an enormous volcano. “Who else knew about this, Ben?”


“Jacob ran into me in LA right before the Ajira flight. Pele said that was how he did it, how he got around. Through the Door.”

“She was correct.”

Hugo’s change of tack caught Ben by surprise. “Dude, you had cancer. If you guys had a fast way off the Island, why didn't they take you somewhere else? Like, you know, a real hospital?”

Something heavy lifted off Ben. If this was going to be the moment Hugo showed him the door, cast him out, even killed him, then so be it. He hadn't expected it to last as long as it had. “I couldn't. If I were to go through the Door, I'd wind up a vegetable at worst, dead of an aneurysm at best.”

“Why, Ben? Why you?”

“When you were here with the Dharma Initiative in 1977, something happened to me. Later, Richard Alpert told me that I'd been shot, but he wouldn't say by whom.” He gave a bitter laugh. “For the longest time, I thought my father did it. Richard said that they lowered me into the pool inside the Temple, and that's why I lived. But it did something to me, I don't know what.”

Hugo pondered for a few heartbeats. “It sounds like The Fly. Some kind of molecular transformation. Man, oh man, Sayid. That's what must of happened to Sayid in the Temple there. He got shot in the gut, they dunked him in the pool and it looked like he was dead, but he wasn't. He was fine, not even a bullet hole.”

“Hugo, Richard was very clear. He told me in no uncertain terms that I was never to use the Door. Or even go near it when it was open.”

Hugo sat in contemplation, his big shadowed face unreadable.

After a long silence, Ben spit out a nervous, tiny laugh. “I thought you'd be all over me with 'How could you,' and 'We could have sent people home,' and 'So-and-so didn't have to die.'”

“Oh, don't worry, Ben. A couple people are gonna say exactly that when they hear about it. Bernard, Desmond, and you don't even want to think about Rose.”

“When they hear about it? You're going to tell them?”

“Why not? Desmond may want to get home that way. Why would I keep this a secret?”

Ben wondered what in the hell he had gotten himself into. “No, I can't imagine you would.”

“So, where is this Door?”

To be honest, this was the last thing Ben wanted to tell Hugo. Three years ago, Ben had held Hugo bound and gagged at gunpoint at the Pala Ferry dock. At the time, he'd been furious that Hugo was even there. When Ben and Juliet had gone over the initial list, Hugo wasn't on it. Bea Klugh had added Hugo all on her own.
Now the tables were turned. Hugo held Ben's life in the palm of his hand, although Ben didn't fear for his life. What he dreaded more than anything was to be left alone, pushed out, abandoned once more.

It would be so easy to lie. Ben could say that the Door had been on Hydra Island, now underwater. Or tucked away in some remote location, and when Hugo found out that it wasn't there at all, Ben could say that Jacob must have moved it.

Lying would be hopeless, though. Best to stall for time. “So, um, what did Pele tell you?”

“That the Door's always been here on the Island, from the very beginning. That Jacob could use it, but he had to come back to the Island in three days, or terrible things would happen to him.”

Ben sighed, once again squeezed and trapped. “All right, Hugo, I'll take you there.”

“So where is it, down in some Indiana Jones cavern?”

“You walked right past it when Ms. Klugh brought you and your friends to Pala Ferry. Do you remember Window Rock?”

“Holy crap,” Hugo said. “It's that big hole in the rock?”

“Not exactly. There was a set of two steel doors built into the hillside—”

“With a Dharma sign on the front, and two guys with guns guarding it.” Hugo sat up now, animated. “They marched us right past it. Talk about hiding in plain sight.”

“Now you know.”

Hugo leaned back on the wooden bench, arms folded across his big stomach. As if Ben had uttered his unspoken fear out loud, he said, “Don't worry, Ben. This is my job now, on the Island. I'm not trying to get out of it.”

“No one said you were.”

“I don't have a lighthouse to spy on people. And I don't know that I'd use it even if I did. But I got to know what happened to everybody. Claire, Kate, Sawyer. And...”

Ben braced himself, even though there was no reason to.

“And I want to see my mom, tell her what's going on. So I'm not running out on everybody here, I promise. But when the time's right, I'm gonna use the Door, Ben, and I want you to help me.”

* * * * * * * *

After Ben left, Hugo cast one long look at the green hill before going inside. Moonlight poured through the front windows, giving the house a chilly, eerie air. Sullivan had straightened up the place, or maybe Sylvie and her friends (lovers? partners?) did it when they first got up here.

So this was Juliet's house. That made the whole scenario even stranger, if only because Hugo had watched her die.

In a way Hugo was glad Sawyer wasn't here. It would freak Sawyer out totally to walk into the house that Juliet had lived in before she even knew him. But not really before, because then Sawyer and Juliet got beamed back to That Seventies Show, and lived together before Sawyer met her. So did that mean they lived there together before, or after?
Man, time travel made his head hurt.

Suddenly the house seemed full of unbearable intimacies. Three years back, he and Sawyer had lived for less than a week in this place. They had laughed at the frilly hats on hooks, the flowered china plates on the walls, the little glass knick-knacks all over the tables and shelves.

Sawyer had rooted through the recipe box, its 3x5 cards scrawled with sad little comments like “Doesn’t work,” or “Who could make this?!?” or “Screwed up again.” Sawyer had remarked how the food didn’t seem like anything you’d eat for a normal meal after a long day’s work.

Very little had changed. Sure, it was way dustier, and the earthquakes had knocked some pictures off the wall. Now, though, Juliet's old house had the feel of a museum dedicated to someone who had walked out one day and had never come back.

When the front door rattled, Hugo sprang to his feet, but it was just Sullivan. “Hey, man, sorry I startled you. Guess we're going to have to catch some candle-fish, make some lamps.”

The skin on the back of Hugo’s arms and neck still creeped from Juliet's presence. "No prob, man."

“I was over at Jerome's, just telling everybody about the change of address.”

Sullivan was about to head for the spare bedroom, when Hugo cleared his throat. “Go ahead and take the big bedroom, okay?”

“You sure? I mean, there's just a twin in the spare, and it's kind of small—"

“Really, dude, it's fine.”

With a skeptical look, Sullivan hauled his gear to the master bedroom. After the door clicked shut, Hugo gave a sigh of relief. He could not have borne it, to lie down in Juliet's bed.

He was just about to turn in, when he stopped by the kitchen for a drink. There he saw it, sitting on the small butcher-block table by the counter.

A VHS tape in a clamshell container. Xanadu.

His heart, already so buffeted by the past few days, very nearly broke. On the cover was the bright-eyed, gorgeous blonde Olivia Newton John, whose magical muse Kyra had transformed the life of the lonely artist Sonny. He stared at the magic-marker inscription inside, “To Jules, with love, Tom.”

Well, one mystery down at least, with about a million more to go. He already had a pretty good idea who “Tom” was, and now “Jules” was obvious. Short for Juliet, for sure. He and Claire had puzzled over that one, a mystery no more.

The first night everyone had arrived in the Barracks, Locke had done something to freak Kate and Claire out, Hugo couldn't even remember what. Just general creepiness, probably. Kate had come running to Sawyer, but she sent Hugo over to Claire's to keep an eye on her, with the tape for an excuse. Turned out he didn't need one, because Claire was pretty glad to see him. They made popcorn, laughed and uttered more than one “What the hell just happened here?” over that insane movie. It was all fun and games, until Aaron decided to wake up and upchuck all over Hugo.

He had been ready to flee in shame and embarrassment, but Claire wasn't having any of that. As she washed his shirt and his hair both, she told him a wild story about watching this soccer hooligan get the snot beaten out of him by some sumo wrestler who he'd been teasing. This had all happened on a nude beach in Sydney, before Claire got pregnant with Aaron.
Then, because she was afraid Locke might come back, and because she felt something strange in the night air, she put to words what was in Hugo's own mind. He jumped at the offer to spend the night on her couch. When it became clear that Kate wasn't coming back, he slept in Kate's bedroom, going back to Sawyer's only to shower and get clean clothes.

It wasn't heaven, not by a long shot, with Locke throwing his weight around and Claire's night-time heebee-jeebies. But in the mornings Hugo held Aaron while Claire made orange-spice tea. She sat on her front porch sewing nappies, while he tied wire mesh to wooden frames for rabbit hutches. Alex bounced the baby, while Karl worked by Hugo's side. Maybe some small, simple heaven really could rise out of the ruins of the Dharma Initiative.

It didn't even last a week.

Looking at the tape case, Hugo for the first and last time regretted that the electricity on the Island had gone off. Then it hit him, how sad it would be to play that tape alone.

Under a strange impulse, he grabbed the tape. From the kitchen he took a big heavy spoon, one that could have stirred a pot of oatmeal for twenty.

He crossed the walkway to where the green hill stood. He could almost swear that the tangled vines were even thicker, their leaves even broader than they had been an hour before. He began to dig. Weird, that there was no debris from the ruined house. Out of curiosity he dug even further.

The structure of the house had vanished, as if it had melted into the earth. Hugo had expected to find window glass, rebar, concrete, and other shattered fragments of that little home, but it was all gone.

He gave up after digging down a few feet. Into the hole he stuck the VHS tape, case and all, then filled it in with red dirt. He trained the vines over the hole, then went round back and stripped to his boxers. It would be a shame to drag in red mud after someone had gone through such effort to clean up.

After hosing off his clothes and hanging them to dry, he crawled into the spare-room bed. Through the window he saw the leafy mound glowing silver-green in the moonlight.

Hugo wouldn't say that he had fallen in love with Claire back then. But even if he hadn't fallen in love with her, he knew he could love her. And that in itself was something.

It had become clear when he saw her again after all those years in Locke's camp. She had pulled him towards her in a warm hug, her radiant smile undimmed by the grime. Later, on Hydra Island, they had sat together in their bear cage prison, where she told him in soft, sad tones how “her friend” had kept her safe and taken care of her. Her battered, forlorn look told Hugo that if this was care, he didn't want to see neglect.

The night had grown cool and damp, and the waiting long. She snuggled up against him like a small, shivering animal clinging to a larger one for warmth. Once she said, “Kate had Aaron, did you know that? All this time.” All he could say was, “He's awesome, Claire. A great kid.” But that didn't seem to help. She just sighed, buried her face in his shoulder, and didn't ask anything else.

Why hadn't he put his arm around her? What an idiot he was. Now it was probably too late.

He had wanted to tell her that the last time he'd seen Aaron was at his first birthday party, but the words wouldn't come out. No one but Kate and Jack knew of his secret shames: his freak-outs, his arrest, his two-year extended vacation in the mental hospital. At the time, he thought he could lay it all out for her during the submarine trip back home.
How’d that work out for you? came the all-too-familiar inner voice.

As they sat in that cage, a heavy wind blew thick shadows across the moon, leaving the Hydra Island jungle in darkness. He could barely see her, could only feel her small shivering form pressed up against him. Once she said in a haunted, faraway voice, “We're going to die here. I deserve to die here.”

“No,” he had whispered. “No, we're not. And you don't.” For an answer, she slipped her rough little paw into his hand, the grip tender and sweet underneath the callouses and chapped skin. Then Kate had come over to their concrete bench, while Sawyer busied himself with trying to loosen the hinges on the cage door. The two women went off into another corner of the cage to talk. Hugo, feeling useless and alone, stared out through the cage bars into the deep green-black night, which stared back like the empty eye socket of some malignant giant.

And now she was on her way home.

Moonlight flooded the small room through uncurtained windows. He lay awake a long time, until the moon continued on its crooked course through the night sky.

Finally, Hugo slept.

He dreamed, one of those strange ones where you're not sure if you're awake or not. He stood on the front porch of Juliet's house, his house now, and looked over to where Claire's used to be.

Atop the garden-mound stood a little old woman in a grass skirt, carrying a stick like Rafiki's in *The Lion King*. In fact, she was so tiny and wrinkled, she might as well have been a female version of Rafiki. Wearing a wry grin, she poked at the squash vines with her stick, chuckling. Instead of singing, “Asante sana, squash banana,” she broke into cheerful little song in a melodic language he couldn't understand. Then she turned to Hugo and winked at him, full of mischief.

When hot morning sun poured through the window, stinging Hugo's eyes even before he opened them, he'd forgotten about the dream entirely.

*(continued)*

Chapter End Notes

Notes on this chapter can be found on [my Dreamwidth](http://my.Dreamwidth).
Chapter Notes

Fever burned Claire like steak on a griddle, and it was good that no one took her temperature, because at one point it reached 106.5 degrees Fahrenheit before trending back down. Claire knew nothing of this, because she was as gone as a person could be while still tethered by the thin thread of life.

She didn't feel the herbal compresses which the women placed across her brow, under her arms, the insides of her thighs. Instead, she floated free as a soap bubble up into a clear blue sky, her body gloriously naked and cooled by the wind. Bright yellow sunlight painted the white clouds with a golden border. Wind pushed her newly-short hair away from her face, as she soared above the blue sea far below.

Claire flew through the sky on the back of a great green bird, whose wings thundered in time with the winds above, the sea below. This was no ordinary bird, either. For one thing, the wind kept whipping the bird's long black hair into Claire's face. For another, when the bird turned its head around, Claire almost fell off in surprise. The bird wore an olive-green girl's face, and she gave Claire a wry grin and a wink.

When the bird-girl swooped downward, Claire's stomach leaped the way it would on a roller-coaster. They dove towards the sea, and almost skimmed the cresting waves. Then the bird-girl pulled up into a sharp bank, climbing ever-higher for the sheer joy of it.

The few times Claire had ever flown in an airplane, she had stared out the window, wondering what it would be like to dance about on puffy white clouds. This was like a wish come true, as the bird-girl darted in and out of clouds that bathed Claire in coolness, despite the sun's relentless heat.

All at once gusts of wind brushed the white clouds aside. Below, set like a green jewel in the middle of the heaven-blue ocean, rested the Island.

The bird-girl circled around once, then twice, each time heading lower. Claire saw thin edges of pale beach lined with white ocean waves: great swells which crashed against the beach in an ever-repeating song.

They headed straight for the range of jungle-covered mountains, their sides looking as if they were scooped out by gigantic fingers. When it seemed the bird-girl might smack right into the mountainside, she pulled upwards hard as she could, her wings straining, and they cleared the ridge just in time.

The bird-girl headed out towards the ocean again, then circled around the dark-colored cone of a large volcano, its steep black sides bare of vegetation. Down again they went, met by hot clouds of heat that reeked of sulfur. As the thin threads of orange lava met the ocean, they erupted into boiling plumes as soon as they touched the surf. Chunks of volcanic land bobbed up, black and glassy. Suddenly afraid, Claire clung hard to the bird-girl's shoulders, and buried her face in the long dark hair.

Rising effortlessly on air currents, the bird-girl glided away from the volcano. Below them spread out a grassy mesa, wide as a generous body. Four-legged creatures grazed on the open plain with lowered heads. The bird-girl circled the mesa a few times, then threaded her way through a narrow,
grassy valley whose green cliff-sides shot skyward.

A small herd of horses thundered down the valley's middle, and the bird-girl pulled in closer. Claire spied roans, a chestnut, even a piebald one. But the lead mare was splendid with glossy black flanks, and the long mane which streamed out behind as she galloped.

Now the bird-girl skimmed along the tree-tops. A thick flock of birds joined them, making a swirling, chattering cloud. “So beautiful,” Claire whispered, but the bird-girl couldn't hear her over the wind and the hum of beating wings. When the bird-girl shook her own wings a few times, the flock took off in another direction. She soared on, lifted by the power of the air.

The land started to look familiar to Claire. They passed over the huge crater of an ancient volcano, scooped out like a great bowl. The bird-girl flew low enough for Claire to see a long row of concrete pylons, each one topped with a little metal dish.

As they circled over the sonic fence, anticipation surged through Claire, and fear, too. The last time she had seen this place was three long years ago, on the day her house had blown up. That night she, Hurley, and Sawyer had been driven out by gunshots and bombs, smoke and fire. Even though the protective fence had long stopped working, even though her friend had moved to and fro through the Barracks whenever he pleased, Claire had never dared to return.

The Barracks didn't look anything like Claire remembered.

Most of the buildings were there, but a few had been knocked down, leaving nothing but grass-covered rubble. The greatest change, though, was in the small yellow bungalows. Many had wide verandas added to them, or pergolas laden with great clumps of pink or violet flowers. Tree houses ringed the perimeter, joined by narrow woven foot bridges.

A cluster of small wooden buildings sheltered rabbits, who ran in and out of their pens. Nearby, chickens fluttered about, some roosting in the short bushes nearby, while others scratched around in the long grass at the edge of the gardens. Claire could feel the bird-girl tense beneath her, as she trembled with the fierce desire to swoop down and catch one of these tasty morsels with her claws.

There was almost no lawn left. Most of the grass had been dug up and replaced by gardens, so many different kinds of gardens. Some burgeoned with flowers, while others were dotted with passion-fruit and guava. Some overflowed with leafy vegetables. Others were overgrown with squash, melons, and cucumbers.

In the middle of the Barracks Claire saw a small round mound covered with a kind of flowering vine she'd never before seen. Pale yellow flowers blossomed everywhere, and their centers glowed with orange-streaked fire. She shouldn't have been able to smell them from this height, but the rich earthy odor rose on the breeze, a scent light as the air itself, and as refreshing.

Claire drew in one huge breath after another, as if she couldn't get enough of it, as if she would never tire of breathing it in.

The bird-girl dropped so low that they almost grazed the roof of the little wooden gazebo, planted in the middle of what little grass was left. The bird-girl hovered above the tree-tops as if held there by some unseen hand.

All at once Claire saw Hurley, standing on the lawn in front of the gazebo, surrounded by a group of people who looked vaguely familiar. His round, massive figure was clothed shoulder to toe in a glorious green robe made of the same feathers as the bird-girl's. A low, red sun laced the wild, long masses of his hair with stripes of scarlet light.
A small smile lit Hurley's face. He glanced around as if he could see the whole of the Island, and beyond. But he seemed to look right through her. As so often happens in dreams, Claire tried to call out to him, but nothing came out of her mouth.

Then, before she knew it, a great wind caught the bird-girl's wings and bore her aloft. The green, gentle scene faded as they climbed upward.

Claire turned around as far as she could without falling off. She hated to leave the sight of Hurley behind, but he was rapidly fading into a small, dark-green dot. No, no, she protested inside. She wasn't ready; she didn't want to leave. Please, why couldn't she stay a little longer? It was so beautiful... why had she never seen it before?

It wasn't until the Barracks had disappeared beneath her that she realized her friend was gone, too. Not that he had been a friend to her in any sense of the word. Samael, that was his name. Deep in dream, Claire repeated that word which she couldn't say before.

Samael.

Sure, Kate and Jack had killed him dead as a dingo and nailed his hide to the barn door, as her grandfather used to say. Knowing was one thing. But Claire tasted the fresh, sweet air; smelled the green, overflowing plants; saw the warmth in Hurley's eyes.

Best of all, her old enemy was gone. The bird-girl circled one last time around an Island upon which no trace of Samael remained.

* * * * * * * *

As Claire hovered between sleep and waking, the thump-clump of the fan sounded like the beating of the bird-girl's great wings. As sunlight seeped through her shut eyelids, the bright vision faded. By the time she rolled over and saw Kate's worried face, much of the dream had vanished, but not the powerful sense of longing.

She stretched, then rubbed her sore neck. “Hope Mrs. Maleaua doesn't care that I bailed on her. I must have needed a nap.”

Kate stuck her terrified face right into hers, waving her hands in front of Claire's eyes. “Honey, can you see me? Can you hear me?”

“Of course I can. Kate, are you all right?”

Instead of answering, Kate darted to the bedroom door and yelled, “Sawyer, Sawyer, get in here, she's awake!”

Claire drew her legs up and wondered why their room was piled high with laundry. The dresser top was cluttered with bowls half-full of water, tea-cups, and there was a bed-pan on the end table. She didn't have long to wonder, because everyone, including the Maleuas, piled into the room and gathered around her bed.

Kate placed her hand across Claire's forehead. “Oh, my God, her temperature's normal.”

“Let me see,” Sawyer said. “Damn it, you're right.”

Mrs. Maleaua turned to Miles. “You know where Auntie Meret's house is, right? Be a good fellow, run and get her.”
“I'll go with you,” Richard said.

“Where's Frank?” Claire said. “I mean, if we're all having a convo, he might as well be here too.”

“Out fishing with our policeman friend Nariki,” Sawyer said. “I think Frank was more scared than any of us, 'cept maybe Kate here.”

“Scared?” Claire shook her head. The dull pain in her neck was more annoying than bothersome.

Kate crawled onto the bed next to her. “What do you remember?”

“Mrs. Maleaua and I were scaling fish in the hot sun. Then I felt really sick. I guess I must have passed out.” Sunset filled the west window, which meant that it was late evening, almost nightfall. “That was some nap, huh?”

Even before Kate got the words out, the look in her eyes was chilling. “Claire, honey, that was three days ago.”

“My God,” Claire said. “No wonder I'm starving.”

* * * * * * * *

Claire was sipping a cup of hot broth when Auntie Merey and Auntie Lilona squeezed into Claire's room. “Okay, everybody out,” Auntie Merey ordered. “Not you, Kate. You can stay.”

Auntie Lilona smiled broadly at Claire. “You look good.”

“Let's have a look.” Auntie Merey inspected the sore on Claire's neck. “Ah, yes. Much better.”

Afterwards the two I-Kiribati women sat quietly, as if waiting for something. Auntie Lilona gave Auntie Merey the look women share when they have been friends for a great many years, and don't need words to get the message across.

Auntie Merey said to Kate, “She's going to be all right. See, I told you Mother Mary would come through.”

Claire sipped her broth, knowing she should be more afraid at having lost three days of her life, astonished that wasn't. Very little of the dream was left, but suddenly she wanted to share it, as if the act of telling would make it last a little longer, keep it alive for a time.

“I had the strangest dream,” she started, and the aunties suddenly fixed on her, sharp and full of attention. “I saw the Island where I used to live.”

“Ahh,” Auntie Lilona said, as if she'd been waiting for this moment.

“I rode on a bird, flying through the air, and everything was green. It was beautiful, so beautiful, and he wasn't— No one was— Let's just say that there was nothing bad there, not like there was before.”

Kate leaned over intently. “Go on.”

“And the Barracks, Kate, you can't imagine.”

“No, I can't. Because the last time I saw them, they were a broken-down mess.”

“Oh, no, they weren't like that at all. There were gardens everywhere, orchards, and the houses were all open to the air, with those bamboo-curtain things that hang down like screens. And there were
people, nice ones, and animals, and—"

Kate interrupted, her face drawn with pain. “Did you see Jack?”

“I'm sorry, Kate, no. Maybe he was somewhere else, someplace I didn't go. But I did see some of the people from our old camp on the beach. And Hurley.”

Kate grew white. Two red spots stood out on her cheeks, as if she'd been suddenly slapped. She stood up, and her hands waved about like birds trapped in a house, desperately searching for an escape. “Sorry, Claire, it's been a long three days... I'm just tired, and I have to—” Then she was gone.

After the door slammed shut behind Kate, Auntie Lilona sat on the bed. “Why is Nei Kate sad?”

Claire had to think of how to phrase it. “Her man took a job on this Island, and she couldn't stay there with him.”

The aunties nodded. They were no strangers to men going to work on fishing boats, or having to live on other Pacific islands. Sometimes they were gone for months or even years at a time, leaving the women and children behind.

“She couldn't stay with him, because she'd promised to help me instead,” Claire went on, weighted down by Kate's sadness. “I guess you could say that she gave up a chance to be with him for me. Because in my dream I saw somebody, but—”

“Not the one she wanted to see,” Auntie Merey said in a flat voice.

“No. But I didn't think Kate believed in dreams, things like that.”

Auntie Lilona studied Claire for a long instant. When she spoke, Claire shivered at the awe in her voice. “That wasn't just any island in your dream, child. That was Buitani, the spirit-land. And better yet, you returned. Not everyone who visits there does.”

Auntie Merey chimed in, “You go to the spirit-land, eat their food, drink their water, you never can really rest back here. Some part of you is always left behind.”

“Not now, not yet,” Claire whispered, suddenly submerged in the dream again. ”I have to see my son. I have to get back to my son. It's been three years.”

Auntie Lilona laid her hand on Claire's. “He was born there, wasn't he? Your child.”

Claire nodded. “You're going to think I'm crazy if I tell you this. What really happened.”

“No,” said Auntie Merey. “No, we won't.”

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth.
Whispers of Xanadu

Over the next week, Ben luxuriated in morning quiet. He could have built a small fire out back, of course, but it made no sense when the great bonfire with its perpetually glowing red coals blazed in the middle of the commons. Like everyone else, Ben was welcome to help himself to chewy camp coffee from the large communal pot which had been boiling since dawn. So far, though, solitude had won. After washing his face and shaving in tepid water, Ben sat down at his desk and began to write.

No one had disturbed him so far, not even Hugo, who didn't quite get why Ben rose early and needed morning silence. By the time Hugo rubbed the sleep from his eyes, the sun had risen hot and bright. His mornings were made for breakfast and greetings, questions and discussions, followed (of course) by “second breakfast” around ten o'clock.

In the early morning light, Ben reflexively reached into his breast pocket for the glasses he no longer needed, then gave a small private chuckle. The Island took away, but the Island gave, too. He had been resigned to go down with the Island. Never did he imagine that it would be reborn, and him along with it.

Ben knew from personal experience that birth meant work, and this business of day-to-day life took effort. Yesterday, someone had found a box of Nancy Drew mysteries in the closet of an unused house; would Ben like them for the children's library he had set up in Alex's old room?

A few chickens had escaped from the run and eaten two rows of new taro transplants before Emma and Marian caught them. There was more carpentry work to be done than carpenters, so maybe Craig and Kenneth could train some new ones.

Then there was the new hot springs, just a few minutes' walk east. During the earthquakes, a cascade of steaming water had burst forth from a crack in the mountain wall. One pool, spacious enough for ten people to sit in at one time, bubbled over into a network of smaller surrounding pools, which all flowed down into a small stream. At first the hot spring seemed to solve the problem of showers.

The question of privacy arose. Rose wanted to alternate men's days and women's days. Kathy's band had been living cheek-by-jowl in the jungle and the upper mesa for three years, and they “all knew each others' bums as well as their own,” as Janice put it. They had no problem bathing together. Then someone brought up the possibility of a couple's day, at which point Janice and Sylvie clearly stated that “couple” did not necessarily mean “two.”

Trying to help Rose, Bernard had suggested that they just wear bathing suits, at which point Shana quipped, “So you used to wear one in the shower?” Then Rose had told her to watch her tone.

And what about the people who just wanted to wash their clothes and keep the rest on? Well, they'd no doubt end up having another meeting about it, until everyone's voice was heard and every point of contention thrashed out. One distinct advantage of dictatorship was that it was eminently more efficient.

Not that Ben was complaining over not being included. Constant negotiations left him vexed and a bit aggravated, while Hugo fielded them with smiling good humor. Even when Hugo was busy digging another patch of lawn for a garden, or pounding nails, or weaving long flexible branches into wattle fencing, he listened. Everyone had a voice. Everyone was going to be heard, even if it took a long time.
After all, time was in generous supply in New Otherton.

On this fine clear morning Ben looked from the window across the lawn, where a few of Rose's colorful dresses and Bernard's white shirts hung on a clothesline. The house which they'd moved into was moved once belonged to Tom Friendly.

Ben missed Tom. For so long Ben had fooled himself that he really ran anything around here. It wasn't true, though. Oh, Ben had issued orders all right, orders which his people had followed like automatons. But the smooth day-to-day ordering of the Barracks had fallen to Tom.

Friendly hadn't been his real name. The one he'd been given at birth, back in his hometown of Peculiar, Missouri, he told only to a few. Jacob's People had named him “Friendly” because that's what he was, in a simple, open way. Back then, Tom had moved through their band very much in the same manner Hugo did now: listening, joking, with an arm around the shoulder or pat on the back, his big face drawing you in because his warm concern was genuine, not forced.

If Tom had lived, he and Hugo would have become fast friends.

It was Tom who had comforted a sobbing Juliet when, eight months after her arrival on the Island, she finally figured out that she wasn't going back home anytime soon. During one of his visits to New York City, Tom had brought back a gift for her, a movie on VHS tape. On the inside of the clam-shell case he had written in a big, sprawling hand, “To Jules, with love from Tom.”

Tom told Juliet he'd brought it with him on the sub, which in a sense was true, as he had slipped the videotape into one of the submarine storage lockers before presenting it to Juliet. In that sense, Tom Friendly was as allergic to lying as Hugo.

Ben couldn't forget the night when Tom gave Juliet her gift. Her door had been open to the warm evening air, and from inside came the beat of disco and shrieks of laughter. *Xanadu*, the chorus went, over and over, as two someones inside sang along. It was the kind of noisy random happiness to which Ben was a complete stranger.

When Ben stepped onto Juliet's porch and peered in, he saw Tom sprawled out on the couch. Juliet leaned over him with a wine glass in one hand, while the other rested on his big thigh. From the empty bottles on the coffee table, they were having quite the festivity. When they saw Ben, they pulled themselves together quickly and straightened up.

Tom waved at Ben as if he owned the place, and his voice was slurred. “Come on in, join the party,”

Juliet's tight, dry smile told Ben that he wasn't wanted. As far as she was concerned, the fun was over. Manic, cheerful music still pounded from the television. Blinded by jealousy, Ben in that instant could have casually killed Tom Friendly. It was a big Island, wasn't it? Tom was one of the best bushwhackers they had, but anyone could meet with an accident out in the jungle.

Ben knew Tom well, too. No matter how high Juliet ran her hand up his leg, Tom would never take her into his bed. But that was immaterial. Juliet had a life apart from Ben, a life where she could be happy.

Tom would never be to Juliet the kind of man Ben dreamed, planned and hoped to be. For Ben, though, possibilities were running as dry as an emptying hourglass. It was Tom who could make Juliet laugh with such energy that the whole Barracks heard it.

Ben never could make Juliet laugh. And Tom never knew that what saved him that night wasn't his homosexuality, but Ben's hope that as long as Juliet could laugh like that, she might eventually
accept life on the Island. And someday might even come to accept Ben.

Well, look how that had worked out.

Outside, Ben watched Hugo and Bernard talk, as they stood in the shadow of a spreading oak. What in seven hells was Hugo doing up at this hour?

Unlike Hugo, Bernard was an early riser. For the past few days had been rooting through the infirmary, or doing house-to-house searches for rubbing alcohol, gauze bandages, or the like. He also collected knives, scissors, rock excavation tools, and any kind of small picks or scrapers he could find.

From the look of it, those two weren't discussing the lack of dental tools, either.

Ben groaned inside. For days he had been waiting for the penny to drop, but it hadn't. No one had exploded into drama at any of their daily organizational meetings. Rose always smiled at Ben when they met in front of the big communal fire. Desmond puttered about as usual, collecting wood and nails, still bunking on the Elizabeth at night. So far, it seemed that Hugo hadn't said anything to anyone about the Door.

Well, that obviously had changed. Might as well meet it head-on.

Ben had barely stepped off his front porch when a very determined Bernard sped directly towards him. “You're just the man I'm looking for.”

“Good morning to you as well.”

“Hugo's waiting for us at the infirmary. There's something we need to discuss.”

Ben had always hated the infirmary for no reason that he could see, and always went the long way round to avoid it. For three decades he'd managed to conceal his apprehension from everyone. “No emergency patients, I hope?”

“That would be a nightmare, as I'm nowhere near ready.”

“Well, let's just hope our luck holds out, shall we?” Ben said as they crossed the commons towards the infirmary.

“We're here, Hugo,” Bernard called out as he pulled open the rickety screen door.

“Awesome.” Hugo sat in the main clinic room at the big metal table. He had blown up a latex glove to gigantic cartoon-sized proportions, its five fat fingers sticking out like pale sausages. He was busy adding a face with a Sharpie marker.

Bernard frowned at Hugo as he sat down in a wheeled office chair. “These are a somewhat limited commodity.”

“What, Sharpies?”

“No, Hugo, surgical gloves.”

“Oh, sorry, Bernard. Just thought it would be fun for the kids to bat around. That boar's bladder didn't last very long.”

“About five minutes, as I recall,” said Ben. “Never mind, Bernard. I'm sure you'll eventually make do with washing your hands.”
Bernard just stared at Ben, simmering.

Hugo started to say, “Guys—”

He didn't get to finish. Bernard leaped to his feet, sending the chair across the room to crash into a metal cabinet. “Do you realize... do you realize what he's done? All that time they were picking us off, kidnapping us, experimenting on us, we could have just gone through some, some 'Door.'”

Bernard slammed his fist down on the table so hard that a few pill bottles flew off and clattered to the floor.

“Come on, Bernard, chill,” said Hugo as he stood. He tried to put his hand on Bernard's shoulder, but Bernard shook it off.

Bernard's words tumbled out in a harsh stream. "Those two girls that got shot, they didn't have to die."

At Hugo's sharp, in-drawn breath, Bernard pressed his advantage further. "Or Mr. Eko. And all those people from the beach who disappeared, if they hadn't run off into the jungle already. Remember that freighter? Nobody had to be here for that. We could have left.”

Ben sat silent. He'd weathered a lot of outbursts in his time. He could outlast this one.

Bernard fixed Hugo with a glance like blue steel. “Claire didn't have to have her baby here, either. She didn't have to get kidnapped.”

The arrow hit its mark, and Hugo went from pale to a deep, flushed red. The air around him felt charged, as if lightning were about to strike. With slow, elephantine grace, Hugo turned to Ben. “Why, Ben? Why?”

Very still, Ben shrank down into his chair. “I'm sorry.”

Bernard recovered his chair and sank into it. “You're sorry.”

“Yes, I am. And all I can do is try to fix whatever I can.”

* * * * * * * *

Lost and confused, Hugo staggered out of the infirmary. He didn't even blame Ben for not telling anyone about the Door. Hurting people and keeping secrets were what the Others did back then.

Bernard's words about Claire had lashed Hugo like a whip, but that wasn't the worst. It all came down to Jacob. Jacob had gone back and forth whenever he pleased. Never mind how many people needed help, or to get to a hospital, or to be saved.

A clear mental picture came to him, what they called seeing “with your mind's eye.” Like one picture laid over another, he saw their old beach before they'd set up camp there. Two boys were playing a board game like backgammon. Hugo knew at once that the blond one was Jacob, the dark one his brother, and that for them both, this had all been a game from the start.

*My game, my rules*, the dark-haired boy said to the blond one. *Someday you'll have your own game, then you can make your own rules.* Pawns in a chess game, that's all they were. Not any more, though.

He stared into the great central fire, burned by a swift, terrible insight: he had never had a
hallucination in his life. Everything he'd seen was real.

Someone touched him lightly on the arm, and the seashore vision vanished entirely. “Hurley, are you okay?” It was Sirrah, baby Lee nestled in his sling. When he stopped suckling, Sirrah held him up against her shoulder, giving him light taps on the back.

“I can do that for you,” Hugo said.

“You sure?” Sirrah said with a smile. “Sometimes he cuts loose.”

Baby Lee was chunky and substantial in Hugo’s arms. He must have patted him just the right way, because the baby soon rewarded him with a resounding belch. Holding little Lee reminded him of times when he’d burped Aaron, so long ago. At least Lee didn’t let loose a long string of half-digested milk, though. Thanks for small favors.

A couple of people had gathered around, not to watch Hugo burp a baby, but because he stood there so obviously stricken. He handed Lee back to Sirrah and said, “Could you, um, kind of get everybody? ’Cause I have something to say.”

As everyone clustered around, Hugo looked anxiously at Rose, but miracle of miracles, she wasn’t yelling. Her calm was obviously having an effect on Bernard, because he didn’t look angry anymore, just crestfallen. Desmond brought up the rear, face stuck in a frown. He’d been on his way to work on the Elizabeth, and now there was this distraction.

Ben asked Cindy, “Where are the kids?”

“Darrah took them to the dock, to work on the fish pond. They’re taking measurements, to see how much stone we need.”

“Just so they stay off the Elizabeth,” Desmond said with a growl in his voice.

Cindy gave him a just-another-rowdy-passenger smile. “Yes, Desmond, the children know not to bother your boat.”

Shana and Kathy walked over, covered in garden muck, with Sullivan and Meredith close behind. Meredith held Kiya by the hand, and when the little girl heard mention of Darrah and the older children, she began to pout. “You didn’t let me go. I’m big enough.”

Hugo knelt before Kiya, a giant next to a tiny elf. “Hey, you get to listen to the big people meeting.”

“How’d you like to be taller than everybody else?”

The little girl clapped her hands in glee. “Climb aboard,” Hugo said, resting her on his shoulders. “Is this everybody?”

“Everybody who’s here,” Kathy answered. “The rest are up at the North Mesa with the cattle.”

“I’ve got Kiya for the day,” Meredith added.

Sullivan hugged her. “Good practice for us.” Her cheeks grew pink with a faint, pretty blush.

Sullivan and Meredith were going to be cutting up sheets for diapers soon. As Hugo lowered Kiya to the ground, he said, “Somebody needs to go get them. Darrah and the kids, too.” Another tiny pang went through him. He might as well carry on, because there was nothing else he could do.
He stood alone in front of the fire, stirring it idly with a long stick. No one came near, but he could feel their eyes on him, could hear the low buzz of conversation.

Finally, when Darrah and the children returned, he cleared his throat to speak. “When we first crashed here, some of you remember, how nobody, um, talked to anybody else. We kept a lot of secrets from each other.”

“I know we did,” Kathy said, and Shana nodded. “People keep secrets when they're frightened.”

At the word “frightened,” Hugo glanced directly over at Ben, who looked away. “Well, I'm not gonna keep secrets. There's a way off the Island that's been here all along.”

Rose said, her voice sharp, “I thought we already went through this. Everyone here is here because they want to be. Present company expected, Desmond.” As if something had occurred to her, she gave Hugo a hard look. “Unless you do.”

Again Hugo was surrounded by a sea of expectant faces, waiting for him to say and do the right thing. He didn't want to disappoint them. “I said I'd do this job, and I'm not gonna shirk it. But things happened really fast, and there were, um, some loose ends. Everybody thinks we're dead, that I'm dead. My mom already went through that once, and it almost broke her heart. Now she's going through it all over again. And then there's—”

“The people who went back,” Kathy broke in.

Everyone seemed to have one mind. They had all watched Hugo sitting on his porch at day's end, gazing over at the flowery mound which had once been Claire's house.

“We can keep things running here,” Kathy said with a smile. “Just don't be gone too long.”

Ben blurted out, “Hugo, Kathy, don't you think—”

Rose interrupted. “Kathy has a point, Ben. We can manage.”

With that, the group began to break up. Anyway, it was time for lunch.

What surprised Hugo was that Desmond was so adamant against trying it.

As Desmond packed some tin snips and rivets from the motor pool, he said his piece in no uncertain terms. “I'm a sailor, not a bloody rabbit popping in and out of a magical hat. My father-in-law brought me here because there's something different about me. What if what made me survive the Heart might also kill me if I used the Door? I'm not taking that chance. So as I said, no bleeding way.”

He hoisted up his heavy bag to his shoulders. “And now if you blokes will excuse me, I've got a boat to get sea-worthy.”

* * * * * * *

Later that evening, Ben found Hugo sitting alone before the fire pit, staring into the flames. Beside him was a red bucket filled with sand, painted with big white letters which read, “In Case of Fire.”

Ben recognized the bucket from the recreation room. The Dharma Initiative had used them back in the day, instead of fire extinguishers. He settled down next to Hugo, careful not to break the aura of silence which surrounded him.
Finally Hugo spoke. “Hey, Ben. What d'you think's going on with Desmond? You know, not wanting to take the short-cut home.”

“Well, maybe he's tried to leave so many times, that he can't quite believe it's going to happen. After you've touched a hot stove, you always flinch.”

“Yeah, maybe that's it.” Hugo didn't sound convinced.

“Also, he's had a great disappointment. He thought he was going to wake up in some perfect Shangri-La.

“Instead he got us. Not much of a bargain.”

“He's had a lot of setbacks, like we all have.” Ben pulled out an Apollo bar and handed half to Hugo. “The last one on the Island.”

“No way. That's it, huh? Umm, marshmallow nougat.”

“Not my favorite, but it'll do.”

Hugo devoured the candy in two swift bites. “I'm not picky.”

“That's good, because we're pretty much down to Island rations now.”

“We're gonna get a few of the cows up here. That'll mean fresh milk, butter, cheese curds. And lots of manure for the gardens.” Hugo chuckled. “That part's gonna be work.”

“You know, it's the end of an era,” Ben mused.

“I thought that was supposed to be a good thing.”

“All change comes with a cost, doesn't it?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Hugo looked over into the bucket by his side, then rubbed his hand over his face like a man who is very tired. “Sullivan's moving out.”

“Well, didn't see that coming.”

“You didn't? Meredith set up house behind the taro garden. Sullivan knocked out some of the walls, for a better breeze. He's been over there the last couple nights.”

There was more here, but Hugo hadn't gotten to the crux yet. To be polite, Ben nibbled his half of the Apollo bar. He never had developed a taste for those things. “What's with the bucket?” He wanted to peer in but wasn't sure if that would be welcome.

Hugo shifted, as if hiding an embarrassing secret. “Nothing. Just a, you know, science thing.”

Now Ben was genuinely intrigued. “What kind of science thing?”

“Okay, take a look at these coals.”

The glowing coals in the bucket looked perfectly ordinary. “I'm not seeing the big picture here.”

“You know how long they've been in there, Ben?”

“I have no idea.”
“Three days. And they're not even cool.”

“That makes sense. They're resting in sand, which is an insulator. And different kinds of charcoal burn at different rates, depending on the type of wood used.”

“Dude, that's not it. Look over there, at the fire pit.”

The yellow flames rose up higher and brighter than when Ben and Hugo had arrived. Ben fought to keep the tremble out of his voice. “Yes?”

“We got committees for everything, Ben. Not firewood, though. Sure, people have cleaned up those fallen branches and stuff, but that won't keep keep a fire like that going. Sullivan organized a firewood detail anyway, until Rose told him to just stop.”

The appeal in Hugo's eyes had turned to fear. “When we lived on the beach, there were, like, forty of us. People spent hours every day looking for driftwood, or deadwood in the jungle. You could look for an hour and only get a few pieces. Some people even cut down trees. I never went for that. But this—”

“I've seen something like that before,” Ben said in a dry tone.

“What?”

“When I went up to the northwest shore, I didn't bury the men that the monster killed. Because Jacob had a fire, too.”

“The one you, uh, burned him up in.”

“Yes, Hugo, the one I burned him up in. Just a ring of stone, barely any wood, and a fire. After his body was entirely gone, the fire burned out. Then, when I went back up there—”

“You didn't gather any wood for that, either.”

Ben just shook his head.

Hugo let this sink in for awhile. “So I guess this is like, my fire.”

“Well, you wouldn't be the first ruler of a utopia to have a perpetual motion machine. In fact, I think the nature of Utopia is to have one.”

“Ben, man, where do you get this stuff? Half the time I dunno what you're talking about.”

“Never mind. Don't worry about the fire, Hugo. Nobody's made a big deal about it, have they?”

“Nope. Well, just Rose, when she told Sullivan to go find something else to do. You know that look she gets.”

Ben did, indeed. “Isis, keeper of mysteries. Just like Eloise Hawking.”

“Who?”

“I guess Jack didn't tell you about Mrs. Hawking.”

“Jack was kind of busy at the end there.”

“It's a long story. But she's how we got back to the Island this time.”
“I know how I got back to the Island. Jacob told me to get on a plane.”

“For the rest of us, it was a bit more complicated than that.”

“Say, Ben, you gonna finish that Apollo bar?”

“I don't think so. Here, go ahead.”

After two more bites, Hugo said, “Sleep’s kind of eluding me, dude. You might as well catch me up on Mrs. Hawking and how Jack managed to get us all here.”

So Ben did, as the eternal flame flickered on through the long watch of the night.

(continued)
As the nights passed, Desmond still slept in the Elizabeth, as if hovering over her would magically stock her galley, patch the shot-up cabin galley door, and put the yacht in dry-dock so he could check her hull for seaworthiness.

Hugo could tell that Des was getting frustrated. Nor was Hugo entirely selfless. If push came to shove, he had to admit that he missed Desmond. Once in awhile he could show his face in New Otherton, couldn't he?

Some people just needed a personal invitation. Maybe Desmond was one of these, and Hugo decided to deliver it himself.

Northwest of the Barracks, the old Dharma road ran down to the dock by the bay. As Hugo plodded along, he pondered.

Should he fix the Elizabeth himself? Desmond didn't need to know. And it was critical that no one else did, either.

As soon as Hugo thought of it, he dismissed it. It would freak people out to see the Elizabeth fixed as if by magic and provisioned out of nowhere. For an instant Hugo felt sorry for Jacob and Jacob's seemingly callous indifference. Because once you started, where did it stop?

As a kid, Hugo had watched this Disney cartoon that had scared the crap out of him. Mickey Mouse was a flunky for this magician guy, a kind of crabby Dumbledore. That wizard dude was downright terrifying, with his bristling brows and hawk nose. Mickey had to fill the wizard's gigantic bathtub, but that was a drag, so he stole the wizard's hat and enchanted the broom to do the work for him. Of course it all went straight to hell, because once the brooms got going, Mickey couldn't make them stop. It only ended when the wizard stepped in to put everything right.

But what wizard would fix things up for him if he screwed up, if he started something he couldn't finish?

And even if he didn't screw it up, was that really how he was supposed to do things, by calling up a magic he didn't even understand?

The Dharma Road stretched out smooth and straight before Hugo. Long ago the trees had been cut away from the road, and they hadn't grown back. Moonlight bright as street lamps lit Hugo's way.

Soon the path veered off to the left. On either side the thicker, taller trees thinned out, replaced by smaller ones with long, thin fronds. Patches of wetlands covered by fine, phosphorescent mist appeared on either side of the road. Frogs peeped and called out to one another, or jumped into pools with loud plops.

Suddenly a light-colored blur sprinted across the path. “Vincent?” Hugo's heart pounded because that darting creature didn't look like Vincent at all.

As far as Hugo knew, there were no other dogs on the Island. Smaller than Vincent, it wagged its tail at Hugo. It looked like a big Shih-Tzu, and its silky white fur glimmered silver in the moonlight.
“Hey, boy.” Hugo had some cheese scavenged from dinner for a midnight snack, and he handed a fragment to the dog. Its black eyes glittered, and for a dog of its size it had awfully long teeth, gleaming white against its dark gums.

“Here you go.” He was a bit nervous at those long teeth coming so near to his fingers. But the dog had impeccable manners. It took the bit of cheese delicately, then wolfed it down in one swift gulp.

Snack finished, the creature began to yip and wiggle. When the hairs on Hugo's arms rose, he knew that the dog's display wasn't for him. Someone stood behind him on the path. He heard the soft in-and-out draw of breath, sensed a sweet familiar odor.

The dog shot past him. He turned around slowly, half-knowing who he would see. Pele wavered in the middle of the path, while the white dog leaped about her knees in excitement.

“Ordinary eternal machinery,” she said in a pale, wan voice. She looked terrible, her hair dark and lifeless as an extinct volcano. Her eyes were tired and her face was drawn. She looked like she had been through a war.

“Pele!” He opened his arms to welcome her in, but she stepped back, hand lifted in warning. The moonlight shone through her as if she was a sheer curtain.

“Ordinary eternal machinery,” she repeated.

He made a small questioning noise.

“Fixing things,” she said. “You wanted to know how you could fix things without it all going wrong. That's how. Practice the ordinary. Carry wood, draw water. Practice the everyday things, the things that last. Use the machinery which makes things work. The motion of work, ordinary work. Pallas knows. Pallas can help with that. She knows all about machinery.”

One good thing, as Pele talked, she seemed to solidify up a bit. She even started to cast a faint shadow on the dirt road.

“I think I get it,” Hugo said. “Just fix Desmond's boat the ordinary way. Nothing fancy.”

Pele gave a weak smile, and turned as if to go.

“Wait,” Hugo called out. “What happened to you?” He tried to put his arms around her again, but again she shook him off.

“No. If you do, I will burn you. Not that I want to, lover. But I'm that angry.”

“Pele, what is it? What's wrong?” He was almost wailing.

“I forget how strong the gods of your world are. The one who uses Hawai'i for his footstool is one of the worst. His price was high.” She shrunk down into herself, pulling her bright red and blue-flowered shawl tight around her shoulders as if it could shield her from some vile memory.

Hugo wanted to wait till she pulled herself together, but the words blurted out anyway. “Did it work? Is everybody all right? Did they get back?”

“Not yet. But they will.”

“Ben said it's gonna take a long time.”

“It won't. A week, maybe not even that.”
The questions tumbled right out. “Did you see them? Did they look okay? How was Claire?”

Some of Pele's old twinkle broke through. She was fully solid now, and had gotten a little of her glow back. “Tarawa's a good place, full of friends. They'll be safe there. They're all together, and they're fine. My colleague,” and she spit the word out like a foul taste, “my colleague knows how to get things done. How to clear the rocks from the path, so to speak.”

The world seemed to lift from Hugo's shoulders. “Pele, thank you so, so much.” Her skin glowed like embers in the fire at the end of the day. As a light rain started to fall, the tiny drops sizzled on her skin.

What kind of trouble had he gotten her into, with his selfish wish? “I'm sorry it caused such a hassle.”

Pele looked genuinely surprised. “Hassle? No, the hassle is what I would have gotten from my mother if I hadn't done this. That hassle would have made my small jaunt to Hawai'i look like a resort vacation.” Her old smile was back now, and another fire besides anger danced in her eyes. “Look, I'm not going to say it was nothing. I'm headed right now for the highest peak on the Island, where the liquid rock still burns. I have to bathe in it, to wash that god's stink off me.”

“Pele,” he said, aghast. What kind of horrible price did she have to pay?

“Lover, don't worry. I can see what you're thinking, and it wasn't like that. No one enters my bed that I don't want there. But the volcano is cooling even as we speak, and I need to take that dip. My will, and my mother's will too, is that your friends get back safe and sound.

“More than that, this little jaunt has shown me just what Kamapua'a and I need to do. This Island needs you. But those islands, our islands need us. And helping you, well, that got us on the move.”

“On the move? Where?”

“Back to the islands which once were ours. Back to Moloka'i, for starters.”

Hugo looked around, disappointed, suddenly bereft.

“Don't worry,” Pele said. “You'll have plenty of help here. You don't need me anymore.”

The white dog came up to Hugo with that canine expression which begged for another treat.

“Thanks,” Hugo said. “For everything.”

When Pele called the dog to her, it trotted over obediently, but not without one last, longing look at Hugo's pocket. “You little piggy,” she said with affection. “You're as greedy as Kamapua'a.” Now her face shone with bright, red-hot happiness. “Leave the man alone. He's got work to do.” To Hugo she said, “Just remember: ordinary eternal machinery.” Then she and the white creature slid away into the dark-green jungle.

* * * * * * *

The Dharma road stopped at a shabby, rusted shelter, where dead street lamps arched over the broken concrete path. A few lamp posts had toppled over, and the wires jutting out of their broken bases looked like stiff metal intestines. Instead of the clean rush of the ocean, there was only the dull slap of sluggish water against the long, rickety dock. A stagnant fishy smell hung over the bay.

Once hundreds of people had ended their submarine journey here. They had walked down the
gauntlet of the dock when it had been in good repair. They had passed under a bright, optimistic banner, greeted by people who folded their hands in a steeple and repeated word, Namaste.

The banner was shredded by storm and wind. Sea-birds had snatched long strips to line their nests. A few weeks earlier, Hugo had stood under it when it was fresh, as a cheery photographer cajoled them into smiling. Back then, the land's end of the dock had been piled high with crates, boxes, metal cases. Now, nothing was left but scattered pieces of rusted, unusable trash.

As Hugo carefully placed one foot on the dock, it creaked under his weight and tipped slightly to the right. One of the pylons was broken, probably. He took a deep breath and walked out, feeling the dock's unsteady sway. Out at the far end, the Elizabeth bobbed in the light waves. A metal outrigger loaded with boxes and cases was tied up next to it. Every so often a wave would drive the canoe into the pylons, where it made dull, clanking thuds.

Desmond stood at the farthest end, and tossed stones into the moon-speckled water. Pallas stood to his right, her boy-cut hair gleaming in the moonlight. Desmond ignored her.

“Yo, Desmondo,” Hugo called out. “And hi to you too, glow-y person. Hugo here, from the party.”

She greeted him with a solemn nod.

Desmond didn't turn around. “Yo, yourself.”

“Am I, uh, interrupting?” said Hugo. “It looks like there's god-talk going on here.”

Something flapped out in the water, followed by a large splash.

“Sounds like a big one got away,” Hugo said. “That's what you get, trying to fish without a pole.”

Desmond sighed. “My life would be simpler, brother, if that were just a big fish.”

Pallas put her hand over her mouth, as if she didn't approve.

“What'd you get yourself into now, dude?”

“Nothing. Everything. Oh hell, that was Nāmaka, alright? She doesn't want me to leave. No, it's not like that, well, not entirely.”

Hugo frowned. “I thought you were gonna, like, go back to Penny and Charlie.”

Desmond missed Hugo's frown as he stared out towards the bay.

Pallas folded her arms, patient. She looked like she'd been there for a long time.

Desmond turned to Hugo, defensive. “Who said I wasn't going back? Nāmaka and me, we were just having a conversation. I promised Penny I wouldn't leave her again. Swore to it on my mother's grave, the sacred stone of the Scottish kings, you name it. D'you know, when I was in the hospital, she was thinking of leaving me?”

“Aw, come on,” Hugo said. “You and Penny, I saw you on the Searcher. You were like white on rice.”

Desmond shook his head, as if none of that mattered. “I could see it in her eyes, hear it in her voice. 'I don't know how much more of this I can take,' she said. I was healing so fast that it might as well have been a bloody miracle, but there she was, crying. So I promised her that when I got back on my feet, we'd sail for Australia, show Charlie the reefs. Then head over to New Zealand, hike in the
mountains. That all this bloody business would be over, for good.”

Hugo's face was all panicked appeal. “Pallas, tell him, it wasn't his fault.”

She stood still and remote, her face cool as carved marble.

“Married life never was your department, was it?” Desmond snapped at her.

“Des, I really do not think you oughta talk to her that way. I read this comic once. This guy fought in some Greek war and then tried to get home. The dude who hid inside the wooden horse.”

“Odysseus,” Desmond said, uninterested.

“He pissed off some goddess and it took him another ten years to get back to his wife and kid.”

Now Pallas did crack a faint smile. “That was Hera's work, not mine. I happened to be helping that particular sailor at the time. As for personal knowledge, Sea-Farer, I don't have to be a fish to know how one moves in the water.”

“You're not, uh, gonna do that to Desmond, are you?” Hugo said in a pleading voice. “Ten years, man, that would suck. Charlie would be almost a teenager by then.”

“All right, I'm sorry,” Desmond said, more petulant than sorrowful. “But look what happened. I finally get Penny calmed down. She leaves the room to go get a cup of coffee. Some nurse comes in, a man I don't recognize, and injects painkiller into my IV line. But it's not painkiller, is it? Because everything goes black, and I wake up here on this bloody Island. Then I go down into that bleeding well of light, thinking it's all going to be better, but it's not. I'm not in a better place. I'm still here.”

“Desmond, I said I'd get you home.”

“And what if there's no home to get back to?”

Hugo pulled Desmond by the shirt-front, getting right into his face. “All right, just say there's not. But you can't do this to your kid, man. My dad walked out on my mom. It's not like he didn't love her or nothing, either. He stopped talking, she stopped talking, and before you know it, it was a year, then two, then five. Then it was like he was gone almost forever. It sucked, you know? Because when he came back, I hated him for awhile, and that sucked even worse.”

“The son of David speaks true,” Pallas said. “You should heed him.”

Hugo let Desmond go. “Pallas, he's just upset. Don't be mad at him and make him take ten years to get home.”

“Don't worry. Your fair speech makes up for his.”

Desmond threw another flat stone into the water. It skipped across the moonlit surface a few times before sinking with a plop, and right where it landed, the surface of the water broke. A dark, seal-slick head appeared, followed by black eyes glittering with cold fire. As her head rose out of the parting waters, long hair streamed over her shoulders like a blanket of wet satin.

“Hey, Nāmaka,” Hugo said. “Come on over, join the fun.”

Nāmaka glided smoothly towards them, without leaving a wake. She pulled herself halfway onto the dock and rested there, water dropping off her dress slick as fish scales.

“Nāmaka—” Hugo was ready to beg if necessary.
She cut him off and turned to Desmond. “So I can't talk you out of it.”

Desmond just shook his head.

“You'll be miserable.”

“Look, I don't want to hear a word against Penny.”

“Who said anything about Penny? My sister Pele is the home-wrecker, not me. Just because we shared a few kisses at a party doesn't mean you get a merman's tail and meet the rest of the family.”

Desmond's blush glowed pink in the moonlight.

Hugo said to Pallas, “Maybe these two need some time alone.”

“No!” both Desmond and Nāmaka said at once, then fell silent.

Hugo shifted from one foot to another, nervous. Then he stopped, because that made the rickety dock really sway.

Pallas broke the awkward moment. “Sea-farer, let's look at this a different way. It's not Penny who will make you miserable, although you've certainly contributed to her misery over the years, haven't you?”

“You sound just like my dear departed father-in-law,” Desmond said with a trace of sullenness.

“Speaking of which. Proof has to reach the world that Charles Widmore is dead, for two reasons. First, because upon his death, your wife will become very, very rich. Even richer than she is now. Second, it's well known, as you yourself have said, that there was no love lost between the two of you. Or between your wife and her father, for that matter.”

Hugo knew right away what Pallas was getting at. “Dude, didn't you ever watch Law and Order? If anybody suspects foul play, Penny's the first person they'll go after. You can't leave her high and dry like that. Even if she is mad at you, which I doubt.”

“Correct, Protector.” Pallas turned from Hugo to Nāmaka. “Lady of the ocean, we need your help.”

Nāmaka frowned, as if the subject was still under debate.

Pallas crouched down to her. “I've seen his fate woven in the woof of time. It is to neither stay nor go, to remain neither in this world nor in his own. There are other gods in the sea, as you well know, and they have claimed him for their own. For him they will open channels upon which others may not sail. And this departure marks the first step of that journey.”

“What in the bloody hell is she talking about?” Desmond said to Hugo.

“I dunno, dude. But you ought to listen to her. Nāmaka, too. Remember what Pele said at the party? Without Nāmaka you don't get anywhere.”

Desmond threw his hands in the air. As he paced the deck, the loose boards creaked even louder. “Some promise. Some 'protector.' I thought you could do this. You're supposed to have the power and all. In general, brother, I smell a giant pile of steaming bollocks. I don't think you could ever get me off this rock. Ironic, isn't it, that the only ones who really could were Charles Widmore with his freighter, his pilot, his chopper. And then Penny. Nobody else that I can see.”

Pallas drew herself up to her full height, then gave Desmond the same unimpressed look which a
mother directs at a toddler having a tantrum.

Nāmaka wasn't so restrained. She waved towards the *Elizabeth* and said, “So, Pallas, should I just sink that old tub over there? Because that may be the only way to get his attention and shut his disrespectful, ungrateful, whining mouth.”

Hugo made a low whistle of appreciation. “Wow, you sound just like Pele.”

“Do I?” she said, the edge still sharp in her voice. “We did have the same mother, after all. I guess we learned from the best.”

Hugo heavily rested his hand on Desmond's shoulder. “Desmondo, bro, I think you need to listen to the ladies here.”

“It’s just that—” Desmond started.

Pallas spoke over him. “Neither your rationalizations nor your guilt interest me in the slightest. This is what you’re going to do. Did you touch that outrigger over there at any time since it's been here? The one full of boxes?”

“No,” Desmond said. “But I don’t see—”

“Ten years, dude,” Hugo said in a warning voice. “Better let her talk.”

Pallas waved her hand towards a large Halliburton strong-box in the outrigger, and the lock sprang open at once. Hugo lurched backward at the sight inside: a wide variety of small arms and ammo.

From the pocket of her her loose, calf-length trousers, Pallas took something small and black, made of leather and dripping wet.

“What the hell is that?” Desmond said, squinting.

“What your people call a ‘wallet.’”

“That's Charles Widmore's wallet, isn't it?” said Hugo.

“Where the devil did you get that?” Desmond asked.

“I saw where the women buried him. One of the bears dug him up for me.”

Hugo winced. “Oh, man, that's gross.”

Pallas tossed the wallet into the strong-box, where it hit the bottom with a squelch. She waved again. The box snapped shut with a loud click and she tossed it into the bay, where it bobbed to the surface like a cork.

Pallas said, “Nāmaka, might I kindly have some assistance?”

Nāmaka gave a little pout, but flicked at the water. All at once, the box began to drift away from the dock and out to sea.

“I get it!” Hugo was practically jumping up and down now, which made the dock sway even worse than before. “That way they get the message that Widmore's gone. They get his gun-box, find his wallet, he gets declared missing at sea, but Desmond’s not implicated.”

“Implicated,” Pallas said. “But yes, that's it exactly.”
“Are you sure you never watched *Law and Order*?”

Pallas gave Hugo a cool smile before climbing into the outrigger. She tossed the rest of the boxes into the bay, where they drifted out to sea in an orderly line.

“What was in those?” Desmond asked. “Mightn’t there have been something we could use?”

“You need nothing of Charles Widmore’s.” Pallas stepped back onto the dock, which didn’t sway an inch beneath her feet. “Now, back to the matter at hand. By the time you’re sea-ready and provisioned, this flotsam will have been discovered.”

“I have to admit, it’s bloody brilliant,” Desmond said. “I guess I misjudged you.”

“At least he admits it,” Nāmaka said.

“Opinions don’t interest me, only actions,” Pallas said. “Heed my words, Sea-Farer. Your wife’s new fortune will bring you neither happiness nor security. It’s not your world anymore, Desmond. It hasn’t been since you started to travel without heading or bearing through the sea of time.”

“You sound like someone I met. An old woman full of secrets and surprises.”

“Your Mrs. Hawking. I’ll take that as a compliment.”

The mention of Eloise Hawking’s name gave Hugo a small shiver down his back. He said, “You know, you and Penny, you’re always welcome. And Charlie would love it here. There are the kids, and, you know, uh, I’d miss you.” Afraid that he’d pushed too hard, he ended with, “But it’s up to you, of course. And Penny.”

“Much obliged,” Desmond sounded still unconvinced.

Nāmaka gave Desmond a little splash to get his attention. “Don’t worry about your boat. I’ll watch her and make sure she suffers no harm.” Then without another word, she sank beneath the waters.

Hugo turned to thank Pallas, but she was gone as well. Only the two men stood at the end of the dock, while the lowering moon hovered over the tops of the dark trees which ringed the bay.

Finally Hugo said, “Look, Desmondo, why don’t you come back to the Barracks and bunk down with me ‘fore you go? Sullivan’s moved out, so there’s plenty of room. And hey, maybe if we’re lucky, we can grab a midnight snack.”

*(continued)*

Chapter End Notes

*(A/N: the chapter title comes from an expression coined by Leonard Cohen in his novel, *Beautiful Losers.*)*
Things moved slowly in Tarawa, but finally the American assistant under-secretary to the US
Ambassador to Kiribati arrived. He reserved a suite of rooms at South Tarawa's finest hotel, a
ramshackle A-frame structure with a sign on the swimming pool which read, “Warning: Hepatitis C.
Closed by the South Tarawa Health and Safety Commissioner.”

Somehow, as often happened in Tarawa, there was a mix-up. The Perth Wagga Wagga Wombats
had booked the entire place for the same two days. There were no computer records. The slips of
paper with the reservations couldn't be found. No American appeals or threats could convince the
manager to dislodge the Aussie soccer team.

The disgruntled Americans had retired to a pub in Betio, where the charge d'affaires for Her
Excellency the Australian High Commissioner happened to be sitting across the bar from them. A
few phone calls later, the High Commissioner herself invited the American diplomats to bunk down
in the guest wing at the Australian embassy.

Her Excellency had encountered this situation before. Other than “Christmas” Island, it was
understandable that Americans didn't get to Kiribati much.

Claire knew that the others were terrified on hearing that the US government representatives had
finally arrived. Everyone was required to show up, except for Claire.

A few hours before the meeting, Claire and Kate sat in their bedroom. Kate went over how to reach
Claire’s mother; the combination to the safe where Kate kept her cash, papers, Aaron's passport.
There were legal papers which would let Carole take him out of the country.

Kate was telling her this because she wasn't sure that she'd be allowed to return to the lodge, much
less Los Angeles. She was preparing to be taken into custody.

All the Yanks could be held, theoretically. But Claire didn't think the Australian ambassador would
let that happen.

The panel van to take the Americans to the embassy bore the Blue Ensign of Australia, and directly
under it fluttered the Stars and Stripes. Kate's white, scared face disappeared into the diplomatic van.
Sawyer followed, his brows knit together with worry. Miles had lost his perennial smirk, and
Lapidus stared ahead, stone-faced. Only Richard seemed unfazed.

Maybe it was crazy, maybe the fever had fried her brain, but Claire wasn't as worried as she
probably should have been. After the van drove off, Mrs. Maleaua tentatively announced that she
wanted to go hear a Mass for the new priest, a young and jovial fellow from the Philippines. Mr.
Maleaua was off fishing with his nephews instead of Sawyer and the rest.

“You could come with me,” Mrs. Maleaua said. It was the first time she'd ever suggested anything
like that to Claire.

“You go ahead. I'll get supper started.”

Mrs. Maleaua hesitated. “You sure? There's eight people, after all. And I always throw a bit more in
the pot, in case we get visitors.”
“I've got this,” Claire answered. “Really. You've done so much for me.”

Mrs. Maleaua hugged Claire, put on her bright blue and yellow scarf, and headed out through the swinging metal gate.

On this hot, wet blanket of an afternoon, Claire was alone for the first time since they'd landed here several weeks ago. It wasn't like being on the Island, overwhelmed with abandonment and loss. This was the delicious kind of solitude, sweet because it wouldn't last forever.

Claire put the enormous battered pot to boil on the gas-ring to boil. Everyone except her and the Maleauas were sick of rice. But Claire had lived for years on greasy rodent, boiled roots and scraps of pork, so white rice was a feast.

The next task was one which she loved. Mr. Maleaua's brother had dropped off an enormous cooler full of ice and deep-sea scallops. Claire shucked each one with a butter knife, tossing the shells into the rubbish bin and the tender white meat into a stainless-steel bowl.

The milky-white scallops were almost as thick as her fist. Once in a while she'd cut off a slice and pop it into her mouth. All they needed to be perfect was a dollop of hot green horseradish sauce, but as far as Claire knew, there wasn't a speck of wasabi to be found on Tarawa Atoll.

Back on the Island, Claire had hungered desperately for sea-food. Forced inland by Samael, she had sneaked to the shore whenever she could, to grab bits of sea bounty before running back under the jungle cover.

One day, she encountered some Others. Not Temple Others, but the ones who lived on the northeast coast in round white tents. She skirted the edge of their camp and made off with a handful of fish drying on the line. The next time, someone had left her a few octopus. After that it was a thick shark steak, and later, a few sea scallops just like these.

Claire finally glimpsed the young, dark-haired woman who left these ocean presents for her. Vanessa, the Others called her, and she had a friendly, open face. Even though Claire didn't dare speak to her, every so often Claire snared a young boar, then left it at the edge of their village as payment. Samael never caught her at it, either.

Ah, but you could never forget the taste of the sea. As Claire shucked and tossed, her thoughts drifted back to her fever dream, as they so often did. She used to read dream books, each one packed with more extravagant nonsense than the last. They never seemed to apply to her dreams, and finally she threw them all away, taking up astrology instead.

This dream, though, was so clear and straightforward. The Island was a garden, peaceful and quiet, with Hurley at the center of it, somehow. The dream didn't feel like a coded message from her subconscious that could mean anything, or nothing. She struggled to find the right word, and finally hit upon it.

Her dream wasn't symbolism. It was news, as clear as a program on the telly. Well, except for the part where Hurley was dressed head to foot in bird feathers.

She sighed. Maybe it had been the fever talking, after all.

Claire was still puzzling it out when the front gate gave a loud creak. She tensed like a cat, alert. It was too soon for Mrs. Maleaua to get back from church, and she usually stayed a long time after Mass to chat.

Then her heart started to pound, because the thin, short shadow which passed over the concrete path
didn't belong to anybody she recognized.

A complete stranger entered the courtyard and strode towards her as if he owned the place. Claire stared into the dark, reptilian eyes of a thin, sallow-skinned man in a black suit, his shirt collar pinned together with a golden snake pin. Its eye glittered at Claire, as if it could see her. The man's violet cuffs hung down below his sleeves, and each cuff-link bore a tiny blue eye-ball.

“Hello, Claire,” he said in one of those neutral American television accents.

Claire dropped the scallop she'd just opened. She rose to her feet with precise motion, ready to fight. The butter knife made a poor weapon, but she'd had worse. She knew how to use it, and to make it hurt besides.

The stranger was no taller than she was, and even thinner. His head bobbed on a slender, hairless neck. If her narrowed eyes and the hard set of her jaw bothered him, he didn't show it. “I'm glad you didn't go to the embassy. These are such better circumstances under which to meet you.”

“Who the hell are you?” she snarled, gripping the butter-knife even tighter. She wondered if it would do any good to scream. Normally the neighborhood was noisy, full of barking dogs, children yelling, women talking, men shouting out boasts to one another from concrete front stoops. But it seemed that everyone had gone inside, or retreated to their back yards.

So screaming wouldn't do a damned bit of good.

Then, the strange man did something extraordinary. He reached down to the pocket of his slim-cut suit and started to pull something out. Her thoughts started to race, Oh god no don't let it be a gun oh please not a gun.

When he handed something to her, she almost dropped it in surprise. Luckily she recovered her grip in time, and stared in disbelief at what she held. It was a tiny jar of light green wasabi.

“It's the real thing,” he said. “No substitutes for you, my dear.” His oily tone reminded her of Samael.

She dropped the knife, not even hearing it clatter on the concrete.

Smiling like a man who's gotten a woman's full attention, he extended his hand. “Mr. Shinigami of Zaibatsu Enterprises, headquarters in Honolulu, regional offices in Tokyo, Seoul, and Los Angeles. I'd offer you a business card, but I seem to have distributed them all at the Australian embassy.”

Claire shook Mr. Shinigami's hand, and it was every bit as cold and leathery as she imagined. His dark, unblinking eyes sized her up and down.

She hadn't lived with Samael all those years to not recognize something like him. It was all in the eyes. Even when Samael had fully taken on John Locke's form, his eyes were still mostly dead. But even Samael's eyes had more life in them than Mr. Shinigami's.

“Wouldn't you like to try your wasabi on some of that fine sea-food, while I tell you how it went this afternoon for your friends?”

As a little girl, Claire's mother had told her the story of Persephone, who ate the pomegranate and thus had to stay with Hades for half the year. Or how if you ate the fairies' food, you belonged to them forever. Then the fairies would bring you back years later, your friends and family gone.

She handed the jar back to him. "I'm not hungry. Maybe you'd best just tell me what happened.”
“Mr. Shinigami's laugh had no humor in it as he returned the jar to his suit pocket. “So you're satisfied to just serve as a fish-wife here, without even a fisher-husband?”

“Look, you said you'd tell me what happened to my friends. So start telling, okay?”

He folded his arms across his narrow chest and gave the entire motel a scathing look of contempt. “What a disappointment you are, my dear, not even aware of the queen's ransom you command. In exchange for getting you and your lot off this dung-heap of an atoll, my employer finally got clear title to the land he wanted on Kaua'i.”


“That's in Hawai'i, my boganette. Drop by in a couple of years for the perfect Hawai'ian theme park experience, complete with water-park and nightly lua'us, complete with authentic dances performed by natives.” His eyes grew unfocused and his tone more robotic, like a demented commercial stuck in an endless loop.

Claire said, “Look, I've got to move these scallops out of the sun, or they'll go over.”

Shinigami gave a contemptuous gesture. “Such a little peasant you are. I'll spare you the details and just tell you what you're supposed to do, as that's obviously the level to which one has to descend to communicate with you.”

Claire slid the bowl of shucked scallops into the cooler, along with the knife. “I'm not interested in your tosh. What's been going on with Kate and everybody?”

Mr. Shinigami fixed her with his snakelike glance. In a horrible imitation of Sawyer's accent he said, “Now, Missy, I made a bargain for you, and I keep my word. And if you want to see that little sonny-boy of yours, you got to get into the good ol' US of A, praise the Lord and pass the ammunition. So you listen up, all righty?”

Samael used to imitate accents for his own amusement, too. The effect was just as dreadful, but she swallowed her terror. “Fine. Whatever you want.”

“That's just what ah like to hear, little Miss,” he drawled.

Claire could have sworn that when Mr. Shinigami had first walked through the gate, he hadn't been wearing a tall black Texas hat and pointed boots. But he wore them now. His shiny boot tips looked like they were tipped with razors.

Shinigami leered at Claire, an ugly and terrifying sight, but his tone of voice was all business. “The Americans are going to issue emergency passports to get your friends into the country, just this once. For all your sakes, they won't look too closely at Ms. Austen's. And thanks to typical American fragmentation of government, the customs officials won't know that Ms. Austen is a parole violator.”

Claire narrowed her eyes, angry despite the fear. “And did you tell anyone?”

“Of course not. Like I told you, a deal's a deal. So this is what you're going to do. At exactly 6:00 PM this evening, I'll send a hired car for you, and you're going to get in. Don't be a second late, because my drivers never are. You'll take one suitcase each. When we get to Bonriki Airport, the fat and lazy airport employees are going to look the other way while the lot of you boards my employer's private jet. It will take you non-stop to Van Nuys Airport, in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area.” Again that sing-song aura crept into his tone.

“What then?” Claire asked, half-hypnotized by that dry, repetitive voice.
“What then, you ask? The customs agents who check you in at Van Nuys will be working for me. There's only one answer when they ask you if you have anything to declare, and that's 'Nothing.' Oh, don't look so surprised. I know all about your friend Miles's baubles. But just so things don't go tits up, as you say in your colorful vernacular, you keep your pretty mouth shut, you and the rest of you. After that, I don't care. Once you clear customs, you're out of my hands.”

With that, he began to sing in a silky tenor, “Oooh, that Shakespeherian rag … It's so elegant, so intelligent...” As he sang, he gradually moved into a soft-shoe. His Texas hat and boots were gone now, replaced by leather dance shoes, a bowler hat, and a cane.

Claire just stood and stared, dumbstruck.

“What's the matter, you ignorant little ockerina? Don't you like music? Maybe you'll fancy this tune. Reminds me of an old friend of mine, in fact. 'No one half so breezy as, Half so free and easy as, Old Tiresias...'

“Or perhaps you'd enjoy something apropos of my employer's new prime Hawai'i real estate.” The soft-shoe changed subtly, sinuously, into a grotesque parody of a hula. “Aloha oe, aloha oe, I knew she'd get it in the end—”

Claire couldn't bear it any longer. If he did something horrible to her, at least he'd have to quit wriggling his hips. “Stop it!”

Amazingly, he did. Hand on hip, head cocked, cane mysteriously gone, he gave her a fierce glare, obviously unhappy at having his performance interrupted. “Don't worry, my dear, you'll get the peasant life you deserve. Now, since I don't want a certain fiery individual with a volcanic temper to erupt on me for not fulfilling my end of the bargain, you just make sure that everybody trots right onto that plane this evening. Remember, the car leaves at six PM, sharp.”

“Does anyone else know about this?”

“If they did, my small Smurfette, do you think I'd be standing here wasting my time with you? I'm a good negotiator. But some things don't get stated obviously. Some points need to be interpreted, with delicacy. You don't seem to appreciate delicacy, but you do seem to be able to take instructions. Don't 'bollocks it up,' as you'd say.”

“I'll try. Not to bollocks it up, I mean.”

He stood there, arms folded, as if waiting for something else. Claire remained silent, so after a few heartbeats Shinigami said in a sour tone, “Aren't you going to thank me? I mean, this is the last opportunity you'll get.”

Even though she didn't want to touch that cold, leathery skin again, she extended her hand, and tried to sound as polite as possible. “Of course, Mr. Shinigami. Thank you, for everything.” But she was willing to wager that wasn't his real name.

Mr. Shinigami gave a small bow, turned on his dance-shoe heel and strode out the front gate. Before he even made it to the roadway, he had vanished.

* * * * * * * * *

The crowded Australian embassy van sped down the pothole-laden main road of South Tarawa, heading back to the Bikenibeu Lodge. Squeezed in between Frank and the van's rear door, Kate clutched a manila envelope so tightly that the yellow paper stuck to her hands with sweat. She wiped her hands frantically on her skirt, then tried to blot the moisture off the paper. Her whole life was in
this envelope. It was going to get her past US Customs and back to some kind of life in LA, whatever was left of it, anyway.

She didn't think she could face again what happened after the Oceanic Six returned to Los Angeles: the media, the paparazzi, the cameras. One step at a time. She had to get out of here first, before she could worry about getting back into the United States, much less what awaited her there.

At the Bikenibeu Lodge, they piled out of the van, exhausted, hot, silent. Sawyer stepped aside to let Kate enter the patio first, but she stopped short, nose wrinkled in disgust. “You smell that?”

“Kate, everything around here smells like wet dog.”

“No, this is different.” The odor was unbelievably foul, like dried reptilian scat.

Richard turned off the propane stove and removed the big pot from the burner. “It's probably this rice. It's going to be burned on the bottom.”

Claire was nowhere to be seen. Pushing past the men, Kate headed for their room.“Claire? Claire, honey? We're back.”

The blinds were pulled down against the afternoon sunlight. Claire lay in the dark, rolled over on her side.

“You sleeping?” Kate said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Claire's voice was muffled by a pillow. “Nope."

A small flame of panic flickered through Kate. “What's wrong? Are you sick again?”

Claire sat up in bed, her face tear-streaked, eyes swollen as if she'd been crying. “I'm going crazy. There was this man—”

“What man?”

“He came into the courtyard. Said his name was Mr. Shinigami, and that we had to do everything he said if we wanted to get out of here. And then—”

“Then what? Claire, what happened?”

“He, oh God, I know this doesn't make any sense, but he ... he did a dance. And had one of those Yank cowboy hats, but then he didn't.”

“Well, you didn't imagine him,” Kate said. “Because there was a Mr. Shinigami at the meeting, for awhile. He didn't do a dance, though.”

“Really?” Claire said, sniffing. “I thought he couldn't have been real. Because what I saw was completely crazy.”

Kate stroked Claire's forehead. “You know, those fevers sometimes take a long time to go away completely.”

“I don't have a fever.”

“Well, I guess you can have after-effects, without a temperature.”

“So, you met him? He was real?”
“It was a big meeting, confusing,” Kate said. “The US embassy people just stared at us, like they wanted to rip into us, but couldn't. Ajira Airlines sent some people, too, and they stonewalled everything. Frank's definitely out of a job, and Ajira might never land anywhere else in the US again. Then, the black box, it doesn't show anything. No record of the Island. Nothing.”

“But what about this Mr. Shinigami? Kate, it's important that I know.”

“It was like watching people play poker. Each group would bluff, bluster, then lay down their cards. Long story short, this guy Shinigami's company is going to invest a huge amount of money in Kiribati, especially on Tarawa Atoll. The oceans are rising and in twenty years, this whole place might be gone, underwater. So his company offered to build sea-walls at first, and then islands, floating artificial islands, where people from Tarawa could live. In return, the Kiribati government wouldn't just turn us over to the Americans.”

“But why?” Claire asked. “It's clear what the I-Kiribati want. But why would the Americans go along with it?”

“Because America hasn't done anything to help Kiribati. This is their chance to not be embarrassed, or something like that. Everybody was cutting deals with everybody else, and we just sat there.”

“Like you were the jackpot that everybody is betting on.”

“Exactly.” Kate realized she was squishing her envelope again, and stuffed it into her bag. “They gave us passports. Well, not exactly, as they don't look like passports. But they'll get us into the United States.”

“Did anybody tell you how that was supposed to happen, Kate?”

For the first time, Kate looked flustered. “No, not really. I just assumed that we'd book flights, wait till the plane to Fiji comes next week, and then leave. But nobody said anything about that part.”

“Kate, we need to get everybody together. And don't think I'm crazy. But this Mr. Shinigami came here to see me while you were gone, and told me what we're going to have to do.”

* * * * * * * *

They huddled together under the tin-roofed breezeway as the western sun slid down the tropical sky. There was about an hour left until twilight.

“We have to be ready at six,” Claire kept insisting.

Kate rubbed her temples, sure that if Claire said that one more time, her head would split right open. She glanced over to Sawyer, hoping he'd help her out, but he just scratched his jaw, paced, and avoided her eyes.

Surprisingly, the one most resistant to the idea was Frank. “You mean we're just going on the lam? After everything everybody here's done for us?”

Richard sighed, impatient. “Frank, we're not going on the lam. If Claire is right—”

“I am right,” Claire said stubbornly.

“Excuse me, Frank,” Richard put in, all politeness. “According to Claire, the I-Kiribati are going to just let us leave the country. They're a sovereign nation. They can do that.”
“Easy for you to say,” Frank snapped. “You just didn't lose your third job in as many years.”

Richard stared dumbstruck for a second, then something inside of him snapped. “That's what this is about, a job? All right, I'll give you a job. You come to Portland, we'll set you up with a Tunisian pilot's license and you can fly for Herarat.”

“Never heard of them.”

“It'll be boring as hell. You can shuttle industrial-process engineers between Portland and the Tunis factories.”

“I can do boring,” Frank said. “But if I'm gonna show my face in the USA again, I've got payments to make. The court-ordered kind.”

“Factories?” Sawyer asked. “What factories you talking about?”

“Mittelos Bioscience.” Richard gave Sawyer a wary glance, as if not sure what he might do.

Sawyer didn't disappoint. He got right up into Richard's face, eyes wild. “You sons of bitches. You were the ones that recruited Juliet.”

Oh crap, Kate thought. If Sawyer laid into Richard, they would never get out of here. She gripped Sawyer's arm, hard. “Hold on and focus. We've got one aim here, the only one that counts.”

Sawyer pulled back, still glaring.

“Are you kidding me?” Richard said. “You didn't know this?”

Sawyer's look of wild anguish filled Kate with pity. “Juliet never told you?”

“She was vague on the details,” Sawyer muttered.

Richard still wasn't ready to back down. “Who the hell do you think has been doing our stateside logistics? And paying Dan Norton's prodigious legal bills?”

“Richard, just cool off,” Kate said. “I believe Claire. You saw that man Shinigami at the embassy today. Sawyer, you know what Locke was like after he got taken over by that thing. It was like that today. Didn't you sense it? There was something there—”

Claire interrupted, pleading in her voice. “I know weird. I lived with it for years. This bloke, he wasn't natural. Guys, after what we've all seen, what we've all been through, you have to trust me on this.”

“You can really get me a job?” Frank asked Richard.

“Hey, what about me?” Miles piped up. “I'm gonna need a job, too.”

Sawyer sat down, arms folded. “What the hell you gonna need a job for, Enos, with your sack full of rocks there?”

“You never know,” Miles said. “The market in diamonds could go down.”

“Yes, I can get you both jobs,” Richard said through clenched teeth. “Jobs for everyone. Can we just please talk about this later, after we get out of here?”

At that moment the Maleauas headed up the roadway, followed by Auntie Merey and Auntie Lilona.
As they let themselves in the gate, Richard pulled Miles aside. “I think it would be prudent to leave these kind people a generous tip.”

Miles started to protest, but with five other pairs of eyes staring him down, he just shrugged.

“Smells like somebody burned the rice,” Mrs. Maleaua said. “No matter, it'll still be OK if we just spoon it off the top.”

“We won’t be here for supper,” Claire said, daring the others to contradict her.

“We know, sweetie,” Auntie Merey said. “By the time we left the church, the news was all over. You’re getting on a plane right at sundown.”

“Well, damn,” Sawyer said.

The two I-Kiribati women frowned at him, then turned to Kate and Claire. “Come on, we'll help you pack. These men can fend for themselves.”

“Aren't you forgetting something?” Richard said to Miles.

Mr. Maleaua pocketed his diamonds as casually as if they were sticks of gum. Mrs. Maleaua refused, saying that the Australian dollars the government was paying her for the travelers' upkeep was more than enough. Auntie Merey waved them away with a laugh, saying, “Save those for the airport, for my brother. He's gonna be the one stamping your exit visas.”

Miles made a disgusted noise and rolled his eyes.

In their room, Kate emptied everything in her suitcase onto the bed, then handed the make-up and most of the clothes to the aunties. “I know you have grand-daughters. And it’s hard to get some things here.”

Auntie Merey stuffed the items into her huge woven bag, saying, “Auntie Lilona and I, we'll divide it up at home. Thanks so much.”

Tears welled up in Kate's eyes. “We're the ones who should thank you.”

Claire just hugged both women, hard. “I'll never forget either of you.”

“We won't forget you, either,” Auntie Merey said.

“It's good you're traveling light,” said Auntie Lilona. “That's the best way to start a new life.”

* * * * * * * *

A shiny grey Toyota van rolled up to the front step of the motel at 6:01 PM, by Richard's watch. Two large Asian men got out and gently held Claire and Kate's elbows as they helped them into the van. Kate noticed the sidearms holstered under their well-tailored, matching charcoal grey suits.

Crushed into two rows of back seats, they drove to the airport in silence. Sawyer must have seen the weapons too, because he kept glancing over to Kate. At one point when Kate started to speak, Sawyer put his finger to his lips and gave a small shake of the head.

At the airport, Miles covertly passed a few diamonds to the cheerful, older I-Kiribati man in a bright orange lavalava as he examined their papers. The man smiled broadly as he waved them out onto the tarmac, along with a friendly, “Have a good trip.”
Outside, the usual crowd had gathered. An airport employee shouted at a few bicyclists to get off the runway. Didn't they see that a plane was about to take off?

“Nice,” Frank said as they climbed up the stairs of the Zaibatsu Corporation's private jet. “A G550. Always wanted to fly one of these babies.”

“Well, maybe you'll get your chance,” Richard answered. “While we've been waiting to get out of here, I've been thinking of a new business model for Herarat. We could put those jets to use when we're not flying our teams to Tunis.”

“Love to hear about it,” Frank said.

They fanned out into the jet's cabin, a luxurious beige cocoon with buttery leather seats and a wood-paneled interior. The only color came from the blue twilight that filtered through the tinted window glass.

Miles grinned in admiration as he settled himself in a wide recliner. “This is the life.”

Kate and Claire settled themselves into two adjacent seats, while Sawyer buckled into the seat facing them. The van's driver waved to his companion, then headed back across the tarmac. But the other man stayed on board, and now had a two-way radio-speaker clipped to his ear. He said a few words to the pilot, then positioned himself in a single seat close to the cockpit.

“Looks like Mr. Moto's joining us,” Sawyer said quietly to Kate. “No, don't turn around.”

Richard, Frank, and Miles buckled themselves into seats clustered around a pale wooden table, intently listening as Richard talked about growing Herarat's business.

As they taxied out onto the runway, Sawyer leaned over to Kate. “So if this Shinigami's jet, where's he? He didn't seem to be the type to book economy class on Air Fiji.”

Before Kate could answer, Claire said in a low, strangled voice, “I really don't think he needs a plane to leave Tarawa.”

Kate just stared ahead as Claire's words sunk in. When the jet took off, this time it was Kate who reached out for Claire's hand and gripped it hard.

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

(A/N: "That Shakespeherian Rag" and "Old Tiresias" are from T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Waste Land." "Aloha 'oe" was written by the last queen of Hawai'i, Liliʻuokalani, who was deposed by the US government in 1893.)

Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth.
On the morning Desmond was to sail, Ben had just fetched some coffee from the commons. Rose's home-ground brew wasn't so bad once you got used to it. He sipped, ignoring the chewy bits, grateful for the surge of energy.

He had been up since dawn writing Desmond's history, up to this very day. Setting down his quill, he stretched his hands and knitted his thoughts together for one last-minute burst of mental organization.

Loud bangs on his front door broke his stride. Damn it, what now?

“Ben! Ben!” Cindy called out, each shout louder and more hysterical than the last.

On his way to the door, Ben almost tripped over boxes of unsorted books. He flung the door open to find Cindy red-faced and tear-stained.

“You have to help us,” she gasped. “Hugo, he... He wants to take the children.”

Ben steered her back outside, trying to sound as reassuring as possible. “Come on now. We'll straighten this out.” Cindy clung to him for support.

A large group had gathered under the big oak tree, all the adults as well as the four older kids, Emma, Marian, Zach and Raffi.

Marian and Raffi weren't in question. They were the only survivors of an Indonesian ferry accident. The children washed up onshore near the Temple, where Darrah found them and cared for them like her own. Now Marian clung to Darrah, while the two boys clowned around the group's edge, as if it had nothing to do with them.

Emma looked up at Hugo, dwarfed by him but defiant. When the two boys saw Ben approach, they stopped their horseplay, but still made comical faces at one another, making fun of the silly grownups.

This was Ben's reward for squirreling himself away, working on the book. He hung back with Cindy and said, “What exactly is the problem here?”

“It started up early this morning. Desmond started prattling on about how much he missed his son Charlie, how good it would be to see him again. Then Hugo got all emotional and almost cried—”

Ben could imagine. “And it went south from there, I'm sure.”

Rose charged over, bristling with irritation. “Glad you decided to grace us with your presence, Benjamin. We got ourselves a situation here.”

Flanked by Cindy and Rose, Ben worked his way into the nucleus of the group, right next to Hugo and Emma.

Emma had certainly grown, hadn't she? No longer was she the frightened little ten-year-old curled up at the foot of Alex's bed. Now she reminded Ben of Alex herself, trying out the strength of her new
womanhood.

Ben made it a point to greet her first. “Good morning, Emma, Hugo, everyone. Why don't you all have a seat, and Emma and I will just have a few words over at the gazebo. That okay with you, Emma?”

Emma still glowered, but not as badly as before. “All they're doing is talking. I'm sick of being talked at.”

“I completely understand,” said Ben.

Hugo didn't sit, though. “Ben, you can't just—”

Ben didn't like the dark expression on Hugo's face at all. “Let us have a few minutes, Hugo, alright?”

Rose put a hand on Hugo's arm. “Hurley, he had a teenager. Give him a chance.”

Hugo still glared at Ben. “Yeah, look how that turned out for her.”

Ben's ears burned with shame as he and Emma headed for the gazebo. From her stricken expression, it looked as if her sails had lost a bit of wind. Her brother Zach trailed behind.

Under the gazebo, Ben settled himself on a bench and said nothing until Emma joined him. Zach bounced up the stairs, then made a game of jumping up and down.

Finally, Emma broke the silence. “Hugo can't make us go. We'll run away into the jungle. He's so fat and slow, he'll never catch us.”

This wasn't the time to mention that if Hugo wanted to find Emma and Zach in the jungle, every rock and tree, every bush and leaf would bend to his will. Not to mention the army of birds, who saw everything. There would be no hiding place anywhere on the Island. All Ben said was, “He hasn't known you as long as I have.”

"I'll tell you something about Hugo, Emma,” and Ben was willing to wager his entire Mittlelos Pharmaceuticals holdings on it. “He misses his mother.”

Emma's skeptical look said, no way could grown-ups miss their parents. Ben sighed at how like Alex she was. He waited for the mercurial moment to pass, and it did.

Emma called to her brother, “Hey, Zach, get over here.” When he bounded up, all puppy-like energy, she said, “Zach, what's our mom's name?"  

Without hesitation Zach answered, “Cindy.”

“No, I mean our mom from back home. Our birth mom.”

Zach screwed up his face, as if she had asked him to do a difficult sum. “Um...”

Emma's face was impassive. “Where was our hometown?”

“Our what?”

“You know, where we grew up. Went to school.”

“School?”
Ben kept his own face perfectly still. Ventura would work as an answer, or Los Angeles, or even California. But the boy just sat, blankly innocent.

“Okay, one more and that's it,” Emma said with a faint Australian lilt, no doubt due to Cindy. “How about Dad? What was his name?”

While Zach was still thinking, under her breath Emma said to Ben, “Not that I remember much about him, either.”

Finally Zach said, “Mr. Linus, you always said that Jacob was our dad. That he was like a father to us.” He desperately wanted to get at least one thing right. “But Cindy said that Jacob's dead now, so Hugo's the new Jacob.”

Oh, brother, here it comes, Ben thought.

“So...” Zach said. “Does that make Hugo our new dad?”

It took all Ben's control keep from laughing. He and Emma exchanged one of those conspiratorial adult glances when a child, in all sincerity, says something innocently and touchingly funny. To laugh, though, would be as unforgivable as a slap.

As Ben and Emma struggled to keep silent, Ben knew that after this moment, he would never see Emma as a child again.

She sounded so composed, she had to know she'd won. “You're right, Zach. Hugo's in charge now. But he's not our dad.”

“Oh, okay.” Zach sounded satisfied. “Hey, there's Raffi. I wanna go get him.”

When Emma gave a nod, Zach dashed off.

“You made your case,” Ben told her. “Now let's both go talk to Hugo.”

“He thinks I'm a little kid,” Emma said.

“Well, you'll just have to show him that you're not.”

Some of the crowd had already dispersed, but Hugo still stood under the wide-spread oak, arms folded, brows still knit in a loose frown. Zach and Raffi had already dashed away on some boyish adventure of their own.

Ben stood before the ones who were left. “Let's give Emma the floor.”

Emma seemed to lose all her steam. Earlier she had set herself against Hugo, small but defiant. Now, she shrunk into herself, not saying anything. Her lower lip quivered as she fought back tears.

She had stitched her teddy bear onto her rucksack, the bag itself pieced together from old blue jeans. Slung across her back, it looked as if the bear rode piggy-back. Trembling, hesitant, Emma slid the backpack off and clutched the worn, tattered bear to her chest.

For Ben, the scene resolved with terrible clarity. He knew exactly what to do. In a cajoling voice he said, “Emma, tell Hugo about your bear.”

She relaxed her grip on the rucksack and stared at the stuffed animal, as if wondering whatever had possessed her to cling to it. “He's not a bear. His name's Wicket.”
Hugo's frown lifted a bit. He leaned closer, interested. “So your bear's, like, an Ewok?”

“You know what that is?”

“I only saw Return of the Jedi a hundred times.”

“Yeah, I saw that one too, where everybody went to the Ewok party at the end. But that's not why he's called Wicket.”

Emma's voice changed to a sing-song lilt. “When I was a little kid, there were these movies. There was a girl called Cindel, and Wicket took her to his village. I always wanted to be her, and I hated it that she didn't get to stay with Wicket.

“It was right about the time our dad left. Every night I'd lie awake and think about Endor and Bright Tree Village. I'd take walks in the forest, climb on the bridges and go from treehouse to treehouse.

“We didn't go to church. I didn't know anything about God. But I knew about praying, and each night before I fell asleep, I'd pray that I could get to Endor, that somehow I'd wind up there. But I wouldn't be like that silly baby Cindel. No matter what kinds of scary things there were in Endor: bad guys, monsters, Storm Troopers, I'd stay there forever.”

Emma looked up at Hugo full-on, no longer timid or afraid. Even with the crowd's full attention, neither saw anyone but the other.

Ben faded into the background as quietly as he could, a small talent learned from years of living with Roger Linus.

Emma went on with her story. “I wanted an Ewok, not a bear. But there weren't any Ewoks in the shops, and he was all Mom could find. So I named him Wicket, and we went off on our adventures together. After awhile I didn't care that he didn't look like Wicket. He understood me. I told him everything. And then—”

Here she paused to draw in a great, deep breath. “Then we crashed here. Of course it wasn't Endor, because the trees were different, and it was hot, and never quiet because of the ocean. But that didn't matter. Because it was like Endor, you know? Then one night Jacob's people came. At first they were scary, and I fought and screamed. But when we stopped crying, they were nice. They didn't yell like Ana Lucia did.”

Ana Lucia's name brushed away the small thundercloud of Hugo's frown. Now he just looked sad.

Emma was deeply wrapped up in her story now. “We got to live in the woods, and climb trees, and hunt for eggs. I learned to shoot a bow and arrow, and got my first quail. I tied Wicket up with a leash so he wouldn't get lost. One night the moon rose so high and bright you could see your shadow, and the treetops whispered like a million leaves singing together. I cried, but for the first time it wasn't because I missed Mom. I cried because I knew I was really in Endor after all. I was home.”

She sank to Hugo's feet, clutching Wicket close to her chest. A few tears leaked out, but she didn't sob or carry on.

No one said anything for a long moment.

When Hugo pulled Emma to her feet with a gentle tug, his voice was thick with tears. “Can I see him?”
Silently she handed him the bear.

“His eyes are, um, kinda worn off. Got a lot of hard jungle miles on him, for sure. You know the shed where we keep the extra clothes? There's a jacket there with big black buttons. You could, maybe, take a couple for his eyes. Ewoks, they got beady black ones.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Hugo shifted back and forth, rocking on his heels as if he didn't want to say what was on his mind, but had to anyway. “Your brother, Zach. He was how old when we crashed?”

“Five. He's going to be nine soon.”

“He doesn't remember much, does he?”

Emma shook her head, as if unsure where this was leading, not daring to hope. “Just about nothing.”

Hugo glanced over at Ben for confirmation. “Okay then,” he said, thinking.

A sudden, terrible knowledge rose up in Ben. Jacob thought he was the one doing the picking and choosing, with his lighthouse, with the cave full of names.

What if it wasn't Jacob, though? There were other things on this Island far bigger than Jacob, and Ben had even met some of them. What if something bigger still moved and breathed through all of them?

The Island itself.

Ben thought he had served the Island, but never until now had he known what that really meant. All bowed to the Island, whether they knew it or not. A sad young girl had clutched her friend Wicket in prayer, and Wicket, or something else, had answered. Here she was, in Endor at last.

“Okay,” Hugo repeated. “For now. But never say never, Emma. Someday you just might want to go back. You never know. And it'll be all right if you do.”

Slowly his decision dawned on her, and her face opened like a sunflower. “You mean we can stay?” She looked around at Ben, at Cindy, at Darrah, still not quite believing it. Then she gave Hugo a wild hug and started to sob, while he awkwardly patted her back.

Cindy rushed to Emma's side, murmuring, “I told you it would all work out,” and “We'll tell Zach and Raffi as soon as they come back.” In a wavering voice she said, “Hugo, I thank you. From the bottom of my heart.”

“Yeah, no prob.”

Ben wondered if Hugo had shared the same brief, penetrating glimpse into the Island. Some thought of it as nothing more than jungle-covered ground and shorelines ringed with sand. They didn't see the living river that pulsed beneath its surface.

The Island spoke to the deepest recess of the heart, and what it said was, *Find out what I want, and everything will be just fine.*

Cindy, Darrah, and Emma retreated, arms around each other, and the crowd followed.

Rose slid her hand into Bernard’s as they joined Ben and Hugo. Desmond wiped his forehead and said, “To tell you the truth, brother, I'm glad. Now I don't have to share my grog with a couple o’
“Your grog?” Rose said, indignant. “Not one drop goes with you. This Island might patch people up, but right now if somebody breaks a tooth, alcohol is the only painkiller Bernard's got.”

“C'mon, Desmond, 'fess up,” said Hugo.

“Very well. I'll give back the last bottles I squirreled away. But that's going to make it a long couple of weeks.”

“You'll live,” Rose said with firmness. She tugged Desmond with one arm, Hugo with another. “Now that we've gotten this business settled, let's have that good-bye lunch we've been planning.”

* * * * * * * *

The fish had all been eaten, the banana leaves thrown into the fire. It was time to go to the dock, to bid Desmond farewell. Everyone gathered together in a line on the Dharma Road, falling behind Hugo the way chicks follow their mother hen.

They trooped in twos and threes, arm in arm or alone. People talked quietly, with no singing or shouting. Even Raffi and Zach kept sober and quiet steps. When they reached the bay, Ben motioned for everyone to stay off the unstable dock.

Everyone except Sirrah and Shana, though. They draped long garlands of flowers over the Elizabeth's pulpit and guard rails. Soon she was swathed in yellows, purples and white, the blossoms shining like soft gems in the bright sunlight. Beneath the rusted archway, everyone hugged and kissed Desmond goodbye.

After the women had decorated the boat, they draped the last remaining wreaths around Desmond: one over his neck, the other over his head like a crown. They kissed him full on the mouth, then stepped back alongside Hugo.

Shana gave Hugo a small nudge. That was his cue. Nobody had told him how much of this Protector gig involved making speeches. All at once Hugo couldn't speak, as a rush of conflicting feelings swept over him. Someone who wanted to leave the Island was really, finally going to do it, without fighting or bloodshed.

Everyone looked at Hugo with calm and expectant faces. This was his life now. He didn't have to say anything great, but he did have to say something.

All Hugo did, though, was sweep up Desmond in the most fervent bear-hug in the whole South Pacific. Desmond's breath shot out of him with a quick wheeze, and the crushed lei flowers sent up a powerful fragrance. Hugo held Desmond for a very long time. Desmond started to shake, but it wasn't until Hugo let him go that it was clear Desmond was the one who leaked tears and fought back sobs.

“I can't believe it. Desmond looked around at the crowd, where some were sniffling too. “It's real. It's really going to happen.”

“Got your compass?” Hugo said.

Desmond patted his side pocket. “Aye, I do.”

Hugo stepped aside. “Tell everybody we're okay, all right? Go with God, man.”
After that, things happened very fast. Desmond clambered up the rough gangplank, and Ben lifted it away from the Elizabeth. Then Hugo untied the rope which tethered her to the dock.

“Anchors aweigh,” Desmond said with a wave. He hadn't even hoisted the main sail when a strong current swept up out of nowhere. Just as it had carried Widmore's equipment boxes, the current sucked the Elizabeth away from the dock. Desmond had to turn the wheel hard to bring her about and head her in the right direction.

As soon as the main sail rose up, a swift breeze blew the Elizabeth in just the direction Desmond needed to go. Ben and Hugo watched the sailboat head towards the eastern spit of land which formed one of the encircling arms of the bay.

People started to head back to New Otherton. Hugo didn't move, though. Instead, he plopped down on the dock's end and unlaced his sneakers. “I think I'll just hang here awhile, Ben.”

“Mind if I join you?”

Hugo shrugged as he thrust his bare feet into the water. “It's a big dock.”

Ben sat down, keeping his own shoes on. Behind Hugo, people talked more noisily now, with more laughter. Bright midday sun blazed down on the dock, but the cool breezes made it bearable. A few white and purple blossoms floated on the dockside waters, sending their sweet, heavy scent into the air.

Out in the bay, a pod of dolphins churned up jets of water as they swam alongside the boat, whose white sail gleamed in the sunlight. Above, the clear blue sky curved like a china bowl.

“Looks like Desmond has an escort,” Ben remarked.

“Notice something else, Ben?”

Ben looked around. “What am I supposed to see?”

“The dock. It doesn't sway anymore.” He had tried to follow Pele's advice, to rely on “ordinary eternal machinery,” but that didn't seem to matter. What else was happening behind his back, that he didn't even know about?

“Isn't that, well, reassuring? The last thing we want to do is take an impromptu dip in the bay.”

“I didn't mean to do it. It just kind of, well, fixed itself on its own.” Hugo braced, waiting for Ben's laughter.

Ben just gazed out on the bay without so much as a smile. “Hugo, you're not going wish anything wrong.”

“Nobody's perfect, dude.”

“Maybe it wasn't even you. After all, we're not the only ones on this Island.”

That was for sure, Sherlock. Hugo tossed one fallen blossom into the water after another, where they floated like tiny pink cups full of sunshine.

Not everyone had gone back to the settlement. Across the bay, along a strip of beach which curved around hilly woodlands, Raffi and Zach hoisted their fishing nets. Emma and Marian followed, carrying long cane poles.
“Come back before sundown,” Darrah called out to the children.

“We'll bring supper!” Marian yelled back. The boys had already run on ahead, kicking up sprays of white sand.

Little Kiya tugged at her father as he held her back from joining the older ones. “Fish!” she squealed. “Catch a fish!”

She squirmed so hard that Craig had to pick her up. “Maybe next time, sprout.”

Emma turned to Craig, “I'll watch her, if you want.” So Craig let the little girl go, and she almost cartwheeled across the sand towards the older girls. Each took one hand and led her towards the shore.

Hugo gazed over at the children for a long time, and even the warm afternoon sun didn't do much to dispel his sense of sadness. Finally he turned to Ben. “You think we did the right thing?”

“You did the right thing,” Ben answered.

“It's just that their mom thinks they're dead.”

“And she's thought that for over three years now, so for her, nothing's changed. She's mourned, I'm sure. Mourned and moved on.”

Hugo swished his feet in the water, brooding. “You think Des'll be able to go see my mom, Claire, somebody?”

“When he can, yes. I think so.”

Hugo let his head fall forward, so his chin almost touched his chest. Over on the beach, Raffi and Zach had caught something already. Emma chided them in a lecturing tone about not having their stringers ready ahead of time.

“Emma's quite the mother Wendy, isn't she?” said Ben.

“Yup.” In afterthought Hugo added, “I didn't want to, y'know, hurt her feelings. But Ewoks still kinda suck.”

“Maybe not to an eight-year-old girl.”

“Naw, I guess not.” Then Hugo looked at Ben, full of appeal and unstated questions. “You think, um, Claire ever saw Star Wars?”

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth.
When the Gulfstream started its descent, the change in cabin pressure made Sawyer's ears pop. He dragged himself out of a dream of holding Juliet's hand. No violence, no blood, no cries of anguish. Just Juliet slipping out of his reach, sinking into dark green water. Gone.

Fully awake now, Sawyer looked around the Gulfstream's cabin, his palms slick with sweat.

“Mr. Moto,” the big Asian bodyguard, sat pretty much exactly where he started nine hours ago. Moto's suit jacket flopped open, unbuttoned, revealing a Glock 45mm, if Sawyer wasn't mistaken. He caught Sawyer's eye, and Sawyer looked away. Under other circumstances, he might have glared back. Not today, though.

Don't bollocks it up, Claire had said. Well, he wasn't going to. But he'd be pretty damned glad to get off this plane for good.

Stretched out on the big recliners, Claire and Kate stirred awake at the same time. “Did you feel that?” Kate said. “My ears hurt.”

Greater Los Angeles filled the windows, along with mid-morning light. When the plane went into a sharp bank, Sawyer saw a vast green swath between the blue ocean and the grey city. “That's a big park,” he said.

Kate craned to see, too. “It's probably Topanga State Park. I always meant to go horseback-riding there, but never made it.” She gave Claire an apologetic look. “You know, baby and all.”

“Topanga. Topanga Canyon.” Claire repeated the word like a spell. “That's where we're going to live.”

The pilot's neutral, radio voice came over the intercom. “Fasten your seat belts, please, for our final approach.”

Claire buckled up, and for the first time she looked terrified. “What do we do now, Sawyer?”

“Whatever they tell us, Mamacita.”

“Don't call me that. Please.”

Of course he shouldn't have. After their journey, the last few miles seemed the longest, the hardest, the most fraught with peril.

* * * * * * * *

The customs inspectors had long since left. Mr. Shinigami's jet had been cleaned out, checked over, and refueled. The pilot had already taxied her out to the tarmac, and the big hangar door slid shut, leaving the hangar in partial darkness.

Sawyer and the rest sat on their suitcases, waiting. They were to stay inside, the big Asian man said, before getting back on the jet.

By the big display clocks which showed the time in Tokyo and Honolulu, as well as LA, an hour
had passed.

Sawyer had already resigned himself to getting slammed face-down on the concrete for potential terrorism. Claire slid her hand into his, her grip sweaty and tight. She huddled against him while Kate stroked Claire's hair, doing a poor job of disguising her own nervousness.

Even the previously unflappable Richard looked anxious. Miles, this time, was the only one who appeared calm. Sawyer suspected that like him, Miles had pretty much accepted whatever was coming.

The sound of grinding gears made Sawyer jump. Slowly the hangar door began to rise. Two black vehicles crept into the hangar while the door lowered behind them. One looked like the exact same SUVs used by the Secret Service, Sawyer thought. And that van was the kind where if they drove you out into the desert, the best outcome was that they left you there.

“Oh, Christ on a Ferris wheel,” Frank muttered. “Here it comes.”

The engines cut out. The SUV’s driver- and passenger-doors swung open, as if choreographed. Claire let go of Sawyer's hand and covered her face.

Instead of TSA guys in Kevlar with drawn guns, two stocky middle-aged people got out of the SUV. The man wore a bright yellow tie, and twenty years ago, the woman might have been a looker. She had red, up-swept hair, and her two-tone heels sent staccato echoes through the hangar.

Another woman got out of the van, one with close-cropped gray hair. She wore a tan wind-breaker, and her expression said that she brooked no bullshit and gave none.

Here comes the muscle, Sawyer thought, as a man followed her out of the van. His black nylon jacket didn't disguise his power-lifter's torso. He stood silently, arms folded over a gut that looked deceptively soft.

“Good morning,” the man in the yellow tie said, hand extended. “Sorry it took us so long to get here. Traffic was a bitch. Big accident at the Hollywood Split.”

Sawyer and Frank exchanged glances, not knowing whether to run or to fight.

The man gave a small sigh and withdrew his hand. “I'm one of the good guys, gentlemen. Think of me as your personal Virgil, here to escort you out of the lower circle of hell. I'm Daniel Norton, attorney-at-law. This is my assistant, Deirdre Hannegan.”

Deirdre nodded and said, “Everybody who's headed for Portland, Jill and Gabriel here will load your luggage.”

“Gabriel?” Sawyer whispered to Kate. “If I called him that, you'd have yelled at me.”

“Maybe that's really his name,” Kate whispered back.

Frank, Miles, and Richard exchanged looks, but didn't move. Finally Miles said, “We're driving all the way to Portland?”

Norton said, “That's the plan, Mr. Straume. I'd think you'd be sick of air travel by now. You need to make tracks, gentlemen. Ms. Littleton, Ms. Austen, and Mr. Ford, you'll ride along with Ms. Hannegan and myself.”

Sawyer helped Kate to her feet. He was about to do the same for Claire, but hesitated. She looked
like a wildcat ready to spring. Her words came out as tight as her rigid, trembling shoulders. “Where's Aaron? Where's my son?”

Dan Norton started to speak, but Deirdre waved him into silence. Gently she said, “Claire, I want you to listen to me. Do you see that gate over there?”

It was sleek and stylish iron, but a security fence all the same. Claire gave a curt nod.

“This is about the biggest entourage Mr. Norton and I felt safe managing. Everyone else is waiting for you back at the house. So, I need you to stay calm. When we get out to the street, you can scream, cry, yell, do whatever you want. But if you want to see your son, we have to get through that gate. Understand?”

Sawyer had to admit, Deirdre was good.

She finished with, “So let's take a few deep breaths, and focus.”

Claire got up woodenly, but most of the wildness had gone from her eyes.

“Wait,” Kate said. “We're forgetting something.”

Dan Norton's eyebrows raised. Deirdre must have known what that meant, because she started the impatient tapping again.

“We have to thank Richard,” Kate said. “And Frank, for getting us this far.”

“What about me?” said Miles. “Seems I deserve some thanks, too, seeing as how I—”

Kate silenced him with a generous hug, followed by a kiss on the cheek. His mouth swung open in surprise.

“We just need a minute,” Sawyer said to Norton.

There they stood, six people welded together by fate, coincidence, or both, arms around each other or shaking hands to the right and the left. Sawyer even hugged Richard, his body stiff and unresponsive but his face full of emotion.

For a few seconds, regret tugged at Sawyer for not hopping on board the Portland train. He'd lived cheek by jowl with these men for weeks. They'd shared fear, uncertainty, as well as the sharp sea-smell of the open ocean, of fish weighing down the nets, the laughter and rude jokes of the I-Kiribati fishermen. Now the others were leaving, and Sawyer wasn't going with them.

Something else tugged at him, for real. Claire plucked at his shirt with absent, repetitive movements, as if reminding him of something. Well, he wanted to make damn sure, even at the last minute. “Hey, Kate. Just double-checking to see if that LA offer's still open.”

“Of course it is,” Kate said, her voice warm.

Richard and the rest were just about to climb into the van when Deirdre said, “Jill, don't forget the phones.”

“Right.” Jill passed around six iPhones, each in a slip-case labeled with their names. “You all have each other's numbers, as well as Mr. Norton's, Ms. Hannegan's, and mine. Remember, with a cellular network, you have no idea who's listening. So no loose talk, if you please.”

Missive delivered, Jill and Gabriel climbed back into the black van. As the dark-tinted window glass
swallowed Frank, Richard, and Miles, the all-too-familiar sense of loss tugged at Sawyer once again.

Deirdre climbed into the SUV driver's seat. "Time to go, Mr. Ford."

As Deirdre pulled out of the hangar, Norton said, "You going to do the orientation, right, babe?"

"That's right." Sawyer waited for Deirdre to take off Dan's head, but she just smiled. The heat passing between them told Sawyer she was more than an employee.

"Drop me off at short-term parking, and I'll see you at the office this evening. You know the route?"

"Like the back of my hand. I helped with the moving, if you recall."

"Don't know what I'd do without you, Didi."

Deirdre chuckled at the nickname.

Sawyer sat wedged up against the passenger door of the middle-rear seat, Claire in between Kate and himself. Sliding his phone out of his case, he looked for buttons to press, then gave up. "What the hell kind of phone is this, anyway?"

"You missed a lot in three years," Kate said.

* * * * * * * *

Deirdre dropped Norton off at the short-term parking garage, whose twenty-foot vinyl signs screamed "$19.95 a day!" and "Shuttle service to LAX," then said to Claire, "Have you ever been to Los Angeles?"

Now that they were outside of the airport, Claire's stomach started to unclench. She squeaked out a faint, "Nope."

Deirdre beckoned to the empty front seat. "Want to ride shotgun?"

Sawyer got out to let Claire pass. Behind them, someone tooted their horn impatiently.

"Tourists," Deirdre said. "Just ignore them."

Claire buckled herself in. "I'm a tourist."

Deirdre looked her over carefully. "I suppose you are, honey."

At the Australian embassy in Tarawa, the stone-faced American consulate officials had given Claire a tourist visa, good for three months. After that was anyone's guess.

To Claire, Los Angeles looked empty. One street after another rolled by, all white facades and tall, shaggy palms. Fuchsia and violet flowers tumbled over walls which hid the low-slung houses. The streets were empty, even though it was the middle of the day.

Deirdre moved expertly through the dense traffic. Claire squinted through the windows of neighboring cars, trying to catch a glimpse of the people inside. At one stop light, a woman caught her staring and smiled, before disappearing into the traffic stream.

"So, Freckles," said Sawyer. "You used to live here?"

"We're heading in the opposite direction from Hollywood Hills," Kate answered. "But yeah, pretty
After a few hairpin turns of the road, the densely-packed, quiet houses with their floral gardens fell behind them. Now scrubby, brownish hills surrounded them on both sides.

“Well, you never told me you lived out in the country.”

“I didn't, Sawyer. I've never been down here.”

The occasional side streets had names like “Antelope Cyn Rd” and “Dry Gulch Mtwy.” The SUV climbed a looming hill with twisted hairpin curves. As they headed down into a valley, coarse shrubs gave way to swaying oaks and beech.

Deirdre turned onto another mountain road, this one unmarked and barely paved. A split-rail fence ran alongside, and a few horses looked up as they went past.

Golden sun filtered through the towering oaks. Finally the SUV rolled up to a gate with a Wild West look, despite its security keypad. Deirdre punched in the code, and the gate swung open.

The road was barely wide enough for the SUV. Claire rolled down her window, smelling the cinnamon-like tang of dried leaves, the water-over-stone scent of the mountain breeze. Fat white clouds rolled above, barely visible beneath the screen of trees.

“I took the back road into the retreat center,” Deirdre said. “If you go out the front door, you'll eventually get to Old Topanga.”

Sawyer's voice dripped skepticism. “Retreat center? What, we're gonna hit each other with pillows and do trust falls?”

“Come on, James,” Kate said.

Deirdre smiled. “It's a fair question, Mr. Ford. Long before the alternative types showed up with their beads and bells, Topanga was Hollywood's get-away-from-it-all destination. They even did some filming up here in the thirties and forties. Then the “nature boys” showed up. They grew their hair down to wherever, literally lived naked in the caves, only threw on a homespun robe to go to town.

“Artists loved the light on these hills. They said it was like painting Tuscany without having to go to Italy. These mountains were supposed to be especially good for UFO-watching, too.”

“You know what happened to me, right?” Sawyer said.

Deirdre nodded.

“You don't have to tell me about the seventies. I lived the seventies.”

“I defer to your experience, Mr. Ford.” Deirdre slowed down, picking her way carefully across a rutted, unpaved road. “In the early 1960s, Mittelos bought this old ranch and turned it into a corporate retreat center. Some years ago, cost-cutting took its toll, and they decided to hold their meetings up in Portland. But the property's too valuable to let go.”

The trees lining the dirt road opened like a curtain, revealing a golden-brown hillside already heavy with early-spring wildflowers. Up ahead, a stone house crowned the hillside, mostly hidden behind aspen and scrub oaks.

Claire clutched at her seat belt, suddenly full of anxiety. This was going to be her home, for awhile at
“Here we are,” Deirdre said as she pulled into the driveway. Her shoes crunched on the gravel as she got out.

Claire got out of the SUV and walked towards the shaded rear door, taking in the thick woods, the swimming pool, the stone pathways which radiated across the back yard into the trees. She sniffed for danger in the air, even though there was none.

She remembered her dream of the Island, and a similar feeling of peace and shelter washed over her.

Two women came out of the house, both light-haired, both middle-aged. One held a small blond boy in her arms. Big for a three-year old, Kate had said. And he was.

“Mummy!” the child called out, wriggling to get down. The woman brushed back her short, curly hair and let him go. He raced right past Claire for Kate, who picked him up.

It shouldn't have hurt as much as it did. Claire had recited the same litany to herself every night, that Aaron wasn't going to know her. That it would take time, but children adapted quickly. None of it held up. Her son had raced past her, oblivious.

Claire swallowed hard and turned her attention to the women at the rear of the house. She recognized Aunt Lindsey at once, the one who'd been holding Aaron. At first she didn't recognize the other woman, this near-stranger with her big, haunted eyes, her long hair blowing in the breeze.

“Mum,” Claire whispered. Then, louder, “Oh my God, Mum!”

She fell into Carole's arms. Nothing came close to actually holding her mother, smelling her minty, powdery scent, feeling the sharp bones of her spine. Claire was a little girl again, six years old, hiding in Mum's lap while Mum put antiseptic and a bandage on scraped knees. She was eight, heart bursting with pride when Mum gave her a single white rose after her ballet recital. That rose had stayed on her dresser for weeks, until the petals fell off and the leaves dried to a crinkly olive-green.

She didn't want to think about twelve, or beyond.

“Claire, oh Claire,” Carole said over and over as she held her daughter. “We thought we'd lost you for good.”

“I thought I'd lost you, Mum.”

She hugged Aunt Lindsey, who might be tough, but cried openly as she hugged Claire, wetting Claire's hair with her tears.

“As soon as Kate Austen left to go find you, your mum called me,” Lindsey said, still sniffling. “I was on the next flight, you can be sure.”

From his perch in Kate's arms, Aaron crowed, “Mummy's back from vacation!”

“Yes, baby, I am,” Kate said, her voice choked.

Claire beckoned to Kate and Sawyer. “Aunt Lindsey, this is Kate. She's the reason I'm here. And this is our friend James, James Ford. We call him Sawyer.”

“James'll do fine, ma'am,” Sawyer said, nodding at the Littleton sisters.

Deirdre hung back through all this, silent and watchful until Claire sent her a questioning glance.
“They know, Claire,” Deirdre said.

“You believe us?” Claire said to her aunt, waiting for any explosion, any protests or denial.

“You've no idea what I've come to believe in the past three years, Claire,” said Lindsey.

“Let's go inside,” Carole said. “We have so much to talk about. Come on, Aaron. You can have that cookie I promised.”

Claire walked into a cool, airy room with a tall cathedral ceiling, whose floor-to-ceiling windows let in a broad view of the forest outside. The wide living room was mostly bare except for several plush chairs and an overstuffed sectional couch. A huge, flat-screen television was mounted to the stone above the fireplace.

Carole went into the kitchen, and began to pour iced tea. Aaron trotted along behind her, so Claire did too, not knowing what to do with herself. Sawyer had piled their bags in a corner by the rear door, which made the impersonally-furnished house seem more like a hotel than ever.

“What's your name?” Aaron said to Claire.

She didn't answer at first.

Carole swooped in to the rescue. “This is Mummy Claire.”

Aaron pointed to Kate, still in the living room with Sawyer. “That's my mum.” He must have picked up the Australian pronunciation in the weeks with Lindsey and this grandmother.

His grandmother. But Claire couldn't tell him that.

“That's right. She's Mummy Kate,” Carole said. “And this is Mummy Claire. Aaron, look. Mummy Claire is going to put some cookies on this plate. You're going to be a big boy, and carry the plate into the living room. When everyone has one, then you may take yours.”

His little face broke into a beaming smile as Claire counted out big oatmeal cookies, laden with raisins and nuts. As he walked from Kate to Lindsey to Sawyer, Claire leaned over to Carole. “What does he... call you?”

Carole gave Claire a surprised look.

* * * * * * * *

A wave of homesickness broke over Kate, worse than any since she'd left Hollywood Hills home over a month ago. Some of her things had been packed into boxes and stored in the master bedroom of this strange new house. She felt ravished, which made her angry, even though she told herself to stop it. Someone had sorted through her drawers, her closets. Fingered her things. Decided.

The clothes picked were just right for early spring in LA: her favorite corduroy jacket, light hiking boots, the oatmeal-colored merino sweater Jack had given her on their first Christmas back from the Island. She picked up the lightweight garment and held it to her face for a few seconds.

There was her jewelry box, its solar design of dark wood inlaid into light. She opened it, and on top rested her engagement ring. After Jack had left, she had never given it back. Call it spite, maybe. Then again, he'd never asked for it. She closed the jewelry box with a sigh.

The bed had been made up with her sheets, blanket, the hand-stitched coverlet she'd bought at the
Palm Springs street fair. Someone had gone over her life, picked out a few shreds, combined them to form a semblance of the one she'd once known.

Even though Jack had left some of his things at the house, nothing of his was in any of the boxes. Nor was her “Baby Eagle” pistol, either.

Who picked those sheets, these clothes? Kate poked her head out the door and fixed her eye on Deirdre, who sat on the edge of one of the plush armchairs. She was explaining to Sawyer that while a lease for Ms. Austen was parked out front, they hadn't made provisions for him. One could be arranged, though. Probably tomorrow.

Of course it was Deirdre.

Frustrated, Kate poked her head into the next bedroom. Unlike herself, Claire had no salvaged fragments from an old life. Her colorless room was hotel-bare; a blank slate on which anything could be written.

Claire's enormous window made the space seem larger than it was. Kate peered into a heavily wooded thicket, where some small cabins peeked through the trees. Branches brushed the windows and filled the room with green-gold light.

A door led directly from this room into Aaron's, without having to go into the hallway.

At first, Aaron's room threw Kate off-balance. His trundle bed was covered with books and stuffed animals. Absently she picked up Willy, the plush-velvet orca. On top of the dresser sat Skippy the kangaroo, who Aaron kept calling “he” even though Skippy clearly had a pouch. Come to think of it, she'd never seen a toy kangaroo without one, and she gave a dry laugh.

Sawyer stood in the doorway. “What's so funny, Freckles?”

He stood behind her, close enough to feel the warmth. “Nothing,” she said. “Just looking at Aaron's new room.”

“Red's leavin' in a few minutes. Thought you might want to say adios.”

“Oh,” Kate said, but didn't move.

The only wall decoration from Aaron's old room was a painting of a blonde girl on a bicycle. Uphill she raced without pedaling, her short yellow hair restrained under a cap. Crude, inexpert, innocent of proportion or perspective, the painting lit up the entire room.

Sawyer squinted at it, trying to get a better look. “First thing I'm gonna do is get me a new pair of glasses.” He pored over the painting, interested. “Damn, this is weird. Especially those playing cards at the bottom there. Seven of spades covering up the queen of hearts. What you suppose that's about?”

“Who knows?” Kate said in a flat voice. “Hurley was in the hospital when he painted it.”

“Hugo paints?” Sawyer said, taken aback.

“Dr. Curtis wanted him to. Some kind of therapy. I have a lot more, back at the house.” Of all of the art in her house, why had they brought this piece? “Hurley was pretty bad off when he did this. It was right before he stopped taking meds, before they took away his comics, art supplies, everything.”
“Well, look at that. It’s her.”

“Her who?”

“Missy Claire. That’s her, don’t you get it?” Sawyer stepped back from the painting, face full of sympathy. “Boy had it bad, huh? Even mired down in the seventh circle, he was still thinkin’ ’bout her.”

Kate wiped her eyes. “I guess you’re right.”

Claire called from the hallway, “Kate, Sawyer, Deirdre’s leaving.”

In the living room, Deirdre spoke as if summing up a corporate presentation. “Here are a few greater Los Angeles maps. If you’re not familiar with the area, please look at the map first, and keep it in your vehicle. It’s easy to get lost.”

“Can’t read anything till I can get me some glasses, ma’am,” Sawyer said.

“There’s a Pharm-Rite just north of the canyon in Calabasas, Mr. Ford. You can pick up some reading glasses there, until you get a prescription. Call our office, and we’ll set you up with an optometrist.”

“Excuse me,” Kate said. “I appreciate you getting my things and all, but there are still some items I need from home.”

“Ms. Austen, I’m going to need you to stay put here for awhile. Ring up Jeffrey, in your phone list. He’ll run over there and get what you need.”

When Kate frowned, Deirdre said, “You remember what it was like back in January of ’05, when the Oceanic 6 returned.”

Kate certainly did. “It really stunk.”

“Exactly. Which is why we’re not going to have a repeat performance, especially with the child.”

Absorbed in a picture book, Aaron sat wedged between Lindsey and Carole. Both women looked up, fiercely protective. Carole said, “We were glad to move out here, Kate. Your home was lovely, but it was simply too exposed.”

Deirdre went on, “So relax, enjoy the amenities, and take the rest of the week to settle in. I’ve made appointments for each of you at our office, just to tie up some loose ends like drivers’ licenses and various legal arrangements. Those dates are in your phones.”

At “legal arrangements,” Kate went cold inside. She’d been trying hard not to think about her missed probation appointment.

“I’ve also taken the liberty to schedule some time for each of you with Dr. Jerome Curtis, a psychiatrist. Obviously you don’t have to go, but if you decide not to, please call to inform them. Dr. Curtis is only in Northridge twice a week, and he’s cleared his schedule for you.” Business concluded, Deirdre picked up her cobalt Aigner handbag.

Sawyer made a scornful little sniff. “A shrink, huh.”

Dread clutched Kate, dread at the prospect of being exposed, trapped. She had met with an Australian prison psychiatrist right before the Oceanic flight, and the memory still stung.
Deirdre's voice hung in the silence which followed. Gently she added, “He knows about your situation, just as Mr. Norton does. You can be completely frank with him.”

“Like hell,” Sawyer muttered under his breath.

After a flurry of thanks and good-byes, Deirdre was gone.

Kate and Sawyer sank onto the short section of the couch at the same time, suddenly exhausted. “You wanna see my cabin?” Sawyer said after a moment. “All that time watching 'Little House in the Big Woods,' I never thought I'd be living in one.”

“Come on, Aaron,” Kate said. “Let's go see the cabins.”

“The toy house? Sure!” Clutching Kate's hand, Aaron turned to Claire. “We have toy houses here.”

Carole said, “Tell Mummy Claire how many, Aaron. Do you remember?”

Aaron held up his hand, counting off on his fingers. “One, two, three... Four.”

“Four,” Claire repeated. “That's a lot.”

Carole said, “Very good, Aaron. Four cabins, all in the woods.”

“Can I show Mummy your toy house, Grandma? And Auntie's, too?”

Carole said, “Of course, sweetheart. Mummy Kate would love to see them.” Then, to Kate, “Lindsey and I moved into the cabins this morning, so you and Claire could have the bedrooms.”

“Thanks,” Kate said, still trembling from the twists in her life, as contorted as the road which led up to this hillside house in Topanga Canyon.

“Bye, Aaron,” Claire said.

He gave her a sun-bright smile. “Bye, Mummy Claire.” Then he ran to the back door ahead of Sawyer and Kate, and was gone.

Claire wandered into the kitchen, repeating her own private litany against fear, against disappointment, against envy. Time. It was just going to take time. She poked through cabinets, opened drawers, examined bags of whole wheat flour, found yeast and sugar. It had been so long since she'd worked bread under her hands. Maybe it would take her mind off Aaron.

“Hey, Mum, Aunt Lindsey,” Claire called out. “You know, it's been almost four years since I cooked something.”

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth.
Claire's Diary, Part One

Chapter Notes

(A/N: Claire uses Australian spelling in her journal.)

Dr. Curtis says he doesn’t think I’m crazy, but I’m not so sure. It's not crazy to fear that I'm just dreaming that I'm in Southern California. That I'll wake up one day to find myself once more in the jungle, or in my shelter amidst the sticks and filth. That once again I'll hear, Claire, I heard your baby crying today behind the Temple walls. No, Claire, I don't think he's too old to have forgotten about you. Yet.

Or that I'll see my “father” again as he picks nervously at his shabby brown shirt, talking in a soft voice, not meeting my eyes. I know that he can't be here, that it's impossible because he's dead, but yet there he is all the same.

If there really is a monster under the bed, is it crazy to be scared of it?

I told Dr. Curtis that I used to write all the time on the Island. He gave me a blue notebook with cream-coloured paper, entirely mine to do with as I wish. I don't have to show him any of it. In fact, I don't have to write in it at all. I can draw, doodle, or simply stare at the empty pages.

No more writing school essays, either: “What I Did At Bush Camp,” or “The First Time I Realised I Was Growing Up.” All those stupid school papers were useless, anyway. They didn't help me with cleaning nappies in a stream, or gutting fish, or learning to live with—

Never mind. Maybe later.

Dr. Curtis had me see some other doctors, too. One was another psychiatrist, a Dr. Stillman. He made me nervous, always staring at me with big sad eyes. Also, it was a long drive to his office at the Santa Rosa sanatorium, up in the mountains outside Los Angeles. Mum had to play chauffeur, as these Yanks drive on the wrong side of the road. Also, driving's been difficult for me ever since the accident, when Mum was so terribly injured.

Hurley used to live at Santa Rosa during those times when he went mad. Jack and Kate visited him there, and both Dr. Stillman and Dr. Curtis were his doctors.

Santa Rosa wasn't too frightening. Some patients were sunning themselves on the lawn, but they didn't bother me. In fact, most of them didn't even know I was there. It was strange to think of Hurley amidst all these mostly silent, preoccupied people.

Back on the beach, on the Island, Hurley used to rest under a spreading tree in the hottest part of the day. I could imagine him sitting under that enormous Santa Rosa oak, the largest I'd ever seen.

The amazing thing is that Dr. Curtis knows about the Island. Santa Rosa isn't just any ordinary san, because some of the people there are special. Different. A few of them actually went to the Island but were damaged by it.

Some like Hurley have abilities. But for the longest time they didn't know what was happening to them, so they became frightened and thought they were going mad. Some knew what was going on
but wound up mad anyway.

Dr. Curtis wants me to hold on to what I learned on the Island, what I know about it. Without falling back into the trap of this world, where even thinking about such a place as the Island would get you labelled as “crazy.”

I guess by the standards of this world, I'm crazy then. Like Hurley.

Inside the clinic, a neurologist scanned my head with a couple of machines. He just grunted out that everything was normal, and that was that.

At least I don't have to go back up to Santa Rosa again. It's far easier to see Dr. Curtis in his Northridge office, in a squat gray building on one of those wide LA boulevards. Mum looks at the shops in Westfield Mall while I have my visits.

A fat, cheerful generalist in the same medical building gave both Aaron and I the once-over, which we passed with flying colours. A bright little boy, he said, very charming. I thanked him but felt bad that I really couldn't take the credit. If Aaron has manners, it's not from me.

Dr. Curtis and I have discussed pills. He put it this way: Just as people need pain-killers when they do physiotherapy, some people find it better to take meds when they try to work out some painful stuff. Mum had lots of PT when she came out of her coma, even though she was in remarkable shape for a woman who'd been under for so long. Miracle-level shape, one of the therapists said, but Mum still used painkillers because her PT hurt.

The hard work of therapy can cause pain in the spirit, just as Mum's PT caused pain in her body.

I'm not afraid of pain, and am willing to bear it. Dr. Curtis supports me in not taking pills, but wanted me to promise that if he thinks I am in any emotional danger, I will reconsider.

I have to be honest with myself. I've lived in the heart of darkness's kingdom, where hate and blind rage were no strangers. It's hard not to be consumed by them. Mum can't bear this weight for me, nor can Kate. Dr. Curtis can help me with it, though.

Neither Mum nor Kate know how bad I got, or how dark I became inside. Kate only caught a glimpse of it. Sometimes I carry the notion that Mum wouldn't be here if she knew, or that Kate wouldn't have even come back to the Island for me.

Sawyer knew, though. He saw right through me. That's why he didn't want Kate to bring me back at first.

Dr. Curtis sits behind a battered wooden desk, while I sit on a comfy leather chair on the other side. Not like in the movies, where the patient lies on a couch and the doctor sits behind him, so that the patient can't see. I would hate that.

When we started to talk about my friend, I started shaking. He gave me a blanket to wrap myself in, then just sat and watched as I rocked back and forth, calming myself down. Feeling sorry for myself over all the bad things that have happened to me.

Eventually I did break down and cry, because for so long I've felt like the dumb blonde chick who just messes up her life. Before she got killed, Shannon and I used to talk about that, how we both felt at times like the punch line of a very bad joke.

Or a punching bag. It was worse for Shannon, whose boyfriends hit her. For me, until that thing took on John's body, nobody had ever hit me: not Mum, not Thomas, not even Aunt Lindsey when she
was at her angriest.

But men never had a problem lying to my face when they wanted me to do something. That's makes someone a punching bag, too, even though it never leaves a mark.

I was so grateful that Kate never, ever spanked Aaron when she was caring for him. She was smacked around a lot as a kid, and she swore she'd never do that to a child. People can hit you with words, though, and lies.

At first I didn't want to write down his name, for fear of contaminating this beautiful notebook. My life now is full of sunshine, cooking, afternoons in the pool as Aaron swims around like a little seal. Full of walks as he runs up and down the Santa Monica Mountains trails, chasing butterflies or grasshoppers in the bright sun. I have been so happy here this past fortnight, even though there’s rough work ahead.

Then, as I put Aaron to bed last night, I read him the story of Rumplestiltskin. When I got to the part where the queen robs Rumple of his powers by using his proper name, I knew what I had to do.

Samael. There, I've written it. His name was Samael.

* * * * * * * *

I mentioned to Dr. Curtis that I was just a dumb kid when I first fell pregnant.

He got this sad look, as if I'd disappointed him terribly. Then he asked if I would say that to Aaron. Well, of course I wouldn't.

He pushed on, wanting to know why not.

All at once I saw where he was going. I would never call Aaron dumb, because it would make him cry. Worse, coming from me he would believe it.

Dr. Curtis wanted to know why if I wouldn't call Aaron dumb, why would I do that to myself? Then in a gentle voice he asked who had called me dumb.

Aunt Lindsey. Girls at high school when I got my usual low marks because I was bored and didn't care. Thomas, although it wasn't aimed directly at me, but more at women who couldn't do anything else save clean house, cook, and have babies. Never mind that I was growing his baby, cooking his meals and cleaning the throne where he took a dump.

Boys at high school just assumed I must not be so bright, because I didn't hang out with the smart girls, the ones sitting for the college examinations. If you weren't in with that lot you were supposed to jump into bed at a moment's notice.

If the smart girls didn't like you, you were nobody, really.

Then there was the whole dumb-blonde thing. Yes, I had the pleasure of seeing Mum's and Aunt Lindsey's faces when I came home from Rachel's house with shoe-polish black hair. The fun continued when I sewed the clothes to match. If I was dumb, it was far better to be thought of as dumb and tough, rather than dumb and fragile.

Samael must have seen this in me, when he egged me on to go after the Temple people, to show them that I wasn't a pushover. It infuriated me when he said they called me small and weak. Go show them who's small and weak, Claire. Give them a big surprise.
I never did get those Temple people, never could figure out what “sickness” it was that they tested me for. Maybe it was a test for moral badness. If that was the case, by their standards I deserved what I got.

Jacob's people were always right, while everybody else was wrong. They were always good and everyone else was bad. Never mind that nobody in their precious Temple ever invited me in, just to see for myself that Aaron wasn't there. No one cared about why I did the things I did, or that Samael was keeping me captive and lying to me. No one in that holy place offered me a word of kindness, when even one look of compassion would have melted me. Instead, all I got was, We don't have your kid, bang bang, shoot, shoot.

Thoughts still race through my head like: You're stupid. You're a patsy. A push-over. You'll follow anybody, just like a baby duck. Some days I feel like I'll never do anything right, that I'll fail at everything I try, especially motherhood. That I'll never be strong or independent, or able to live on my own with Aaron.

Not that I have to worry about money. Aaron too has a big settlement of his own, bigger than mine or Kate's even. It's because he was a baby, and solicitors know that juries love babies. So Oceanic handed over a huge pot of money just to keep Aaron away from a jury.

It's not only about money though. It's about being the kind of mum for Aaron who can pull herself together, instead of screwing everything up.

When I sit on the golden hillside in the wilderness preserve outside our house, I don't feel that way. There's some strength there which flows right into me. The bees buzz in and out of the trumpet vines overhead and a few come down to investigate the wild flowers. Even Aaron sits still for awhile, just to watch them.

What if the whole world could be like this? But that wouldn't work, would it? There are too many people like Jacob's brother Samael: liars and thieves and kidnappers. They aren't going to be good all on their own.

* * * * * * * *

It's getting easier than last week, to see Dr. Curtis and tell him stories. He doesn't care about getting every detail right. He just wants me to be honest as I can about what happened.

So today I told Dr. Curtis how Samael caught me.

The night when Sawyer, Miles and I were on the run back to the beach camp, I awoke to a soft voice calling my name over and over. I didn't hear it with my ears so much as inside my head, like a voice in a dream. Sawyer and Miles were snoring, and I'd never had such a headache in my life. A man who looked just like my father sat in front of the fire holding a baby, but I didn't care about the child. Or even know that it was mine. This sounds terrible. I mean, what kind of dumb “Dingo ate my baby” excuse is that?

“Dad” missed me so much, he said. He was sorry for being such a jerk, and now he wanted to make it all up to me.

All I cared about in that moment was how happy I was to see him, too. The splitting headache got worse, and I had to sit down. I'd forgotten about everyone and everything: Hurley, Sawyer, creepy Miles, the baby, even the crash itself. All done. All I knew was that Daddy was here and he was going to take care of me.
“Dad” said it wasn't safe out in the jungle, with those dangerous men still roaming about. Carrying the baby, he took me to a small cabin, where he gave strict orders to stay inside while he went to take care of something.

It was all very dream-like, as if I was under some kind of spell. As soon as I stepped into the cabin my headache vanished. Instead of feeling sick I felt drunk, floating, but without any of the queasiness of drinking too much. Everything glowed. Everything seemed funny.

When “Dad” came back to the cabin, the baby was gone.

He said that we were going to have a visitor, a man named John. I wouldn't know him, but was to be polite and act as if I did. Someone did come to visit, someone I didn't recognise. I babbled some nonsense, I can't remember what. Both he and “Dad” looked absurd talking to one another, so serious. Didn't they realise how amusing this all was?

The next morning every scrap of well-being had vanished. “Dad” was hovering around me in the crowded cabin, sending me anxious looks. I wanted to know why my breasts were so sore, and why they leaked milk.

Since I'd been nursing Aaron regularly and now I wasn't, my breasts were going crazy. But since I didn't remember having a baby, I didn't know what was going on. I did recall that my dad had been a doctor though, so I started crying for him to help me, that I'd gotten cancer or something, that I was going to die on this Island, what was wrong with me, stuff like that.

"Dad" told me the most shameless lie, but I'm ashamed to say that it worked. Yes, I had been in a plane crash, and while on the Island I'd eaten a lot of native plants. Some of them had effects on people, especially women who weren't used to them. Pseudo-lactation, it was called, and he sounded convincingly medical.

He had me rip up a blanket and tie it tightly around my chest. Then he showed me this dusty grayish plant and told me to make a tea of it, which really helped. After a few days my breasts stopped leaking and went back to normal. So of course I came to trust him.

One day, Samael was out. Just my luck, it was the first day of my time of the month. I needed some rags, and fast.

The old battered sideboard and chest of drawers were empty, though. I started to panic. So I ripped up my outer shirt into strips, which would last until I could find something better.

I sat there rocking back and forth in the rickety chair, dull pain cramping through my stomach and back. Then a realisation hit me like a bomb. I was having a period. More important, this was the first one I'd had in a really long time.

I started to cry. This was happening because I'd had a baby, and had been nursing. But now I wasn't nursing any more. So my body was responding by having a period.

“Dad” had lied to me.

I scrabbled under the broken-down, filthy cot where I slept, and pulled out a box. Inside were the torn remnants of Aaron's blue baby blanket, still covered in places with milk-stains.

At first I couldn't bear to rip up the blanket any further. I put it to my face and breathed in a symphony of odours. The freshest was sharp, smoky, even bitter. It smelted angry, no other way to describe it. That must have been Sawyer. The other scent was fainter but still strong, and I tried to take in as much as I could. The fresh woody odour made me feel less afraid. That was Hurley's
smell.

Underneath these two melodies, I recognised the small refrain of my son, whom I still couldn't remember having. But I knew I had, and that he was mine. Or was. Because I hadn't a clue where he was now.

My jeans were already starting to soak through, so I tore off half the blanket into long strips. I left the cabin and went down to the stream nearby to wash the rags I'd already soiled.

When “Dad” came back that evening, I screamed at him, demanding to know where my son was.

He pretended not to know what I was talking about. So I waved around one of the rags, still stained despite all my scrubbing, yelling that this was my baby's blanket. That he'd better bloody well tell me right away where my child was. Because if he didn't, I was going to go off into the jungle and find him myself.

“Dad” almost looked scared. He flickered a few times like a light bulb right before the power goes out, then walked out of the cabin, leaving me alone in the dim twilight.

I put together a pack for myself, though there wasn't much in the cabin to take. A hand-made knife with a bone handle. Some dried fish. A few bananas. I wrapped all this up in an old burlap bag, tied together and looped over a stick, like a kid in the old cartoons who's running away from home.

Because I couldn't remember my child's name, I ran around the forest yelling, Baby, Baby, it's Mummy, can you hear me? Suddenly a deep familiar noise rumbled past, the sound of a freight train about to derail.

Above me loomed the smoke thing which we all feared. I knew it at once, knew it had watched me, lingered over me, scanned me from the very beginning.

At first the moonlight shone through its black spread-out shape. Then it shrank down to a human-like outline filled with swirling dark grey smoke. Its head and chest got more solid, so you could see it was a man: younger than my father but way older than me. A hard, bitter expression marred his handsome face.

In a smooth voice he said that my manners disappointed him. We should be introduced. He told me that his name was Samael, but that was to be our little secret. In general, I could call him “my friend.”

I remarked that there was no point in calling any such thing. He shot back that while my so-called friends had left the Island without me, he'd sheltered me in his cabin, given me a place to sleep and fish to eat.

This confused me, as I thought I'd been living in my father's cabin.

When Samael laughed, little sparks of lightning flashed through his half-congealed form. He knew everything about my “poor pathetic father,” as he called him. How he'd abandoned our family in favour of his other one in Los Angeles. How he only came back to Sydney to get me to pull the plug on Mum.

All at once I remembered Mum lying there full of tubes, rigid and comatose in a hospital bed.

Samael went on about his enemies on this Island, the ones who had stolen my child. I started to cry and rage again, but he told me to shut up. If I wanted my baby back I was to do exactly as he said, or he couldn't be responsible for the outcome.
When I calmed down, I told him how my “Dad” had lied to me. I knew there was something wrong with me for having all that milk, and it wasn't from eating plants.

In a thin, dry voice, Samael remarked that I wasn't the first child to be lied to by a parent and wouldn't be the last.

Weeks turned into months. Even though I didn't live in the cabin any more, it was where we still met. In the cabin he could focus better for some reason, and could hold a human form longer. There he could really talk, although sometimes his voice sounded more like wind through the trees than a human one, depending upon how tired he was.

I found that I could focus better in the cabin, too. My head started to clear, and wasn't so muddled.

Why me, I wanted to know. Out of all the women from the plane crash, why had he picked me?

In a sharp, condescending voice he told me that it definitely was not for my looks. I was scrawny, flat-chested, too pale and my hair was almost as white as an old woman's. Nor was it for my intelligence or wit.

But I was a good listener, Samael said. One of the best.

Well, whatever he thought of my brains, I wasn't so stupid as to contradict him. Most of the time his monologues just washed over me, even though I made sure to nod at the right moments. How many times can you listen to someone drone on about Sumerian versus Chaldean cuneiform?

Nor did Samael ever ask me what I thought, or expect me to comment.

In that ramshackle cabin I sat in the old rocking chair, while Samael paced about or half-floated above the cabin's rough floorboards. Sometimes he'd come in as “Dad,” but less and less, and then not at all.

It wasn't necessary for him to pretend to be my father any more, to get me to do what he wanted.

(continued)
Everyone had assembled for breakfast on the commons. Although Desmond had been gone for over two weeks, as of yet Hugo had made no move to find the Door.

He really couldn't say why. His mother was probably praying her daily rosary for him in front of the large, brightly-colored painting of the Virgin in her bedroom. He hoped that just like before, she had faith that he was still alive.

Also, leaving the people who had settled down in New Otherton seemed like quitting, like abandoning them. He didn't want to do that.

Hugo had to admit, though, that things were running more smoothly than he would have ever imagined. Ben and Cindy had taken over educating the older children. In between building the fish pond up at the swampy North Flats, the kids were busy converting the living room of Ben's house into a library, including putting together a handwritten “card catalog” to keep track of all the books.

Everyday management of New Otherton fell to Kathy and Shana, while Meredith and Sullivan supervised the gardens. Rose, with Hugo's help, ran the kitchen, and Bernard kept working on the infirmary.

It was Bernard who kept nagging Hugo about using the Door to return state-side. More than once he said, “I need dental tools and lidocaine, especially. If Richard Alpert the wizard Ben says he is, he can get a prescription for a good quantity. They have kinds that don't need refrigeration. Some surgical tools, suture kits, antibiotics would be nice, too.”

This morning, though, Hugo enjoyed his fried jack-fruit and taro porridge in peace. He sat with his back up against the great spreading oak, enjoying a large mug of the tea which Cindy brewed. Like him, she'd never developed a taste for coffee. Ben sat on her other side, and whenever Cindy spoke, he gave her a small, fond look.

It was that calm, peaceful time of morning, when breakfast is just done but not yet digested; when the day's work is laid out before you, but a few minutes' more of contemplation won't hurt.

Suddenly, something glinted over at the edge of the grassy commons, making a few bright flashes of light. As Hugo squinted to get a better look, three new people emerged from out of the shadows. They were dressed in brown and red Temple garb, and sunlight reflected off the burnished barrels of their rifles.

“You know these guys?” Hugo said to Ben. “They look kind of familiar.”

Ben looked up and gave a slow nod.

Two dark-skinned young people, a man and a woman, both wore their rifles at the shoulder. But the pale-skinned, greying man in the center held his at the ready, as if he might start shooting at any moment. The three took their time striding across the grass as if they owned the place, and the older man didn't disguise his look of contempt.

“Rennie Delacroix,” Ben said. “I don't know the younger ones.”
Cindy looked at Hugo, terrified. Across the lawn, Sullivan put a protective arm around Meredith, then led her away from the approaching group. Everyone else on the lawn stopped what they were doing, and fell silent.

Hugo didn't like those rifles, not one bit, but there was no time to think about that right now, as he heaved to his feet. As he strode towards the new arrivals, he called out, “Yo, Temple dudes.”

* * * * * * * *

Shaking like a leaf, Cindy got up. “I have to find the kids.”

Ben stood as well. In a calm voice he said, “They'll be OK. They're up at the fish pond with Darrah, remember? They won't be back till afternoon.” He hated to admit that he was caught out in anything. Something had happened at the Temple, though, and it had scared Cindy out of her wits.

Out of earshot, it looked like Hugo was welcoming the Temple group. Rennie Delacroix looked irritated by Hugo's energetic patter, but the younger man smiled. The girl casually polished her rifle with her red scarf.

Between clenched teeth, Ben said to Cindy, “Fill me in.”

“You sent us to the Temple, Ben, remember? When we all had to leave the Barracks. You didn't know, I guess.”

“Know what?” Ben tried to suppress his frustration, unwilling to show that he had known next to nothing about conditions in the Temple.

“Dogen ran it as an armed camp. We couldn't leave, except for the work crews who tended the fields. Rennie was the enforcer, directly under Lennon.”

“I'm sorry." Ben hoped that was good enough for the present. Hugo was still nodding, still smiling. That Southern California “chill” was coming in handy right about now.

Soon Hugo led the Temple group over to the central fire, gesturing to what was left over from breakfast. The young couple set a pot of boiled taro between them and began shoving porridge in their mouths with their fingers, clearly hungry.

Rennie scanned the grassy commons in between bites of fried jack-fruit, his face unsmiling. When he saw Cindy, his glance turned sharp and unfriendly. She averted her eyes.

Ben decided to try pleading, to overcome Cindy's reluctance. “Cindy, please. You've got to tell me what happened up there.”

She swallowed hard. “The monster's man, Sayid, told us that whoever wanted to live had to join his master that same evening. Rennie, though, said that if any of us left, he and his men would hunt us down as traitors to Jacob. Everyone was running around screaming, yelling... It was chaos. A good half of us walked right past Rennie and out of there.”

“That was smart, Cindy. It was the right thing to do.”

She just shivered.

Hugo passed out mugs to the newcomers, then poured out coffee while the long seconds ticked like a bomb.
As long as Ben could remember, the Temple had always been a point of difficulty. A faction of Jacob’s People had always lived there like monks: going barefoot, eating no meat, weaving and dyeing their own cloth. They went without marriage or sex because that was how Jacob lived, how they thought Jacob wanted it.

They cultivated barley for the soup pot, flax for thread, and their fields covered the northwestern island with gold and blue patchwork. They dyed homespun with bark and berries, then embellished their tunics and loose pants with sea-shell beads.

Jacob inspired in them the reverence due to a god, but they regarded Richard Alpert with contempt and suspicion. Even as they talked of peace and serenity, they enforced Jacob's will with a large arsenal of Korean War-vintage rifles.

Charles Widmore had despised them, calling them beatniks and parasites. He claimed they stank, which was untrue. However, they never bathed in their sacred pools, neither the moat which surrounded the Temple, nor the stone pool inside of it.

But Widmore had to take them into account, whether he wanted to or not. It was their spartan influence which had for many years kept Widmore's crew living in tents. Nor was Widmore above trading military weapons and ammunition for grain, homespun and medicinal herbs. Nonetheless, the Temple people returned Widmore's sentiments about their respective ways of life, and preferred to hold themselves separate behind their thick stone wall.

The Temple followers had one advantage over Widmore's band, though. Ever since the time of the Incident, whenever a woman under Widmore's command died in pregnancy, the Temple gained a few new recruits. That didn't change, either, after Widmore reluctantly followed Ben and his infant daughter Alex to the Barracks.

Rennie Delacroix had been one of these. When Juliet Burke began her doomed work on pregnant women, Rennie believed with his whole heart that women who volunteered to become pregnant were doing Jacob's will. But when Rennie's wife Sabine died under Juliet's hands, the forty-four year old widower packed a kit-bag and entered into monastic life at the Temple.

Ben's train of thought derailed when Hugo walked over to the gazebo and said in a loud voice, “Hey, everybody, time for a meeting.”

When everyone at the settlement had collected, Hugo said, “This is Rennie, Otis, and his friend Deanna.” Then Hugo said to Rennie, “OK, tell them what you told me, about the Temple.”

Rennie looked directly at Cindy. “I'm not saying nothing in front of traitors.”

Hands on his hips, Hugo acted as if he hadn't heard that. “After the monster showed up, how'd you get out?”

Rennie shrugged, turning away.

“Tell him, Rennie,” Otis said.

Face full of rage, Rennie repeated, “Not in front of turncoats.”

Hugo’s voice was gentle. “Dude, we don't have any traitors here. Everybody's cool.” The dark cloud of his brow said without speaking, _And you better be cool, too._

Rennie's words tumbled out raw and violent. “We cut and ran, all right? That what you wanted to hear? When he came, we didn't stay to fight. We ran like rabbits. A week later we went back, and
there was nothing left. Not the Temple, not the people. Nothing.”

Again that disorienting feeling swept over Ben, of not being on top of things. He had simply assumed the Temple remained out there in the jungle still: unchanged, remote, protected.

Leaning on his rifle, Otis said, “We didn't even need to bury the bodies. It was like the whole thing fell down. Nothing left but rubble.”

Hugo turned away, a sick expression on his face.

“We've been looking for the rest of our people ever since,” Otis finished.

Ben put on his most conciliatory face. “There's plenty of room here for anyone who wants to stay.” It felt strange to say those words and really mean it. He didn't even need to look over at Hugo to feel his nod of agreement.

All through this, Deanna had been staring over at Cindy, trying to catch her eye. Finally she couldn't wait any longer, and darted over. “Cindy, you're alive!”

Still watching Rennie out of the corner of her eye, Cindy folded the younger woman into a close hug, then stroked her hair. “So it's just you three?”

“Fraid so,” Deanna answered. She surveyed the wary crowd which had formed around Rennie and Otis.

“Darrah's here too,” said Cindy. “She's out with the children. All four of them are fine. Darrah and I got them out.”

Deanna's lip trembled, and she suddenly looked very young. It wasn't until Faith and Sirrah approached that two fat tears leaked from Deanna's eyes and ran down her cheeks.

“Your baby, he's beautiful.” Deanna said to Sirrah, choking back the tears.

Little Kiya reached for a red feather woven into the neckline of Deanna's shirt.“Mommy, I want one.”

“We can look for feathers in the woods,” Faith answered. “These aren't for touching, baby. They're Deanna's.”

“You have children here,” Deanna murmured, as if she didn't believe it.

Along with Faith and Sirrah, Rose sidled up. “Claire had a baby too, three years ago.”

“Right before mine,” Faith added.

At Claire's name, Rennie swung his head around.

Hugo must have heard her mentioned as well, because he said, “Yeah, Temple dudes, sorry if you wanted to like, fly home or something. There was a plane last month that took Richard Alpert back. Claire, too, and some other people.”

Ben held his breath. The bonhomie Hugo had expected to establish with that revelation didn't happen. Rennie raised his rifle, and everyone heard the audible click of the safety going off.

Otis must have recognized Claire's and Richard's names, too, because he beckoned to Deanna in a way that said, Get over here, now. She slipped away from Rose and other women, joining Otis at his
Rennie said in a loud, hard voice, “So the Monster's woman is gone?”

“What?” Hugo said.

“Don't play like you don't know,” Rennie said in the same accusing tone. “If we stepped a toe out of the bounds, she hunted us like a panther. She was at his beck and call, did his dirty work. Claire was her name. Claire.”

Hugo’s face was terrible to see. Ben wasn't sure what Hugo might do at this instant, but he wasn't going to wait to find out. Raising his hand to Hugo as if to shush him, Ben said to Rennie in a firm voice full of quiet reassurance, “Yes, Rennie, Claire's gone. Like Hugo said, she left on the plane with the others.”

“Good riddance,” Rennie muttered. He lowered his rifle, but didn't re-engage the safety.

The group let out a long collective sigh, but their relief came too soon. Rennie spun around as if something had just occurred to him. “Did she do it?”

“Did she do what?” Ben said, confused.

“Don't play stupid, Ben. The only reason the monster got in was 'cause Jacob was gone. She served the Monster. So, did she do it? Did she kill Jacob?”

Ben didn't want to lock eyes with Hugo. It would be the worst possible thing to do at this moment, with Rennie scrutinizing them both. Even so, as much as he fought the impulse, he and Hugo’s eyes slid together anyway. For an instant it seemed as if only the two of them and Rennie stood there on the green grass of the commons.

With a deep breath and new assurance, Rennie swung his rifle around. His fierce eyes glittered under grizzled brows as he glared at the crowd. “Just one question. Who here's ever seen Jacob?” Then he raised his own hand.

Hugo said, nonchalant, “I thought nobody saw Jacob, dude.”

When Rennie didn't answer, Ben reluctantly raised his own hand, and Hugo followed. No one else moved.

“Now,” Rennie went on. “Who saw him last?”

While Hugo kept his hand up, Ben lowered his own.

In three long strides Rennie reached Hugo and pressed the muzzle of his gun in the center of Hugo's chest. “So if you were the last one to see Jacob, you must have been the one who did him in.”

Otis said in a calm voice, “Come on, man, you don't know that.”

“Shut up, Otis,” Rennie snapped.

Ben stepped forward. He could no more have moved Hugo than one of the mountains which ringed New Otherton, so Ben pushed the gun barrel aside instead, and stood directly in front of Hugo, blocking him with his body. As Rennie swung the rifle back into position, Ben felt the cold muzzle through his thin shirt.

Trying not to appear terrified, Ben said, “Think about it, Rennie. If Hugo's the new Jacob, what
makes you think you could shoot him?"

“Step aside, Ben. My quarrel's not with you.”

“Rennie, put down the gun, and let's talk about this.” Ben started to sweat, hoping Rennie would just think it was just the mid-day heat.

“Nothing to talk about, Ben. OK, fat boy, how'd you do it? How'd you kill Jacob?”

Ben wondered what would happen if Rennie did fire, whether his own body would stop the bullets, or whether they would pass through to Hugo's as well.

“Ben, one last time. Move your ass, or I will put another hole in it.”

The whole scene swam before Ben's eyes. Like old film caught in a projector, everything shuddered, then seemed to stop. In that frozen instant, Ben said through a throat dry as sand, “He didn't do it, Rennie. I did. You want to shoot someone, let's do it around back of these buildings, so folks here don't have to watch.”

When Rennie hesitated, Ben seized the moment. “Faith and Sirrah, maybe you could take the little ones out of here, all right?” The two women gathered their children and headed for the nearest house. Even in his terror, Ben still felt a flick of pride that his voice didn't quaver.

Behind him, Hugo's indrawn breath sounded like a giant bellows. Ben didn't dare turn around, but the hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and his skin prickled in the electric air.

With a sudden, rough movement due more to Hugo's vast momentum than any harshness, Hugo shoved Ben to the side and took a step forward.

Rennie stood there, paralyzed. Hugo took the weapon from his hands as easily as a toy from a naughty puppy. To the other Temple people Hugo said, “You too, both of you. Drop 'em.”

Rose started to cry, and Bernard tried to hush her.

At once, Otis and Deanna put their guns down onto the grass. Hugo half-dragged, half-pushed them into a small pile at his own feet.

“All of ’em,” Hugo said.

“OK, man, you got me.” Otis set down a large pistol as well.

“Ammo too, guys.”

With hard anger burning in his eyes, Rennie drew out a pistol from the back of his jeans and laid it down. The pile of guns and clips rested on the lawn like an ugly accusation.

The entire crowd grew completely silent.

* * * * * *

Hugo gazed at the firearms, mind blank but senses on fire. It was as if he could see inside the weapons. His mind's-eye traveled over the bullets in the clips, the firing mechanisms, the rifled barrels, the hard-grained wood of the stock, the gleaming dark steel, all so carefully oiled and cared for.

Then, without being able to voice what he was doing or how he did it, Hugo broke the guns.
It only took a few seconds. When it was done, Hugo handed Rennie his rifle butt-first, positioning the business end right over the swell of his own stomach. “OK, go ahead. Shoot all you want.”

Rennie didn't move. With a gentle motion Hugo took the rifle from Rennie once more, pointed it at his own thigh, and pulled the trigger.

It didn't even click.

“Check out the other ones if you want,” Hugo said to Rennie. “None of them are gonna work.”

A bitter pain stabbed through Hugo as he said it. Jacob could have done this. Rifles, machine guns, howitzers, poison gas, maybe even atomic bombs: Jacob could have made all of them just stop. All those people who had died by gunshot, shell or poison: none of them had to. Sure, people could still pound the crap out of each other with their fists, or use knives. You could push someone over a cliff, beat their head in with a rifle butt. A rain of flaming arrows could kill a lot of people, and had.

Well, he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

“Hugo, may I?” Ben said, reaching for one of the rifles. When Hugo nodded, Ben picked it up, then turned it over in his hands with intent, expert practice. He aimed it skyward, away from the crowd, and tried to fire. Nothing happened.

Hugo gestured to Otis. “Give me one of those bullets.” When Otis handed it to him, Hugo set it down on a flat rock, and raised another rock to strike it.

With an alarmed expression, Otis stepped back. “Man, are you nuts? You smack that bullet, it's gonna blow up in your face.”

In response, Hugo brought the rock down on the bullet as hard as he could. The brass casing split, and a tiny amount of sand poured out onto the ground.

People gathered around close, to see better. Hugo smacked one bullet after another, until there was a small pile of sand and a larger one of shredded brass casing. Rennie stood silent and graven as stone.

Hugo stood up and turned to the crowd. “This is the way it's gonna be now. Nowhere on the Island. This gun thing, we're done.”

“Thank God,” said Rose from off to the side.

Hugo faced Rennie. “Dude, I get it. You, Dogen, Lennon, a few of you Temple dudes really got to meet Jacob. And yeah, he was a pretty persuasive guy. If you would of let me explain, I'd of told you that I was the last to see Jacob 'cause when I saw him, he was already dead. Call it a superpower, I guess. Sometimes I talk to dead people.” Or he had, at least. Not since he'd talked to Christian Shephard, though, while Jack's body lay in his arms.

Rennie looked downward, his face shrouded in shadow. Then, with an abrupt motion of surrender, he sank to his knees in front of Hugo.

“Come on, man, cut it out. Get up, please,” Hugo said, embarrassed.

Rennie stared down at Hugo's old, stained New Balances, where a hole was beginning to form right over the toe. “We'll clear out of here. Just say the word.”

“Speak for yourself,” Deanna said.
Hugo extended his hand to Rennie, who was still sunk on his knees. For a breath or two Rennie didn't move.

Finally Rennie put forth his own hand, and Hugo pulled him to his feet as easily as if the older man were a child. “Like Ben said, you guys really don't have to leave. There's plenty of houses. Or if you wanna bunk together, there's a dormitory over behind the rec center. I stayed in it once. It's not too bad.”

“I think we'll find our own place, Deanna and me,” Otis said. Then he turned to her as if something important had been left out. “I mean, Deanna, only if you—”

“I want to. Very much.”

“Where she goes, I go, Rennie. She says stay, I stay.”

Rennie just nodded, so Hugo said, “That's cool. Lemme tell you how we do things around here. Everybody shares. Everybody helps out. We don't keep secrets, and we don't hurt each other.” Hugo didn't want to think about what he'd do if someone decided to ignore all that.

Some bitter memory must have crossed Rennie's mind. “We had that too, at the Temple. We were fine, until you people showed up—”

“We were not fine,” Otis interrupted. “You know we were all living in fear. Every morning the same thing, get up, wait for the ax to fall. One day it did.” He hesitated, looking at the woman at his side. “Deanna and I, we couldn't get married.”

“Damn right,” Rennie said. “Look what happened to Sabine.”

“That's over,” said Deanna. “Open your eyes, Rennie.”

Hugo grasped Rennie's shoulder. “Look, we need you. I need you, all of you. We got a lot of stuff to do here. You don't have to live here, but you can, if you want. Thing is, though, it's all one Island now. We got to live like it. We got to act like it.”

Years ago, Jack had stood in the midst of a group of scared, angry people very much like these, some of the men with the blood of a recent fight still on their knuckles. The words were Jack's, but Hugo didn't think Jack would mind one bit if he borrowed them. “If we don't figure out how to live together, we're going to die alone.”

Bernard, who had been silent up till now, said, “Now that we're all back together here, it's like a fresh start.”

“Tabula rasa,” added Ben.

Hugo gathered up the useless weapons into his arms. “You guys worry about your tables. I got something to do.”

* * * * * * *

Hugo strode down the concrete path to the motor pool, his arms fully laden with weaponry. Damn, guns are heavy. He had no idea what to do with them. Bury them, maybe. Out of sight, out of mind was best.

A jagged scar of red earth wound its way around the remnants of the motor pool, where the ground had split from the quakes. Hugo set his burden down, and the guns sank a bit into the soft earth. He
hadn't brought a shovel, so this was going to be fun.

Then a strange thing happened, as the earth spoke to him without words, like a message straight to the heart. Look, Protector. Watch. All on their own, the guns sank a few inches deeper into the red ground, ready to gather them in if Hugo would just speak the word.

What the hell. It was worth a try. When Hugo said, “Take them,” the guns sank into the red earth as if it were quicksand. A few moments later, the guns vanished, like they had never been there at all.

Hugo stepped over the spot, half-afraid that he might sink into that red scar too. All that happened was that he left some wide footprints, for the earth was denser than it looked.

Sudden curiosity made him dig into the ground with his hands. Tossing handfuls of earth aside, he made a conical hole where the guns should have been, but they were nowhere to be seen.

He wiped his brow with his shirt front, and bet that even if he could dig down to bedrock, those guns would still be gone. A weird exhilaration ran through him. What else might he be able to do?

Another voice came to him, his Grandma Titi's this time. Clear as if she were reciting something, he heard her say, Not my will, but yours.

He plunged his hands into the pile of soft earth up to the forearms. The ground grabbed him back and his heart skipped a beat, for fear that it might pull him into its sandy embrace, just as it had the guns. Instead, the earth enveloped him in a grip warmer and more alive than any ordinary ground could ever offer.

“Dude,” he breathed out in a long sigh.

With a final, gentle squeeze, the earth let him go. He kept his hands still submerged, though, luxuriating in the feel of the Island, its sensitive closeness, its love. A love so full that if he tried to do anything stupid or foolish with this vast power of his, if he strayed from his job as caretaker of this strange place, the earth itself would reject him, would no longer open to his will.

In this odd fellowship, he and the earth were linked, but it was very clear who saw farther, whose will was greater, whose wisdom more ancient.

“Why do you even need me at all?” Hugo whispered.

At once, his head filled with that light which he had never seen. Jack had, though. It had burned through Jack's closed eyelids as living waters poured over him in the Heart of the Island.

Because I love you.

As quickly as it had come, the presence was gone, leaving Hugo staring down into no ordinary hole left by no ordinary earthquake. All across the Island, much had sunk in the same way: all of it equally gone, all beyond recovery, and all on purpose.

Not my will, but yours, Hugo mouthed silently.

As he slid his hands out of the ground, the dirt fell from his arms. He filled the hole slowly and meditatively.

He had just finished when Ben turned the corner of the motor pool path. “Well, that could have gone a whole lot worse.”
Hugo wiped first his hands, then his brow. “You know, that road trip we were gonna take to the Door... I got to stick around here for awhile. Make sure everybody gets settled in.”

“Make sure Rennie gets settled in, you mean.”

“Yeah, Ben, that's what I mean.”

At first, neither of them wanted to say what was on their minds. Ben broke the silence with, “You know, if there are more people from the Temple out there—”

“There aren't,” Hugo said in a flat voice.

“Not to challenge you, but how exactly do you know?”

Hugo sighed. “How do you know when you got a pebble in your shoe? It's like that.” What he couldn't explain was how the earth under his feet sensed other footsteps as they walked upon it, then telegraphed the message to him through the earth itself. “They're gone, Ben. 'Cept for Cindy, Darrah, the kids, these guys that just came in today. And one more.”

“One more?” Then Ben got it. “No wonder Deanna was so willing to challenge Rennie. She didn't think she had anything to lose, did she?”

Hugo sighed again, not unhappy, but feeling more removed from this quiet joy than he liked. “Yeah, her and Meredith, their kids'll probably have birthdays in the same month. Look, let's give Rennie a few weeks. Then—”

“You've got it,” Ben said. “Then we head up to Window Rock.”

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth.
Aunt Lindsey decided Mum and I were managing well enough on our own, so she's gone back to Sydney. We all clung to each other at the LAX international gate, each of us blubbing and not wanting to let go. It even made Aaron cry a little: the first I've seen, as he's normally so cheerful.

It scared me at first when Aunt Lindsey broke down like that, as she's usually stoic at best, or furious at worst. She cries, though, when she's feeling that particular kind of happy laced with sadness, just like me. Then she had to get into the security line, and soon she was gone.

Lindsey was a life-saver, Mum says. Now it's just Mum and I, Kate and Sawyer, all of us doting on Aaron. Well, most of Sawyer's doting consists of tossing Aaron up in the air or into the pool.

Everyone's visited Dr. Curtis at least once now, including Mum. As part of the coma recovery process, Mum had her own therapist back in Sydney, although this saves her the bother of finding a new one. Dr. Curtis joked that he didn't get just one patient (me) but the whole family. That made me glow inside, to think that word could apply to all of us, not just Kate, Aaron, and I.

Sawyer didn't have a good time of it, I'm afraid. He didn't speak about his visit, just put on some gloves and went to split logs for the wood-stove. Even though the pile grew, he didn't stop. His hair flew about, as did the sweat, or maybe it was tears.

Kate went to the rear garden to talk to him, but that probably didn't help, because both of them ended up sobbing. When he put his arms around her, Mum and I turned away from the picture window, feeling like peeping Toms who got caught looking out instead of in.

Poor Kate, who's been so strong for so many weeks: returning to the island, surviving the terrible ordeal of those last days there. Me being so horrible to her. Waiting for all that time in Kiribati. Mum says that Kate feels safe enough now to let out all those feelings which have been bottled up for months, from the time she first knew that she was going back to the island with Jack.

Yesterday, Kate and Sawyer sneaked up to Kate's old house, even though Dan Norton told her not to. Mum and I were on tenterhooks for hours, waiting for our phones to ring even though they almost never do, fearing the two of them had gotten arrested or, worse yet, cornered by reporters from the tabloids.

No arrests, though, and no reporters. Instead, Kate and Sawyer unloaded the SUV of toys and books for Aaron, a couple of stuffed suitcases, and some photograph albums. Kate also needed a few things from the medicine cabinet, but didn't say what.

Later, Aaron, Kate, and I snuggled up on the couch to look through photos, with Aaron pointing to everyone he recognised, or else wanting to know who they were.

When Kate and the others flew back from Indonesia to Hickham Field, the soldiers wouldn't let anyone take any photographs. A few days later, though, Jack's mother Margo snapped a few shots when Jack and Kate went to her home.

Aaron was so cute, dressed in a little sailor suit and matching jacket. It was a silly thing to start sniffling about, but it made me sad that on the Island Aaron never had any charming outfits, only blankets and nappies.
Looking at those photos was like watching a movie on fast-forward. The months flew by with the turn of the pages: Kate moving into her house, cradling Aaron in her arms, Jack carrying boxes for her, or assembling Aaron's new crib. One photo showed Jack with a lopsided grin, hanging a landscape on the wall.

For his first birthday, Aaron had a vanilla custard “cake” topped with a single unlit candle. In the next shot, he wanted to eat the candle instead of the custard, so he fussed as Kate took it away from him.

Kate said that were she to do it over again, she'd have a candle made of cake, one that the child could eat as well.

These photos weren't taken at Kate's house, either, but rather at Hurley's, with its airy rooms all white and gold, except for the deep red furniture. Many of the shots were blurred, and one even had a thumb over the corner. Mrs. Reyes couldn't take a picture to save her neck, apparently. But she'd been nice enough to give Kate copies.

Jack wasn't in any of Aaron's first-birthday pictures, anywhere. For a few crazy seconds I wondered if Kate had left Jack and taken up with Hurley instead, which was why the party was at his house. When I asked where Jack was, Kate just mouthed, *Later.*

After we put Aaron to bed, Kate explained how Mum had introduced herself to Jack at our dad's remembrance service. Things kind of fell apart for Kate and Jack after that. They didn't break up exactly, but Kate spent a lot of time at Hurley's house.

Then, only two months after Aaron's first birthday, Hurley was hospitalised again.

It was past midnight when Kate wrapped up the long, sad story. Hurley had told Kate most of it, but his mother made a point to fill in the gaps as she and Kate drank lemon soda and talked in the enormous Reyes kitchen. It broke Hurley's mother's heart when he had to go back in hospital, especially when he let Jack and Kate visit him, but not his parents.

After Kate went to bed, I searched through the albums for more pictures of Hurley, but there were none. In most shots he looked preoccupied and somber, only brightening a bit in one where he held Aaron's one hand while Kate grasped the other, with Aaron grinning between the two of them as he practised his walking.

So many firsts I missed: steps, words, all those little discoveries and triumphs. All that's left of those times are the carefully-mounted images, their captions written in curlicued letters, little cut-outs of moons and stars decorating the stiff paper corners. Shadows on a page.

If nothing else, my little boy breathes in rhythmic sleep as he clutches his stuffed orca. Where Hurley and my brother are, though, or what they're doing, I can't imagine.

* * * * * * * *

Dr. Curtis told me about this American woman who was kidnapped almost 40 years ago. Her father paid a lot of money to get her back, but the kidnappers decided to keep her anyway. Months later they robbed a bank, and there was Patricia Hearst right there on the security camera, toting a gun. She covered for the other bank robbers; helped them get away. When the law caught up with her, she went before the bench, and the jury sent her to jail.

Her kidnappers brutalised her, and not just to get her to do what they wanted. They needed her to want to do their will; it wasn't enough to force her.
I shook like a leaf when I heard this, and we had to stop for awhile.

After I pulled myself together, at first I denied that it wasn't like that for Samael and me. Samael was interesting; I liked listening to him, even if he lost his temper, all those rationalisations. Dr. Curtis didn't say anything, just let me keep right on talking until I saw the point that he made, without him even having to open his mouth.

What finally happened to Patty Hearst was this. One president got her released, and another one pardoned her altogether. She went on to become an actress and even got married. People still blamed her and called her a terrorist, even after the doctors at her trial said that trained soldiers probably wouldn't have borne up under what she suffered.

People blamed Patricia Hearst, Dr. Curtis said, because it made them feel safer in their own beds, secure that this could never happen to them, or that they'd never do something like that themselves.

But people can do things like that. I know, because I did. I joined Samael in his war against the Others, and in the bigger war against his brother, whom he hated more than anyone. Even more than himself.

Dr. Curtis reminded me that I didn't join. I was conscripted, locked away on the Island instead of in a closet.

I wanted to know if the Hearst woman ever got better, really better. She did, it turned out, but not without scars. Well, I have plenty of those. The star-shaped brand on my left shoulder, a little present from Dogen at the Temple. A bullet wound I had to sew up. Too many smaller ones to count. Infections, bruises, even a broken wrist.

Dr. Curtis says that scar tissue has to be strong if it's to hold things together.

* * * * * * * *

On that day Samael showed himself to me as John Locke, I had killed an Other. Before, I'd fire at them through the woods, sometimes not even knowing if I hit my target. This time, though, it was up close and personal.

I knew the man's name. He tried to reason with me, talk to me as one human being to another, but hate and terror still shone in his eyes. The more frantic he got, the more cruel I became.

Samael becoming John unhinged me. It wasn't until Samael got his body that he hit me, even though he'd threatened it before. After he took his human form, he decided to wipe out everyone at the Temple, then sink the Island entirely. By that time I was in such despair, I thought I deserved to go straight to hell no matter what happened to the Island.

When Samael showed up at my hut, expecting me to share in his joy, I had a big surprise waiting for him. I fired off a couple of shots square at his chest, but they didn't do a thing.

He just laughed and said that even if everyone else called him John now, I could still call him by the name his mother gave him. At the word "mother," he lobbed a great spit-wad onto the ground. Then he leered at me, saying how good it felt to have body fluids again.

I almost sprinted into the jungle like a hunted rabbit, but if you do that when a predator is after you, they just give chase even harder.

Of course I knew he really wasn't John. Samael had told me often enough what he planned to do. But even if Samael hadn't told me that he wore John's face, I would have recognised Samael
The crazy urge rose up to taunt him. So I asked him if this body was the best he could do.

He cuffed me across the face, not enough to break my jaw or anything, but hard enough to show he meant business. That was my warning. There was to be no more cheek from me. Things were going to be different now.

I've been thinking about Patty Hearst all week. Looking back, I don't know why Samael in his John-body never tried to touch me in that way, never even suggested it after that first day. When I first heard of his plans, I steeled myself for the worst, and resolved that I would never submit. I'd run off a cliff first.

John repulsed me, even when he cozened up to me back on the beach before disappearing into the Hatch and forgetting about me entirely. So after that dreadful night when Charlie grabbed Aaron and waded into the ocean, I asked John if I could sleep down in the Swan Hatch with him. While I didn't say so exactly, I did mean “sleep with,” not just rest in bed. It seemed the only way to keep Aaron safe.

Much to my surprise John refused. For awhile he set up camp next to my tent, but he never tried anything. As macho and tough as he seemed, John wasn't the kind to hit hard on a woman, much less force himself on her. More likely he'd whine about how he'd done so much for her, so wouldn't she want to be a bit nicer to him?

I always found it easy to brush off that type. Back then, though, I was desperate.

Perhaps that's why Samael never tried it, because John didn't seem to want me in that way.

Samael looked like John, but he didn't much act like him. John always dropped mysterious remarks, like me when I was in that palm-reading and horoscope-casting phase. Samael on the other hand was eminently practical.

He had caught some kind of raccoon for us and was busy roasting it. Mangoes and bananas didn't compare to the first meat of two millennia, as he put it. He wanted to share this very special experience with me before the new people found us. Before things got busy.

The gamey, greasy meat stunk like polecay, and was one of the worst things on the Island you could catch. I'd only eat it if I was starving, and every time wondered if starvation might be better. Samael bolted it like Wagyu beef, though, till I feared he'd make himself sick.

While Samael stuffed his face, completely taken over by the pure sensation of food, all I could think of was that there were actually people from Oceanic 815 right here on the island. People who'd left me once, but now were back.

My first instinct was to jump up, grab my rifle, and head off into the jungle to look for them. Instead, I forced myself to keep chewing. When Samael held the floor, he didn't want to share it with anyone else.

Even so, he got angry with me. Taking on John's form didn't blunt his talent for reading thoughts, and he sensed that mine were elsewhere. In a bitter voice he complained how all I cared about was the approaching party rather than him, the only one who hadn't abandoned me.

No longer was I stupid enough to believe his tosh, that I'd been left behind and Samael had rescued me. Still, I shrank back. He'd already smacked me around that day, and I didn't want to give him another excuse to do it again.
The fire-glow made John's craggy features look even more ominous. Seeing that he had centre stage once more, Samael told me in the most callous and sarcastic language why he'd picked John in the first place.

Just any old dead body lying about the Island wouldn't do. It had to be the body of someone Samael had gotten to know in life, someone who had once let Samael in. Otherwise the link, as he put it, wouldn't work. Otherwise all he could do was make a shadow, like the one he'd made of my father.

Nobody else in our group had ever let Samael in the way John had.

Samael hadn't done it all on his own, either. His brother Jacob had helped him. Samael always looked disgusted in one way or another, but whenever he mentioned his brother, whatever face he wore at the time took on a particularly nasty expression.

When our plane broke up in mid-air above the Island, Jacob held us frozen. Only seconds passed in outside-time, but for Samael and Jacob, it stretched into hours. Jacob kept us in this in-between state so that Samael could look us over and decide which of his toys to play with.

The women were out, right from the start. Samael admired Ana Lucia, and marvelled that in our world a woman could serve as a soldier of the guard. He would have never picked her, though, because the thought of living in a woman's body repulsed him.

Kate would have made a good lever, a useful tool. Kate, though, had no interest in what Samael called “the big picture.” She had too little imagination and less loyalty, at least to the things Samael thought important. He could teach her all kinds of tricks, do her all kinds of favours, but she'd just take until she was satisfied and then walk away without looking back.

I didn't even make it onto the list. Not only was I a woman, I was pregnant and even weaker than the others.

Jack: now Samael would have loved Jack's body. Jack was fit and strong, and Samael would have been able to tap into all of Jack's knowledge and skill. But Jack would have never believed Samael's whispers. Jack would have diagnosed himself crazy from the stress, and just rationalised Samael away entirely.

The biggest trick in Samael's bag was that he knew what you felt bad about, what secrets he could twist around and use against you. That's why the aeroplane pilot tempted Samael at first. What made him especially appetising was that the pilot's friends all thought he was this perfect husband and father. Seems he had two families, just like my dad, and a woman on the side as well.

That made me sick and sorry, because I'd met the pilot in the airport before Oceanic 815 took off. He had a gentle voice and an appealing teddy-bear look (like Hurley.) Odd, too: right after the crash I lay there screaming on the sand, and this big man in dark trousers and a light blue shirt dashed over to help me. Until I saw that wild mass of hair, I thought at first it was the pilot, but it turned out to be Hurley instead.

Half-laughing, half-spitting with contempt, Samael could barely get the words out at the thought of Hurley. That one would be even worse than taking on a woman's body.

If a woman was beautiful or even moderately passable, she had something to trade. When the queen had the king properly in her grasp, she could have just as much power, and Samael grabbed the air like he was squeezing a pair of balls.

Then, directing a cutting glance at me, Samael added that peasant women who'd borne sons were
likely to bear others, so they were at least good for that.

A man like Hurley was pathetic. A walking joke. The Romans of Samael's village used put on plays from their own land, to pass the time. They especially liked the funny ones, where some stuffed their clothing with straw to look like big fat men. The straw-stuffed men strapped on long wooden phalluses, then chased other men in dresses, who'd scream in horror and lift their skirts as they ran.

Samael said he'd spend another millennium as smoke before crawling into that flesh.

He only mentioned Sawyer in passing. Sawyer had some kind of protection which Samael couldn't fathom. So while Sawyer's body would have served well, something in Sawyer's mind locked Samael out, as Sawyer shut out everyone back then. Perhaps it was hate.

Jacob held us suspended in time, while Samael inspected the new shipment. John just had the great misfortune to be the toy Samael took from the shelf.

* * * * * * * *

At the very end of that last entry, I wrote, “Given that, who was the real monster?” Now, though, I've just scratched it out. Because today Mum told me how she woke up from her coma.

When she came to, she could turn her head only a very little bit. Everything was white: the ceiling, the gleaming walls, the curtains which she could just glimpse out of the corner of her eye. In the other direction, the only spot of colour in the room was a small Christmas tree wrapped in gold garland.

Near her bed stood a man dressed in a white shirt so bright that it almost shone. Mum wasn't in any pain, but other than turning her head slightly, she couldn't move. She did remember the car accident, though, and her first thought was that she was paralysed from the neck down.

The man leaned over her. She would never forget his rough features, his sandy hair, his kind blue eyes, and the way he kept repeating not to be afraid, that she was going to be all right. Mum tried to talk, but couldn't at first, even though she didn't have a tube down her throat or anything. It was simply that she hadn't spoken for so long.

The man pulled up a chair and sat down next to her. She heard a noise like a small motor, and tried to crane her head around to see.

It was the pump for her feeding tube, the man told her. She wasn't to worry, for soon she wouldn't need it any more. There were other tubes, too, but soon they'd be gone as well.

Finally enough spit went down Mum's throat that she could croak out words. Had she broken her neck?

The man just smiled, the most comforting one Mum had ever seen. She was weak, that was all. It would take time, but no, her back wasn't broken, nor her neck.

The sun coming through the curtain behind him gave him a pale glow. Then something extraordinary happened. He placed his hand on her brow, and it was as though she came to life. That's how she described it, that she could literally feel the life moving through her, like electricity.

She felt revived enough to ask about me. His face got sad for a second, and at first she thought I'd been killed in the auto crash. Tears leaked from her eyes, which is the saddest thing in the world: to cry and not be able to mop up after yourself.
So the man took a tissue and cleaned Mum's face. As he wiped, he said that while I'd survived the car accident, she wasn't to worry about the rest right now. Her first job was to get better. Before she could say anything else, he left her side, and poked his head out into the hallway. In a clear, loud voice he called for a nurse, saying that someone might want to get in here right away, and to bring a doctor, too.

It was only when the room filled up with doctors and nurses, all talking at once and fiddling with equipment, that Mum realised how this stranger had sat by her bed, wiped her tears, and it hadn't even occurred to her to be afraid.

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth.
Sometimes it was hard to hear Samael when he talked, as it took enormous energy for him to hold himself together in even a sketchy form. In that in-between state, you couldn't touch him, and he really couldn't touch anything, either. He'd try to pick up rocks or sticks, only they'd fall through his fingers. Then he'd curse a blue streak in Latin, or sometimes would even cry without tears. In a way that was worse than the cursing.

Dr. Curtis was surprised that I speak Latin, too, even though I can't read or write it. He even asked me to show off a bit for him.

I speak Latin because it was easier for Samael to talk to me that way, especially whenever he took the shape of his original body.

It wasn't hard for me to pick Latin up, either. For one, there wasn't much else to do for recreation. Also, Samael would help me. If he was speaking and I didn't get it, a picture of what he was saying would appear in my head. So it was easy from the get-go to understand him, and after awhile I could form sentences on my own.

This also probably explains why he was easiest to understand when he was swearing. Whenever he cursed up a storm, pictures appeared in my head whether I wanted them to or not.

* * * * * * * *

Funny, but sometimes I felt sorry for Samael. He didn't ask for his real mother to be shipwrecked and then murdered. She probably would have loved him, and her people would have cared for her, even though her husband died in the shipwreck. I was pregnant and alone too, but people helped me.

Samael was a child when he found out that the woman who raised him had killed his real mum. As he put it, that teat-fed calf Jacob wanted to have their false mother Judith all to himself, and he was welcome to her.

The way Samael said it in Latin made it sound far dirtier.

He was clever, Samael was, even as a boy. He knew he couldn't just walk into the Roman village without causing suspicion, so he hatched a plan. He threw himself out of a tree into a thorn bush, which tore up his clothes and covered him with bleeding cuts.

He'd been watching the men for months already, so he knew where they fished each morning. There he hid behind rocks on the shore, poking his nose up only to breathe. He floundered to shore as if he'd just been washed up from a shipwreck, pretending that he couldn't remember anything but his name.

The Romans believed him and took him to their settlement. He didn't dare tell them what had happened to his mother thirteen years before. The Romans believed in vengeance, and they would have burned down the Island until they found her killer. Not that they could have hurt Judith, though. Even as a boy Samael had an inkling of what Judith could do.

It turned out that the Romans were en route from Italy to the Roman colony of Carthage when the storm caught them. Dr. Curtis remarked that Carthage was in what's now Tunisia, directly under the
modern city of Tunis.

This wasn't any ordinary Roman trading expedition, either. Samael said that beneath the Earth there ran mysterious rivers made of not water but what he called “flux.” In some parts of the world this flux ran closer to the surface than in others, just like springs of water can bubble out of the earth.

Rome had been fighting endless wars against all these tribes across Europe, and the Senate was getting tired of paying for them. Maybe this flux could be made into weapons that would put down the Gauls or the Germans for good. Everyone knew that lodestones drew iron nails to themselves. What if you could use this flux to make gigantic lodestones, ones which could pick up not just nails but steel armour, and toss the men into the sea? Or pull warships underwater and sink them?

After all, the Greeks had beaten the Persians with Greek fire, even if the secret had been lost since then. Flux would be stronger than anything the Greeks could come up, if it could be controlled.

The more the guild-masters talked to the senators, the more interested they became. For years strange stories had been told of the desert surrounding Carthage. Birds would suddenly lose their way. Compasses would whirl about like tops. Finally the Roman Senate put together an expedition of guilds-men along with their wives, children and many slaves.

So off the Romans went to look for Carthaginian flux, until they were blown to the Island by a storm.

As a boy, Samael followed the metal-workers everywhere, pestering them with questions, doing any scut work they threw in his direction. Finally he wore them down, even though at thirteen he was technically too old to apprentice. Since he was clever and capable, the master builders taught him mining and metal-working.

And more. For a few of the master craftsmen had been to Egypt, where they learned secret arts: including those which would help find flux.

I could tell Samael admired the Romans. Even after three decades they kept the Roman customs and laws, right up to they day they died.

As he became a man, Samael learned more than metal-craft. Over their fires at night, the men talked endlessly of Rome: the queen of cities and the heart of the Republic. They described the brothels with their painted signs advertising women, girls, eunuchs, boys: all available for a few coins. Even hairy, bearded men if that was your taste, but the men all looked disgusted when that came up.

Although Samael liked those stories, what he really wanted to hear about were the magi. Their ranks were filled with Greeks, Jews, Arabs, Assyrians, Persians, even those from the farthest East, and they had more wisdom than you could ever learn in a lifetime, try as you might.

Besides, as much as Samael might have wanted a woman he wasn't going to get one easily. Fewer women than men had survived the wreck and by the time Samael became a journeyman in the guild, most of the women were already going grey.

When the few girls who did survive grew up, they were given as wives to the men who were leaders, but even the young and healthy girls hardly ever fell pregnant. When they did, though, they had their babies easily and none of the women or babies died. None.

The older women couldn't believe it at first. They doubled their sacrifices to Juno, thinking that she must have made her home on this island and was keeping them safe.

The men were another story. At first they worked it out so that if a man’s wife didn't fall pregnant,
he'd pass her on to a man of lesser rank and then trade another woman for himself. This had pitfalls. Some women did bear after they were exchanged, but others never did.

After all this rearranging, most of the Roman men figured out that they were never going to found a family. So they started to fight viciously, and more than a few got killed trying to steal bearing women away from their husbands. Slave women were set free and made wives, because while the penalty for violating a slave was just having to pay a fine, the price for stealing a wife was death.

There wasn't much chance of Samael founding a family for himself, not if he stayed on the island at least.

To the Romans, dying without children was worse than death. They couldn't understand how the ground poured grain as fast as they could plant it. Their flax made a cloth soft as silk. They could sow the women all they wanted, yet very little fruit came.

The Romans knew too that if they didn't increase their numbers somehow, their small stock would become thin and weak. It needed new blood. Some of the men wanted to sail back to Rome, while others were willing to simply look for women on any nearby islands. So they built ships and tried to sail away just like Desmond did, but ended up right back where they started.

The women were still sacrificing to Juno while the men sacrificed to Neptune, although it didn't do any good. When the old women told them to honour the Greek sea goddess Amphitrite instead, the men just laughed. Who would waste a perfectly good boar on a Greek female instead of a virile Roman god like Neptune?

But Neptune didn't seem to be listening. Then, twenty years after joining the Romans in their village, Samael found a source of flux.

The Romans had almost given up on their original purpose, distracted by trying to get off the island. Now they felt encouraged, because flux was power. Maybe they could harness that power to push through the powerful winds and waves that wouldn't let them leave.

By then Samael had a woman of his own.

Her name was Octavia, from Etruria. She helped with the few births and the old women said she was taught by Juno herself. The only time I heard Samael's voice break was when he spoke her name, although in his ghostly form he couldn't cry. But he would have if he could.

The guilds-men were digging deep wells all over the Island and her man had fallen into one, broken his neck and died. So the guild gave her to Samael as a gift. She was in her early forties and had never borne a child, but the Roman's attitude was that there was hope if a woman still washed out her rags every month.

Samael came to love her beautiful singing voice, her wit, her stories of the rocky Etruscan hills where the goats played, where vineyards hung heavy with grapes, where the fields bloomed yellow with grain. There were wild grapes on the island too, but Octavia made a face at their wine, so poor compared to the ones from her own village.

Then the monthly ways of women stopped for Octavia. She told Samael that if he could get away, or if the men could bring women back, she'd pick his concubines herself. She knew what went into making a good bearer, and it wasn't looks. Let the others grab the pale and pretty ones. Octavia would go for the hips, the low, wide-set kind which meant good sons. He could sire children and raise up the strong ones as his own, teach them to work metal and make weapons just as the guild masters had taught him.
This desire burned in Samael as much as he burned to meet the magi of Rome.

That was Samael's life, until the day when Judith blew into their village like a storm of wind and fire, turning it to ash along with everyone in it except him. Until the day he killed Judith with a knife forged by his own hand.

Until Jacob threw him down into that well of his own.

* * * * * * * *

At first Samael didn't miss having a body. For the first few hundred years he soared over tree-tops and scattered the terrified birds. He shot down into the mouth of the big northern volcano, dodging lava plumes. The lava couldn't hurt him so he swam around in it like a bath.

Eventually he stopped because that angered the “others.”

I didn't know what “others” he was talking about. It certainly wasn't the ones we called The Others, that we were always afraid of. These were different, neither like him nor Jacob, nor the occasional survivors of shipwrecks or plane crashes.

Samael wouldn't say much about them. While he would never admit to fear, especially to me, he held those “others” in cautious respect. If I pressed him for more details he either blustered or ignored me.

Later I went looking for those “others” behind his back. Because if there were other beings on the island besides Samael, maybe they would help me.

I never did find them, but on some days a kind of lightness would steal over me. It felt like the green hand of the jungle itself stroked my hair, apologising for not doing more but counselling patience, saying *Wait, wait, it will get better.*

Sometimes I stole into the big mesa which flattened out the centre of the island like a wide curved dish. Big emerald-green birds soared like eagles up and down the sides of the mountains. I'd lie on my back in a field full of ginger plants whose red spikes shot up like flames and just watch the birds circle above me. Sometimes they'd dart down with lightning speed, then leap up with something small and furry wriggling in their claws.

Sometimes the birds came quite close to me and I'd lie perfectly still. As they returned to the sky they'd make strange long calls and circle endlessly over the ginger field. Lying out there in the green shadow of the mountain, I almost forgot that I was a prisoner.

Right after we crashed on the island, we never had time to just sit and marvel at the beauty around us. Besides the soaring green eagles, the jungle was full of jewel-coloured birds: oranges, blues, intense violets. Some had long tail plumes, feathers like sheets of red and orange fire.

High up in the middle canopy there lived the most peculiar bird, or lizard, or perhaps a little of both. This purple creature wore a royal blue crest, and its forelegs had claws, which stuck out when it spread its blue and violet wings. It soared like a sugar glider, and once I saw it use its claws to climb a tree trunk.

Back in the beach camp days, I used to walk up and down the surf line for hours, sometimes with Aaron but mostly alone. On those strolls, I'd wish that I could just walk the entire way around the island and drink in all its beauty.

Careful what you wish for, I guess.
I didn't just rest in the ginger field. The big green birds watched from the tree-tops as I set up snares for trapping. From the way they cocked their heads and stared at me, I could swear they had intelligence. One day I went to the cluster of trees where they perched. Trying not to scare them, I asked for permission to hunt in their field.

I promised that I wouldn't take much. There'd be plenty of ground squirrels left for them, as well as these fat things that looked like a cross between possum and rabbit. There was enough yellow lard in one of those to keep me for two days without eating. I called them “pikachus” because they looked like the toys.

Pikachus stayed mostly underground so I'd snare them when they left their tunnels. But even if the birds didn't catch many of them, it seemed polite to ask.

Samael would swirl around in his smoke form at the edge of the ginger field and watch me. Something about that field kept him at bay. Once in awhile he'd change into his original human form and stroll about, but not often. I think the whole business of trapping and skinning, of cooking and eating bored him.

He never failed to tell me what a fool John was, thinking that he had the skill on his own to hunt the feral pigs, and how the rest of us were equal fools to be taken in by him.

It was like a game between us. If he mocked me for setting up a snare, I'd demand to know why he just didn't hunt for me. I could use a boar now and again. Also, I didn't have all that much time to ponder the island's beauty, not with feeding myself and staying out of the way of the Temple people.

“Cats who don't hunt get fat and lazy,” he'd say.

I'd snap back, “As if you'd know. You've probably never seen a cat.”

“There were ship's cats.”

“So where are they now?” If there were cats, they should have flourished with all the little ground creatures about.

Later Samael admitted he hadn't ever seen a cat, that his knowledge of cats came only from absorbed memories. There once were cats on that Spanish slaver, the Black Rock, all eaten by the starving crew before they reached the Island.

Later Kate told me that she actually saw a cat at this little station up on the Mesa, the station that John blew up. Maybe any island cats knew when Samael was coming and ran away. That made them a world smarter than me, I guess.

Once I asked Samael who it was he'd absorbed from the Black Rock, and he looked surprised. Why, the captain, of course. Who else? Samael didn't only take on the memories of his prey, but some of their thoughts and personalities: for example, the cruelty and brutality of the slave-ship captain.

In school we learned about the transport ships which brought my own many-times-great grandparents to Australia. Family stories got passed down to Gramps, too, and they made my hair stand on end. I can't imagine it was any better for those on the Black Rock.

The ginger field was my refuge, one of the few places where Samael would mostly leave me alone. Samael didn't like me apart from him for very long, though, herding me like he was a sheepdog and I was his little flock of one.

* * * * * * *
Samael had some favourite places other than the cabin where we had so many of our talks. One was the cave system down by the beach camp, where Jack originally found the waterfall. That's because Samael's original body was there, the body Jack called “Adam.” It's why Samael lured Jack to the caves, because for Samael the caves were a place of great power.

He didn't form into a body in the caves. Instead he used them for what I called “whispering;” not with words, but the kind you heard in your mind. Even if he didn't form himself into a speaking body, he could still fill your mind with pictures. Samael wanted us at the caves because that's where he could whisper the loudest.

The caves also gave him a feeling of the “good old days” when people on the island used to pray to him, brought him tribute, called him a god and gave him lots of respect. Believe it or not, Samael reminded me of Gramps as he got on in years. Gramps would sit on the shaded front porch and reminisce about the times when the taxes were lower, prices for mutton and wool were higher, and the natives knew their place way better than they did now.

At that last part Mum and Aunt Lindsey used to protest that nobody talked like that any more. Then they'd tell each other they really had to get out of there.

Once Samael took me to see for myself what he was talking about. Hundreds of years ago the Indonesians had built a temple on the north-west side of the island. He laughed at that Temple, said that now it was full of poseurs. What was more interesting was the maze of tunnels underneath, for the Temple wasn't the first one built on that spot.

We took a terrifying trip down to a cave-like room with thick round pillars carved in the style of the Egyptians. Worse, Samael took poor dead Alex's form. Instead of ooh-ing and aah-ing like I should have, I blurted out a question: how he could have been worshipped by Egyptians? My world history wasn't the best, but even I knew that the old Egyptians in the carvings came way before Samael's time at the end of the Roman Republic. A good thousand years, in fact, maybe more. So how could this Egyptian god Anubis be worshipping him?

What he said chilled me to the bone, made worse by Alex's sweet face all distorted and grimacing. “What makes you think I was the only one?”

There weren't just Egyptians on the Island, he told me. Sumerians had lived there, from the dawn of the earliest city-states. And before that the ones he called the children of Cain, the earliest civilised people in that part of the world.

“Children of Cain, who came to worship Cain,” he said.

Even though I didn't know what he meant by that, I'd gotten pretty good at not pushing too hard with the questions. I had to make them count, because I never knew whether he'd answer or just storm around, or lose his bodily form altogether. This time I had to venture just once more, even though static had started to crackle in the air around him, a sign he was getting irritated.

Trying to sound as naive and innocent as possible, I wanted to know whether that wouldn't have been a rather long sea voyage for them.

He threw back his head and laughed, not a girl's laugh, but the kind you'd hear from the rough swag men on Gramps' station when they told a dirty story. That laugh twisted Alex's poor face almost into a knot.

Samael said that even peasant stock was worth preserving, or otherwise he'd snap my neck for stupidity. “What do you think it means, to move the Island?”
Slowly it dawned on me. All those Egyptians, Sumerians, and even earlier people had been here because the Island hadn't always been where we happened to crash on it in the south Pacific.

Atlantis. The Island of the Golden Apples. Mu. Lemuria. Avalon. All those stories were true.

Dr. Curtis remarked that the oldest stories usually are.

All those stories about worlds next to ours, that you can't directly see. Beings who have magical powers in one world and none in the next. People who speak with the dead. Walled gardens, secret and protected. Fountains which contain the elixir of life. Old houses in the country or in the mountains, which exist only to safeguard the passageway.

All true.

We don't know that we're living in a dream while we are dreaming it. Only when we wake do we marvel at how extraordinary it all is.

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth.
On the day Hugo decided to use the Door, Deanna made ready to take a group of women up to the flax fields east of the Temple. The day before, they had come back bearing heavy bags of tiny, dark-brown seeds.

“They're delicious,” Deanna said to Rose as they poured themselves each one final cup of camp coffee. “And you can squeeze them, get the oil out. We have plenty for the next planting, too.”

Rose thought cultivating flax for linen was a waste of time, and she made no bones about it. “We don't need clothes. There are more clothes in these houses than we'll ever use. And if we need to sew up something special, there are those treadle machines in the store-room.”

Cindy had just drained her own cup, and picked up her hoe, ready to join them. “Good thing the Dharma Initiative was so full of old hippies.”

“Clothes are going to wear out sometime,” Darrah pointed out.

Don't count on it, Ben said to himself as he poured the dregs of the morning's coffee into his mug. Somebody had thought to bend wire mesh into coffee filters, which cut down on the sludge factor. Still, there was enough caffeinated acid in that coffee to strip paint. Ben loved it.

His rucksack lay at his feet, ready for a journey of its own. Ben traveled light, having packed only a water bottle, a thin blanket, a flint striker, a Dharma Initiative school notebook, and a few pencils. Paper was probably their most valuable commodity at this point, so he'd come up with a kind of shorthand for note-taking, which he then transcribed into his big blue book. There he could let his longhand sprawl all he wanted.

This was the downside of pre-industrial society, where simple things like pencils and paper became unobtainable luxuries. Well, maybe Hugo could bring back a couple of boxes of Ticonderoga No. 2s. The children were writing in charcoal on pieces of bark, or with dolomite on chunks of grey slate. That wasn't a recipe for producing novelists anytime soon.

From flax, though, came linen, and linen could be used to make paper. So Ben gave Cindy an encouraging smile. “Good luck.”

She smiled back, although her eyes were serious. “Good luck to you, too. I know he's only going to be gone for three days, but still...”

“It'll be all right.” Ben hoped that he was telling the truth.

“I'm glad you're not going, though.” Cindy then turned abruptly and almost ran to catch up with Darrah, Deanna, and a few others.

Ben was so busy puzzling over the meaning of that last remark that he didn't see Rose's wicked grin. “What?” He sounded more irritated than he felt.

“Sorry,” said Rose. "I can see you're worried."

“I'd be dishonest to say I wasn't. But Jacob did it more than once, as well as Richard and Tom. So I
think he'll be fine, Rose."

She sighed as she dumped the coffee grounds into the compost bucket. “I can't say I blame him. His momma must be going through hell.”

Ben would wager that Carmen Reyes wasn't the only one suffering. Hugo closed his front door, but instead of heading straight to the commons, he paused in front of the flower-covered mound which had once been Claire's house. That very morning, buds had opened into a riot of pink and yellow blooms as wide as your hand, with a fragrance like snow from high mountain peaks. Fat bees crawled in and out of the flowers, sipping nectar.

Hugo plucked a blossom and smoothed it closed, then stashed it in his cargo pocket. Instead of moving along he stayed in front of the mound, as if drinking in its scent and beauty.

Until a month ago, Hugo had played host to both Desmond and Sullivan. Desmond was gone now, and after Meredith announced her pregnancy Sullivan had moved in with her for good. Now Hugo lived alone. A few times Hugo had hinted about them bunking together, but Ben had managed to evade the subject. He liked his privacy, even if Hugo didn't.

Sirrah and Chen, Faith and Craig, Kathy and Shana: it was like Noah's Ark around here with all the couples. Then there was that triad of Sylvie, Janice, and Jerome, busy transforming their cottage into a breezy, vine-covered lanai, green and cozy as you please.

Among the un-paired, Darrah and Cindy lived with the children in the old Dharma women's dormitory. Kenneth, Jane and Brian spent most of their time in tree-houses which they'd built down by the pastures. None of them were going to room with Hugo anytime soon.

Hugo would have even lived with Rennie, had the old curmudgeon stuck around New Otherton for more than a week. After Hugo had literally disarmed him, Rennie sulked around the settlement, only helping out if asked. Then out of the blue he announced that he was off to find other Temple survivors.

Wisely, Hugo hadn't mentioned that there weren't any. Instead, he had encouraged Rennie to take his buck knife and a pack full of provisions, as Rennie set out to purge whatever internal demons remained.

“There are a couple outriggers down at the old beach camp,” Hugo had added in his most helpful voice.

Deanna and Otis seemed to breathe more easily now that Rennie had left. Otis had joined the cowherds, but returned in the evenings to his and Deanna's New Otherton cabin.

Deanna now led the cultivators. There hadn't been much to do at the Temple other than grow flax, meditate and listen to Lennon and Dogen give lectures. It was a lot more fun down here.

Hugo’s large silhouette blotted out the morning sun, throwing Ben into shadow. “Guess it's time to boogie.”

* * * * * * *

Ben and Hugo slid Widmore's metal outrigger canoe into a cove formed by the spit of land just south of the Pala Ferry dock. Unlike the white-sand beaches on the rest of the Island, this shoreline was made of dark basaltic boulders sprayed with white foam. The outrigger banged into a few rocks, then spun around in several whirlpools before Hugo managed to steer it onto a narrow strip of black sand.
Hugo dragged the canoe to shore. “Didn't there used to be all kinds of little houses here? And fish. Lotsa dried fish.”

“That was a Potemkin village,” Ben said.

“What?”

“Just for show.” Ben did wonder where the hell the yurts had gone. Someone had removed them all, then raked the black and stony ground free of even a single footprint. On the jagged peak above, Window Rock rested like a keyhole open to the heavens.

Hugo walked over to the rusted metal door with its stenciled Dharma symbol and touched a handle. He visibly shuddered, then stood for a few long seconds, as if maybe he didn't want to open this particular can of worms after all.

Ben couldn't blame him. Three years ago, Ben had stood on this very spot with Tom Friendly on his right hand, Michael and his son Walt on his left, while Alex loaded Jack, Kate, and Sawyer onto the boat which would take them to Hydra Island. Whatever Ben had told Michael, that un-seaworthy tub wasn't going anywhere on the open ocean. Two guards trained their rifles squarely on Michael and Walt.

Michael had followed Ben's instructions, had turned the tugboat around and headed back to the dock. Although Tom had done his best to keep Michael calm, he still sputtered and protested when the guards marched him towards the metal Door. Then Walt started to snivel, and Ben's frayed nerves almost snapped.

Tom's voice had been full of worry. “You better get to a safe distance, Ben. You know what Richard said.”

Walt's irritating whine grated like nails on a chalkboard. Through gritted teeth Ben said, “I'll be fine, Tom.” Sometimes Ben had hated Tom for his tender solicitousness, even though he knew where it came from.

“What the hell is this?” Michael complained. “You jerk me around, Ben, I swear to God—”

Michael didn't get to say anything more, because Tom grasped both handles and pulled. Ben never got to see the rest. A high-pitched vibration thrummed through his head, stabbed his ears, and sent him to his knees, violently retching. He pulled himself together enough to turn and flee halfway up the hill. When he finally looked up, Tom, Walt, and Michael had already disappeared. The Door was shut once more, with guards posed in front of it.

One of the men with rifles helped Ben to his feet. It was only when Ben raised his hand to wipe his face that he saw his eyes were bleeding.

Now, three years later, Ben watched Hugo stand stricken and hesitant, gripping the curved metal handle.

“I have to go now,” Ben said. “I can't be here.”

“I know.”

Ben feared that Hugo would try to hug him, but he didn't. He just stood there, wearing a hang-dog expression. “You know, if I... well, what I mean is, if I don't... It'll be all yours, Ben. Take good care of it.”
“That's ridiculous, Hugo. You're going to come back. You have the phone number I gave you, right?”

“Same one you gave Desmond, yeah. I remember Dan Norton. He got me out of the LA lockup.” Hugo patted the cargo pocket opposite to the one where he had put the flower.

“Say hello to Desmond for me. And everyone else.”

“Right.”

Ben held out his right hand. Hugo gave it a good, hard shake, surprisingly firm. It wasn't until Ben had climbed to the top of the sloping hillside opposite Window Rock that Hugo pulled both doors open at once.

* * * * * * * *

At first Hugo stared into a jagged wall of brownish-grey, and his heart sank in disappointment. He was about to turn around and slam the doors shut in disgust when the rock in front of him softened and folded, as if it were dissolving. Darkness broke through the melted rock-skin, and Hugo breathed a strong scent which he never thought he'd smell again.

This sea breeze wasn't like the fresh ones which wafted onto the Island. This ocean stunk of oil. It hung ripe with the foul scent of a million cars all belching fumes. Above these heavier odors floated the fake-coconut perfume of the sunscreens and body oils which coated the Los Angeles sea-coast along with the leakage from off-shore drilling.

In other words, it smelled like home.

Hugo entered the closet-like space between the door frame and the shimmering rock ahead. He turned to pull the metal doors shut behind him, then stepped forward into the jelly-like surface of the rock inside the Door.

A swirling maelstrom sucked him up like milk through a straw and pulled him right into the mountain itself, through dirt no thicker than air. Something thrust him into an indescribable space filled with yellow and white curtains of glowing radiance. He spun forward, then backward, then tumbled head over heels down one shimmering corridor, then another.

He kept telling himself that he should be afraid, but instead, he felt exhilarated. It was like careening down a roller-coaster made entirely of light.

Until the landing, that is. For a brief second Hugo found himself suspended five or so feet above the surface of a black, churning ocean. The unseen hand which had pulled him let go, and he dropped into the water with a splash.

One wave crashed over his head, then another. He pulled himself to his feet, thanking his luck that he stood in neck-high water. He was just getting his bearings when an oil-slicked wave slapped him beneath the surface.

Clawing for breath, Hugo instinctively flattened his body into the familiar body-surfing position. The water surrounding him sucked out backwards and he braced himself for the big one. It didn't disappoint, either. An enormous swell lifted him, then crashed, all its energy propelling him forward as he torpedoed towards the shore.

The wave dumped him into knee-high water. While smaller waves tried their best to push him over, they couldn't fight his substantial weight.
Hugo's head swam with nausea. Directly in front of him, the glow of camp-fires broke up the dark of the beach. Lights from the restaurants and clubs stretched out in a thin bright line along the berm. To his left was nothing but sand, sea, and shadow. To his right, the gleaming lights of a great Ferris wheel rose out of a tangle of sound and color.

If he hadn't landed in some alternate dimension, or gone completely crazy, he'd swear that he'd washed up on the Santa Monica Beach. As he dragged himself into the swash zone, another wave of nausea hit him, along with the terrified realization that he could have just as easily been dropped another hundred feet out to sea. He fell to his knees and vomited into the wet sand, then rolled away from the mess as the ocean carried it out to sea.

The few stars bright enough to break through the Los Angeles haze finally stopped rolling around. He opened his eyes to a pair of torn, sand-covered tennis shoes with a hole big enough for a twisted, gnarled toe to poke out. Nearby, another set of dark-skinned toes stuck out of sandals held together with duct tape.

Two men stood over him. The one with the open-toed sandals wore a red knit hat and a wide, gap-toothed grin. The other shivered in a beige woolen sweater which hung down to his knees. The night was cool, the water colder, and Hugo started shivering as well.

Red-Hat offered Hugo a hand up. “You got it bad, don't you, buddy?”

Hugo's world still wasn't quite stable, and he reached out to support himself on Sweater-Guy. He hated to lean on the smaller man, who looked ready to blow away, but it was either that or hit the sand again.

Even though Sweater-Guy wouldn't look at Hugo, his shoulder held surprisingly steady. He kept muttering in a way Hugo recognized all too well from Santa Rosa. “Toldja what I saw, toldja, dinnint believe me, didja? He just went blip there in mid-air, right over the water. Toldja, toldja—”

Red-Hat turned to his friend. “You see a lotta things, man, some there, some not. Don't matter none now. He needs to get warmed up.”

A ring of stuffed black-plastic trash bags formed a sheltering wall around their fire. From one bag Red-Hat pulled out a blanket that smelled like it had been left in a wet basement too long. Hugo wrapped himself in it anyway, and when he stopped shivering, Red-Hat passed him a half-filled bottle of Old Crow.

Hugo badly wanted to wipe off the bottle's rim, but figured that would be rude. He took a tiny sip and handed it back. Then it hit him: there could be a whole lab's worth of germs on that bottle, and he probably wouldn't get sick.

As Hugo took another swig, Red-Hat studied him closely. “Last time I saw a guy walk out into the ocean at night, he was headed the other direction from you, and he kept on goin'. You wouldn't be tryin' that, now, would you?”

“It was an accident,” Hugo said. “Sorry to scare you.”

Sweater-Guy rocked a little, staring at the sand while he spoke. “You just get out? You look like you just got outta somewhere. The lockup, maybe?”

“Nah, that was a couple months ago.” Hugo was glad to be telling the truth.

Sweater-Guy took a long pull from the bottle, giving Hugo the side-eye, like maybe he was checking if Hugo was dangerous. “Whad'ya do?”
“Nothing,” Hugo said. “Wrong time, wrong place.”

Red-Hat laughed and took the bottle from Sweater-Guy. “Story of my life, man. I'll drink to that.”

“Guys, look, I got to call somebody.” Hugo rummaged around in his wet pocket, finding nothing but clumps of wet paper. Anything written on Ben's note had dissolved into a sticky mess. “Damn.”

“I tried to call my lawyer once,” Sweater-Guy said. “He hung up on me.”


Hugo gave a small shiver of recognition. “I been there, too, for awhile. 'Bout five years ago now.”

Sweater-Guy finally looked up, with way more clarity in his eyes than when they had all sat down. “A 5150, huh?”

“Yeah, my mom signed me in.” It felt so good to say it, so easy. “Then they transferred me somewhere else.”

Sweater-Guy stopped rocking. “Somewhere else, huh. They just sent me up to Metropolitan.” He shook his head as if trying to loosen the grip of a long bad dream.

“Sorry,” Hugo said.

Red-Hat capped the whiskey bottle and stowed it in his coat. “So, you got a call to make.”

Hugo could try to find Dan Norton's regular office number, but he doubted that was the one Ben had given him. From the look of the traffic up on the PCH, it had to be eight, nine o'clock at night. Maybe he could sleep on the beach, try to get ahold of Norton tomorrow when the office opened.

Hugo spread out his hands in a gesture of emptiness. “Doesn't matter. No phone, anyway.”

“Got just the thing for you, my man.” From a Safeway plastic grocery bag, Red-Hat pulled out the cheapest kind of flip phone, a real burner. The kind drug dealers bought for ten bucks, used once, then threw away.

“Dude, I can't take your phone.”

Red-Hat shrugged. “Not mine. Got it from a trash can on Third Street after some guy tossed it. It's got like five minutes left. You might as well use it.”

“You sure?” Hugo flipped it open. Five minutes, forty-two seconds of air time. Zero service days left, and the clock read 8:46 PM. “This is awesome. Back in a bit.”

Without the smelly blanket, Hugo started shivering all over again. He headed for the concrete restrooms in the parking lot, praying that they'd be open at this time of night. A few people camping on the beach in ratty sleeping bags asked him for change, but he just opened his hands, saying, “I got nothing, sorry.”

In the restroom, a couple of tourists skittered out as soon as Hugo went in. He saw himself through their eyes: huge, lumbering, hair frizzed out from the sea, his wet cargoes crusted with sand, and he still smelled like that damp blanket. He washed his face and hands, but there were no paper towels and the automatic dryer didn't work, so he came out looking even worse than before.

A patrol car cruised lazily through the parking lot. Hugo's heart pounded out the seconds until it turned on the cherries and headed south on the PCH. Something going on down at the pier,
probably. His hands were shaking so badly that he took a few deep breaths before trying to open the phone, afraid to drop it onto the concrete.

One bar's worth of charge, and five service minutes. That was all he got. Who the hell should he call?

The answer blazed bright as the lights from the pier. Kate. Her number had stayed burned into his brain from when he'd called her from the hospital, before his final breakdown when they took his phone away.

Doubt seized him again. If he messed up punching in Kate's number, or if it was the wrong one, sure, he could call his parents. Of course if he called them out of the blue at night like this, they'd probably both have heart attacks. Or at best think he was a prankster and just hang up.

_OK, try Kate first._ Her number rolled off his fingers effortlessly, as much muscle memory as anything else.

_Oh, please don't let her have unknown calls blocked. Or a full voice-mailbox. Or a new phone number._

It rang seven, eight times, with no answer. _Oh, shit, oh, no. Please, no._ He fought the rising panic, trying not to hyperventilate, just keeping to slow, steady breaths. Maybe she was in the can, or busy with Aaron. _Try it again._

It felt like the phone rang forever, but it couldn't have been more than five or six rings when someone picked up.

"Hello?" Kate's voice sounded tinny and far away.

"Kate? Kate, it's me, Hurley."

Silence, in which he prayed harder than he ever had in his life. "Kate, I'm in L.A. Don't hang up, for the love of Mary, please."

Kate's faint, strangled whisper seemed to come from the other side of the planet. "Hurley, is that you?" Then she blurted out the question Hugo had been dreading from the first moment he decided to use the Door. "Is Jack with you?"

Airtime seconds ticked away as he hesitated. "Kate, it's just me... I'm sorry."

Now she was shouting. "What? You're sorry? Sorry about what? What the hell happened? And how are you even here?"

"Kate, I've only got like three or four minutes till this phone conks out. You got to come pick me up."

"Where the hell is Jack?"

At the blast of sound he pulled the phone away from his ear. Kate was yelling to other people around her now, stuff like, "Get Aaron's bag, we're going out." Another voice came through, muffled, male. Oh, sweet Mary, let that be Sawyer, please. A woman's voice rose, shrill and questioning. If his leaping heart wasn't wrong, that was Claire.

Now Kate shouted, "Sawyer, stop asking me... Now you know why I had to get this old phone... Damn right I'm right... Yes, it's Hurley... Oh, Christ, I don't know..." Kate's voice trailed off into a
Indistinct speech exploded in the background, as if a bunch of people were talking all at once.

“Kate?” Hugo said. “Kate, you there? Listen, I got to tell you where I am.”

Someone else must have grabbed the phone, because a familiar twangy voice rang out over the airwaves. “So, hoss, you made it off the Island.”

“Sawyer, that you? Where's Kate?”

“Claire's got a hold of her, Hugo. She's meltin' down faster than ice cream on the Ju-ly pavement. Sounds like bad news about the Doc.”

“Listen, I got three minutes, maybe less. You know anything about LA?”

“Not a damn thing.”

“I can only maybe say this once, so listen. I'm in Santa Monica. There's a beach-side parking lot across from Palisades Park, with this kind of spiral-y walkway thingie that goes over the PCH from the park to the beach. That's where I'll be. And it's north of Pacific Park.”

“So you're in Pacific Park right by Palisades Park, north of Santa Monica. But what the hell's the PCH?”

“Oh, God, Sawyer, no. Palisades Park, I said. Pacific Park's at the Santa Monica pier. Don't go there, or you'll never find me. And PCH, that's the Pacific Coast Highway. Highway 1.”

Sawyer sighed, and even through the phone Hugo could see him rubbing the long hair from his forehead, exasperated. Hugo repeated the directions, and after a few tries, Sawyer even said it back correctly. In the last few seconds Hugo remembered to ask, “What kind of car you driving?”

Too late. The phone went dead.

Red-Hat and Sweater-Guy hadn't moved from their fire. When Hugo rejoined them, he handed Red-Hat the useless phone.

“You find who you was looking for?” Sweater-Guy said. His voice had lost that vague, muttering quality.

Hugo nodded. “Thanks, guys. They're coming to get me.”

Red-Hat offered the bottle of Old Crow, mostly empty now. “Sure you don't want a hit for the road?”

Hugo waved away the bottle, too busy staring into Sweater-Guy's wide, blue eyes, which never looked saner.

“They're gone,” Sweater-Guy whispered, hoarse with emotion. “The voices, they're gone.”

“That's awesome, really. Look, guys, I gotta go.” Hugo nearly fled back to the parking lot, hoping the two homeless men weren't following him, pressing him for an explanation, because he sure had no idea himself. What the hell had just happened?

* * * * * *
The phone still had enough charge to show the time. Hugo paced around the parking lot for awhile and pretended to talk into it, so that it looked like he had something to do, somewhere to be. A few more tourists gave him the wide berth, but at least none of them called the cops.

About half an hour later, a black Yukon SUV swung into the lot and just idled there for a minute, then pulled into a parking space.

The driver's window rolled down, and behind the wheel sat someone Hugo thought he'd never see again: tall, rangy, with hair almost down to the collar of his thin leather jacket.

As Hugo approached, Sawyer took a sniff. “What'd you do, ese, lie down in a garbage dump?”

Kate sat in the front seat, her eyes puffy from crying. She looked like a bomb had just gone off under her.

“Climb aboard, Hugo,” Sawyer said. “We're makin' a damn spectacle of ourselves out here.”

Hugo grabbed the driver's-side rear door and swung it open to the Yukon's vast, dark interior. A child was buckled into a car seat, a child who looked up at Hugo with wide, curious eyes. What the hell, that must be Aaron, completely unrecognizable. Well, no wonder, as Hugo hadn't seen Aaron since he was one.

Then his heart almost stopped. Next to the child, staring at Hugo as if she could bore holes in him, sat Claire.

“Get in, damn it,” Sawyer growled.

Claire scooted over, and Hugo tumbled in as fast as he could.

As Sawyer waited to turn left onto the PCH, he thrummed his fingers impatiently against the outside of the car door. “You mind if I lower the windows, get some air in here?”

Hugo didn't answer. He was too busy drinking in Claire with his eyes. She looked so different than his last glimpse of her, firing deadly rounds into Widmore's band of mercenaries, picking them off one by one. Too soon Hugo had disappeared into that tin can of a submarine, death in a can it turned out. The Locke-monster, though, hadn't let her get on. Which probably saved her life.

Now, here she sat, almost too good to be true, her fluffy blonde hair back-lit by the street lamps. From the look on her face, she was taking him all in, too. Finally he found the wit to say, “I'm really wet and gross.”

She didn't say anything, just reached up and put her arms around his neck, drawing him to her in a warm hug, exactly as she had done back in Locke's camp on the Island. Her words came out muffled in the flesh of his neck. “I don't mind.”

When she let go, Hugo felt compelled to say, “Sorry about your car, Sawyer. There's kind of sand everywhere.”

He could barely hear Kate's choked voice from the front seat. “It's my car.”

Sawyer glanced back at Hugo through the rear view mirror, and tipped an imaginary cap. “I'm the chauffeur.”

As they bounced north on the PCH, Claire's eyes never left Hugo. If she minded his thigh and the rest of him jammed up next to her, she didn't show it. Anyway, there was nowhere else to go. She sat
like the calm eye of the hurricane of unanswered questions which swirled around inside the car.

Aaron leaned over to Hugo, breaking the silence. “Hello.”

“Hey, there, little buddy.”

“I'm Aaron. You're fat.”

A chuckle ran from Claire's thigh all the way up to her shoulders. “This is Hurley. He's a friend of both your mums. Tell Hurley how old you are.”

Aaron held up assorted fingers. “This many. Three and a half.”

“That's awesome,” Hugo said.

Sawyer pulled up to a red light. “So, this is the plan, hoss. We're gonna get you hosed off, fed, and liquored up, and you're gonna tell us everything, from when Kate and I did a swan dive off that cliff.”

Food sounded great, but Hugo was very happy not to move at present. Claire was studying him again with the most peculiar expression, and all at once, Hugo was reminded of the homeless guy on the beach, when the fog had suddenly lifted from his eyes.

Hugo had a strong suspicion that whatever he'd done, he'd just done it to Claire, too.

Suddenly a cellphone rang, and Sawyer jumped. “That's got to be yours, Freckles. The Ricardo-phone, not your old one.”

“I think I can tell my phones apart.” Kate tapped it, listened, not saying anything for what seemed like a long time.

“Who the hell is that?” Sawyer asked, but Kate shushed him.

“Hold on a minute,” Kate said into the phone. She then looked around to everyone in the car. “It's someone who knows Richard. Someone named Eloise. Eloise Hawking.”

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth.
Just as Sawyer turned onto the canyon road which led up to Topanga, a light rain started to fall. The road steeply inclined, then took a hairpin turn to the left. As Sawyer made the curve, the rear tires of the Yukon slipped a little on the winding road.

Kate was still on the phone with Eloise Hawking. “My God, Sawyer, be careful.”

As Sawyer let the Yukon slide gently into the skid, irritation laced his voice. “So who's this Eloise?”

“Oh, crap,” Hugo said from the back.

“I'm sorry,” Kate said into the phone. “Could you hold on a second?”

Sawyer said to Hugo, “What, you know her?”

“Sorta. She helped Ben and everybody else get back to the Island.”

Sawyer hugged the canyon wall as a pick-up truck swerved down the road in the opposite direction. “Friend of Ben's, huh?” This conversation was getting interesting, but there was nowhere to pull over for a ways, and the road was about to go down to one lane, too. Then the fun would really begin.

“Oh, I'm back. Yes, he's here.” Kate craned her head around to give Hugo the once-over, her expression cool. “He's fine... What, you knew already?” Kate was silent for a long beat, then said, “We're headed back to Topanga now.”

It sounded to Sawyer like Kate was listening to instructions, ones that didn't set well with her.

Kate said, “You're damned right I'll call Richard to confirm. You can't expect me to just—”

Eloise Hawking must have interrupted her, because Kate drew in a little painful breath. “All right. We'll do that.” To Sawyer she said in a stricken voice, “Turn around.”

“What?”

“Just do it, okay?”

“The hell I will. Give me that goddamn phone.”

Kate's tone bordered on hysteria. “Sawyer, how many times have I told you not to swear in front of the baby?”

From the back seat, Aaron said, “I'm not a baby! What's a bitch, Mummy Claire?”

“A mother dog, Cuddlepot.”

“So... a 'son of a bitch' is a... puppy?”

Kate started to laugh, great gasping shrieks disproportionate to the humor in Aaron's remark. Since she was distracted, Sawyer snatched the phone and put it to his own ear. “Miz Hawking, you still
Eloise Hawking's precise British tones came through clear as crystal. “Do I have the pleasure of speaking with Mr. Ford, or Mr. Reyes?”

The courteous tone unnerved Sawyer. Reflexively he answered, “Mr. Ford, ma'am.”

When she repeated her instructions, Sawyer said, “That won't be possible. You know Topanga Canyon?”

“Indeed I do.”

“It's dark and raining. There's no turn-around on this mountain-way till we're practically home. No doubt what you got to show us at that church is mighty important, but it's just gonna have to wait till tomorrow.”

“I understand, Mr. Ford. Please put Mr. Reyes on the line.”

“Look, Queen Elizabeth, I know you want to bump this upstairs, but—”

“Please. Give. Me. Mr. Reyes.”

The change in her voice was so abrupt, Sawyer almost dropped the iPhone. In her tone Sawyer heard his grandmother and a host of aunts of all kinds: great, maiden, and otherwise. Steel magnolias, the whole lot of them. He reached over his shoulder and waved the phone at Hugo, signaling for him to take it. “Hey, you two back there, this ain't the drive-in.”

“What?” Hugo protested. “We're not—”

“Never mind. Miz Hawking wants to talk to the boss, and that'd be you.”

Silence filled the back seat, punctuated by Hugo's occasional “Um, hm,” or a drawn-out “Okay,” followed by “Sure, I know where that is. It's kinda near my parents, which reminds me, I gotta call them—”

Eloise must have derailed that train, because the silence was long this time, and even without peering through the rear-view mirror, Sawyer could sense Hugo's uncomfortable shifting. Finally Hugo wrapped up with, “So I don't have to get down there tomorrow? Sunday's fine?”

Apparently Eloise agreed. Hugo handed the phone up to the front seat, where Kate took it without speaking.

“So,” Sawyer said, fumbling with the defogger, trying to get the residual mist off the inside of the windshield. “Sounds like I'll have to get out my best string tie for go-to-meetin' Sunday.”

When the Yukon pulled into the big circle driveway of their house, Sawyer managed to get the driver's side rear door open before Hugo could find the latch. Hugo almost tumbled out, flushing with embarrassment at Claire's small chuckle.

Inside the house he stared, slack-jawed at all the glass and wood, at the high, pointed ceilings lit by golden lamps which made the steel kitchen shine like burnished metal. His parents' mansion was far more luxurious. But this was where she lived. This was her home now.

Carole Littleton darted about in a blonde blur, sending Claire and Kate off to put Aaron to bed. She
then ushered Sawyer and Hugo downstairs to the shower and nearby laundry room. “Give Hugo one of those sheets, Sawyer, and put the machine on speed-wash. You fellows can have a toga party while we make a late supper.”

When Hugo came out of the shower, toweling his hair, a beach towel wrapped around his wide middle, Sawyer said, “Give it to me straight, Hugo, mano a mano. We kinda got interrupted on the drive up. What happened with the Doc? I'm only askin' now, on account of how there might be a detail or two you don't care to share with Kate.”

“Can I just, like, tell it once?” Hugo twisted the royal blue sheet around himself once, then twice, but it threatened to tumble to the floor whenever he moved.

“Goddammit, don't you know how to tie up a toga? Hell, I never went to college, and even I know that.” Sawyer brushed Hugo's long wet hair aside, then took the sheet in hand. After wrapping, draping, then knotting it, he grabbed another one for insurance, and did the same. Finished, Sawyer stepped back and admired his work. “Now you're not gonna shock the ladies.”

When Hugo showed himself upstairs in his bedsheets arranged like robes, Carole gave a low chuckle, while Claire stared.

“You need a crown and a scepter,” Carole remarked.

Kate set the table like an automaton, while Claire and Carole sliced cold chicken and cut thick slices of wheat bread from the loaf. At one point Kate dropped her handful of silverware, just staring as they clattered on the tile floor.

Sawyer sped to her side. “Come on, Freckles, take a load off. We got this.”

She brushed him off. “I have to be doing something. I just can't sit.”

Sawyer handed a beer to Hugo. He did the same for Kate, but she waved it away. As they settled themselves in the living room with sandwiches, Sawyer turned to Hugo. “Okay, hoss, you're on.”

It took the better part of two hours. Hugo got out most of what had happened since he, Ben, and Jack had walked away from Kate and Sawyer on that sun-drenched Island cliff-side. He mostly stayed on the straight course, although whenever he got badly tangled, Carole kindly helped him unsnarl the tale.

Kate sniffled a bit when Hugo mentioned how he and Rose had washed and dressed Jack's body. He didn't bring up how Bernard had gone over Jack's wounds. Hugo had to go over the part about Pele's beach party twice, as everyone gaped at him.

Claire finally broke the silence. “So there were others. I mean, ones we couldn't see. I knew it.”

Hugo had just gotten to the part where Desmond left for home, when Aaron woke up needing his plush kangaroo Skippy instead of Willie the orca.

In the middle of Hugo's description of Ben and Cindy's school, Sawyer's phone rang.

“That was Deirdre Hannegan,” Sawyer explained when he came back from taking the call. “Your folks are driving up tomorrow, first thing. Miz Hannegan wanted to send a car for them, but your dad said he used to ride his Hog up and down these mountain roads all the time.”

“Mom'll be hysterical no matter what,” Hugo said. “Dad might as well drive.”
On and on it went, until Hugo's tongue felt like leather in his mouth and his jaws ached. After her initial burst of tears, Kate sat calmly, knees to her chest, hands wrapped around her legs. When the talk shifted from Hugo's tale to conversation, she excused herself and got up.

As Kate slipped past Carole, Hugo heard her say, “The Zolpidem's in your medicine cabinet.” Her tone alluded to an earlier talk, or maybe even an argument.

But Kate didn't fight back. Resigned, she said, “One, or two?”

“Normally one, but two if you think you need it. It says as much on the label.”

“Thanks.” The door of the bathroom slammed behind Kate, probably a little louder than she intended.

Carole turned her pointed gaze towards Hugo. “Your clothes are probably dry by now.”

Sawyer chuckled. “You may be bull-goose on the Island, Sir Hugo, but around here, she's the boss.”

* * * * * * * *

Kate's door was halfway open, so Hugo gave a light tap on the door-frame. He could tell by her breathing that she wasn't asleep. “Kate? Could I, uh, talk to you for a minute?”

Her voice was muffled by pillows and medication. “What do you want?”

“Can I come in?”

“Suit yourself.”

“If there's anything you need—”

“Anything I need?” She pulled herself up to a half-crouch, eyes red from weeping, hair in wild disarray. “Jack. I need Jack. But that's the one thing you can't do, is it? With all your... protector powers.” She spat out the last words like a curse.

Mental reservation, Fr. Aguillar had called it in catechism class. Kind of like crossing your fingers in your head. But Hugo didn't think he was lying, he was pretty sure. For one thing, Jack had been dead way too long. For another, this was the one boundary he'd sworn never to breach. “No, I can't.”

“Now I know how James felt at the Temple, when Sayid got revived instead of Juliet.”

Hugo knew what she meant.

She didn't waste any time coming right out with it. “Why Jack? Why did Jack have to be the one who died?”

Well, the karmic payback shouldn't have surprised him. Hugo's own long cry of despair rang in his memory, when he and Ben had hauled Desmond's unconscious body up from the well of light. Instead of Jack's. “You mean, why'd Jack die, and not me?”

Kate rested her head on her knees, caught.

Hugo knelt down by the low bed. “It's OK, Kate. You're upset.”

“He said I wouldn't see him again. But I still hoped...” Her voice trailed off, despondent. “Look where hope got me.”
Hugo didn't say anything, just rested a heavy hand on her shoulder. She burst into tears, then crawled over to his embrace. Sprawled on the floor, Hugo gently rocked her back and forth the way a parent comforts a crying child.

She wiped her eyes and even her nose on the front of his freshly-washed t-shirt, but he didn't care. He sat like a large and patient rock, beaten by the waves of her anger and sorrow.

After awhile she stopped sniffling, then crawled back into bed. Giving his hand a squeeze, she said in a slurred voice, “I think I'll sleep now.”

“He really loved you.”

Kate had already pulled the covers over her head, and from deep beneath the bedclothes Hugo could barely hear her answer. “I know.”

* * * * * * * *

Hugo closed Kate's door behind him, trying not to click the latch too loudly. In the living room, Claire was arranging a few pillows and some bed-clothes on the longest section of the couch. The lights had been dimmed, leaving the room in partial darkness.

She turned to him with a face full of worry. “Kate's taking it rough, isn't she?”

“No surprise there.” Hugo stared out the wide windows at the pool, the surface of the water twinkling in the moonlight. “How are you holding up?”

Claire's reflected image in the glass hovered behind him. “When I found out he was my brother, I used to imagine him coming back some day to rescue me. After he... after all of you ditched me, I hated him. Then, when I thought he'd died on that sub, I didn't hate him anymore, just myself.”

Her voice was so low, it almost might have been a ghost talking to him. He didn't dare turn around.

“I guess I did most of my crying back then. But Kate wasn't the only one who wished he would have made it.”

He couldn't take it any longer. Slowly he swung around to face her. “Claire, listen. I'm glad you followed us anyway. Even though we ditched you twice.”

“I'm glad I followed you, too.”

Her words took on dimensions of meaning. Claire on the day of the crash, following him away from burning wreckage to a place on the sidelines which they thought would be safe, even though it hadn't been. Where they risked getting killed all over again, if Jack hadn't saved their bacon that day.

Claire in that first week, following him to a hastily thrown-together shelter made of bits of fuselage, sleeping at his side, but on the outside because she had to get up so much in the middle of the night.

Claire, following him from her shelter at the beach camp for what would be the last time as they fled to the radio tower, him holding Aaron while she got her small bag of possessions together.

Claire, standing by his side at the broken wreckage of the fuselage out in the middle of the jungle as Jack and Locke went their separate ways. Not standing with Locke, but standing with him, Hugo.

Finally, (oh Mother of Sorrows, pray for us) Claire trudging behind him to the Barracks for a few sweet days, her small determined presence always in his shadow. Until she was taken.
His train of thought stopped when Claire opened the patio door, letting in the cinnamon-scented night air. “Oh, hell, I forgot to cover the pool. Want to go help me flip a switch?”

Out on the pool-side, the gears in the automatic pool cover made noisy, grinding sounds as the cover moved about six inches, then stopped dead. Claire returned the pool cover control to the "Open" position and sighed. "It's been on its last leg for awhile now. I'll have to call the service company tomorrow."

"Right," Hugo said, entranced by the night-time vista of the thick forest spread out below them. It was weird, too, how fireflies winked on and off in the nearby trees, a lot of fireflies. Weren't they out kind of late in the evening?

Overhead, airplanes glided in their stately dance to and from LAX. Up north, a few stars broke through the moonlit Los Angeles haze. Cool air blew down from the mountains, making Hugo shiver a little.

Finally Hugo said, “This isn't what I expected.” When Claire's face fell, so did his heart. Feeling like a complete idiot, he hastily tried to recover. “No, no, that's not what I meant. You, Kate, Aaron, it's awesome. I mean, I knew you guys got back, but to see it. Wow. It's just, well, different. Not how I thought it would be.”

“Different how?”

“I dunno. Like maybe I'd just get in the Hummer, drive home, make some verde nachos, watch TV with my dad. Like nothing ever happened.”

“I thought things would be different, too. The first few days, Aaron would barely speak to me. If I came into the room, he'd run into Kate's arms, or Mum's. I started crying, couldn't stop. Mum made me call Dr. Curtis, and now I see him three times a week. Kate wouldn't see him again after her first visit, though he did give her something to help her sleep.”

“He was nice. I remember him from the hospital—” Hugo broke off abruptly, stopped by old habits, old concealments. Abashed, he turned away. “I guess Kate told you about that.”

Her sympathetic expression answered for her. When she took his hand, the gesture was so warm, so spontaneous that his eyes began to sting. “I screwed up bad, Claire.”

“No, you didn't. You couldn't help it, any more than I could help being taken.”

“I put my mom and dad through so much.”

“From what Kate said, they haven't held it against you. Look, I have an idea. We'll cook brunch for them. Would you like that?”

“I'd love it.” To be honest, there was no word for the emotion which threatened to burst from his chest, a feeling even stronger than love. He didn't have to let out everything at once, either. He just had to promise himself that he wasn't going to hide anymore. “There's so much you don't know about me, Claire.”

“Same with me, Hurley. I'm no saint. I killed people on the Island. Others.”

He turned to her slowly, as if seeing her for the first time. As she swung around to face him, he grasped both her hands. “I killed one of them, too.”

“But it was a fair fight. With me...” Her voice vanished into a distant point of sadness.
“It wasn’t your fault, Claire. You were…” He struggled for the right word. “Drafted. It was like a war, and you were drafted.”

“That’s just what Dr. Curtis said. ’Conscripted’ is what he called it.”

“We were all conscripted.”

“In a war that went on for two thousand years.”

Hugo stared at her, eyes wide, as an unwelcome, unpleasant revelation bubbled to the surface. Hugo’s old jealousy over Charlie lay submerged in the deep waters of Looking Glass Bay. As far as Aaron’s father, Hugo couldn’t even remember his name.

But Old Smokey in his spanking-new Locke body... Oh, no. No way. No wonder Claire had looked and acted so crazy. Three years was a long time, too. You could learn a lot about a person in that time. Maybe after long enough, a person could even come to think that way about a smoke monster.

Hugo managed to choke out, “I guess you and Locke got, um, close.”

Claire’s hands were still warm in his, but her eyes changed from tender blue to glacial hardness. “It wasn’t like that, Hurley. It could have been, but it wasn’t. Never.”

“It’s OK, Claire, I didn’t think—”

“Yes, you did.” She dropped his hands like hot potatoes.

Everything rested on his answer. “You’re right. I did think that maybe you and Locke... Fake-Locke, I mean.”

“Would it have made a difference? Here and now, I mean. Would you be out here with me? Because sometimes in wars, Hurley, women get drafted for things other than fighting.” Claire stood before him, small and shivering now, trying to hold together a tough and confrontational pose, but not very well.

Something inside him melted, the last vestige of resistance. Even if Claire had loved “the monster,” it would have been because she wanted to live. To survive. What was the special kind of crazy that hostages got, named for some city he couldn’t remember? Anyway, Smokey was dead, but he wasn’t. Nor was she.

“No.” Hugo knew in his heart it was true. “It wouldn’t make a damn bit of difference.”

The resistance in Claire’s face broke. Hugo held his arms open to her and in she fell, coming to rest right on the spot where his chest ended and stomach began. He enfolded her in the soft circle of his arms as she melted onto him, into him. Resting his face on her hair, he caught a whiff of pool chemicals, mixed with ginger-smelling conditioner. She must have gone swimming earlier in the day.

Something stirred down at the base of his spine: not just desire, but a seismic flood of richness and power which he couldn’t hold back. As he breathed in another hint of her hair, some movement across the pool caught his eye.

At the broken contact, Claire raised her own head, quizzical. When she caught him staring, she turned around, too. “Oh, my God.”

Every firefly in Topanga Canyon must have gotten the invitation to the party at the Austen-Littleton house. They hovered above the shimmering rectangle of the pool, reflecting off the water like pale-
green stars. The light they cast was bright enough to leave faint shadows.

Hugo walked forward to the pool's edge as if in a dream. When he stretched out his hand, the cloud of living light swirled around it for a few seconds, and tiny wings tickled the hairs on his forearm. Then, as if cued by a silent note which only they could hear, the cloud of fireflies thinned out. They dispersed into a faint glowing haze which drifted off into the night-blackened trees, then vanished.

“Quite a light show.” Sawyer stood at the patio door, his face almost tender.

“At least none of them landed in the pool,” said Hugo.

“Then we'd have to skim them off,” Claire added. “Aaron hates that. Those water-bugs yesterday—”

“Don't remind me. Couldn't stand that as a kid, myself, seein' 'em kick and struggle in the water trough.” Sawyer reached into his front shirt pocket for the pack of cigarettes that wasn't there, then sighed. “Old habits. Dharma people smoked like chimneys. I quit hard, Island-style, then took it up again. Juliet always nagged my ass about it.”

“You smoke around Aaron, Mum'll do more than nag you. She'll drown you in that pool there.”

“You better watch this one, Hugo. Them women from Down Under are like wildcats.”

Claire ignored Sawyer's quip. “Did you just check on Kate?”

“She's sleepin' like a baby.”

Hugo said, “That's what ten migs of Zolpidem will do to you.”

“She didn't want the prescription at first,” Claire said to Hugo. “It was the strangest thing, like she thought it would hurt her or something.”

A thought formed in Hugo's mind, half insight, half imagination. He tried to keep his face under control, to not let the wild hope show.

Claire sounded proud of herself. “I told her that just having it around didn't mean she had to take it.”

Sawyer chuckled. “Reverse psychology. This li'l gal's good at it. 'Fore you know it, she's gonna tell you to stay up till one A.M. Which it is right now.”

“It's after one, Sawyer. Why don't you stay up?” she said.

“You got it, Sheila. 'Night, all.” Sawyer headed down the hill to his own cabin.

Hugo sank into the soft couch, wanting to prolong whatever had started on that ghost-lit pool deck.

Claire crouched delightfully close, and her “Good-night, Hurley” barely sounded above a whisper. She brushed his cheek not so much with her lips as her breath, then melted into the dark of the quiet house, leaving on his skin a glow of warmth small as a single firefly.

(continued)
Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth.
Kate opened her eyes, then quickly scrunched them shut against the glaring sunlight which poured through the window at an angle where the sun shouldn't be. Or maybe she was the one in the wrong place. She never slept in, especially not this late. The whole room looked different, drenched in unfamiliar light which crowded out the shadows.

The big master bedroom was pale and anonymous as a hotel room. She had added nothing to it except a few clothes and the well-stuffed satchel scavenged from her old house. The bag sat half-zipped on a chair, ready to bolt out the door as soon as Kate was.

The shut bedroom door vibrated with noise from the rest of the house. Those baritone laughs sounded like David Reyes and Sawyer, accompanied by Carmen's squawks. Two interwoven melodies must have been Claire and Carole. Hurley blatted out, “Dude, no, you're killing me...” while Aaron's piccolo shrieks rose above the noise.

Nature's call drove Kate out of bed. Before heading to the bathroom, she reached into her satchel and grabbed a small, pink cardboard box. As she studied it, she looked inside, then shook the contents so they rattled. Without taking anything out, she tossed the box onto the bed and darted into the bathroom.

As she washed her hands and face, she wondered if Hurley was still speaking to her after last night's performance. She couldn't remember what she'd said, but it had probably been pretty ugly. All she could remember was blowing her nose on his shirt like a five-year old. Her ears burned as she smoothed the bedclothes and fluffed the pillows. The clock on the dresser read 11:15.

Mentally, Kate checked the hollow space inside where Jack used to be. Still there, no surprise. At least her heart didn't bleed as much when she ran her mind over the serrated edges of that gaping hole. Maybe it was because she'd had her first long, unbroken sleep since leaving for the Island.

She probably shouldn't have yelled at Dr. Curtis the way she had, either, when he wrote out that prescription during their first and only visit. Before losing her temper, she'd asked the not-so-hypothetical question: Sure, she needed to sleep, but didn't having a pill-popping drunk for a biological father put her at huge risk?

Dr. Curtis had remarked in a mild voice that if he thought she'd abuse a sleep aid, he wouldn't offer her one.

Maybe it wasn't just sleeping pills which had made her feel better. She touched her shoulder scar, once a ragged bullet wound. Pulling down her t-shirt neckline, she bent in towards the bathroom mirror for a better look, but the thin white line was barely visible.

"Island mojo," Sawyer had called it. Maybe that mojo worked on more than flesh.

Sudden anger at Hurley lashed her. How dare he do that? It was like a violation. Kate wanted her grief to hurt, to rip her to pieces, yet here she was: rested, physically fresh, skin glowing, eyes bright. Then it hit her. Hurley hadn't done anything, at least not on purpose, no more so than a flower could keep from putting out scent, or a cat could avoid shedding hair.

Nor had Hurley back-filled the yawning canyon of her grief, not by a long shot. Only difference was
that today she could sense a path through. Last night she had been mired in it.

Lost in thought, Kate didn't hear the light taps on her door.

Soon the door swung open, and Claire entered. “You okay, Kate? Carmen thought I should check on you.”

“I'm fine. Just washing up.”

Kate swiped her face with the towel one last time, then went back into the bedroom, where her heart dropped several stories. Claire sat on the bed, closely scrutinizing the pink cardboard box.

“A three-pack, huh? One's missing, I see.” Claire lifted her eyes expectantly, as if waiting for Kate to tell her something.

“I used one of them a couple months after Jack moved in.”

“So, are you going to?”

“Going to what?”

“Use another one.”

Kate sank down onto the bed next to Claire. “I don't know. 'Late' doesn't mean anything with me. I can go months between. This time, though, it just—”

“Feels different, right?”

“Right. It's not like I'm sick or anything, though.”

“Some women don't get sick. Mum didn't, even though I threw up buckets for weeks. Then it just stopped, like throwing a switch.”

The look Claire gave Kate was so tender, so full of sympathy, that Kate's eyes at once filled with tears. “It's ridiculous. Even before that bad news yesterday... I've been so emotional. Last night I even snapped at Hurley.”

“That is another sign, after all.”

“I know,” Kate said in a small voice.

Claire was just about to speak when thumps echoed down the hallway, along with a loud, “Yoo-hoo, Claire, did you wake her up?”

Claire quickly shoved the box of pregnancy tests underneath the nearest pillow. Kate didn't know someone could move that fast.

“In here, Carmen,” Claire said as she and Kate leaped to their feet.

Carmen Reyes bore down on Kate like a floral-clad Mack truck, wrapping her in a jasmine-scented, bosomy embrace, murmuring endearments like, “You poor girl... Hugo told us about Jack... I'm so, so sorry.” She finally let Kate catch her breath, then went on, “I called Fr. Aguillar right away. He's our old priest, from Our Lady of Lourdes. He's going to remember Jack Shephard in his daily Mass for a whole year.”

Tears welled up again as Kate sniffled out, “Thanks.”
Carmen must have scented something in the wind, because she looked around the bedroom with a shrewd and practiced eye. She stared at the bed, and for a second Kate had the weirdest notion that Carmen knew something was hidden under the pillow, but simply chose not to mention it at the time.

“Throw on some clothes,” Carmen ordered. “There’s plenty of breakfast left.”

* * * * * * * *

All in the space of one morning, the house had been transformed. Cartoons blared from the normally silent television, despite Carole's occasional frown. Sawyer and David Reyes both sprawled on the floor with Aaron, where all three pushed wooden railroad cars along convoluted lengths of track.

Sawyer ran his train head-on into Aaron's. “Casey Jones, you better watch your speed.” As both trains derailed, Aaron shrieked with laughter.

Into the pile-up David shoved his own train. “Oh, no, I can't stop! Oops, too late.”

On the couch Hugo watched cartoons, controller in hand. Kate tried to slip past him into the kitchen, but it was too late. As soon as he saw her he bounded off the couch, knocking loose a section of track as he passed. David rose to his feet as well.

Aaron demolished the rest of the section, yelling, “Giants, giants in town, making earthquakes!” followed by noises like explosions.

Sawyer looked up at Kate with a dimpled grin. “Mornin', Shortcake. Or afternoon. Your call.” Then he and Aaron set to work repairing the ruined track.

David and Hugo jostled Kate on either side. “That was a damn shame about Jack,” David said, pulling Kate towards him.

Engulfed in the third Reyes embrace in a day, Kate had a ludicrous thought. Back in high school, she'd learned about something called the hardness test. Diamonds were a ten, if she recalled, and chalk was a one. Well, someone should create the Reyes softness scale, and use it to rate hugs. As David let her go, she chuckled to herself. Hugo must have heard it, because he broke into a relieved smile. At once Kate knew that he'd been equally worried about facing her.

Kate poured herself a cup of coffee in the midst of the overflowing kitchen. “Plenty left” didn't even come close to describing it. Both the kitchen island and dining room table groaned under a feast for twice the number of people. From a long deli tray, David helped himself to a pulled-pork sandwich. A half-full tub of macaroni salad sat next to a large bowl laden with cut fruit. Hugo cut himself a generous slice of sheet cake decorated with shaky, hand-squeezed letters that once read “Welcome Home.”

The cake box proclaimed that it came from Stan's, a popular deli on Santa Monica Boulevard. Kate knew it well, from catering Aaron's birthday parties, as well as Jack's last one. She turned to Claire and said, “How'd all this happen?”

“Carmen and David,” Claire answered. “They stopped for take-out on their way up here.”

Hugo didn't take his eyes off Claire. “We kind of didn't get to cook.”

“We can make up for it tonight,” Claire said.
Hugo shifted the way he did when he had something uncomfortable to say and couldn't quite spit it out. “I'm, uh, kind of heading down to my parents'.”

Claire sent Kate a quick glance of disappointment.

Hugo tried to recover the fumbled ball. “Um, maybe if you wanted, you could come along. And bring Aaron.”

Kate could tell how much Claire wanted to say yes. Once more, Kate got that sinking sensation of being a third wheel, abandoned.

Claire flushed a little pink. “Thanks, Hurley, but your parents probably want some time with you.”

His face fell, as Kate knew it would.

Claire added, “We'll pick you up tomorrow, to go to the church.”

Before Hugo could say anything, Carmen interrupted. “What church? You started going to church?”

Hugo tried to stall her with a fruitless, “I'll explain later, Ma,” but it did no good.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Kate beat a hasty retreat to the pool deck, where Carole sipped coffee and gazed out at the Santa Monica Mountain range.

“Mind if I join you?” Kate said.

Carole's smile was a bit worn around the edges. “They're wonderful people, aren't they?”

“They are. Exhausting, though.”

“Indeed.” Then Carole looked Kate square in the eye. “Kate, tell me how you're doing. Really.”

Kate didn't know what to say at first, but the words tumbled out all on their own. “I feel locked inside my skin, Carole. I just want to rip all the stupid things I've done, the mistakes, everything. The people I hurt, the people I got killed, the people I...”

Carole said nothing, her face cool and impassive.

“It's a mess, Carole. I'm a mess.”

“All right, so you're a mess. What next?”

What was next? “I just wish there was a way to wrap it up in a neat little bundle, throw it all away.”

“Whatever you want to get rid of is tied to you, Kate. It's part of you. But when you don't notice it anymore, then you've already let it go.”

Kate rested her head on her knees. Like mother, like daughter, really. Claire with her astrology charts, or her tarot cards that she didn't even use for fortune telling, just dealt out one by one, like someone leafing through a magazine. Carole, sitting for hours cross-legged in the big downstairs room on a yoga mat, her utterances sounding like fortune cookies. Kate had no patience with all this mumbo-jumbo. Wasn't it enough that the world just worked, even if she herself didn't?

Carole spoke again, and this time she didn't sound airy-fairy at all. Instead, she used the same voice Kate herself had used on Aaron more than once. “Kate, give Dr. Curtis one more chance.” She followed with a more gentle and conciliatory, “Please.”
“I’ll think about it.” Kate knew that she sounded sullen and far younger than her years. Then, a little of the ice inside broke free. “Thanks, Carole.”

* * * * * * * *

As afternoon eased into evening, Sawyer paced around the driveway, wondering if he could get in a quick smoke before Carole caught him. He spied Kate as she stepped onto the front patio, carefully closing the front door behind her like a teenager sneaking out.

As she passed by, seemingly oblivious to his presence, he touched her gently on the arm. “You OK, Short-stack?”

“I just need a breath of air. Or ten.”

“Know what you mean. The Reyes clan’s loud enough to bring down the rafters.”

“I thought I’d take a drive up the beach.”

“Well, this time of day you won’t get much of a tan.” Her irritated look told Sawyer that maybe he should dial down the charm.

“Let me guess. You want to go along.”

The late afternoon air fell on him as cool as her tone, but it was worth one more try. “You know me, always up for a ride.”

She didn’t move towards the Yukon, though. Instead, she gazed over at mountains like brownish-green quilts dumped out of a laundry basket. Lighter greens and the red-gold of the fading sun shot through their tumbled ridges. Even in front of all that beauty, she held her mouth tight, her eyes narrow.

What the hell’s got into her? Sawyer wondered, then kicked himself inside. Of course Kate had a lot going on. He’d been a basket case himself in Tarawa, and good money said she was feeling the same way right about now. Well, he could bend with it. Juliet had known damn well that he wasn’t much of a go-with-the-flow guy, despite his relaxed speech and lazy smile. But maybe he could learn.

Kate glared at the yellow Hummer which sat square behind the Yukon. “Oh, hell, David Reyes parked me in.”

“No problem. We can take mine.”

Sawyer was proud of his red 2003 Mustang Mach 1. It was the kind of car he’d dreamed about since his freshman year, when he did little but leaf through Motor Trend and dodge bullies who polished their shit-kicker motorcycle boots on high-school bottom-dwellers like himself.

On the way to the car, Sawyer thought about putting his arm around Kate, but the tight cast of her shoulders told him that probably wouldn’t be the best idea. “So, where we going, Freckles?”

Kate slid into the buttery-smooth leather passenger seat. Instead of staying there, she scooted over the gear-shift into the driver’s seat and held her hand out for the keys.

“A sur-prise joyride,” said Sawyer. “Even better.” He fast-balled the keys to her, but she snatched them out of the air in an instant. Ignoring his grin, she sat there for a few seconds without starting the ignition, resting her head momentarily on the wheel.
Sawyer leaned over, genuinely worried. “Kate, what's wrong?”

She raised her head, avoiding his gaze. “Nothing. Why don't we drive up the coast to Malibu?”

“You're on.”

When she pulled out of the driveway onto the gravel road, she turned so sharply that the Mustang's rear end fish-tailed a bit.

Sawyer tried not to show his alarm. “Take it easy, Kate. This baby's a tiger, not like that big ol' land yacht of yours.”

Kate said nothing, just accelerated faster down the packed gravel. He relaxed a bit when she turned onto the mountain-way, then had to swallow his heart as she sped down the center of the twisting one-lane road.

He sat back, eyes closed. Kate was a damn good driver; he had to give her credit for that. She'd tell him where they were going when she was good and ready, and not a moment before, so he might as well hang on and enjoy the ride.

Good thing he'd left the convertible top down, too. Fresh evening air poured over the two of them, blowing away the gravel dust. Since there was no shoulder, trees grew right up to the asphalt, where their thick branches hung over the road like women's long hair. Those trees were mighty pretty until they got heart-stoppingly close, as Kate swerved around one curve, then another.

Sawyer's ears popped, just like in an airplane, but if it bothered Kate, she didn't show it. Waiting for a right turn at the Pacific Coast Highway stoplight, he saw that he'd dug his fingernails in the passenger seat's fine-grained leather, leaving tiny marks.

I'm getting too damn old for this, Sawyer said to himself.

They joined the long line of Saturday evening traffic leaving the city, and drove on in silence. Suddenly, Kate jerked the car across lanes, turning left into what looked like deserted, gravel-lined beach frontage. He gripped the seat again and let out a small gasp.

“What's the matter, you don't like my driving?” Kate said with a grin.

Caught out, he forced his jaw shut. His stomach lurched when Kate swerved around a big “Private: Keep Out” sign, then headed right for a cluster of rocks tall as a man and twice as wide. He'd be damned if he said a word, even if she plowed the Mustang right into the biggest one.

She picked up speed, making the car jounce over the rocky beach front path. Boulders loomed on either side as the Mustang bounced towards the glittering edge of the evening sea.

Kate swung hard to the right, threading the needle through the rocks. All at once they emerged onto an open, sandy causeway which led along the shore, and Kate got out of the Mustang.

The setting sun cast black shadows behind great rocks which looked like beach balls tossed about by giants' children. It wasn't much of a shore-line for sunbathing or swimming, either, given the jagged boulders which tumbled right down to the sea itself. The tide was coming in with a vengeance. Gulls perched on the cliff-side and glared at them.

The whole place seemed to say, You don't belong here.

Sawyer tried to make light of it, while fighting the apprehension which rose in his his gut. “I should
of brought some weenies. We could of had ourselves our own party right here.” No beach, though, seemed less congenial. Finally he said, “You sure it's okay to hang around hereabouts?”

“It's okay, Sawyer. We own it.”

“We?”

“Not us personally. But Mittelos.”

“Nobody owns the beach in sunny California, sweetheart.”

Kate waved towards the boulder garden behind them. “I mean the access point, where we came in.”

As the tide advanced, the rock-ringed pools filled with angry swirls of spray. Sawyer had no trouble imagining how easy it would be to drown out there.

He followed Kate down to a narrow strip of beach, hemmed in by soaring rocks. “You know, Freckles, any more tide comes in, it's gonna cut us off. Don't know about you, but I'm not up for spending the night on a rock, waitin' for the water to go down.”

“It won't,” she said. “I've been down here at high tide. We can still get back out.”

Well, maybe. All at once the isolation and unreality of the place got to him, and he felt the first flicker of panic.

Kate, though, climbed onto a rock jetty which thrust out into the churning surf. She stood at the top in triumph, hair streaming behind her like a brown flag.

He called out to her, “You fall in, Ariel, your mermaid friends are gonna have to fish you out, because I ain't going to.”

Amazingly, that got a small laugh out of Kate, even if it didn't impede her progress towards the jetty's far end. Nimble as an otter, she clambered over the slippery rocks, heading ever closer to the dashing sea.

Sawyer felt that he had no choice but to climb up after her. He slipped more than once, and it crossed his mind that if either one of them fell in, their bodies would probably never be found.

When Kate reached the farthest tip of the rock jetty, she plopped herself down. Sawyer surveyed behind him, as if to reassure himself that the Mustang was still there. But the jetty curved away from the shoreline, making it impossible to see the beach road, or even the car itself. Both had vanished behind a rocky screen tinged with purple and sunset gold.

Sawyer got the odd feeling that they sat on the edge of the world, and if either one of them moved another inch forward, they'd fall out of it entirely.

Kate ignored the cold spray which had already soaked the hems of her jeans and her shoes. Her abstracted silence left him feeling shaky and unsure. Why had she dragged him down here just to look at a sunset?

A bullshitter was pretty bad off when he believed his own bullshit. She hadn't dragged him at all. She'd been ready and willing to come down here on her own. He was the one who'd invited himself along.

He had to admit, though, he'd rarely seen such a glorious red and gold riot in the sky. Not even in
Australia, and their sunsets were spectacular. In fact, there was only one place where the sun poured radiant colors into the sea like that, making it gleam like some giant-king's robe.

The Island.

If he hadn't known better, Sawyer could have sworn for a minute that he was looking directly into the eye of an Island sunset.

With sharp-honed intuition, he studied Kate's stricken face. For years, Sawyer had made it his business to know exactly what women were thinking and feeling, angling for just the right response that would separate them from their cash. More precisely, their husbands' cash. Such knowledge was sorely won, though. Maybe he could put it to good use, to ease pain instead of profiting from it.

Well, here goes nothing. “Hugo's been followin' Missy Claire with his eyes all day. Who didn't see that coming?”

“Claire's going to be fine,” Kate said, abstracted.

Sawyer wanted to take her slender hand in his own, but he waited. It wasn't time, and he knew from experience that timing was everything. Whatever Kate had come down here for, she hadn't yet found or accomplished it. All he said was, “You done right by her and Aaron.”

“You didn't think so back in Tarawa.”

“I've had time to reconsider.” Hell, if there was a point to get to here, they might as well dance around it a bit first.

Dancing wasn't necessary, though. In a faraway voice, Kate said, “We were going to be married.”

“You and the Doc? Didn't see a ring on your finger when you crawled out of the time machine.”

“The engagement lasted a week.”

“Better than me and Juliet. We never got engaged at all.”

“Yeah, I remember. You made that really clear.”

The sun was even more splendid now than it had been a few moments ago. Sawyer tried again. “So what happened?”

Instead of answering, she reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out a ring with a diamond the size of a pea. “He bought this weeks before he gave it to me. I found the receipt in his jacket pocket. Wonder what made him take the plunge all of a sudden.”

“Weeks, huh. Better than months. Or never.”

As Kate twirled the ring around, the diamond flashed in the sunset like a ruby. “I even went to a few boutiques in Beverly Hills to find a dress.”

“That's the next step,” he said, suddenly uneasy.

“Then I came home late one evening because Cassidy and Clem were in town. Don't you dare give me that look, Sawyer. You asked. Anyway, he was drunk, and not just drunk, but taking some kind of pills, too. He left the empty bottle. I was going to look up what it was, but didn't bother. Because by then he was gone.”
Now it was Sawyer's turn to sit, silent. The sun had blown up to twice its size like it did at sunset, and it struck Sawyer that he had no idea why it did that.

Then something else happened which he didn't understand at first, until he did.

Kate stood up so fast that she teetered a little on the rocky ledge, then recovered her balance at once. Her body blocked out the massive red sun, and once more the sea breezes lifted her hair. With the ring gripped tightly in her hand, she pulled her arm back in a long, curved arc, like a baseball pitcher ready to throw.

With a quick, instinctive motion, Sawyer leaped to his feet, seizing her arm from behind. He gripped her waist, too, hoping she didn't jerk or fight him. If she did, they were both going into that churning ocean.

“Don't do it, Kate.” Her hair blew into his face as the gulls circled overhead, screaming out one last volley.

She lowered her arm. “Why not?” Tears and sea-spray ran down her cheeks.

“Because I did, and it was stupid.”

She held the ring so tightly that her hand trembled. “Stupid for you, maybe.”

“Believe me, you're gonna regret it. It don't make it hurt any less.”

When the sun sank halfway into the sea, Kate slipped the ring back into her pocket. With a heart-stopping turn she pivoted on the wet stone, then headed back to the shoreline, with Sawyer close behind.

They had barely climbed down onto the sand when an enormous plume of water rose like a hand and smacked the end of the jetty. Chunks of loose rock broke off and fell into the crashing sea. Sawyer was mightily glad that Kate and he weren't standing there when that happened.

In the last red gasps of the dying light, Kate hurried away from the hungry ocean as if pursued.

Loping along to keep up with her quick stride, Sawyer had never been so glad to get out of anywhere in his life. Not even prison, and that spoke volumes. Along the path they fled, heading towards the beach, the car, the world.

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth.
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The day of Hugo's return to the Island arrived quicker than anyone imagined.

Sawyer drove everyone north on the Santa Monica Freeway, following the directions to the church which Kate had given him. Night was falling fast, and they were more than a little late for their meeting with Eloise Hawking.

Earlier that afternoon Hugo had said, “Just swing by my parents' house in Santa Monica, and we'll hit the road.” Sawyer never should have believed him.

At Chez Reyes you didn't just "hit the road," as Sawyer discovered. Everyone had to pile out of the Yukon onto the Reyes's broad, four-car-wide driveway. Then Carole had to wrestle the kid out of the car seat. By that time, Mama and Papa Reyes, along with Hugo, were all jumping around, looking over the car, making a fuss over Aaron. Even for February, it was hot as hell on that driveway, so of course they all had to go inside for “just a moment.”

Before Sawyer knew it, Hugo was urging everyone to stay for an early supper (and for the Reyeses, it was always meal-time somewhere.) While he and Claire pulled together some grub from the double-wide stainless steel refrigerator, Carmen and David insisted on giving them the full house tour, including the pool and grounds. Naturally Aaron started yammering to go swimming, so Carmen oh-so-conveniently came up with a pair of kid-sized swim trunks, left behind by some second cousin.

Right. Sawyer knew a con job when he saw one.

Carole just had to get the kid into the bloomers and climb into another suit herself. Did the Reyeses have a trunk full, just for special occasions? Given how zaftig Mama Reyes was, that swim-suit certainly wasn't hers. Carmen and Carole splashed with the kid in the pool, chattering away. If Sawyer knew those older gals like he thought he did, Hugo and Claire didn't stand a chance. Carmen and Carole were probably picking out the china by now.

Then David Reyes showed Sawyer and Kate his new billiards table, which led to the three of them playing a game of Cutthroat. Kate won.

“You snookered me, sweetheart,” Sawyer had said.

Kate had tossed her head at him, and damn, the first real smile all weekend broke through the clouds. “Wouldn't be the first time.”

Rather than wrangle Aaron out of his swimsuit, Carmen suggested that Carole and Aaron stick around while everyone else went to meet with Eloise Hawking. At first Claire didn't want to leave the boy, but Carole's sharp look said loud and clear, Don't smother him.

Sawyer had agreed to that plan, maybe a little too quickly. He, Kate, and Claire could pick up Carole and Aaron on the way back to Topanga.

Then Hugo had to say his good-byes to Aaron. This involved raising the dripping-wet kid to his shoulders and circling the patio a few times, while Aaron grabbed Hugo's pony-tail and hollered to bring down the rafters.
Finally, they managed to get out of there. Now Kate rode shotgun, with Hugo and Claire scrunched together in the Yukon's mid-seat.

Man, that was some house, though. House, hell: it was a genuine mansion, far more lavish than the homes of any of the multi-millionaires Sawyer had conned. Sawyer had to admit that he'd never really thought of Hugo as loaded. Sure, Kate had filled him in on the whole lottery deal and the investments which never went bust, despite housing and banks starting to circle the drain.

Sawyer knew that he was an asshole, even though Juliet had charmed or argued a lot of it out of him. To Sawyer, Hugo had always seemed too fat, too sloppy, too friendly to be that rich. In his days of crime, Sawyer had met rich pricks, and to the man they were sleek, toned, well-dressed jerks. You almost didn't feel bad ripping them off.

He glanced back at Hugo and Claire, who sat with heads almost touching. Claire spoke quietly, but Hugo raised his voice once in awhile above the road noise as they chatted about Island babies, who had one and when. Something about how Ben and that former Oceanic stewardess set up a one-room schoolhouse for the older kids.

Babies. Juliet would have loved to see that. Sawyer gave a heavy sigh, so much that Kate side-eyed him. Hugo and Claire raised both their heads at once, then went back to their shared murmurs.

Kate settled herself back down into the embrace of the Yukon’s front passenger seat. She seemed okay today, and believe you me, Sawyer was keeping close tabs on her, especially after her performance yesterday evening on the Malibu beach. She'd gotten herself some new jewelry, too, a long silver chain which fell between her breasts.

He had a pretty good idea what weighted down the end of it, unseen but secure beneath her crinkled cotton blouse.

Behind Sawyer, Claire said to Hugo, “So you got everything, then?”


“Glad you're not gettin' on a plane, sport,” Sawyer interrupted.

Kate turned around to the rear seat. “How are you getting back, Hurley?”

“No idea. I figured Mrs. Hawking was gonna work it out.” He shrugged, and resumed counting. “Let's see, we got a couple suture kits for Bernard, but no novocaine or needles. Richard said he couldn't pull that together quick enough, so it was gonna have to wait till next time.”

_Next time_, Sawyer repeated to himself. Hugo might have missed the smile which broke out on Claire's face, but Sawyer sure hadn't. Even in the purple Los Angeles twilight, you could almost feel the sunbeams radiating from Claire.

Well, him and Kate were just like Dad and Mom squiring two kids around on a date, ones too young to drive. When Claire rested her face on Hugo's damp shoulder, it was clear those two had been holding hands from the minute they cleared the Reyes's front gate.

Hugo wasn't exactly a kid, though, was he? Neither was Claire. Still, they sure as hell made Sawyer feel old.

* * * * * *
The church sign read, “Our Lady, Star of the Sea,” and you couldn’t miss the life-size marble Christ set smack-dab in the roundabout. Sawyer knew just what his Granny would say about such papist tomfoolery. Ardelia Eustachia Tidwell wasn't here to comment, though, sleeping as she was in Jasper's First Baptist Church cemetery.

Damn, sometimes Sawyer missed her, especially as he could use a little advice right about now.

Kate squinted at instructions scrawled on a note-pad. “We're supposed to pull up to the loading dock and wait there.”

Sawyer swung around the long driveway to a galvanized door big enough to admit a semi. “What church needs a loading dock anyway?”

As if in answer, the door slowly rose, revealing only black emptiness. Sawyer pulled up right to the open door, hesitant to enter.

All at once, light flooded the loading dock. A woman in a long blue shawl beckoned them forward, and Sawyer drove in until she signaled him to stop. A glittering pin held her wrap fast, and her hair gleamed snow-white in the harsh fluorescent lights.

Kate said in a low voice, “That's who we're supposed to meet.” She swung the door open and charged out, momentarily groping the back of her jeans for the pistol that wasn't there.

*Old habits die hard,* Sawyer thought.

The woman stood her ground, bemused at this defensive display. “Hello, dear. Miss Austen, isn't it?”

“You know damn well who I am.”

“Does this mean we have to dispense with the pleasantries?” The woman's extended hand bore perfectly shaped nails, and the blue stone in her silver ring flashed like a star. “I'm Eloise Hawking. And this must be Mr. Ford.”

Her firm grip on Sawyer's hand was a bit dry, as if sprinkled with talcum powder.

The Yukon's rear driver's side door flung open, and Hugo practically poured out, followed by Claire, so Eloise extended her hand once again. “Mr. Reyes, and Miss Littleton too. What a pleasure. Mr. Reyes, you may leave your things in the vehicle for now.”

Hugo protectively drew in Claire to his side. “How’d you know who we are?”

Eloise looked Hugo over with a cool, calculated appraisal. “Richard's been re-acquainting himself with fax machines. He kindly provided me with a dossier on each of you.”

“A dossy-what?”

“Never mind,” Sawyer said to Hugo. “She got our cre-dentials from Rickey Ricardo himself.”

Damn, if the Snow Queen didn't fight back a smile. As Eloise beckoned for them to follow her, Sawyer let down his guard a little.

A long, dimly-lit corridor passed through basement-beige walls streaked with rust. Light bulbs glowed in wire cages, and several doors bore faded fallout-shelter signs. The roar of ventilation fans took away the dampness, though, and the floors were freshly swept.

After a few rat-maze turns, Eloise stopped before an over-sized metal door with a red wheel mounted
directly in the center. She took a deep breath and rubbed her hands together, as if preparing for some enormous effort.

Kate stared at the octagonal label on the door. “What's this, some kind of Dharma Initiative station?”

Sawyer noticed the sigil at the same time Claire did.

She crept in closer to Hugo. “I'm not going in there.”

Hugo said to Eloise, “She doesn't go, I don't, either.”

Sawyer grabbed Hugo's free arm, the one not wrapped around Claire. “Look, amigo, you need the Queen Mother here to get back to the Island. Besides, we can trust Richard. Weren't for him, Claire and everybody else'd still be rotting on that damned atoll.”

Hugo shrugged off the grip with a rolling motion. “I got this, Sawyer. Look, Claire, it's okay. Ben told me about this place.”

Claire clung so closely to Hugo's side that she might have grown there. Earlier, they'd all been wondering how Hugo was going to get back. Now Sawyer wondered if Hugo even wanted to.

The massive door swung open with a creak, flooding the basement passageway with pale blue light. As Sawyer was about to swear, the words died on his lips.

Eloise stepped to the side and let them take in the spectacle for a few seconds. “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Lantern Waste. Take care not to cross paths with the pendulum.”

* * * * * * * *

Hugo stepped into the enormous, circular room, followed by Claire, Sawyer, and then Kate. Ben had told him about this place, but that didn't come close to seeing it. The walls of the great circular room were lined with blackboards, bookshelves, and ancient computers, all dark and silent. “Man, what are these? They're all, like, from the Pong era.”

Eloise gave a small chuckle. “You're correct, Mr. Reyes.”

“So, I thought this was the Lamp Post Station.”

“Just a small private joke. The 'lantern' is a bit of a 'waste' at present.”

What the hell, just another thing he didn't understand. You think he'd be used to it by now.

The pendulum swung back and forth in a straight line across a floor-map of the world, centered on the Pacific Ocean. Mrs. Hawking was right, too. The big weight on that pendulum would knock you flat on your ass if you got in its way.

Claire piped up. “Hurley, I think I get it. Didn't you ever read the Narnia books?”

“I saw the movie.”

“Lantern Waste was where Lucy and everybody went, to get back to our world from Narnia.”

Eloise said, “I'm glad to see love of literature still lives in a few scattered outposts.”

“My mum's a librarian who hates most telly,” Claire said.
“Lamp Post station, right,” said Hugo. “But now it's... wasted? I don't get it.”

Now everyone's attention was trained on Eloise, who spoke as if she'd been rehearsing this. “The movements of this pendulum were used to determine the position of the Island. These computers might have been old war-horses, literally, but they served well in their time.”

Hugo said, “So what is this place, then? Or what was it, before it broke?”

“Excuse me, dear. I look around and realize that none of you were here for the initial briefing of the return flight of Ajira 316. The Lamp Post was how the Dharma Initiative reliably found the Island.”

“But you turned the computers off,” Hugo said.

“That's right, Mr. Reyes. A few months ago, when I entered this room, I was greeted by something which I never expected to see. The pendulum had stopped moving.”

When no one reacted, Eloise gave an irritated sigh. “Never mind. I shouldn't expect any of you to understand the physics of chrono-synclastic infundibula. In any event, if that wasn't bad enough, exactly one hundred eight minutes later, the pendulum resumed its motion. And it's been this way ever since.”

Hugo stared at the pendulum as it swung on its silent pivot. It could hypnotize you, if you weren't careful. “Been what way? It seems to work fine.”

“Of course it's working fine, Mr. Reyes, if all you want is a garden-variety Foucault Pendulum. Completely useless for our purposes, because we already know that Earth rotates around her axis. Further, Phoenician sailors obtained precise measurements of latitude millennia ago, and at far less expense.”

Sawyer spoke up. “In other words, ma'am, what you got here is one giant, shiny door-stop.”

“Mr. Ford is correct in principle, although I think the Los Angeles Children's Museum will no doubt be grateful for the donation.” Eloise turned to Hugo. “My suspicion, Mr. Reyes, is that the pendulum stopped when something happened on the Island, something unprecedented.”

Hugo swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. He avoided looking at Kate as he spoke. “Desmond pulled the big plug. Then Jack put it back in.” That's about how long the whole thing had probably taken, just about the length of a short movie.

Eloise's face blanched, approaching the color of her hair. To herself she said, “So that's what you were about, Charles. I should have seen it coming.” Collecting herself, she took them all in with a single sweeping glance. “Where is Desmond Hume, by the way?”

“We thought you'd know,” said Hugo.

With an unconcerned wave, Eloise brushed off Hugo's worry. “I know when and where his vessel crossed the Boundary, so I can say with certainty that he wound up in international waters. He'll turn up eventually. He always does.”

Hugo was just going to have to trust that Desmond would make his way back to Los Angeles sooner or later. Assuming that Penny even stayed there. But Hugo was pretty sure she would.

Eloise was still talking, like one of his older aunts who kept right on after everyone else had turned their attention elsewhere. “…I've already shut down most of the computers and de-gaussed their memories. Some nice young men from a technology museum in Mountain View are driving down to
pick them up.” She pointed to the piles of printouts and blue binders. “I admit, though, I'm not looking forward to the shredding.”

Hugo said, “So, cutting to the chase, nobody can find the Island now, right?”

“Well, not nobody,” Eloise said. “I'm sure that if I can detect the electromagnetic anomalies which result whenever someone uses the Door, or crosses the Boundary, the CIA or some equivalent agency can do likewise. If they're even looking, that is.” She then fixed Hugo with both barrels of her bullet-blue stare, and it was if he was the only person in the room. “However, Mr. Reyes, if someone knocks on the door, you don't have to let them inside.”

Kate had been pacing back and forth, crossing and uncrossing her arms, ready to explode. “So this was why you wanted us to come down here? Just for a history lesson?”

“Forgive an old woman her conceits,” Eloise said. “You're right. We need to return Mr. Reyes to the Island in a timely fashion.”

“And in one piece,” Sawyer added.

_Thanks, Sawyer_, Hugo said to himself, as Claire looked up at him in alarm. “Hey, Mrs. Hawking, could you, like, stop calling me 'Mr. Reyes'? Mr. Reyes is my dad.”

Eloise's frosty manner thawed a bit. “Luckily, Hugo, the destination and return coordinates of the Door can be set.”

“I'm supposed to know this? It's not exactly like the Door comes with a manual.”

If this bothered Eloise, she didn't show it. “I think we can guarantee you a softer landing upon your next arrival. When you return to us from the Island, you have to focus your mind carefully on your point of arrival. Previously, you might have been thinking about the Santa Monica pier, or your parents' house. All we can say with certainty is that something got muddled.

“If you clearly fix in your mind the place you leave from, it's where you will return to. Further, it helps to have some deep emotional connection to that place. Finally, it needs to be secure, as you don't simply want to appear out of nowhere.”

Claire's hand was warm, and suddenly Hugo imagined his own hand empty for weeks, maybe months. “How the hell do I do this, then?”

Sawyer said, “That's easy, Dorothy. Just click your ruby slippers three times, 'cause there's no place like home. Right, Miz Hawking?”

Claire's hand trembled like a small bird, and Hugo knew at once that this wasn't any easier for her than it was for him. “Give it a break, Sawyer, OK?”

Eloise beamed at Sawyer as if he were a particularly bright pupil who delivered the right answer. “Actually, it is that simple. I have the perfect place: private, quiet, which won't require that Hugo suspend himself over the ocean. He just needs to make it 'his,' so to speak.”

The pendulum swung on its endless path, indifferent, as if it could go on forever.

Hugo gave Claire's hand a squeeze, and she squeezed back. “Where's this place?”

Eloise Hawking stood up, regal in her blue shawl. “Let's go take a look. On the way we can retrieve your parcels, Hugo, and I can fill you in on a few more particulars. I believe it's time for you to go.”
The small stone building sat behind the church, walled off by a grove of long-established manzanita bushes drooping with light purple flowers. Instead of windows, the building had tiny slits wide enough to stick a musket through. Its thick walls were covered with climbing red roses, and their odor gave Hugo a pang of sadness, as it reminded him of Jack. Grape-like vines draped over what was left of the roof. An iron-banded oak door gave the whole place a shut-off, secretive air.

Eloise stood before the oak door, waiting. “This was the original chapel, built by Spanish missionaries. Except for me, no one comes here, not even the priest. I call it ‘the shrine.’”

Hugo’s head was spinning from Eloise’s recent info-dump on the walk to the shrine. He didn't know how he was going to remember it all: that he could return on equinoxes, solstices, and the cross-quarter days in between, whatever those were. Or how the three-day rule was real, not just something Pele had made up. The polarities of molecules inside his brain would get scrambled, or something. This wouldn't happen to other people who used the Door, like Richard, Tom, and Michael had.

They weren't Protectors. They weren't tied to the Island like he was.

Then there was Eloise’s weird remark about how he was to make the shrine “his,” to associate it with something he'd remember. What did that mean? Worse, Eloise didn't have any concrete suggestions. All she said was that he'd know what to do when he got there, when the time came.

Well, he sure as he had better, because if he had to get back in seventy-two hours, the clock was running out.

Sawyer clapped Hugo on the shoulder. “I guess this is it for now, hoss.” Before he could step back, Hugo drew him into a bear-hug, and Sawyer turned away, eyes wet.

Hugo reached for Kate and pulled her close. “It's gonna be okay.”

She gave a little nod and a sniffle in return.

“Come on, Freckles,” Sawyer said. “Let's go wait in the car.”

After Kate and Sawyer had vanished around the corner of the building, Eloise pulled open the door. It moved smoothly, and Hugo could smell the sweet, metallic scent of oil. Pale moonlight shone through the holes in the roof.

Hugo peered inside, but there was nothing there except short, scrubby grass. Climbing roses covered the inner walls almost as thickly as the outer ones.

What kind of stupid joke was this? He was about to turn around and head back to the Santa Monica beach, if nothing else, when Claire gave a little gasp.

“Hurley, look, there's something there. Let's go closer.”

At first he didn't want her to. Not because he didn't want her near him, oh no. Now that he was down to the last few minutes, he didn't want to let go of her at all. Something, though, filled the space of the shrine with a pull as strong as the rosy smell. Whatever it was, Hugo didn't want it to suck Claire in, maybe take her away from the child she'd worked to so hard to get back to.

Hugo turned around to ask Eloise if it was all right for Claire to come, too, but she was gone. He was on his own now.
No, not quite on his own. Claire stood there, small in the silvery light, looking at him with big eyes. He said, “Sure, let's go see.”

They stood in the very center of the square, stony ruin. The flower smell was stronger here, mixed with sharp, recognizable sea-brine, and the dusty, clean odor of hot sun on sand. Claire nestled up against Hugo's side, a sheen of sweat on her lip, eyes bright.

That fresh smell, what was it? He smacked his head in recognition. “I'm such an idiot.”

Then he almost couldn't speak at all, because she laid her hand across his chest. His heart pounded through the flesh so hard that her hand trembled from it.

“I forgot, when I first got here. It's probably ruined by now.” Hugo lowered his heavy pack, which thudded onto the grass. He dug around in his pocket, and there it was: smooth, slick, and even a little cool to the touch. “I wanted to give this to you.”

Hugo held out the squash-blossom from the vine which covered the wreck of her Island house. It lay flat and stuck together on his broad palm, but when he stroked it with a tentative forefinger, it opened to his touch. As its fresh smell rose up, the rose fragrance faded.

“It made it through the washer and dryer, too,” he said.

“That's one tough flower. But so beautiful.”

Without thinking, he blurted out, “Like you.”

She smiled and put her face to the blossom. “It smells like the Island.”

“Is that... good?”

“That's wonderful.”

Then something happened which he couldn't have seen coming in a million years. He was so surprised, he almost forgot to breathe. In one smooth motion, Claire slipped the blossom into her jacket pocket, took his face in her hands, lifted her small pointed chin, and kissed him.

It wasn't a hungry kiss, or a desperate one. It was as far from Pele's volcanic kisses as one could get. Instead, this kiss was intended specifically for him, as much his as if Claire had wrapped it up as a present with his name on it.

Her soft mouth drew him farther and deeper in. Hugo opened to her, letting her taste him, kissing her back. After they both took a breath at the same time, she held him with her eyes, unflinching. He knew what she was looking for, what she wanted, so he whispered, “That was so, so awesome.”

She covered his mouth with her thanks. Their first kiss had been long and tender, and crafted just for him. With this second one, time itself seemed to stop. He closed his eyes, awash in her skin, and scent, and hair, her tender mouth roving on his.

All given to him to keep in the deeply-buried box of his great, thumping heart.

Hugo kissed her tenderly and thoroughly, trying to make up for every kiss they had missed over the long years. Since no kiss can carry all that weight, he gave up halfway through, and just kissed her for her own sweet self, his heart bursting as he realized how much she wanted him to.

She broke their kiss, pulling his lips a little with hers, then put her mouth to his ear. “I am going to
I miss you so much.”

“Me, too.” It was cruel that after all this time, he had to leave her again.

Her warm breath flowed from his ear down the whole front of his body, leaving him flushed and trembling. She reached around him as much as she could, so close that her breasts pressed into his belly as she formed herself into a curve, to fit better.

He leaned down for what he meant to be a final kiss. Over her shoulder, a faint glimmer that was more than moonlight shone against the rough stone wall. The light glowed yellow, like sun reflecting off on an Island shore.

That great, soft kiss broke like a large wave into a dozen smaller ones, each soaked in the taste of her lips, tongue, mouth. Gradually even these kisses faded into breath blended with breath.

More bright light appeared in that shining spot which hung suspended in the air, and the smell of the sea grew stronger. His words tore their way out of him. “Claire, I gotta go.”

She rolled over in his arms, turning towards the spot of sunlight as if drawn to it. “It's the gulls. The gulls, and the sea.”

The aperture of light had opened as wide as it was going to get, of that Hugo was sure. Maybe he could make this hurt a little less. “Six weeks isn't that long. What did Eloise Hawking say, the spring solstice?”

“The spring equinox, silly. The third week in March.”

“I'll think about this place. This place, and you.” No wonder Eloise couldn't have told him what to carve into his memory. But Claire had known.

“I'll be here,” she said.

One final time he lifted her chin, brushed the hair out of her face where it had fallen, and wondered what the hell was going to happen now. “Claire, maybe you should—”

“Right. I'm going.” Her lips brushed his chin in farewell. She slipped through the great oak door, giving him one final look before disappearing into the shadows, and the door creaked shut behind her.

Sunlight was pouring freely out of the glowing oval. Through it, Hugo could see the scrubby Island hillside. Since there were no shadows anywhere, that meant it was around noon. The bright oval of light rested about a foot above the grass of the shrine, so Hugo hoisted his pack, lifted his foot, and heaved himself up. Once more, Hugo was pulled along, but instead of tossing him into a whirlwind, airy hands drew him into a caress.

Hugo stepped forward, onto the Island.

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

(A/N: I didn’t make up the chrono-synclastic infundibulum; Kurt Vonnegut did, in his
novel Sirens of Titan. It's how Desmond became “unstuck in time.”

Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth.)
Claire's Diary, Part Four

Last night Hurley gave me a flower, which floats like a tiny island on a miniature ocean in its clear glass bowl. If I poke its petals with my finger, it sends up a cool, fresh smell which makes me tremble inside all over again.

I don't know what got into me last night. What am I saying? I've wanted to kiss him for ever so long. Since he didn't draw back or look surprised, my guess is that he's wanted the same. So no use in blaming the roses and moonlight.

Never has a kiss taken hold of me like that. It was as if time itself stopped, and the whole world collapsed to a single point: his mouth on mine, and the warmth of his skin sliding over my own.

He didn't kiss like someone who knew exactly what to do, either. Instead, he just lost himself in it, and pulled me under too, bathing me in pure feeling. I can still taste him, a little salty, his tender lower lip between my teeth, his tongue gently rolling around mine, everything happy and welcome.

How many hundreds of nights have I gone to sleep alone, and never noticed, never cared? Now, only one night has passed since he disappeared through that shining hole in reality, and it seems like an eternity. All last night I clung to my pillow, fervently wishing it was him. Full of wanting him, I brought myself off in a way that I haven't in ever so long, not since before moving in with Thomas.

Open, opening, I opened wider, until pleasure trickled out of me, pleasure mixed with sadness, too. As I lay there glowing in the dark, still stroking myself, as the spasms grew gentler and finally faded away, only pillows filled my arms, instead of his big soft body.

I don't want to forget one moment of these past three days.

When we were at his parents' house, we went up to his room for a bit. Even when the Ajira flight went down, even when he'd been lost for the second time, his mother had refused to believe that he was gone for good. So she'd left his things in his room undisturbed.

It struck me how bare his room was: a big TV, some wheeley-things for playing video games, comic books in those plastic sleeves. Nothing else much, no posters, no clutter, as most of his things were still in storage. Less than a year after his first hospitalisation, he'd already won the lottery and moved.

He'd been too sad to unpack most of it.

He shook slightly as he talked about it. At that instant he didn't at all look like the ruler of some kind of special island full of terrors and wonders, but someone who still carried the scars of old sorrows.

There were these movies that he really wanted to watch these with me, next time. If I wanted to, that is. Then he put them back on their shelf hastily, as if he was embarrassed for asking. It was the Star Wars trilogy.

I used to mind some children who always had them on in the background, and thus I knew a bit of the story. When I said that I'd love to, his face got bright as a sunrise on the island. He was that happy.

This is the sweetest request for a date I've ever had.

Nothing is casual for Hurley. Everything he touches, tastes, kisses becomes for him a great and precious gift, one which he holds closely to his breast.
It's been a week since Hurley's gone. I don't miss him to the point of suffering, as I feared I would. I'm certain about him in a way I've never been about anyone. I'm far more used to having doubts and questions about a man, so this sense of security is something new. There's no question of, 'Does he like me?' or 'What's he really thinking?' Every one of Hurley's thoughts gets written on the billboard of his face.

So while Hurley is reliable all through his bones, I know full well that the island can be unpredictable and full of dangers. This thought has put a damper on some of that golden glow. While everything still seems soft around the edges and full of promise, thoughts of the island and of Hurley come to mind with a bit sharper focus.

For instance, I'm not sure what I think about Ben working with Hurley on the island. On one hand, if there is the smallest speck of good in someone, Hurley will see it. On the other hand, I can't forget how Ben ordered Ethan to snatch me when I was pregnant with Aaron. How Ben took Jack, Sawyer and Kate into captivity on Hydra Island.

Then there was the whole business of Ben stealing Juliet. Earlier this week, Sawyer had a terrible blow about that. He wanted to go to Miami, to visit Juliet's sister Rachel and her son Julian, who'd be seven or eight now. Kate made him call our solicitor Dan Norton first, to get his opinion.

Deirdre rang up Sawyer to give him Dan Norton's answer, and as Sawyer spoke with her, his face became terrifying. After he hung up, he roared out of the driveway in that big race-car of his. Later, he came back with an armload of bags and disappeared into his cabin. He spent the rest of the day shouting and crying, throwing up over the back deck, tossing his empties onto the forested hillside below.

Mum said he needed to get it out of his system, and not to talk to him until then. Kate became first indignant, then frightened. She was just about to call Dr. Curtis when Sawyer staggered up to the house and collapsed on the couch.

Sawyer laid his head in Kate's lap and choked out what had happened. About six months after Juliet had left Miami for the island, her family received a notice that she had died. “Dengue fever,” the death certificate read. Mittelos offered Rachel an enormous settlement, including a trust for Julian's college.

The settlement was conditional, though. Rachel had to promise complete silence, and she could never sue Mittelos for 'wrongful death' or anything else.

The Carlsons had made their peace with losing Juliet, Deirdre said, and Sawyer shouldn't bother them.

'Dead woman walking,' Sawyer kept repeating. 'Juliet was just a dead woman walking.'

He fell asleep on Kate's lap, and the two of them were still curled up on the couch the next morning.

Instead of breakfast, Mum made Sawyer a tall glass of salty tomato juice with a couple of eggs beaten into it, for his hangover. As soon as he was looking human again, Mum told him in her sternest voice to pick up all the empty cans and bottles which had rolled down the hill-side, then hose off the rocks under his deck.

Kate chided Mum for being so harsh: it was bad enough how Juliet had died, but this made it so
much worse. Mum snapped back that Sawyer needed a firm hand, especially when he got emotional, and the sooner Kate learned that the better.

* * * * * * * *

Dr. Curtis was so pleased to hear about all that had happened with Hurley, and that he was doing well. It's so good to speak freely with Dr. Curtis about the island, how things are going with Kate and I, about Hurley and all the welter of feelings I have about him.

The flower is still fresh in its little bowl, even two weeks later.

We also talked about my distrust of Ben, and about justice versus mercy. I am the 'justice' type, I know. Mercy doesn't come naturally to me. In an off-hand way Dr. Curtis remarked that Hurley had selected Ben out of mercy.

Hurley understands way more about mercy than I do. Dr. Curtis said that mercy derives from hope, and that Hurley could show mercy to Ben because Hurley has hope.

Back on the island I had hope, at least for a little while. The remaining survivors had met by the broken front end of the aeroplane, but Jack and John didn't agree on our getting rescued. It seems odd to associate that moment with hope, as Charlie had just died, and Hurley had confused everyone by saying that we weren't going to be rescued at all.

No one knew what to do, it seemed, except Hurley, because his faith in Charlie's message was so strong. While John and Jack argued, Hurley just radiated this power and certainty. So when Hurley joined John, it seemed the most natural and right thing in the world for me go along.

I wasn't following John, but Hurley.

That was the beginning of real, genuine hope. Not hope over being rescued, because I believed Hurley when he said that no rescue was coming. Sure, before that I'd been so silly as to stick a message on a sea-gull. That was more to convince myself that Desmond was just mental, and the only reason he couldn't leave the Island was because he'd been drunk for two weeks. No wonder he'd lost his bearings, right?

It's so easy to just label someone as 'crazy.' Or 'the pregnant girl.' Or 'hysterical young mum who doesn't have a clue what she's doing.'

I hoped that we could live in peace, at least for awhile. That we could go to the Barracks and have some kind of life. We were due, weren't we?

Nor did I understand why we couldn't just make a truce with Ben's people, with them on their side of the Island, us on ours. Of course that could never happen, not with Samael stirring up trouble. As long as he was around, any hope of a normal life was off the table.

That week at the Barracks filled me with enough hope to last me through all the dreadfulness which followed. Without those days, I wouldn't have had anything left in me at all. Who knows, maybe Samael would have destroyed me like he did Danielle Rousseau's men. Like he almost did to Sayid.

We parted ways with Jack and Rose and everyone else, then set out for the Barracks. I was already so tired I could scarcely put one foot in front of the other, and we had a long way to go. Sylvie and Janice took turns helping me carry Aaron, while Hurley moved in front of us like a tank in an old war movie.

It sounds crazy, but as Hurley walked ahead of me, I understood why in olden times the woman
would walk behind the man. Not because she was necessarily beaten down (although often she was),
but so that he could clear the path as well as deal with whatever lay up ahead and out of sight.

I spent most of that long march looking at Hurley's huge back, at those massive shoulders. He never
stopped or lagged unless someone needed to rest. Then, no matter how much John hemmed and
hawed, we weren't going anywhere. Not until Janice got to take off her boot and massage out the
kink in her arch. Or not until I'd fed Aaron and burped him besides. Or until someone else finished
up their visit behind a tree. Then we'd move on with John in the lead, but with Hurley paving the
way with his slow unstoppable movements.

Once John told him to shush, because Hurley didn't care how much noise he made going through the
jungle. In a mild voice, Hurley wanted to know if being quiet would make Not-Penny's-Boat arrive
more slowly. John didn't say anything, just shrugged in the way your prissy old aunt does when she
doesn't get her way.

That's why my heart and my steps were so light.

We crossed the river which flowed down the middle of the island and stopped to rest for the night on
the other side. John remarked that even though some people went very slowly (and here he glared at
Hurley), we were still making good time. Hurley brought me a bottle of water. Some people dozed
off. No one had the energy to hunt for firewood.

While Aaron slept limp and heavy in his baby sack, I leaned up against a tree, too exhausted to close
my eyes. The tree was wide enough that Hurley could share part of it too. Having him there felt safe
and familiar.

The sun came up over the eastern mountains and flooded our camp-site with a pink-golden light.
Hurley had fallen asleep by my side, and in the dawn he looked so peaceful, as if he hadn't a care in
the world. When he helped me to my feet, his face was soft and open. That was the moment when I
genuinely started to believe that all this could work out. That whatever came, I could look forward to
waking up in the morning.

John wanted to get going right away, but Jerome and Doug had already gone to a nearby stand of
palm trees to look for fallen coconuts. John had to wait while the guys sharpened a thick stick, peeled
the coconuts' outer coatings, and broke them open. By the time we all had some, John was positively
dancing with impatience.

Janice got all in John's face and said flat out that if he couldn't nurse a baby, he'd best let me eat,
unless he could call for take-away formula. She said I was all skin and bones as it was, even though I
didn't mind being that slim. Normally I resented getting labelled as 'the mum who's slowing us
down,' but Janice was brave, as John had a gun.

When John looked away, Hurley gave Janice the thumbs-up.

* * * * * * * *

The little house at the Barracks which Kate and I shared was the first one ever in my life that was
truly mine. First I lived in Sydney with Mum, in a ranch-house with a rusted swing set and a dusty
garden, so close to the airport that the windows rattled whenever the aeroplanes landed or took off.
When the planes would shriek overhead, I'd hide under the frangipani bushes, and Mum would come
looking for me under a screen of white flowers with centres like yellow sunbursts.

After Mum fell into the coma, no one thought she'd ever function again, so Aunt Lindsey got power
of attorney to sell the house. Half-way through high school I went to live in Lindsey's bungalow,
closer to down-town.

Mostly I could avoid Aunt Lindsey, as she often worked long weekends. I was in plays; my nights were taken up with rehearsals as well as set construction and painting, so our paths didn't often cross.

In a sense, Mum's accident brought Aaron into being. If I hadn't moved in with Aunt Lindsey, I never would have gotten involved with the Sydney Regional Theatre and thus wouldn't have met Thomas.

I lived in Thomas's loft for a few short months, then moved back to Lindsey's again before I got on that flight to Los Angeles. But for a week or so I had a house of my own.

All the Barracks houses were painted yellow and looked pretty much alike, but the one I picked was set apart by thick masses of vines, which covered the whole back with a wall of green. All the Barracks seemed right out of an apocalyptic movie where everyone has disappeared entirely. The Others had left food in the fridges, and some houses even had the lights on. Kate and I sniffed everything in the fridge and threw most of it away, because the place had been abandoned for at least a week.

John wouldn't say where the inhabitants had gone. He just gave everyone that mysterious look which we found out later meant that he hadn't a clue.

For a little while it was fun being there with Kate, in a best-friends sort of way. We rummaged through all the undies and socks in the drawers, and as well as trying on the dresses which hung in the closet of our new house. None of them fit us, being too large, but we snagged flannel sheets for nappies. We washed our dirty jeans and shirts in the bathtub, as the washing machine didn't work.

Sylvie and Janice took one house, and Doug and Jerome moved in next door to them. Those four spent most of their time together, avoiding John as much as they could. Sawyer picked his house because a woman had lived there, one who had bright, cheerful taste in colours and furniture.

Hurley told me that this house had actually been Juliet's all along. And that it was the same one that he lived in now.

Sawyer thought these pretty things would make the house more appealing to Kate. But Kate hung close to me, so Hurley moved in with Sawyer instead.

After Kate had a fight with Sawyer and left, I was afraid to stay alone at first, but it was kind of thrilling, too. The Barracks compound was built in the middle of a deep valley, actually a crater left over from some long-dead volcano. Even with a moon, the surrounding mountains loomed heavy and black over our tiny village, covering the whole valley with darkness.

The Barracks had an eerie, haunted feel to them. Not just because everyone had recently disappeared in a Bermuda Triangle sort of way, but because you always felt like something was staring at you from the shadows underneath the trees. Or peeking at you from around corners, especially right before nightfall.

Had I known that Samael had made a nest for himself underneath Ben's house, I probably would have run the hell out of there.

Or at least I like to tell myself that I would. For in so many ways we were so cosy. Since I couldn't shake that creepy feeling of being watched, Hurley stayed with me in the night, sleeping in Kate's room.

We left our bedroom doors open, and I could hear the comforting sound of him breathing. A few
times I even thought of slipping into his room, sliding into the small space left on the bed that wasn’t
taken up by him. Something stopped me, though. Worry that the baby might wake up.
Embarrassment at being so 'forward.' The certainty that sooner or later, one thing would lead to
another, and I already had a baby: what would I do with another one?

How might things have changed had I given in to that first impulse?

Another black mark on Ben's list: I think Alex might have fallen pregnant. The night before the
freighter attack forced us to leave the Barracks forever, we had a dinner meeting at Ben's house.
Alex attached herself to me all evening, wanting to know about how to take care of babies. How the
birth went, did it hurt, was there a lot of blood. Karl kept putting his arm around her in a protective
way. He was disappointed that Hurley hadn't seen Aaron get born and thus couldn't tell him anything
about it.

Then Ben sent poor Karl, Alex and Danielle to the Temple, which got them all killed. If they had
stayed with us in Ben's house when the freighter attack came, they most likely would have lived. So
the next day Alex was dead, and if there was a baby inside her, no one will ever know.

* * * * * * * *

I guess Kate's not as lucky as I thought. She threw up yesterday morning, and this one besides. Then
Mum came out of the laundry room hunting for her new pink bra, and Kate had to admit that she'd
nicked it. Borrowed it, as Kate put it.

Mum gave Kate the once-over and wanted to know when she was going to make an appointment
with a gynaecologist.

Kate went on about how she wasn't pregnant; she'd just eaten some bad shellfish.

Mum remarked in a dry voice that February had an 'r' in it, and Kate retorted that was an old wives'
tale. If there had been an algae bloom, you could get sick from shrimp in any month, 'r' or no.

With a cross look, Mum told Kate that if she needed larger clothes, the sensible thing to do would be
to buy some.

I know full well why Kate hasn't called a doctor. Kate hasn't shared with Mum some of the more
dreadful things that have made her so afraid, like her bastard of a step-father. Kate can't stand to be
restrained, or held down, or forced to feel helpless in any way, and we all know how defenceless one
can feel on an examining table with one's legs in the air.

What the Others did to her on Hydra Island only makes it worse, when they tested her to see if she
was ovulating. She was, so they stuck her in a cage next to Sawyer, like they were zoo animals or
something.

It's clear as glass what's going on, to Mum and I at least. Kate doesn't have a 'baby bump' but some
women don't at three months. She's definitely rounder, more plumped-out. Also, it's natural that all of
us would all be weepy with everything that's happened, but Kate turns on the water-works in an
instant, it seems.

Plus, she just has 'the glow.' Since the island I have never gotten my proper colour back, but even in
early pregnancy with Aaron a kind of glow surrounded me. Not to sound vain, but I turned heads in
the street. When you fall pregnant you get softer around the edges, blurry in a way. It's as if you're
melting and getting shaped into something new.

Kate has that warm pink flush. I suspect she's mentioned nothing to Sawyer, although he must sense
something, because he's more tender with her. Since his upset over Juliet last week, he's started joining us for supper more, and tonight he pulled out Kate's chair for her.

Later, Mum apologised to Kate for being sharp. She handed Kate a few of her bras, at least until Kate gets some of her own, as well as a couple pairs of her roomier jeans for when she needs them. Kate didn't argue.

* * * * * * * *

Hurley's flower finally got all brown and dried-out. At first I thought of pressing and saving it, but then had a better idea. Out in the rear garden there are all kinds of trellises and raised beds, where they once must have grown vegetables long ago. The beds are now all neglected, except for a few spots where I recently planted some lettuces and spinach. I buried the poor shrivelled thing in one of the beds, and in moment of silliness watered it as well.

Kate came out to watch me, but she didn't laugh.

Mum's jeans look good on Kate, as do the embroidered smocks which she picked up from this vintage hippie clothing shop in Old Topanga.

Two more weeks until Hurley comes back. It seems like forever.

(continued)
The Two Towers

Ben floated on his back in the mineral spring, breathing in the metallic scent of hot, bubbling water, and drifted towards the center of the steaming pool. Hugo had been back from his visit to Los Angeles for a month now, none the worse for wear, apparently. A little quieter, maybe. Thoughts far away, so that if you wanted to speak to him, you had to say his name twice, or even touch him on the arm.

But he had only been gone for seventy-two hours, and Ben was damned glad of it. Ben had sat vigil on that lonely hilltop opposite the Door for three days, leaving his camp site only to search for firewood, or snare a few fish. The first week after Hugo's return, Ben's arm had ached from writing, mostly about Claire and the rest of the Ajira returnees, Eloise Hawking and the broken pendulum in the Lamp Post Dharma station.

So the Lamp Post was now useless for tracking the movements of the Island. Interesting.

The bushes rustled, and Bernard stepped into the clearing and immediately began stripping off his clothes. "I see you put the red rope across the path."

"Well, by the calendar it's 'boys' day."

Bernard chuckled. "Say what you want about Rose's systems, they keep the peace."

Ben stretched out lazily. Hot water was about as close to heaven as you were going to get on this earth. "You'd think there'd be a simpler system."

"Tell that to Rose's face, I dare you." Bernard lowered himself into the hot water. "It was her idea to stretch a rope across the path. Red for men's day, blue for women's, yellow for mixed bathing."

"That was a good compromise for our local threesome."

Bernard swam out to join Ben in the center, where the water was about six feet deep. "And green for Hugo."

"Hugo does like his privacy." Ben switched to dog-paddling, just to wake himself up a bit.

"He'd have hated the Chicago Men's Athletic Club. When I was in dental school, they still had nude noon-time swims, and all those saggy old men horrified me. Now I'm one of them."

They both laughed. More rustling came from the bushes along the path, and Hugo's curly head peeped through. "What's so funny, guys?"

"Just Bernard reminiscing about his misspent youth."

Wearing a t-shirt and board shorts, Hugo lowered himself into the hot spring and immediately submerged. When he surfaced, his long, wet mane streamed down over his shoulders.

"How's the renovation going?" Bernard asked.

Hugo bobbed like a cork, his shirt billowing. "Done. Sullivan helped me hang the bamboo blinds this morning."

Ben had watched over the past few weeks as Hugo had ripped out the walls of his house, pulled up carpeting, hauled away appliances which were useless without electricity. Barracks houses had been
difficult enough to keep clean when the power was on. Unmodified, they were almost unlivable.

Most of the New Otherton inhabitants had already converted their cottages to open-air lānais, keeping the roofs and structural supports intact. They wove blinds from thousands of tiny bamboo twigs, and lowered them on rollers for privacy, or protection from rain.

Across from Hugo's house, fat bees covered the blossoms on the grassy mound, and fruits were already starting to swell along the spreading vines.

Hugo had more to say, though. "Hey guys, I been thinking."

Ben suppressed a groan. The last time Hugo had used that "I have a plan" voice, he'd merged four croquet sets into one, and distributed the wickets all over New Otherton. When they ran out of wickets, Sullivan obligingly formed another couple dozen out of spare wire. The game had gone on for days.

"So, what's on your mind?" said Bernard.

Now that Hugo actually had their attention, he hesitated, then cupped water in his hands to squirt at the dragonflies which buzzed the pool's perimeter. "I, um, next time I go to LA... If she wants to, I mean... I'm gonna ask Claire if she wants to come to the Island sometime. For a visit."

Ben and Bernard stared, too astonished to speak. Bernard was first to recover. "Really? After all that she had to get through to get back home?"

"It's just a visit. I don't know if, like, she'd even want to."

Ben tried to sound casual, his thoughts racing. "What about Aaron?"

"Sure, she could bring Aaron. He'd love it. The beach, fishing, everything. He could play with Kiya. I bet Emma and Marian would fight over watching him."

"Hugo, if anything happened to him here—"

"You think nothing ever goes wrong in LA?"

"No, of course not, but—"

Bernard broke in. "Hugo, I think it's a fantastic idea. I can't speak for Rose, although I think she'd really like to see Claire again, and Aaron, too. Look, Ben, there are people here who've known him from birth. We all got close to the little guy, and Claire, too."

Mentally, Ben kicked himself for not seeing this coming. What was with him, was he going soft? Distracted? "So that explains the renovation. It'll be a lovely place for her to stay, Hugo."

Hugo beamed, and Ben could have sworn that when he smiled like that, the shards of light reflecting off the roiling water actually shone brighter.

"Awesome, Ben. There's something else I got to do before I ask her, though. We've gotta go around, check out the Island."

"I've got it," Bernard said. "You want to 'beat the bounds.'"

"What's that?" said Hugo.

"When I was in Wales, years ago, I visited this parish church in the country-side. It was spring, right
after Easter. The vicar, choir-boys, and the towns-people all went in procession around the parish boundaries, and whenever they stopped at a landmark, they'd hit it with sticks."

Hugo snorted with laughter. "What the hell?"

"It was an improvement over hitting the boys, which was what they used to do in more barbarous days. The thinking was that when the kids grew up, they'd remember where the boundaries were, and could pass it on."

"Before detailed surveys," Ben explained.

"Exactly."

"I wanna go around the whole Island, but without the sticks."

"We could take the metal outrigger, the one tethered at Boat House Dock. You can smack the water with the paddle if you want. That said, Ben's curiosity still prickled at him. "So, why this sudden interest in surveying the Island, Hugo?"

"Umm... reasons."

Usually when Hugo got an idea, Ben knew that he wanted to act on it. "Right. Tomorrow, then, at first light?"

Hugo frowned, but only a little. It was obvious that the prospect of this upcoming trip pleased him. "Not till after breakfast, dude. You know the drill."

* * * * * * * * *

The sun had climbed halfway to noon when Hugo and Ben loaded their backpacks into the metal outrigger canoe, then paddled from Full Moon Bay out to sea. As soon as they rounded the curve of the bay, a strong current pulled their craft to the south, right along the western coastline.

Since the ocean was doing most of the work, even Hugo's powerful strokes didn't contribute much. Ben leaned back in the stern and relaxed a little, making only tiny corrections to keep the outrigger on its course.

It was impossible to steer a canoe and not spend an inordinate amount of time staring at your paddler's back. If a back could be said to look happy, Hugo's did. To Ben, a canoe was just another form of transportation. Like airplanes, canoes were boring at best, mostly exhausting, and in certain moments utterly terrifying. But every so often Hugo turned around to give Ben a wide grin, and his happiness infected Ben, too.

Soon Window Rock came into view. The Door couldn't be seen from the coast, but in Ben's imagination it pulsed in the heart of the hillside, a sleeping eye now closed, one which in a few weeks would open once more.

Ben stopped musing when they reached the archipelago of tiny islands which jutted out to sea directly to the southwest of Window Rock. Strong winds kept trying to blow them into their jagged sides, tossing them between competing waves which danced in between the rocks.

This was where paddler and steersman had to trust one another. As Ben called out commands to Hugo, he tried to keep the growing panic out of his voice.

All at once, the passages between the rocks settled into calm, and Hugo pointed towards one of the
larger islands with his paddle. "Dude, look!"

The surface of the tiny island seemed to be moving. Ben squinted against the sunlight, and the seething mass turned into brownish-gray seals, piled on top of one another so closely they formed a solid, wriggling mass. A few seals on the edges of the group dived into the water, splashed, then struggled to make it to shore once again.

"Hey, can we look at some more of these little islands?"

Instead of answering, Ben swung the canoe around the archipelago’s curve, away from the main Island itself. They followed the rocky chain for awhile, passing one small island after another, each so thick with seals that the rocky ground was barely visible.

A few of the seals swam alongside the outrigger for a few minutes. Hugo said, "I guess they're safe here, huh? Nobody's gonna hunt them or nothing."

“Unless you want fur.”

“Nah.” One of the seals floated canoe-side for a brief instant, and Hugo pointed his paddle at it. “Hey, little buddy, you get to keep your coat.”

When the archipelago came to an end, they picked up speed and headed out across the open water, back to Jacob's great foot-statue.

Ben fought down rising anxiety and the remembered smell of burning human flesh. He had piled up the corpses of Ilana's bodyguards into the center of Jacob's fire-pit, where they had flared up in a burst of light bright as a white-hot sun. While Hugo wouldn't have to look at their bodies, they were seared into Ben's memory.

Both Hugo and Ben stopped paddling at the same time, letting the current take them. “You want to check it out?” Ben said.

Hugo looked the gigantic structure up and down, then turned away. “Man, that place looks depressing.”

“You have no idea.”

“Yeah, Ben, I think I do.” When Ben didn't answer, Hugo gestured towards the steep mountainside, where birds rose and fell on the wind. “There used to be a radio tower up there.”

The flat finality of Hugo's words made something inside Ben crumble. Everything he remembered of the Island, his Island, was literally vanishing before him. Even the rusted corpse of the old Dharma micro-bus now served as home to two dozen chickens. “Think we should hike up there to see?”

“Nah, I didn't even make it halfway there the first time. 'Course, back then we took the inland route. Not like there'd be any point now.”

The sea-wall which made up that mountainside was virtually unassailable, except by air. The Joint Task Forces had built the radio tower on the highest point of the Island for a reason. Nor did Ben even have to ask Hugo how he knew that the tower was gone. Still, Ben couldn't resist a tiny barb. “I thought you might be sentimental. When you think about it, that radio tower was what brought you here.”

The flicker of pain which Ben expected never materialized. Instead, Hugo chuckled, but his laughter wasn't directed at Ben. “Man, was I ever a dumb-ass. Curses, schmurses. Come on, let's get outta
here.” Hugo dug his paddle into the water with such force that Ben jerked back a little, and they continued on their way.

* * * * * * * *

Coconut palms cast long shadows onto the sand when Ben and Hugo arrived at the old Oceanic 815 beach camp site. Two months had passed since Hugo had hammered his small, friendly note into the ground, despite Bernard's skepticism that it wouldn't last the first thunderstorm. The note was still there, as were the shelters, remarkably undamaged.

What wasn't there, though, was the smaller outrigger canoe. The larger one, which Ben had brought back from his trip to Jacob's statue, still rested under its screen of leaves and branches. Ben had a sneaking suspicion who had taken it, and had left traces of a fire, too. He wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Living at the Temple makes you sloppy."

Hugo looked up from his attempt to start their own fire. "Huh?"

"When Richard taught me jungle-craft, it was a point of pride that we never left a single trace. No fire, no footprints, not a broken leaf, nothing. My guess is that Rennie was here."

"Yeah." All at once, Hugo's fire blazed up yellow and cheerful in the gathering gloom. Ben didn't want to know whether its flickering warmth resulted from skill or something else.

As always, Hugo brought the provisions. Ben's arms ached, and twilight fishing was his least favorite prospect right now. Luckily, Hugo drew from his back-pack a wheel of hard cheese, a greasy package of dried fish, followed by a couple of strings of dried plums, strung like wrinkled purple beads.

Ben cut off a slice of the sharp cheese, fragrant and crumbly, well-cured. "This reminds me, we're running low on salt."

"Can't we just, um, use the stuff the cows do?"

"The cows need it way more of it than we do. No salt, no milk."

"Hmm." Hugo cut his plum-string and pulled off dried fruits, one by one. "You know, I kinda miss this place. We had some good times here."

Ben was glad his incredulous look got lost in the dusk. He had to admit, though, that of all the beaches of the Island, this was the loveliest. An ancient ironwood tree presided over the whole strand, a great lady with a magnificent crown of dark, feathery leaves, cloaked in sunset like a royal-purple robe.

“I wonder what Rennie was doing down here,” Ben mused.  

* * * * * * * *

Out on the water once again, Ben and Hugo paddled around the first of the Island's three great southeastern peninsulas. On the steep cliff-face, a broken ladder still dangled above a dark opening in the rippled rocks.

Hugo squinted against the bright eastern sun. “Looks like there's some kind of cave up there.”

“That's where it happened.”
“What happened?”

“The end. Of Jack, and the monster, too. Don't you recognize it?”

“I'm not a seagull, so no, not really.”

“By the time you and I got there, it was already over.”

Realization broke across Hugo's features. “Oh, man, yeah.”

Ben was just glad that Hugo had no interest in that cliff-side cave, because he sure as hell didn't want to explore it.

From the set of Hugo's shoulders, it was clear that his mood had dampened a bit, even though he still broke through the water with strong, untiring strokes. Ben skillfully caught the right cross-currents and the canoe sped forward. Even so, a stiff easterly wind blew them closer to the boulder-ridden shore than Ben liked.

Ben almost lost his focus when the lighthouse came into view. It stood like a bridge between earth and heaven on its high promontory, surrounded by a living wreath of circling, shrieking gulls.

Hugo twisted around. “Sorry, dude, I owed you a lighthouse trip, and we never pulled it off. Wanna collect that rain-check?”

Without answering, Ben executed a powerful back stroke. The bow of the canoe swung around towards the shore, then smoothly came to rest in a small cove lodged between massive piles of boulders.

Hugo's voice rang with admiration. “Dude, that was swift.”

Ben smiled, priding himself on his steersman skills.

They dragged the outrigger onto a spit of beach barely fifty feet wide. A narrow rocky trail led up the hill-side to where the lighthouse sat.

In the glaring sun, Hugo wiped his brow. “That's some hike. When Desmond and I came here, we took the overland route.”

“Don't worry, we'll take it slowly.”

Slowly was an apt description. An hour later, both Ben and Hugo were panting like two sets of bellows. Far below them, the outrigger sat wedged in between two rocks, as high as they could stash it above the tide-line.

Exhausted as he was, Ben couldn't stay silent. He craned his neck upwards, trying to take in the imposing structure. “It's like the Pharos of Alexandria, only not so tall.”

“The what?”

“An ancient lighthouse built with a system of mirrors at the top. The legend was that the focused light was strong enough to destroy invading ships.”

“I wouldn't hold my breath for any mirrors. Jack kinda broke them.”

Hugo waited for Ben to precede him up the narrow spiral stairway, but Ben just stood in the doorway in a kind of half-dream. “It's like the Heart of the Island, isn't it? Someplace you don't see
unless you're in just the right spot.”

“Or with the right person. After you, Ben.”

The two of them finally reached the top, puffing and panting. In one swift glance, Ben took in the brass clockwork mechanism, the shattered mirror-glass which littered the stone floor, the astonishing view of Island and ocean.

None of these were what stunned Ben into speechlessness. In the fire-pit, a clean white flame shot up almost to the lighthouse's roof. He stretched his hand towards it, but felt practically no heat. The pounding of his heart slowed, as astonishment gave way to curiosity. What glowed in that fire-pit wasn't a flame at all, but rather a column of clear, white light. It was easy to believe that with intact mirrors aimed in just the right direction, you could set a ship ablaze.

Or guide it in towards home.

“Hey, somebody turned on the lights.” Hugo ran his finger over the names inscribed on the great brass wheel. “Yup, here it is. Just like Des and I left it. Hugo Reyes, Number 8. So now the Door opens to L.A.”

Ben barely heard him. He understood how moths could immolate themselves against an incandescent bulb. Nothing was as beautiful as that unflickering light, no woman's face, no child's.

If what Hugo said was true, the radio tower on the west side of the Island had fallen, along with so much else of what the Pacific nuclear test program and the Dharma Initiative had wrought. Only this tower remained, straight and undefeated, even after the earth-splitting events of a few months earlier.

Ben tore his gaze away from that column of pure clarity to the great brass gear-wheel, upon which so many names had been inscribed. Virtually every one, it seemed, had been struck through with a graphite line, including Jack Shephard, number 23. “Did you do that, Hugo?”

Hugo was already heading towards the stair-well. “Not me. No pencil, for one thing.”

Ben's voice sounded very far away. “The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on.”

Only the dull roar of the wind answered him, for Hugo had already turned to descend the lighthouse's precarious spiral stair.

* * * * * * * *

A mile across from what Ben now thought of as Lighthouse Point rested a small sandy island ringed with scraggly coconut palms. A few enormous sea turtles sunned themselves on the beach, sending disinterested glances towards Ben and Hugo as they set up camp.

It was Hugo who stated the obvious. “Turtle Island, right?”

“Obviously.”

When night fell, the beacon at the lighthouse's highest point gleamed like a miniature sun, piercing the fog which settled over the strait between the lighthouse and Turtle Island.

“You know, that can probably be seen for miles out to sea.” Ben didn't want to stir up alarm, but he could imagine ships being drawn in by that clear jewel.

“Doesn't matter, Ben. Unless they're looking for it, they can't see it.”
“Hugo, I'm afraid I don't—”

Hugo fed a few thick branches into the fire. “Look, dude. When that radio signal sent out the Numbers, if you just walked by it, you wouldn't hear anything, right? To hear the Numbers, you'd need a radio.”

“A radio receiver, you mean.”

“Yeah, whatever. 'Cause you can't, like, hear radio waves with your ears.”

Ben was beginning to get it. “Not only do you need a receiver, you need to be tuned to the right frequency.”

“That's right. If you don't got a receiver, and you don't know the station, you can't tune in.”

“So riddle me this, Hugo: with the lighthouse, what kind of receiver are we talking about? And what station do you have to tune in to?”

Hugo's words were muffled by his coarse brown blanket as he rolled over, clearly ready for sleep. “Who knows?”

* * * * * * * *

The next morning Ben and Hugo took to the waves once more, leaving Turtle Island behind. Buffeted by strong cross-winds, they bore due north, where it took all their combined strength to keep a straight course.

At the angular spit of land which cut across the sea-front in a jagged dog's-leg, Ben saw for himself the blank ocean which had once filled by Hydra Island. Out on the open waters, long gray fins sliced through the waves with lazy circling motions.

Closer to shore, white-water churned in complex patterns. Their roughest course was fast approaching. While Ben could wend his way through the tall boulders, rocks right below the surface of the water would get you every time. “Maybe we should call this 'Cape Hydra.' It's treacherous enough.”

"More like 'Cape Sharko Mundo.' Besides, I don't think it's a good idea to remind Rose about that place. Remember how upset she got."

Ben was just about to suggest naming it "Dog-Leg Point" instead, when Hugo dug in hard. The outrigger took such a forceful turn to port that Ben almost flew out of the stern. "What the hell?"

Hugo made himself heard, even above the crash of waves on rock. "Over there! Left!"

Ben screamed, "Just paddle and let me steer!"

A six-foot wave drenched them with spray, dumping a few inches of water into the boat. The canoe rocked back and forth, held stable by the outrigger.

One thing about having a bow-man as wide as Hugo was that he was hard to see around. Hugo was hysterical now, shouting, "'Ben! Look!' although Ben couldn't see anything. They swung again hard to starboard, where they met another wave face-first.

The current dragged them directly towards a group of three tall, sharp boulders. "Back!" Ben screamed. "Back-paddle, now!"
Hugo's stroke almost lifted them out of the water. As waves bashed them from all sides, Ben tried to keep the canoe as straight as possible. Finally he wormed the canoe into an eddy formed by a low, tightly-grouped rock wall.

It wasn't until Ben wiped his face enough to get a look at the deadly boulder trio that he saw what Hugo had been screaming about.

The missing outrigger from the beach camp was wrapped around two rocks of the three, its hull almost bent in half. The canoeist must have gotten sucked into the same maelstrom that Ben and Hugo had narrowly avoided. The craft was pinned to the rock wall as if nailed there, fixed in place by the relentless ocean currents which poured into the canoe's broken body.

"Oh, crap," Hugo said. "Ben, look around the side, at that smaller rock."

Ben almost didn't want to. To the right of the three massive rocks was a smaller formation, rounder and lower to the surf's edge. Wedged in between them was a man's body.

The body swished back and forth in the waves. "He tried to swim for it, apparently," Ben said.

"Looks like he missed."

"This musta just happened. He looks pretty fresh."

"That isn't always a reliable indicator, Hugo."

"Crap, crap, crap. Ben, that's Rennie."

Of course it was. What was left of Rennie Delacroix still wore red and brown Temple homespun. Gulls tore off strips of skin and cloth from the body, screeching at Ben and Hugo for interrupting them.

"We have to get him. I can swim over and—"

"No, Hugo! Don't get out of the boat! I can't manage it by myself, not in this. And don't stop paddling, whatever you do." Even the eddy was one in name only. It was taking all of Ben's strength just to stay stable and away from the rocks.

"Okay." Hugo closed his eyes, as if concentrating. Suddenly, a wave pushed up and lifted Rennie's body out of the rocky crack. Skin and clothing tore away as his body came free. Then the wave collapsed into a great swirl, sucking Rennie underneath with it. The body vanished.

The remaining water from that bizarre wave had to go somewhere, and that somewhere was right at them. "Pull!" Ben shouted, so Hugo started paddling even harder. They had barely cleared the eddy when a ten-foot wall of water smashed into it. Had they not moved, they would have been pinned up against the rock wall themselves.

Hugo's back strained from effort. Not that Hugo's life depended on it, but Ben's did. It wasn't until they reached the calmer waters to the east of Cape Sharko Mundo that they rested their paddles on their knees, panting heavily.

Hugo was first to speak, and his voice trembled. "Ben, you don't think I... did that?"

Content to drift, Ben didn't even answer at first. "Did what?"
“You know, made Rennie swamp somehow. ’Cause of what happened with the guns. Like I might have made the Island turn on him, or something.”

"How would you be able to—" Ben cut himself off and fell silent. He really had no idea whether Hugo could do that or not. Still, he mustered the energy to say something comforting. "Being land-locked, the Temple wasn't known for its water skills. This was a dangerous spot. We almost got sucked into it ourselves. I can't imagine what possessed him to try and run that channel the way he did."

Hugo’s lips moved silently, and his eyes were wet with more than salt spray. Then, prayer finished, he picked up his paddle. "Go ahead and rest, Ben. I can steer from up here."

Ben was grateful for the offer. To their port-side, a wide rocky crescent spread out, a footstool for the green cliffs which soared above the sea. A thin strip of beach highlighted the c-shaped shoreline, and the still, deep waters shone aquamarine blue.

Letting Hugo pull him along, Ben had literally nothing to do but drink in the beauty of the Island's eastern shore. The rocking of the waves, the rhythmic slap of water, the bobbing of the outrigger, all washed over Ben like a lullaby. He was about to drift off to sleep with his eyes open, when Hugo's voice broke through.

"Dude, you are gonna want to see this."

Up ahead, at the far edge of the crescent-shaped shoreline, white dots covered the beach. As Hugo and Ben pulled closer to shore, the white dots resolved into a dozen or so yurts, their bleached canvas sides glittering in the bright sunlight. Small dark figures moved among the tents, and Ben wished he had a set of binoculars. "I think we found our missing yurts."

"Hey, you know that Potem-thing you talked about, some kind of fake village?"

"The Potemkin village that was set up around the Door, yes."

"Well, I don't think this one's a fake."

On-shore, people ran to boats, pushed them into the surf and started paddling towards the outrigger. Ben swallowed, hard. "I don't think so, either. Maybe we'd better stop right here."

(continued)
Chapter 34: Fishertown

Hugo and Ben's canoe bobbed in the waves near the white-yurt village. From the beach, two outrigger canoes put in to the churning surf. Hugo's heart leaped to his throat in fear when he saw that some of the men in the canoes weren't paddling. Instead, they aimed drawn bows straight at him and Ben, with arrows at the ready. On the shore, someone else was raising the sail on a wide-bottomed wooden skiff.

A series of long, powerful barrel waves slowed down the outriggers long enough for Hugo to make a decision. He was pretty confident that he could take whatever damage the archers could dish out. But it would majorly suck if Ben got shish-kabobed.

He prayed that Ben wouldn't argue with him. “Look, I'm gonna swim to shore, talk to them. You can take the boat back to our beach, and I'll get there when I can.”

Instead of answering, Ben flung off his t-shirt, and with his knife sliced it into two halves. When he leaped to his feet, the outrigger wobbled in an alarming way. "Crouch down, Hugo, all right? They have to be able to see me."

Ben raised both pieces of fabric over his head and waved them energetically back and forth. He then pointed his left hand straight out, and his right hand down at an angle towards his knee, then repeated the process.

"I didn't know you were a Boy Scout, Ben."

"Richard was a thorough scout-master. I'm telling them that we've stopped."

The outriggers had cleared the rolling waves, but hung back as if observing. The archers still held their bows drawn. Buffeted by one rolling wave after another, the skiff brought up the rear.

Ben signaled again, then stopped momentarily. "I think they got the message."

"Which was what?"

"That we just want to talk."

At the prow of the skiff stood a dark-skinned woman with long braided hair. Her loose tunic and trousers gleamed white as the sail, and in her hands she bore a pair of colored flags.

Behind her crouched a younger, pale-skinned woman with masses of dark hair. Two men sat behind them, one blond and muscular, the other with warm brown skin and a shiny bald head. Both carried long spears.

Oh, great. More bearers of pointy things. Back when Hugo had broken the guns in New Otherton, he told himself that he'd deal with arrows and clubs later. Well, "later" had just arrived, and those obsidian spear-points looked mega-sharp.

The woman waved her flags back at Ben, signaling in a dizzying sequence. When Ben didn't respond, she repeated the motions.

Ben's tone was hesitant. "I think they want us to come to shore."
"You think?"

"I'm telling them yes. I wish I could remember what the semaphore code is for, 'Don't shoot.'"

Hugo immediately raised both hands in the air as high as they would go. "Universal language, bro."

As the outriggers bore down upon them, the people on-board whispered to each other, and one of the men in the stern pointed. It wasn't until the archers lowered their bows that Hugo let out a long, slow breath.

The skiff pulled up alongside Ben and Hugo, close enough for them to come under the dark woman's intent gaze. The blond man lowered his spear and squinted at Ben, as if trying to place him. The pale woman gave a gasp which sounded like recognition.

Ben must have had a revelation of his own, because he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted above the ocean roar, "Ahoy! Nancy!"

* * * * * * * *

When Ben and Hugo reached the yurt-village shoreline, their escort of boats disembarked first, then signaled for them to drag their own canoe onto the white-sand beach. About twenty people surrounded them, some bearing spears, others wielding long knives or bows-and-arrows.

"Hey," said Hugo in greeting. He wanted very badly to ask Ben where he knew Nancy from. Other people looked at Ben in the same curious, scrutinizing way: not unfriendly, but cautious. Most of them weren't strangers, that was for sure.

Hopefully they didn't hate Ben, or worse. That could get messy.

Nancy gave a hand signal, and down went the weapons. "Long time no see, Benjamin."

Ben smiled, but not too much. "Not that long. Just a couple of months ago, in fact, back at the foot statue. I'm glad to see that you didn't make it to the Temple after all."

Nancy shot sharp looks from Ben to Hugo, and back again.

"This is Hugo Reyes, our new Jacob."

Hugo raised a hand in protest. "Not exactly. There was Jack there, in between."

The flicker in Ben's expression told Hugo, Quiet. He then turned to Nancy. "We would love to tell you the story, if you're interested."

As if she hadn't heard him, Nancy beckoned to the two men from the skiff.

Ben nodded to the blond man first. "Franz, you're looking well. And Rodriguez, nice to see you."

They ignored him. Nancy said, "Take them somewhere to rest."

With spears at their backs, Hugo and Ben followed Vanessa through the yurt-village. They passed dozens of wooden racks which held dried fish, while octopus and squid hung on clotheslines. At the north end of the village, a wide stretch of shoreline looked like it had been dusted with pink icing-sugar. Whoever had been working there must have left, because their wooden spreaders lay abandoned in the middle of the sparkling field.

Hugo pointed, overcome by curiosity. "What's that?"
Vanessa gave a small smile, as if proud despite herself. "Those are the salt flats." She stopped in front of a yurt, its canvas sides dazzling white.

"Get inside," Franz growled in his thick accent right out of The Terminator.

Before passing through the flap, Ben turned to Vanessa. "Richard Alpert is well, by the way."

Vanessa's eyes opened wide. Then she spun aside, leaving Franz and Rodriguez to guard the yurt's door.

Before lowering the flap, Rodriguez handed Hugo a gourd sloshing with water. His expression said that if it were up to him, he wouldn't have. The canvas flap fell with a thud, leaving Ben and Hugo inside.

The yurt floor looked like it had been made out of loading pallets, with wide gaps in between the planks. Otherwise, the round tent was entirely empty. Ben settled himself down cross-legged, and Hugo did the same. After he took the drink which Hugo offered him, Ben wiped his mouth. "If they were going to kill us out of hand, they'd have already done it."

"Who the hell are these people?"

"You probably don't remember, but some of them were on your plane, Oceanic 815. In the tail section."

The words hit Hugo with a dull thud. "The ones that got kidnapped."

"We chose very carefully, Hugo. The first night, Goodwin selected Franz, Rodriguez, and one other, whom I don't see. Later, after Goodwin provided his lists as ordered, we took Nancy and six other men."

"You took the kids, too."

"Yes, Hugo. Nancy was a great help with them."

Slow anger rumbled through Hugo, and at first, he didn't trust himself to speak.

Ben sat before him, narrow-shouldered, bare-chested and entirely defenseless. "I did some pretty bad things, Hugo. I don't deny it."

What the hell, what was done was done. Hugo took off the button-down shirt which he wore over his t-shirt, and handed it to Ben. "Here, dude, you look cold."

Ben buttoned up, small as a child in the vast windowpane-checked garment. "Thanks."

"What about the rest of these guys, the ones that weren't on the plane?"

"They're from the Barracks. When the mercs from the Kahuna were on their way, I sent my people to the Temple, although most of them didn't stay there long." Ben gave a small, rueful laugh. "Too used to creature comforts, I guess. And the couples among them had to separate."

"'Cause of all the baby stuff?"

"The Temple had strict rules. Enforced celibacy was one of the less stringent ones."

"So, your Barracks people split. Let me guess, they wound up here." Hugo had heard stories from Cindy and Emma about Temple life, and he wasn't surprised.
"Richard came up with the idea. He and Vanessa."

"So, Ben, when were you gonna tell me that there was a whole other Other village on the Island?"

Ben seemed to shrink into Hugo's tentlike shirt. "After Jacob... died, I thought they had all fled to the Temple, and we know what happened there. There wouldn't have been much point if they were already dead."

That wasn't quite what Hugo was looking for, but it would have to do for now.

Sunlight filled the yurt as Vanessa entered, carrying a wooden tray with slices of raw fish and strips of yellow vegetable. She knelt down before them and held the tray out.

"I guess you get a lot of sushi around here," Hugo remarked.

Vanessa didn't answer, just offered the tray in silence.

Ben explained to Hugo, "If we eat it, they can't kill us outright."

"What, some kind of Island mojo?"

Ben shook his head. "No, courtesy. If we came looking for a fight, we'd refuse it. That would be an insult, and one thing would lead to another. But by eating their food, we show that we trust them not to poison us."

"So, this is kinda like the Others' version of a trust fall. Cool." Hugo helped himself to fish still sprinkled with tiny flecks of blood. "Over the lips and past the gums." Down the mouthful went, cold and slimy.

Ben took his own slice, along with a bit of the yellow root. "Fresh ginger. Try some, Hugo."

Vanessa squatted before them, unmoving. There wasn't enough fish for a meal, just a few bites each. As soon as they were done, Vanessa's words tumbled out. "You have no idea how hard I had to argue, to get Nancy to let me bring this to you." She turned to Ben. "Your star has somewhat fallen among us, after all."

"I know." Ben's tone wasn't defiant or sarcastic, just sad.

She gave a deep sigh. "Tell me what happened with Richard. When he... the monster took Richard away, and Richard didn't come back, I was sure that—"

"You thought the worst, no doubt." said Ben.

Vanessa bit her lip, and Hugo suddenly felt sorry for her. His guess was that while Richard was probably pretty stuck on his dead wife, Vanessa still had a few hopes. "He flew outta here a couple months ago. Now he's in Portland, running Mittelos."

The face of the blue dream-genie appeared in his mind, radiating caution. *You can't make anybody fall in love.* That probably applied to falling out of love as well.

"He went with the girl, didn't he?" Vanessa said.

Hugo's mouth suddenly went dry. "Uh, what girl?"

"The one who used to visit us on the sly, because she didn't want the monster to catch her. Sometimes she brought us piglets. She'd drop them at the foot of the hills, then run away."
Hugo didn't have to ask who "the girl" was. "Yeah, Claire went back, along with some other people. Sorry you didn't get to hitch a ride too."

Vanessa's words came out slowly, as if dragged from within. "So, he left... with her?"

Hugo wanted to laugh, not at Vanessa, but at how totally, powerfully wrong she was. If he even chuckled, though, this whole strange diplomatic visit could turn disastrous. Everything rested on him keeping his voice and face as serious as possible. "Nah, they left on the same plane, but he didn't leave with Claire. If you know what I mean."

A welter of relief, longing, and even hope spread across Vanessa's features, mixed with a dose of sadness, too.

Ben's voice was full of compassion. "Richard was out of his mind with grief when he left, Vanessa. Jacob was dead, and everything around Richard had collapsed. Everyone had to move fast, as the Island was breaking apart."

Vanessa's expression was flat as the wooden tray balanced on her knees. "So, Hugo, it's you then."

It took Hugo a second or two to know what she meant. "Yeah, it's me."

"You have to understand, we were fooled once already."

"By fake-Locke. I know."

"Richard had told us for years that John Locke was supposed to lead us, that Jacob wanted him to. Then he disappeared right before my eyes, and everyone else's. Richard swore Locke was going to return, but he never did. Not alive, anyway. Now, here you are."

"Hate to disappoint you. I guess."

"Please, I don't mean to be rude. It's just that ever since I washed up on these shores, the name of Jacob was always whispered, barely ever said aloud. We never saw him, no one could. Richard filled us with stories, wonderful stories which hung in all our minds." She looked down at the floor, her cheeks pink. "It's not disappointment. It's just that you're sitting here, eating fish. You're so—"

Franz lifted the tent flap to interrupt. "Vanessa, what's taking so long?"

Vanessa didn't glare at Franz; in fact, she gave him a little smile. Hugo still wanted to hear what she had to say, though. "I'm so... what?"

"Ordinary." She sprang to her feet, and disappeared through the tent flap before Hugo could say anything.

There was nothing else to do but relax and wait. The floor beneath Hugo seemed to rock, as if his body hadn't gotten the message that they weren't in the canoe anymore. "Was she, like, Richard's girlfriend or something?"

"When Richard went to the mainland, she served as his aide and traveling companion."

"Traveling companion, huh."

Ben looked genuinely shocked at the suggestion. "Richard is strait-laced. I'm sure he neither reciprocated her affections nor took advantage of them."

"Good." Hugo wasn't exactly a font of advice for the love-lorn, but if Richard hadn't gotten over
Isabella after a couple hundred years, he probably wasn't going to. “Anyway, the Terminator seems pretty stuck on her.”

“The Terminator?” Then Ben got it, and chuckled.

Their grins faded when Rodriguez stuck his head in the yurt. “Get up, you two. Time to go see Nancy.”

* * * * * * * *

At the entrance to Nancy's yurt, Rodriguez pointed to a shady spot of sand right outside. "You, Benjamin, sit there."

Hugo balked. “No way.”

"It's okay, I'll be fine." Ben settled himself on the sand under Rodriguez's watchful eye.

From inside, Franz opened the tent-flap to Nancy's yurt, and beckoned Hugo in.

The first thing Hugo noticed was a large glass bottle laid on its side, filled with an intricately-built wooden ship with many sails. Vanessa and Franz stood like an honor guard on either side of Nancy's metal Army-surplus desk. Hugo took the only empty seat, a camp chair which squeezed his sides and creaked under his weight. Behind Nancy rested a pile of rifles, five or six at least.

*Uh, oh.* Hugo suddenly had a notion of what this was about.

Nancy steepled her fingers beneath her chin and fixed Hugo with her piercing, dark-brown eyes, reminding him of his mom when she got going on one of her hunting expeditions. No matter how embarrassing the truth was, she'd drag it out of you by sheer will alone.

The camp chair creaked again, this time louder. If there was ever a time for a tiny cheat, this was it. He willed the aluminum frame and canvas webbing to hold together, at least until he got up. Then he rested his hands on his knees and kicked back, waiting.

"So," Nancy said after a long silence. "Why are you here?"

"Ben and me, we were going around the Island, checking things out. I saw your village, wanted to tell people that the war was over."

Nancy brushed a few thin, tight braids out of her face, as if less sure than before. "For us, the war was over when John Locke's body lay there on the sand, yet he was still walking around. We set out for the Temple, but a lot of us had second thoughts. Most of us came back here. I guess the few who didn't are at the Temple, still."

"There is no more Temple." Hugo left the rest hanging in the air between them.

"What did you do?" Franz said, gripping his spear.

"You wanna put that down, I'll tell you what happened."

Nancy gave Franz a look, and he rested back on his heels. "Go ahead, talk," Nancy said. "But it better be a good story. Ever since our firearms stopped functioning, we've been expecting an attack. When it didn't happen, some people wanted to slack off. Not me, though."

At once Hugo put the scenario together. Sure, he'd broken the guns all over the Island, without giving a thought about what people elsewhere on the Island would think when their rifles or pistols
suddenly wouldn't fire. Whether Nancy's people thought it was magic or some kind of super-weapon, they probably started knapping obsidian arrow-heads and spear-points almost at once.

Hugo took a deep breath. Well, here goes nothing. He went over as much as he could of the past two months, wishing Ben was there to explain things a little better, fill in any parts he might have missed. When he mentioned going to Los Angeles via the Door, Vanessa's eyes got wide. She knew exactly what he was talking about. Throughout it all, Nancy leaned back in her chair, hands folded, silently listening.

As Hugo described finding Rennie's body on the rocks, Nancy remarked, "He made my life miserable at the Temple. Main reason I left."

Hugo had no trouble believing that.

"We have a good life here. Without our guns, we were afraid that we wouldn't be able to defend it."

"So you freaked out. Totally understandable."

Vanessa broke into the conversation. "No, you don't get it. Richard always told us how Jacob had to remain apart. Separate. How it had to work that way."

"Yeah, it did, for Jacob. Look, I already told you how this was all a big game to Jacob and his brother both. Games have rules, but the rules change."

Nancy, Vanessa, and Franz sent glances towards each other, but didn't say anything. When Hugo had seen Jacob, he hadn't seemed like a bad guy, just kind of mopey and depressed. Then again, most of the time Hugo had seen Jacob was when he was dead. Maybe you couldn't really judge.

In a mild voice, Nancy said, "That's quite a claim you're making here."

Hugo didn't answer, just leaned back in his chair. At least it had stopped making noise.

Franz broke the momentary silence. "You say you can do these things. So prove it. Do something."

"He doesn't have to do anything," Vanessa protested. "Weren't you listening, Franz? He knows about the Door."

"He could have found that out from Richard."

Vanessa's voice cracked with exasperation. "You want to take that risk, Franz? If he's not the new protector of this Island, then we'll find out soon enough. If he is, he could break your thick skull, as well as a gun."

Hugo had to admit that her logic was worthy of Mr. Spock.

Nancy's voice was gentle. "All right, Vanessa. Point made."

"You know how to fish?" Franz said. "We pull our weight around here. No slackers."

Vanessa didn't even give Hugo a chance to answer. "They found Rennie Delacroix at Gnasher Pass, and made it through in one piece. So they can't be too bad in a boat."

Hugo said, "Gnasher Pass, huh? Good name. Speaking of boats, where'd you get all these?"

Pride rang out in Vanessa's voice. "Ships in bottles weren't the only ones Richard was interested in. He got us started on carving outriggers. It was Franz's idea to build sailing skiffs."

The tall German's stern face stayed grim, although his eyes crinkled with warmth at the praise.
Vanessa said, "Richard isn't coming back, is he?"

Honesty was best, and Hugo didn't know how to soften it. "I don't think so."

Pain flicked across Vanessa's face. Franz set his spear aside and folded his arms, stoic.

Hugo said, "Ben and I, we'd love to help out. But we got to get everybody together, talk to them. No leader-secrets, none of that stuff. Everybody gets to know what's happened. And if anybody wants to leave, I'm gonna find a way. Everybody gets a choice."

"Fair enough." Nancy unsteepled her hands and leaned back in her office chair, then turned to Franz and Vanessa. "Hugo and Benjamin are our guests now, and we're going to treat them as such." She angled her head towards the door, and Vanessa and Franz left at once.

Afterwards, Nancy didn't speak. She just looked Hugo over with her deep, dark eyes, and now she didn't just remind Hugo of his mom, but of Rose too, and Kathy, and even old Mrs. Toomey from Kalgoorlie, all rolled into one.

Then it hit Hugo that Nancy wasn't trying to sweat him out or anything. She was being polite. She knew he had a question, and would sit there all day if needed, until he figured out what it was.

* * * * * * * *

The next morning, Hugo gave his "Anybody who want to go, can" speech. Just as when he had extended the same offer in New Otherton, nobody took him up on it.

Not even Vanessa, which was kind of a surprise. If she was being forced to stay or something, he was going to find out. So when he saw her working at the salt flats, he ambled over to join her.

Hugo knew he could spy on Vanessa's thoughts if he wanted to, but that was gross, like peeping in windows. Sometimes people shed thoughts, though, and Hugo couldn't help but pick up how Vanessa wanted to talk as much as he did.
It was hot work, raking half-evaporated sea-sludge into a smooth paste which would ultimately dry into crusted pink sea salt. He toiled away with Vanessa, pouring sweat, hoping he was drinking enough to replace what he was losing, as he waited for Vanessa to say what was on her mind.

Finally she rested on her wooden spreader, and turned to Hugo. "Is it really true what you said about the women of your people? That they've had children?"

_Oh brother, here comes that “my people, your people” thing again. "We're one Island, Vanessa. But yeah, Faith had a baby three years ago. Then Sirrah had hers last year. And Meredith and Deanna are due in September, October, I forget."

Vanessa gazed out to sea, her voice faraway. "You're wondering why I didn't speak up, when you asked who wanted to go. When Richard and I would travel, I'd lie awake in my hotel room, think about knocking on his door. I imagined begging him to not go back, to just take me away, to somewhere we could have a life."

"You didn't, though."

"No. I knew deep down that there wasn't any point." She gave him a brave smile, then kept on raking.

*********

Hugo and Ben stayed in Fishertown, as Ben named it, for two more days. Nancy laughed at the new name, remarking that they'd never thought of calling it anything before. Even Franz's face cracked at the edges a bit, his version of a smile.

Ben had been busy, too, because the fisher-people were more than willing to trade. What especially tempted them were cheese and flax, as well as all the assorted Dharma Initiative scraps which filled storage sheds and the recreation center. The ranchers of New Otherton would get their salt for meat preservation after all.

Vanessa and Franz would follow Ben and Hugo's boat back to the Dharma Initiative dock at Full Moon Bay, an easy sail around the North Shore. As a sign of good faith, Vanessa wrapped bags of salt in watertight shark-skin, and Nancy added a large basket of dried fish, their scales shining dark-gold. When Vanessa and Franz were finished loading the skiff, they all put out to sea at once.

Hugo pointed his paddle towards the couple in the boat behind them. "I guess they're kind of like ambassadors, aren't they? Dude's a marked man, too. He doesn't stand a chance."

There was a faint smile in Ben's voice. "I don't think you'd find a more willing victim. You should know how that goes, Hugo."

Hugo was glad that he faced out to sea, so Ben couldn't see his blush.

(continued)
Kate opened her eyes and stretched, her body stiff from sleeping in the big recliner instead of her bed. This new sleeping position was an experiment, and when the first ray of pale pink sunlight hit the edge of her window, she started the countdown.

_Five... Four... Three..._

She didn't even make it to two before she flew to her feet, flung herself into her bathroom, and hurled.

_Well, sleeping upright isn't the answer,_ she told herself as she washed her face. _Maybe tomorrow I'll try nibbling crackers before getting up._ The internet had tons of advice, and some of it might even work.

_Or I should just make the call._ Her purse sat on the dresser, and at the bottom of the least-used zipper compartment sat a business card, a present from Carole. Who had gotten it from Deirdre Hannegan at the law office.

Dr. Caitlan Flynn, Obstetrics and Gynecology, MD, PhD, FACOG.

What was the alternative, if she wasn't pregnant? A little fear clutched Kate's middle, squeezing it just hard enough to get her attention. Mom's problems had started like this, too. _Too old for morning sickness, Katie,_ her mother had joked, back when her mother was still speaking to her. Then Mom got the test results, and she wasn't wise-cracking anymore.

The woman in the mirror stared back at Kate, the color coming back to her cheeks now that the hormonal storm had passed. It was like the rain-storms on the Island, oddly enough. Within minutes, clouds would gather and darken to deep blue-gray. Then the sky would explode, soaking everyone with water so sweet and cool, you just wanted to lean back your head and let it run down your throat. When the rain-storm was spent, little tendrils of mist would rise and swirl about.

Dancing rain fairies, Claire had once called them. At the time, Kate thought it was just a picturesque figure of speech.

Now, after Hurley's last visit, she knew better.

Kate finished washing her face, then stuck her head into Aaron's room. The doorway which connected his room and Claire's was open, and the neatly-made beds showed that those two were already up and about. Aaron's laughter floated up from the big lower-level room, the one which Mittelos had used for their encounter-group sessions, back when the Topanga Canyon house was still a corporate retreat center.

Kate heard Claire say, "Look, Cuddlepie, if you don't want to use your brush, try fingers instead." Obviously they were busy with what Kate privately called The Project.

She munched a piece of toast left over from Aaron's breakfast plate, then reached automatically for the coffee maker before stopping herself. Even the smell of brewing coffee made her retch, much less drinking the stuff. Grimacing, she heated a mug of water for peppermint tea, a recommendation of Carole's.

Claire must have heard the microwave beep, because she called up the stairs, "Kate, is that you?"
"Yeah, I'll be down in a few minutes."

Steaming mug in hand, Kate headed downstairs to the big room, where Aaron darted towards her. "Mummy! Mummy! Come see what I painted!"

"Slow down, Aaron. Mummy has hot tea." She set the mug out of reach.

He grabbed her hand and tried to drag her across the room. "See? See, Mummy?"

Claire looked up with a wide smile. She had taped a wide, long swath of heavy butchers'-block paper to one of the walls for Aaron to use as a canvas. Despite his smock, Aaron had rainbow splashes of paint all over his hands up to the elbow, and a wide swath of blue streaked his hair. "Isn't it nice, Mummy Kate? It's just like Mummy Claire's."

Across the span of paper, Aaron had painted one blobby, broad-leafed tree after another. Big red and pink flowers on stems decorated scribbly green lawns. Behind one of the trees, a crude dinosaur's head peeked out, the rest of his body invisible.

Kate knelt down by the little boy. "It's beautiful, Goober."

Claire had stuck a paintbrush behind her ear, and her own apron was covered with paint as well. "He's been working really hard." She poured a little red tempera paint into a small plastic cup for Aaron. "Here, I think these flowers need a few more petals."

Scrunching his face in concentration, Aaron dipped his forefinger into the paint, and started to dab red dots around the green stems.

The Project had come along splendidly. "You've made a lot of progress," Kate said, gazing at Claire's own painting.

"Haven't I, though?"

The longer wall had been transformed by a great painted tree, lush and full-leaved, whose curling branches curved out everywhere. Birds rested on its limbs, their magenta and yellow tail feathers swirling down around the tendrils at the branches' ends. Nearby, Claire had sketched out mountains whose high, scooped-out shapes soared skywards.

The vivid forms weren't realistic, looking more like illustrations in a children's book. Kate recognized the places, and walked towards the wall as if hypnotized. "It's the Mesa, and the mountains around it."

Aaron had given up on petals, and was now daubing green paint-leaves on his trees with his fingers. "What's a mesa, Mummy Kate?"

"A big, flat space of land high up in the mountains, just like Mummy Claire's painted here."

Then Kate's breath vanished, and all she could do was stare. In the center of the Mesa, Claire had sketched in a dark horse, and was now bringing it to life. Charging across the Mesa grass, its mane and tail flew behind as if caught in a wind-storm.

Although the paint shone wetly, Kate touched the horse's flank, which left a blue smudge on her finger. "Where did you... How did you know about that? Did Sawyer tell you?"

Claire was adding white streaks to the horse's flanks, to create the effect of a sheen on its blue-black hair. "Tell me what?"
It was so long ago. The raft on which they had all placed their hopes for rescue had been wrecked by the Others, and Sawyer had been shot. He returned to the survivors, weak and sick. When Kate had taken him outside the Swan Hatch for some fresh air, they had both seen the beautiful animal, which had even let Kate curry its long mane with her fingers. As she touched the painting, she could almost feel the silky horse-hair, the warm flank.

Claire continued to apply paint. "You're going to smudge it, now."

"Sorry. Did you... imagine this?"

A faint pink tinged Claire's cheeks. "Dreamt it, actually." She washed her brush, then mixed up a dark gray-green for shadows. "I dream about the Island all the time. Especially since Hurley left."

"He's coming back tomorrow night, isn't he?"

Claire's face broke into brightness, sun coming from behind a cloud. It was all Kate needed to know.

A phone began to ring to the tune of "Catch a Falling Star."

"That must be yours," Kate said, casting about the room.

Claire pointed with her brush, her hands splattered with paint. "It's over there in my ditty bag. Mum's gone to the shops, she probably has a question about the marketing. Do you mind?"

"Of course not." Kate rummaged through Claire's big leather bag, full of dog-eared sketchbooks, boxes of crayons and a child's coloring book, as the phone played its tinny little tune. Finally she found it at the bottom. "Hello? Kate Austen here."

"Ah, finally someone picks up." The alto voice was calm, modulated.

Claire gave Kate a questioning glance, and Kate half-covered the phone. "It's Deirdre Hannegan."

"Deirdre, how are you?"

"Never better. You want the good news first, or the bad?"

That was straight and to the point, wasn't it? A crawling anxiety wormed its way through Kate's insides, set in motion by something in Deirdre's tone. Kate glanced over to Aaron, assessing how much she could say in front of him, even though he was deep in concentration over his painting.

"The good, please."

"We found your friend Desmond Hume. He's fine, just a little worse for wear. He spent a month in a jail cell in Tongatapu, before the British High Commissioner could take custody of him."

"Tonga-where?"

"Capital city of the Kingdom of Tonga, about five hundred miles southeast of Fiji. A few days ago the embassy staff took him to Suva, then put him on a plane to Heathrow. They didn't even attempt entry into the United States. His wife and child met him in London."

Kate let out a breath that she didn't even know she was holding. "It's about Desmond," she said aside to Claire. "He's fine, back in England with Penny."

"That's wonderful. Hurley will be so glad to hear it."

"You know, that phone does have a speaker." Deirdre sounded slightly annoyed.
Aaron piped up, "Who's Desmond, Mummy Kate?"

"Ssshhh, dear, Mummy Kate's on the phone."

"But you let Mummy Claire talk to you! Why can't I talk to you too?"

The books all said the same thing about kids at this stage, that they were obsessed with fairness. "Sorry, Deirdre. The speaker wouldn't be convenient right now."

"Very well. Now for the less pleasant." Deirdre paused, as if giving Kate a second to prepare, and Kate's stomach clenched again. "Mittelos received word of your mother, Diane Janssen. She's been transferred to Mother of Mercy Hospice in Des Moines."

Her mother, last seen a little over a year ago in the Foltz Justice Center's grimy conference room, her lips bluish despite the cannula which delivered its steady boost of oxygen. Piteously she begged to see her grandson, reeling under Kate's harsh last words, "I don't want you anywhere near him!"

Deirdre was still speaking, but Kate barely heard her. Finally, Deirdre's voice pierced the static in Kate's head. "... And she's been asking for you, repeatedly... She doesn't have long, maybe a week at most. That's optimistic."

"A week?" Kate repeated. She started to reel. There was no furniture in the big room, only a few yoga mats rolled out for Claire and Aaron. As Claire guided Kate down onto one, Kate continued to speak. "How do you know all this? Never mind, I've got to get ready and—"

"Ms. Austen." Deirdre could have commanded armies. "Mr. Norton would like you to come to the office as soon as possible, so that you and he can discuss things further. Can you be here in an hour? His court appearance was canceled this morning, and he has an opening."

"You want me to get from here to downtown in an hour? Are you kidding me?"

"If you leave in ten minutes and take the Hollywood Freeway instead of the I-10, you'll make it."

"Just barely."

"Ms. Austen, I have to take another call. See you here in an hour, with luck."

The phone went dead.

As Kate dashed up the stairs, Claire followed closely behind, Aaron in her arms. "Kate, you sure you don't want me to drive you? I mean, I know I just got my California license, but you look upset."

“No, it's fine. I'm fine.‖ From her closet, Kate yanked out the first dress she found, and pulled it on over her camisole. She shimmied out of her pajama bottoms and stuffed her feet into a pair of ballerina flats.

"Where are you going, Mummy Kate? Can I go, too?"

"Not this time, Aaron. She's asking for me. Mom's dying, and she wants to see me. The thought spun in Kate's head like a wheel. She dragged a brush through tangled curls, then gave up and twisted the tumbled mass into a loose bun.

Claire turned to Aaron. "Snugglepot, go to your room and find a pair of bathers, okay? We'll clean up downstairs, then Mummy's going to take you for a dip."

As soon as Aaron was out of the room, Kate said, "It's my mom. She's sick, like in not-going-to-live
sick."

"Oh, Kate, I'm so sorry. I knew she was bad off, but this—"

"And when I tried to tell Deirdre that I wanted to go see Mom, she cut me off. Told me to come
down to the office."

"She probably didn't want to say anything over the phone."

"Claire, I was so awful to Mom when I cut a deal with the DA, when Mom agreed not to testify. The
things I said to her—"

"I know how that goes, Kate. Look, if you don't want me to drive you downtown, maybe I should
go wake up Sawyer—"

"No!" Oh, damn, she hated to over-react like that with Claire, but there wasn't time to explain
anything right now. She gave Claire a hug and a peck on the cheek, saying, "I'll tell you everything
when I get back," then scooted out the door.

* * * * * * * *

Deirdre was right. The Ventura and the Hollywood both were pretty passable for mid-morning, with
just a few slowdowns. Meanwhile, the 511 hotline told her about an accident on the eastbound I-10,
with multiple lane closures. Luck was with her.

When Deirdre ushered Kate into Dan Norton's office, the first thing Kate noticed was the ring. It had
to be at least two carats, and it gleamed like a super-nova under the bright fluorescent lights. "So, I
guess congratulations are in order."

"Thank you," Deirdre said, obviously pleased with herself.

"Have you set a date?" As soon as the words flew out of Kate's mouth, she wished she could have
taken them back. During her own week-long engagement, she had hated it whenever people brought
that up.

Deirdre just smiled. "Depends on our work schedules."

Dan Norton's eyes followed Deirdre out the door. "Thanks, Didi." Then he trained his full attention
on Kate. "I'm sorry to hear your mother's taken a turn for the worse."

"I appreciate that. Now, do you mind telling me why I had to drive down here in rush-hour traffic?"

"Your timing was perfect, Miss Austen," and he drew the soft "s" sound out, deliberately. "The geek
boys from Data Privacy Solutions finished sweeping the office right before you got here. I can't say
the same thing for the security of cellphone calls."

“And how do you know all this about my mother? There's supposed to be such a thing as medical
privacy."

“In a perfect world, yes. Let's just say that Mittelos Bioscience has been following your mother's case
for quite some time now.”

What the hell was that supposed to mean? Dan Norton's fingers formed a perfect steeple under his
chin, just like the game she used to play with Aaron. Here is the church; here is the steeple; but
inside, Dan Norton's eaten the people.
"Let me explain something to you, Kate. Can I call you Kate? There's a great glory road which runs through this city, all the way from Malibu to Riverside. When you're sailing along at ninety on a clear night, that road's so smooth you don't even know it's there. It's like coasting along on angels' wings, or so it seems.

"Until you hit a pothole and go flying. Then Didi and I show up with the meat wagon, and hopefully there's something left of you to scrape off the pavement. That's what we do, Didi and me. We drive up and down the glory road, picking up and patching up the casualties.

"You were the luckiest woman in LA when you slipped back into the country under the wire. Good trick, because as far as everybody was concerned, Kate Austen had never left the country at all, and thus wasn't lost in another plane crash."

Kate had to stall for some time, to pull herself together. "Excuse me, I... need some water."

Dan reached into the mini-fridge right by his desk, and handed her a bottle, cold. "Of course, it didn't hurt that a good friend in Probation and Supervision owed me, big time."

Kate's new parole officer, a stone-faced woman of about sixty, had fiddled through her papers casually, as if Kate hadn't missed two meetings. Five minutes later, the woman showed Kate to the door, without the usual check-list of questions. Some gift horses you just don't look in the mouth, and Kate hadn't. "Whatever you did, Dan, thanks."

"The five-figure donation in your name to the Probation Officers' Benevolent Association didn't hurt, either. Your current predicament, though... Now if we had eight, nine months, it would be easy-peasy—"

"I don't have eight or nine months," Kate snapped. And not just because Mom is dying.

"Hear me out. You remember Melissa Dunbrook, don't you?"

Kate shuddered at the memory of the dark-haired, hatchet-faced district attorney who had pursued her case. She hid her hands behind her purse, so that Dan Norton wouldn't see them shake.

"Melissa's ambition has only grown since you last met her. Now she's reaching for the brass ring, challenging her boss in November for Chief Prosecutor. So while the law limits you to a $1,500 donation, there are other ways to grease the skids. If Dunbrook gets elected, I think I can convince her to quietly drop your parole restrictions."

"She despises me." Kate spat out the words, still chafing under the contempt which the DA had rained down on her during her trial. "And you want me to bribe her?"

"Don't be ridiculous. As your attorney, I can't advise you to do anything illegal. Although you did have some interesting stories about how you and your fellow returnees managed to lighten the burdens of detention."

Kate clamped her jaws shut, remembering the genial Officer Nariki from Tarawa Atoll.

"Human beings are the same world-wide, aren't they, Kate?"

Whatever Dan was hinting at, she might as act as if she knew what he was talking about. "Pretty much."

He opened a battered road atlas and thumbed through it. "I know they've got computer programs now, but somehow I can't see them replacing one of these. Not to mention no electronic record. Ah,
here we go."

The page displayed an interstate highway map of the United States, and Dan traced his finger along the southern route from Los Angeles to Des Moines, Iowa. "Two days there, with a break for sleep, and two days back. Plus a week or two to attend to your family affairs. I think your new PO would appreciate an extra two weeks of vacation as well."

Slow anger started to lick around Kate's edges. The chair's coarse upholstery chafed the back of her legs, and she kicked herself for picking a short skirt. *Oh, great, here come the tears again.* She didn't know what she hated more, the lawyer sitting before her, or the emotions which washed over her like an Island cloud-burst. "This is my mother you're talking about. She's not a 'pot-hole.'"

Dan continued with his train of thought, as if he hadn't even heard. "Call me sexist, but I don't usually recommend that women take long cross-country trips alone." His bemused expression told her that she could burn a bra right in front of him, and he couldn't care less.

"Wouldn't flying be easier?"

As Dan closed the road atlas, he chuckled. "If it were me, I'd never get on a plane again in my life. Not to mention that an airline check-in is proof-positive of a parole violation."

*Maybe he doesn't trust the geek boys to have done a thorough enough sweep,* Kate thought, as Dan's pointed glance bored holes into her. *Or maybe this is just how Dan Norton covers his ass.*

When Dan leaned back as far as the chair could go, it squeaked like a small animal was trapped under the rollers. "Do I make myself clear, Kate?"

"Perfectly."

************

An exhausted Kate pulled into the rear driveway of the Topanga Canyon house. She left the car running as the air conditioning blew and Emmylou Harris on the CD player finished up "Boulder to Birmingham."

With a long sigh, Kate killed the engine. Instead of going into the house, she picked her way down the flag-stone path to Sawyer's cabin, careful to avoid the occasional loose paver. Thankfully she'd worn flats. If she tried this in heels, she'd break something critical.

Sun filtered through the ridge of tall cedars, leaving slanted pools of shadow at their bases. Beyond the trees, a valley stretched out, lightly dusted with lavender and yellow spring flowers. Afternoon gold tinged the edges of brown hills dotted with scrubby green.

Sawyer's white wooden door stood open, and from it drifted the tap-a-tap of an electric typewriter. Kate wouldn't have figured Sawyer for a good typist, but the keys pounded out a swift rhythm, with only an occasional pause or tiny bell-ring at the end of a line.

There was a computer up at the house, but Sawyer didn't use it. Instead, he had bought an old IBM Selectric on EBay, along with a box of ribbons and correction-tape. He wadded up any spoiled pages, then burned them in the barbecue pit on the cabin's rear deck.

*What's he writing, his memoirs?* Whatever it was, Sawyer was hitting his stride now. She stood there for a short time, strangely soothed by the hyperactive-woodpecker noises, not wanting to bother him but very badly wanting his presence, a chest to lay her head upon, arms around her, somebody to tell her that things were going to be all right. Even when it was clear that they probably weren't.
The path to Sawyer's cabin crossed a short foot-bridge, which spanned a shallow ravine. Kate stood there for a moment, hesitating. He's busy. And it's not like he'd want to get involved in this whole sorry mess, anyway. As she turned to head back to the main house, her foot skidded on a stone, which broke loose and clattered down into the rock-filled gully.

A disgruntled "Son of a bitch!" sounded from inside, and the typing stopped. Then it was too late for Kate to make her escape, because Sawyer's tall frame filled the cabin door, barely clearing it. Shafts of sunlight lit up his fair hair like gold fire, leaving the rest of his face in shadow. His sleeveless t-shirt clung to his tight, muscular torso. A faint sheen of sweat covered his chest and brow.

When he saw her, his slight frown dissolved into concern. "Hey, Short-stack, Claire said you headed down to the shark-tank. Why didn't you come get me? I'd a gone with you."

"I didn't want to bother you."

"Wouldn'ta been no trouble." He stepped onto the foot-bridge, heading towards her, and she did the same for him. When they met almost half-way, he said, "Sorry to hear about your momma."

"Thanks, Sawyer." Something cold and reserved inside of Kate melted at the warmth in his tone. She took a step forward, then stopped. One more pace, and she would fall right into his arms. Instead, she inspected the boards beneath her feet. "You sure this bridge can hold us both?"

"Considering it survived Sir Hugo trompin' back and forth, I'd say yes." Sawyer rested both hands on the bridge rails, blocking her path, waiting.

One step was all it would take. She trembled, held back by one weight after another. All the years when her mom and dad were happy together. My real dad, Samuel J. Austen, so what if he wasn't the sperm donor, that's not what makes someone a father. All the years after the divorce when her mother still loved her, until she found someone who she cared about more.

The weight of the drunken fights, the beatings, the leering wretchedness, all gone now, up in flames and smoke. The stench of roasting meat overwhelmed the smell of mercaptan in the natural gas, when she blew that son-of-a-bitch straight to hell where he belonged.

The weight of murder, of taking lives, even though they deserved it.

_I saved you a spark, Wayne. Boom._

_I saved you a bullet, Samael. Crack._

The gully beneath her feet wasn't deep, maybe ten or twelve feet at the most. It would be a nasty fall, though, because the stones at the bottom were sharp. She touched the hand-rails as if they could support all those years, and two tears ran down her face, one on each cheek.

She and Sawyer both took one step forward at the same time, met in the middle, and the bridge didn't collapse.

His chest was warm and his skin smelled like almond butter mixed with the crispness of cedar. He held her while she fought back the tears, stroking her hair, making little murmurs which didn't mean anything except that he was there, ready to listen. Even after she calmed down, she still let her face lie on that broad, smooth chest, and her arms went around his narrow waist before she knew it.

He was the one to pull back first. As he gazed down at her, chin lowered, she noticed bits of gray mixed in with the dark-gold stubble.
"Want some lemonade?" he said.

"What, that powdered stuff? No thanks."

"Powdered?" Sawyer looked insulted. "While you were at the lawyer's, Claire and them picked a basket of lemons."

"So you know how to make lemonade."

"Damn straight. Why don't you come inside and test it out? Then you can tell me what's got you all riled up."

There was nowhere to sit in the shotgun cabin's single room, except the twin bed and an office chair. She sat cross-legged on the bed, rather than disturb the manuscript papers spread out over the butcher-block table which served as a desk.

"This is good," she said as she sipped.

Sawyer settled himself into the mesh office chair. "Granny Tidwell's secret recipe. You got to boil the sugar first, make a syrup, then add the lemon juice and water."

"And you did all that while I was gone."

He clinked the ice in his glass. "Okay, Freckles, enough about my culinary aptitude. Spill."

So she did, starting with Deirdre's phone call, and ending with Dan Norton's veiled instructions. When she'd finished, Sawyer spun his chair around to the desk, and draped the Selectric with its black nylon dust cover.

Had she just wasted her breath? "You know, maybe I should just get out of here so you can get back to work."

"Hell, Kate, if I do that, how am I gonna have time to pack?"

"Pack?" Then it hit her, the knowledge that he was inviting himself along, and the sheer relief of it. "Thanks, Sawyer. Really. I was thinking about leaving tom—"

"Bright and early tomorrow, you got it. Kate, this ain't just for your benefit, me hitching my team to this wagon. I'm gettin' itchy feet, too. Missy Claire and Gramma Carole might be fine growin' lettuce and pickin' lemons, but—"

"I know what you mean. I'm going a little stir-crazy myself. Just wish it was for a different reason, though." Then she remembered. He had his own journey in mind, but was ready to put hers first. Still, it had to be said. "What about Jasper, Alabama?"

"Hell, Jasper can wait, Shortcake. Doubt anybody there misses me anyway." He got up and started to pace the cedar-smelling cabin, so cozy, yet not much bigger than a generously-sized prison cell.

She crawled off the bed, stretching as she gazed up at the main house, barely visible through the leafy trees which lined the path. Half to herself, she mused, "This was always a detour, wasn't it? Coming back here, to California."

Even before Sawyer spoke, the heat of his body told her that he had come up very close behind her. "How d'you mean?"

"Claire dreams about the Island, Sawyer. All the time, she says. Including our horse."
"Horse?" From over her shoulder, his breath rustled her hair.

"The black horse, on the Island. When you were so sick. I thought I was seeing things, but I wasn't. Because you saw it too."

Sawyer let out a low whistle, sending a caress of air over the back of her neck. "Damn, that girl can be spooky sometimes. I'd forgotten all about that."

"I never have." She couldn't see the swimming pool from where she stood, but Aaron's squeals and splashes wafted down the hill towards the cabin, followed by amused shouts from Claire or Carole, it was hard to tell which. They sounded so much alike.

Kate had done exactly what she had promised Jack she would do. Now she had to figure out what to do with the rest of her life, and maybe this trip would be the first step.

Sawyer's chin almost rested on Kate's shoulder. "They'll be fine, Shortcake."

"I know. And Hurley will be here with them too, if only for a little while."

Even though he didn't touch her, she could feel his laughter. When she turned around, she found him grinning. "Well, Missy Claire's just gonna have to give him a big kiss for both of us. Come on now, let's make tracks. That land yacht's not gonna pack itself."

(continued)
On the spring equinox, the night of Hugo's return, Claire parked the Ford Escape on the circle drive
of Our Lady Star of the Sea. She scraped the curb with the tires and grumbled to herself, *Why do
Yanks have to drive on the wrong side of the road?* The church grounds were silent and deserted,
sending through her a shiver of fear mixed with excitement.

She hurried around the back of the church, to the squat stone building which Eloise Hawking had
called “the shrine.” It was here that Hugo would appear from the Island. A snaking brick path took
her through clusters of poppies and wildflowers, instead of lawn. Soon she reached the shrine,
covered in climbing roses erupting into bloom.

The oak door stood shut. Thin threads of light pierced the cracks, as if something bright lurked
behind the facade. *It's opening,* she thought as her heart skipped a beat. *It's the right time after all.*

The enormous mystery stopped her for a few seconds. It would be easy to turn around, walk back
down the path, go back to the safety of Topanga Canyon, and never know what lay behind that
door. Her pounding heart almost left her faint and breathless as she stood, deciding.

*I wouldn't miss this for anything.* She placed her hand on the rough wood as if it were a big man's
thick and heavy chest, and it swung open with no resistance at all.

A great wind pulled her into the shrine. Swirling, it fluffed her hair about her ears, and lifted her short
ruffled skirt. She'd expected to find bright light like a miniature sun, but inside, only moonlight
dusted the grass and roses.

A strong sea smell filled the shrine, a scent rough and intimate as clean-washed flesh. Claire knew
that shore well. She'd walked it up and down until her legs ached; had stolen from it sea-bird eggs
still warm from the nest, slippery egg-slime running down her throat.

Iodine seaweed had laced that shoreline with huge ropes. Dusty sand caked your feet. Above the
symphony of waves hovered a fresh and fragrant air found nowhere else. She would have
recognized it anywhere.

In the very center of the shrine, air rippled like the surface of a wind-swept pond. It jelled into a
shining oval blue as an Island sky.

Claire stood frozen, as a hulking silhouette filled the bright oval. Now he was clearly visible, his
shaggy mane flung about his head. Another ocean-fresh gust swirled up, and the Door opened fully.
Light poured into the shrine, spilling over Claire.

Hugo stepped down from mid-air carefully, as if testing how far he stood above the ground. He
swayed a little as he squinted into the darkness, his head and shoulders back-lit by sunlight. “Claire?
Is that you?”

“Over here.”

His face brightened like a searchlight just switched on.

When she took his hand and pulled him towards her, he breathed out her name again, not a question
this time. Together they collided belly to breast. Big as a world, he drew her into his orbit.

Claire lifted her chin to Hugo, eyes fixed on his beaming face, and the kiss pulled them together. He
hung back a little at first, as if shy, so she teased the kiss out of him with her tongue, licking the inside of his mouth with tiny delicate movements.

On tip-toe, she took his face into her hands, nuzzled the roll of flesh beneath his chin, then buried her face in his neck. He smelled of wood-smoke and clean air, and tasted salty.

He lifted her so that her feet left the ground. One flip-flop slid off her foot, then the next. To keep her from sliding down his belly, he propped her up with one arm under her rump, then pulled her to him in a great hug. "How'd you know when to be here?"

"I looked on an equinox chart."

"Man, I am so glad you made it."

"Me too."

In the rosy moonlight, he lowered her down over the curve of his body and held her face between his hands, planting little raindrop kisses over her cheeks and down the long curve of her throat.

The air itself felt alive. Responsibility tugged on her, and she pulled back, to reach for the car keys. "I borrowed your dad's car."

"So you can drive now. Super."

"It's not so bad, now that I've got my lefts and rights straightened out."

When they reached the SUV, the carillon in the church tower struck eleven. Hugo held out his hand for the keys. "Not that I don't trust you. I'm sure you're a great driver. It's just that driving's one of the things I miss on the Island."

As he slid behind the wheel, Claire said, "Oh, wait, you're going to need this. A present from Richard Alpert." She dug around in her bag, then handed him a wallet.

Hugo opened it, and broke into a wide smile. "Man, this is fantastic." One by one he pulled out the thin plastic cards. "Ha, a new license. Visa card, too. Oh, looky here." He drew out the crisp bills, flipping first through the hundreds, then the twenties. "I got to make sure to pay him back."

"No, you don't, silly. It's your money."

He drove seamlessly through thick surface-street traffic, windows down. Cool night winds played over his hair, and the air had a faint spicy smell. On Santa Monica Boulevard, a car charged up behind him, tail-gating, and he waved it around. "I guess, um, everybody's down at my house, then?"

She hesitated, not wanting to disappoint him. "Mum's in Topanga, as she didn't want Aaron out late at night. Schedules and all. Then, with Kate, her mum's very sick. She and Sawyer left this morning for Iowa, to see her. She doesn't have much time, apparently."

"Man, that sucks." He fell silent, tilting his head a bit as if listening to something.

The quiet unnerved her, leaving her suddenly insecure. "So I'm afraid it's just me."

"Just you," he repeated.

There were a lot of stoplights, and they seemed to miss each one. "Oh, just your luck. And this traffic, it's worse than an hour ago."
“Yup, I can't seem to catch a break,” he said in a luckiest-guy-in-the-world tone, as they came to rest behind a Lexus SUV almost twice their size. He relaxed back into the deep bucket seat as if he'd been born there, a round and calm Buddha of the boulevard.

Finally, she worked up the nerve to ask, “So, what else do you miss? Besides driving.”

Hugo got that faraway look again. “Pizza. Rose and Kathy try, but they just can't get the crust right. Nachos, with sharp cheddar. It's gonna take a year for our cheddar to get ripe like that. And cheeseburgers. Man, I do miss cheeseburgers.”

Something in his light and playful tone made her glance at him with a bit more sharpness than she intended.

As he coasted to yet another stoplight, he was smiling, bathing her with those warm, brown eyes. “You. I really missed you.”

A delighted laugh flew out of her like an uncaged bird. In answer, she rested her hand on his thigh, and kept it there all the way to the Reyes's house.

* * * * * * * *

As Hugo let himself and Claire in, only a faint television glow lit up the downstairs. The tall curtains were drawn, filling the enormous house with shadows, so he flipped on the kitchen light. "Mom? Dad?"

David padded into the kitchen, pulling down his grey Lakers t-shirt, then reached for his son. The hug went on a long time, as if he might never see Hugo again.

Claire knew how that felt.

Bussing her cheek, David said, “Hey, Claire, just as gorgeous as a couple hours ago.” He waved at the double-wide refrigerator. "You kids hungry? Help yourselves."

Hugo opened the freezer door and poked around. "Hey, Dad, are those tapes still down here?"

"On the sideboard."

"Awesome. Thanks." As David left the room, Hugo opened a few boxes of frozen snacks and arranged them on trays. "You like nacho bites, Claire? Maybe a Hot Pocket?"

"Think I'll just have a drink." Claire peeked inside the refrigerator. "Yum, 'Double-shot Mochaccino.' That'll hit the spot. Want one?"

"Nah, coffee makes me jittery. Anyway, far as I'm concerned, it's afternoon."

"That's some jet-lag."

Hugo chuckled as he loaded the tray into the microwave, then noticed the clock, as if suddenly aware that it was halfway to midnight. "Oh, Claire, you must be wiped." His gaze roamed over to the videotapes. "You probably got to get back. I kinda hoped that maybe—"

"Mum's on duty tonight, Hurley, so I'd love to watch a movie. A bit of iced coffee, and I'll be wide awake."

David passed by the kitchen door, carrying a pair of reading glasses. "Take 'em upstairs, OK? All that 'Da-da-da, dum-de-da, dum-de-da music, it's gonna wake up your mother."
"That's the Darth Vader theme, Dad. We might not even make it to Empire."

"Either way. 'Night, now."

Claire smiled at David. Then, maybe her eyes deceived her, but she could have sworn he gave her a wink as he said, "G'night, sweetheart."

* * * * * * * *

It took a few trips, but Hugo and Claire wrestled up to Hugo's room a couple of snack trays, a liter bottle of lemon soda and two Double Mochaccinos, as well as the Star Wars trilogy VHS boxed-set.

Hugo shut the bedroom double doors with a click, and Claire settled herself onto the small couch which faced the wide-screen television. His room was the same as six weeks before, except for a couple of cardboard boxes in the corner, the anonymous kind handed out by storage lockers.

Claire turned the VHS box over in her hands, caught in Darth Vader's black, insectoid gaze. "I'm surprised this isn't out on DVD."

"It is. I never bought it, though." When the FBI warning appeared, Hugo clicked the pause button. "I was in Australia when the DVDs came out. I was gonna get them soon as I got back to the States. 'Course, we never made it." For an instant, something leaden and sad seemed to weigh on him. "After the Oceanic Six got back, I didn't even want to. Everything... kinda went flat. Like I didn't care about Star Wars anymore."

Oh, sweet baby. So much has happened to us both. With no effort, she drew him down next to her on the couch. Together they filled it, so she snuggled close. "Tapes are just perfect. Go ahead and start."

* * * * * * * *

The remarkable thing about actually watching what had once been background noise was how much sense everything made. Random fragments like fighters swooshing through space, cries of horror, hushed moments of sadness: all knit together to form the story of a shy young man catapulted by fate into a war for both freedom and his own soul.

Not only did Claire watch the movie, she felt it through the warm closeness of Hugo's body. He leaned forward at tense moments, or jounced with delight during the space battles. She took in the film not only with her eyes and ears, but her skin as well.

The iced coffee carried her all the way up to the Battle of Yavin. Then she hung her legs over the couch armrest and slumped down onto Hugo's thigh. She drifted off, only opening her eyes when Hugo shouted, "Yahoo!" as the Millennium Falcon appeared in a bright circle of sun and sent Vader's ship cork-screwing off into space.

"You want me to rewind that part, where Han shows up?" Hugo said, as the Death Star exploded into a nova of fireworks.

"I'm fine. Just had to get my second wind."

The sad heroic theme erupted into triumph as Leia gave Luke and Han their medals. When the credits started to roll, Claire turned to Hugo. "What, no award for Chewbacca?"

He rolled his eyes, but not at her. "No kidding. He did get one later, in a comic book."
"Not quite the same, I should say. Back in a sec, just got to stretch." The large, sand-colored room had an attached loo, almost the size of a bedroom itself.

When she came back, face freshly-splashed with cold water, Hugo said, "It'd be cool to watch the next one. They sorta go together, like one long movie. It's okay if you fall asleep."

The first film had been a rousing adventure story. There was no way she was going to sleep through this next one, though. Claire sat at the edge of her seat all through Luke's sojourn on the swamp planet Dagobah, home to Jedi Master Yoda.

When Leia gave Lando the stink-eye, Claire said, "Oh, Han, how can you not see it's a trap?"

Things went from bad to worse for the little band. By the time Han was ready to be lowered into the carbonite freeze, and Leia told him that she loved him, tears trickled down Claire's cheeks.

When Hugo said in a soft voice, "You okay?" she knew that he'd been watching her as much as the film.

Luke, all full of piss and vinegar, challenged Vader to a fight. She gasped in shock as he struck off Luke's hand. Then, as Luke catapulted himself into what looked like the tunnel to infinity, Claire said in a haunted voice, "Oh, poor Luke. He wanted to die, didn't he?"

"You know when he got sucked into that air shaft? I bet Vader did that, to save him."

They both spent the rest of the film on the edge of the couch, hands tightly clasped together. Luke got his new mechanical hand, but Claire felt twinges of doubt. "Now he's part machine like his father, isn't he?"

Hugo sat rapt in the emotion of the moment, as Luke stared out into horizonless space, his arm around Leia, but not holding her as a lover would. Hugo's eyes were damp, and he let go of Claire's hand long enough to wipe them. "The end, it gets me every time."

"I feel so sorry for Leia. She's just told Han she loves him, and then—"

"I know."

All the caffeine and sugar suddenly drained from Claire's body, washed out in a flood of emotion. The digital clock on Hugo's bedside showed that it was almost five o'clock. In a few hours Aaron would wake up, and for the first time since returning to Los Angeles, she wouldn't be there to greet him.

Don't feel guilty, she told herself. Mum's got things in hand. She wanted me to go.

Claire stood up, suddenly weak in the knees. She plopped onto the big bed, with its plush quilt of little animal-skin printed squares. Hugging a pillow to her chest gave her something to hold onto in the storm of feeling.

She couldn't get Han and Leia out of her mind. How long had they danced around one another on Hoth, making smart remarks like there was no tomorrow? Sure, down inside the space-whale thing they'd finally kissed, only to lose each other in that city in the clouds.

Hugo was speaking. "...So if you want, there's a bedroom right next door, or you could sleep here and I'll, um—"

She was tired of dancing. Of missed starts. Of lost opportunities. "In here."
"Awesome." He lingered for a few seconds, hand on the back of the couch as if to support himself. The tape finished rewinding, but he made no move to eject it.

She patted the side of the bed. "Don't go."

"You want me to—?"

With only her in it, the bed seemed enormous. "That last movie was just so intense." Then, embarrassed, something occurred to her. "Look, if your mum wouldn't like it, of course I'll bunk down in the spare. I don't want her mad at me."

He crawled onto the bed next to her, very close. With him in it, the bed didn't seem so big anymore. "She's not gonna be mad. She really likes you."

"I like her as well, Hurley. Your dad, too. They're good to us when you're away. I don't want to bollocks that up."

"You won't."

"So, this is okay, then?"

Her heart sang when he nodded, Yes, then leaned back against the padded headboard, where he welcomed her into his arms. She snuggled so near that their noses touched, and slid her hand up around him to stroke his round arm and side, the lush flesh tender beneath the fabric.

Before she knew it, they were kissing in between deep breaths, more rapid with each mouthful. She clambered up onto his lap into a straddle, hiking up her skirt. There was so much of him, all of him so warm and full.

*Massive life form readings, indeed.* Her smile broke out, wide and uncontained. From the tense muscles of his back, his deep breaths, she knew he was straining with desire.

Her, too. Never had she wanted anyone this much, in such a wildly reckless way. She rested her head on his broad chest, and the stark proof of his excitement pressed against her thigh.

He sighed out her name, then took a deep breath. "We're gonna have to... If we don't, I don't know how much more I can take."

"I know what you mean."

His face was serious under the dark red flush. "It's not just 'cause you're so gorgeous, even if you are. Or that all I want to do is... well, yeah, of course I do. But it's not only that."

She slipped off his lap into a cross-legged position. "I'm not casual, Hurley. I don't want anything casual."

He placed her hands on his chest, over his heart, now pounding so hard that his breast trembled from it. "I swear, Claire, I don't, either." His earnest face stood open and revealed, waiting. "By all that's good and holy, if we were together, I'd never leave you."

*Four, five steps across the room to the door, that's all it would take. Downstairs to that comfy red couch in the great-room. Then, a morning phone call to Mum. Is that really what you want?*

Or she could stay in this cave-like room, work her hands up and down this man's soft body, take him into, over and through her. No more staring out at the horizon, waiting for the future to start. Hers
rested in the massive weight of the present. This moment. Now.

"We are together," she said. "And I won't leave you, either."

Despite the pre-dawn gloom, every space inside Claire filled with light. She leaned forward onto him, burying her face in his neck, overwhelmed. Into him she fell, swooning in the dark as their mouths found each other again, melting into one another.

He stroked her breasts, and suddenly she hungered for bare skin. Clothes, why did people wear so many, with all these zippers and buttons and fasteners? She pulled off her gauze shirt, and guided his fingers to her bra hooks.

When her breasts fell free, all he could do at first was stare. As he reached for her breasts, she gave his shirt a small tug. "Fair's fair." Obediently he lifted his arms, and she slid off his t-shirt, worn thin as silk by home-made soap and bright Island sun.

In the cool air, her nipples crinkled. Across them she laid his open palms, moving them in slow rotation. When he put his mouth to her breast, rolling the nipple in his tongue, she moaned in sheer delight. Encouraged, he pulled her up closer, up against the headboard. From one breast to the other he went, sending her dancing out of her skin with desire.

He came up for air, face crimson, mouth swollen and half-open. It was clear that in him the wave was beginning to crest, full and heavy. Any moment it would break, and sweep them under.

Never mind, she was ready for all of it. For all of him, whatever might come.

Into the surf of his desire she dove, falling on his tender mouth, lips puffed up twice their size with blood. He collapsed onto his back, the mountain of his body spread out before her, hunger in his eyes. She shimmied out of her skirt and underthings as quickly as she could.

He put his hand to the waistband of his boardies, then stopped. "I, um, don't have anything. To use, I mean."

Her words spilled out low and urgent, like prophecy. "It doesn't matter, Hurley. Call it what you want: fate, destiny, the Island. If there's a child out there for us, nothing we use will make any difference."

Once more he seemed to listen to some faraway sound. He turned to her, convinced. "You still... want to?"

"Only if you do."

"A kid would be so awesome."

"I don't know if that'll happen. What I do know is, I won't sleep with a man who wants the fun, but not the child."

In answer, he pulled the sheet up like a tent, inviting her in. The shock of naked skin against skin sent her reeling. He kicked aside his shorts, then eased her up onto his body, fluid as a waterbed beneath her.

As she sprawled atop him, resting her head on his breast, he slid into her easy as a hand into a glove. She lost herself in the whole warm length of him, round and about, in and over and through, overwhelming and timeless.
When the onrush came, it started in the deepest, lowest pit of her spine, then rolled like thunder up through her belly, into her chest, straight to her heart. She rocked on him without thinking, wild, while his strong hands clasped her hips. His slow, deliberate thrusts went on until he spilled into her, drowning her in a cloudburst of feeling.

He fell back in a mountainous heap, winded. When he opened his eyes he wore the broadest smile she had ever seen. "Wow."

Down onto him she sank. He continued to hold her close, even after he slipped wetly out of her body. Off to the side, dawn's first fingers outlined the windows with cool light. Claire had never felt so safe, so wanted, so secure in her life. Hugo had barely pulled up the sheet around her shoulders when she fell into sleep's soft embrace.

* * * * * * * *

When Claire opened her eyes, bright sunlight in the eastern window told her it was mid-morning, maybe later. Alone in the crumpled bed, she stretched out on her back, her body a little tender. Handled. Loved.

Above the bed arched a huge, curved symbol, molded into the ceiling plaster. An omega, the last letter of the Greek alphabet. "The last?" The last what? What does that mean? Those movies, they've gotten into my head. And one more to go, yet.

Wrapping herself in the checkerboard quilt, she cracked one of the bedroom's double doors. They opened to an open walkway which circled the great-room below, forming a kind of atrium filled with daylight. From below drifted up the sounds of cutlery and conversation, along with the delicious smell of fresh-brewed coffee.

Three Reyeses, it sounded like, making enough chatter and laughter for a group of six. Hugo was giving some kind of update, which she was missing. Never mind. There would be time later. A little, at least.

The attached bathroom looked even more lavish in the morning light. After showering, Claire toweled off the signs and scents of Hugo's body, but the warm inner glow remained. Now, the trick would be to get downstairs with the minimum of embarrassment. At least if Mama Reyes was mad about a girl up in her son's room, she hadn't sounded like it.

Then something hit her. Oh, God. Mum. Claire reached for her ditty bag, where her phone was, but she'd left it downstairs. If she's been blowing up my phone, hopefully Hurley will have answered it.

Halfway on her "walk of shame" down the spiral staircase, Claire called out a tremulous "G'morning." For an instant the conversation stopped, along with her heart.

At the bottom of the stairs, David gave her the most mischievous, knowing look. "Hey, Sleeping Beauty."

Carmen hugged her, taking in her damp hair, the vanilla-scented conditioner. "Good, you found the shower. That son of mine, what kind of host did I raise?"

There was no hiding the blush which ran from Claire's neck to the roots of her hair.

"Ma," Hugo protested. He poured Claire a mug of coffee, then loaded it with sugar and cream. "I hope this is all right."

"It's perfect." She cast about, trying to remember where she had put her bag.
Carmen didn't miss a trick. "When Hugo came downstairs, he called your mother first thing. He told her you two had a late night watching movies, and that you were sleeping in." Her tone didn't have a trace of irony. Nor did she scrutinize Claire the way she had Kate, the time when Claire had shoved the pregnancy tests under Kate's pillow. *I guess Carmen doesn't need to pry when she already knows the answer.*

If David let loose a chuckle like he wanted to, Claire was going to die right there on the spot. Time for a deflective maneuver. "Hurley, was Aaron okay?"

Hugo looked up from loading the dishwasher, and his smile lit up the room. "He's great. Carole wanted to know our ETA. Said I'd ask you when you got up."

Claire took a long sip of coffee. "Pretty soon, if you don't mind."

"Ready when you are. Dad, where're the keys to the Hummer?"

"That drawer under the microwave. You don't want to take the Camaro? We finally got it out of impound."

Hugo rummaged for a few seconds. "Thanks, Dad. Maybe some other time."

"Just don't get pulled over. That Hummer's a cop magnet."

"Oh, and the Camaro isn't? I promise I won't speed. Claire, you all set?"

His backpack was ready to go, sitting by the side door which led to the garage, along with one of the cardboard boxes originally from his room. "What's in that?" Claire said.

Hugo wore the same look of mischief as his father. "You'll see. Don't open it. It's a surprise."

Nobody got out of the Reyes house without a long sequence of kisses, hugs, and last-minute questions. Of course Carmen and David had to help load the Hummer, too.

It wasn't until Hugo and Claire had cleared the street and turned out of sight of the house, that he glanced at her with a sweet, apologetic expression. "My parents can be kinda intense."

"They're wonderful."

"I didn't get to, uh, really say good-morning."

"That's okay. You can when we arrive. Look, I'm going to let Mum know we're on our way."

All the way up to Topanga they chatted about the Island, his life, hers. Claire folded her hands over the pit of her belly, a little smile playing about her lips.

(continued)
Fifteen hours earlier

Fading afternoon sunlight fell over Sawyer’s shoulder and lit up the Yukon Denali’s dashboard as Interstate 15 rolled beneath the wheels, leaving the desert city of Barstow, California behind them. Kate sat in the passenger seat, staring out at the coarse beige landscape dotted with olive-green fuzz.

Sawyer had never piloted an airplane, but driving the Denali probably felt just like that. No wonder Sir Hugo had this thing for big, expensive cars. You could barely feel the road underneath the Denali’s wheels. Instead, it soared along, effortless, the faint throb of the engine like the chanting of a mantra.

Damn, if he wasn’t glad to get shut of LA. An open sky blue as a china plate welcomed him to a thousand miles of desert and mountains, and the feeling of freedom shocked him, because it had been so long since he’d felt anything like that.

Kate hadn’t even put up a fight when he offered to take the wheel for the first leg of LA to Flagstaff. That had surprised Sawyer, but he guessed it shouldn’t have. Kate wasn’t herself these days. He glanced over to where she sat fiddling with the CD player. The strains of some jazzy woman at the piano emerged, her husky voice crooning about being “bewitched, bothered, and bewildered.”

"Remind me again, Sawyer, why we’re taking the southern route."

"Cause this tank ain’t equipped with a snow plow, Shortcake. You drive through the Rockies this time of year, you can get snowed in somewhere. And we’re on a schedule."

Kate sighed and settled back into the copious arms of the Yukon’s passenger seat. The odometer ticked forward in time with the dashboard clock as they moved across the desert-scape. After another thirty miles she said, “That’s not the only reason, is it?”

Sawyer didn’t look away from the road. They’d already agreed to continue due east on I-40, rather than detouring north on I-15 to Vegas. “That stone's best left unturned, Kate.”

“Sawyer, she's your kid.”

“And she’s gonna be set up for life.” Damn right, he thought. Dan Norton had put together a trust, an iron-clad one. After buying the Mustang, Sawyer had put near everything of his Oceanic 815 award into it. The settlement had sat for three years while the Oceanic lawyers fought over the death declarations of everyone on-board, the balance doing nothing but compounding. Now, thanks to the investment genius of Norton's finance whiz kids, the principal had doubled in that time.

Sure, he'd skim a little of the interest now and then for beer and typewriter ribbons, gas and insurance on the Mustang. But the principal, that was for Clementine.

Kate was worse than a dog worrying a bone, though. “Money’s not the same as having a dad.”

No point in arguing with her. “I’spose it’s not. Though I didn't think you were particularly anxious to visit with Cassidy, either, seein’ as she's blocked your calls.”

Kate looked away, embarrassed, and stared out the passenger window. “She didn't approve of me going on this trip with you. She thought I should have risked flying.”
When Sawyer didn't say anything, Kate added, “She's always been jealous. I didn't even tell you what she said when she found out we were all living in the same house together.”

This was starting to get uncomfortable, so Sawyer fiddled with the CD player. “Ain't we got anything that don't sound like the damn cocktail hour at the Blue Note?”

Kate grabbed a CD at random. “We were friends, as long as she thought you ditched me.”

“Ditched me?”

“On the helicopter, when we were all heading to the freighter. When Claire was gone, and we had Aaron.”

“I didn't ditch you, sweetheart. We had to drop two hundred pounds or we were all gonna wind up in the drink. Sun was light as a feather, she wouldn't have made no difference. You had the baby. Let's be honest, everybody wanted Hugo to bail. He made up four of Sun, or two of the men. But I saw Hugo's face when he looked at that water. He wouldna survived.”

Kate pressed her face into the glass, and Sawyer could barely hear her. “I know.”

“The day before we got on that chopper, I told John Locke that if he hurt one curly hair on Hugo's head, I'd kill him. I wasn't about to make a liar of myself.”

She turned towards him, and laid a cool hand on his. “It was a very brave thing to do.”

Now Sawyer flushed, for a different reason. “T'weren't nothin'. Hugo would of done it for me. Besides, I thought I could go back and look some more for Claire.” He gave a small, humorless laugh. “Turned out that was a pipe dream.” He took her hand in his, and it was very cold. “Too much AC for you, Short-stack?”

“I'm fine.”

“Heaven Can Wait” boomed out over the Dynasound Full-Surround speakers.

Sawyer gave a chuckle. “Didn't figure you for a Meatloaf fan.”

“It was Jack's. I picked it up when we went back to my house.”

“Jack, fan of Wagnerian rock. Well, I never.”

“I could put Diana Krall back on.”

“Nah, this'll at least keep me awake.”

At least she gave him a half-smile. Better yet, she held onto his hand all the way till the exit for Needles, California.

Deirdre Hannegan's words, via Kate, hung in Sawyer's mind: Don't break the speed limit. Don't use Kate's credit card or phone. Don't attract attention. Well, when they crossed that state line into Arizona, all bets were off anyway.

Sawyer pointed to the Needles exit. “Time to fill up.”

Kate leaned over to peer at the dash, and he caught the heady scent of her hair, warm and fresh. “We've still got more than half a tank.”
“Rule of the desert, sweetheart. Whenever you can, you get a drink, take a piss, fill your tank.” He looked over at her briefly, serious. “Sure, we’re on the interstate, we got our phones, and there’s a lotta white knights of the road about. But you saw that stretch of the Mojave we came through. Nothin' but sagebrush and sand up ahead for a long ways, and we’re not takin' any chances.”

At the truck stop the Denali drank, thirsty. Sawyer and Kate got their hamburgers and fries to go, and as they headed for the Yukon, Sawyer leaned in close to Kate, almost whispering into her ear. “Last chance before the point of no return. Ten miles down the road, we cross that river, and we’re committed. You sure about this?”

Kate's expression could have melted steel. “It's my mother.”

Sawyer sighed as they pulled back onto the highway. He knew something about Kate's long conflict with Diane Janssen, formerly Diane Austen, but he bet he hadn't heard the half of it. Sam Austen, at retirement one of the highest-decorated NCOs in the US Army, had raised a cuckoo in his nest. He'd come back from two tours of 'Nam in '73, all full of piss and vinegar, and married the barely-eighteen Diane. Problem was, though, Diane wasn't done with her high-school boyfriend, a black leather jacket-wearing greaser named Wayne.

Sam did one too many tours-of-duty overseas, and while he was off being a hero in South Korea, rescuing some UN pussies nabbed by the Norcs, his loving wife was making the sausage sandwich with good old Wayne.

Sam returned to the states halfway through Diane's pregnancy, and no one said a word about how the months didn't add up to nine. It wasn't till after another tour with Operation Desert Storm in 1991 that Sam found his wife and eighth-grader daughter moved off the family farm, and living with Wayne on a small ranch between Ames and Des Moines.

New town, new school: Kate had lost all her friends in the move. Bitter, smart as a whip, she threw herself into classwork and working her stepfather's horses. Sam's marriage to Diane might have been over, but he tried to salvage what he could of his relationship with Kate. He switched to doing recruitment in Des Moines, while Kate spent her summers and hunting-season weekends in his cabin, or flew with him to Texas to hunt feral hogs.

Still, as the Yukon approached the Colorado River bridge, Sawyer's stomach clenched a bit anyway. The river passed beneath them, smaller and muddier than he would have imagined. The “Arizona State Line” sign had an air of finality about it. Well, like Granny Tidwell liked to say, you might as well get hung for a sheep as a lamb.

Sawyer and Kate rolled on towards Flagstaff, where cedars thrust their way up through the pale hard-pan desert soil, and Meatloaf's “Two Out of Three Ain't Bad” boomed on the stereo.

* * * * * * * *

The moon had long since risen when they stopped at a fake-adobe motel on the east side of Albuquerque. In the circle driveway, a sputtering floodlight iluminated a concrete saguaro cactus taller than Sawyer. Its olive-green paint had mostly chipped off, leaving patches of grey like leprosy.

Sawyer wasn't impressed, but the place looked like it took cash. “Leftovers from when this used to be the Mother Road.”

“What?”

“The old Route 66, Freckles.”
Kate must have been exhausted, as she didn't even protest when he grabbed her bag as well as his. They'd driven thirteen hours, and her drawn expression looked how Sawyer felt.

Trucks of various sizes sat in the midnight silence of the parking lot, and for an instant Sawyer worried that the motel might not have any rooms for them.

The dark-skinned man behind the counter wasn't quite up to Hugo standards of roundness, but he beamed a similar smile to Sawyer and Kate as they staggered into the tiny lobby. In a niche in the wall behind him sat a small, squat-bellied statue of Ganesha, with a red candle burning nearby.

*Good thing Granny Tidwell didn't live to see that. She'd of stomped right out of here and slept in the car.*

“You're in luck. We have one room left, two double beds. No smoking.” The hotel clerk's voice had a musical lilt, and he seemed remarkably cheerful for it being middle of the night.

Sawyer braced for a despairing look or even an argument from Kate. Instead, she just shrugged. The smiling clerk was glad to take cash in advance, but Sawyer's heart sank a little as the man jotted down the Yukon's license plate number. Well, he was too damned tired to worry about that now.

Although the room was a square stucco box, it was clean and smelled of lemon oil. Sawyer kicked his boots off, then flopped down on the bed, which rollicked underneath him with the ghost of a car's motion. When Kate went to the bathroom he stripped to his boxers, then crawled in between the crisp sheets. He was dead asleep before Kate even came out.

The next morning, Sawyer woke up to the crunch of gravel right outside the motel-room window. A few children's voices chirped like little birds; the school-bus door whooshed open, then closed, and more gravel sprayed as the bus took off.

*Kids live here?* he thought, as he sank back into sleep.

When he woke again, the vinyl blinds could barely hold back the white sunlight, even though the room was still a little chilly from the desert night.

In the bathroom, Kate was throwing up.

* * * * * * * *

All through that day, as Kate drove through the scrub of the Texas Panhandle to the welcome green of Oklahoma, she could feel Sawyer's eyes on her. He didn't say anything about her morning retching, and that made her nervous enough to say at one point, “Truck stop food doesn't agree with me, I guess.”

He just shrugged and replied, “Not too much organic, low-fat vegetarian cuisine out here in Flyover Country.”

This made her laugh. Long ago on the Island, she'd told him that she was a vegetarian and wouldn't eat boar. Of course, when Locke passed out thick, fat-laden slices, she gobbled it down along with everyone else.

After dinner at a Country Roadside Inn outside Stillwater, Oklahoma, where Kate actually managed to score a salad that had something in it besides limp iceberg lettuce and pale, starchy tomato, Sawyer got up to excuse himself. She watched him as he spoke with the middle-aged woman at the cash register, and when the woman glanced over at Kate more than once, Kate knew that they were talking about her.
Sawyer came back to the table, and pushed two metal tins of lozenges across the table towards Kate. “Peppermint or lemon, Freckles. Your choice.”

“What are these for?”

“I told her you were havin' trouble keepin' your food down. Roadside indigestion. That's what she recommended.”

So that's how he's going to play this game. For an instant she thought about handing the lozenges right back to Sawyer. Instead, she opened the peppermint one, and put a small white pastille under her tongue.

He must have marked the pleasure which crossed her face, because he said, “Sometimes home remedies are the best, Shortcake.”

* * * * * * * *

Sawyer insisted on taking the wheel as they drove through the Kansas night. The faint lights of Emporia had just fallen behind when Kate's phone rang, and her heart flip-flopped with anxiety.

“I thought you left that in California,” Sawyer said.

Another few rings, like death knells. “Why would I do that? The hospice has my number.”

“Well, for cryin' out loud, answer it.”

“But Deirdre said...”

Ring, ring.

“To hell with what Deirdre said. Get it 'fore it goes to goddamn voice mail.”

Unknown number. Well, that's no surprise. She braced herself, ready for anything. “Hello?”

“Kate? That you?”

She was glad she was already sitting down and not driving, because a wave of vertigo went over her as all the tension released itself at once. “Hurley?”

“Sorry I didn't get to see you guys off.”

“You're in L.A, right? Is everything OK?”

“Things are awesome. Listen, I'm real sorry about your mom.”

“Yeah, thanks.” The silence stretched out for one or two more seconds than she would have liked. “How's Aaron?”

“He's great. Claire and I took him for a long hike today, all up and down Topanga Canyon. I had to carry him on the way back. Claire's giving him a bath now, and after he goes down, Claire and me are gonna watch Return of the Jedi. I figured the Jabba stuff and the Sarlaac pit might scare him, so —”

“Hey, Hugo,” Sawyer called out.

Kate held the phone up, so that Sawyer could hear.
Hugo's voice came through, tinny and a little fuzzy. “Hey, yourself, Sawyer. Oh, wait a minute. Aaron just got out of the tub, and he wants to say hi.”

Kate could see Aaron clearly in her mind's eye, wrapped in a towel, hair tousled and sticking up like a miniature punk rock star, probably clutching a dripping plastic toy boat or animal. She could almost smell the non-perfumed shampoo and the fresh pajamas air-dried in the hot California sun. He seemed almost close enough to touch, yet faraway, too, as if on the other side of the planet.

“Mummy, it's me!”

“Hi, Goober.”

“Mummy Kate, I caught bugs today!”

“What kind of bugs, sweetie?”

“Some brown ones, then some grey ones. The kind that roll into balls. Then Mummy Claire made me let them go. And I saw a spider in a web. Hurley said not to touch it, though.”

“That's right.”

“When are you coming home, Mummy Kate?”

“In a few days. You be good for Mummy Claire and Grandma Carole, OK?”

“Mummy Claire says we're camping out in her cabin tonight. And tomorrow we're going swimming at Aunt Carmen's. I like her pool. It's like the jungle, with all the plants. Uncle David hides behind them and pretends to be a tiger.” He gave a little roar, and Kate could hear laughter in the background.

“Bye, sweetie. See you when I get back.”

Hugo came back to the phone, and he must have walked away from everyone, because the background noises faded. “Kate, listen. Everything's gonna be all right.”

The good feeling fled, replaced by a stab of bitterness. “Except for the part where my mother's dying.”

Hugo drew in a long breath. “Everybody dies, Kate.”

“Can you do something about it? Can you fix it?”

A few beats of silence. “Sorry. No.”

She could feel Sawyer's eyes on her. “Sawyer, pay attention to the road.” Back to Hugo, she said, “Can't, or won't?”

“It's kinda hard to explain. It's just that... it's her time.”

*Her time. Fate. Destiny.* Kate covered her face with her free hand.

“It's not easy, I know.”

“No, it isn't.”

“Kate, please trust me on this.”
She could almost see his round face creased with an earnest expression, shoulders hunched forward, his big body shifting a little bit to the right, then left, as he paced with the phone to his ear. He had never been her lover and never would be, yet the intimacy struck her with a gale force, almost too much to bear. She could sense the feeling pouring off of him, despite the miles. It made it easy to say, “I'll try.”

“Hey, can I talk to Sawyer?”

“Sure, Hurley. Thanks for calling. Here he is.” She handed the phone to Sawyer.

Hugo seemed to talk to Sawyer for a while. In between, Sawyer murmured, “Um, hm,” a few times, interspersed with a few repetitions of, “You got it, Hugo,” and finally, “Of course I'll look after her.”

That last part made Kate prickle for an instant. She pulled on the lap part of her seat-belt, uncomfortable, but that wasn't what pinched her lower belly. It was her jeans, or rather, Carole’s, which weren't all that much more generously-sized than her old ones, and were less fashionable to boot.

She'd squirmed around a few times, trying to get comfortable, before noticing that Sawyer had rung off, and was holding out the phone to her.

“What's the matter, Freckles? Got ants in your pants?”

It was too tight a fit to slide the phone down into her jeans pocket, so she stowed it in her backpack. “There's got to be a Walmart right outside of KC. I want to stop.”

* * * * * * * *

The vast parking lot of the ultimate big-box store was studded with trucks, and surprisingly busy for ten o'clock at night. Kate tried to swallow the sinking feeling which had come over her ever since she'd heard Sawyer tell Hugo that he’d “look after” her.

I don't need looking-after. I'm not some lost kitten that showed up at the back porch one too many times. Well, that wasn't exactly true. Jeans, that's all she was here for. Just jeans. Inside, she knew that wasn't true, either.

A cadaverous-looking man in his seventies greeted them as they entered. His crooked smile revealed several dark gaps where teeth used to be. Irrationally, Kate thought of Wayne, if he would have lived to that age. She turned to Sawyer, dismissal on her face. “They've got books here. An auto section, if we need anything for the Yukon. Sporting goods.”

A hint of nervousness tinged his grin. “I get it, Freckles. Go find the man-things and report back later, when you're done.”

“That's it, Sawyer. Exactly.”

Before heading for the pharmacy section, she looked over her shoulder twice, to make sure he wasn't dogging her. Four brands of pregnancy tests sat on the shelf, none of which were the same brand as the remaining unopened test which rested in its very own zippered pouch in her back-pack.

Still alert, Kate headed to ladies' wear. She rifled through racks of jeans, searching for a size 8 instead of her regular 6. In the dressing room, she set aside one pair after another. If they fit in the waist, they were too baggy in the butt and thighs. Finally, she settled on one style with a lot of stretch, then grabbed a pair of fleece-lined leggings.
In case of snow, she told herself, but in reality because of comfort. What's next, black stretch pants?

Panic seized her in a hard grip. If she didn't do this now, she never would. She handed her garments to the sleepy, bored fitting-room clerk. “Could you watch these for a minute? I'm going to find the rest room.”

Once inside, Kate locked herself in the handicapped stall, hoping no one would come in who genuinely needed it. With the acrid smell of floor cleaner stinging her nose, she sat on the stool and unwrapped the pregnancy test with trembling hands, almost dropping it on the floor.

Get ahold of yourself. That little speech didn't work, so slowly, with multiple deep breaths in between, she began to count to five. When she reached “four,” she had calmed down enough to wet the test stick in mid-stream. She could have taken out her phone and used it as a stop-watch, but it wasn't necessary.

Leaning her head against the cold tile wall, she closed her eyes. A minute wasn't that long, anyway. Sixty, seventy heartbeats. She held the test stick in her lap, not looking at it.

Someone came into the rest-room, used the stall, then went to the sink to wash up. That had to have taken more than a minute, so Kate steeled herself and looked down at the test stick.

Two bright pink lines showed in the little oval window. Before she could help herself, a gasp flew out of her mouth, followed by an “Oh, my God.”

“Honey, you OK in there?” The voice was flat, Midwestern.

Kate couldn't speak at first. Nothing came out of her mouth but a dry gurgle. As she tried to get up, the pregnancy test flew out of her hand, bounced off the floor, and skidded outside the stall, just out of reach.

“Oh, shit,” Kate said to herself.

“You in trouble? Need some help?” the woman said.

“I'm fine,” Kate managed to choke out as she pulled up her jeans. The stall door banged on the wall with a loud crack as she flung the door open, a little too hard.

By the sinks stood a heavy-set woman in a navy-blue polo shirt and khaki pants, a store employee, obviously.

Kate picked up the pregnancy test and blurted out in a defensive rush, “I didn't buy this here... you don't even carry this brand... I brought it in myself.”

The woman finished drying her hands, and gave Kate a long look of sympathy. “Honey, I'm not gonna bust you for shoplifting.” She glanced down at the test, its positive result plain as day. “I've been where you are. He's twenty years old now, in the Army.”

The woman's tone was so warm that tears stung Kate's eyes. “It's just that—”

“You don't have a clue what you're gonna do. Am I right?”

Kate just nodded.

In the same gentle voice, the woman said, “How far along?”

Kate had to count on mental fingers. “Three months, about.”
The woman let out a long whistle. “Whew, you waited a long time to pee on the stick. What about
the daddy?”

Before Kate could answer, someone thumped on the outer door of the women’s room, hard. When
there was no answer, more thumps followed, along with Sawyer's anxious bellow. “Kate, you in
there?”

“Out in a minute.”

The woman looked Kate up and down, carefully. “So, that the daddy?”

“Oh God, no. He's a friend. The father...” Kate's voice trailed off, because she didn't trust herself to
speak.

“What, honey, he run out on you?”

“I guess you could say that. He's dead.”

The woman nodded, as if she'd heard this before. “Happened to my cousin. Her man was in Iraq.
She found out she was expecting two weeks 'fore he was due to come home. One week later, an
IED blows up his Humvee with him in it.”

“It was something like that.” Because there had been a war on the Island, and Jack had been on the
front lines of it. Only there would never be any medals for him, no military funeral, no rifle salute.
Before the woman could satisfy her curiosity, ask what branch he’d been in, where he'd died, Kate
jammed the pregnancy test into her pocket. “Thanks. I'll be OK, really,” she said as she scooted out
of the rest-room.

As they left the store, Sawyer grumbled, “What the hell do you women do in there?”

They'd driven all the way through Kansas City before Kate remembered that she hadn't bought her
jeans and leggings. She decided not to bring it up, though, when Sawyer swerved a few times. Not
enough to be dangerous, but enough to convince Kate that they needed a break.

At the rest-stop they bought cans of soda and bags of chips, then reclined the Yukon's front seats all
the way back and nestled down into them.

“Good idea, Freckles,” Sawyer said. “We can catch a few hours of shut-eye, then be in Des Moines
by early morning.” He unwrapped a thermal blanket from its package, and tucked it around her.

She closed her eyes, but sleep wouldn't come. The pregnancy test was still in her pocket, jabbing into
her. What the hell, better now than later. She pulled it out, and tried to keep her voice from shaking
as she spoke. “Sawyer? There's something I have to show you.”

He must have been almost asleep, because he shook himself under his jacket, like a dog flinging off
water. “Whatcha got, Freckles?”

“Turn on the dome light.”

He peered at the stick for a few seconds, as if he didn't know what he was looking at. “Two lines...
that's good, right?”

A Missouri State Highway patrol vehicle pulled around the bend at the rest-stop, then cruised
through the parking lot. Kate switched off the dome light in a flash and crouched down into her seat, as if trying not to be seen. The officer shone a light back and forth across the rest stop parking lot, but not at the Yukon.

Now Kate could breathe again. Two lines, the summing up of one whole night, the night before the Ajira 316 flight from Los Angeles to Guam. Jack hadn't been expecting her to show up in his apartment, probably hadn't even remembered that he'd given her a key.

She hadn't worried about birth control. She never did, because nothing had ever happened. That night, though, something felt different. She had opened herself to him in ways she never had before, had never felt desire so reckless. He had buried his face in her neck, between her breasts, in her groin, drawing in great sobbing breaths as if he wanted to literally inhale her into himself.

It had to have happened that night. The only living remnants of Jack Shephard were two lines on a test strip, and the unknown being inside her, growing, re-packaging her, softening her and blurring all her lines into a new form.

She wondered if her child would have his eyes, her freckles.

Meanwhile, Sawyer was still waiting for an answer, his face full of grave compassion.

"I'll be due around late August, early September. So, yeah, two lines is really good."

She expected him to say "Son of a bitch," but he didn't. Instead, he took her hand in his warm, rough one, and gave it a squeeze. "Really wish the Doc were here to get the news, Freckles."

"Me, too."

After awhile they fell asleep, hands still linked together, and didn't open their eyes until a cold blue dawn dusted the trees around them, bringing with it the faint scent of approaching snow.

(continued)
Evening sun filled the Topanga Canyon house with a red glow. *So weird to have a phone again,* Hugo thought as he said good-bye to Sawyer, before sliding the iPhone into his pocket.

From her seat on the big living-room couch, Claire played with the television controller, moving it from hand to hand. “Everything OK, Hurley?” *Return of the Jedi* sat in the VHS tape player, ready to go. Aaron was down at Carole’s cabin for the night. For once, the house had a quiet air about it, full of late-evening shadows and expectations.

Hugo hesitated for a few seconds, badly wanting to tell her, not wanting to steal Kate's thunder or anything, though. “They're awesome. Making really good time, it sounds like.”

“Poor Kate. Such a long drive, and in her condition, too.”

Hugo looked up, startled. “You... knew?”

“It's been apparent for some time, even if she didn't say anything. What, did she finally take a test?” He hadn't asked, because he didn't have to. Like with Meredith and Deanna on the Island, he could just sense it, like knowing someone was in the room, even if you couldn't see them. “Don't know. Either way, I hope Sawyer listens to me.”

“He will, Hurley. He cares about her a lot.” She patted the space beside her on the couch, inviting.

“Be there in just a minute.” Hugo headed over to the kitchen and rooted through the cabinets, frowning a little. Grandma Carole kept a lean kitchen, that was for sure. He grabbed a bag of baby carrots and a tub of garlic-eggplant hummus, then nestled in close to Claire on the couch.

She was about to start the tape when he laid a hand on the controller, stopping her. "Do you remember right after we crashed?" When her body tensed, he pulled her to his breast. "Nah, nothing scary. It was when I first, like, met you.”

She rested her face on his chest, closing her eyes like a cat in front of a warm fire. "Ummm."

“Something Jack said back then.”

At Jack's name, Claire's eyes opened. "Hmm?"

Screams had filled the air. Jack had told Hugo to get Claire away from the jet fuel that was spraying all over the beach. So they took shelter under the wing, until Jack saved their bacon when the wing started to fall. Then the whole wing exploded, just like in an action movie. Hugo lay on the sand, half-deaf and more terrified than he'd ever been in his life, while Jack's words rang in his ears like the voice of some imperious angel.

"He told me to stay with you." Hugo hoped she remembered.

"It was a blur, Hurley. So he said that, did he?"

"Yup."

She nestled in again. "Well, it was good advice."

“I kind of just did that with Sawyer.”
“As I said, good advice.”

“I hope he does a better job than I did.”

“You did your best, Hurley. Look, I made a lot of mistakes, too. I was a dumb kid in so many ways.”

“We both were.”

It was a long reach around his belly, but she managed it, even though the kiss missed his mouth and grazed his beard instead. He held her face, making sure not to miss this time, and almost forgot about Star Wars until she came up for breath.

“Ready?” she said. “You keep on like that, and we won't get to watch this at all.”

He started the tape and grinned. “Hold on for the ride of your life.”

* * * * * * * *

Admiral Ackbar had just finished briefing the Rebel pilots about the upcoming attack on the second Death Star. Hugo lay splayed out on the couch, with Claire's sweet weight sprawled across his body, when he heard the side door open with a click.

Claire sprang to her feet, suddenly alert. The tape went silent as Hugo hit the pause button, then struggled into a sitting position.

“Coming through,” Carole's voice rang out.

“Mummy, it's us,” Aaron added.

“Everything all right?” Claire said.

Aaron held up his plush kangaroo. “Hi, Hurley! Skippy got lonely for Willie.”

“Sorry, guys,” Carole said, “I should probably have rung up first. Come on, Aaron, let's go to your room and find Willie.”

“Well, that was awkward,” Claire said, her face pink.

Hugo remained on the sofa. Carole was a lot cooler than his own mom, but he still wasn't ready to stand up yet, not without mega-embarrassing himself.

A moment later, Carole and Aaron returned with the stuffed orca, its velvety surface well-worn from little hands and many hugs.

Aaron stared at the jittery image of Akbar on the screen. “Who's that? What are you watching?”

“Star Wars,” Hugo said before Claire or Carole could answer. “Return of the Jedi.”

“What's a Jedi?”

“A kind of warrior,” Hugo answered.

“Somebody who fights?”

“Or knows when not to,” Claire said.
Aaron looked around at the adults, as if deciding who to ask, then trained his glance on Claire. “Can I watch, Mummy?”

Carole gave Claire a disapproving look, but didn't say anything. Claire raised an eyebrow at Hugo.

He said, “All the s-c-a-r-e-y parts are over.”

“What's that spell, Grandma?”

“Scary,” Carole answered.

“I'm not scared.”

“Mum, it's fine,” Claire said. “He can watch the rest with us, and I'll bring him down to bed afterwards.”

Carole shot the television one more dubious glance, then tossed Claire a *You're the boss* look. Hugo chuckled to himself. The living room and rear foyer had practically no walls on the side facing the cabins, only floor-to-ceiling glass. While Carole must have gotten an eyeful of him and Claire on the couch, television was what really ground her gears. Nope, not like his mom at all.

“Mum, really, it's all right,” Claire said.

“Come on,” Hugo said to Aaron. “You sit here, and Skippy and Willie can watch, too.” He arranged the stuffed animals on either side of the child. When Claire squeezed in between the two of them, Hugo picked up the controller. No fast-forwarding past the Moon of Endor stuff, though. Aaron would probably like Ewoks.

* * * * * * * *

The movie was over, and a squealing, dancing Aaron had finally been put to bed in Carole's cabin, still chattering about the fuzzy forest creatures of Endor's moon. Now Hugo stood in Claire's bedroom, lit only by a single votive candle, a *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* one given to her by his mom.

Claire turned down the bed, straightening the thin quilt, fluffing pillows. “Mum's never going to forgive us for that.” She didn't sound too irked about it.

To be honest, he could barely wait. *Slow it down*, he told himself. What made his heart almost burst from his chest, though, was the ordinariness of it. People turned down the bed every night and slid between the sheets, then woke up together the next morning, made breakfast, played with the baby.

It was almost like heaven.

Back turned, she lifted her t-shirt slowly, as if she wanted him to see. With hypnotic motion, she undid her bra and laid it aside, too, not turning around.

The flickering light cast a golden glow over her from top to bottom. She stepped out of her shorts, graceful as a dancer. When she turned to him, all he could do was stare as she gathered up the hem of his own shirt and lifted.

Bare and exposed, he shivered at first from the cool night air, then in delight as she slid her hands up and down the front of his body as if seeing him with her palms, coming to rest on his breasts. His nipples sprang to life, crinkling under the lazy, delightful motion.
When she stopped, he stood, paralyzed. She gave his waistband a tug, then drew his head down to whisper, “You need an invitation?”

Her breath in his ear flowed all the way down him. At first he wanted to undress beneath the covers, because there was no hiding how aroused he was. She helped undo his clothing, sliding everything down over his hips and the stubborn, poked-out sign of his desire.

He followed her to the bed as if hypnotized. There she lay, arms spread out like a starfish, her face wild and feral.

He loomed over her and put his face in between her breasts, almost drowning in their softness. His body was almost ready to explode with heat, but he took a few deep breaths, trying to cool himself down. When he laid his face on her chest, it shook from her pounding heart.

Something spurred him along, curiosity mixed with desire. He wanted to know her, taste her, all of her. He slid his face down her chest, past her belly, till his mouth rested on her groin. There he almost lost his nerve. Maybe she wouldn't want to, or would think it was gross.

He looked up, meeting her half-lidded eyes. "Claire... Is this okay?"

"Oh, God, yes. Please." She smelled good, like seaweed ripening in the sun, and at first all he did was nuzzle her warm cleft, breathing in her rich fragrance.

At the first upward swipe of tongue, she arched her back and let out a low moan. She tasted briny, like the ocean. He tongued the tender oyster of her sex, never losing momentum, never getting out of sync. She dug her nails into the sheets, rocked her hips back and forth, making low, mewling cries.

After a time, her whole body shook like a bow drawn back ever tighter. The tiniest motion, the smallest flick, and she'd explode. Instead, she grabbed his head with both hands, lifting it. Confused, his face dripping, he stopped. Had he done something wrong, something she didn't like?


He knelt over her on all fours, not sure what to do next. This wasn't Pele beneath him, solid with muscle and almost his equal in height. This was Claire, less than a third of his size and delicate-boned as well. The flesh of his body drooped over hers, and he couldn't imagine lying on her with his full weight. He wanted desperately to bury himself in her body, but wasn't sure how.

"Claire, I dunno about this—"

In answer, she raised her bottom and wrapped her legs around him. Suddenly he plunged inside her as she clung to his hips and back, while he held himself up with his knees and strong arms. Down into red darkness he fell, knowing nothing but pleasure and the thrust, parry, and thrust again in time with the rhythm of her hips, in and out, as she rocked him in the pit of her body.

He felt her pleasure burst inside her as squeeze met with thrust, push met with shove, hip bucked into hip, leaving his flesh drenched and shaking, hers squeezing him like a hand. Where did she start and where did he end; was it her climax he was feeling, or his? They both collapsed at once and she dropped free of him. Exhausted, he fell to her side, gasping out the last bits of the fire which fueled the engine of his breath.

She faced him with a tender, faraway expression and drew him into her trembling arms. He had to tell himself that this wasn't some beautiful midnight dream, that the Door hadn't broken him after all, that his mad hallucinations hadn't returned. He told himself, Just because Claire loves you, loves this, doesn't mean you're crazy.
As soon as the small flash of doubt appeared, it was gone. Hugo leaned over to Claire and whispered, "Is this still what you want? Us, together? Because I do."

Warmth and sleepiness rose off of her like mist. "Yes. A thousand times yes."

As she leaned over to blow out the candle, he gave a heavy sigh of contentment. He rolled over onto his stomach, fumbling for her hand, and when he found it fell into sleep almost at once.

* * * * * * * *

Morning sun peeked through the drapes as Claire woke, her arm circled around Hugo's side. Soft, everywhere so soft, so full of comfort. She watched him for awhile as he slept, hugging the pillow, not so much snoring as letting out low, purring vibrations.

Sounds from the kitchen brought her to full alertness. Mum and Aaron were moving about to the tune of Aaron's patter. "Grandma, Grandma, you be the Stormtrooper and I'll be the Ewok."

Her mum answered, "Wait till Hurley wakes up. He'll be a better Stormtrooper than me."

"Why aren't Mummy Kate and Sawyer here? Sawyer could be Han. And Mummy Kate could be Princess Leia."

"Aaron, look, help me set the table. After your breakfast, you can go play in your Ewok fort."

_Ewok fort?_ Probably the old stand-by of two chairs with a sheet draped over them. Mum came up with the best ideas for keeping Aaron busy. Content, Claire watched Hugo sleep on.

Soon his eyes opened, a little unfocused. He found her face and smiled. "Hey."

"Hope I didn't wake you."

"Nah. Time to get up anyway." He pulled himself to a sitting position, his great brown halo of untamed curls flying about. He looked so winsome that she mussed his hair even more, before kissing his shaggy face. When he flopped back down and pulled her close, she could tell he was ready for love again.

His outstretched arms and look of mischief invited her to climb aboard, and she very badly wanted to, with him all sleep-tousled, warm and roused. So much wanting, enough to fill an endless ocean that would never run out. But now wasn't the time for love, because day had dawned and the rest of the household was awake.

She pulled the blanket up around her. "About last night," she started to say.

He finished her words for her. "I haven't changed my mind."

"Me, either."

"So, um, how do we do this? Tell everyone at once, or one by one?"

"Let's tell Mum and your parents first. Then Aaron."

He stroked the side of her face. "This is really happening, isn't it?"

"Of course it is."

"You wanna get California-married? Though I don't have a ring or nothing."
"We don't have to do anything at once, especially since Kate and Sawyer aren't here." Then it hit her. Tomorrow night, Hugo had to return to the Island. To Claire, time suddenly felt very short.

"There's something else, too..." His voice trailed off, hesitant. "It's not like I'm super-religious. Not like Mom, for sure. My dad, well, Dad doesn't care. But some things you just want to do right." He fell quiet, his expression begging her to complete his thought.

At once she understood. The memory of Mr. Eko pouring water over Aaron's head and her own washed over her, clean and powerful. "I don't care about California. It's not like we're going to live here. But yes. I want a priest too."

He broke into a wide smile, bright as morning sun. “I know just the guy. I'll let Mom call him, though. Don't wanna spoil her fun.”

As he pulled himself out of bed, Claire waved at her closet door. “There are bath sheets in there. And just FYI, Aaron's been playing Ewoks.”

Hugo wrapped a large white bath-sheet around his waist. Before heading for the shower, he said, "Your mom's never gonna forgive me for that, is she?"

* * * * * * * *

When Hugo pulled up into the driveway of his parents' house, he turned to Claire as the garage door opened. “You sure you can drive this back to Topanga? After I leave, I mean.”

Claire smiled, wanting to show off just a little. “Tell him, Mum, what I learned to drive on.”

From the back seat, Carole said, “An old 1976 Land Cruiser, when she was thirteen and barely tall enough to see over the wheel. She'd tool around her grandfather's station, scaring the sheep.”

“Four on the column, one hundred thirty-five horse power,” Claire said.

“Hey, awesome that you know that. But that's like, half the horsepower of the Hummer. It kicks, Claire.”

“Hurley, if you don't trust me with your truck—“

At that instant, the inside door to the house opened, and David and Carmen poured into the garage. Claire found herself swept into the kitchen in a flurry of hugs and kisses.

Aaron insisted on bringing his box, too, which Hugo hauled for him. The “surprise” had turned out to be an assortment of Star Wars toys, including two TIE Fighters, an X-wing, and a battered Millennium Falcon with just about every antenna or small part long-since broken off.

“Uncle David!” Aaron cried out as David swept him up in a hug. “Will you play TIE Fighters with me?”

“Oh, sweet Mother of Mercy,” Carmen said to Hugo. “Your grandparents and I, we listened to that all the time.”

“Hey, Ma, gotta pass it on to the next generation.”

Aaron ran from David to Hugo, narrowly missing a collision with Carmen as she carried a pitcher of iced tea to the kitchen table. “Hurley, you play with me, OK? You can be Chewie!”

Hugo leaned his head back and gave a realistic Chewbacca roar, then said, "Hey, little buddy, you
wanna ride the Wookie?"

"Yes!"

"OK, hold on," and Hugo lifted the wriggling boy onto his shoulders. Aaron grabbed Hugo's mane, tugging hard. "Ouch!"

"Giddyap," said Aaron, bouncing up and down, clinging now to Hugo's t-shirt collar instead of his hair.

As everyone crowded around the table, Hugo set Aaron down. He squeezed himself in between Claire and Hugo, picking grapes off Claire's plate. "Mummy, I had a sleep-over with Grandma. Did you have a sleep-over, too?"

Hugo flushed pink, and Carmen's stare could have bored holes through them both. This was the point where you were supposed to say something false and soothing to "protect innocent ears." That's how it always starts, for some greater good. Well, bollocks to that, Claire thought. "Yes, I did."

"With who?"

"With Hurley," she said, looking Aaron full in the face.

David couldn't contain his snicker any longer, and Carmen smacked him on the arm.

Aaron stared at Hugo, incredulous. "But she's a girl!"

Claire caught Hugo's eye. Here goes nothing, she thought. Turning to Hugo's mother, she said, "It's all right, Carmen. I guess I'm going to have to start calling you 'Mum' now."

In perfect sync, both Carmen and Carole's jaws dropped in shock.

Hugo leaned over and put his arm around Carole. "Hiya, Mom."

Carmen sputtered, "You're... you're getting married?"

David's face was red from laughter. "You see, Carmencita, I told you there was nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about? There's everything to worry about. Are they getting married in church? Where are they going to live? What are they going to do about—"

"Carmen, my love, calm down—"

"Don't tell me to calm down, David! I've got to—"

Aaron's shrill voice pierced the chaos as he pulled on Hurley's sleeve. "But how can you get married? Girls get married!"

“What?” Hugo said.

Astonished, Claire repeated, "Getting married is for girls?"

Aaron gave his mother a knowing look. "You know. Girl dolls get all dressed up. Then they get married."
This time Carmen laughed right along with her husband.

Carole, however, wasn't amused. "This," she announced to the room in general, "is why children should not watch television."

Claire fought back laughter herself as she said, “Oh, Mum, really—“

Through all this, Hugo leaned in close to Aaron. “Hey, little buddy, this isn't like playing dolls. Your mom and I love each other, and we're gonna get married."

Claire saw the ball coming in her direction, picked it up, and ran with it. "That's right, Aaron. You and me and Hurley, we're going to have a house to live in, and we'll sleep in it every night. All of us."

Aaron screwed up his face, unsure. “You mean... getting married is like a sleep-over?"

“A real long sleep-over,” David chimed in.

“Like you would know,” Carmen said.

“Ooh, Carmencita, put away your claws.”

Aaron wasn't through. "Is Hurley going to sleep with us every night, Mummy?"

"That's what people do when they love each other and are together."

"Jack didn't always stay with Mummy Kate. A lot of times he went home."

Everyone grew very quiet.

Sensing the shift in the wind, Aaron turned to David and Carmen, his tone solemn. “Jack died.”

Carmen made the sign of the cross. “We know, sweetheart.” Then she gave Hugo a hard stare. “And just where is your house going to be?"

A thousand complications rose up to plague Claire, and Hugo didn't have an answer, either. Finally she said, “We still have to talk about that.”

“What's to talk about?” David said. “Son, you know you can't stay here, not if you don't want to—“

“Believe me, Dad, I know what my responsibilities are.” The pain on Hugo's face shot through Claire's own body.

Carmen got up to refill a glass dish with jalapeño-salmon dip and tortilla chips. While she was occupied at the counter, David leaned over to Hugo and said, “So, when you gonna make it official?"

Hugo looked confused. “Official?"

David turned to Claire. “Sweetheart, I see he didn't give you a ring yet.”

“We figured there was time—“Claire started to say.

Carmen interrupted. “A ring? I've got the perfect ring. Come on, Hugo.” She practically dragged him away from the kitchen table and up the spiral stairs, with David padding along behind.
Quiet fell over the kitchen like a blanket. Claire picked at a chip or two, while Carole leaned back into the padded chair.

Finally Carole spoke. “I'm really happy for you, love.”

“It wasn't the most elegant way to tell you, Mum, I know.”

Aaron started to fidget, so Carole said, “Aaron, you can take two toys out of the box. Just two, all right?”

He darted away from the table, and pulled one TIE Fighter and the X-Wing out of Hugo's old cardboard box, then sat on the floor and made them zip around, going “Pheeww! Pheeww! Pheeww!”

When he was settled, Carole turned back to Claire. “Carmen posed a realistic question, you know.”

“There's only one answer, Mum. I just didn't feel like going into it right then.”

Carole nodded. “I'll miss you, Claire.”

*What is Mum talking about? Miss me? “Why should you? Of course you're invited, too.”*

“Maybe you should wait and talk to Hurley. A lot of men wouldn't want their mother-in-law tagging along.”

“Nonsense.”

“Besides, I have to consider Lindsey as well.” Then Claire and Carole both looked over at the child, rapt in his space battle. “I don't think I'm the one you're going to have to convince,” Carole finally said.

“I won't leave without him,” Claire said.

Carole's tone was neutral, but the underlying steel came through clearly. “Legally, she is his mother.”

“Kate would never—“

“I didn't mean to suggest that she would. But this is going to require some sensitivity and patience on our part.”

Claire clenched her jaw, stubborn. “She has to understand. Mum, before I was taken, Hurley and I were this close to having something, something good. Then it got bloody bollocksed up and I lost them, Hurley and Aaron both.” Her eyes stung, and she thought, *Damn it, don't let me start bawling now, of all times. “I'm not letting it happen again.”*

Carole laid a reassuring hand on Claire's. “Hurley will be back on May Day. That gives us six weeks to work things out with Kate. Who knows? Kate may decide that life on the mainland isn't for her anymore, either.”

It wasn't nice to scoff at your own mum, but Claire couldn't help it. “I seriously doubt that. She hates that place. It was where Jack died. If I had to guess, I'd say she thinks the Island killed him.”

Before Carole could answer, Carmen, David, and Hugo bustled back into the room.

In his hand Hugo clutched a small wooden box. “You should see it, Claire. It's really gorgeous.”
He pulled his chair in close to hers. In the box there sparkled a ring with a tiny round diamond, almost a chip, really. Near it rested a matching wedding band.

David said, “She only gets the first one, son. The second one's for the wedding.”

“Dad, I know.”

“So go on and tell her,” Carmen said. “Tell her that it was your grandmother's, and—“

“Mom, if I could get a word in edgewise, I would.” He picked up the diamond ring, leaving the band on its cotton bed. “This was my Grandma Titi's. Grandpa Tito saved for three years to get it for her. After they were married, he wanted the jeweler to weld it to the wedding band, so she could wear both of them, but she said no. She cleaned houses, and she didn't want to lose it or break it.”

“You can't break a diamond,” Carmen said.

David said, “My love, you can knock it out of its mounting. Or lose it.”

“Anyway, Claire,” Hugo said, “if you want to... I mean, I'd like you to—“

“I'd love to, Hurley. It's beautiful.”

“Son, this is where you slip it on her finger.”

Hugo rolled his eyes, where his father couldn't see, while Claire held out her hand. His glance met hers, and as close as they'd been over the past two nights, this was different. He sat before her, trembling and exposed as if on-stage, and in a way he was. Aaron must have sensed something was up, because he had set down his toys and come over to join them, squeezing his way in between Hugo and Claire to get a better view.

The ring stuck at her second knuckle. While Claire's fingers were slender, Grandma Titi's must have been really small. Hugo gave the ring a little push, but it stubbornly wouldn't move. Then Hugo gave her a long, intent glance, and at once she knew his silent question.

He had told her how he'd made all the guns on the Island no longer work. How the fire in the middle of the Barracks never went out. How Desmond's sailboat had had cracks in her hull, yet somehow never took on water.

This was probably way easier. She raised her face to his, and gave him the tiniest of nods. Go ahead.

Maybe it was her imagination, but the ring glowed warm for an instant, then slid over her knuckle as easy as if it had been buttered.

“Congratulations!” David said. “Think this calls for that bottle of Cristal champagne I been saving.”

Hugo leaned over to kiss her, when Aaron said, “When you get married you have to kiss? Yuck!”

* * * * * * * *

That night, Claire and Hugo snuggled down into in his bed, under the sign of the omega. Neither was inclined to do anything more than cuddle. For one thing, while Claire still shivered with delight at the memory of Hugo's body in, under and over hers, it was sweet to just drift off with him as his big chest rose and fell in time with hers.

For another, Aaron was bedded down on Hugo's couch, tucked under a quilt and clutching an X-Wing. Before Claire fell into sleep, she wondered if he dreamt of being an Ewok child in the green
forest, the sky filled with both a golden sun and an enormous planet of ocean-blue.

(continued)
Kate navigated the remnants of Des Moines’s morning rush-hour as Sawyer fumbled with the map, while spits of snow turned to water as soon as they touched the windshield. She didn’t need his directions, though, because her memories of the city carried her onward. Although strip malls and industrial parks had sprung up in the fields of a decade ago, the underlying shapes of the land were the same.

A fist of anxiety balled in her stomach. She pulled into a parking space near the industrial-style brick building with the Mother of Mercy Care Center sign, and rested her head on the steering wheel. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“Sure you can, Freckles. ’Cause the other alternative is I carry you in. I didn’t drive eighteen hundred miles to sit in a parking lot.” While his words were harsh, his tone was warm.

“You didn’t drive eighteen hundred miles. Maybe a little more than half.” Then apprehension punched her again. “What if she’s drugged or something, and doesn’t remember that she asked for me?”

She didn’t have to look at him to feel his shrug. “Then we leave.”

That wasn’t enough. “What if she starts screaming at me, like she did before?”

“Same answer, Kate.”

The fist inside her opened into a hand sharp with ragged claws, slicing her insides, and she pounded the steering wheel in frustration and fear. “What if they call the cops, and you get killed?”

She felt his hand on her face before he even touched her. He pulled her chin around, and while his face was sober, his eyes were warm. “Kate, I survived prison, polar bears, time travel, a nuclear bomb, and Ben Linus. You think I’m gonna die in Iowa?”

The laugh crackled out of her before she even knew it.

* * * * * * * *

The hospice nurse held the door for Kate as she and Sawyer entered Diane Janssen’s room. Her mother lay sleeping beneath a blue-checked quilt in the quiet, sage-scented space, and she wasn’t alone. A rugged, grey-haired man sitting at her bedside dropped her hand when he saw Kate and Sawyer, then rose to his feet.

He was the last person Kate would have expected to see here. “Daddy,” she whispered as she fell into his bear-hug. It wasn’t until Sam Austen had met Sawyer and shook hands that Kate turned towards the woman on the bed. “Can she... Is she... awake?”

“Mostly,” Sam said. “Hey, Di, look who’s here.”

Diane opened her eyes and tracked the room, finally landing on Kate. She didn’t look drugged, only frail and far away. When she finally spoke, her voice came out scratchy, like rustling paper. “Katherine.”
Kate drew close to the bed, not believing her ears. Every line in her mother's face lay loose and relaxed, like untied strings. Other than a small oxygen tube resting in her nostrils, there was no other medical equipment: no tubes, no wires, nothing beeping.

“Come on, son,” Sam said to Sawyer. “Let's you and me grab a donut. You want one, Katie?”

“No thanks, I'm good.”

Behind her, she could hear Sawyer as the two men walked out. “I'll get her one anyway, else-wise she'll eat half of mine.”

Kate didn't pick up her mother's hand. Instead, she stared at the wall across from the bed, its pale-blue paint almost greenish in the snow-flecked morning light. Diane gazed at her as if from a great distance.

What do you say to someone who's dying? I've seen enough death, so you think I'd know. You'd think I'd have the hang of it by now.

Before Kate could stutter something out, Diane cleared her throat. “Didn't think you'd make it.”

“We drove, Mom. Don't know if you saw the news, but I was in another plane crash. I'm kind of spooked on flying now.”

Diane nodded, but her expression was vacant, as if she hadn't quite understood. “I don't have much time, Katherine.”

“I know.”

She seemed to sink back into sleep. Sawyer and Sam hadn't returned yet. Probably having a smoke, although Kate couldn't imagine where. There was no smoking on the nursing home grounds, and Kate had already put her foot down about smoking in the car.

Even with the men gone, the room didn't feel empty. Morning light had moved away from the window by the time Diane opened her eyes again. “I didn't do it for you.”

What was she talking about? Kate pulled her chair closer, although Diane's words had come through loudly enough. “Didn't do what, Mom?”

“At the trial. Didn't testify. That was for me, not you.”

“Mom, sorry. I don't understand.”

Diane sucked in a few breaths, as if there wasn't enough air in the room. When she spoke again, her words came out with terrible clarity, as if she drew on every last bit of energy for the final battle. “They came to me... that drug company.”

Kate's heart skipped a beat. She knew exactly which one. “Mittelos?”

Diane shook her head, as if she couldn't remember. “Their lawyer... made a deal. If I wouldn't testify. They had a drug. Experimental.”

Kate didn't say anything. She'd seen how the scattered light in Claire's eyes had focused to a single, coherent beam after Hugo's first touch, when they had picked him up wet and stinking from the Santa Monica beach during his first visit back from the Island.

She'd heard Carole's story, how a mysterious sandy-haired man stood at her bedside when she
awoke from the coma, who disappeared through the door of her hospital room, whom no one even
remembered seeing.

She'd seen that man herself on the Island, when Jack had made his final, fatal promise.

Jacob.

There was no drug. Kate would bet any money on it. All she said was, “Sounds like it was a good
deal to take.”

Diane's weak smile flickered across her mouth. “It bought me... a little time. And no pain.” The
laugh which followed sounded like a small, dry cough, and she had to take a few long breaths before
speaking again. “Dying of cancer, and no morphine.”

At the words “dying of cancer,” Kate flinched. Diane must have seen it, because she gasped out,
“We talk about that here. We don't dance around it.”

Kate swallowed, hard. “I'm so sorry, Mom.”

“Those drug people... they kept their promise.” Speaking had taken so much out of Diane that Kate
had to put her ear almost to her mother's lips, in order to hear her at all. “It was all for me. I couldn't
let go.”

“But now you can.”

Again that flicker of a smile before Diane drifted away again. It was easy to see how her dad had
fallen in love with her. And Wayne, too, as much as Kate hated to admit it.

Sawyer slipped back into the room, and took Kate's hand. Instead of cigarettes, he smelled of clean,
bright air laced with snow, and Kate gave him a questioning look.

“There's a park down the road a spell. I took a walk to clear my head.” Under her sharp gaze he said,
“I tossed the smokes, okay?”

“Good for you. Where's my donut? And where's Dad?”

From his jacket pocket, Sawyer handed her a half-squashed jelly donut. “He's been hangin' about
here most of the past two days. Gone back to his hotel to catch some shut-eye.”

“Hotel? He's got a condo over in Urbandale.”

“Not any more, sugar. Your daddy lives in Texas now, right outside Dallas. Got himself a little
ranch, couple thousand acres. Told him we'd meet up with him for supper, if that suited you. He can
give you the 411 then.”

As Kate licked the donut's chemical-red jelly from her fingers, Sawyer studied the resting Diane.
“You tell her yet?”

“Tell her?” Even so, she knew exactly what Sawyer was talking about. What the hell, why not?
Everything in her life seemed to converge to this point: the blue room, the dying woman, seeing her
real father once more. Yes, damn it, her real father. Not her mother's boyfriend, who happened to
catch the egg cell which became Kate at the right time of the cycle. Wayne might have engendered
her, but he had never been her father.

She wanted so much to be done with lies, with evasions. Well, in a perfect world, maybe. Here, in
this one, it was time for a few more lies, just small ones. *Here goes nothing.* “Mom?”

Diane’s lids fluttered open. It was as if she had only enough energy to move her lids, her lips, and her rusty voice-box. “What, sugarplum?”

Tears sprang to Kate’s eyes, and she fought them back as she fumbled in her bag for a small, 5x7 photo album. Mom hadn’t called her “sugarplum” since she’d been a small child. “I’ve got a few pictures here of Aaron.”

“My grandson. Aaron.” The sigh drew itself out, and for the first time Diane looked as if she might be in pain.

Kate smiled at her mother. “That’s right, Mom, your grandson.” As she ruffled through the album pages, she sent a sharp, surreptitious look to Sawyer, thinking hard at him, *Please be quiet. Please.* Sawyer gave her a little nod, *Message received.*

The claws which gripped Kate inside loosened a little, and she brought the album closer, so Diane could see it. “Here he is, on his last birthday. He wouldn’t blow out all his candles at once. Instead, he blew out each one, one at a time.” Kate had been careful to pick photos which didn’t show Hurley or the Reyeses. “In this one, he’s playing trains.” The most recent photo showed Claire painting her Island wall, and Aaron in his smock, covered with paints.

“Who’s that? Friend of yours?”

*It doesn’t matter,* Kate told herself. *Mom’s almost gone. She’ll never know. Let her die with a few consolations, at least.* “A good friend. Her name’s Claire.”

“From that island.”

“No, Mom. From L.A.”

“Yes. He’s talented, Mom. He paints beautifully for his age.”

Kate didn’t think Diane had the strength, but she reached for the photo with a scrawny hand. Kate brought it closer, so Diane could stroke the surface of the image with her fingers, as if touching Aaron’s own face.

“Something else, Mom. I’m going to have another baby, in August.”

Diane glanced over at Sawyer, who ran his hand over his face as if embarrassed.

“No, Mom. Do you remember Jack, from the trial?”

“The one... the one who said he didn’t love you.”

Kate hated how Sawyer’s eyes widened in surprise. She had never told him anything about her trial except for the bare bones. He had been back in the 1970s when tabloid headlines screamed, “Crash Doc Spurns Ex-Gal on Stand.” He didn’t know about the reporters who had followed her to the filling station, yelling out, “What happened, Ms. Austen? Why did he fall out of love with you?” as she pumped gas. How she couldn’t join play-groups, or enroll Aaron in nursery school because the *paparazzi* would swarm them like flies.

The look she gave Sawyer was full of apology, but it had to be said. “Jack lied, Mom.”
Once more, Diane gave that flash of what used to be a smile, then fell back, exhausted. Her hand went limp, and Kate laid it gently across her chest. There was no sound except the low-pitched, irregular snore of Diane's breathing, and the faint hiss of oxygen.

* * * * * * * *

The three of them had chowed down on prime rib and twice-mashed potatoes at a roadhouse outside Des Moines, where Sergeant Major Austen put away the brewskis like there was no tomorrow. Sawyer had given up trying to keep pace with him.

Sawyer had to admit that Kate's old man was a stand-up guy, too, even if he shied away from telling the battle tales Sawyer would have loved to hear. Said he put it all behind him when he retired, and besides, he didn't want to upset Kate.

It wasn't Sawyer's place to tell Sam that his little girl had put a bullet through the chest of something as scary as the Norcs, at least if you were trapped with it on the Island. Since Kate didn't share that tale, neither did Sawyer. Instead, she regaled Daddy-O with stories of tropical survival, of trapping and butchering boar, of tracking and exploring the rivers and vales of the Island. Her dad didn't bring up how Aaron came into the world, and neither did Sawyer.

Sergeant Major Sam had taken the news of Kate's pregnancy pretty well, too. He just gave Sawyer that long silent look Sawyer had come to know so well from Kate. It wasn't just blood that passed along when two people were as close as Kate and Sam. These two were peas-in-a-pod, regardless of who had gotten Kate started in the fast-fading Diane.

Fortunately for Kate, Sam hadn't mentioned a word about Kate's probation. Maybe he didn't know. Sam did seem to be more about the hunting and fishing than surfing the Internet waves. Anyway, once you passed out of the news cycle, it was like you didn't exist. Weirdly, Sam didn't seem to have heard about the Ajira plane crash either, or hadn't put two and two together.

Either way, if Sam suspected his little girl was on the lam again, he hadn't let it show.

Now Sam had gone back to his hotel, and Sawyer swayed a little as he followed Kate into Diane's room, which save for a few night-lights was buried in blue darkness. He settled himself down into the stiff recliner, whose wooden arm-rests dug into his sides, while Kate took up vigil near Diane's bedside.

Sawyer hated to admit it, but he was getting too old to sleep on car seats and hospital recliners. A man got to the point where he needed his own bed. *Just gonna close my eyes for a few minutes. Kate won't even notice.*

A flash of light, a noise, who knows, but something made Sawyer jerk forward with a start. Kate wasn't sitting at Diane's bedside any longer. Instead, wrapped in a blanket, she lay curled up on the small couch with her feet dangling over the arm rest.

From where he was sitting, Sawyer couldn't see the room clock. Even though it was the dead of night, and old Diane over there wasn't going to last much longer, the room itself felt full of life. He gazed at Kate for a few more moments, wishing he could run his hands through her loose hair spread out like an inky storm cloud.

Every hospital room he'd ever been in, no matter how clean, still carried faint, underlying whiffs of residual urine, sweat, fear. Not here, though. Not now. Something fresh blew through the room, a scent which Sawyer couldn't place at first. Summer rose to mind, the kind only found in central Alabama, where the gardenia bushes around Granny Tidwell's front door grew taller than twelve-
year old Sawyer, their smell hanging thick in the moist July air.

Sawyer shook his sleep-fogged head, trying to clear it. *Did somebody bring in flowers while we were napping?*

A white flash near Diane's bed caught his eye, and he craned his head around to look. Then Sawyer almost stopped breathing from shock. There by Diane's bed stood Jack, dressed in some kind of white hippie-guru shirt and loose pants.

*I'm dreaming,* Sawyer told himself. *This can't be happening.* He tried to get up, but his leaden arms and legs stayed still. No sound came out of his open mouth. All he could do was follow Jack with astonished eyes as Jack rested a pale hand on Diane's forehead.

There was no telling how long Jack stood there, because time had stopped for Sawyer. He wasn't even sure if his own heart was beating. In that timeless interval, Jack didn't so much walk as glide over to where Kate slept.

*Please don't let her wake up. Not 'cause I don't want her to see him. But she might not be able to take the shock.*

Jack watched Kate for a spell, his face full of love and sympathy. After the clock of Sawyer's heart started ticking away the seconds once more, Jack caught Sawyer's eye. He gave Sawyer the kind of radiant smile Sawyer had never in life seen on the Doc's face.

*It's like he knows about the baby. 'Course he does. I bet Hugo knew, too.*

As if Jack could read his thoughts, he did something Sawyer thought he'd never see the Doc do. As Jack knelt down between Sawyer's chair and the window, he gave Sawyer a thumbs-up, ignoring Sawyer's titanic yet paralyzed struggle to move, speak, anything. His heart pounded out a terrified bass line as the two-by-four of reality struck him up-side the head.

*This is no dream. Jack's dead, but he's here.*

Still wearing an expression of tenderness, Jack's presence drained from the room. His body faded, leaving only a faint glow at the window from the parking-lot street lamps, while Diane let out ragged breaths and Kate slept on.

As if released, Sawyer stretched a few times. The gardenia scent and the warm sensation of room-filling life were both gone. The smells of antiseptic, sage incense, and dying all returned.

Kate had told him about Hugo's sabbatical in the funny farm, his “regular conversations with dead people,” as she put it. Now everyone knew better, didn't they? Jacob had made Jack the new Moses after Jacob was already dead, which Sawyer had seen with his own eyes. He himself had forced Miles to tell him of Juliet's fleeting last thoughts. That was on the Island of Mystery, though. You didn't expect to see things like that in Des Moines. He was still trying to puzzle it out as his eyes drooped shut.

* * * * * * * *

The next Sawyer knew, Kate was shaking his shoulder gently, her sleep-tousled hair falling into his face. A heavy-set nurse in lilac scrubs and a thin Indian woman in a white doctor coat stood at either side of Diane's bed, where the motionless woman lay. The doc was writing something into a chart.

“*Mornin', Freckles.*” He struggled to pull himself out of the chair, fighting the pins and needles
which stabbed his legs and feet. It was only then that he noticed Kate's tear-splashed eyes.

“It happened in the middle of the night. We slept right through it.”

*One of us slept through it*, Sawyer thought. No point, though, in telling her what he'd seen in the “hour of the wolf.”

“Would you like some time alone with her?” the lilac-scrubbed nurse asked Kate.

Kate didn't answer as she leaned on his shoulder. He put his arm around her, pulling her close. “I'm real sorry, sweetheart.”

She nodded into his shirt-sleeve, and her tears soaked through the fabric, down to his skin. To the nurse he said, “You'd be doin' us a courtesy if you went ahead and informed her daddy.” The doctor had already disappeared.

When Kate finally spoke, it was into Sawyer's upper arm. “She never saw Aaron.”

“You had every reason not to let that happen, Kate.”

“Did I, really? She was so sick, they brought her into the courtroom in a wheelchair.”

Sawyer thought back to his own preliminary hearing and plea-bargaining sessions with the DA. *Appearance is everything*, his lawyer had stressed. Back then, Sawyer had thought of his guilty plea as another form of con. He'd hung his head and looked mighty sorry, all gussied up as he was in a suit and silk tie, hair cut short. He'd landed seven in medium security, with a parole hearing in one, depending on good behavior. Not too shabby, either, especially when he'd managed to walk out of there in under a year with a big nest egg besides. Not that he was going to tell Kate at this moment that the sicker her mother had looked, the more likely she was to get what she wanted.

Gently he said, “Kate, you were a good mother.” At the hurt in her eyes, he course-corrected, fast. “You are a good mother. From what you said, that trial was a circus, and no one can fault you for not tossing Aaron into the center ring. Diane made her choices, sweetheart, and she had to live with them.”

“A good mother, right. I stole Claire's baby.”

“And now you and Missy Claire are gonna have another one to raise.” He paused a moment, cleared his throat. “Me too, if you want. And you know Sir Hugo's gonna shoehorn himself into the act.”

Gratitude flashed across her face. Then something inside took hold of her, one of those periodic collapses of confidence which Sawyer never could understand. In a small voice she said, “I'm going to stink at it.”

“Sure, like you stunk with Aaron. He's a pistol, that kid. Spunky, happy, with a heart of gold. Look, even Carole don't hold it against you none.”

“Thanks, James. Really.”

He tried not to stare, but couldn't help himself. She hardly ever called him James unless she was pissed as hell at him. When he lifted her chin and lightly brushed a tear-streaked cheek with a brief kiss, just a scrape of the lips, her smile broke like morning.

A few aides stuck their heads in the door, then quickly withdrew when they saw Sawyer and Kate. He gently turned her around, towards the bed. “Come on, Kate, let's say good-bye. They're gonna
come take her soon.”

*(continued)*

Chapter End Notes

Notes on this chapter can be found on [my Dreamwidth](http://my.dreamwidth.org).
The Tarot Game

Three days past the spring equinox flew faster than seabirds hunting fish, and now it was time for Hugo to return to the Island. He pulled the Hummer up in front of the big parking garage door of Our Lady, Star of the Sea church, Claire's hand warm on his thigh. Glancing over at her with a mix of tenderness and regret, he had to talk himself out of bolting.

_I could do it. Just give it back, and walk away free. Mom and Dad would be overjoyed. We could make Claire and me legal, too, fix her immigration stuff. If Kate let us, we could adopt Aaron. Ben'll do fine on his own. Anyway, what does the Island need a protector for, now that Smokey's gone?_

When he'd first listened to Jack's call, he'd been scared by the size of the responsibility, of being overpowered by forces of unimaginable size and power. Ben, though, had been right in his advice to Hugo: do what you've always had done. Let the ordinary eternal machinery of the universe grind on. Carry wood, draw water.

That advice seemed outdated now, given how everything in the past few days had changed. This morning, someone had woken up besides him, pale hair all wild from sleep. She had fixed him with her bright blue eyes and drawn him into a morning kiss while her son jumped from the couch to the bed and back again, shrieking with laughter. Someone had sat across from him at the breakfast table, cutting melon into pieces for the child. She had ridden shotgun all day while he picked up hypodermic needles and other medical supplies for Bernard. Someone had helped him pack all of it into two large duffel bags, which sat in the Hummer's trunk. Then, they'd shared a late meal of burgers, fries, and shakes, and he'd licked a vanilla streak from her chin.

That someone wouldn't be next to him when he woke up tomorrow in his narrow monk's bed. After all these years, to draw her into his arms, only to have her torn out of them, it wasn't fair. Even the thought of leaving her tore small shreds off his heart.

Her sidelong glances told him that it hurt her, too, and that she sensed the storm thrashing inside. "It'll be all right. Mum, Kate and I, we'll hold down the fort till May Day."

His earlier thoughts of walking away felt like madness. What had come over him? Pele's words came back to him, _Three days on the mainland is all you have. After that, whatever devils plagued you will return seven-fold._ But they weren't late, so it couldn't have been that.

Who was he kidding? "Claire, I really wish you could go with me."

"We've been over this, Hurley. I should be at the house when Kate gets back. There's everything she's going through with her mum. And she's going to need time to... get used to things." They both craned around towards Aaron's empty car seat. His mom and Carole had stayed behind with Aaron, saying they needed to "make plans." God knows what they were cooking up together, but he'd bet it had to do with the upcoming wedding.

With a creak, the garage door slowly began to rise. As the Hummer crept into the dim space, Hugo had to maneuver around an older Ford pickup, navy-blue in the shadows. A wheelbarrow, lawn mower, and gardening equipment filled the bed.

Up half a flight of stairs, Eloise Hawking stepped into the light. Something about the way her thin lips formed a straight line started the old familiar churn of anxiety in Hugo's middle. He tried to shake it off with lightness. "Hey, Eloise. Your truck?"
“Yours, as a matter of fact.”

“Mine?”

"I'm putting you on the church payroll, so that you have an explanation for your presence here, other than piety. I suggest you drive it instead of that garish vehicle."

Claire smiled and hugged his arm, but her warm presence didn't reassure him. Nor did anything in Eloise's manner, especially when she glanced at her watch. “You have a few moments to spare. Indulge an old woman, and come see what's left of the Lamp Post.”

* * * * * * * *

Hugo barely recognized the big basement room which made up the former Dharma station, even though its sign still decorated the door. No longer did the big pendulum whoosh back and forth. The blinking equipment was gone, as well as the blackboards and shelves crammed with manuals. Without the computer clutter, the fluted stone columns gave the room a spacious, chapel-like feel.

Eloise's heels clattered on the giant map which filled the room's floor, now scrubbed of all its chalk lines and inscriptions. Hugo followed Eloise, with Claire close behind him, even though it seemed wrong somehow to walk across the enormous map-face. He craned his head upwards to stare at the gaping black hole in the ceiling, where the pendulum once hung. Even when he quickly looked away, a black hole stared down at him like some cyclops's empty eye.

Eloise stopped at the center of the Pacific Ocean, where the Island might be. “What do you think?”

“I think this map would be awesome for a game of Risk,” he answered.

Claire gave a small laugh, and positioned herself atop Australia. “The players could walk around on it, instead of pieces.”

Suddenly the room grew cold and serious, sending a shiver down Hugo's spine. Someone had actually tried that trick already, with uneven results. “You know, on second thought—“ He broke off speaking when a faint pink glow caught his eye, and he stepped across China to examine the source of the light. Whatever force had abandoned the now-vanished pendulum, it hadn't left this room. The blue-tinged air, the small patch of pink, all of it felt alive.

One computer still rested on a battered metal table, clunky and old-fashioned like the machine in the Swan Hatch. The keyboard and monitor were all glommed together in one case, which probably made it his own age, or even older.

“Looks like the computer museum guys missed one,” Claire said.

Hugo squinted at the small, blocky screen, which displayed a game's title screen. It must have been more modern than Pong, because it wasn't black-and-white. The image was chunky and pixellated, though, the colors crude.

Claire gave a little disapproving cough, but Hugo's eyes were glued to the screen anyway. A blonde woman looked forward, her hair tumbling over her shoulders. Her arms were squeezed together, so that her enormous breasts spilled out of her tight blue princess dress. Her skirt was hiked up above her knees, which were set wide apart.

Between the woman's legs, big block letters in hot pink read, “Spread 'Em.”
Hugo barely had time to glimpse, “...Development Lab, Ann Arbor, MI, copyright 1983,” before Eloise settled herself in the chair. “You two might as well see this, as it concerns you. I don't want to presume, but may I call you Hugo? And you, Claire?”

“Sure,” Hugo muttered, still staring at the pixel cleavage. “Never saw this one in the bargain bin at Fry's.”

“This one's for the lads, I guess,” Claire said, from over Hugo's shoulder.

At least Claire wasn't pitching a fit. His mom would have just reached for the “Off” switch, and that would have been that.

Eloise hit a key, which brought up a menu screen. “I have to apologize for the developers' sophomoric taste. Sometimes all we can do is use the tools which we're given.” The list was barely readable against a background of cards, but not the usual ones with hearts, clubs, and so on.

Claire murmured, “The tarot. It's a tarot game, right?”

Eloise smiled like a garish pink moon, her white hair the color of boiled shrimp in the screen's light. “That's right, dear.”

Hugo suppressed a shudder. The psychic in North Hollywood who'd read his fortune had been a fake, but tarot cards still gave him the creeps. “So why didn't you give this computer away?”

“It's the only one of real value.”

Claire read down the menu. “'Query.' 'Three-card spread.' 'Tree of Life.' 'Meru?' 'Kalki?' What is all this?”

“Why don't we take a look? Who wants to be first?”

“I will,” Hugo said, giving Claire an apologetic look. “Yeah, I know, normally ladies first, but—”

“Go ahead, Hurley.”

The chair squeaked as he sat down, and it made him nervous when Eloise craned over his right shoulder.

“My advice is to start with 'Kalki.'”

“What's 'Kalki'?”

“You'll see. Use the down-arrow key, and hit 'Enter.'”

When Hugo did, the screen went green for a second. Then a huge, fat man appeared, sitting on a vine-covered throne, dressed in long electric-green robes. The man's hair and beard hung down long and black, curly like Hugo's own. On his lap he held a large golden disc, like a coin. He might have been wearing some kind of crown, but the image was too poor a resolution to tell.

“Is this... me?” Hugo whispered.

“What you see is the King of Pentacles. Or Coins, if you prefer. The way the game was supposed to work was that you could ask for a single tarot card, or a spread: that is, a group of cards. The game would draw from a deck. Needless to say—”

“It doesn't really work that way,” Hugo interrupted. “Does it?”
“No, it doesn’t. When I first came here, ‘Kalki’ always showed a card called The Hermit, celibate and alone, carrying his lantern. A few months ago, the image changed to The Magician, but stayed that way for less than a day. Now, this is what you see.”

“What the hell is this?”

“I don’t know, Hugo. This machine was here when I arrived. In any event, when the tarot image changed, I knew that Jacob was dead. When it changed again, it was clear that his successor had died as well.”

“Jack.”

“Yes.” Eloise then turned to Claire. “My dear, would you like a turn?”

“Sure.” She gave Eloise an apologetic smile. “I’m used to feeling the cards in my hands. But these aren’t really cards, I suppose.”

Eloise didn’t answer. “I recommend ‘Query.’ It will draw a single card for you, something about yourself. A kind of self-portrait, if you wish.”

There appeared on the screen a woman with wild blonde hair, her almost-bare, lush breasts not so exaggerated as the woman's on the title screen. Her long green gown hugged her body. She sat in a field of red flowers, and was visibly pregnant.

“The Empress,” Claire whispered.

Eloise gave the screen a look of alarm, then scrutinized Claire, which started Hugo's heart leaping. The already-cool basement air seemed to grow a little chillier.

Claire felt the change in atmosphere, too. She slid out of the chair and over to Hugo's side, pressing herself against him, staring at Eloise. “What? What's wrong with the Empress?”

Eloise folded her hands, looking somber. “Earlier this evening, I queried your future, the two of you.”

“What?” Hugo said.

Claire’s eyes blazed in the dim light. “Really, now?”

“Settle yourselves, my dears. Mostly auspicious; some sorrows, as everyone has. Most critically, though, the reading culminated with the Six of Swords.”

Hugo said, “What's that?”

Claire turned to him, her voice calm, even though she was trembling. “There's a boat, with a woman in blue, and a child. A man is ferrying them across a river. I think it refers to Aaron and I going back to the Island with you.”

“Very good, my dear,” Eloise put in. “Of course, you're right. But the Empress adds an additional wrinkle.”

“What wrinkle?” Claire snapped.

The anxiety which had been circling Hugo's middle found a spot to its liking and settled in to build a nest. The sense of something alive in the room grew even stronger.
“I take it you were planning to use the Door, Claire.”

“And why shouldn’t I?”

Eloise sighed, long and drawn-out, full of sadness. “Let me tell you a story.”

*Oh, great, Hugo thought. A ghost story, in the basement of the Mystery Church. Just what I need right now.*

“It was decades ago, on the Island. I was forty, and finally pregnant after all those years. Let's just say that I had a quarrel with the child's father, one of those on-going ones that never seem to resolve. Then your friends from the future showed up—“

“Dude, that must have been Jack and Sayid. Because Jack wanted to blow up the Island with the bomb, and you helped them.”

“Yes, I did. Because like Jack, I believed I could change the future, too.”

Claire settled herself back down in the chair. “But you didn't.”

“No. My son still died. The carousel wheel still spun, and I never got off of it.”

“What does this have to do with me?” Claire asked.

To Eloise, Hugo choked out, “You left the Island, didn’t you? And you didn't use a submarine, neither.”

“It was still tightly in the Dharma Initiative's control. So of course, no.”

Hugo said, “You used the Door.”

“I did. And I wish I never had.”

“Did it do something?” Claire said, voice full of anguish. “How pregnant were you? Did it do something to the baby?”

“I was five months. Daniel was brilliant, but unstable. I always blamed it, and blamed myself for using it.”

Hugo had enough. “Eloise, this is all great, cool game and stuff, and I'm really sorry about Daniel, but Claire and me, we gotta go. We're burning moonlight here.” Everything seemed to be leaking out of him: any confidence, all the good feelings of the drive over, the anticipation of six more weeks, then everything coming together. He, Claire, and Aaron stepping into the shrine, passing through the Door, then hitting the warm Island sand with the sun on their faces. He could see Aaron rushing towards the waves, shrieking with excitement. The whole vision popped like a soap bubble.

“Of course,” Eloise said. “Let me show you the way out.”

****

Hugo clung to Claire like a child in a storm, still trying to piece together what he'd just heard. When they stepped into the late-night air, he didn't head for the shrine, where the Door hung open. He didn't even need to see it, to feel its yawning presence. It waited for him, an unsleeping eye that wouldn't be satisfied until he stepped into its relentless gaze.

Instead, he sat down at a round concrete table right outside the side door of the church, and pulled
her down next to him. He wished he had a paper bag to blow in. Seven devils, Pele had said. Right. The first ones had already sat down to join them.

His panicked face must have scared her more than the tarot card, because she said in a rush, “Hurley, we don't even know if I'm pregnant.”

He just stared past her over at the parking lot, miserable. *What the hell have I done? Stupid, useless, careless, the whole old list.*

“Look, maybe you can tell,” she went on. “You told me you could, with Kate and the women on the Island.” She stood between his legs, his belly pressed against her thighs, and brought her head close to his. “At least give it a try.”

He tried to pull together what little concentration he had left, and rested his hands on her hips. All he saw inside Claire was a reddish-grey darkness, like a soft, spongy nest. Nothing like the clear light he'd seen inside Kate, for instance.

It was if she had read his thoughts. “Maybe it's too soon. I mean, it was only this weekend.”

“I don't think you should even be around the Door when it opens.”

She stepped back, challenging him. “That's ridiculous.”

“No, it's not, Claire. Maybe it gives off something like X-rays.”

“Don't you know?”

His stricken face admitted to her that he didn't.

Biting her lip, she went on. “Or maybe Eloise blames the Door for breaking Daniel, when maybe Daniel was just born that way, brilliant but unstable. It happens.”

He hoisted his pack across his shoulders, and she pulled on his hand, leading him towards the shrine. “You're not going to fall apart on me, Hurley. You're going through the Door, to get things ready for us.”

“You're not going through it,” he said, as if expecting an argument.

“No, of course not.”

“But what are we—? How are we—?”

“I don't know. What I do know is that we've got to get you back on time.” Claire strained to open the heavy oak door, so he gave it one final push. The Door glowed like a shining jewel in the shrine's open, grassy center.

Hugo didn't even think to argue anymore about whether she should be near that gleaming opening or not. Now she almost shoved him along, her small hands buried deep in the flesh of his arms and sides. When he stood right on the rim of light, in a moment of startling clarity he looked full into her wide eyes welling with tears.

“Good-bye, Hurley,” she said in a strangled voice, before kissing him with a hard, fierce motion. “We'll figure this out.”

A single step, and the wind in the Door sucked him inwards, away from Claire, towards the Island.
Glaring fluorescent light fought its way through the window of Eloise's office. Last night, at this same lonely post, Eloise had watched a few coyotes lope through the parking lot, then retreat to the canyon which bordered the parish property.

A bright yellow utility vehicle drove past Eloise's office window. That would be Claire, steady at the wheel despite the shock she'd had this evening. From her pale face, Eloise suspected Claire's conundrum. Of course, The Empress card didn't necessarily imply a pregnancy. But it was obvious that Claire suspected, or was at least open to the possibility.

She began to fill out Hugo Reyes's I-9 and W-4 forms, copying his signature from one in his file, with no compunction on her part whatever. A nagging anxiety sent a thread of pain through her forehead, and she leaned back in her Aeron chair.

She had just filed copies of Hugo's paperwork when the old rotary-dial phone began to ring, the one that almost never did. Her heart started to pound. “Star of the Sea. May I help you?”

“Hello, Ellie.”

His voice sounded the same as it had thirty-some years before, and she would bet her share of Charles Widmore's estate that her caller's hair was still glossy black; his face only lightly lined. She knew how that particular magic worked. It was one reason why she had left the Island in the first place. “Richard. What a surprise.”

“It shouldn't be. I emailed you at the parish.”

“I'll have to check my spam filter. They're such a bother.” You've only been on the mainland how long? And now you call?

“Hugo told me that the pendulum stopped working.”

“A platoon of strapping youths from the museum came to pick it up.”

“That's all right. We don't need it any longer.”

She suddenly felt very old and useless. “I suppose not.”

A few heartbeats' worth of silence hung between them before Richard spoke. “So, I hear the... arrangements with Hugo are working out.”

“The target point has been fixed, on the property here. Also, we've put him on the payroll as a 'landscaper.'”

“Are you sure about that? I mean, there's always a chance of publicity—”

“No one is going to bother a Hispanic gardener with a valid US driver's license who works for a Catholic parish. You and I have always disagreed about this, Richard. You want to hide, but I favor living in plain sight. Mr. Reyes can store his utility vehicle in the garage. Yes, it's off the street.”

“What does he even need to drive for, Ellie?”

She rolled her eyes. Richard could be terribly dense at times. Just another item to check off in the leaving-the-Island list. “To visit his parents. And the Topanga Canyon house.”

“Oh, right. They're his friends, after all.”
“One is more than a friend.”

Richard cleared his throat. “I've been meaning to bring that up. It could be complicated. Claire and her mother are here on a three-month tourist visa, and they've already eaten up a good part of it. After that—”

She didn't bother to hide her irritation. “I know how it works. If the Littletons play by the book, they have to return to Sydney. Taking the child will be complicated, as his birth registration shows Kate Austen as his mother. Once in Sydney, Ms. Littleton can apply for another tourist visa, of course. Why are you even troubling me with this, Richard? It's Mr. Norton's area of expertise, not mine.”

“I just don't want Hugo to do anything stupid.”

_As you did with me? “I'm afraid he already has, although 'stupid' is a bit harsh, wouldn't you say?”_  
“How far along have things... progressed?”

“Let's just say that I recommended she not use the Door. And it's definitely out for Ms. Austen.”

“Oh, hell.”

“Richard, do remember what it was like to be in love?” As soon as she said it, regret stabbed her. There was no need to bait him, to open old wounds.

“Not since the early 1850s.”

_Touché. You're quite the swordsman.”_  
“You always thought so.”

“Although you drew the first blood.”

“No, that honor went to Charles.”

“Bad form, Richard. Definitely beneath you.”

No static crackled in the dead air between them. She missed the noise which older phones made, because it gave you something to focus on during the wait. When Richard spoke again, she could barely hear his low, strangled voice.

“Ellie, let's not quarrel. Look, I'll admit it, I'm afraid. I sat on that dock on the Island, and age ripped through my bones. At first, when I knew I was getting older, I was happy. Now it gnaws at me. I wake up at 3 AM and can't get back to sleep, because I'm afraid I'll die.”

In a dry voice she said, “Go to confession, Richard.”

“I did, back in 1956. The priest asked for so many details, I was afraid he was going to get me arrested. I ran out of there before receiving absolution.”

“You're where, just outside Portland? Hold the line a second.” She flipped through the Rolodex on her desk. “Call this number in the morning, and ask for Fr. Gutiérrez. He'll shrive you whenever you're ready.” She rattled off the phone number, and he must have written it down, because in the background she heard small, scratchy noises.

“It's not just a matter of hell, Ellie. Long ago I stopped believing that confession could help me.”
“Sweet milk of Mary, you've been infected with the heresy of Luther. I'm not your confessor, Richard. You don't have to believe in the sacrament. Who outside of a few saints does? Just go. Go to fucking confession.”

The obscenity settled in the space between them. When Richard spoke again, it was with a hard challenge in his voice. “Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Go to confession.”

A pointless wave of sadness brought Daniel to mind, bleeding out onto the rusty Island dirt while she watched. “Of course I did. After twenty minutes of discussion as to whether you could apply an act of contrition to something that was inevitable, that was fated to happen.”

Sorrow ripened in the silence before Richard said, “He was my son, too, Ellie.”

Why should she be so perverse as to deny Richard this little victory? What would it cost, to finally share what she had already long suspected? “To be honest, he probably was. I'm so sorry.”

“Like you said, Ellie, I'm not your confessor.”

“Fair enough.”

“I'm going to rearrange my schedule. I can be in Los Angeles by the end of the week.”

“I won't be here, Richard. I need to fly to London, to shake a few apples loose from Desmond Hume's tree. His and his wife's time would be better served here in Los Angeles, rather than trying to liquidate Charles Widmore's businesses at fire-sale prices. Already she was thinking ahead, envisioning plane schedules, what to pack, when to call the driver to take her to LAX.

“He left everything to Penelope, I understand.”

Inside, she took back every kind thought about older phones. Eloise wanted to pace, and the coiled cord tethered her to a small radius around her desk. Her frustration erupted in her words. “No doubt, although it doesn't sound as if she's very appreciative. Some of Charles's creditors are already threatening lawsuits.”

“Maybe Mittelos should buy out Widmore Laboratories.”

“Excellent idea, Richard.”

“If you're flying to London, we could meet there. I could prepare an offer for Penelope Hume and the board of directors.”

“You don't give up, do you?”

“I want to see you, Ellie. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad to be back in the States, but there's just something, I don't know what. Something missing. You've been there, Ellie. You've seen. And I...”

She didn't let his voice trail off too long. “You miss him. You're trying to adjust to a world in which he's gone. It's not surprising. One hundred forty years is a long time, and I'm sure the two of you were close.”

Richard laughed, bitter and sarcastic. "Jacob was never close to anyone. Look, Ellie, when you're back from London, why not come up to Portland? It's a beautiful city, not like that rat-maze down
there.”

He made it sound so easy, save for one small, insurmountable obstacle. “Did you forget that I'm seventy? You remember the Parthenon in her glory, but nothing remains save a ruined edifice.”

“People make pilgrimages all over the world to ruined edifices. Remember, I've spent most of my life among ruins.”

“You haven't lost your charm, Richard.”

“Neither have you, Ellie. Neither have you.”

When Eloise rang off, she was smiling.

(continued)
Kate stood in front of her mother's death-bed and drew the sheet up over the face of the silent form. At first she didn't hear Sawyer's words coming from behind, for her mind was as empty as the body in front of her. What had he said, something about how they were going to come take Diane away soon?

Slowly she came back to herself. "I'm not ready yet. Why don't you find my dad, do some manly things together for awhile? You can pick me up later."

When he winced a little, she knew that she'd hurt him. It couldn't be helped. There was something here, though, something she wanted to just sit and bask in, before it vanished like smoke and was gone for good.

On the way out the door, she let him kiss her forehead as she clung to his arm for a few seconds. "Tell Dad he should take you to the Cimmaron Grill for breakfast. You'll love it. They have all these Remington pictures of cowboys."

"You want anything, Short-cake?"

"I'm good, James. Thanks anyway."

The door was one of those designed to make as little noise as possible, and it barely made a click as it closed. Kate didn't take her mother's hand, or cry. The bedside clock read 7:15, in universal block numbers.

_The same digits everywhere. The same sun coming up every morning. The same death, waiting for us all._

Maybe if she sat here quietly, she could go back into last night's dream, one of the sweetest she'd ever had. She walked over to where she remembered him standing, right there at her mother's bedside. He had leaned over and rested his hand on her mother's head.

Then he had floated over to the couch where she lay, and stood there for the longest time. When he finally spoke, his voice was full of tenderness, as if all the sorrow had been smoothed out of it. "I've got to go now, Kate."

Maybe she had answered him, or maybe she just dreamed that she had. "When am I going to see you again?"

Jack hadn't answered. Then, all at once, she had felt his hands inside her, wrapping them around the pit of her belly, even though he hadn't moved. Her insides had glowed, full of warmth.

"It's going to be all right, Kate." That's what he had said. If she stood in this spot, staring at the woman-shaped form under the sheet, maybe she wouldn't lose it. Maybe she wouldn't forget. Already, though, it was slipping away, like snow on a warm morning.

"What do I do?" she said out loud to the empty room. "What do I do now?"

* * * * * * *

Diane's passing might have been quiet, but for Kate, the rest of the day flew by in a hectic blur. A plump woman in pink scrubs came into the room and stood quietly by the door, her broad face
unreadable and her tone professionally calm. Was this a good time? If so, Diane had signed some paperwork, willing her body to the University of Iowa medical school. But they liked to get the next-of-kin's signature as well, if Kate wouldn't mind.

Kate groaned a bit inside as she scrawled her John Hancock on the form. *Just another nail in the coffin. Another brick in the wall.* Ever since that day on the jetty on that wild beach, when Sawyer had stopped her from throwing Jack's ring into the surf, she hadn't been able to shake the feeling that her days here were numbered.

_Here? Where's "here"?_

From deep inside, a voice seemed to say, _"Here" is anyplace not the Island._

*Oh, hell no*, Kate said to herself. *Not that.* But there was no energy in the argument.

The woman in pink scrubs studied Kate's signature far longer than Kate would have liked, then gave her a penetrating glance. Something flickered through Kate that she had almost begun to miss, the sense of being tracked. Hunted.

Kate tried to get a glimpse of the woman's badge, but all she could make out was the “CNA” in big letters. “Is everything all right?”

The woman smiled broadly. “Everything's fine, Ms. Austen. If you like, I'll call the main office about a memorial service in our chapel. Just to make things a little easier on you.”

Once more that nagging anxiety pricked her. *Kate, you're getting paranoid. They just want to help. Not that anyone will probably show up anyway.* The nurse's assistant had warm brown eyes, and suddenly a wave of tiredness washed over Kate. Even if her mother's body wasn't there, it was still fitting to say the words, right?

The woman must have sensed Kate's surrender. “I'm sure we can schedule something for this afternoon.”

“That'd be great. We... James and I, we have to get back.”

“Leave it to me, Ms. Austen. Just let me have a contact number.”

As she wrote down Kate's cell number, Kate tried to numb herself to the chill running up and down her backbone, the twitching at the back of her neck. Maybe it was the woman's broad mouth, or did it seem like she was positively grinning?

* * * * * * * *

The tall, faded chaplain closed his black, cloth-bound book and turned away from the few people scattered around the bare paneled room which served as a chapel.

_Not much of a funeral,* Sawyer thought, his metal folding chair scraping on the linoleum as he got up. That didn't set right by him, but it wasn't his family, was it? Practically everybody in Jasper had come to see his own momma off.

Not his daddy, though. His body had laid on a slab in the Alabama State Police morgue in Montgomery for the longest time, and whatever happened to it after that, nobody had bothered to tell young James Ford.

Kate looked damn good, though. Her black dress hugged her figure like she'd been poured into it,
especially with her new “baby bump.” You couldn't tell from behind, but when she turned to the side, it was pretty damned obvious.

Sawyer scanned the room with its cheap paneling and flickering fluorescent lights. The few people shuffling out stopped to talk to Sam and the chaplain. How the hell did anybody know to show up on such short notice? Maybe Des Moines's like Birmingham, just a big small town.

One old couple brushed past Kate like they didn't even see her. They must be from Wayne's side, he thought. He put a hand on her arm, the slick nylon of the dress cool under his touch, and she gave him a small smile. He wished she'd put her hair up, though, instead of leaving it all tumbled down in a brown tumult that made you just want to run your hands right through it, even if it was a funeral. She was attracting stares, which was the last thing they wanted, wasn't it? And not just his.

A man in his forties in a shiny sports jacket that had seen better days sidled up to them. He was Diane's cousin, he said. Well, not really. Their mothers had been second cousins, it seemed. But just by marriage. They'd gone to high school together, out at the R-9 campus.

"Wouldn't even be here, if I hadn't seen the sign outside,” he said in a flat Midwestern twang.

Before Sawyer knew it, the guy had pulled a 35mm camera from his brown bag. “Family reunion come June. Mind if I get a shot or two?”

Kate shook her head in refusal. Even so, the man snapped off as many as he could in the few seconds before Sawyer growled, “Wait a minute, here,” and lunged for the man.

“James, what's going on?” Kate said.

Quick as a snake at an August picnic, the man spun out of Sawyer's reach. He darted for a side door Sawyer hadn't even seen, with Sawyer close at his heels. The door had one of those fire-door bars across it instead of a doorknob, but it was no use. The man, whoever he was (second cousin, my ass) had locked the door from the outside.

Sam had broken away from his conversation and charged to Kate's side, as Sawyer sprinted out the main chapel door and headed up the half-flight of stairs. Even as he pushed his way through the double glass doors to the parking lot, he knew it was too late. A silver sedan peeled out of the parking lot and turned left across the oncoming traffic, barely avoiding getting hit.

“Son of a bitch,” Sawyer swore, wiping his forehead.

Sam and Kate caught up to him, and Kate's eyes were wild. “What the hell was that about?”

Sawyer badly wished he had a smoke, but things were bad enough as it was. “Paparazzi.”

“In Des Moines?”

“You're still a celebrity, Katie?” Sam asked. “I thought that was over.”

“Apparently not, Dad.”

Sam pulled out his phone. “You want me to call the cops?”

“No!” Sawyer and Kate said in unison.

Damn it, Sawyer thought. That's all we need are cops.

"So, back to sunny California, I guess,” Sam said. “Not going to stick around and see the sights of
Des Moines."

"I have to get back, Dad," said Kate. "I'll visit again when it's a... better time."

No, you won't, Sawyer said to himself.

Sam hugged his daughter, then gripped Sawyer's hand, hard. “Look after her, son.”

Kate tossed her head. Despite the scare and the annoyance, Sawyer wanted to kiss the top of it, just because he knew it would irritate her, and she'd toss her head again. To Sam she said, "Oh, Dad, come on."

All at once it felt critical to Sawyer that he not disappoint the older man. “You got it, Sarge.”

* * * * * * * *

On the way to Kansas City, Sawyer kept watch over a silent Kate out of the corner of his eye, trying to stifle his own yawns. Two nights of sleeping in cars and uncomfortable hospice chairs had just about worn him to a frazzle. He didn't like it how she moped, even if it was understandable. Also, he badly needed a distraction.

"Talk to me, Freckles."

"Hmm?" She came back from staring out at the flat grey landscape of snow-dusted fields and overturned earth ready for spring planting. "Okay, I'll talk to you. Tell me what your book's about."

That stopped him cold. All at once he froze, feeling exposed and naked. Might as well stall for time. "How'd you know I was writing a book?"

"What else would you be doing? And we always hear you typing." Her tone grew serious, maybe even a little afraid. "Is it about the Island?"

The frozen feeling swept away. "Hell, no. It's called Big House, about some guy in the joint who runs a con on the warden."

"Sounds like that movie with the weird name, what was it? Shawshack-something."

"Shawshank Redemption, and with all due respect to Stephen King, he ain't ever been in the joint, and he never ran a con, that I know of. 'Sides, I ain't aimin' that high." He fell silent, waiting for Kate to ask if it was autobiographical, not knowing what he'd say if she did. She knew he'd been in prison and exactly what for. Cassidy had made sure of that. But what had happened inside, even Cassidy didn't know, and things were going to stay that way. Anyway, he was changing enough stuff around that nobody would recognize it. Hopefully.

As he mused, he drifted into the next lane, so close to a car that it tooted a few angry honks.

"Okay, that's it," Kate said. "We've got to stop."

"Any suggestions?"

She rummaged through the glove compartment for the pocket road atlas. "Looks like the KC airport's coming up in two exits."

"The airport? What the hell?"

She tossed the atlas back in the glove compartment with a slam. "Sawyer, I'm exhausted. Luckily the
morning sickness stopped, but I feel like a wrung-out washrag. The lease on the Yukon's almost up. Let's turn it in at the airport car-rental place, and grab a flight back to Los Angeles."

"I thought you loved this car."

"It's just a car. There are more where this came from."

"Freckles, you've already left a trail of breadcrumbs 'cross the USA. But you get on a plane, that's gonna be it."

She scrunched down in her seat, looking miserable. "I'm just so tired."

"Course you are, sweetheart. Look, there's a Motel 8 right up ahead. How 'bout we sleep on it, figure out what's next in the morning."

* * * * * * * *

Sawyer hardly had enough time to lay his credit card on the counter, much less open his mouth, before Kate spoke out clear as a bell. "One room, please."

He tried to catch her eye, give her a raise of the eyebrow, a skeptical turn of the mouth, anything to make sure that this was really what she wanted. She kept her gaze firmly on the desk clerk, though.

The middle-aged man with a comb-over didn't even look up as he pushed the registration form towards her. "We got one with a king on the first floor. Normally fifty-nine ninety-five, but I'll give it to you for five dollars off, 'cause the TV's busted."

"No problem," Sawyer said. "Nothin' on anyway."

Now she did look at him, and something stirred deep down, pleasure mixed with sadness, too, because of Diane's death, and how well he knew Kate, knew how like her it was to reach out in sorrow and desperation.

She didn't speak all the way to the room. When she got inside, she tossed her duffel bag down on the single chair, uncomfortably like one in the hospital room. He took in the broken television, the cheap particle-board dresser, and a king-sized bed covered with a plaid-polyester coverlet, then poked his head into the small bathroom. At least it was clean. Even though it was starting to spit snow again outside, the room air conditioner was blowing, and he turned it off.

The narrow, suffocating intimacy of the room embarrassed and excited him at the same time. He closed the vinyl blinds and heavy brocade draperies. Now the room held them fully in its embrace, warm and stuffy like the inside of a body.

When he got back from the bathroom, freshly showered, wearing only a t-shirt and pajama bottoms, she had already pulled the covers up past her neck. She clicked off the light as soon as he slid into his side, leaving him to arrange his musty-smelling pillows in darkness.

He was so painfully aware of her that it hurt. The space between them felt wide and deep as a canyon. He could smell coconut on her clean hair, and the covers rose and fell with her breathing. When she shifted her feet to and fro, they made little sliding noises on the cheap cotton-poly sheets.

Before he could decide whether to say good-night, or just try to drop off (Good luck with that, soon enough I'm gonna do a bang-up imitation of a tent-pole), her voice breached the distance. "I've got a confession to make."
His heart, already pounding out a drum solo, picked up the pace. "Do tell."

"I stole one of your t-shirts. I was cold."

"Thought you were gonna really lay something on me." He rolled over, facing her, wondering if she could feel the heat that poured off him in waves.

She must have, because she scooted a bit closer. "You're like a furnace."

A dozen snappy comebacks jostled for position at the starting gate of his mouth, but he kept it shut.

"My feet are cold," she went on.

"That's probably 'cause you got no socks."

A few more scoots, and she was closer still. Why do they make these beds so goddamn big?

"It's like you're glowing in the dark."

"My feet ain't a bit cold," he said.

"Mind if I just lay mine across them?"

Instead of answering, he scooted a bit closer. Now they met halfway in the middle of the bed, where she slid her feet over and around his.

Damn, they really were like ice. Her face was so close now that little puffs of breath landed on his cheeks and lips when she spoke. "I've got another confession."

“I was a good Baptist boy, Kate. Got no practice with this confession stuff.”

She didn't laugh, though. When she spoke, her tone chilled him as much as her feet had. "I had a dream about Jack. Last night, at the hospice."

God damn. “Me too.” It tumbled out before he could even think about it.

Her breath drew in like a snake hissing in the dark. "He was standing—"

“Next to your mom.”

“In some kind of white caftan.”

“'And white robes were given unto every one of them.' Revelations, 6:11.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“He looked... happy, James.”

“I know.”

She snuggled closer, tucking her head under his chin to bury her face on his chest. She shook a little, and he touched her cheeks to see if she was crying, but her face was dry. He ran his hand through her damp hair, murmuring, “Comin' to bed with a wet head, no wonder you're shivering.”

“I want you to warm me up.”
He thought about getting a towel from the bathroom, but instead pulled off his t-shirt and wrapped it around her hair, blotting the damp spots while her hair slid beneath his hands. It took everything in him to keep from pulling her close to his body, because if he did that, the jig was up. He'd get stiff as a pole, and he didn't want her to yell at him, or toss him out of bed.

Not that he'd ever let her sleep on the floor.

He sighed from the tenderness and desire which ran up and down through his body like an electric current. She whispered, "What's wrong?"

"Nothin. Toast your tootsies a bit, and then I'm back over to my corner of the ring."

She shook a little, almost like laughing. "Don't do that." Before he could answer, she raised her mouth to his and spoke, so that he not only heard her, but shared her breath, felt her lips move against his own. "Warm me up. All over."

"I ain't made of stone, Freckles. If we're gonna share a bed—"

"I don't want to just 'share a bed.'"

"Kate, you just lost your momma. You're sad. And..." His voice trailed off. Years ago he'd told her, *You ain't gotta use me, Freckles, all you gotta do is ask.* Tonight, though, while he wasn't insisting on a wedding in Vegas, he wasn't in the mood to use anybody. Or be used, beyond getting her warmed up.

Too damned old for this.

When she slid her hand across his bare chest, he didn't draw her to him right away, and he tried to keep his tone light. "You gonna respect me in the morning?"

"I'll even buy you breakfast."

The warmth in her voice brushed away his hesitation, and he pulled her towards him, hard. She crushed her mouth up against his, wrapping not just her feet around him, but her legs as well, pulling his hips close.

All up and down the length of her he ran his hands, from her sweet, swan-like neck, across her strong, graceful shoulders, down to breasts softer and with more weight than he remembered.

When his hands came to rest on her plump little belly, he hesitated.

"That felt so good, why'd you stop?" She took advantage of the change of momentum to pull off a few clothes.

He knew how Kate liked it: strong, pounding, intense. When he hesitated again, she thrust his hand between her legs, so that slippery wetness streaked his fingers. He brought his hand back up to her belly, leaving a wet little trail along her skin.

It was as if she could read his mind. "You're not going to hurt the baby."

"You sure?" Even as he asked, he knew the answer. Back on the Island, back in a rapidly-fading past, Amy had confided to Juliet that she and Horace used to go at it like minks in heat during Amy's pregnancy. Even when Amy was eight months gone, it turned out. Juliet said there wasn't a thing wrong with it, neither. You just had to go slower and more gentle.
"I'm sure."

No rough stuff, he told himself. Time to dial it down a few notches.

From the feel of her, she'd shed everything, and lay underneath him, open and ready. In the past he would have held her shoulders down and taken her without thinking. Maybe she still wanted that. But she didn't act like it. She gripped his hip with one hand and guided him in slowly with the other, and it was like diving into a fountain, she was so wet.

Slippery as a fish, she pulled him in farther, farther, but he held back, letting her draw him in only as far as she wanted to go.

"Stop treating me like I'm going to break," she said into his ear.

Into her he fell. He let her do everything that she wanted, from pulling him in up to the hilt, to withdrawing and teasing him until he thought he'd go crazy. When she came, she raked her nails down his back, and lucky for him they were short. Still, he held back, because it felt so damn good to just watch her head flung back, the lightning in her eyes, her thunderstorm of hair.

When he did pour himself into her, sadness shot through him along with pleasure. She clung to him, saying his name over and over, “James, James.” Like a rat that anticipates the electric shock which it knows will come, he rolled over and clung to her side as tightly as he could, without squeezing her, before she had time to run away.

He knew the drill, or so he thought. Long ago she'd told him that she slept better in her own tent, but here there was nowhere to retreat to, except for that Naugahyde chair. Of course he'd let her go, if that's what she wanted, but for now, all he wanted to do was drown himself in the sweetness of her flesh, the soft up-and-down rhythm of her breasts, his name like a hymn on her breath.

His last thought before sleep dragged him down was that she still lay nestled in his arms.  

* * * * * * * *

When Kate opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was the cheap plastic clock face. Eleven-thirty-three. We slept the whole morning away. Buried under an avalanche of bed-clothes and Sawyer's warm limbs, she started to extricate herself one arm and leg at a time. It's like Pik-Up Stiks. Only if I get the wrong one, he'll just wake up, rather than everything tumbling down.

Too late. Behind her Sawyer stretched, yawned, deposited a kiss on her left shoulder. “Guess you're not gonna buy me breakfast after all, Short-stack.”

She rolled over onto his lean, hard torso. He smelled a little stale, like morning after a long night, but she didn't care. “There's a waffle house on the other side of the parking lot. Depending on how fast you are in the shower, we could make it by noon.”

He didn't stir, though. All he did was pull her head down onto his chest, in a warm, deep hug.  “Thanks, Kate.”

She pulled up to look at him, curious. “For what?”

“For... staying. Afterwards.”

“No problem. I was glad to.” She tossed one pillow at him, then another, until they fell back onto the bed, laughing. Maybe it would have to be lunch, after all.
To her surprise, though, Sawyer pulled on his pajama bottoms, his face serious. “You still lookin’ to catch a jet plane out of here?”

“It doesn’t matter, Sawyer. That horse is already out of the barn. No use putting it off.” Tonight, she told herself. We could be home by tonight. “At least if we get back soon, Carole and Claire won’t have to deal with it.”

He sat on the bed's edge, a golden panther ready to spring. “Deal with what, Kate?”

“I have a feeling they're going to arrest me. I at least want a chance to say good-bye to Aaron.”

(continued)
Desmond woke to ringing, followed by piping, childish shrieks. “Daddy! Daddy! Phone!” Squinting in the morning sun, he reached across Penny’s shoulder and missed, sending the telephone clattering to the floor.

“Des, what on earth?” Penny held her arms out to Charlie as the almost-three year old boy scampered onto their bed. “Come here, love.”

Stumbling, Desmond almost knocked over the gold Ormolu clock on the bedside table, then placed the receiver in its cradle. “Too late.”

“Well, you did ask for a wake-up call, Des.”

“Aye, I know.”

Shrieking with laughter, Charlie bounced on the bed, then hid under mounds of pillows. As Penny tussled with the boy, her dark gold hair fell into her face, and her pink Lanz of Austria gown slipped off her shoulder.

Charlie had his own room with a low trundle bed in their suite at the May Fair Hotel, but he didn't often stay there. This was one of those mornings when a spot of privacy might have been nice. With a sigh, Desmond placed a kiss on Penny's bare shoulder, then drew back the drapes to reveal a splendid view of Mayfair and in the distance, the misty spring green of Hyde Park.

Penny reached for the phone and a room service card. “Settle down, Charlie, Mummy has to call for breakfast.”

“I want bangers! Bangers!”

“Daddy wants bangers too,” Desmond said. “And black pudding this time.”

The order given, Penny began to brush her hair in front of the Chippendale vanity mirror. “I admit that I'm getting tired of breakfast in bed. Can't we take a meal in the dining room for once?”

They'd been over this multiple times since checking in. "You know what happened when we got to London, Pen. We couldn't even stay at your flat, mobbed as we were by the press. Even when we went to ground here they still found us, and went right after You-Know-Who.” He gestured towards the child, busy pretending to be Mr. Mole chasing Mr. Toad through tunnels in the bed-clothes.

Charlie's curly blond head popped out from under the coverlet. “Who's You-Know-Who, Daddy?”

“Big ears,” Penny said to Desmond.

Full of indignation Charlie said, “I don't have big ears!”

“Why don't you take him into the shower with you, Des, get him dressed? I have some paperwork to do before our appointment.” She tried to hide her exasperation from the child, who wasn't the cause, but rather Widmore's enormous, tangled mess of an estate.

As Desmond led Charlie to the bathroom, he said, “What in bloody hell does Mittelos Bioscience
want with your father's business, anyway?"

Penny trained ice-blue eyes on him and said, “Language, Des,” then went back to counting brush-
strokes.

* * * * * * * * *

Even though the charcoal-grey suit hung loosely on him, Penny insisted that he wear it. The food in Tonga hadn't been the best, but at least his clothing fit better than when he had fallen into Penny's arms at Heathrow. Then the first words out of her mouth were, “Des, you're skin and bones!” Good English fry-ups were a remedy for that, but the suit still looked baggy.

“Come on, Des, it's almost ten, and you haven't even put on your tie.”

“That's because you haven't picked one out, Pen.”

She handed him a mauve silk tie with dots of dark violet and watched as he fumbled with the knot. Years ago she would have stepped in and tied it for him. Now she knew to stand back, even though she did straighten it when he was done.

Charlie had been bribed with an hour of telly while Mummy and Daddy met with the grown-ups, although Desmond doubted the meeting would be over that quickly. More than once Desmond had brought up the possibility of a nanny while Penny attended to Charles Widmore's affairs.

However, Penny wouldn't hear of a child-minder. “Would you trust just anyone with your son?” she had wailed, eyes full of fear and appeal. “I already lost you in Los Angeles. What if that had been Charlie?”

She wouldn't be budged. So Charlie went everywhere with them, even once to the court-room, where he sat in the gallery with Desmond, fascinated by the robes and wigs.

Thank God the child was easily amused and not fidgety. Dour solicitors broke into smiles and called him “little man,” praising Penny for how well-behaved he was. More than once Desmond was tempted to spit out that unruly toddlers who grew up aboard sailing ships were soon dead ones.

Penny settled herself into the suite's office, where manila folders full of notes and a laptop covered one end of the wide mahogany table. From a wheeled room service trolley laden with coffee, tea, pastries and sausages, Desmond helped himself to a cup of Earl Grey.

He was about to nick a Weißwurst when Penny gave a little cough. “Those are for the meeting.”

Arguing would be pointless. All at once, a few sharp knocks cut through the sounds of some Yank cartoon coming from the next room. Penny straightened her suit jacket and gave him a smile. “Look sharp, Des.”

Hand on the doorknob, Penny peered through the peephole, then scrutinized a photograph of a lean, hawk-faced man with black hair. Satisfied, she opened the door and thrust out her hand. “I'm Penelope Widmore, and you must be Richard Alpert. Please come in.”

*So this is the ageless legend,* Desmond thought. Alpert's reputation preceded him, courtesy of Ben and Hugo's stories. Then Desmond shoved himself in front of Penny, blocking Alpert's entrance to the suite, while Penny gave a little gasp. Richard Alpert wasn't alone.

Penny's voice rang out in anger and fear. “You.”
“What in sodding hell might you be doing here?” Desmond glared at the white-haired woman in a trim blue suit who stood behind Alpert.

Charlie padded up to his parents. “Mummy? Daddy?”

“Really, Mr. Hume,” Eloise Hawking said in an affronted voice. “Your child is going to grow up swearing like a sailor.”

Darting eye-daggers at Eloise, Penny gathered Charlie into her arms. “Haven't you done enough already? Did you have to track us here from Los Angeles?”

“Mrs. Hume, let me explain—“ Richard started to say.

Down the hall, a bellhop struggled under the weight of several enormous bags, while an elderly couple followed close at his heels. Eloise turned to Desmond with a twinkle in her eye, as if the whole scene amused her. “Might we come in, Mr. Hume? I doubt you want the entire hotel to hear what we have to say.”

* * * * * * * *

At the office table, Penny poured coffee for Richard and Eloise, all the while staring stone-faced at Desmond. At least she no longer had that white ring around her lips, the sure sign that Penny was ready to take off heads. Why the hell was she blaming him, though? She should have saved her ire for Richard Alpert, who had dropped this bomb on them without any notice.

Richard opened his own laptop and began his presentation. At first Desmond peered over at Penny's screen, but the charts and spread sheets soon set him adrift with boredom. Richard slung around numbers and phrases like “insufficient capitalization” and “unsupportable debt.”

The price they were offering was fair, Richard insisted. If she wished, Penny could continue to operate Widmore Laboratories at a loss, even drive it into bankruptcy, although people depended on Widmore drugs for their very lives. Worse, there was the threat of unrest in Tunisia, even a possible collapse of the government. Was she prepared to deal with that level of risk? Mittelos had, and quite successfully.

Penny just nodded, unsmiling, while Eloise smirked openly at Desmond. According to Penny, Eloise had come to the Marina Medical Center in LA right after Desmond had been shot by Ben Linus and had apologized, almost in tears. Lot of fat good that had done Desmond, seeing as Widmore had kidnapped him from the hospital that very night.

Eloise leaned back in her padded chair and played with her lapel brooch, a silver snake eating its tail in an endless circle. From her ice-blue eyes and ever-present smile, Desmond was willing to bet that she wasn't here to negotiate the sale of Widmore's pharmaceutical business.

An icy realization ran through his body and at once he knew. Oh, no. Hell no.

Penny's voice brought him back to the brightly-lit room lined with glossy antiques, its table spread with papers and technology, the old mixed with the new. “I'm going to run it past our solicitors, and our board has to vote, of course. But I think we may have a deal, Mr. Alpert.”

Richard half-rose from his seat, shook Penny's hand, then turned to Desmond, expectant.

A deal? Penny sent him a small, tight smile, the first since Eloise had showed up at their door. Desmond took that as his cue to shake Richard's hand, although he honestly had no idea what they were ratifying. All he could see was the cool purpose in Eloise's eyes.
“I can assure you, Mrs. Hume, you won’t be disappointed,” Richard was saying.

The cold sense of dread hung over Desmond like fog, making him jump when Eloise spoke. “Now that our first order of business is out of the way, I’d like your leave to move on to the second.”

She waited until everyone had helped themselves to the breakfast trolley, even Charlie. When the child had settled down with another program and a plate full of biscuits, Eloise turned to Penny with a grandmotherly smile, eyes as brilliant as those of the coiled snake on her brooch. “Mrs. Hume, do you really want to be doing this job?”

Penny’s face fell, and Desmond knew exactly why. Penny loved the open sea, hopping from one island to another. Duty called, though. Take it on the chin. Keep up the side. Blood is thicker than water, you know.

“I’m here to take this off your hands, Mrs. Hume.”

Startled, Richard sat up. Ah, so even the long-lived one was out of the loop.

Desmond watched, helpless, as in the dreams he used to have right before performances, the kind where on opening night no sets were yet built, where he’d missed every rehearsal, yet in ten minutes the curtain was going up whether he was ready or not.

“What are you suggesting, Mrs. Hawking?” Penny’s voice was clipped, tough, but Desmond could see that she was ready to yield.

“That you petition the court to allow me to serve as executor to Charles’s estate.” Eloise laid a folder on the table. “Here are my bona fides, proof of my financial experience as assistant comptroller in Widmore Pharmaceuticals’ early days, and as parish administrator for Star of the Sea. Letters of recommendation, including a few from Charles's former board members. I have no financial or emotional stake in this offer, and I make no claim upon the estate as an heir.”

Penny just nodded. Go on.

“Last but not least,” and here Eloise gave Richard a glance akin to the one the butcher gives a chicken before delivering the killing blow, “While it is true that Charles and I had a son, he’s dead, and thus not a claimant either.”

Penny stared at the manila folder without opening it, while Eloise leaned back in her chair.

No one seemed to notice her irritating smirk except Desmond. “So what's the catch then?”

Eloise's wide blue eyes were all innocence. “The catch?”

Before Desmond could answer, Richard stirred himself out of his shock. “You don’t just lay a request like this on the table, Ellie. Mittelos has offered twice what this obviously depreciating asset is worth, and now you swoop in and offer to take over the management of the Widmore estate. Of course there will be suspicions.”

That doesn't explain the hurt in his voice, Desmond thought. Not by a long shot.

Eloise shook like a peahen ruffling its feathers. “Of course there's a catch. There always is. Desmond, do you remember what my last words were when we parted ways?”

The dread ran up his back like an electric shock, almost propelling him out of the chair. Slowly he recited, “The Island isn't done with you yet.”
She nodded at her apt pupil. “And yours were that regardless, you were done with the Island. Which turned out to not be exactly true, was it?”

Desmond flew to his feet, voice almost at a roar. “Did you have anything to do with that? You and Widmore?”

Penny's voice cut through the red fog of Desmond's rage. “Sit down, Des!”

“Daddy?” rose Charlie's voice from the other room, above the din of the telly.

“Now you've done it,” Penny said through gritted teeth. She called out, “It's all right, love. The grown-ups are just talking.”

“OI had nothing to do with your kidnapping,” Eloise said to Desmond, cool and collected. “What do you take me for? Charles never even asked for my help. Whatever he required to return to the Island, he didn't obtain it from me.”

“Jacob,” Richard said half under his breath.

“No doubt.” Eloise folded her arms, as if she had all the time in the world. “I understand, Desmond, that your sailing vessel is docked in Newport Beach.”

Richard leaned back, eyes half-closed, as if he knew what was coming and simply wanted to get it out of the way. Penny started tapping her spoon on the side of her tea-cup, the clicks of sterling against bone-china like tiny piano notes. Irrationally, Desmond wanted to start breaking furniture, just to fight his way to the door.

But Penny would kill him if he did that, so he tried to pull it together. “Aye, and just why would you be asking about Our Mutual Friend?”

“Because I wish to charter her.”

“No. It's bloody ridiculous.”

“Won't you hear me out first?” Eloise said.

“Hear you out? Last time I heard you out, you told me that I was never going to marry Penny, and that whatever I did on the bloody Island was going to be the best thing I ever did in my life.” He turned to his wife, hating to tell her this, but unable to stop. “I bought a sodding ring from her and didn't give it to you. Just threw it in the Thames instead.”

“What?” Penny said, losing her composure for the first time.

“Well, I suppose I was wrong,” Eloise said.

At once Desmond hated her and her silver brooch, her skin flawless despite her age, her posh accent which never lost its faint sneer. Whatever Eloise's offer was, he wanted no part of it. “Anyway, I can't do what you want.”

“And pray tell why not?”

Desmond lowered himself back into his chair, silent before the memory of how the Tonga police had gone over him, how their ham-handed search of his person had degenerated into a fight when he resisted. He supposed he had deserved the full-body cavity search which resulted. Not to mention that they had confiscated his compass, Komos's gift from the Island.
The Tongans had locked him in a concrete-block gaol and never laid a hand on him after that. Soon he'd gotten used to the drunks who passed through for a day or two, then vanished until the next weekend. A few of them he even got to know by name as they played some cards, threw a few punches, but nothing serious.

After a long pause Desmond said, “Why? Because I don't have the compass that got me from the Island to Tonga in the first place.”

“Well.” Eloise looked as if she smelled something unpleasant. “A bit of a complication, I agree.”

“Desmond, what is she talking about?” Penny said.

Eloise rose to her feet, graceful despite her years. “Come along, Richard. I'm sure these two have matters to discuss.” She laid a business card on the table as she swept both Penny and Desmond with her searchlight of a gaze. “Richard and I are staying at Claridge's. I've written down our room numbers. Please don't delay, as there's a bit of a timing issue here.”

“Isn't there always?” Desmond said, his tone surly. He remained seated as Penny saw Richard and Eloise to the door.

* * * * * * * *

Desmond grabbed a bottle of stout and joined Charlie in front of the telly, where grotesquely-drawn figures ran around making maniacal shrieks. The little boy had fallen asleep on a heap of throw pillows, so Desmond turned the telly off and covered Charlie with a quilt, then shut the door behind him.

The other rooms were empty. Penny, Eloise, and Richard were still talking in the hall for quite some time, with Penny's low tones barely audible through the heavy door.

After Penny let herself in, she sank into the couch and covered her face with her hands. “Eloise Hawking makes a convincing argument.”

The ice of anxiety stabbed Desmond again. “For what?” Not that, no, not that, anything but that.

“Desmond, I want to hand this to her so badly. She knows the magistrate presiding over the estate and he's sure to allow it. Their fathers were at Oxford together—“

“The old school tie, eh?” He couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

“I don't want to spend the next year of our lives chained to London, writing checks, watching creditors fight over every scrap. My father never involved me in any of his dealings. Why should he have burdened me with them now?”

“She's after the money, Pen. Didn't you tell me that his will specified 5% to go to the executor? That's hundreds of thousands of pounds.” Even as he said it, he knew it wasn't true. Whatever Eloise wanted, it wasn't money.

While Desmond finished the last of the tea, Penny picked at a soggy Danish. “Needless to say, I'm going to check all this over. But it's not that severe a request, is it? Her one condition, I mean.”

He couldn't believe his ears. “You think I should?”

“Not 'I,' Des. We.”
The same helplessness washed over him that he'd experienced in the Royal Scots, in military prison, in the Tonga gaol. No, the worst was being trapped in that hole in the ground on the Island, not even knowing why he went along. He must have been mental, round the bend entirely.

Before he knew it, he was reaching for his coat and heading for the door. Anything to keep moving, to escape the trap which yawned at his feet, the whirlpool ready to suck him into the long funnel of fate. Once he descended, there would be no second chance. No getting out this time.

"Where are you going, Desmond? I swear, if you walk out on me—"

He whipped around, pushing overcoat buttons through the buttonholes as fast as his fingers could manage. "I just need a walk, to clear my head."

"This is absurd, we have to talk—"

As the door shut behind Penny, it cut off the last words of her sentence. When Desmond stepped out onto the busy London street in front of the May Fair Hotel, he saw that the sun had melted into the pale grey rain which passed for an English spring.

Two blocks from the hotel, he noticed he'd left his mobile phone behind.

* * * * * * * *

Desmond wandered up one London street and down another, turning right, then left, but always heading towards the Thames.

The city had changed from eight, nine years before. Every block, it seemed, was covered with scaffolds which obscured the pavement. New storefronts popped up everywhere, advertising mobile phone shops and Yank chain restaurants. Three hundred year old buildings sprouted shiny new facades.

He ducked into a news-agent's shop where he browsed the tabloids, then stopped as cold fear ran down his back once more. The cover of the gaudiest and worst of them featured a woman in a tight black sheath dress, her dark hair flying, caught in mid-motion by the camera. Sweet bloody hell, he knew her, if not the tall, lean man also in the shot. When he picked up the tabloid, the clerk growled, "You want to leaf through it, mate, you buy it."

Absently laying a quid onto the counter, Desmond retreated outside. Under the awning, out of the rain, he tried desperately to stop the pounding of his heart.

It was Kate Austen. Above her shapely form, enormous red and black letters screamed, "Double-Crash Babe on the Run Again!" Inside were more photographs of Kate, as well as her father Sam Austen ("formerly of Des Moines, Iowa") and the light-haired man ("unidentified as we go to press, although possibly a passenger on the doomed Oceanic 815,") all taken in front of some sanatorium in Iowa. He skimmed further, thought he saw the name "Aaron Austen" mentioned, then could read no more.

His flesh creeped, as if being watched. There, in front of the book seller's next door browsed a man, unremarkable in his grey coat and black homburg. Despite the strange man's ordinariness, again a nagging sense of familiarity haunted Desmond. His gaze traveled down the man, and then his heart did skip a beat, for the strange man didn't wear dress shoes, but cherry-red Converse trainers.

Not seeing any books which interested him, the red-trainer man turned away. Desmond let his tabloid fall to the pavement and darted over to the man's side. "Excuse me, brother, I know you."
The man turned eyes as grey as his coat onto Desmond, and he wore a sarcastic little smile. “I don't think so.”

“Aye, but I do. I watched you die.”

The noise of the street suddenly grew very quiet, despite the rumbling buses, honking horns, and the crush of midday pedestrians. All at once the man bolted down the street, pushing through the crowd. Without thinking Desmond took off after him like a shot.

As middle-aged as the man appeared, he sure as bloody hell could run. The man raced down a side street with Desmond in hot pursuit as he panted like a bellows and cursed himself for having gone soft in recent months. Right, left, then right the man dashed, always with Desmond just far enough behind, until Desmond lost sight of him near an Underground entrance.

Had his prey gone down to the Tube? If so, he might board a train and never be seen again. Desmond’s heart sank. Just as he was just about to give up pursuit, down the block he caught a glimpse of the man's bright red shoes, and gave chase once more.

When a double-decker bus rounded the corner, the man had to stop, and Desmond almost caught up with him. Then, the fleeing man doubled back and dashed into a blind alley surrounded by older buildings not yet renovated.

Even though it was mid-afternoon, the sky grew suddenly dark and rain poured like buckets. There were no doors along the alleyway, just brick walls with windows too high to reach from the street level. At the end of the cul-de-sac there appeared a shabby door with a faded pub sign which read, “The Friend-in-Deed.”

_He must be in there_, Desmond thought. Water was running freely down his collar, and despite the sheltering walls, a strong wind made it feel more like February than early April. _All right, here goes nothing._

Inside, the wood-paneled pub was full of men of a sort you didn't see anymore in Mayfair or Covent Garden. No one wore a dress coat or designer clothes, much less red shoes. Rough men rested their tweed elbows on the tables and shouted to one another in accents Desmond hadn't heard since his youth. It was as if he had once more become dislodged in time.

He slid into the only open stool at the far end of the bar, near a wall that appeared to be made of wattle-and-daub. From his coat a steady stream of water dripped onto the wooden floor. To his right sat an old man whose fat hams drooped off either end of the bar-stool, his flat woolen cap pulled down low over his face.

At the opposite end of the bar, an aproned man wiped glasses and laughed with some customers. In order to catch the barman's attention, Desmond craned his head, trying vainly to see around the fat man. All at once, the man raised his leonine head and bellowed, “Nigel, get your shiftless arse down here!”

Grinning, the barman stood before the two of them. “You old sod, I should have cut you off an hour ago.” His laughing tone softened his harsh words.

“Not just me, you whore-son. My friend here's thirsty.”

“Wet too, by the looks of him.”

“The house rye, if you please,” Desmond said, feeling around for his wallet.
The fat man said, “Bollocks to that swill. We'll have a couple rounds out of Nigel's special stock.”

The laughter vanished from Nigel’s face. “At once, sir.”

After the barkeep hurried off, the fat man said in a friendly growl, “Put your blinking wallet away. These’re on me.”

When the whiskey came, Desmond knocked back the whole shot. It slid down his throat like liquid gold, then kicked him right between the eyes. The bar glowed with rich yellow light, hazy with pipe smoke and the sweat of damp wool jackets. Again that sense of familiarity washed over Desmond, as if he'd been coming to this pub for his whole life and knew everyone there, especially the fat fellow across from him.

“True, this isn't Glasgow, but at least we have some good Scottish single-malt,” the man said. “Good to see you again, Desmond.”

He had lost his mind, no doubt about it. True, the fat man's pasty skin was pale instead of bright green, and his beard no longer covered his broad chest. Even so, across from Desmond sat the gift-giver from Pele's party back on the Island. The one who had given him the compass.

Desmond flopped against the wall, letting it prop him up. “Komos.”

“The very same.”

“You look as though you'd been dipped in bleach. And you trimmed your beard.”

Komos chuckled. “Appearances my friend. All appearances.” From beneath the bar he struggled with a canvas bag. “By the way, I've got something of yours. It was devilishly hard to get back.”

Curious despite himself, Desmond leaned in for a closer look as Komos rummaged through what looked like leftovers from an unsuccessful jumble sale. His breath seized when Komos dug past a pair of red trainers, then said, “Ah, here we go.”

From the bag Komos pulled Desmond's compass, none the worse for wear.

At first Desmond didn't want to touch the shiny brass object, the culmination of all the madness which had started from the moment he had walked into Eloise Hawking's jewelry shop years before.

Komos must have sensed his hesitation. In a soft, keening chant he quoted, “Your fate, woven on the woof of time, is to neither stay nor go, to remain neither in your world nor this one. Other gods in the sea have claimed you for their own, and for you they will open channels upon which others may not sail. And this departure marks the first step of that journey.”

“Quite a memory you have, brother,” Desmond whispered.

Komos shifted his bulk off the stool and leaned in very close. “They need you.” His words could barely heard above the pub's din.

Throughout Desmond's life, too many people had called him a coward. He had thought that the bravest thing to do was to return, to find Penny and Charlie once more, with no thought to what came after.

Now, the hereafter was being handed to him in the form of a compass that would point towards home, wherever that might be. Desmond stared into that round Father Christmas face which waited patiently for an answer.
“I can’t do this on my own,” Desmond finally said.

“Of course not,” Komos replied. “No one does it alone.” From his jacket pocket he drew a mobile phone unlike any Desmond had ever seen. Its glass display had no icons, just a solid green glow, and it gave a faint ring as if a number had just been dialed.

“Go ahead, Desmond. She's going to pick up in a second.”

When Desmond took the phone, Penny’s voice came through as clear as if sitting next to him. “Hello? Desmond, is that you?”

“It is, Pen. I forgot my phone, and this bloke let me borrow his.”

“Thank God you're all right. Where are you?”

Desmond didn’t answer at first. At once he knew that when he walked out that pub door, if he turned around he would see nothing but a boarded-up hole in a crumbling building slated for demolition. “Just took shelter from the rain. I’ll be home soon.”

She spoke to someone in the background, a woman. “Eloise is here, Des. We're just sitting down to tea. We've... we've had a long talk. Working things out and all.”

“Penny, I've been thinking that you and I should—“

“I'm three steps ahead of you, love. I agree.”

Relief washed over him like warm rain, Island rain. “Go ahead and have your tea, Pen. I love you.”

When Desmond handed the phone back to Komos, it was like a trade. The brass compass felt warm in his hand, as if it belonged there. Tears stung his eyes as he placed it in his pocket.

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

(A/N: “Tales of Brave Ulysses” was a song on the British rock group Cream's 1967 Disraeli Gears album.)
The Dance of Venus

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

From Claire's Diary:

Kate and Sawyer got back two days ago, with Kate crouched behind the wheel of an enormous Ford SUV with bright silver tyres. When I asked her where the Yukon was, she said she'd gotten tired of it and traded it in for this. Then she remarked casually that they'd flown in and picked up the new SUV at the airport.

Mum didn't say anything, just tightened her mouth into that long line I know all too well. She's not mad at Kate so much as worried about what this might mean for all of us.

Aaron practically cart-wheeled over to her. It's not like she's been displaced by me, not at all. He genuinely has two mums now. Then Sawyer hoisted him onto his shoulders and Aaron complained that Sawyer didn't have a 'mane' to hang on to like Hurley did.

Oh, out of the mouths of babes.

* * * * * * * *

Yesterday we went to visit Hurley's house, where Carmen caught me looking despondent. Nothing gets past her, so I fessed up that I missed Hurley, and Kate darted me a look of surprise. Carmen pulled me aside and wanted to know if Hurley done anything to upset me. If he had, when she got through with him so help him etc. I told her no, it was just that my tourist visa was due to expire soon.

Before you know it Carmen was inviting us all to live with her and David in that big empty mansion. She's so like Hurley in that regard; she wants to draw everyone into her sphere.

Carmen says their house is 'protected.' I don't know what she means by that. Perhaps Hurley did something to it before he left? I jokingly asked if it was anti-immigration police-proofed, but Carmen and David got very quiet and didn't say anything at first.

Then David said that he'd done it to our house, too. Couldn't we tell? Kate and I gave each other the side-eye: Kate because she probably didn't believe it, me because I did.

Maybe it would be better if we were all under one roof, Carmen said. Kate thanked her nicely, but said she'd rather live up in Topanga.

Then Kate cornered me in the kitchen, which was a surprise. Other than talking a bit about her mum, we've barely spoken twenty words since she and Sawyer got back a few weeks ago. She's not cold to me, just always somewhere else in mind or body.

Everything in Carmen's kitchen is decorated with chili peppers, from the biscuit tins down to the red and orange lights strung around the window. Sawyer and David kept Carmen and Carole occupied while Kate and I made chicken salad.

Kate fixed me with a sly look and said that was fast work for a weekend, with Hurley and me. My face grew bright red and I wanted to know if she was psychic. Not psychic, just Carmen bending Kate's ear about how Hurley and I spent two nights at his house. Carmen's world is a fish-bowl and
we are all guppies swimming around in it, with her face pressed up to the glass.

When I got my wits back, I joked that she and Sawyer seemed to have taken it to another level or three themselves. Now it was her turn to flush, although for her it's complicated in quite a different way.

* * * * * * * *

There are men watching our house at both the front and rear entrances. They've been there for a week now, just sitting stone-faced behind their tinted windows. They don't look at us when we drive by, even when Sawyer smirks and waves at them. Mum says Sawyer is foolish to provoke them, 'protection' or not.

Today while Aaron was napping, I asked Mum what she thought they wanted. Instead of answering, from her bag she pulled a tabloid she'd bought at the grocers. Ruffling through it, she showed me Kate glaring at the photographer with an annoyed expression.

It seems that someone recognised her in Iowa.

I'm ashamed to say that I fell right back into an old habit with Mum: never show weakness. I tried to sound casual but just came off as flippant, remarking that this was old news, not even on the front page.

Well, that did it. Mum lit into me, growling that if Kate was hauled in, the worst the Yanks could do was deport us. But Aaron would disappear into the Los Angeles foster care system and never be seen again.

When she saw how upset I was, she held me and wiped the tears like I was ten.

That wasn't all, though. As comforting as Mum was, I couldn't bring myself to tell her that I'm almost two weeks late, and I'm never late.

* * * * * * * *

On Mum's urging, I finally saw Dan Norton. We spoke today, and he was surprisingly sympathetic, not his usual sarcastic self. He counselled me to keep a low profile, and to ignore the men watching our house.

Dan had already sent someone by to run their number plates, but he still can't figure out which agency they're from. He's pretty sure they're not Immigration and Naturalisation (for Mum or me), or LA County Sheriff (for Kate.)

He sounded worried, a first for him.

He says I have a few choices. Mum and I can go back to Sydney, hang there for a while, then re-enter the States under new tourist visas. Or (and here Dan gave me this oblique look) while Mum and I were back in Sydney, someone from the States who wanted to marry me could apply for this other kind of visa. After we were married, we could bring Mum to the States.

It would take months, though, and Hurley and I would have to be investigated, interviewed etc.

When Dan saw my face fall, he dropped it.

Besides, both of those options would mean leaving Aaron in California. Here's where it gets tricky: Through channels, Dan has found out that there will soon be a warrant out for Kate. Something
about how that woman prosecutor who hated her is going to get elected after all. Dan said frankly that if Kate takes Aaron and runs, it will go badly for her.

Of course, when Mum got through with her, jail might be a safe haven.

Needless to say, it was a dispiriting visit.

When I got home, Kate was taking an afternoon nap. Then she slipped out to Sawyer's cabin before I could catch her. Sawyer spends his days tap-tapping away on his typewriter, doubling down on the writing ever since their return. He only stops to eat and Mum swears he barely sleeps. Kate says he's writing what he knows, a novel about being in prison.

At least Kate's speaking more now, although she's still dreadfully quiet. Sometimes when Sawyer comes up to the house for a break, she snaps at him not to hover. Then a few hours later she'll bring him a beer and their supper, which they share on his deck.

What a coincidence, there's Kate now, right outside Sawyer's cottage. Here we go, then.

   * * * * * * * *

Claire capped her pen and hastily slammed her journal shut, although she needn't have hurried. Barely visible behind the sparse pines, Kate and Sawyer stood talking on the bridge outside his cabin. Deep orange sunset lined the roof, while twilight crouched in the blue shadows.

*Go ahead, talk,* Claire thought. *I need a few minutes to pull it together anyway.*

By the time Kate let herself in the back door, Claire had already microwaved two mugs of apple-spice tea. “Want some?”

“Sure.”

They headed for the deck which overlooked thick pines, scrub oaks, and the distant Santa Monica Mountains. Maybe it was the sunset, or maybe Kate's cheeks were a little flushed for another reason. In any case, Kate's relaxed expression told Claire how long it had been since Kate had looked that way.

*No assault like a frontal assault.* Claire smiled, trying to generate a calm she didn't feel. “Hey, you know your three-pack of preggo-tests? There were two left, as I recall.”

Kate stopped her mug halfway to her mouth. “It's in my dock kit, but I used one on the road.”

Claire squeezed her tea-bag, stalling for time. “I trust the result was no surprise.”

Kate gave a low chuckle. “Nope.”

“Does this mean I can officially congratulate you? After all, it isn't every day I find out I'm going to be an aunt.”

As Claire leaned over to hug her, emotion welled up in Kate's eyes. “Thanks. And for, you know, recognizing the aunt part.”

“People are going to assume Sawyer's the daddy, you know. But now that you're 'out' about it, you can tell everyone that this is Jack's child.”

“I already had a bit of practice. It wasn't as hard as I thought.”
Kate sipped her tea quietly and Claire knew at once it wasn’t the sunset, or even a good-bye kiss from Sawyer which had put the roses in her cheeks. “You’ve got that four-month glow.”

“I do, don’t I?” Over the rim of her blue china mug, Kate gave Claire a piercing glance, although her tone was half-joking. “So why would you be needing a pregnancy test?”

Claire’s words caught in her throat. In the few seconds of silence, the laughter in Kate’s eyes changed to astonishment as she lowered her mug and gave Claire “that look.”

The one Aunt Lindsey gave me when she found out. The ‘How could you be so irresponsible?’ look.

Kate took a sip of tea, then cleared her throat. “I know Hurley’s Catholic and all, but I’ll admit I’m surprised.”

Claire flared up, defensive. “Surprised? Why?” No no no wrong thing to say, can’t you control your tongue?

“Oh, no, that’s not what I meant—”

“Look, I know in the beach-body department he’s not to everyone’s taste—”

“Claire!”

“—But he’s certainly mine.”

“Oh, Claire sweetie, it’s been obvious from the night we drove down to the Santa Monica beach and picked him up. It’s just, well, it’s Hurley. Did I tell you about how we met, a few days after the crash? He was carrying an armful of water bottles and practically spilled them all over the beach, just because I introduced myself to him.”

If Claire had been a cat, her back fur would have lowered a bit. “He told me about that. Sure, he thought you were cute, but he’d seen your mug shot in the medical tent. Not to mention the marshal’s pistol. Hurley’s nervous around guns.”

Kate’s eyes dimmed, as if from a sad memory. “He saw that, did he. That explains a lot.”

“Kate, he thinks the world of you.”

A hint of a grin edged Kate’s voice. “So, do you want to share? How’d things move along so fast?”

“We marathoned Star Wars. All three movies.” It sounded silly when it came out, so Claire added, “Everything just... felt right.”

“Except for the ‘you might be pregnant’ part.”

Something settled across Claire like a large arm, or a heavy shield. “Come on, Kate. You told me that you didn’t use anything when you went to Jack's apartment before the Ajira flight. I’m not judging, OK? Sometimes that’s the right thing to do.”

“Sorry, I just assumed—”

“That I wanted it to happen?”

“Something like that.”

Only half of a red sun remained over the purplish-blue mountains. Warm twilight breezes blew over
Claire, or maybe it was simply the feel of the life sheltered within her. “Look, when I got pregnant with Aaron, I was taking the pill like clockwork. I didn't get the flu, didn't use any antibiotics, but I got pregnant anyway.”

“It happens.”

“Aaron's father thought I tricked him, did something to trap him. Looking back on it, I think that Aaron was just meant to be. Kate, Hurley didn't want to sleep with me at first, because we didn't have anything at hand. This is going to sound crazy, but something came over me—”

Kate laughed. “Yeah, that's called wanting someone so much you just can't wait. Or don't want to.”

“Oh, I'm bollocking this up. It wasn't like that. I just knew, can't say how, that if Hurley and I went to bed together, I was going to fall pregnant, even if you stuffed a whole clinic's arsenal into every orifice. I'd have to wait for menopause to be safe.”

Something mysterious flitted across Kate's features. “Don't be so sure. Sarah, Anne, Elizabeth, it all happened to them, and they were old.”

Claire stopped for a second, confused. “Relatives of yours?”

“Stories from Sunday school. They stick with you.”

Claire shrugged. “I never went. Didn't even know what baptism was until the day it happened.” Then she smiled despite herself, because even mentioning Hurley's name seemed to fill the room with his almond and wood-smoke smell, his warm presence. “Of course I wanted him. He's kind and caring. I don't love him despite his body, either.”

“You don't have to explain it,” Kate said. “Sometimes love just is.”

“I feel the Island in and around him, the good parts, the beautiful ones. More than that, I felt the Island through him, telling me not in words but through feelings, that if we did this there was going to be a child. The choice was ours, although when you're in that moment, well, you know.”

Kate's nod implied that she most certainly did. “I guess I'd better go get that pee-stick.”

Claire didn't get up at first. “Um... would you, you know, sit with me while I wait? For the results, I mean.”

“Don't you want to take it in the morning? What are you, a week late?”

“Two weeks and a few days. Look, if it's what I think it'll be, night or morning won't matter. If I'm wrong, I owe you a PG test.”

“What for? I think I'm out of the market. Come on, let's do this.”

Kate's laugh, her generous smile brought Claire back to old beach days, when she had so badly wanted Kate to like her, to become her friend. “OK, back in a flash.”

After using the bathroom, Claire wrapped the test stick in a tissue and carried it back to her bedroom, where Kate lay stretched across Claire's bed.

“I'm not going to stare at it, waiting for it to turn,” Claire said as she held it out of sight.

“I can't resist staring. How can you not?”
Claire didn't feel like explaining the anguish and chaos of her last pregnancy test, with Thomas practically knocking it out of her hand, complaining that she couldn't be. Anything to evade responsibility, to foist it off on her, make it her problem and not his. With a little sigh, Claire said, “Let's leave the lights off and just watch the evening instead. Look, there's Venus all in green, right above the tree line there.”

Kate's voice came softly through the dusk. “I waited with Sun, too, on the Island. Sawyer was such a shit back then, but he didn't even dicker, just gave it to her.”

Claire chuckled at Sawyer's discomfort around “girly” things. “Remember how embarrassed he was to even pick up a box of tampons, much less hoard them? It was like they had some magical power to un-man him right there.”

Both of them laughed, long peals which rang off the walls. Then Kate grew quiet and serious. “That was Ji Yeon. A sign of her, I mean.”

“Hurley saw her once, when she was a little baby. He visited them in Seoul.”

“I know.” Kate sighed at a small but sad memory. “He never said much about it. Just that the baby was awesome, and that Sun wasn't the same as he remembered.”

“Poor Sun,” Claire said. “Look, could you switch on that light by the bed-side? I'm so nervous I can barely get up.”

A pinkish glow filled the room, and Claire gripped Kate's hand with her free one as she brought the test into view. She stared for a few seconds, not saying anything.

“Two pink lines,” Kate said. “I guess you don't owe me a replacement stick after all.”

The tears began to leak before Claire even knew it. Dropping the test stick on the bed, she clung to Kate and sobbed. Not out of surprise, because she'd known what the stick would show. Not out of fear, even if using the Door was out of the question now, and she had no idea how she'd get to the Island. Pure happiness welled out of Claire, the kind which finds its voice only in tears.

Kate held Claire close to her cheek, and Claire could feel as well as hear her words. “Congratulations, sweetheart. Have you said anything to your mom yet?”

Claire untangled herself from Kate. The easy part was over. “I haven't.”

“Well, no offense to Carole, but I can understand.”

“It's more than that. Mum found your picture in a newspaper.”

“I know. She handed it to me with nothing but a grim expression.”

“She's worried about Aaron. Of what could happen if—“

“Don't say it. Don't even think it.”

“Kate, I have to, and so do you. We have to talk about Australia.”

“Australia? Why Australia?”

“Because it was my home, and I still have a passport,” Claire said. “Mum isn't even supposed to be here, and I'm soon to follow. I don't know who's watching our house, but sooner or later we're going to get exposed. Aaron's not legally related to Mum and I, but the magistrate could make us all take
blood tests, and while that's going on, Aaron will be in child protective services. And Aaron's getting old enough to understand what's going on.”

It tore at Claire a little inside when Kate pulled back, stiff and cool. “I would think that you'd want to go back to the Island with Hurley. Or am I misunderstanding how things are between you two?”

“You're not misunderstanding anything. But how am I supposed to get there, fly? No more plane crashes for me, thank you. Nor can I risk the Door, not after what Mrs. Hawking told us about Daniel.”

Kate frowned. “Don't forget, Claire, I was there when Daniel died. It wasn't the Door that screwed him up.”

“So would you take that risk, then?” Claire said with a challenge in her tone.

“Of course not,” Kate said, her head lowered, surrounded by a halo of sadness. “If Australia's in the picture, I notice you haven't said anything about me going with you.”

“Kate, Dan Norton is good, really good. But you'll never get into the country, not legally. It's not like here, where I'm just a girl with a funny accent. Yanks stick out in Oz. Also, entry’s gotten tighter. Sure, you could get a fake passport, dye your hair, but what about Aaron?”

“You can't take him out of the country without me.”

“That's right, I can't. But you can give me the papers I'd need, if worse came to worst.”

“Why?” Kate said. “Didn't we all come here to live quietly, all together?”

Claire stared, unable to believe her ears. “Kate, you know what Deirdre said. Sooner or later they're going to show up to serve you, or Dan is going to have to take you in. Look, you've kept up your end, helped me be a mother to Aaron. Now I'm letting you off the hook. I want to take Aaron to the Island, even though I don't know how that'd work. Maybe I'll have to have the baby first. But sooner or later I'm going, and you could come too. You and Sawyer.”

“No, I can't.”

“Can't, or don't want to?”

Sadness fell over Kate like a grey mantle. “It's where Jack died.”

“It's where I died, too.”

That got the reaction Claire had been trying for. Kate's expression turned pale, even in the pink-shaded light, and her voice shook. “What?”

“No, I'm not a zombie, even though I probably looked like one when you first saw me.” And acted like one, too. “But the Claire you knew from the crash, that sweet girl who put up with everything, who believed anything no matter how stupid, that girl died the night Samael came to me and took my son. We all lost something or someone on the Island, Kate. We all died, in a way. Only some of us haven't yet left a corpse.”

“I had a life here, Claire. I had a shot with Jack. We came so close, but I had to get Aaron back to you. It was Jack's last wish.”

“Look, I know my loss doesn't measure up to yours. But Samael robbed us both.” She handed Kate
a tissue and let her sniffle for a few moments.

Finally Kate said, “Why go back to the Island? Why?”

“Kate, I'll be honest. It's where Hurley is. I love him, Kate, and I'm carrying his child. But that's only part of it.” She placed her hand across her flat lower stomach and said, “This is your niece or nephew. And here,” she laid her other hand on Kate's curved belly, “This is mine. They're family, Kate, and so are we.”

Kate sat quietly, her attention fully on Claire now.

“I never had much family.” Claire went on. “I want our babies to grow up together, play together, get to know their aunts and uncles and grandparents.”

“How's that supposed to happen on the Island?”

“I don't know. But if Dan Norton is right, it's not going to happen here.”

Kate leaned back against the headboard and closed her eyes. “Claire, it wasn't until I felt those first little baby flutters that this all got real. Hell, it is real. Then there's Sawyer—”

All at once ferocity flamed up in Claire. “He's not pressuring you, is he? Trying to talk you into something you're not ready for? Because I'll skin him if he does.”

Kate broke into her signature smile, the broad one where her eyes crinkled at the corners and flashed green even in the dim light. “Oh, Claire, no way. I'm the one who tripped him and beat him to the floor.”

It took Claire a second to parse that, and when she got it, she blushed.

“Better yet,” Kate went on, “When we were on the road, Hurley phoned and read him the riot act. He told Sawyer to stay with me, but only so far as I was willing. At worst, if I told Sawyer to go jump in the ocean and never bother me again, that's what Sawyer was going to do, according to Hurley.”

“Like I said, Hurley thinks the world of you. And he loved Jack. Of course he's going to want you and your child provided for.”

Kate gave a small laugh before continuing. “Sawyer said it was like listening to the voice of God, if God was a four hundred pound Hispanic man who could pound him into the carpet. Are you sure you know what you're getting into, Claire? Hurley's pretty old-fashioned.”

“Old-fashioned?” Now that Kate mentioned it, Claire supposed that he was. On the other hand, if being a rock of stability, tender, devoted, a man whose desire was focused on her like a searchlight and whom she was pretty sure would never, ever stray — well, then she'd take old-fashioned any day. “I suppose I am, too.”

“It's just that I learned pretty early on that I couldn't rely on a man. Then, when I finally decided I could...” Kate's voice faded like the last remnants of dusk. It was night now, and other stars had joined Venus in her dance across the western horizon.

“Listen to me. You know why I got on that Ajira plane with you and Sawyer? Because you broke through to me. I don't know how, but you did. What did my brother say, Kate? Nobody does it alone. It's not a choice between one man or nothing. You're my sister, did you realize that? And that makes Hurley your brother.”
“I guess it does.”

“So let's raise these babies together, Kate. Let's give them the families that for all sorts of reason we never had.”

“Claire, I'm in terrible trouble.”

“I know. That's why we have to do this together.”

From the depths of the house came the click of an opening door, followed by footsteps on the threshold. A small piercing voice rang out, “Mummy Claire! Mummy Kate! We're back!”

Claire called out, “Mum, is that you?”

Carole poked her head in Claire's bedroom door. “Am I interrupting something?” Claire counted her heartbeats, one, two, three, as Carole stared at the pregnancy test resting on the coverlet, but Carole didn't say anything.

“Just some girl talk,” Kate answered.

“Right,” Carole said in a neutral voice.

Claire watched a collage of feelings play over her mother's face: sadness, elation, love, pity. Pretending a calm she didn't feel, Claire tossed the test stick into the trash can just as Aaron darted into the room and bounced onto the bed. Gesturing towards Aaron, Claire said, “Mum, we'll talk later, OK?”

“Talk?” Aaron piped up. “What are you talking about? I want to talk, too!”

“Aaron, Gran will make you some warm Ovaltine in a minute, then it's hop-skip and into bed with you.” Carole had pulled her face together and now gazed at Claire and Kate as if something had been decided, without speaking. “We certainly do have to talk. You'll never guess who rang up when we were at Carmen and David's this afternoon.”

“Oh, no,” Kate murmured, her voice edged with dread.

“Nothing bad, love,” Carole said, smiling. “Nothing bad at all. Kate, would you mind fetching Sawyer? He can tear himself away from that manuscript long enough to hear this.”

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth.
Hugo beached his outrigger canoe on the white sands of the old Oceanic 815 beach camp site, proud of himself for paddling solo all the way around the eastern Island coast. Since he had last returned from the mainland, he made it a point to get out and about the Island every week or so. Just to keep an eye on things, as he put it to himself.

Last week he and Ben had trekked to the Temple. That had been kind of depressing, although Otis and Deanna had warned him that there would be nothing left. Ben had looked over piles of rubble already half-covered with thick jungle vines and pronounced, “Vintage ninth-century Indonesian,” whatever that meant.

So much for Jacob’s “monastery,” which was Ben's other name for it.

Hugo hadn’t circumnavigated the Island since he and Ben had met the fisher-people on the Island’s north-eastern shores. Ben had wanted to come along on Hugo's rounds this time, but Hugo had talked him into staying in Fishertown and doing what Ben did best: working out deals for Fishertown trade with New Otherton.

Even Hugo could use some down-time now and then.

Since the trade with Fishertown had started, New Otherton hummed with activity. The old Dharma kitchen was full of round wheels of cheese wrapped in salt-crusted burlap, ready to be loaded into Fishertown boats. Sacks of dried squid and octopus lined the pantry shelves, waiting for the stew-pot. Bernard had remarked that it wasn’t till they’d gotten a steady supply of salt again did they noticed how they'd missed it.

Other than the relentless sea, only the flapping tarps of their old shelters made any sound. In his mind’s eye Hugo saw the long expanse of white sand as he remembered it from their settlement days, when fires had dotted the beach, Vincent ran up and down on the strand as he chased Frisbees or seagulls. Sawyer had lounged in the shade with a book in hand while Claire did the baby-dance as she walked Aaron along the beach, singing to him.

As he dragged his canoe to a spot above the tide line it struck him that of all the places on the Island, this was the one which felt most like “home.”

Ingrained habits were hard to break, so upon landing the first thing Hugo did was to light a fire. After he set water on to boil, he studied the remains of Claire and Sawyer’s old shelters, toppled by wind and rain.

His mom had been talking about a wedding before he and Claire had to part. Whatever his mom wanted them to do he had no idea, only that it was likely to involve Father Aguillar. Not that his mom was going to get Claire to do a single thing Claire didn't want to.

At least Claire would have rings. Sure, while marriage wasn't rings or dresses or bouquets but in the promise, he still wanted to give her something more than the New Otherton house made ready for her and Aaron. That was ordinary, because they had to have some place to live along with everyone else. This should be special.

_A summer house_, he thought. Never mind that it was always summer on the Island, at least when it
wasn't raining. A special place for them to go with a reminder of old happiness. Sure, bad things had happened at the beach. But other than tearing up a few trees, Smokey had never come there. Yeah, Ethan had murdered someone right under their noses. And Desmond had once fished Claire out of a rip-tide. But compared to the Barracks or the Temple, their old beach camp was paradise.

Further, Hugo didn't even want to think of Claire's sad pile of sticks and old Dharma debris where she had lived during her years in the bush. He and Ben had come across it on their trek to the Temple. In a rare open display of power, Hugo had made the whole stinking mess burst into high white flames which almost licked the tree-tops. Nothing was left but small heaps of light-grey ash soon blown away by the wind.

He could make a summer house, though. There were more than enough slabs of fuselage lying about, and plenty of wire to tie everything together. At first Hugo eyed Sawyer's shelter for spare parts, then paused. Someday, maybe (try not to think it, you can't make him, you don't want to, it has to be his idea, he has to want it) Sawyer might stand beside Hugo on this very shore. Sawyer would be pretty pissed if his shelter wasn't here, even though nothing of his stash was left except for a few girlie magazines.

Hugo took a quick peek or two, then tossed them into the fire, where the shiny paper rose into blue and red sparks. Long ago Hugo had teased Sawyer about being the kind of guy who “needed stuff,” but that wasn't Sawyer anymore. He wouldn't miss them.

Sun and Jin weren't using their tent, that was for sure. Months ago, Hugo had felt guilty even taking Sun's packets of seeds, overcome by the sense that she would simply appear at the doorway and politely ask why he was rummaging around her tent. A strange feeling stole over Hugo, warm and sad at the same time. Sun and Jin both would want this. They would be glad to give up what they no longer needed.

So Hugo raised the long metal slab which had served as Claire's eastern wall, then supported it with Sun and Jin's old walls. Across the new shelter frame he wove long palm fronds into a thick thatched roof, snug and dry.

Sleeping on sand kind of sucked, so he dragged out Sun and Jin's narrow bed, smiling to himself at how the two of them had managed to fit into it. That wouldn't work for him, though.

From his old shelter Hugo lugged his own cot made of economy-class seat frames. Early in their beach-camp days, Sayid had helped him lash cross-braces beneath it, to support his weight. After placing the two beds side by side and securing them with cables, he tested his creation by lying in the middle, bracing himself for the crash, the plop to the sand below. But the bed held.

The shelter needed a few more touches, so from Sun's tent he gathered a large cloth of navy blue decorated with Korean characters in bright white. As Hugo hung the fabric across the middle span of the new shelter, he found himself lip-reading phrases like “Celestial happiness” and “Ocean calm.”

Hugo froze. Back in the early days in the Swan Hatch, Jin had fought one too many times with Sun and had sailed away from her on Michael's doomed raft. Shortly after, Hugo had dreamed about a friendly and smiling Jin, not at all like the frightened and angry man he had been. In his dream, he and Jin had talked a little in Korean, which was crazy.

Crazy, right. Not as crazy as him reading Korean right now, though.

Still shaking his head, Hugo hung the curtain so that it divided the big shelter into two parts, like rooms. Still, something bothered him about the arrangement. Maybe it was the flimsiness of the cloth, or how embarrassed he had been when his dad moved back home. How his mom and dad had made
the walls vibrate, so to speak. But Faith and Craig, and Sirrah and Chen too had lived in huts out on the Mesa, yet had managed to find enough privacy to make a few babies.

How, though? He gave a heavy sigh, wondering who he could ask about how this married-life stuff worked when kids were involved.

He put the question aside when he spied John Locke's old hammock. Poor Locke, who had always liked Aaron. Even old-bachelor Locke had managed to make Claire feel better about handling a frazzled baby.

If Locke could see them now, he'd probably be smiling as Hugo hung the hammock in the smaller of the two “rooms.” He didn't dare test it like he had the bed-frame, for fear of bringing the whole structure to the ground. But for a smaller person it would do just fine.

Kids loved hammocks.

He hung a few other cloths as a “front door,” silently asking them to stay fresh and unfaded in the sun and wind, feeling a faint electric tingle beneath his fingertips.

Then he stepped outside, glad that the new shelter opened to a clear vista of the sea. Cool breezes played about his sweat-soaked hair and shirt. But wait, Claire's summer house wasn't done yet. One final item remained on the list.

Between a pole and a thick tree branch he stretched a taut section of wire. Claire had always loved the look and smell of fresh laundry drying in the wind. Now, with the addition of the clothesline, the summer house was done. Perfect.

The water in the pot was steaming, so Hugo surveyed the landscape like someone going down the line in a cafeteria. In the years since the beach camp had been abandoned, fish once more teemed in the shallow tide pools. Snails and crabs dotted the shore, enough even for the greedy seagulls. The thick coconut groves had put on a whole new crop of green fruits.

Eastward and a bit inland, a salt marsh played host to dozens of ground-nesting gulls' nests hidden among the spiky vegetation. The nests were full, but Hugo didn't take a single egg at first.

Something remarkable had happened to the marshy flat land. From a nearby cliff face so steep that even Kate had refused to climb it, a thin waterfall now bubbled. Hugo strode over and stuck his hands into the tinkling stream. Cold underground water cascaded over rocks and tumbled down the slight incline to the flat beach land, where it spread out and watered the coarse green shore plants on its way to the sea.

Fresh water, with no need to hike to the caves or wait for rain. Hugo could have sworn it wasn't here at his last visit. He filled his hands again and again, splashing liquid ice into his mouth, over his sweat-soaked hair and sticky shirt. One of Grandma Titi's old songs came back to him, something about “streams of living waters.” A sharp mineral tang came alive in his mouth.

“IT would have been nice if you could of showed up after the crash,” he said to the water, which ignored him as it gurgled its way over stones.

Sighing, Hugo filled his shirt with brown-speckled gulls' eggs, eleven in all, smaller and more pointed than chicken eggs. Claire used to eat them “warm from the bird,” as she put it, but he never could get into that. As he lowered the eggs carefully into boiling water, Claire's absence went through his body like a dull pain, and the beach all at once felt very lonely.

Before, he hadn't understood why Jacob had brought people to the Island. Now he did. Was it
possible to want something so much that you made it happen? He hoped not, because so help him, that was a promise he intended to keep. No one would come to the Island unwillingly because of him.

After eating, he crumpled the eggshells in his hands and tossed them into the churning waves. Immersed up to his knees, Hugo faced the ever-present bass drumline of the pounding sea. Relentless noon sun beat down on him, and even the light winds which lifted his hair didn't cool him off.

The gulls, the sea, the surf all rolled in tune with one another. He wished Claire were here to see her gift of a new shelter, how tidy the others looked all blue and brown against the white sand and green ironwood trees. How she would smile at the pots, spoons, knives tied neatly under tarp scraps, sheltered by the food tent's great orange parachute. Once more his solitude turned into a burden.

He forded up to the spot where long ago he had plunged into the surf, drenching Bernard with spray. Here the waves stretched out blue and inviting, and he would have given in to their call but for a small sadness which held him back.

Just because the last cannonball ended badly doesn't mean this one has to, he told himself. OK, here goes nothing, then.

As he ran across the flat rock-spread towards the welcoming sea, it seemed for an instant that if he left the ground, he would keep soaring over the white foam.

That was an illusion, though. The cold water hit him with a hard smack across the bottom and down he went, ten, then twenty feet. Then alarm shocked him as much as the water, because he was sinking, not bobbing to the surface as he usually did.

Weird, too, that he had no urge to breathe. He paddled a bit forward and opened his eyes to a stunning blue ocean-scape. Mottled light sparkled across a sandy ocean floor dotted with yellow and green corals. Schools of bright orange and red fish darted to and fro, as if he wasn't there at all. Sea snails the size of his fists crawled along the bottom, where thickets of green seaweed floated upwards like hair.

Hugo held his breath, taking it all in, until a silver flash caught his eye. Porpoise, or shark?

If it was a shark, he was sunk. He dog-paddled around for a better look, and stared right into the laughing face of Pele's sister Nāmaka, she who ruled the Island seas from the coast to the line of the horizon. Her long black hair floated upward, mingling with the ocean grasses.

The urge to breathe came upon Hugo strong and fast. As he started to struggle, Nāmaka seized him and pulled him to the surface, where he took one gasping lungful after another.

Nāmaka flipped back her wet mane and grinned. “What are you doing down here?”

“Cannonball,” he gasped.

She looked around the churning waters, her face suddenly feral. “If an armed ship entered these waters, I'd know it. And so would you.”

He paddled clumsily to his rocky launch pad and pulled himself up, still breathing heavily. “You never did a cannonball? You should try it sometime.”

Nāmaka floated before him in the tide pool. “You saved me the trouble of looking for you, Protector.”
Clouds had blown across the sun in preparation for the approaching afternoon rain, covering the beach in grey coolness. Hugo dangled his feet in the water, delightfully refreshed. “Uh, just plain Hugo is fine.”

She caught a small silver fish in her long fingers. When she squirted it into the air, it fell into the waves with a plop, then swam off. “I've got some news for you, courtesy of the gulls. And from Pallas.”

“The gulls?”

“They overheard a few of the birds who live near your old home. New Port, they called it, something like that.”

“Newport Beach?”

“Sounds right, although with gulls you never can tell. Half the time they scream at you, then when they finally calm down, they sound like they're drunk. Everything comes out all garbled.”

“Yeah, I saw that movie. Scuttle never could tell a story straight.”

She obviously didn't know who Scuttle was, but didn't seem to care. Her black hair streamed over her shoulders in a wet mantle as she bobbed lazily on the surface. “Supposedly these gulls spied the Wanderer with his woman and child at this New Port place working on a sailing vessel. A big one.”

Hope flickered in Hugo. “You mean Desmond?”

Her smile broke bright as a dashing wave. “The very same.”

“So what's old Desmondo up to? Last I heard he was in London.”

“Apparently not any longer.”

Anticipation surged through Hugo, so much that he didn't want to jinx it with too much hope. Desmond was in LA. Maybe he'd still be hanging around there next week, when Hugo was due to return. Probably, because Hugo knew from experience that it took Desmond awhile to get underway, no matter where he was going.

He was so lost in the prospect that he didn't hear Nāmaka at first.

“...So I told Pallas, I'm not your messenger service. Don't you have owls or something? Or spiders? Well, you know Pallas, nobody can say anything to her without her getting all—“

“Nāmaka, I'm sorry. What was it you said Pallas wanted?”

“Oh, her. She said she wants you to fix the Lighthouse.”

Fix the Lighthouse? Hugo could solder and weld, and with help could drop an engine or rebuild a transmission. But the Lighthouse, what the hell? “I don't even know how it works, Nāmaka.”

She fixed him with a glance as silvery as her fish-scale dress. “You don't need to know how it works. Just replace the mirrors that the old Protector broke.”

“You mean Jack?”

When Nāmaka shrugged, her whole body shivered in disdain. “I don't know why Pallas couldn't have told you herself. I mean, I know just where to hit a ship below the waterline to make it drop like
a stone, but the Lighthouse was Jacob's sorcery. With her help, of course. Anyway, that's it. Replace the mirrors. Simple, right?"

Sure, Hugo said to himself as Namaka dived beneath the dark blue waves. Real simple.

* * * * * * * *

Hugo needn't have worried about recruiting a crew from New Otherton to work on the Lighthouse. By evening, it became clear that their greatest limitation would be finding enough boats to transport everyone who volunteered, as well as all the tools and supplies they needed.

It was Ben's idea to send a few people to Fishertown to borrow a boat larger than an outrigger canoe. Rose and Kathy had rounded up three full-length mirrors from various New Otherton houses. No one knew what the Lighthouse would do once it started working again, but that didn't matter, as Ben and Hugo drew everyone into the circle of enthusiasm.

The next day, the mirrors were wrapped securely in blankets, along with metal saws and a rivet gun salvaged from the motor pool wreckage. To set the mirrors in their frames, Kathy and Shana had made a kind of putty from rubbery tree sap. Franz of Fishertown lent them his boat, which he insisted on captaining. Stolid and silent, Franz and his first mate Rodriguez loaded everything into the wide-bottomed craft. Ben, Hugo, Craig and Brian followed in two outrigger canoes.

At Lighthouse Point, everyone marveled at the tall, elegant structure, then took their turn climbing the narrow winding stairs. While the men gazed out at the Island and ocean from all directions, Franz looked over the bent and broken theodolite.

"I could turn this into a telescope," he remarked.


The big blond German cracked a rare smile.

Ben added, "Think of it as a rental fee for your boat."

Cool white light still rose from the fire-pit mounted in the brass wheel's center. Craig said, "Hey, man, how are we supposed to work on this with the lights on?"

Hugo placed his hand in the middle of the glowing column, and at once the light vanished.

"Things are going to take awhile to cool down," Brian said.

Hugo shook his head. "It's fine now. Go ahead and take your measurements."

While Franz and Brian argued about the best way to mount the mirrors on the wrecked frame, Ben carefully recorded in his blue leather book all the names and their corresponding numbers written around the circumference of the brass gear wheel.

When Hugo picked up a rag and started to polish the lighthouse wheel clean, Ben cleared his throat. "Hugo, are you sure you want to do that? I thought this was how you set the Door."

Hugo studied the penciled-in names, then placed his hand across the smooth brass surface. As it faintly vibrated under his palm, the answer came to him. Jacob had used the gear wheel's position to "set" the Door to wherever he wanted to go: LA, Seoul, Alabama, Iowa. But it didn't have to work that way. He, Hugo, could pick the Door's outlet, not the Lighthouse. Now the gear wheel position was for something else.
What, though? He had no use for “candidates,” and didn't want unwilling visitors. And there were one hell of a lot of willing visitors he'd rather not see either. Like any Widmore leftovers. Or Sun's gangster father Paik Woo-Jung, who had been Widmore's business partner. Or for that matter, the US Navy.

Maybe it would be easier to just write down who he wanted to let in, rather than all those known and unknown that he wanted to keep out. “Nah, Ben, don't worry about it. You got all the info you wanted?”

“I'm done.”

After Hugo had polished the gear wheel clean, he leaned over to Craig, who was busy sorting screws from the pile. “Hey, Craig, where's that red tool-box?”

“Here you go, man.”

In stubby grease-pencil Hugo scrawled out “Desmond Hume” at position #1 on the brass wheel.

* * * * * * * *

It took two days, but eventually the mirrors were screwed into their shiny new frames and positioned around the gear wheel. Everyone crowded in close to admire the work, even Ben, who had spent most of his time sketching the Lighthouse and surrounding point, down to the multiple gears beneath the table-like structure.

Slowly, ceremoniously, Hugo pulled the chains which rotated the gear wheel to position #1. He reached out his hand and once more a column of clear bright light blazed up from the pit, glancing off the mirrors with sun-like brilliance. Out to sea, an approaching flock of gulls careened towards the beam of light, then broke to the right and left as they swirled to avoid it.

Ben sidled up close to Hugo. “If Desmond's headed this way, he can't miss it.”

All Hugo could do was smile.

Down on the narrow strip of beach below Lighthouse Point, the crew was dividing up for the return home. Hugo spied Craig lashing some bedrolls into an outrigger canoe. “Hey, Craig, can I hitch a ride?”

Craig looked up, as if quizzical. “Sure.”

“Bow or stern?”

“Surprise me.”

Hugo climbed into the stern because it would be easier to have this conversation staring at the back of the other man's head. Even so, Hugo didn't say anything until they had cleared the tricky waters which ringed Lighthouse Point and worked their way into calmer seas. Also, Craig was normally a quiet guy, which only made this worse. He cleared his throat. “So, looks like the cattle are doing well.”

Craig turned around, smiling. “They're calving like crazy. Kevin's talking about penning up the bull and castrating some of the calves, or we'll have to open up some new pasture.”

Ouch, Hugo thought. Not the direction I wanted to go in. “You and Faith, you doing OK in New Otherton? I mean, compared to living out on the North Mesa.”
After paddling a few strokes, Craig said, “It's fine, although sometimes I miss the open air.” He continued to paddle on, leaving the ball in Hugo's court.

“You know, Claire's gonna come to the Island sometime. Maybe even in the next couple of weeks.”

*Maybe. But the other possibility's awesome, too. Just more complicated.*

This time Craig’s smile was warmer, more sympathetic. “You did a great job on the house, man. Those tree-houses in the commons, too, that was genius. The kids love them, and so will her boy.”

The thin cloth dividing the beach shelter with “ocean happiness” fluttered through Hugo's mind. “Dude, I got something to ask you, um, if it's not...” He gulped, self-conscious now. “Too personal.”

*This really sucks. I'm going to blow it for sure. “Because, uh, you're the only guy with, you know, experience.”*

Craig didn't turn around. “Shoot.”

“When you and Faith were out in the jungle and then on the Mesa with Kiya, and, you wanted some, you know, alone time, um...” Hugo's voice trailed off, helpless. “But you know little kids, they bounce around and everything—”

“Hurley, it's OK, man.”

“It is?”

“Really.” Craig laughed, but not in a mean way, and not at Hugo himself. “Believe it or not, little kids sleep. You can still have your moments, but you just have to pick them a little more carefully.”

“I guess.” Despite the cool salt spray, Hugo flushed with embarrassment.

Turning half-way, Craig set his paddle on his knees. “You and Claire, it sounds serious, man.”

Hugo nodded. The fullness of the whole situation came down on him at once, as big a responsibility as protecting the Island.

“You know, kids sleep more soundly when they know their parents love each other.” Craig turned around, his face full of sympathy. “Chill, Hurley. You're going to be a great dad.”

“Thanks, man.”

“No prob.” Craig dug his paddle into the water, hard, and the canoe lurched forward. As he shouted, the wind carried his words back to Hugo. “Dinner in Fishertown tonight, and it's on Franz. I'd say we've earned it.”

Behind them, the Lighthouse glowed like a white jewel. As afternoon clouds surrounded Lighthouse Point, the path of its brilliant beam shone out across the open sea.

(continued)

Chapter End Notes

(A/N: The expression “the path of the Beam” comes from Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* series.)
Notes on this chapter can be found on my Dreamwidth. )
May Day had come and gone without Hugo's arrival. On this May 2 eve, Kate floated on an inflated recliner in the middle of the Reyes's pool, watching Claire worry, unable to offer any help beyond hugs and sympathetic smiles. Light evening breezes lifted a few goose-bumps on Kate's arms and legs, but the fading sun kept her comfortably warm. She stretched her arms out on the plastic float, eyes closed, head leaned back. Water lapped against the pool-side, while air rustled through the jungle of plants which filled the patio.

Deep in the pit of her body, light flutters poked right and left. Somebody else was taking a swim, flipping up and down like a tiny fish.

She laid her hands over where her bikini bottom wedged under her belly, and breathed in deeply, letting her stomach expand in and out. She'd just read in one of Carmen's women's magazines about how important it was to reduce stress during pregnancy. Inside, the child floated, then trembled, then floated again.

Oblivious, but happy. Secure and protected.

As Kate took a few more breaths, she fought down the anxiety which ambushed her whenever it got the chance. From across the pool, Sawyer's and Desmond's voices drifted over to her, just far enough away that she couldn't make out all the words. Sawyer was telling a story, though, and every so often Desmond gave a low chuckle.

Desmond had been in Los Angeles for the past two weeks. From the instant Penny had rung them up with a surprise phone call, Kate had felt the same mounting excitement you get when you approach the top of the roller coaster, the one your boyfriend has talked you into going on, even though you told him that they scared you to death. But instead of tipping over the top and catapulting to the bottom at breakneck speed, this roller coaster grew slower the closer it got.

The edge was coming, but it was sure taking its sweet time.

After the initial rush of tears and hugs, after Aaron had met Charlie and the two of them squealed practically nonstop whenever they were together, the sense of the approaching cliff had never left Kate.

Penny was just as Kate had remembered from the Searcher: always interested in everything you said, leaning forward with that small half-smile, coolly reserved and impeccably polite. How Penny and her family had managed as Carmen and David's house guests for those weeks was beyond Kate.

Over on the kitchen side of the patio, Carmen and David squabbled as he arranged firewood in a large pizza oven. Carmen complained that if he didn't get it right, that thing was likely to blow up on him. What was wrong with the regular gas oven for making a pizza, anyway?

David just laughed and continued to poke away at the fire. “It'll be a big surprise for Hugo. He loves making pizza.”

Carole had invited the Humes to stay in the Topanga Canyon house, but they'd declined. The Reyeses were closer to the Santa Monica pier, where their new cruising yacht, Our Mutual Friend II, rested in her slip. Every day Desmond and Penny drove from the Reyes house down to the waterfront, where Desmond supervised the nautical contracting crew busy at work making her sea-worthy.
Claire and Penny emerged from the kitchen with frosted pitchers and glasses. Charlie and Aaron darted around, more like puppies than two excited little boys. Kate slipped from her float into the water, and with a few swift strokes reached the pool-side.

“What you got there, Missy Claire?” Sawyer said.

“Mai Tais, virgin and otherwise.”

“How about some plain Demerara without all the fruity goodness?” said Desmond.

Claire gave a swift nod towards the house. “In the kitchen, on the counter.”

Kate beached herself as neatly as a seal, then took a cocktail glass from Claire.

Claire smiled, even though her lip trembled. “Two virgins on the rocks.”

Sawyer and Desmond chuckled. At first Penny darted stiff glances at them, then broke down into her own small laugh. “I'll take a virgin, too.”

“No!” Claire said. “Really?”

Kate didn't even have to hear Penny's answer, because Desmond's broad grin said it all.

Penny gave Claire's middle a close look. “I might ask the same of you.”

A tense second ticked by before Claire said, “Somebody's got to play lifeguard to these children, right?” Over on the other side of the pool, Carmen had left David to his own devices and was now fastening Charlie and Aaron into their life vests. It was ridiculous, really, because both boys swam like fish, but Carmen insisted.

Her house, her rules, Kate thought. At home Aaron dives to the bottom all the time. Home? Who was she kidding? Since they had come to live with the Reyeses in this past week, the Topanga house seemed like a hotel you had once stayed in, but which soon blurred together with all the others.

That would be just like Sawyer, to open his mouth. It was clear that Claire wanted to tell Hugo before anyone else, so Kate slid to Sawyer's side and poured him a Mai Tai. “Here you go, unless you want Demerara on the rocks.”

Sawyer took the glass with a grin. I guess you decided for me, sweetheart.”

Did Penny just wink at me? Yes, she had.

In her smooth accents, Penny pointed to the Mai Tai pitcher and said to Kate, “It goes so much easier that way, when we decide. Who's going to drink all this, I wonder?”

Kate laughed. “I don't know. David has a beer already.”

“Perhaps Hugo can make a dent in it when he arrives,” Penny said.

Claire took a non-alcoholic sip. “Hurley doesn't drink.”

“I guess it's up to Carole and Carmen, then,” Kate remarked.

“Oh, good,” Claire said. “We can watch the grand-mums get drunk.”

Penny gave a confused glance over to Carole, who'd joined Carmen in boy-wrangling. “Grand-
mums?"

During Kate's Island time-skipping adventures, she had met Charles Widmore: first as a youth, as a man in his forties, and finally on Hydra Island as a septuagenarian. Penny's tone carried the same sharp edge as her father's.

Claire blushed a deep rose-pink. “Oh bother, that just slipped out. I was saving it for Hurley. And Carmen.”

All at once Penny's stiffness melted, as she put her arms around Claire and Kate both. “So we're all in the same boat.”

Claire giggled. “It's like it's contagious.”

“When are you due, Penny?” Kate asked.

“October 29. What about you, Claire?”

“Middle of December. And Kate's due in September,” Claire replied. “I just know that they'll all play together.”

A sick fear washed over Kate at the thought of her baby being born in prison. Even at its dizzying height, the roller coaster advanced another couple of feet through stagnant air toward its summit.

“Kate, are you all right?” Penny said, steering her to a chair beneath an umbrella-covered table. “You look a bit peaked.”

As Claire and Penny clustered around her, Kate shook her head, not wanting to speak at first. Finally she said, “It's just that I'm worried.”

Desmond strode over, carrying a glass of dark rum garnished with lime, Sawyer at heel. “Worried about what, sweetheart?”

“Today's visit with Dan Norton, for one thing.”

“I was wondering how that went,” Claire said. “You didn't mention anything.”

“It's not what's happening,” Kate began. “It's what's not happening. Every time I go to the store, I expect to not come back. But they just sit there, watching. Then, when we got back from Norton's office, there were two of them. Two cars this time.”

“We almost don't notice them anymore,” Penny remarked. “Your solicitor had no more suggestions as to who they might be?”

Kate shook her head, but Desmond broke in. “M.I., I'd say.”

“M what?” Sawyer asked.

“Military intelligence.”

“Oh, God,” said Kate. Every science fiction movie she'd ever seen leaped into her imagination. They probably had scanning devices aimed at the house, maybe even listening ones. A few days ago she and Claire had driven past Star of the Sea parish, where two black SUVs squatted in the parking lot. She had spun a donut and peeled out of there, terrified that they'd follow, but no one out of place had appeared in her rear view mirror.
Claire had remarked that if they were really good at following people, she and Kate wouldn't even have noticed them.

Desmond drained the first half of his drink in a long swallow. “You want to know what I think?”

“Shoot,” Sawyer said.

“Kate, you heard the story. Remember how Pen knew to aim the Searcher for the Island? When the Swan Hatch imploded, the physicists detected it.”

“Kind of like a seismograph for an earthquake, right?” Claire said. “You can find the, what's it called?”

“The epicenter,” Desmond answered.

“It lit up the instruments like a lightning flash,” Penny added. “They calculated the coordinates within the hour.”

Desmond finished his drink and poured himself another. “Same principle, love. The church is where Hurley comes and goes. Hurley most likely makes a blip like the implosion, only not such a big one.”

“You'd be surprised,” Sawyer said with a wry tone.

“James,” Kate said, even as she melted a little at his rascal's grin.

“Missy Claire here knows what I'm talkin' about.”

Kate rolled her eyes, hoping Claire would back her up. Instead, Claire chuckled for the first time in what felt like days.

The boys dashed towards the pool-side as Carmen yelled, “Walk!” Too late, though, and into the air they leaped as Aaron yelled, “Cannonball!” Charlie followed close behind, and the two of them hit the water together. The spray reached Kate and everyone else seated around the table, as the boys bobbed to the surface like small orange corks.

“Mummy!” Charlie called out to Penny. “Why does the water stink?”

Penny rolled her eyes, but not so Charlie could see her. “Remember what Mummy said, dear? That's the chlorine.”

Charlie said to Aaron in a solemn voice, “The ocean doesn't have chlorine.”

“What's it have?” Aaron asked.

Charlie looked at his parents as if unsure, then answered, “Salt. Lots of salt.”

* * * * * * * *

As the sky darkened to violet, a thin sickle of a moon rose. David Reyes's pizza went unbaked, so Kate raided the refrigerator for cold chicken. Now that she wasn't sick anymore, hunger burned inside her like a flame: for eggs, cheese, yogurt, but especially meat.

Claire poured the almost-full pitcher of alcoholic Mai Tais down the sink. She took a drumstick for herself, then set it uneaten on the kitchen counter.
Kate pulled strips of meat off of a chicken thigh. “Stomach topsy-turvey?” She tried to keep her voice low, so that Carmen wouldn't overhear. “Sometimes it can happen at night, too.”

Claire shook her head, her face pale under the kitchen lights. “Just worried. It's been a whole day.”

Carmen wrapped the pizza in foil and said to no one in particular, “May Day, at sunset. That's what he told us last time.”

“Maybe something came up,” Claire said in a shaky voice. “Or maybe he drove up to Topanga, but we weren't there.”

Carmen shook her head. “I remember him saying that he was coming by here first.”

“You know how the Island can go,” Kate said with a confidence she didn't feel. At Claire's stricken expression, she wished she hadn't spoken at all. “I'm sure Hurley's fine, Claire.”

Claire gave a weak smile. “I'm going to settle the boys for the night.” Desmond had set up a dome tent for the boys in the maid's room next to his and Penny's bedroom. Charlie and Aaron had filled the tent with toys, flashlights, and sleeping bags.

_Every night's an adventure_, Kate said to herself as she tossed the picked-off bones into the trash and wiped the counters.

Instead of going to her own room, though, she headed for the path which circled around the back of the house. Brushing aside ferns and dangling philodendrons, she followed the flagstone walkway to the cabana where Sawyer had set up camp.

He stretched out in a deck chair, writing, his bare chest gleaming a little from sweat and humidity. Other than his IBM Selectric typewriter and a few clothes, he'd brought nothing from the Topanga Canyon house. This time he wasn't tapping away, but instead scrawled across pale stationery with a fountain pen. Kate hung back, watching through the leafy screen, until he capped his pen and glanced up.

“You don't need to spy on me, Freckles.”

She emerged into the golden porch-light. “You writing an epilogue?”

He gave a sigh as he laid the paper aside. “It's a letter.”

“Better than the last one you carried around with you, I hope.”

“You want to snatch it and read it, Smarty-pants?”

Taken aback, she pulled up a chair. “Looks personal.”

“Yeah.”

Night-birds chirped from high in the palm trees, and a light wind rippled the pool surface. Through the foliage, Kate watched Claire come out of the kitchen to sit by the pool, followed by Desmond and David. They didn't sit, though. From where Kate sat, she could faintly hear David's calm-voiced explanation to Claire. They were going to drive up to Star of the Sea parish. Just to have a look around, you understand. She could phone them if Hugo showed up in the meantime. They'd be back in ninety minutes at the latest.

Sawyer's voice was pitched so low it might have been a growl. “Nobody there anymore, from what
old Desmondo said earlier. Miz Hawking's up and gone for good, and not comin' back."

“They have to try,” Kate whispered back. “Claire's frantic, even though she looks calm.”

“Well, Hugo's a big boy. Hey, don't give me that look there. What I mean is, he can take care of himself.” Sawyer reached over for a box big enough to hold a ream of paper. “You never even asked to read my manuscript.”

“I figured you'd share it when you were ready.”

“When Deirdre in the office handed it to that cute li'l intern to make copies, all of a sudden it felt real.” He smoothed the typewritten original with his hand. “Weird, too, signing all those papers giving her negotiating rights.”

“She'll do far better at getting it into print than you or I. She knows agents, people in the business—“ He chuckled. “She said I had a writer-ly name. James Ford.”

“That you do.” Kate took the box and leafed through the first few pages. “Hm, short dedication.” Then she paused, not trusting herself to speak. Something sharp as a chicken bone caught in her throat.

In the middle of the stark white page, four black words stood out like an indictment. “To Clem. I'm sorry.”

She read through the first few pages, caught up at once in the stink of an un-air-conditioned Florida prison, full of hot metal and male sweat. The clang of a door made her jump, because it brought back all too clearly the slam of the Sydney holding cell, as Ed Mars arranged for her flight back to the United States.

It was too much. She rested the manuscript box on her lap. “Not tonight, Sawyer. It's too...”

“Too close to home. I know.” He took Big House from her hands and set it down on the rattan side table.

Across the pool, Carole had switched the lights out and come out to join Claire. She took some wood from the pizza oven and started a fire in a chiminea shaped like a pot-bellied man, with the opening in his belly. Carole handed Claire an afghan, then wrapped up in her own as they sat by the pool-side fire.

“Guess the Beach Boys lied,” Sawyer remarked. “It does rain in California. Or will by morning.”

Dark clouds blotted out what little moon there was. Kate clutched her sleeveless arms and shivered a little, while Sawyer watched her with silent eyes full of night-colored warmth. The look went through her like a knife through soft butter, so that when said, “Wanna come inside for a spell?” she already knew the answer.

She switched off the porch light and followed him in. The one-room cabana contained nothing but a sink, shower, and a twin bed.

“I could haul in the chairs,” he offered.

Instead of answering, she crawled into bed, the stucco wall cool and rough against her back. Wind high in the palms drowned out both Carole and Claire's murmurs, as well as the light rumble of traffic from Santa Monica Boulevard. Pool water slapped against the tile sides, and for a second Kate
was back in Sawyer's shelter on the beach, where the ironwood trees rustled and the surf noisily kissed the shore.

He slid into bed beside her and drew her into a hug, his bare arms roped with smooth muscle. She ran her hand down his flat chest and rippled stomach, drawing in a long breath. He must have taken that as encouragement as he leaned over to kiss her. She could taste the rum on his breath as the kiss grew wider, wetter, more open, until her own kiss traveled across his stubbled cheek and down his neck.

They hadn't slept together since that no-tell motel outside the KC airport, and he hadn't asked. Now Kate mounted the carnival ride of her life, closer than ever to the summit, and once you catapulted over the top of the roller coaster, that's when the breath got pulled out of you in long jagged bursts as everything solid gave way beneath you and you were finally floating, free. Until you hit the bottom.

Best not to think about that right now.

He undid her sarong but hesitated at her bikini bottom until she whispered, "Go on." Then Sawyer's hands took on a life of their own as they roamed over all her skin, warming and rousing her. Even though his wood-chopping days were long behind him and his palms were smooth, the rugged bones beneath remained.

Hot and anxious for him to push himself inside her, she pulled him closer. Instead, he seized her hips and scooted underneath. "Climb on up, cowgirl."

So she did, as he bucked beneath her, hands on her breasts, the edge approaching, the sense of inevitability pushing them closer to the void of an unknown future. Whatever was bound to happen, nothing could stop it, and over they both went. Into each other they fell, silent as wheels on steel rails, because the cabana windows were nothing but open screens, and the rain-heavy night had fallen still. Through gritted silent teeth Kate rode all the way down.

When she slipped off of him, still in free-fall, she caught his eye. "What was in the letter, Sawyer?"

"All right, Delilah. You unmanned me, now you want my secrets." The trace of a laugh in his voice turned serious. "It's to Clementine, once she's eighteen. Tells her pretty much what she needs to know about me, includin' the book. If it ever makes it."

Kate stared at the paneled ceiling while shadows fell on her one by one. "This is because Cassidy's getting married, isn't it? To that accountant at the casino where she works."

"He's adopting Clementine, Kate. And Cass is gonna be momma to his little girl. I'm not standin' in the way of it, 'cause Cass deserves some happiness after the shit-storm I brewed for her. When Clementine's old enough, though, I just want her to—"

"To understand."

He grunted in agreement, then settled himself against her in the narrow bed, his flesh cool instead of roused and warm.

It must be the hormones that made her want to just melt into him, pull him down on her breast, fall with him free as a bird and not think of the ground approaching at thirty-two feet per second squared.

"You still want to read it?" he said, almost asleep.

"No," she said as she pulled a sheet over both of them. "But something tells me you want to get that letter to Dan Norton as soon as possible."
From her pool-side seat, Claire watched the cabana porch light wink off. A few disappointed moths scattered into the gloom. The chiminea's rosy belly fire took away some of the night's chill, but Claire still clutched her fleece blanket like a child locked in a cold, lonely room who has no other comfort.

Her mother stood up from her own pool chair. “Don't you want to come inside? No use getting soaked.”

“Mum, it's just misting.”

Carole huffed a bit, then wrapped Claire in her own afghan, the wool rough against Claire's bare arms. To Claire, her mother looked frail and defenseless, clad only in a thin t-shirt. In the past, her mother's vulnerability had kept the questions at bay. Not now, though. “Mum, is this what my dad used to do?”

“Your dad... What?”

“Say he would show up, and then, well, not?”

Her mother didn't have to speak, as the flash of pain which cross her face answered for her. “There's a sea-wind blowing in,” Carole said in a tight voice. “Salt in the air.”

“I'll take that as a yes.”

Her mother faced her directly, eyes wide with appeal in her haunted face. “Hurley isn't like that, hon.”

“I almost wish he was.”

“No, Claire, you don't.”

Lumps of despair clogged Claire's throat, and she struggled to speak through them. “Mum, don't you see? If he's just ditched me, then at least he's all right, somewhere. As it is—“

“Honey, think of it as him being caught in traffic with no mobile.”

“For a whole day?” Claire pulled the blanket over her head, then pointed to the fire. “I'll put that out.”

Face full of sympathy, Carole nodded.

The kitchen pool door clicked open behind them. Claire spun around, hating that she couldn't conceal her disappointment at the sight of Desmond and David.

“It's like everyone's cleared out,” Desmond said. “The whole church is empty as a tomb.”

David frowned. “How can you just close a church? The truck was still there, though.”

“Did you check the garden?” Claire wanted to know.

“Sorry, sister,” Desmond said. “It was locked.”

“Thanks,” Claire said as she turned away to stare again at the water.
“Try to get some sleep,” Carole said. “We'll talk about what to do in the morning.”

Cocooning herself in a blanket brought to mind days on the Island beach when everyone huddled under wreckage which vibrated under the rain's assault. Soon the survivors had stopped hiding from wetness as inevitable as the sea. It was just water. Eventually you dried off.

Even as mist turned to rain, the hot smell of the sea still hung over the patio. Moisture beaded on her skin and made her hair curl. The night felt very large, and Claire closed her eyes against its huge dark breast.

She must have slept for some time, because when she stirred again her body was stiff from the damp. Some low vibration had woken her, a thrumming that was more than a memory of Island rain. A great weight of air gathered above the pool. The dim golden lights which ringed the pool flickered once, twice, then went dark.

Claire clutched her blanket, trying to stifle any pointless hope. Winds stirred up tiny ripples on the water, black no longer. Over the pool's surface, right at the height of a tall man, the air began to glow.

Closer the water's edge she crept, heart almost leaping out of her chest. The glow in the air swelled, stretched into an almond shape, then split wide open. A burst of light broke through the darkness, blue as an Island sky. A huge shaggy form hung suspended, lit by the blue.

All at once the light winked out, but the round man at its center hovered over the pool for another heart-beat.

Hugo curled into a ball and dropped straight into the pool.

Claire packed all the fear and sadness of the evening into one shrill yell, but the sound of Hugo hitting the water drowned it out. A great wave soaked her to the skin, almost knocking her over. She flung the blankets to the tile as a grinning Hugo bobbed to the surface, his wet mane plastered to his head.

Into the water she dove. The pool waters still sloshed as if in a giant basin, and they thrust her into the pool's center, so that she almost crashed into him.

He pulled her in close with one hand, while treading water with the other. "Oh, man, I thought I'd never get here."

All questions, all worries buried themselves along with her face pressed into his slick, wet neck. She clung to him, all of him, whole and warm in her arms, safe and secure, then wrapped her legs around his belly.

Behind them a security light came on, flooding the pool deck with harsh brightness. She heard her mum shout, "Claire, are you all right?" followed by Carmen's thunderous "Huuuu-go! What are you doing in the pool at this time of night?" They must have woken up Penny as well, because in between Carmen and David's shouts, Penny's "Good heavens, what's this?" could be heard.

None of it mattered. She scrunched her eyes so tight that green spots appeared, and rocked in the center of a chlorine sea, clinging to him as if he was an island, her island.

"Hey, Claire, it's OK. You're kinda choking me."

She let loose her death-grip a bit, then worked her way up his dripping beard to his mouth. He tasted of pool-water and sunlight. Distracted by the kiss, he stopped kicking, and they sank a little. She
finally opened her eyes when he broke off the kiss and gave her an intent stare, his own dark eyes round as saucers.

"Really? For real?"

*Oh my God, he knows. He can feel it.* All she could do was nod, tears of relief running down her face.

Behind her, a high-pitched voice called out, "Mummy, Auntie Claire's swimming. I want to swim, too!"

Hugo squeezed her to him, keeping them both afloat by kicking alone. They turned in a slow half-circle, so that Claire could see Sawyer and Kate hurrying across the poolside. Aaron stood alongside Charlie and said, "Can we, Mummy Kate?"

"You sure can," Kate said.

Penny nodded. Both boys yelled, "Cannonball!" and hit the water at the same time. Carmen gave a few yells about how they were all going to catch their deaths of cold, and what about life vests, but when Kate jumped into the water, Carmen just planted her face in David's shoulder and cried.

Desmond raced to the water dressed in nothing but boxers, then flung himself in as well. Claire pulled herself around to cling to Hugo's back, while Desmond and Hugo hugged like two bears in a stream.

"All this shouting and splashing at three in the morning," Carmen cried out. "The neighbors are going to call the police!"

David steered her towards the French doors which led to their bedroom. "Come on, Carmencita. These folks are gonna need some towels."

Sawyer stubbornly remained pool-side, dodging Kate's attempts to splash him. "Somebody's got to be ring-master of this seal show."

When Charlie clambered up onto his father's shoulders, Aaron darted like a fish over to Hugo. "Me, too!"

Claire floated away as Hugo pulled Aaron up. Sawyer grabbed two long foam fun-noodles and tossed one to each of the men.

"Cage fight!" Hugo yelled.

They tussled in the water as each boy tried to whomp the other with his fun-noodle. When they tired of that, Desmond called out to Charlie, "Hold your breath," then dove beneath the churning water as Hugo followed with Aaron.

Without Hugo to warm her front, Claire started to shiver. The strange force which had filled the night with heat had vanished, and Hugo had to practically pull her out of the pool.

Desmond and Hugo were both talking at once, so excitedly that no one could understand, while at the same time Hugo was trying to hug everyone. David sidled up to Hugo and thrust a couple of bath sheets into his hands, then pointed to Claire. "Son, this girl's cold as a drowned shrimp. You need to take care of her."

Hugo wrapped one towel around her shoulders, then covered her face with the other one as he
blotted her hair, but mostly just dried her tears. In a low voice he said, "Come on, let's go upstairs," then stole a glance over at Aaron.

"They're camping out next to Des and Penny's room."

The syllable came out soft and slow, graced with a smile. "Good."

Everything inside her collapsed into warm surrender. Above, the clouds let down the burdens which they had been carrying around all night, and it began to pour buckets of rain.

(continued)
Hugo woke to the sound of rain beating on the roof, then opened his eyes to the sign of the omega sculpted into the ceiling above his bed. Claire had fallen asleep sprawled across his belly, but sometime in the early morning she had slipped off, and now lay collapsed amid the crumpled covers. Deep in the cave of her body, the child glowed like a tiny red coal.

Claire's loose t-shirt had slid off of her shoulder, and he wanted nothing more than to run his lips over the pale skin, all down her breast and more besides. He didn't dare touch her, though, not even to brush a few stray blonde hairs away from her mouth. He knew that if he did, he'd fall on her and bury his face in her neck, drink her flesh like cold water on a hot afternoon.

He hated to wake her, because he knew how tired she had been the night before, how frantic, how hard she had worked to keep up a brave front. So instead of making love, they both collapsed into sleep under the sign of the omega.

Hugo only knew what that was because back on the Island, Ben was teaching the children Greek. “In English, we say from A to Z,” Hugo had overheard Ben say one day. “For the Greeks, it was alpha to omega. The beginning, and the end.”

Ben's words had haunted Hugo, although he couldn't say why. It had spurred in him a notion that he couldn't shake.

He lay quietly, not wanting to wake Claire, while the sheet draped over his lower body pointed up towards the ceiling like a tent-pole. Claire stirred a little in her sleep and snuggled in closer, wrapping her arm around his belly.

*Why am I always so horny in the morning?* It was pure agony of the sweetest kind, and that slender arm held him down more firmly than any restraint. To distract himself, he stared back at the great white letter which seemed to bear down on him.

A scrap of catechism floated up from the depths. Hugo had spent most of his time in Fr. Aguillar's confirmation class blowing spit-wads at his friends or making farting noises when the priest's back was turned. The priest had been way younger then, newly arrived from Nicaragua.

“*The last shall be first, and the first shall be last,*” the priest had droned over noisy boys chattering in English and Spanish. At something in his tone, though, they hushed.

Omega, the last.

Jacob had bled out in Ben's arms. A knife had torn Jack in the side. Who knows how many centuries protectors had died like this, like a VHS tape stuck in an endless loop?

He ran his hand over his own belly, wincing as he imagined a knife piercing the soft flesh, blood squirting out. He didn't want to get stabbed, or pushed off a cliff, or squashed under a rock, just so that the Island would get a new protector.

*Maybe there's a better way,* Ben had said.

Sure, the Island needed protection. That went without saying. But why did the mantle have to pass from one to the next stained in blood?

Omega. The end.
Whatever that better way might be, he wasn't going to puzzle it out this morning, because Claire turned towards him, wide blue eyes streaked with sleep and love. Grinning, she slid her hand down his body, pulling from his depths a low, soft groan.

The whole bed shook as he rolled over towards her. She stretched out her swan-like neck in invitation, and suddenly he wanted to devour her, cover all her flesh with his mouth, drink her into him.

Her neck tasted even better than he thought, but his beard must have tickled her, because she said, “Umm, fuzzy.”

“I guess I should shave it.”

“Don't,” she said, rubbing her face all over his beard. “It's fluffy. Like you.”

He made his way up to the pink tear-drop of her earlobe, until she took him full in hand and guided him into her body. Down he fell, drowning in her, his mouth full of her neck until he came up for air and breathed into her ear, “Claire, I love you so much, thanks, thank you,” over and over.

“Thanks? For what?”

For what? For everything. That was too big for words, though. All that came out was, “For having me.”

She gripped him with a gaze unmoving as her flesh. “I'll always have you. I love you too, Hurley.”

If sliding inside her had filled him with tortured delight, that was nothing compared to this complete stillness, broken only by the beating of blood through his flesh and hers.

Then with a grin of devilment she stopped his breath by pulling him down into the red dark with wild rocking movements, and the bed shook all the way into morning.

* * * * * * * *

Hugo had barely finished his scrambled eggs when his mother fixed him with “that look” and said, “All right, mister, we're waiting for an explanation.”

Everyone ringed the big kitchen table, and eight pairs of eyes scrutinized him. Claire hadn't asked why he'd been so late. She had just clung to him as if his presence was all that counted. Not his mom, though.

A small television screen mounted on the kitchen counter chattered in the background, as a weather commentator pointed to a Los Angeles map covered with images of thick storm clouds.

Carmen glared at the TV. “David, turn that thing off.”

The announcer said, “Threats of mud-slides and rising water levels have made the following streets impassable—“ until the sound shut off with a click.

After that reprieve, Hugo had his mother's full attention again. He shuddered, because this wasn't going to be easy. “I think, um, maybe the Door's broken.”

At first it didn't register with anyone but Claire. He hated the wild flash of pain and fear which crossed her face.

“So let me guess,” said Sawyer. “You don't have the repair manual, do you, hoss?”
Kate leaned forward, full of concern. “Hurley, what happened?”

“Ben didn't come with me to the Door this time, 'cause it makes him sick. But it was cool because Vanessa and Nancy, they come to fish up by where the old village used to be. You know, the fake one. Only it's not really fake anymore.”

Desmond looked puzzled. “Decoy village?”

“You didn't see it when you ran circles around the Island?”

Desmond shrugged, but Hugo didn't want to detour for an explanation. “I checked the sun, it was time to open the Door, but there was nothing but rock. Sometimes it would kind of glow, or the rock would get a little soft, but mostly nothing. Nada.”

It had been horrible, like getting stuck in a blind alley when you thought you knew the way out. Hugo had felt his way around the small chamber behind the rusted Dharma-logo door, then climbed up to the top of the hill to peer through Window Rock out at the glittering sea. Below, the women cast their nets and hung fish on racks, trying not to pay too much attention to him.

“Finally I sent Vanessa to go get Ben,” Hugo went on. “She took an outrigger, but it still took a couple hours. I guess by the time Ben got there I was kind of frantic.”

Frantic wasn't the word. He had practically been in tears, shaking. Night had fallen over the rocky beach, but instead of stopping for roasted fish or even water, Hugo kept prodding the cold and unresponsive stone.

“It got really dark, and the rocks turned kinda mushy. And glowed, so I could see streetlights through it. But I still couldn't get through. Finally the church appeared, but it looked wrong. Everything was dark. Not like the lights were out or anything, 'cause the parking lot was bright. But still dark, if you know what I mean.”

“Indeed I do, brother,” Desmond said. “Mrs. Hawking is gone.”

“So what?” said Carmen.

Claire and Kate started speaking at the same time. “Do you remember, those guys in the van—” “It's not safe anymore—” “She must have known—” “Where did she go, anyway?”

Penny spoke up. “That part's easy. She's in London, settling my father's financial affairs.”

“That Door, though,” Sawyer said. “It can't just depend on Miz Hawking. After all, Jacob used it, Richard, a few of them Others, long before she was even an item.”

In the silence which fell, Penny said, “Consider this. Perhaps it's not so much a function of Eloise Hawking. Perhaps the Door wouldn't let you use it, if doing so would put you in danger.”

Claire squeezed Hugo's hand so tight that it pinched. Penny must have seen Claire's anxiety, because she dialed it back a notch or two. “Perhaps danger is too strong a word. Call it 'uncertainty.'”

As Sawyer leaned back and sipped coffee, he spoke to Hugo and Claire both. “Or perhaps your teleporter ain't broke at all. Seems like it put you right where you needed to be. You can lower your back fur, Mamacita, 'cause Hugo ain't goin' nowhere.”

“Except that he has to get back. We, I mean.”
“You're in the right place, brother,” Desmond said to Hugo. “Because we have a—“

He was interrupted by the loud ring of the rear doorbell.

“Well, looky who’s here,” David said as he unlocked the back door. “Carmen, my love, you called for a priest, and one arrived.”

* * * * * * * *

The seventeen years since Hugo's catechism class hadn't been kind to Father Aguillar, although his eyes twinkled with kindness. Water pooled at his feet as he stood in the doorway.

Carmen took the priest's dripping wind-breaker. “Father, you're soaked.”


Hugo stood up to shake Fr. Aguillar's hand. He was smaller and greyer than Hugo remembered, not much taller than Kate and wiry besides. Out on the driveway was parked a large white panel van, its sides blazoned with gold and blue letters which read, “Our Lady of Lourdes Meal Services.”

As Hugo was about to offer Fr. Aguillar a seat, Sawyer pushed his own chair back. “Take a load off, padre. It can get a little crazy around here.”

The priest's scarred face twisted into a smile. “I had eight brothers and sisters. My mother deserved sainthood for simply getting meals onto the table.”

Lured by the doorbell, Aaron and Charlie padded into the kitchen. Charlie clambered up onto his mother's lap, while Aaron sidled up to Claire and stared at Fr. Aguillar. “What's wrong with your face?”

“Aaron, honey—“ Claire began.

Fr. Aguillar waved her off. “It's all right, dear. What happened, young man, was that I was hit by lightning.”

“Really?” Aaron said, studying him from within the circle of Claire's arms.

“Really.” Long strands of scar tissue covered the left side of Fr. Aguillar's face and ran down the neck of his open-collared shirt.

“Did it hurt?”

“I didn't even know it happened until I woke up in the hospital.”

Hugo glanced up at his mother, making sure she was doing all right. Fr. Aguillar had been struck during Grandpa Tito's funeral, when a sudden storm had broken out.

He had lived, but people in the parish said that he was never the same afterward. During prayer he would sit quietly as if listening to something beautiful, the edge of his ravaged mouth turned up in a small smile.

The old women of the parish said that he sometimes heard the singing of angels.

Jacob's words rang in Hugo's memory, from what seemed like a lifetime ago. What if you weren't cursed? What if you were blessed? Maybe Fr. Aguillar was blessed, too.
Curiosity satisfied, Aaron wandered into the living room to join Kate and Sawyer. Soon only Hugo, his parents, Claire, Desmond, and the priest remained around the kitchen table.

Fr. Aguillar beamed at Claire. “Carmen has told me what a lovely bride you are.”

Claire’s cheeks flushed pink. “Thanks.”

The priest’s next words chilled Hugo, though. “The coffee and pastry were lovely, but we don’t have much time.”

“Much time?” Carmen squawked.

Fr. Aguillar fixed her with a calm expression. “Let me tell you how my brother priests and sister nuns survived in Nicaragua. We didn’t sit and wait for the contras to show up. By the time they arrived, we were already long gone.”

To Hugo, it was like the solution to a troublesome puzzle. He was about to speak when Claire got there first. “Father, I don’t know if Carmen or David told you, but Hurley has a way of coming to and from the Island, one which is... unusual. We were talking about it right before you got here. Even if it was working right, and we’re not sure it is, I wouldn’t be able to go to the Island that way anyway.”

She paused. Hugo’s heart sang at her next words, even though they came as no surprise. “It’s because I’m going to have a child.”

Carmen gasped and clutched the neckline of her blouse as if it had suddenly tried to strangle her, while both David and Fr. Aguillar broke out into wide grins.

“Well, well, son,” David said. “You been busy.”

Now Claire and Hugo both flushed beet-red. If it wasn’t bad enough to be sitting at the breakfast table with your parents both speculating how and when you’d fathered a baby, his mom began to laugh and cry at the same time. “Oh, Mother Mary and the saints, now you have to get married.” Then she grabbed Claire’s face in both her hands and covered it with kisses.

At the sound of Carmen’s shrieks, everyone poured back into the kitchen. Fr. Aguillar suppressed a broad smile and said, “I thought that was why you asked me here, Carmen: for a wedding.” He pulled himself to his feet, crackling all over with bantam-weight energy. At once Hugo remembered how Fr. Aguillar had told his confirmation classes that as a young man, he had fought in prize-fights to earn money for seminary.

Maybe it was Carmen’s energetic kissing, or that Claire had finally reached a tipping point. When she began to cry, Penny and Kate both headed for her.

“Come on, love,” Penny said. “Let’s get you ready.”

* * * * * * *

Claire wasn’t accustomed to being fussed over. Sure, she and Rachel used to give each other perms, and once Rachel had let her pierce the cartilage of her upper ears. But from the moment when Carmen swept Claire away to her bedroom and dragged out a large trunk from the depths of the walk-in closet, four pairs of hands flew over her from every angle.

“This was my wedding dress,” Carmen said, holding up a yellowed garment which could have held two of Claire.
Kate cleared her throat. “Umm...”

Carmen shook her head, doubtful. “You're right. It is out of fashion.”

“But lovely,” Carole put in. “Is this the petticoat?”

Carmen nodded. “My mother embroidered it.” Her eyes took on a faraway look, and regret tinged her voice. “She wanted to make a traditional dress for me, but I said no, I wanted a modern one like in the magazines. So she made this instead, for me to wear underneath.”

Grey light poured into the bedroom through the closed French doors. Even though the rain had slowed to a drizzle, the day was still dark as evening. Claire held up the petticoat to the light, imagining the needle bringing birds and flowers to life out of thick, brightly colored thread. The once-white fabric had taken on the faint golden hue of heavy cream.

“I'd like to wear this,” Claire said. “If you don't mind.”

Carmen just started to sniffle again.

“Oh, look,” Kate exclaimed, lifting a silk piano shawl from the trunk.

Carmen said, “My mother cleaned for a lady who gave it to her. I never wanted to just throw it over the piano.” She held it up to Claire's face. “That blue is your color, isn't it?”

“Looks like we have everything except the 'something new,'” Carole remarked.

Carmen peered out the window at the flower gardens which ringed the pool, their blossoms beaten down by rain. “So much for that.”

Instead, she took a bunch of roses from an altar in the corner of her bedroom. The pale pink flowers' edges were tinged with dark red. “You have to have flowers, Claire,” she said.

“May I?” Penny said, reaching for the bouquet. “I've a notion, but it'll require nail trimmers and some tape.”

As the other women watched, Penny clipped the thorns from some of the roses, wrapped their stems in tape, then wove them together with a few ferns into a flower crown. “See, here's something new. These particular roses have never been made into a garland before.”

The women started their chattering anew, and Claire once more submitted to a flurry of hands and excited voices. Kate brought Claire's make-up case and painted her face with tender pinks and pale blues.

Claire stepped into the embroidered skirt and cinched the drawstring tight around her waist. Carole draped her in the blue piano shawl, then fluffed her hair into a golden halo.

She was ready for the crowning touch. Penny lowered the rose garland onto Claire's head, while Kate finished up with a few dabs on Claire's cheeks and chin.

Carmen wrapped the remaining roses in a lace kerchief, so the stems wouldn't prick Claire's hands. “Every marriage has some thorns, and a few always stick through,” Carmen said. “This reminds you.”

Carole whispered, “You look lovely.”

Claire's head spun a little as she looked around at the chorus of women. It was like playing dress-up,
but bigger and more serious. “I suppose we're ready, then.”

“What about your shoes?” Kate said.

“I can't wear trainers, can I?” She had no others, though. “I'll just go barefoot, I guess.”

* * * * * * * *

Claire stood in the Reyes's red and gold living room, flanked by Kate and Penny, while David and Sawyer flanked Hugo. “Don't worry, Goldberry," Sawyer said. "I won't let Tom Bombadil here run out on you."

Claire stifled a giggle, embarrassed because Father Aguillar stood before them, waiting.

"James," Kate hissed. "The kids behave better than you."

From their position on the living room rug, the boys stared up at the grown-ups. Then Aaron crowed, "That's my mum, getting married!"

Fr. Aguillar placed one hand on Claire's shoulder and another on Hugo's. From up close, Claire could see how pale he was, how papery his skin, and how his eyes shone.

"Friends old and new, this man Hugo and this woman Claire have something to share with you. They have given me this great honor as well.” He turned to the couple with a smile and continued.

"There was no Church to witness the marriage of our first parents. Now you may think, Ah, a wedding, some cake, music, a party. Or you think, the Mass, the exchange of rings, the lighting of a candle. But like clothing, these are garments which have been put on or taken off throughout the ages. They are part of the ceremony of marriage. They are not what marriage is.

"We priests are accused of using fancy language, but sometimes it is necessary to be precise. Hugo, perhaps you remember what I have told you in the past. Claire, perhaps this is new to you. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward spiritual grace. The reality of flesh, your flesh makes up the outward sign, the physical matter, so to speak. And the inward spirit? Ah, that comes from the one thing that will make your marriage real: the promise. Hugo, tell Claire yours."

When Hugo hesitated, Claire could feel the nervousness which radiated off of him as he spoke. "Claire, a long time ago, my friend Jack - your brother Jack - told me to stay with you. I didn't always do that. And we didn't get to know each other as well as we could. Then, we thought we might have a chance, bad stuff happened, and we were apart for a long time. Now, all of this, it's like a miracle. A second chance to do that now, to stay with you, forever. And to take care of you, and Aaron, and..."

Turning toward Sawyer, Hugo said, "Is it supposed to be this hard?"

"You're doin' fine," Sawyer answered. "At least it don't sound rehearsed."

"Now you, Claire," Father Aguillar said. "Your promise."

Claire paused a second, her hands tight in Hugo's grip. It felt a little bit like doing improv on stage, and all of a sudden she wasn't nervous at all. Instead, a column of happiness shot up through her, and her voice rang out in confidence. "Hurley, after my house on the Island got blown up, I asked you if we were dead. You said, 'Well, if this is heaven, then heaven sucks.'"

Aguillar smiled, a few people laughed, and Hugo chuckled. Claire went on, "Even though it was lost
on me then, that was the beginning of heaven. Now I know that heaven is wherever I am, as long as it's with you. As your wife, forever, with no one else, no matter what happens." Her confidence wavered for a second, and she searched frantically for words, finding none except, "I promise."

Aguillar gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "That was fine, dear." He stepped back and said to Hugo, "The ring?"

"Oh, yeah. Almost forgot."

He slid the wedding band onto her finger, and the metal grew warm as it had the first time, as the ring glowed with heat from within. The ring had formed into one unbroken whole, with no need for a jeweler to weld the two bands together.

Then she had no time to wonder about it, because Hugo bent down to cover her mouth with a wide, deep kiss, skewing her rose crown a bit.

Fr. Aguillar raised his arms, his voice surprisingly loud for a man his age and size. "Hugo and Claire: give them your blessing!"

In the midst of clapping and cheering, Carmen said in a dazed voice, "Was that the wedding?"

"Yes, Carmencita." David then gave Hugo a wide, generous hug. "Congratulations, son. And you, Claire, you were beautiful. The second-most beautiful bride I've ever seen in my life."

His wife gave David a little push and rolled her eyes. "Hugo, next time give your mother some time for a little more planning." Then she slammed her hand over her mouth, realizing what she just said.

"Let him get through this one first," David said. "Before going on about the next one."

"Oh, you know what I mean," she said, flustered.

Aaron piped up, "Mummy, what about cake? I want cake!"

Before Claire could answer, Fr. Aguillar cleared his throat with a small sound which managed to silence the room. "Now, children, it's time. The contras are on their way."

"That's what I started to say earlier," Desmond burst out. "We've got a boat."

(continued)
Hugo hadn’t been married twenty minutes when it became apparent that this wasn’t any ordinary wedding. His mouth still tingled from Claire’s warm kiss, and the scent of roses from her flower crown lingered on his beard. Aaron had mentioned cake, but Fr. Aguillar’s severe expression dictated that there wasn’t going to be any. On the other side of the living room, his mother was wringing her hands from nerves.

“Blessings on you both,” the priest said. “Now for plans.”

Penny gathered up Charlie into her arms, as if waiting for a signal.

“Right,” said Desmond, drawing his wife and child close in. “We’ll meet everyone down at Marina Del Rey. Our Mutual Friend II is at Poseidon’s Marina, Slip 16.”

Sawyer laced his arm through Kate’s as if he were escorting her through a square-dance promenade, instead of towards the back door. “Roger that, Captain.”

“Wait,” Hugo said. “What about, you know, the dudes outside? In the black SUVs?”


Carmen rolled her eyes at Sawyer’s butchered Spanish, while Hugo tried to sort out the little shadow which hovered over Kate. She was going to pull something, he was sure of it, although he couldn’t say what. “Guys, go straight to the pier, OK?”

“You got it,” Sawyer said, but Kate wouldn’t meet Hugo’s glance.

It wasn’t until the back door clicked behind the two of them that Carmen whirled around to Hugo, and the sorrow in her face cut him to the heart. “I won’t have this! One son’s already gone, and we never see him. He never calls.” To Fr. Aguillar she pleaded, “Now after losing this one, twice, you’re taking him from me.”

“Carmen, love,” David broke in.

She swung from Fr. Aguillar to her husband. “Now I have no sons.”

Hugo grabbed the notepad and pencil by the phone, and rushed forward. If he didn’t act quickly, this was going to spiral out of control, and time was of the essence. “Mom, listen. You got to do exactly what I say here.”

Something in his tone got through to her, because she fell silent. Hugo scrawled on the pad as he spoke. “You and Dad, you got to fly to Hawai’i, then take the ferry to Moloka’i. When you get there, there’s a town called Kaunakakai...”

*Oh, for the love of Mary, don't let me forget the name. Or how to spell it.*

The word leaped into his head, lit up like a sign. “Kaunakakai. Right outside, on the way to the beach, there’s this diner called the Blue Lagoon. Just ask anybody where it is. Go there and there’ll be a big guy there, bigger than me, with lots of tattoos.”

David gave Hugo the look he used to give him right before his last hospitalization, but his tone showed interest. “What's this man's name, son?”
Hugo came up blank. *A friend of Pele's* wouldn't make any sense to them. “I dunno. But it doesn't matter, because he's kinda expecting you. He'll help you rent a house.”

“A house?” David said. “You're not making sense.”

“Yes, he is,” Claire put in. “Hurley, you're going to move the Door to Moloka'i, aren't you?”

Love surged through Hugo as he gazed at Claire with all the warmth he could muster. *She gets it. She really gets it.* “Claire's right. Now listen, 'cause this is important. You got to rent a house, not buy one.” *Or Pele's gonna be mega-mad.* “And on the, what do you call them, Claire? The solstice and the what?”

“The equinox. On the solstice and the equinox.”

“Yes. I'll be there. We both will, and we'll visit.” *Until you're ready to come to the Island.* That wasn't going to happen right away, though, so no point in bringing it up. *All in good time,* he thought, as he pressed the streaked note into his mother's hands.

Desmond and Penny had been waiting patiently through all this. Now Desmond sprung into action, steering Penny and Charlie towards the door.

“You too, Desmondo,” Hugo said. “You watch your back.”

From his pocket Desmond took the compass. He must have polished it, because it shone like a bronze star as he tossed it into the air before catching it. The laugh in his voice matched the one in his bright eyes, and briefly Hugo saw him as he had appeared on that weird beach under the multi-colored stars. Desmond's white linen shirt and blue jacket flickered into that of an old-fashioned sea captain's, and as the compass glittered, so did the gold braid on his shoulders.

Penny's sensible “Come along, then,” broke the spell, and Desmond was himself once more.

From the circle of Claire's arms, Aaron started to whimper, and Hugo at once knew why. Pretty much the only friend Aaron had ever known was disappearing, and as far as Aaron knew, for good.

“It's all right, Snugglepot,” Claire said. “We'll see Charlie on the boat.”

All at once Carole's arms wrapped around Hugo's neck. In a hoarse, urgent voice she said, “You take care of her, you hear?” When she broke off to hug her daughter, his own mom moved in to hug him even harder.

Cold, hard rain blew into the kitchen when Fr. Aguillar opened the back door. “Children, it's time.”

* * * * * * * *

Rain beat a drumline on the roof of Kate's Ford Escalade as she careened down Santa Monica Boulevard towards Highway 1. Sawyer glowered from the passenger seat, knowing better than to interfere or comment on her driving, even though his heart rose in his throat. Two, then three sets of emergency vehicles passed them, going in both directions.

At least the goons in front of *Chez* Reyes hadn't been parked in their usual spot. Maybe they were made of brown sugar and were afraid they'd melt. Sawyer reached out to turn on the radio for weather and traffic, but she laid her hand on his.

“It won't make any difference,” Kate said.
“Make any difference how?”

She didn't answer. He soon found out, though, when she didn't slide into the left turn lane at the PCH to head south to Marina Del Rey. Instead, she swerved right, almost skidding out on pavement slick with water and mud.

“Goddammit, Kate! You shanghai-ing me?”

She flinched when he shouted, but didn't stop driving. “I want some things from the house.”

He and Kate had only stayed at Chez Reyes for a couple weeks, but Sawyer had already put the big Topanga Canyon house behind him. What the hell did she want back there, anyway? He stole a look at her neck, where the diamond ring hung. So it wasn't that.

“Some hiking boots that fit, for one. I went for three months with blisters, remember?”

He did. Back in their early beach days, he had once held her foot and daubed flecks of blood with scraps of moss. The broken blisters had never gotten infected, but they kept reappearing, a consequence of ill-fitting boots scavenged from a dead passenger lying in the wreckage.

She was still rattling off her list. “...The baby clothes I bought. Pampers. Some pads for... afterwards.”

“Sir Hugo said we'd have everything we need.”

“And he knows what about babies? Claire worked her fingers to the bone trying to keep Aaron warm and dry.”

“On the beach, Kate. You been in the Barracks. They got stuff there you and Claire can use.”

“Not for babies, though. There haven't been babies there for forty years.”

“Beggin' to differ with you, sweetheart, but according to the man who should know, there's babies there now.”

“They're... Others. They're used to it.” At once she clapped her hand to her mouth as she realized what she'd said. “You know what I mean.” Then, sullen as a disgruntled teenager, she added, “You didn't have to come with me. You could have gone with Hurley and Fr. Aguillar in the van.”

Sawyer heaved a sigh. “What, and let you drive up here on your lonesome? All right, but we ain't lingering. Grab what you want and let's get the hell out.”

All along Highway 1, brown waterfalls cascaded down the hillsides, sending slimy water oceanwards. Opaque waves as dark as the sky heaved up almost to the road itself. Even with the windshield wipers at full speed, Sawyer still had to strain to see the road ahead.

Only one more stoplight till Topanga Canyon Road. Sawyer was increasingly coming to believe that there was a God in heaven, even if His sense of humor ranged from ridiculous to savage. Well, if there was one, Topanga Canyon Road would be barricaded due to mudslides.

On the other hand, he really wouldn't want that to happen. Sawyer had never seen an LA mudslide, but he knew they could bring entire houses down in minutes. Cars got submerged, and while you had a fighting chance in water, good luck swimming through thick brown goo.

So he saw with a mixture of relief and anxiety that the mountain road was clear, even though way
more people were headed down to the PCH than away from it.

* * * * * * * *

Claire huddled down in a stuffy cardboard box in the back of Fr. Aguillar's meal-delivery van, her arms wrapped around Aaron. The little boy clung tightly to Willie the Orca and Skippy the Bush Kangaroo, squeezing their plump plush bodies almost flat. Fr. Aguillar had refused them a flashlight, so they sat virtually blind, forbidden to speak above a whisper.

At first Aaron had balked at climbing inside the refrigerator box. In a moment of inspiration, Claire had said, “Let's play a game. What kind of dinosaur are you?”

“T-rex!” Aaron had answered at once.

“What kind is Charlie?”

“A velociraptor!”

“Good. The two of you have been in cages in the dinosaur zoo for ever so long. Now, though, you've escaped the zoo, and you're going to get on a boat. It's going to take you back to the island where you were hatched.”

“From an egg!” Aaron said, giving a few swift claps. “Dinosaurs aren't born. They come from eggs.”

“That's right, Cuddlepot. But the drivers don't know they have a dinosaur in the box, so you have to be very, very quiet until we reach the boat. Doesn't that sound like fun?”

It had felt like a nightmare to Claire, but Aaron had grinned and jumped inside the box.

Now every bounce of the van jarred her bottom and lower back. They stopped for a long time, much longer than a traffic light cycle, but all Claire could hear was Hugo's remark, “Looks like they were parked outside the subdivision.” Then, tense with anxiety, he said, “Oh, crap, here they come.”

Fr. Aguillar answered with a laugh in his voice, “Don't worry. The collar still has meaning for a lot of G-men.”

Claire hung on to Aaron in the dark, hoping and praying he didn't speak, or have to pee, or want to know what kind of boat could travel to Dinosaur Island. From his little fidgeting movements she could tell he was bored.

The delay went on for a very long time, and she braced herself for the box being ripped open, the blinding glare of a flashlight in her eyes, Aaron ripped from her arms—

Stop it, she told herself in no uncertain terms. You hid from far worse on the Island and survived. She began to rock Aaron back and forth, just as she used to when he was a baby, and slowly, gradually, his fidgets ended.

Finally the van coughed to a start. Loudly Fr. Aguillar said, “San Jesús Malverde, gracias.”

Hugo's answer was a long, slow, “Dude.”

On they rumbled until the van pulled to a stop once more, and the box side-flap opened to reveal Hugo's smiling face. As he helped her to her feet, Claire squinted in the pearly grey light, overcome with the familiar smells of salt and rotting seaweed.
“Mummy, mummy, there's the dinosaur boat!” Aaron shrieked, pointing to Charlie, who was perched on deck of a yacht a good twenty meters long. Equally luxurious craft bobbed on either side in their own slips, but other than themselves and the Humes, the marina was deserted.

Light as a cat, Desmond leaped from deck to dock. “So where are Kate and Sawyer, then?”

“Dunno,” Hugo answered. “I thought they'd be here by now. We had an unscheduled stop.”

“I told you, son,” Fr. Aguillar said. “Cops respect the collar.”

“I think it was when you told them your Beemer was in the shop, which was why you had to drive the church van.”

“They respect the collar even more when they think it's attached to money.”

Claire bent down to Aaron. “Say goodbye to Fr. Aguillar, and thank you for getting us to the dinosaur boat.”

The priest gave Aaron a solemn handshake. “You're welcome, Mr. T-Rex.”

Stretching up, she kissed Fr. Aguillar's leathery, scarred cheek. “Thanks from me, too.” As an afterthought she added, “Who's Jesús Malverde?”

Fr. Aguillar grinned. “The patron of outlaws and smugglers.”

Desmond was still preoccupied, though. “We can't ring up Kate or Sawyer, since you made us leave all the mobiles behind.”

At once Claire felt a change along the skin of Hugo's arm, as a depth opened in his eyes. The unseen glow warmed her, but frightened her a little, too.

“Damn,” Hugo said. “They've kinda gone off mission.”

“What?” Desmond said, sharp.

Claire could barely hold on to Aaron, anxious as he was to join Charlie on deck. To Desmond she said, “Might I ask the captain's permission to come aboard?”

Before Desmond could answer, Penny called out, “Of course, Claire. Just mind the gangplank, as it’s a bit wobbly.”

Tightly gripping Aaron's hand in hers, Claire tried not to look down at the churning water between the dock and the yacht. Behind her, Hugo said, “Dezzy, let's get underway, take off, whatever. Head north along the coast, but slowly.”

Claire spun around, despite the swaying motion of the gangplank. “We're not just leaving them!”

“It'll be OK, Claire. Trust me.”

A little shiver went through her at who he was, what he had become. As he crossed the gangplank, it creaked under his weight, and she knew that it held only because he willed it so.

“All right,” Desmond said, resigned. “Make ready to weigh anchor.”

* * * * * * * *
After twenty minutes, Kate saw that the southern traffic down the mountain road had stopped, and only she and Sawyer were left in their slow progression northwards. Maybe Sawyer was right, that this was a crazy idea after all.

The child in her womb fluttered, as if agreeing.

What were a pair of boots, anyway? Even if hers were gorgeous: Columbia Cascades which fit like slippers. Not that her feet were swollen or anything. Just... spreading. Hormones did that, she had read. Hormones which loosened everything up and softened the joints, including the ones in the feet.

And the hips. She shifted in the plush leather seat, edging away from a twinge of pain, and barely heard Sawyer's low growl about how Hugo and Desmond were going to leave without them, and if that's what you wanted, Freckles, why didn't you just come out and say so?

“I'll be quick,” she said, only half-listening to him, preoccupied with the thought that this was it, good-bye to California for good, trying to push down the column of joyful excitement that kept bubbling up no matter what, the prospect of adventure, something new—

“Dammit, Kate, slow down!”

She hit the brakes, felt the car slide on the muddy asphalt, then deftly pulled the Escalade out of a spin. Up ahead, right after the curve, a Lexus SUV blocked the mountain road. Its front end had crashed into the guardrail, and a dump-truck's worth of mud covered its back end.

“You think they're all right?” Kate said.

A middle-aged man and woman stood in front of the Lexus, arguing loudly, heedless of the driving rain which soaked them to the skin. Bad directions, can't handle the car, where did you go to driving school, if you weren't such a bitchy nag... the angry words ricocheted back and forth like ping-pong balls.

Sawyer rolled down his window. “You folks want a lift down the mountain? 'Cause you ain't goin' nowhere right now.”

The man looked over slowly, as if a rock or tree had suddenly spoken to him. A soggy golf hat was plastered to his head. “No thanks,” he said in tones cold as the rain. “We have Triple A.”

“Well, alrighty then,” Sawyer said, rolling his eyes at Kate. “Freckles, you think you can back up this land yacht and get us down the hill?”

The woman fussed with her phone, making complaining noises. “I'm not getting any coverage.”

Kate's stomach sank to her knees. All at once the Escalade seemed very large, the road narrow, and the guard-rail as flimsy as aluminum foil. Sawyer must have felt her hesitate because he said, “Time for a Chinese fire drill, Freckles. Let's switch.”

Lodged behind the wheel, Sawyer stuck his head out one more time. “Last call, folks.” The squabbling couple ignored him.

Inch by inch, Sawyer managed to point the SUV downstream instead of up, and Kate fought back tears as they slowly crept back the way they'd come. The house at the top of the hill had never been home, she knew that. All the same, it might have been on the other side of the world instead of a mountain. Sure, they could drive all the way around to the north. That would take hours, in this rain, and who knows what roads would be closed.
This is it, she told herself. Just get us to Marina del Rey. Please.

They had just rounded a curve, one of the steepest along the road, when everything fell apart. Sawyer's explosive, “Son of a bitch!” was almost drowned out by a grinding, squelching sound like nothing Kate had ever heard before. The whole SUV shook with one thud, then another.

“Sawyer, what the hell—“

“Damn it, I'm trying—“

“Look out!” she shrieked, but it was too late. A wall of brown mud slapped the SUV into the guardrail.

“Oh, my God,” Sawyer whispered. Mud had covered all the driver's side windows, blocking out what little light there was. He frantically tried to back up, but clods of earth and rock had piled up behind them as well.

Another wave of brown flowed over the windshield, leaving only the passenger side windows clear. Don't look don't look don't look, Kate told herself as she stared down into the steep canyon, the arroyo at the bottom filled with swirling muddy water capped with tiny crests of foam.

Sawyer turned to Kate with a look of pure helpless apology. The SUV must have been resting up against the guardrail, because when the hillside gave another shudder, the guardrail collapsed beneath the weight. They were going down.

It didn't happen as fast as Kate would have thought. In the movies, cars ricocheted all the way to the bottom, bursting into flames at the final bounce. This slide was slower, almost gentle, cushioned as it was by sodden earth.

The SUV rolled onto its side, so that gravity pinned Kate against the passenger door. Above her, Sawyer flailed and grabbed at the seat belt, clinging to it for stability.

Finally, after what must have been only a few seconds, but felt like minutes, the SUV slid to a halt. It rested on its side, angled up somewhat, as if something had pushed them into a 45 degree angle, with Kate on the low side. Rain watered the mud on the windows into streaks, so that she still couldn't see anything outside.

Everything was still, except for the incessant patter of rain.

Sawyer let out a long breath. “Whew. Who scheduled that carnival ride?”

“We're lucky to be alive,” she snapped back.

“We ain't out of the woods yet.” A bit of daylight slipped through the streaked driver's-side window. “I'm gonna risk a peek.” The engine had died, though, and the window wouldn't roll down.

“Can you open the door?”

“I'm gonna try. Gotta get this damn seat belt off first. If I tumble onto you, Freckles, don't squawk.” Sawyer grunted and pushed, but finally the door opened. He pulled himself up and climbed out of the car, then gave a low whistle.

“How bad is it?”

He leaned down and extended a hand to her. “Take a hold, and get a step up on the steering wheel.”
Embedded in mud, the SUV was wedged in a rocky cleft between the slope of the canyon wall and the arroyo beneath. Kate and Sawyer clambered away from the car, barely getting free before the Escalade shifted and slid another twenty feet into the whitewater. Angry water tore around it as if it was an intruder, trying with all its force to pull it in. After a brief struggle, the swollen stream won, and the Escalade bounced on its way downstream.

Kate looked up the canyon. Slick with mud, it would be almost impossible to climb up. Below, the flooded stream bed surged. She sank onto a mud-slimed rock, shaking with sick fear. “Think we can wait for the water to recede?”

“We can't stay here, Kate. The rest of that hill could come down at any second.”

Kate had never felt so trapped in her life. When the child twitched once, then a few more times, she steeped herself inside. “I'd rather risk drowning than getting buried alive.”

“Great to have choices, ain't it?”

“Look, there's a little path right above the water-line. Anyway, you know we can swim. Didn't we survive that swan dive into the ocean, on the Island?”

Sawyer's grin encouraged her, but inside she wondered. How much of that had been skill at swimming, and how much had been Jack wanting them to make it to safety? Never mind. They had to try.

They had just picked their way down to the stream when Kate saw the horse.

I must be in shock, she told herself. Because horses didn't just rise out of the foam, especially not from a flood which had already carried away two tons of US-made steel. Water ran off the creature's flanks, so deep a black that they stood out like smears of midnight against a sea of pale brownish-grey.

Sawyer gripped her arm, tight. “Kate, you see that horse?”

“I see it, all right.”

The horse was large, larger than she remembered from that afternoon on the Island, when in tears she had stumbled out of the Swan Hatch into the steaming jungle to where it had calmly grazed in a shaded clearing. Its mane reminded her of a woman's hair whipped by the breeze, and its long, curly fetlocks skimmed the ground. Thick muscle roped its chest and shoulders.

What held Kate rapt, though, were its eyes. Warm brown, dusted with a faint golden sheen, the horse held her in its gaze as she approached.

She barely heard Sawyer as he repeated, “Wait, Kate, don't...” When it did no good, he slipped behind her. The horse nickered, lowered its head and gave a few snorts.

“It was on the Island... How can it be here?” Sawyer sounded as if the shock had just caught up with him.

From high on the hillside came the faint wail of sirens. The Escalade must have made it to the arroyo's outlet. Or maybe the stranded couple had finally managed to call for help.

The horse heard it, too. Then it did something Kate wouldn't have thought possible. It knelt down in a full crouch, lowering its body almost to the ground, as if inviting her to climb aboard.
She hesitated. “This is crazy. Horses’ knees don’t work that way.”

“This one’s do. You see another way out of here, Kate? I say we accept the invite.”

Flashing cherries were massed at the hilltop now, a lot of them. Bullhorns spouted garble which echoed off the canyon walls. Out of the slurry of sound, Kate distinctly made out, “Down there.”

*They see us. OK, here goes nothing.* Kate climbed onto the horse’s back and clung to the thick mane, with Sawyer right behind her, his arms tight around her waist. The horse raised itself to its feet without effort.

*A horse can’t do that, not with two riders. Who are you? What are you?*

The horse stepped into the flood. Churning waves pounded Kate's knees as it continued to wade, until water covered its shoulders.

Then, incredibly, the horse broke into a gallop. It cut through the foaming muck as if it were thin as air, speeding along the water-way, leaping over fallen logs. They passed the caved-in Escalade, pinned by rushing water against a boulder.

*That could have been us,* Kate said to herself. Then there was no time for thought as the horse burst through a thicket of overhanging branches onto the mud-slicked surface of Highway 1, pausing as if waiting for traffic. There was none, however, on the highway.

Out of the corner of her eye Kate spied the flashing lights of emergency vehicles making a blockade. The horse thundered off to the north, away from Marina del Rey. Behind her, over the thunder of hooves, rain, and the crashing surf, Kate barely heard Sawyer's roars of, “Wrong way! Steer the damn thing, for crissake!”

She could have no more guided her mount than altered the course of the planet. The horse pounded past stranded cars and a few police cruisers. One officer bellowed at them as they passed, and a few people snapped pictures.

The horse pounded along at breakneck speed, with that exhilarating sense of leaving the ground with every beat of the heart. Behind them, Kate heard the howl of sirens and the blare of orders from the highway patrol. Stopping was as impossible as diverting the horse from its path, and so on they flew, until the horse veered sharply left, towards the sea.

It had to slow down in order to pick its way through the forest of boulders which dotted the seacoast. Kate's heart leaped to her throat, because she knew where she was. She and Sawyer had driven up here months before, when Sawyer had stopped her from throwing Jack's engagement ring into the ocean. “You'll regret it,” he had said as he restrained her wind-up pitcher's throw.

*It was the very same spot. There was the jetty, sticking out into the sea like the tongue of a defiant child. A milky fog had blown in, making the jetty's seaward end almost invisible. That didn't stop the horse, though. It pounding over the rocks without a stumble, increasing its speed.*

When they went airborne, Kate wrapped her arms around the horse’s thick neck and buried her face in the long mane. Right off the end of the jetty they soared, and in that second's flash of terror and confusion it seemed the horse might sprout wings and carry them away.

No chance, though. They hit the water with a crash, and the shock almost flung Kate off the horse's back, and Sawyer along with it. She gripped hard with her legs and clung to the mane with an iron grip. The horse sank a bit, almost up to Kate's neck, then pulled itself forward with powerful swimming strokes.
One wave slapped Kate's face, then another. Sawyer was still with her, his grip so tight that she could barely breathe. The water was cold and stank a bit of oil. In the calm seconds in between waves, she saw that it had stopped raining, and that they had passed through the murky fog.

It was Sawyer who saw the ship first. “Son of a bitch, Freckles, look! Look!”

A seventy-foot yacht, sleek and beautiful, rode the choppy waves a few hundred yards ahead of them. Hugo's big form waved and shouted from the deck, followed by Desmond, who unrolled a ladder down the side.

The horse swam harder and closer, then stopped, drifting. Everything gelled into an instant of silence. Even the pounding waves seemed to pause, and Kate let go of her death-grip on the horse's mane. It craned around to look at her with one shining golden-brown eye, its neck far more flexible than a horse's should be, and its gaze was warm and compassionate.

It wasn't saying good-bye, was it? Kate whispered into the wind, “Will you be there, too?”

The horse bowed its head as if it understood. Yes.

All at once the horse's body melted away from between her legs. It dissolved into the ocean so quickly that she sank, pulled down by Sawyer's weight. For a terrifying moment she stayed submerged until he let her go, before dragging her to the surface. They had drifted closer to the yacht, and now Desmond was in the water with them.

“Can you make it to the ladder, brother?” he shouted to Sawyer.

Sawyer nodded.

“Then go, for the love of God!” Desmond held Kate's head above water, murmuring, “Relax, love. Don't fight me. I've got you. Just go limp.”

Easier said than done, but she tried. Soon he was pulling her with strong strokes to the side of the yacht, where she clung to the lowest rung of the ladder for dear life. “I got this,” she sputtered out.

“You sure? Because Penny can throw down a harness.”

“No, really.”

“Aye, then.” He gave her a strong shove under the hips, so that she could pull herself up a few rungs and wedge her foot under the lowest one. Above her, Sawyer had almost reached the deck.

Climbing up was harder than it looked. She shook so hard from cold, terror, and exhaustion that she didn't even care when Desmond held fast to her rear end as he stabilized her climb. When she reached the top, Sawyer heaved her up onto the rocking deck where she collapsed, capable of nothing but staring at the faces circled around her.

“Where's Claire?” she said. “And Aaron?”

Penny smiled, full of reassurance. “We thought it best she take the children down below.”

Kate shivered. Probably so they wouldn't see us drown.

Hugo plopped to the deck, his eyes full of warmth and mischief. In a breathless, excited voice he said, “Dude... did you two both just swim out here on a horse?”

(continued)
Penny almost knocked Sawyer aside to get to Kate, who lay flopping and breathless on Our Mutual Friend II's deck. Brusquely Sawyer said, “Hey, easy there, Mama Bear.” As far as he could tell, Kate mostly had the wind knocked out of her.

“Come on, love, let's get you below with Claire and the kids,” Penny said to Kate. Sawyer tried to follow, but Penny stopped him. “I'm sure Desmond find a use for you on deck.”

“Hey, dude,” Hugo said to Sawyer, drawing him close. “I really wanna hear about that horse.”

“Thought you were the one who sent Equus, boss.”

Fog draped the yacht from stem to stern, making it impossible to see anything farther than fifty feet. Behind the milky screen, Sawyer could hear the whine of another boat's engine. Maybe two, and they sounded way faster than Our Mutual Friend here. Above the engines echoed the steady whump-whump of a helicopter.

The thumping of rotors drew closer. Desmond called out, “Sawyer, at the helm. Fall in.”

Hugo stood at the bow, as relaxed as if he were on a cruise. He looked way too calm for Sawyer's taste. Turning to Desmond, Sawyer said, “Think you can outrun the US Coast Guard?”

Desmond just laughed, then shouted above the driving rain, “Hurley, it's time. Brace yourself, Sawyer.”

“What the—“ Sawyer barely got it out before everything went white.

Silent, too, as the sounds of both rain and engines switched off. A great wave lifted the yacht, then dropped her with a jerk. The white curtain parted, but not the way fog does. Instead, it seeped away like paint washed by a hose, thinning to nothing.

The choppy grey waters off the coast changed to ripples of blue-green which mirrored the sky. Sawyer and Kate had only come on-board a few minutes earlier, but the rocks and cliffs of Malibu had vanished. The same smooth blue extended in every direction, as far as Sawyer could see. Wherever the hell they were, it sure as hell wasn't US coastal waters.

The yacht's engines had shut down, too. There was no sound save for the wind and the slap of water against the ship's hull.

Desmond broke the silence. “Want to take the helm for awhile, brother?”

“You sure? This one's twice as big as the Elizabeth.”

“Not quite,” Desmond said, his tone laced with amusement. “And it's not like you're going to run into anything out here.”

Hugo still crouched at the bow, a steady breeze blowing his hair backwards like a flag. When he crossed the long deck to Desmond and Sawyer, his face shone. “Isn't this awesome?”

“What'll be even more awesome is raising the mainsail,” Desmond said, the same gleam in his eye.
“Hold her steady, Sawyer.”

The mainsail billowed out stark white against the sky's pure blue. Desmond eased the boat downwind into a close reach, where she slid into the embrace of the wind. Along she sped, while shrieking birds too large to be seagulls crossed above the port bow in a tight formation.

After a time, the women and children emerged from down below and spread themselves across the main deck.

“You better now, sweetheart?” Sawyer said to Kate. She sure looked it, in a one-piece bathing suit that must have been Penny's, and her face all dusted with rose around the edges.

She nodded, then joined Claire on the starboard side, Kate holding onto Aaron with a firm grip. Orange life vests made the two boys look pudgier than they were, as they craned over the hull's edge to spy the water below.

“Charlie's a bit miffed at having to wear a vest,” Penny remarked to Desmond. “I had him do so for Aaron, who's...” Here she bent in close to Desmond's ear, although Sawyer caught every word. “Not quite as seaworthy, I'd say.”

Sawyer cracked a smile despite himself. That would be just like Kate, to bundle the kid up in a life jacket. As the sails caught the wind at just the right angle, the yacht sped along smooth as you please. He could get into this, no doubt about it. Damn him for his own stupidity, not renting a boat and taking Kate on a day trip to Catalina Island.

Too bad the first and last time he'd piloted the Elizabeth, everything had been such a horror-show. That had been a clean, smooth ride too, until he'd thrown the Doc overboard for wanting to stay on the Island.

_The same Island you're going back to_, Sawyer told himself.

One thing bothered him, though. “Hey, skipper, those cutters that were chasing us. They had to have us on radar, right? What'd they see when we just blipped out of there?”

Desmond frowned, as if considering this for the first time. “Dunno, brother. My focus was on getting away without... consequences.”

Sawyer knew exactly what those “consequences” could have been. He gazed over at Kate and Claire, chasing after the children as they scampered about the deck.

Even though there was no way Sir Hugo could have heard them from his perch in the bow pulpit, he headed towards the stern as if he'd been in the conversation the whole time. “They didn't see nothing,” he said to Sawyer and Desmond. “First we were there, then bloop. Just like when the Island disappeared.”

“Aye,” Desmond murmured, his voice laced with fear.

Before the Island had pulled its vanishing act, Sawyer had already bailed from that doomed helicopter, but he could imagine. He seriously doubted, though, that the guys with the guns would have felt the same anxiety. “You don't think they wondered about us being on radar one second and gone the next?”

Hugo shrugged, apparently unconcerned.

“One more thing,” Sawyer said. _Let it go_, part of him said. The other just had to spit it out: not from
cruelty, but because if it was his own kin, he'd probably still care. Despite himself. “Weren't you worried that when we 'blooped,' they'd go back for your momma and daddy?”

A flicker of pain crossed Hugo's face, and Sawyer was sorry at once. Hugo turned to face the wind, which made his tent of a t-shirt billow out just like the mainsail. After a few heartbeats of silence, his words drifted back to Sawyer and Desmond. “Turns out, you and Kate deciding to head back to the house gave Mom and Dad just enough time to get to the airport.”

Sawyer collapsed a little inside. “Course they did.”

* * * * *

Time passed, but it was impossible to say how much. The clocks on board Our Mutual Friend II had stopped working as soon as they emerged from the fog. Hunger and the tiredness in Claire's muscles told her that it was probably day's end, yet the sun hadn't gone down. In fact, there hadn't been any sun in the sky at all. The entire glazed-blue dome had shone with a light all its own, before fading seamlessly into a velvet blue night.

Since these were strange waters, Penny insisted that Charlie be clipped to one of the long cables used to secure crew and passengers on deck in rough weather. Claire and Kate didn't even have to convince Aaron; when Charlie got “leashed up” Aaron wanted to, as well.

They squatted, or crouched, or sat cross-legged on the deck for their supper of chicken stew and rice. The yacht seemed to have a mind of her own as she clipped along the same tack as before, at a steady speed.

Something nagged at Claire, no matter how she tried to suppress it. She was no stranger to sailing, thanks to Thomas taking her out on occasion on his family's twelve-meter Beneteau, and yachtsmen at the Sydney harbors loved to brag. Eight, maybe ten knots an hour were all you'd get, unless you were a racing yacht, which Our Mutual Friend II wasn't.

As Desmond opened a bottle of dessert wine for himself and Sawyer, as Hugo stretched out and drew Claire close into his side, she traced little calculations on the side of her leg. Say eight knots an hour, assuming this wind held up. That translated to maybe fifteen kilometers per hour.

Carmen had wanted to know how far Hawai'i was from Los Angeles. Forty-one hundred kilometers, Desmond had blurted. Again, more tracing on the leg. That would take almost two weeks, assuming the wind held up, and that was just Hawai'i, much less the Island. “Hurley?” she said, not wanting to alarm anyone, but a bit irked that no one had mentioned this earlier.

“How?” He was staring up at the sky, where several unusually bright stars began to peek out.

The tone in her voice must have caught Kate and Sawyer's attention, because they stopped chatting with Desmond and Penny. Embarrassed, she pushed on. “How long are we going to be on-board? Because I thought you had to be back to the Island within three days.”

Hugo turned to her slowly, glowing starlight reflected in his eyes. “Don't worry, I will.”

Was he serious? Desmond's small nod showed that he agreed. Claire shook her head, really confused now. “But... but that's not possible.”

Instead of answering, Hugo just pointed up. More stars had emerged, large as golf-balls, bright as candles. They glowed pink, red, pale blues, even light green. That wasn't possible either, she told
herself. There were no green stars, that anyone had seen, at least. Planets, yes, like Venus. But these were stars, mounted high in the cathedral vault of the sky, so bright they cast faint shadows.

Kate’s voice matched the hush in Claire’s heart. “Where are we?”

“I don’t rightly know, sister,” Desmond answered. “All I’m doing is following the compass. Which seems to track the wind.”

Hugo continued to gaze at the sky, his voice soft. “Or maybe it’s the other way around.”

“Aye, maybe.” Desmond pointed upwards. “You recognize the stars, brother?”

“Recognize them?” Claire said, a little sharp. “From where?”

Hugo’s voice sounded as if it came from faraway. “Remember, Dezzy, the beach behind the beach?”

Desmond picked up the chant. “The Island behind the Island.”

“Maybe this is the ocean behind the ocean.”

“It’s like Pallas said,” Desmond went on. “Back at the dock on the Island. ‘Channels on which others may not sail.’”

“I have no idea what you two are talking about,” Kate broke in.

“Kate, you remember that night I first came back to LA? I told you about the party,” Hugo said.

“I was upset, Hurley.”

“Sorry. I know.”

“Party?” Penny said. “What party?”

Desmond reddened a bit, even in the pale starlight, and a look passed between him and Hugo. “Go ahead,” Hugo waved at Desmond, his smile outlined by a faint sketch of mischief. “They’ve heard my take. Some stories make more sense when they’re told twice.”

“Ho, ho,” Sawyer chuckled. “This is gonna be good.”

“Oh, I have no doubt about that,” Penny said, her tone warm in the darkness.

* * * * * * *

Day blended seamlessly into night, and on the third one, the stars returned to their proper form. The familiar band of the Milky Way stretched across the sky once more, and Hugo breathed out a long sigh of anticipation.

Real dawn broke this time, as the tropical sun’s edge lit the horizon with white fire. The winds grew fickle, the waves choppy, and everyone but the children had to crew or take their turn at the helm.

In a spare moment, Hugo resumed his perch on the bow pulpit, and Claire joined him, linking her hand in his. Over the horizon the Island waited: out of his sight, but not his senses.

Claire tugged at his shirt sleeve and pointed at the gulls whirling overhead. “We’re almost there, aren’t we?”
“I can’t wait for you to meet everybody,” Hugo said.

“Hey, brother,” Desmond called to Hugo. “There’s your lighthouse.”

Its light winked like a white jewel on the horizon, drawing them in. Desmond steered towards it, and soon they were met by a breathtaking sight.

Hugo had paddled around the Island, but circumnavigating close to shore wasn’t the same as watching it emerge from the ocean’s rim as if being born. Over the next few hours, mountain tops grew from tiny, sharp points to soaring emerald heights. Clouds of gulls shrieked above them, and the lighthouse continued to burn like a star.

All at once a strong wind blew them to the southwest, and try as he might, Desmond couldn’t fight it. “Might as well let it take her where it wants,” he said, as the brilliant speck of light vanished around the curve of the Island’s shoreline.

Just ahead, Hugo saw a gleaming strip of beach feathered with green palms.

On Desmond’s call, he lowered the jib while Sawyer and Kate dropped the mainsail. The boat drifted in the surf a few hundred feet from the beach as Desmond dropped anchor. Everyone clustered on the starboard side, not wanting to move at first, just drinking it all in.

Sawyer was the first to put it into words. “It’s our beach. Our old beach.”

Aaron darted over to Hugo and Claire. “Mummy, look, there are little houses.”

Desmond put one hand on Hugo’s shoulder, the other on Sawyer’s. “Ready to go ashore?”

“We don’t have to swim for it,” Penny added. “Des, love, bring out the raft, all right?”

* * * * * * * *

The inflatable raft wasn’t anywhere near the size of a Zodiac, but after two trips everyone made it to shore. Kate stood on the white sand beach she’d come to know as well as her own face, still reeling a bit under her sea-legs.

The food tent with its orange canopy was one of a few familiar landmarks, as most of the old shelters were gone or rearranged. Sun and Jin’s old tent now held tackle, nets, and other fishing supplies. Claire’s tent under the spreading tree seemed to have doubled in size, while a few new ones ringed the center.

Sawyer paced about. “Hugo, you want us to live here?” He didn’t sound enthused at the prospect, Kate thought.

Hugo looked surprised. “Huh? Nah, I was just checking something out.”

“Checking what out?” Kate said. “Although I have to admit, it looks way better than when I saw it last.”

“If a ship comes to the Island, and if it’s, you know, in trouble, and they’re, um, supposed to be here, I want this to be the place where they wind up. First, I mean. So they can get used to stuff.”

“I get it,” Sawyer said. “Something like quarantine.”

Hugo frowned a bit. “Well, not really.”
Claire called out, “Hurley, what happened to my tent? It's splendid.”

“Scuse me, guys, I want to show Claire around. Kate, there's water just northeast of camp. Want to get some?”

“Water?” This was something new. While Desmond and Penny made another trip to the boat for supplies, Kate grabbed a five-gallon plastic jug and circled around to the cliff face.

It was a lonely area, screened by a thicket of short trees, out of sight despite how close it was. A little pool had formed at the water-fall's edge, which overflowed into a small marshy delta. The ground soggéd beneath Kate's feet as she climbed up the small rise to the wet cliff-face, and a clean smell of fresh water hung in the air.

She put her hand in the cascade before opening the water jug's wide mouth, and liquid silver played over her. Cold and clear and sweet it went down, and it wasn't until she drank that she realized how thirsty she was.

The jug full, she rested it on a rock, and then jumped at the sound of bushes rustling behind her, although she didn't turn around. Putting a growl into her voice, she said, “Sawyer, if that's you playing a trick, I swear I'll—“

Leaves rustled again, a lot of them this time. Now Kate did turn, slowly, and it seemed that the whole weight of the Island turned with her: water and sky, earth and plant, ocean and sand.

It wasn't Sawyer at all. There, half-hidden in a bushy copse, almost near enough to touch, stood the black horse.

She stepped back from the pool, almost forgetting her jug. With a mild glance, the horse passed by her, then bent down to drink.

Not it, Kate thought, getting a close look at the entire creature from muzzle to dock for the first time. She.

The horse raised her head, mouth dripping. She knelt once again before Kate with that peculiar, non-equine crouch, expectant.

From down the beach came Desmond's laughter, followed by Penny's smooth contralto. Above them rang out Sawyer's “Where the hell is she? How long does it take to go get water?”

Kate stroked the horse's wavy mane, then stepped back a few paces. “I can't. Not right now, anyway. Soon...” and here she ran her other hand down her own curved belly, “Soon I won't be able to, not for awhile.”

The horse rose to her full height of twelve, maybe fifteen hands, and nuzzled Kate from cheek to shoulder. I'll be here, her warm eyes seemed to say. In the shadows, in the deepest part of the forest. When you're ready, come find me. She ambled into a nearby thicket of trees, and was gone.

When Kate returned to the beach camp, trudging along with forty pounds of water in tow, Sawyer took it from her hand. Desmond and Penny crouched over a crackling fire, opening cans from Our Mutual Friend II's stores into a big iron frying pan.

The two boys were trying to catch seagulls at the water's edge, their shrieks of laughter blending with the birds' cries of annoyance. Hugo and Claire crept out of Claire's newly-expanded tent, their faces flushed.
Sawyer lightly tapped Kate's arm. “Looks like somebody's been checking out the honeymoon suite.”

“Sawyer, you're awful.”

He grinned, flashing dimples which caught the sun. “Told me he built it special for her. They'll come back here, sometime after Hugo introduces everybody around to the folks in New Otherton.”

Off-shore, the yacht bobbed like a white toy on the water. Claire approached Kate, her eyes shining, her hand warm as it slid into Kate's. “Thank you,” she whispered to Kate. “I mean it.”

Down at the shoreline, Hugo swept up one small boy into a great arm, then another.

“Come on, you ruffians,” Desmond shouted. “If your lunch gets cold, you'll answer to your mother.”

High in the ironwood trees, birds fluttered back and forth, spreading news of the arrivals across the entire Island.

(continued)

(A/N: The title is from the 1970 song by Van Morrison of the same name.)

Chapter End Notes

(A/N: The title is from the 1970 song by Van Morrison of the same name.)
The Road to Shambhala

Fifteen years have passed.

If you and Rima the bird-girl could sweep skyward on this beautiful Island morning, rising and falling from one thermal column to the next, this is what you would see.

The large volcano on the northwest coast has never fully settled down since Jack replaced the great cork-stone of the Heart. Over the years, lava has formed into a new peninsula which thrusts out as far as Seal Island. Leathery volcanic plants cover the black surface of the new land, as the sea diligently grinds it into black sand beaches.

Beneath Window Rock, the Door sleeps, firmly fixed to its exit on Moloka'i.

Fish-ponds like burnished silver coins dot the marshes of Pascal Flats. Far below, tiny figures go to and from New Otherton, carrying their nets and poles. The North Mesa spreads out like a counterpane embroidered with ripening gold barley and cornflower-blue flax. The coastal waters burgeon twenty, thirty feet high, and surfers slide the waves on their hand-carved boards.

Rima would take you on a heart-stopping thrill ride down the sides of steep green mountains, and screams of pure joy pour from her eagle's throat. Fifteen years haven't touched the mountains, nor will fifteen hundred.

After that wild ride, you would see below you the wooden yurts of Fishertown. Salt flats like pink tiles alternate with the scaffolds of the ship-builders, busy at their canoes and outriggers, dories and sailboats.

Rima returns to the central plains through passages so narrow that they almost scrape her wide-spread wings. Finally, the Mesa lies all open before you, miles of broad greensward where cattle roam and herds of wild horses thunder.

The Island has roads now. Foot-paths, actually, but feet and hooves keep the sedge grass at bay, and some even bear names. The Dharma Road leads from New Otherton to Boathouse Dock. Surfer Road takes the field workers to their flax harvest, and the wave-seekers to the northern beaches.

Last but not least, Shambhala Road stretches all the way from South Pylon Gate down to Beach Camp itself. Long ago, Hugo had ridden a runaway VW microbus down part of it, traveling along the path of least resistance to the clang of Three Dog Night. After squawking in terror, the birds had talked about it for weeks.

Rima follows the Big River which divides the Island in two, until she reaches the great carcass of a long-dead volcano. In its center you can barely make out a town. Its green roofs are covered with grass and flowers, and the houses themselves seem like afterthoughts planted among the vast spreading gardens.

If Rima grazed the tree-tops of New Otherton, you might see the elaborate network of blinds, platforms and bridges which link one tree to the next. Only the children are small and light enough to enter this tree-top fairyland, and they run back and forth, shouting with laughter, scaling up and down ladders which lead to the ground.

Since Rima is a creature of the air and the wilds, New Otherton is somewhere she prefers not to linger. So she rises once again, circling to the outskirts of the Mesa, where a ranch called The Flame Station long ago met its fiery death. In the same spot a new house stands, surrounded by a paddock.
of split-rail. A solitary figure, round and wild-haired, laden down with a backpack and the weight of responsibility, ambles towards it.

Here Rima leaves you, before soaring off to rejoin her flock in their endless cyclic journey around the steep mountains.

* * * * * * * *

Hugo's long walk ended at a wooden archway decorated with rusted-metal letters, which spelled out "Bar None Ranch." Every time he crossed this threshold he chuckled at the name. He might as well have, seeing as it had been his idea in the first place. Kate had looked at him cross-wise at the time, but Sawyer had gotten the joke right away.

“I used to watch Hey, Dude, too,” Sawyer had said, while sending Kate a leer. “The girls were cute.”

Kate had just rolled her eyes.

Now, as Hugo approached Kate and Sawyer's cabin, he noticed at once that the paddock was empty. The bay thoroughbred, the pinto, and the rest of the horses were gone.

Everybody must be out with Kate. For ordinary riding and teaching horsemanship to the Bar None's apprentices, Kate took the bay. Only when she rode out alone, sometimes for days at a time, did she mount the coal-black mare who came and went as she pleased.

The cabin's porch with its wide overhang wrapped around three sides of the house. Sawyer had started building it before even raising the crossbeams for the roof. Years ago, he and Hugo had sawed and nailed, while Kate chased Baby David as he practiced the skill of running away as fast as possible.

Sawyer had wiped away sweat and said to Hugo,“Three things a man needs in this world: a front porch rail, a rocker so's you can put your feet up on the same, and a good woman to bring you a tall glass of lemonade.”

Kate had laughed and swatted at him, saying, “Get your own lemonade.” Then she tucked David under her arm like a squirming football, and brought Sawyer and Hugo some lemonade anyway.

It seemed like forever ago. “Sawyer, you there?”

“Round the side, hoss,” came the answer.

Sawyer sat with propped-up feet, reading a fat, dog-eared paperback. On the cover, a knight in a white tunic fought a dark, bird-headed creature with razor-sharp teeth in its beak.

As Sawyer untangled himself from Hugo's bear hug, Hugo said, “How many times have you read that?”

“This'll be my fourth. It's givin' me an idea for a new book.”

“Based on... that?”

“I'm gonna write a sequel. Change the names, gussie it up a bit, fix a few things.”

Hugo knew the story of The Stand. He also knew from his visits to Moloka'i that its plot was closer to reality than he liked. “Sawyer, that book's really depressing. Why don't you write something, you
know, happier?"

“Ese, this is how I make myself happy. And there won’t be no movie, neither. Never have forgiven that damn studio for what they did to Big House.”

Almost at once, Big House had gotten optioned for the screen. When it finally made it to Honolulu in 2010, Kate and Sawyer had taken their only trip through The Door, armed with fake ID and brave faces. The film had ended with a pardon and a Hollywood-style wedding. As the credits rolled, Sawyer stormed out of the theater, swearing to God that it was only Clementine’s expanding trust fund and the fear of going back to jail that kept him from burning the damn studio to the ground.

Clementine hadn’t seen the movie when it came out. Years later, as a graduate anthropology student at the University of Nevada, she had texted to Sawyer what he called his best review. “ITA dad it sucked. book was way better.”

Her summers were spent on the Island. She put together demographic tables of the growing population and explored the remaining ruins with Zach, six feet tall and obviously in love with her. Sawyer didn’t admit it outright, but he counted every month till her next visit.

Sawyer’s offer of rose-hip tea brought Hugo back to the present. “David settling in OK?” Sawyer asked.

“He’s doing great. We love having him. Don’t even notice the piano practice anymore.”

Hugo knew all too well how long Sawyer had worried over the withdrawn and preoccupied boy. When David was two, Kate had suggested rebuilding the Flame. She had liked New Otherton well enough, but it wasn’t suited for horses. Thundering hooves and the open plain were her real elements. Grudgingly Sawyer agreed.

At the age of four, during a visit to Auntie Claire, Uncle Hugo, and Cousin Leia, the child had walked into the New Otherton community room and stood before the upright piano, staring. “What is that?” he whispered.

By the end of the afternoon, he had begun to pick out chords. From that moment on, he tolerated the ranch, did his chores, cared for the horses diligently but without real affection. It was clear that his heart was elsewhere, and he begged to visit New Otherton whenever he could. Meanwhile, Leia loved the herd almost as much as Kate did.

“Just so he don’t keep Baby Lucas up none,” Sawyer said.

“Nah, he's not working on any new teeth right now.” Hugo chuckled. “When he does, whew. He gets one, he sure knows how to use it.”

“Yes, I remember that stage. Kate’d yelp a blue streak when she got nipped.” A sigh rumbled beneath Sawyer's words. “Been awhile since little feet pattered up and down the porch steps.”

“So, I guess Simon's out riding with Kate.”

“That kid was born in the saddle. Exact opposite of David.” He poured more tea for Hugo, his thoughts far away. Eventually Sawyer said, “I wouldn't be averse to another one, even if Kate's forty-five now. Not that her age matters, if you know what I mean.”

Hugo knew exactly. In fifteen years Sawyer had barely changed. Claire didn't look forty, either. The children, though, progressed at a normal rate. Emma for instance had grown to a graceful woman, married to a Temple survivor and now a mother of two. Zach and Raffi were in their mid-twenties
and looked it.

Charlie and Aaron, inseparable since childhood, now apprenticed together at boat-building under Franz, Vanessa, and their brood of ten children.

Ben, Rose and Bernard... unchanged. So were Desmond and Penny, for that matter. His dad, well, that was another story.

Hugo himself hadn't changed, either, although he hadn't told anyone but Claire that aging was a process he could control. If he wanted to let himself age up a bit, he could. Maybe if Claire grew old faster than him, he would.

Only once had he offered her the same burden which Jacob had given Richard Alpert, but she shot that down faster than skeet. “I don't want to be younger than my grandchildren,” she'd snapped.

Maybe there was a middle ground. It was Bernard who had come up with the idea, actually. “Middle age isn't the worst time of life. In fact, it's not bad at all. Yes, you slow down. But that also gives you time to reflect.”

Well, that was a long way off.

Out on the Mesa, dark shapes on horseback came into view. There was Kate, hair flying in the wind. Alongside his mother rode Simon, nine years old, tawny-haired and reddened from almost constant living outdoors. Horses were in his blood. When Kate had gentled the foals, even as a small child Simon had sat on their backs to get them used to people.

Now Simon had already gentled two yearlings himself.

Behind Kate and Simon trotted the other love of Hugo's life, besides Claire and baby Lucas: Leia Lindsey Reyes, fourteen years old, whose mane of light-brown curls tumbled to her waist. Broad in flesh and muscle, she bore his stocky frame, but some of her mother's delicacy showed in the curve of her arm as she waved, and in her bright smile.

Beside her rode the blonde, slender Jenn, daughter of Sullivan and Meredith.

“Dad!” Leia shouted as she dismounted. When she and her father collided in a hug, it was a marvel that the ground didn't shake.

Then it was Kate's turn for a hug, but not until after she had removed the light rope halter from the bay, and the other riders did the same. Freed, the animals trotted off to the water trough to drink.

Leia leaned against the porch rail, giving her father a cock-eyed grin. “You really didn't have to come all the way out here to fetch us.”

It was true. But he'd missed her during her six-week stint at the Bar None, and Sawyer and Kate besides.

“It's almost noon,” Sawyer remarked. “Surely you're going to stay for dinner 'fore you head back?”

It was an offer Hugo couldn't refuse.

* * * * * * *

Back in New Otherton, Claire weeded the garden, with Lucas tied fast to her back. She heard the girls' chatter before she saw them, as Hugo plodded along behind.
The burned wreckage of her old house had turned to a mound of the finest earth that anyone had seen on the Island. Trellises groaned under the weight of long purple string beans. Tomato plants heavy with red and orange fruits snaked up trellises of wattle, and sandboxes scavenged from the old playground made fine raised beds for onions and herbs.

Over everything arched the flowering vine, its stems thick and woody, its heavy white blossoms golden at the center and rich with fragrance.

Five cottages made up the compound, with Hugo and Claire's at the center; each building joined to one another by bamboo breezeways covered with flower-laden vines. Aaron's and Charlie's stood silent and empty. Carmen and David took up the third, while Carole and Lindsey Littleton lived in the fourth. From the last came the droning repetition of a piano being tuned.

Hidden as Claire was by the vines and tall garden plants, Hugo passed by her and went directly into his parents' cabin.

Claire sighed as she picked up the heavy basket of vegetables, aching for her husband. His father's illness was so hard on him, and it wasn't going to get better.

Ten years before, David Reyes had a heart attack in Moloka'i, and by the time he'd gotten to the hospital, the damage was extensive. It wasn't clear he would survive even a flight to Honolulu, much less Los Angeles.

Claire had never understood why Hugo couldn't just pull a Jedi trick and make his father better. Instead, Hugo had brought both his parents through the Door, to the Island. Now, time was catching up with David Reyes.

As she washed vegetables under the outside tap, Leia and Jenn giggled with their heads together, in front David's cabin. Finally Leia gave the door a few kicks, and the piano sounds stopped. “Hey, slug-face, come on out,” she shouted through the door. When it didn't open, she raised the volume. “Jenn's here. Crab boil at her house tonight.”

The door swung open, and Claire could have sworn David had grown an inch since that morning. At fourteen he was well on his gangly way to his father's full height. His hair gleamed midnight-black, and his eyes shone bright blue, especially when he looked at Jenn.

“Maybe I'll catch you there later,” he said to the girls, who were still grinning and poking each other. “If I'm not too busy.”

That set off a new round of giggles. “Oh, you're always too busy,” Leia said, while Jenn flushed deep pink.

Claire looked away quickly, pretending not to have noticed any of this. Leia had been gone six weeks, and already she was off to the next event. They grew so fast.

As Jenn chatted with David, Leia bounded over to her mother's side, anxious to fill her mother in on every horsey event at the ranch. In between breathless sentences she washed onions and kept up a patter with Baby Lucas. “You little mugwort, you treating everybody all right?”

The baby squawked and gurgled at the bursts of attention.

“Hey, Mom, I'm going up to Jenn's early. Dad already said it was OK.”

Across the compound, Hugo gently shut the door of his parents' cabin, his face shadowed.
“Sure, you can go early, sweetheart,” Claire said. “Take these carrots and onions along for Meredith.”

“Thanks. And Mom, make sure that slug-breath cousin of mine shows up.”

“No promises,” Claire said.

After a hug and a quick kiss, Leia was gone, running to catch up with her friend.

David was as stubborn as his father Jack. Jenn had certainly caught David's eye, but at the tender age of fourteen some boys would die a thousand deaths rather than admit they liked a girl.

All at once, a flood of rhythmic, beautiful sounds burst from David's cabin. Claire never could remember the names of the composers or the pieces he played, although each time Desmond and Penny went to the mainland, they returned with boxes of sheet music. Or maybe it was something David had made up himself, as he often did.

Hugo slid over to her side and buried his face in her hair, rubbing the baby's curly head, lost in the music and sadness. After a time, she murmured, “Let's go inside.”

He finally looked ready to reveal what weighed him down. “I wasn’t sure, but now I am.”

“Sure about what?” Claire almost feared the answer.

“A shipwreck.”

“What?” Claire stared up at him, astonished. Over the years they had talked about new castaways, but no ships had come anywhere near the Island. Never had a plane's contrail marred the sky's purity since Oceanic 815.

“You know how we talked about it for a long time, but it never happened? Well, looks like it did.”

“When?” Claire whispered. “When will they get here?”

“Tomorrow evening.”

The unspoken fear popped out before she could stop it. “Do you think they're... good?”

He smiled, full of sun and warm assurance. “Pretty sure. Tomorrow I'm gonna paddle down to the beach camp, make sure everything's in top shape.”

As suddenly as it had started, the music from next door fell silent. A few moments later a cabin door clicked open, then shut. David must have decided to go to the party after all.

(continued)
Three days earlier, a chartered sailing yacht had left Oahu for a week-long cruise, when the storm erupted out of an empty sky. Winds churned the sea into twenty-foot funnels, and by the time the weather cleared, all eight of the wealthy passengers had drowned, as well as the captain and most of the crew.

Only a man and woman remained, a deckhand and the ship's cook. Thirsty and sunburned but in no real danger, they clung to what remained of the damaged hull.

At first they thought that the great flash of brilliant white which engulfed them was ordinary lightning.

They drifted into a current which pulled them towards the Island's shore. Porpoises leaped alongside them, squeaking in their high-pitched language.

They had another day to go.

* * * * * * * *

Hugo pulled his outrigger canoe well out of the tide-line and surveyed the old Oceanic 815 beach camp. Brilliant sun danced off bone-white sand, making him squint.

At first he had wanted to welcome the newcomers with open arms, but Ben suggested that the gradual approach might be best. Let them get their bearings, recover from the shock of the wreck, of sun and dehydration. Slowly the Island's healing balm would work on them from the inside, just as a coconut shell full of aloe jelly would salve their outsides.

All Hugo needed to do was make sure everything was in order.

His old welcome-note still stood pinned to its wooden stake, its black marks as clean and legible as the day they were written. Below the message he scrawled a P.S., that there was now water east of the beach.

Vincent dashed around the beach camp, wanting Hugo to play. Hugo tossed driftwood into the surf and Vincent bounded in after it, then shook water everywhere.

“You got the right idea,” Hugo said, wading into the surf after the dog. Waves wet the bottom of his board shorts, while cool ocean sprays kissed his cheeks. As Vincent splashed, Hugo opened his arms to the ocean.

“Hey, fish, we got some new people coming. They won't have a clue what to do, so give them more of a break you gave me, OK?” That seemed a bit ungrateful, so he finished up with, “Thanks.”

It was hard to fish without tackle, so Hugo added five bone fish hooks to the fishing gear in Sun's old shelter. Long ago, the green god Komos had given Bernard fish hooks which caught true and caused
no pain, and some of that magic had passed on to the ones Bernard carved, too.

Hugo puttered in Sun's tent, trying to shake the feeling that she might catch him trespassing. Not much danger of that, though, as many years had passed since Hugo had spoken to the dead. That chance encounter with Christian Shephard outside the bamboo grove had been the last.

Sometimes Hugo caught fleeting ghostly impressions in twilight shadows, but when he tried to catch a better look, nothing was there. He had glimpsed Sun in her garden, and she had shot him a brief unsmiling look. Greenish light shone through her as if she were made of dusty glass. He'd never seen Jin.

Whatever knots bound the dead to this place were slowly coming unraveled.

The beach camp in order, Hugo was about to paddle back to New Otherton when he saw that Vincent had disappeared. Where was that dog, anyway? Hugo was just about to bellow for him when Vincent yelped a few times from the eastern end of the sea-strand.

Hugo headed in Vincent's direction, then stopped short. Further down the beach, a stranger sat on a driftwood log.

The man's iron-grey head was bent over a blue box, his face fixed in an attitude of deep concentration. A closer look showed that it wasn't just a box, but a small board game. The man's ragged cutoff shorts dripped, as if he'd just come out of the sea. A light dusting of freckles covered his deeply tanned shoulders, and the sparse hair on his chest was gray.

When the dark man saw Hugo, a smile crinkled his slate-blue eyes.

Hugo studied him, confused. If the dude was from the wrecked boat, then he was ahead of schedule. Of course, with the Island, who knew? The Island and Hugo were pretty down after all these years, but ultimately the Island had a mind of its own.

Hugo held out his hand. “Hey, welcome. What you got there?”

The man didn't return the gesture, despite his smile. “It's a game. I'm waiting for someone to play it with me, but they're not here yet.”

“Don't worry, man. She probably washed up down the beach. She'll be here soon.”

The man broke into a sharp explosive laugh. “She? That's a good one.”

What the hell? Hugo could have sworn that the other approaching castaway was a woman. Mischief narrowed the dark man's eyes. “You want to play a round while I wait?”

“Sure.” Hugo settled himself heavily on the other end of the log, the game board positioned between them. Ivory, it looked like, from a very long time ago. Nobody would make anything out of ivory today.

The dark man held out two fists to Hugo. “Go ahead, pick.”

Hugo tapped the man's left hand, and his eyes went wide with shock.

The man opened his fist with a grin. “You're white. Just like in chess.”

“Dude.” Hugo wondered why he hadn't noticed the misty grey aura surrounded the dark man. “Hey, I'm sorry.”
“Sorry for what?”

“That you're dead.”

“Why? I'm not.”

“So you're not from the wrecked boat.”

“Boat?” the man said. “What boat?”

“ETA sundown, probably. Busted up in a storm.”

A bitter curtain fell over the man's face. “I suppose you brought them here.”

Hugo was genuinely surprised. “Why would I do that? I haven't brought anybody here. I'm just the welcoming committee.”

The man made a noncommittal noise as he arranged tiny white and black stones on the ivory board.

“So, how do you play this?” Hugo said.

“You know Parcheesi?”

“Yeah, man, sure. Who doesn't know Parcheesi?”

“Oh, you'd be surprised. It's a lot like that, but no dice. Instead, we roll these knuckle-bones.”

“Roll them leaden bones,” Hugo quoted.

“Seven come eleven, boys, I'll take your money home. Don't worry, we're not wagering. Just good clean fun.”

The rules weren't that hard to understand, although the game actually wasn't much like Parcheesi. They played a round, which Hugo lost. He couldn't remember the last time that had happened, and he rose to the unexpected challenge. “Better than checkers, for sure. How about we play again?”

The dark man set up, and this time added some extra pieces carved of glossy, reddish wood. Now the board was divided between white, black, and brown. “For the one who'll be joining us soon.”

Another figure stepped into view. Back-lit sunlight surrounded his blond hair like a halo and reflected off his bleached-linen caftan. Hugo started to struggle to his feet, almost knocking over the game board in the process, but the newcomer waved for him to stay seated. The dark man sat motionless, his smile mutating into a wry grin.

Realization hit Hugo like waves slapping a rock. “Whoah, Jacob. You said I'd never see you again.”

Jacob gave a small smile. “I guess I was wrong.”

“Wouldn't be the first time,” the dark man remarked.

Jacob settled himself cross-legged on the soft sand in front of the game board. “And it won't be the last.”

“Oh, man,” said Hugo, fighting a toppling-down-the-rabbit hole feeling. Just when he thought it couldn't get any weirder, he recognized the dark man sitting across from him. The last time, the man had worn John Locke's face. The eyes were what did it, though. You could always tell by the eyes.
“You.”

“The very same.”

“Glad you didn’t start without me, Samael,” Jacob said.

“We already played a round,” Samael said. “Where have you been?”

“Just touring the place.” Jacob turned to Hugo, smiling. “You’ve done wonders with it.”

Hugo couldn’t resist a small flush of pride. “It’s not all me. I got lots of help.”

“You’ve done well, Hugo, given the rough start.”

Ignoring the dagger in Jacob’s last remark, Samael said to Hugo, “I take it that Claire’s all right?”

“More than all right,” Hugo answered. An old, icy reflex flickered through his gut, more habit than real fear, since Old Smokey didn’t look very threatening right now.

Samael must have felt the change in temperature. “I don’t expect you to tell her that you saw me.”

“You got that right, dude.”

There was no fight in Samael, though. “I just want you to know that I’m sorry.”

Hugo wished there were Emily Post columns for dealing with the dead. Some you could talk to about anything, including their deaths. Others didn’t like to bring it up. You just stumbled your way through and hoped you didn’t hurt their feelings too much. “Claire’s not mad anymore, but I gotta tell you. She’s always gonna think that Kate did the right thing by shooting you.”

“No offense taken,” Samael said.

Jacob sat silent as a Cheshire cat, a small smile on his angular face.

“OK, your turn,” Hugo said to Jacob.

For an instant Jacob looked confused. “My turn? We haven’t started playing yet.”

“No, your turn to say you’re sorry.”

Samael leaned back, clearly amused at where this was going.

“Excuse me, I, uh—”

“You don’t get it, do you, Jacob?” Hugo said.

“He certainly doesn’t,” Samael chimed in. “He was never swift on the uptake,”

“Don’t be mean,” Hugo shot back. “Jacob, do I got to spell it out for you?”

“You think I— You think I had something to do with that? With Claire?”

“Didn’t you?” Hugo said.

Samael cupped his chin in his hand, arm resting on his knee, as if this had been coming for a very long time.
“It was his idea.” Jacob stabbed the air in his brother's direction, like a small boy caught at something he didn't want to own up to.

“I know that.” Hugo settled his whole massive stubborn weight in Jacob's path, for however long it took for Jacob to get the point. “When did you first find out?”

Jacob passed a hand over his face. “When I heard the baby. I knew my brother had been… watching her. Until then I didn't think he'd really pull it off.”

“I set the infant on the busiest boar run, right at snacking height,” Samael said in a helpful voice. “Just so there would be no slip-ups, although the gunslinger got there first. Ultimately, of course, I'm glad he did. In the end, I mean.”

Hugo folded his arms across his chest. “Then what'd you do, Jacob?”

Again Jacob looked confused. “Nothing.”

“That's right, man. Nothing.”

“That was the point. I didn't interfere. I always wanted people to choose the good on their own.”

Hugo sat with arms still folded. He could do this all day if need be.

“Admittedly, there were … difficulties,” Jacob finished, twisting one of the ovoid wooden pieces between his fingers.

“Dude, people don't just choose to be good on their own. They need help from other people.”

Jacob shook his head, skeptical.

“Never mind, man,” Hugo said. “You'll figure it out sooner or later. Let's just play.”

The three of them rolled the bones and moved their little pieces around the board, lost some of them to capture, won them back. Jacob won the first round, then Samael, then Hugo, but not by much, because Samael was an especially clever player.

As the afternoon stretched on, the lowering sun shone through Samael and Jacob's translucent forms, highlighting them with reddish-gold. If Hugo was going to paddle home before dark, it was time to go.

Samael put the game in a rucksack, then slung it over his shoulder. “Coming, Jacob?”

“Where you guys headed?” Hugo asked, curious.

“To the Heart,” said Samael. “I visit a lot these days, just to look. It never gets old. You want to join us?”


The two brothers crossed the beach towards the jungle. Samael draped his right arm around Jacob's shoulder in a light, companionable gesture, and Jacob brought his arm up around his brother's waist. Neither of them left a shadow on the orange-tinged sand, and soon they faded into the dusk at the forest's edge.

They were gone now, really gone. Moving on.
When Hugo pushed the outrigger into the surf, a swift current pulled him out to sea. He paddled more for show and to have something to do than out of necessity, as fast-breaking waters carried him around the western coast towards home.

* * * * * * * *

When you take your first step on the Dharma road, there's no telling where it will lead you. So thought Hugo as he plodded towards New Otherton in the cool of the evening. Soon the town's roofs peeked through green canopies of overhanging trees and trailing vines, and before he knew it, he stood on the threshold of home. From inside, lamplight cast dark green shadows over the porch. A delicious shiver of anticipation played over him. When that the door opened, love as soft and warm as golden light would bathe him from head to toe.

The hinges creaked as he opened the door. “It's me.”

“Hey, you,” came her voice from within.

The spaces where the oil lamp didn't reach had filled up with moon- and starlight, making the blonde halo of her hair glow silver. She sat cross-legged on a thick woven floor mat, nursing the baby. “Lucas is almost finished. I'll get up in a minute.”

“Don't. I know where the kitchen is.”

“Hope you don't mind that I ate already.” She gave a small apologetic laugh. “Nursing's hungry work.”

“Where's Leia?”

“Spending the night at Jenn's. Last night they went to a party, and now they need another whole night to talk about it.”

Hugo brought a large bowl of spice-laden curry to the low table and dug in. “So, where's Mom?”

“Which one?” she said.

“Both of them, I guess.”

“Tending to your dad.” Her sweet face grew serious. “He's fading, you know.”

Hugo sighed, deep and sad. His dad didn't have much time left.

“He's not afraid, Hurley. He's at peace. It was the best gift you could give him.”

Supper finished, he joined her on the mat, taking his son's foot in his hand and pinching it a little.

“What are you doing, trying to wake him up?” Claire said, smiling. “I thought you wanted him to settle down, so we could take advantage of the quiet.”

“Just trying to hurry him on.”

“Look, he's done.” Claire gently pulled the baby off her breast, then set him down in a large woven basket. Lucas murmured a bit in protest, crammed a chubby fist into his mouth, and settled down.

Hugo and Claire rose. He drew her close, to breathe in the sweet warm scent of her hair. That never got old, no matter how often they stood like this.
“Everything in order down at the beach?” Claire said, nuzzling his chest.

“Great.”

“They've probably arrived by now, I imagine,” she said as she came up for air. “I remember how scared I was that first night.”

He pulled her even closer. Her small but very pregnant body had trembled against his as they sheltered up against a scrap of fuselage, the stink of burning rubber and flesh all around them. So many years had passed since then, with so many detours, yet here they were.

“It'll be different for them.” He rubbed the small of her back, pretty sure that the baby would stay asleep long enough for things to get interesting.

“Hurley?” she said, something still on her mind. “I know we're not anywhere near there yet, but what happens when we get to one hundred and eight people?”

“I dunno. I guess people will start dying.” Against his will, he thought of his father. “Or maybe a few will decide to leave.” Like some of the kids, but he didn't want to say it out loud. Charlie and Aaron had already sailed around the Island more times than anyone could count, and Aaron was talking of setting out onto the open ocean someday. Charlie would join him, and Desmond was already bragging of having two more sea-farers in the family.

“Someday” came upon you before you knew it.

It was Aaron and Charlie's choice, though. On his watch, at least, no one was going to stay on the Island against their will.

“And after that?”

“There'll always be shipwrecks, Claire. And more babies. It's gonna balance out.”

Claire didn't answer. Instead, she gently tugged on Hugo's long hair, inviting him to kiss her. Her open, wet mouth played over his, pulling him into a pool whose waters poured out endlessly, yet never overflowed. Her blue eyes met his, bright as reflected stars, inviting him to kiss her once more for good luck. Even after pulling away, the glow of her mouth still rested on his.

In his sleep, Lucas made little mewling noises.

“I missed you,” she said. “Even if it was just since this morning.”

“Me too,” Hugo said. “It's good to be back.”

(The End)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!