

Chapter 1: Cold Iron Bars

Freedom. That's what I was dreaming about. I wake to the deep hum of the Aerobolt engine, opening my eyes to the tiny area I sleep in, With walls of light brown windwood, heavily reinforced and lacquered. It's almost a regular, although tiny, room. Except for what I see when I look up. Cold heavy iron bars. As the ship moves forward through the sky. My only view is the clouds passing above. Which only serves as the cruel reminder and similarity of a bird that is separated from freedom by its owner and the cages around it. My owner is to be decided, but however long that journey will take, I have no idea. The Aership Traders, they call themselves, bought me from my slave house back near the American-Mexican border.

Since birth, we have only been part of business in the Global Oceanic Slave Trade, and in their words, we always will be until death. I brush my brown hair back from my eyes, I'm lucky I still have it. The "Aership Traders", they should just call themselves degenerate pirates, threatened to cut off all my hair if I wasn't a "good little boy". They don't know I heard the stupid twins talking to the Captain. Apparently the old man in Indonesia they were going to sell me to likes brown hair and brown eyes, but for a more secretive reason. God knows what the secretive reason is.

Oh yeah, that reminds me, the twins. You would think that two heads are better than one, but in this case it's as if the twins fought over intelligence in the womb and in the end they ripped it apart like a teddy bear. Bald with a tuft of hair at the back, and a piercing on different ears. Kiggy had his piercing on the right ear, and Liggy on the left. They always harassed and kicked me whenever they had the chance. Always looking to boast about their dominance over me.

My stomach rumbled as if agreeing with my anger against the twins. It wasn't uncommon to be hungry while stuck on this ship. Actually it was pretty much normal. I stared up at the clouds as I had done in

repetition for so long. There were other slaves on this ship, but they've been sold. I'm the last one left. I wish I could be on land.

My tía, my "aunt", always said that I was part Mexican, even though I don't think I look anything like someone from Mexico. She said to call me "tía" and told me it meant aunt. She was actually just a slave working at the slave house. For some reason she was always nice to me. Sometimes she'd give me extra food, or simply talk to me. Then one day, she got in trouble for talking to me. In the slave house, the slaves working there aren't allowed to talk to the potential slaves. That's why she always used to talk to me in the dimly lit corridors when the guards weren't looking. Apparently tía had gotten in trouble before for other things, and they told us that she was moved to another slave house. I think they were angry and took it out on us potentials cause the next day, the already tiny portions of meat we got didn't taste like any normal meat at all.

Remembering meat, my stomach which had extremely sophisticated levels of speech decided to rumble much louder this time. As if magic, Tanvik, a crewmate, looked at me from the top of the deck. Tanvik was the only crewmate that was nice to me, and the other slaves that were here. Sometimes he would offer us food or treat us kinder than the other crewmates. Him, and surprisingly, the captain.

"What's up? You hungry?" Tanvik asked, peering down. If I didn't respond I'm sure my stomach would've.

"..Yeah." I said sheepishly, I wasn't sure how friendly I could be with Tanvik even after weeks, or maybe months on this ship. He dropped some bread down, the fragrance filling the room.

"It's.. f-fresh.?" I asked. I never got to eat fresh bread or even "normal" bread. Usually the twins would wave whatever food they knew I would want in front of me. Most of the time, it was normal bread. What was standard to them was a luxury of the kings from my view.

"You bet, remember how we stopped by Karachi recently? We got the bread from there." Tanvik smiled, crouching down on the iron bars, "Sleep well? Any dreams?"

"Not really." I shrugged, Tanvik was much nicer than the other crewmates, but I don't know how he would take me telling me I

dreamed I was free. I looked up at him as I said this, he was tall, much taller than I am. I don't know my own height, but I think he would be around 6'0 or 6'1. I recalled what Tanvik said about Karachi. That's right, my journey's coming to an end soon. Soon, we'll finish flying along the waters near the Indian coast and make our way to Indonesia.

"That's right, we're getting closer to Indonesia, missing your friends?" I blinked a few times after he asked, could he read minds? I shrugged again and shook my head. The slaves weren't friendly with each other. They were just quiet and contemplating their own fate.

At the time, I didn't notice, but Tanvik didn't address them as other slaves.

"Alright well, the captain wants to bring you up to the deck." Tanvik stood up and went to open the iron bar trapdoor.

"The captain wants to bring me up to the deck?"

"Am I talking to a parrot?" Tanvik said, for a second a slight fear arose in my chest. I thought I had done something wrong. Noticing my abrupt silence, Tanvik clarified, "Don't worry, just joking." I breathed a small sigh of relief. "Alright, get up, gotta bring you up here." I stood up as Tanvik outstretched a hand for me to take. He pulled me up. Now, I was standing on the deck for the first time in God knows how long.

The wind, cold yet refreshing, brushed past our faces. The clouds, instead of just being above me, were now all around. The ship wasn't moving at a fast pace, or the crewmates would've been blasted off by the wind. Instead it was cruising through the clear blue sky that surrounded it in all directions except down. The ship was powered by the Aerobolt, a large pure white crystal, connected to pistons, gears, and all sorts of machinery. It was discovered long ago that this crystal absorbed energy from the air. Since heat and energy were always diffusing into the air, this was an extremely useful and large discovery. However, the crystals only got so large, and could only hold a finite amount of energy. The crystal provided the energy for the ship, but it had to be light enough so it wouldn't drop all the way to hell from the sky. That's where the windwood came in. This type of wood had holes with many air pockets inside of all sizes, and was extremely light. Because of all the air though, it was really easy to burn. That's why

it's reinforced with plates of metal, thick layers of lacquer, and other materials.

"Alright, I'm gonna have to put these handcuffs on you." I felt the cold metal around my wrists, even if I'm above the trapdoor, I really can't escape it after all. I let out a small sigh, which I instantly regretted.

"Did you just complain..?" Bia grabbed my throat with a grip of steel. She was the captain's sister, a forceful, trigger happy, angry, beast. Tanvik firmly, but not aggressively, reached to her arm and pulled it away.

"I think he's just happy he gets to see the full sky for once." He said as I roughly coughed, free from Bia's grasp.

"Don't get ahead of yourself. Slave." Bia made a scornful face and spit at my feet. Luckily, it didn't touch me or I might have considered cutting my feet off. I resisted letting my feelings show as Tanvik brought me forward to the captain. He wasn't allowed to loosen his grip on the handcuffs one bit. In the past, slaves sometimes got past the crewmate holding them and jumped off the ship. Maybe they thought the water would catch them, even though that was impossible from this height. Maybe, and more likely, they didn't care.

Chapter 2: The Captain

“Well well, that’s enough Bia.” The Captain turned around from looking at the bowsprit with a smile, making eye contact with me.

“You’re allowed to talk,” Tanvik whispered into my ear.

“Why..why was I brought up to the deck?” I was confused as to why the Captain would want to see me. After all, I’m just a slave, and he’s the captain of the ship. Was I in trouble? Was I being freed? Of course not, but even slaves can dream.

“Well slaves don’t usually get brought up to the deck, do they? Everyone has to get outside once in a while. After all, we’re all human, right?” I averted my eyes, if only everyone were this kind. Yet in the end, I was still a slave, being brought to my destination, and I couldn’t forget that. Strangely, Tanvik and Bia’s faces were averted from the Captain and me, a shadow lurking along their faces. “Well anyways, Tanvik, bring him over so he can see everything.”

“Yes sir,” As Tanvik brought me forward, I gazed down at the water.

“Jump.” I told myself, “You want to jump.” I had to shake my head to get those intrusive thoughts out of my head. At that moment, Kiggy, one of the twins, had come up from the gallery, near the back of the ship.

“Look Captain, he wants to jump, just push him off!” Kiggy walked forward, taking me from Tanvik’s grip by surprise and held me off the side of the ship, with only my feet on the ship. My eyes widened as I saw the great expanse of the ocean, although maybe not the best luxury view. If I was an energy producer my heart could’ve fueled five, no, ten, ships.

Out of my sight, the Captain took me back from Kiggy with a dark look on his face. “My bad, my bad.” Kiggy shrugged.

“My apologies for that, Jason.” The Captain said Bia dragged Kiggy away by the collar. “I hope that didn’t hurt.” I wasn’t sure what to say, so I mumbled something so incoherent that I couldn’t even decipher. As we were talking, Tanvik seemed to notice something in the clouds, or rather, the clouds themselves.

“You see Tanvik? There might be rain coming, we should get ready.” the Captain said.

“Yeah, it might be troublesome, I’ll get the lightning field ready.”

“No need, it’s only going to be simple rain, just make sure we clear out the deck and all, and make sure to tell the others.”

“Are you.. Sure?” Tanvik seemed reluctant, his brow furrowed, to him it seemed to be better to play it safe. Especially with lightning.

“Are you doubting me Tanvik? I have experience in this, don’t worry. Just do as I tell you.” Captain Zelos firmly said.

“No sir, I didn’t mean it that way. Will do.” Tanvik clenched his teeth, he didn’t agree with the Captain but couldn’t do anything about it. Even though I was their merchandise, I trusted the Captain. He seemed kind to slaves and knew what he was doing.

The reason being afraid of lightning was so important is because lightning was basically the bane of Aeroships. The extremely hot and powerful bolt of lightning could easily rip through the coatings on windwood. If it hit the metal it could even create a fire inside the windwood pockets, that’s how flammable it is.

It wasn’t all bad though, the lightning field, a device located in the inner center of the ship, protected the aeroship from the dangers of lightning. Using the energy from the Aerobolt, it creates a transparent, light blue, spherical field that absorbs the lightning if it hits. Then, it diverts the lightning to the bottom center of the sphere, where it discharges the lightning.

As Tanvik brought me with him to the back of the ship to tell the others, he voiced his confusion about the Captain. “Why would he say to not use the lightning field? There’s no reason not to use it, especially with the dangers of lightning.”

It took me a bit to realize he was waiting for a reply, “U..um.. Maybe he didn’t want to waste time?” I really had to work on this stutter.

“I have a bad-” Tanvik went to say but was interrupted by Kiggy and Liggy.

“Yo Tanvik, what’s up?” Liggy sneered at me. Did I really

have to see their faces? Not everyone likes having to look at dog crap all the time.

“Did you have to bring the stupid slave? You should’ve just left him with the Captain” Kiggy said to Tanvik.

Tanvik shot him a sharp look, “He stays with me.” He said firmly.

“Yeah yeah, whatever.” Kiggy shrugged..

“Captain Zelos wanted me to tell you that the rain's coming, and you should go down below.”

“You gonna go down and get the lightning field?” Liggy asked, walking by Tanvik and I.

“For some reason, no. The captain told me not to.” The twins shrugged at this statement. They didn’t care to think too much about stuff like this.

As Kiggy walked by, he abruptly turned, swinging with his right fist to punch my gut, a smile on his face.

Luckily for me, Tanvik caught Kiggy’s fist with his left hand, exercising his grip strength to make Kiggy’s fist break down. “Tch,” Kiggy said, rubbing his right hand and walking away.

“If you see Bia, tell her about the rain.”

“Got it SIR!” Kiggy said mockingly, walking away.

Tanvik sighed and looked down at me, “You good?”

“Yeah.. thanks.” It was tough talking to crewmates. I usually kept my mouth shut when Bia and the twins harassed me since saying anything would only make it worse.

“No problem,” Tanvik started, “Listen, about the Captain..” but he was interrupted by the rain starting above the ship. “Crap, let’s go,” we ran towards the main deck where the entrance to the lower area, or the gun deck, was.

As we entered the gun deck, Bia grabbed me by the collar, “Why’d you bring him here?”

“That’s right! Why didn’t you just put him in the slave hold!? Right Captain??” Kiggy exclaimed, standing up and making exaggerated gestures. He was obviously trying to get Tanvik in trouble.

“I came quickly and I didn’t have the time to put him there,

more importantly we can't just let him freeze in the rain." Tanvik frowned at Kiggy.

"Why not? We always put slaves in there, they can freeze for all we care. In the end, we get the money." Liggy said, sitting down and leaning against the wall.

"No no, Tanvik is right, we can't leave Jason out in the rain." The Captain said, smiling at me. I dared to smile back.

Chapter 3: Ablaze

Some minutes had passed, I was sitting by the wall looking down at the floor. Tanvik was beside me, reading a book. I couldn't make out what the title or words looked like though. Yt looked like another language. I squinted my eyes, although I don't really know how that would help me.

Tanvik noticed me looking at his book, "What's up?"

"Uhh yeah," I went to point at the text but I forgot I was in handcuffs. Of course, nice one Jason. I sighed, "what language is that?"

"This? This is Hindi," he said, showing me the cover of the book. It looked to be an Indian man in white clothing, wearing a long scarflike cloth.

"You're Indian?" I realized the question was pretty useless as soon as I asked. Looking at Tanvik, his skin was clearly brown, although I think there's other countries nearby India with brown people. Slaves aren't exactly geography experts.

"Yeah, hard to tell right?" Tanvik said as he chuckled, I resisted rolling my eyes. "Yeah, my father was Indian, and I'm pretty sure my mom was too."

The second part caught my attention, "Pretty sure?" I blurted out, and then proceeded to mentally facepalm.

Tanvik noticed, "Don't worry I don't mind." He yawned, "Waiting for this rain to end is always so boring. Anyways, I said I'm pretty sure because I can't know for sure. She passed away before I was born. More accurately, she was killed." Tanvik sighed, scratching the back of his head. "Even more accurately, she was killed by my father." Tanvik paused, slightly smiling, "You must be thinking, 'what?' right now aren't you?"

He was right, what kind of a plot twist was that? "Y..yeah.. Pretty much."

"Basically, my mother was a prostitute, who fell in love with my dad then they got married and had me. Soon after, my mom

realized my father was an insane old bat and tried running away with me.” Tanvik paused and sighed, “then he chased after, shot her and threw her into the river and took me with him.” He knocked on the wooden hull of the ship. “Now here I am, for better or worse.”

“I’m uh... sorry,” I had no idea what to say in situations like these.

“Don’t worry about it, I didn’t even know her. Although I wish she ran faster.” Tanvik said, a slight tone of bitterness in his voice. “Anyways, now you.”

“...Me?”

“Yes, you tell me about yourself now.”

“I-I don’t really have anything.” This stutter always caught me, I don’t actually have any speech problems but I’m not used to talking to people. Everytime I do, I either think too much about my words before I say them, or I’m just not used to it.

“Say that again? Didn’t hear that well.”

This time I forced myself to say it without stuttering, “I don’t really have anything that I know of.”

“Do you know where your parents were from?”

“W-well,” gotta retry, “*Well* my slave house was near the American-Mexican border, and by looks I think I’m American, but my t-, I mean aunt, always said I was definitely half Mexican.”

“You knew your aunt?” Tanvik raised an eyebrow at me.

“Oh no no, she was just a working slave at the slave house who told me to call her aunt. She was taken away from the slave house because of it.” I wasn’t still sad now, but my face drooped thinking about it.

“They told you they took her away..?” Tanvik asked, with a suspicious tone.

“Yeah, is that weird..?” His seemingly random question made me confused.

Tanvik put a hand on my shoulder, and looked me in the eyes. His eyes had a pitiful look in them. “Listen, you’re not gonna like this but..” He paused, “Should I even tell you this?” he thought out loud. He sighed, “Listen Tanvik, when slaves in slave houses get in big

trouble and get 'taken away', that's not what happens."

I was scared to ask, but I felt like I had to. As if telling the future, a nauseous feeling started budding in my stomach. "W-what... What happens?"

"They kill them."

I paused. It was so obvious, why hadn't I thought of that? I started to laugh at myself but then it really kicked in. They had lied to us, they had lied to me. Why did they even kill her? Wasn't it just wasting work power? Was talking to a potential slave that bad? I felt all sorts of anger, sadness, and nauseous too. I lurched forward, gagging.

"Woah woah," Tanvik stuck out his hand that wasn't holding my shoulder to catch me, "you good?" I wanted to say "What do you think?" but obviously couldn't. It seemed like Tanvik had gotten the message, "Yeah, yeah my bad."

"Why would you tell me this?" All this information would do now is make me feel negative feelings. That's it.

"Because I feel like it's your right to know." Tanvik said with a solemn face.

I processed this for a moment, he was right, it's better to be aware of this than stay unknowing. "...Thank you."

Tanvik nodded as Liggy, sitting on the other side of the deck, said "What's going on with the bastard slave Tanvik?" He hadn't heard our conversation but he had seen me gag. Most of the crew was focusing on other things.

"Yeah, don't worry about it, Liggy," Tanvik said.

"If he vomits it's your job to clean it up, I'm not doing it."

Tanvik sighed looking at me again, "You good now?" He asked.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Alright but if you feel-

I interrupted him, normally I wouldn't have, but right now I had a burning question. "Why do they kill them?"

Tanvik hesitated, he had noticed how the information had affected me. It made sense that it might make me feel worse, but he

respected my question and answered. “Sometimes they want to make an example to the other slaves. It basically serves as a warning and threat for them too. Sometimes the slave might’ve angered the house owner personally, and sometimes, it’s just because they want to.” I clenched my teeth at the last reason. Just because they want to? They’d take a life? I forced myself to calm down. There was no point looking for sympathy on a aeropirate ship. “You angry?” Tanvik asked, “It’s okay to be angry.”

“Really..?” I was surprised that he would be supporting me on this topic, especially considering his position.

“Listen, don’t speak of what we talked about to any other crewmate? You hear me?”

“Yeah, I got it.” Although I wasn’t planning to talk to any other crewmate either way.

10 minutes had passed, the rain had not yet finished pouring. I noticed the Captain looking outside, as if waiting for something. I assumed it was for the rain to end. Tanvik was looking out to the rain as well, but with a more worried look.

When lightning strikes, the fire starts on the surface of the wood. You would think that the rain helps, but it does almost nothing. In no time at all the fire reaches into the windwood, as there’s lots of air inside. Then the fire courses everywhere inside the ship. The ship essentially becomes a giant container of fire.

The fire makes the wood even lighter than it is, since it burns through it. Because of this, the ship rises even higher in the air. Almost ironic, it rises up only to tumble down to the ocean. It’s said that if lightning strikes your ship you’re as good as dead. In some rare cases, the lightning field stops working and allows lightning to pass through. As I was thinking about this, we all heard a crashing sound on the ship. Our heads jerked in the direction to where it came from. Only to see that Kiggy had dropped the stack of crates stored on the

lower deck.

“Crap, sorry, sorry, we’re good.” Kiggy sheepishly said as he went to pick up crates.

“Seriously Kiggy..” Liggy said, all of us breathing a sigh of relief in unison.

“Hey, you slave! Come help me pick this up.” Kiggy snapped at me, trying to regain some confidence from that moment.

It was here I knew I had a chance that I couldn’t miss. Kiggy had obviously missed the fact that I was in handcuffs, but I couldn’t be too smug about it. I shuffled sideways a bit to show the cuffs, “Sorry,” I said in the most innocent way I could manage.

Kiggy’s face turned a shade of red, “Tanvik, release his cuffs!” He snapped.

Tanvik shrugged, shaking his head, “No can do Kiggy, gotta follow protocol.” I could see that Tanvik was trying hard not to smile or laugh. Kiggy gave up, putting the crates up in silence, incoherently grumbling as he did so. Tanvik turned serious and looked at the Captain. “Captain, can I have permission to go turn on the lightning field again?”

The Captain sighed, “Yes, you can go turn it on. After Kiggy’s.. accident, it might be better to be safe so our nerves are spared.”

“Thank you Captain.” Tanvik said, tapping me on the shoulder for me to stand up as well. “I have to bring you as well.” I stood up as Tanvik held my handcuffs and walked me to the stairs. The lightning field was located by the hold, which was in the last level of the ship. “Sorry about this,” he quietly said as we walked down the stairs.

“It’s okay.” Even if I didn’t like it, I was a slave. That’s it. Tanvik was being friendly to me, but it’s not like we would ever be real friends. We both knew that.

As we reached the hold, I looked around the barely lit area, everything down here was crates holding dry supplies. Most crates had a thin layer of dust, whereas the ones nearest to the stairs had almost none. I could hear the pitter patter of the rain from outside, knocking on the wood. Tanvik and I walked to the lightning field generator in the middle of the room. I stepped on a floorboard which

made a creaking noise as a tiny spider ran out from under it. I wasn't scared, but I can't say I didn't flinch.

Tanvik chuckled, "You scared?"

"No way," I said, partly embarrassed. Tanvik unclasped his flashlight from the right side of his belt. It was powered by a small shard of Aerobolt crystal. It provided the energy for the flashlight to work. Tanvik pressed the button with a satisfying click, the light turning on pointing at the generator. The generator was a sphere in the middle surrounded by three metal pipe encirclements. On the pipes themselves there were small antennas, eight on each pipe pointing in every direction. There was 1 on the top of the sphere between the on and off buttons, and a hidden one on the underside of the sphere. We heard thunder rumbling outside the ship, making both Tanvik's and my heartrate soar.

"We gotta hurry, I don't think you'll run right?" Tanvik went to release my handcuffs as I shook my head.

He quickly walked over to the lightning field, turned something that I couldn't see from the light. While it seemed simple, he needed to perform two tasks in quick succession.

The lightning field redirects energy and electricity, since it covers the whole ship, it also cuts off the energy from the Aerobolt. It was designed to fully strengthen when it reaches full extent so as to not damage the Aerobolt. Although weaker, even at this strength it still turns it off due to the electrical pulse. That's why as soon as he clicks the lightning field button, he has to click a button beside the lightning field. This button was connected to the Aerobolt controls, and basically turned the Aerobolt back on. He had to time it well, if he hit the button before the field was fully extended, there was no point and it would turn off. Even in a short while, having delay and confusion could result in lots of altitude loss and downwards momentum. If he clicked it too late, it would be similar, the ship could have lost too much altitude and already set for the path to hell.

However, Tanvik had done this before. He clicked the activation button and tapped his foot twice. I'm guessing that's his way of timing it. He then clicked the button firmly to make sure it had worked. As the field started, the generator let out a high pitched

dissonant hum, before quieting to a calmer sound. “Has it ever done that?” I asked.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard that one, but the field started so we should be fine.” Tanvik pointed to a green light on the sphere of the generator, indicating that it was activated.

“It sounded like Kiggy for a second.” I said under my breath.

Tanvik laughed, “Good one!”

“You heard that?” I said, surprised, it seemed that Tanvik didn’t like Kiggy either.

“Yeah, but don’t worry it was funny. Plus, the guy’s really annoying.”

We started walking back up to where the other crewmates were. Now the rumbles had increased, but the field was up and we were safe. We were also a hundred times less likely to have a heart attack. The crewmates could tell we were coming up by the noise of our footsteps on the stairs.

“Good work Tanvik.” Captain Zelos nodded to Tanvik from the top of the stairs.

“Thank you sir.” Tanvik saluted the Captain once we had gotten up. I glanced at Kiggy, he was groaning and struggling to put the last crate on the stack. It was almost comical in a way. At last, he had gotten the crate up. He noticed me and glared at me as usual.

Tanvik and I sat at our spots again, waiting for the rain to end. After a few minutes we heard the crash of lightning on the lightning field. I could tell we were all grateful the lightning field was activated. Otherwise we would’ve been dead meat.

A minute passed, in silence. Then all of a sudden, Tanvik dropped his book and stood up. “What happened?” Bia asked.

“I heard crackling, a fire.”

“You probably just imagined it.” Liggy said, “It obviously hit the field.”

Tanvik shook his head and ran outside into the rain, there was no time.

I stood up to follow but Bia shouted at me, “SIT DOWN!”

“Jeez I got it.” I thought, but I didn’t dare say it out loud.

Tanvik rushed outside into the rain, it was hard to hear in the rain, but he didn't need to. The fire was right in front of him. It was ablaze, crackling, and it would soon course through the ship. Bringing us all down. Tanvik swept his damp hair to the side and ran back into the gun hold, throwing open the door. His heart was racing. "See I told you it was not-" Liggy said, assuming that since Tanvik had come back quickly, there was no fire. "I was right, we gotta get out. Now!" Tanvik said, there was no time to explain, and right now he was in charge. They paused, but Tanvik repeated what he had said louder. I had a hard time getting up because of my handcuffs, but the other crewmates didn't need any more instructions. They rushed out the door. Where are they even trying to go? "Let's go!" Tanvik said, running over and getting me out the door.

"Is this really happening?" I said, half to myself, half to the world. It just hit, there was slim to none chances of survival. This was it.

"We have to hurry, we have escape boats with parachutes equipped to them." We ran to where the other crewmates were, but it wasn't a pretty sight. Everyone had a look of desperation, fear, and hopelessness mixed into one crushing amalgamation. There was a single boat, with one parachute. It could fit 2 people at best. Tanvik pushed past them, and stopped at the sight of the single boat.

"Tanvik! Where are the other boats!?" Liggy shouted.

"I don't know, they were secured here!" Tanvik said as Kiggy looked at each of the other crewmates, including his brother. In pure desperation and fear he ran to the boat, but it was too late.

This was stage 2, the ship started rising higher, throwing all of us to the ground. I flew to the back of the ship, hitting the deck which instantly winded me. With my breath gone, the rain in my eyes, and the fire that was going to kill us, it was a hopeless situation. I lost sight of Tanvik and the other crewmates, for all I know they could've been thrown off the ship entirely.

The dark clouds rumbled with lightning lighting up the surroundings. The wind whistled as it hit against my face, but I could barely feel it. I was losing consciousness. The violent storm spoke once more. In what looked like slow motion, a finger of lightning

reached from the clouds down to the ship one more time. It hit the lightning field, the energy dispersing. Yet instead of going around the ship, the lightning field redirected inside. At the same time, the ship had started falling. My vision was almost gone, and then the lightning hit. Crash. Over.

Chapter 4: Past

I opened my eyes, I didn't want to wake up. Do mom and dad have to

wake me? I groaned as I took my blankets off from my thin mattress on the floor, the sun shining straight into my eyes. Did the sun really have to do this to me in the morning?

“Jason! Wake up! We have to go to the market today to get some food, and you’re coming with me.” My mom said, I looked up at her face, but something was... fuzzy about it.

“But mom! Can’t I just stay home with dad?” I said, pointing to my dad who was still asleep. I don’t want to go outside right after waking up. I always HAVE to go to the market.

“Jason, mom needs help carrying our food back, and mom’s not as strong as you.”

“Fine, since you really need it.” I fully threw my blankets off and it landed on my dad’s face. Who kept snoring.

“Eat this and go get ready, we’re going out soon.” Mom said, handing me a piece of bread with strawberry jam spread over it. We had it everyday, but I didn’t mind. Mom said even though we only eat this everyday, it lets us spend more on dinner. We don’t have lunch since my parents say that we combine dinner and lunch. I wolfed down the bread and got dressed quick, walking out with my mom.

Our house was small, but I think it’s quite cozy. I looked back at our wooden walls and our roof that had some wood stripping off. A lot of the houses in this area looked like this.

First we walked to a store where this old man sold fruit. He gave my mom the strawberry jam at a lower price that it was listed as, but always gave her a sly look. “Mom, why does he always give us that look?” I said as we walked down the street. She always held my hand, even though I never wanted to. She said it’s to keep me safe. How would holding my hand keep me safe?

My mom thought for a while as we walked on the road, there were some other people around but not much. The weather was also nice, cloudy enough for some shade, but also sunny and warm. She finally answered, “Hmm, I don’t know, he’s an old coot.” She shrugged, something felt off but I couldn’t really place it. Next we went to a store where they sold bread and meat. We only got a little bit of meat on special days. The man there always ruffled my hair and

smiled at me.

“I’ll take the loaf of sourdough and the flatbread as usual, James.” My mom said, we always got this order. We had some food back at home too.

“I’ll throw in some extra and 3 chicken thighs, for free.” James, the shopkeeper, said, already going to bag it.

“Really James? You don’t have to. It’s okay.” My mom insisted, shaking her head.

“Don’t worry Emma, it’s just a favor.” The shopkeeper said, taking the money from my mom and handing her the coins

“Thank you so much. Jason, say thank you to Mr. James.” She said, tapping me on the shoulder. I was looking at some ants on the ground and wasn’t really paying attention.

“Oh, thanks Mr. James!” I said, smiling at him.

“No problem Jason, see you next time!” He said, waving at me as we walked away. I looked back, waving. I should’ve been careful because I tripped on a stone in the road that was sticking out, but my mom caught me before I could fall.

“Jason! Watch where you’re walking.” She said, holding my hand again.

“I will I will,” I said as my mom sighed. We walked along the road for a minute, before seeing a friend of mine. “Hey mom,” I nudged my mom, “isn’t that Connor and his mom?” I pointed over to them, they were ahead of us looking at another fruit shop.

“Don’t point, what if it isn’t them?” My mom said, but she looked over and said “But it is them, go say hi to Connor.” So what was the point of not pointing if it was them.

“Hey Connor!” I ran over as my mom walked over to them behind me.

“Jason!” He said, waving over to me. I got over to them, but then we got silent quickly to the confusion of our moms. It was time for the rock paper scissors ritual. Everytime Connor and I saw each other, we had to play rock paper scissors before talking about anything else. I thought about what I would pick. Last time, Connor picked scissors, and I beat him with rock. This time I shouldn’t go rock. I would go scissors, which he wouldn’t expect since he picked it. No

wait, he would probably know I wouldn't go rock since I used it last time. That means I should go rock this time!

"Rock!"

"Paper!"

"Nooo I should've gone scissors!"

"I beat you this time Jason!" Connor said with a triumphant grin, clearly proud of his giant win over me.

"Let's play again, I'll win this time!" I said, this time I would go paper. No actually I would go rock, but maybe I should go scissors? This is too confusing, I'll just choose paper and get it over with.

"Paper!"

"Lightning!" Connor made an upside down L shape with his index finger.

"Lightning? No fair!" I said, I wasn't predicting this, what a cheap move! Then suddenly I stumbled backwards, an image of lightning flashing across my vision.

My mom caught me, "Jason? What happened?"

I was confused, I fell out of nowhere. I looked up at my mom's face, fuzzy. Must've been the sun. "I don't know, I guess I just tripped on something." I shrugged, getting back up. "How do I beat that lightning??" I asked Connor.

"You don't! It's an invincible move." Connor jokingly stuck out his tongue and made the index L shape again.

"What, that's not fair! You know what, I came up with an invincible move myself." I grinned smugly at Connor. "I'll just take a knife, and throw it through your lightning!"

"Is that even possible?" Connor asked, squinting his eyes in suspicion.

While both of our mother's were amused at what was going on and our exaggerated expressions, maybe we were being a bit loud. They had us go over down the road and talk about whatever we wished there. Meanwhile they talked about their own topics.

"So Emma, how's Frank?" Connor's mother, Iris, asked as they watched their two boys talk about lord knows what.

“He could be snoring in bed or maybe he did what I asked him to for once and put up the clothes to dry.” Emma said with an exasperated tone. “How’s your father?” Emma asked. Iris and Connor lived with her father, Connor’s father had disappeared one day after one witness said he was robbed. Most people assumed he was murdered, but Iris refused to believe it.

“Old age isn’t helping him. Recently it seems he’s been getting grumpier and weaker year after year.” Iris sighed, “Old age isn’t helping me either, I thought my back would hurt many years later.”

“We’re around the same age, if you’re calling yourself old you’re calling me old! Don’t do that to the both of us,” Emma joked as she pretended to wave her hand in front of her face like the rare posh rich ladies seen on the streets who refused to talk to “commoners”.

Iris laughed, “Alright alright, we’re forever young and healthy.”

“That’s right! Now hopefully the world listens.”

“If only, it would be useful to have any wish granted.”

“Iris,” Emma said, taking a more serious tone, “have the slave traders been seen lately?”

“Last time they took someone was a month ago.” Slave traders would target communities with poorer people to take and sell as slaves. Since they weren’t anybody important, nobody would notice them. The traders preferred kids over adults, kids could be made to be more obedient. They could also work for longer when they grew up.

Emma considered this, the movements of the slave traders were irregular as to not be predictable. Normally you’d think this wouldn’t be allowed, but the money acquired from selling slaves was used to bribe officials. “All we can do is pray, and that’s what I hate about it.” Iris stayed silent, it was also speculated that instead of being robbed, her husband was simply taken as a slave. Emma put her hand on Iris’s shoulder, understanding what she was thinking. “I’m sorry.”

Iris sighed, “Don’t worry Emma,” she said as she noticed it was almost noon, “I have to get going now. Connor, come over here!” She called Connor, waving him over.

Emma called Jason as well, both of the mother's had work to do at home.

I noticed our mom's calling Connor and I, "Coming!" I said as I ran over.

"Connor, say bye to Jason, we have to get going." His mom said, waving at me as well.

"Bye Jason! See you later!" Connor said with a smile, waving as they started to walk away.

"Bye Connor, bye Aunt Iris!" I waved goodbye back to them with my mom.

"Alright Jason, let's go home, dad is waiting for us." My mom said, taking my hand again, even though I didn't need it. I wanted to go home, but I also know there's chores waiting for me.

"You know you'd have to do your chores either way right?" My mom, somehow reading my mind, said.

"What?? How did you know I was thinking that?" Could mothers always read minds? Oh no, I could be in some real trouble.

"You didn't know? I always know what you're thinking."

"You do!?" I stepped back, shocked, not getting the obvious joke my mom was telling.

"Yep."

"You're lying!"

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are, liar liar pants on fire!"

"Okay maybe, but my pants aren't on fire!" We started laughing as we walked home. My mom and I.

Mini Chapter 5: Slavehood

Finally, we had reached home from the hot sun. As we walked home, the sun rose higher and the clouds went away, so it was on full blast. We turned the corner, only a few more steps till home.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

What I thought at first was the sound of my footsteps would soon be my heartbeats. First, we noticed the door was broken, the

pieces lying on the floor in front. “Mom? What happened?” I asked, as I stepped inside.

My mom was confused at first too, but she quickly realized what was about to happen. “Wait, Jason!” She shrieked, but it was too late.

“Mo-” I went to say, but I was interrupted as I tripped on the bottom part of the door still left intact. In an instant, I heard the ruffle of metal and people. I groaned and went to look up, but my mom had rushed and held my face down.

“Jason, whatever you do, don’t look up.” Emma was seeing a sight she would have rather expected to see in hell. The room was dark, the only light coming through was from the door. Yet she could clearly see her husband, and Jason’s father, lying on the floor. This time he wasn’t sleeping though, he was dead.

His eyes shot open with a white glaze, his limbs strewn apart. He was lying in a pool of blood, his head lolling to the side. It was a feat that Emma wasn’t screaming and freaking out like most would have, but she realized there was no point. All that filled her was sad acceptance and hopelessness.

She was now surrounded by slave traders, multiple guns pointed at her head. Emma realized there was no point in struggling. This was slave trader tactics, if you don’t find someone at home, hide there until they come back.

The traders were wearing masks, except now one had taken his mask off. An older indian man, with a strong build and white moustache, stepped forward. He was wearing a red coat, and a satisfied look on his face. As if satisfied at making another catch.

“Mom? What’s happening?” I muffledly said, struggling to put my head up.

Emma didn’t reply, “Even if he might see it later, after I’m dead, I won’t let my son see the murdered body of his father.” She thought. She looked at what looked to be the lead slave leader, the man in the red coat. She wasn’t looking for any mercy, Emma knew what was about to happen. The leader pulled out his silver pistol from inside his coat. Knowing what was about to happen, Emma leaned her head down to Jason’s ear.

All I heard was “You won’t remember this when you’re older, but your mother loves you Jason. I’m sorry this had to happen to us.” whispered into my ear. Then, a gunshot.

Chapter 6: The Island

Fuzzy vision. My head hurts. What was I dreaming about? My ears are ringing. Actually now that I think about it, my whole body hurts. I'm just lying here, on what I think is sand. I'm not moving, because I can't.

Why am I here again? I can't recall. Whatever, I'll just go back to sleep and think about it later.

An unknown amount of time passed as I laid there unconscious on the sand, next to the rolling waves. I opened my eyes, I didn't want to wake up. Do mom and dad have to wake me? I groaned as I sat up, the sun shining straight into my eyes. Did the sun really have to do this to me in the morning?

Wait, what am I doing? I must be going insane. I fully opened my eyes to my surroundings. It was a beautiful coast, lined with trees that have long, separate leaves. It almost looks like an umbrella. The sun reflected off the calm ocean, swaying back and forth as if dancing with the sand. I looked to my left, the sand seemed to be going into a more grassy area, with more of these long leaf trees. A breeze blew some sand into my eyes. I went to brush it off, but my limbs were still stiff.

I tried to stand up, but my legs were stiff too. I managed to get one leg hoisted up, now I was in an awkward lunge-like position. I used my forward leg and tried to get myself up. My legs were sore like hell, but I managed to get up.

I was a bit confused. Why was I here again? I turned to look at the water, I'd never been on a coast like this. This water was clear, pure, and sparkling. A slave like me, getting to see this. I felt free.

That's when it all hit. A slave like me. I stumbled backwards as my head felt like someone took a hammer and started hitting away. I remembered everything that happened. I looked at my hands and feet. How was I not dead? I scrambled backwards as I realized another fact. They would be looking for me. I should have thought about it

more rationally, but the only things in my mind were confusion and fear.

They would be looking for me, and I don't want to go with them. I scrambled backwards, like I was running away from someone, got up, and ran into the trees and foliage. Where was I running? I have no clue. Who was I running from? No idea again.

I ran and kept running. My body was ignoring the sores I had, and everything was just about running. At one point I realized that I had no idea where I was going. Now I was in a new area. There were long leaf trees all around me, their leaves providing plenty of shade.

Before I had time to appreciate the scenery, my stomach and throat reprimanded me. I don't know how long I was out, so I might've already been days without water or food. My throat was parched, and my brain was definitely not working.

Another fear arose in me, sure, I was free, but how was I going to live? I knew nothing about surviving in the wild, and I was already starving and thirsty. Panic arose in my chest, and I was freaking out. I needed to find water fast, but where was it? Then I realized that I really was dumb, there was water all around the island, I could easily drink that. The only problem was, I didn't know where I was. I had run deep into the trees, and now I have no bearings.

I walked along the trees again, looking for something, anything. Anything that would help my hunger or thirst. I stepped along the grass, sometimes brushing by bushes. As I passed the trees I noticed there were some bugs on the bark of the trees, scurrying around. Could I eat those? There's no way. They wouldn't even do anything to help the hunger with how small they are.

I kept walking, sometimes in a straight line, and if I thought I saw something I'd go over there. Yet I found nothing. Soon, I saw an animal that looked like a rabbit. We stared at each other, both of us unmoving. This was my chance. I made the first move, lunging towards the rabbit, but it turned and hopped away into the bushes. I scrambled after it, scouring the bushes with my eyes for any sign of the animal. I thought I heard movement in a bush to my left and leaped over, sticking my hands into the bushes. I thought I had it, but the rabbit was in a completely different bush. It ran away and I chased

after it, my hand outstretched, but my eyes locked on the rabbit missed a tree root sticking out. It was too late to jump over, my foot got stuck and I fell hard to the ground. My hand still outstretched, but for no reason. The rabbit was gone.

I stayed lying on the ground. Ironically it felt like my stomach was eating me up from the inside. How long could humans survive without food? I think it was 3 days or 3 weeks. Wait no, water is 3 days, that means food was 3 weeks. Has it already been 3 weeks? I felt like I could die right now. My eyes struggled to stay open, and I felt dizzy. Soon, I was asleep.

I dreamed of nothing. At least, nothing that I remember. I don't know how long I slept for. A few hours? I struggled to open my eyes, and I was still lying down where I had fallen. My entire body felt weak, and the dizziness hadn't completely gone away. The world really was against me. Fighting against the sluggish feeling, I got my foot out of the root and managed to get myself up by using the tree as support.

I looked up at the sky, the sun looked to be a bit past noon and was now heading down. I walked aimlessly. I had no goal. I had passed some trees with what looked like fruits, but I didn't process them. My legs, seemingly getting weaker with every step, just kept walking.

My stomach rumbled again, and louder. I was still starving, thirsty, weak, dizzy, and lost wherever I was. Would I ever get out of here? A sadness filled me, but my eyes had no tears to spill. Hearing stories of slaves who had tried to escape but either got captured or died in the wilderness, I knew it was a painful way to go out.

I prayed that this was just another terrible dream, as I vaguely remembered the dream I had while sleeping on the sand. The memories of that dream quickly faded. All I could recall was walking with a stranger, talking with another boy, and a lady whispering in my ear. It was fuzzy. My vision was fuzzy then, it was fuzzy now.

I wonder if Tanvik had died in the fall. My eyes drooped, he probably had. He was a crewmate, and his job was to sell me, but he was the only one who actually talked to me. I was lucky enough to

survive. Maybe I shouldn't call it surviving, since I'm not exactly all good over here.

I looked up at the sky, the clouds passing by. I used to be up there in the sky. Now I'm on this island, with no home, no ship. Although the ship was never my home either way. I had stopped walking while contemplating, when I heard a growl behind me.

I froze, looking over at the corner of my eye and turning my head. A.. tiger? My legs were frozen with fear as the tiger bared its fangs. RUN, everything in my body told me, as my legs started to listen to me again. I pumped my legs, running forward. I was breathing hard, sweat running down my face. What fuel I was running on, I had no clue. The only thing powering my legs was adrenaline, and soon I'd be caught. I looked back for a split second, and there was nothing behind me. The tiger had disappeared.

I stopped running, did it not care? What was going on? I looked around me, my heart was practically a drum at this point. Everything seemed like a threat. Every sound, every movement. I needed to hide, but where? The sun shined in my eye, and my breathing kept getting faster. In, out, in, out. I was breathing hard. My arms were twitching and I was flinching at everything. It felt like there was something stuck in my chest, a shank of pure fear. I wanted to give up, scream, run and fly away, and cry at the same time.

Then I heard a rustle of the bushes behind me, it was the tiger. A blur of orange, white, and black flew out of the bushes. It went to roar, but the sound that came out sounded like the sound of a cat. Disrupting my fear was a moment of confusion. However, that was taken over by fear once again as the tiger lunged, ready to take a bite out of me. I closed my eyes and flinched, expecting death, but nothing happened. The tiger was gone again, and I was sitting on the ground breathing hard. What just happened?

I looked down at my stomach, but nothing was there. Not even a trace of the tiger. My fear was still there, but accompanied by a lot of confusion. Everything was moving too fast. First the lightning, now this disappearing tiger. My body was weak, my mind was weak, and I just wanted to get out of here. I looked around, would the tiger come back? Was it even real? Then, I caught a shimmer of light. I

focused on where I saw it, and there I saw water. Beautiful, clear, water.

I rushed over, practically scrambling, My hands pushing apart bushes and leaves, every cell of me focused on that water. I ran across the dirt, tripping on something I couldn't see. I was on a hill, and needed to get down to the sand. Falling, I rolled across the grass and landed on the sand. That was one way to get to it. I didn't care if I had fallen. I barely registered it. I clawed my way to the water, hope coursing through my body. I cupped the water from the ocean, ready to drink. "Finally," I croaked.

"Fool! Don't drink that!" Someone said, kicking the water from my hands. Why now, when I had finally gotten to the water, but I couldn't do anything. My vision was blurring as I fell on the sand.

Chapter 7: Breadfruit and Coconuts

I groaned as I woke up, feeling stone behind my back and where I was sitting. Seriously, how many times was I going to pass out and wake up. I remembered almost getting to the water, and then my goal getting disrupted by a mystery person. I should have probably been more curious about the person itself, but my body wanted nourishment, and it was going to get it. Thinking about the water, I noticed that my throat wasn't nearly as parched as before. Did I end up getting to the water anyway?

I now went from my half-awake state to more awake, but my eyes were still blurry. Where was I? I rubbed my eyes, trying to clear them out. Now that they were clear, I looked around. I was in a cave, but not a deep one. It only went a few meters into whatever hill it was by. The stone was cold, but some sun was shining from outside. Some more jagged parts stuck out from the walls, a nice surprise if an unsuspecting person tried to sit there.

I now turned my head to the left, looking outside. There, I could see the trees once again, and the afternoon sun shining upon them. The wind blew on the grass, and a warm breeze flew into the cave. In the center, stood a man. A brown-skinned, 6'0 to 6'1, muscular man with short black hair.

Tanvik turned around, "What's up, you awake?" He said in the most nonchalant tone, you would've thought he was just trying to look cool. Honestly, I still don't know.

"T..Tanvik??" I took a double take, my eyebrows raised in utter confusion. My inner self breathed a sigh of relief that he was alive, but it means that the other crewmates could be alive.

"That is my name, yes," Tanvik started, "I'm just joking. I found you trying to drink seawater by the coast. I mean I was surprised you were alive, I thought I was the only one, but what were

you doing?”

“Uhh,” I was still a bit shocked at the mystery person being Tanvik. It really wasn’t fair, he had probably had multiple hours to take in that I was here, meanwhile I have a few seconds. “I mean, uh, trying to drink water?”

“Trying to drink seawater? That stuff can kill you.”

“Kill me? Isn’t it just water?” I said as he sat across from me, almost hurting himself on a piece of the wall sticking out.

“Damn it, anyways as we were saying. Water is all fine and good, but seawater is saltwater. When you consume saltwater you become even thirstier and by God you were thirstier than a drunk divorced man at the pub.”

I took in what he said. I never actually knew that. It might be surprising but slaves don’t get education. “Oh. Wow. So I almost took myself out.”

“Pretty much, that’s why I kicked the water out of your hands. Then you just looked at me in shock and collapsed. When I brought you back, I gave you water.” Tanvik said, gesturing to his water bottle on his belt. “Just how thirsty were you?”

“I don’t know how many days I was out. I guess one way to put it is I was so thirsty and hungry I almost died and lost my mind.” My stomach gracefully decided to accentuate my words with a well placed roar, as I just remembered the hunger.

“Oh crap, well you should probably have this.” Tanvik stood up and went outside, coming back with a fruit I didn’t recognize at all. It looked like a green, oversized lemon with spikes? He grabbed it by the stem and easily split it in half. It almost smelled like bread, which threw me off. “It’s called breadfruit, it should help. Plus, it’s pretty ripe so it should be sweet.” He gave me both halves.

Breadfruit, it matches the smell. The inside looked like small white thin noodles that were connected to each other. A part of me was a bit reluctant to try a fruit I had never seen before, but as always, I have to take what I get. “Thank you.” I said with plain and genuine gratitude. I’m sure my stomach was grateful too.

“No problem, just eat it off the inside skin.” He gestured

towards the breadfruit, now sitting in the cave again. Without words, I put my mouth to the flesh and bit some off. It tasted sweet and breadlike, but also like custard. This fruit was really throwing me off, but it didn't taste bad at all.

Now my hunger took over me and I just breathed the fruit. Food also has water inside it, so it was really helping the rest of my thirst. After finishing the breadfruit in record time, I still wasn't satisfied. For once, my stomach helped me out by saving me from telling Tanvik. "Woops." I embarrassedly said.

"I would be surprised if you didn't want more." He said, passing me another opened breadfruit. I wolfed half of this one too, when Tanvik interrupted me. "Wait, I know you still might be hungry, but take a break from eating this for now." I looked up, had I done something wrong? "You were starving, so it isn't healthy to eat lots of food at once. I don't know how much is the limit, but I've heard it's even killed people"

I put the breadfruit down with a mournful gaze, but it was for the best. "I keep almost killing myself with things I think are safe."

"Tell me, what happened after you came to the island?" Tanvik asked.

"Well, I woke up by the water on the sand, and at this point my brain wasn't working at all. Then I," I paused because I realized that running away from crewmates included Tanvik, but it was already too late. "I realized that crewmates from the ship might be alive and looking for me, so I ran into the trees. Then, I realized I was really hungry and thirsty, so much so that I was losing my mind. So I walked along the forest, looking for anything. I actually found a rabbit, but blew my already fat chance that I was gonna find it. Then I tripped on a root and passed out."

"Ouch."

"Yep, so after I managed to get up even after my limbs were super stiff, I heard a growl behind me. And then I looked behind me, and there was a tiger."

"What? A tiger? On this island?"

"It's an island?"

“Yes, if we were in India right now someone would’ve found us, plus India is much larger and doesn’t have this kind of agriculture. We were above the ocean when we fell, but I don’t ever remember seeing an island in this area on the map.”

“I had no clue what agriculture meant, but I went on with my story. I ran from the tiger, and I thought it was chasing me. When I looked back, it was gone. Now I was in an area where bushes were all around me. Now my fear overtook me and any sound made me react like the tiger was coming from that direction. Freaking out, I heard movement from the bushes, and the tiger appeared. It growled at me, and roared, but.. All I heard was a cat’s meow? Then it charged at me, and just.. Disappeared.”

Tanvik seemed to have an answer for this, “I think you might’ve been so hungry and thirsty that your mind just started making up stuff. Although I have no idea why. The tiger probably sounded like a cat because I assume you’ve never heard a tiger before? Your brain might’ve just replaced the sound with something related to it.”

“That.. makes sense, and it’s probably why. I never want to go through that insanity again.”

“Very understandably, with all of the things you said.” What Tanvik said made me think, even the crewmates part? Well, he was probably just saying it for most of the things.

“In a way, it’s almost a good thing the ship went down. Then again, being stranded on a random island isn’t exactly preferable.” Tanvik said. I was a bit confused about this. A good thing? How could this be a good thing for him? I might understand for a slave like me, since some “freedom”, but he’s a crewmate.

“Huh?” I accidentally said in reaction to what he said.

“Wait wait, that came off way wrong without context. I need to back up a bit and explain, and I guess it’s okay to talk about it here.” Tanvik sighed at how confusing he must’ve sounded to me, and continued. “If I were to put it in a few words, I never wanted to be a slave trader, a pirate.” What? It surprised me that he called the job “pirate” instead of “crewmate” or “aeroship trader” since most people in that career were very particular about what they were called. Even

though they knew full well what their actions resembled. “My father was a slave trader, and hunter.”

“I know what a slave trader is, but what do hunters do again?” I felt like I should know this, but it’s like it was stuck in a place in my brain I couldn’t get access to right now.

Tanvik had a sad look on his face, “That’s right, you wouldn’t remember and nobody would tell you.” That makes sense so far, almost nothing was told to slaves. “Slave hunters are people who acquire people, turn them into slaves, and sell them. Most of the time it’s done to children.”

I took in what Tanvik said, “So that means that, slave hunters found me and turned me into a slave? I wasn’t a slave from the beginning?” I hadn’t fully processed what this meant, but as it hit, anger rose in my chest. I could’ve been a kid living a normal life, but slave hunters took me, and turned me into a slave. Forced me into a life of work, suffering, unfairness, pain, sadness, and so much more. Yet I couldn’t do anything about it.

“I’m sorry. You might’ve not been found. Slave hunters sometimes took children from their families, and then they..” Tanvik wasn’t sure if he should tell me what he was going to say, but I didn’t realize immediately.

“So that means I have a family?” I said excitedly. I have a family? Where did they live? Maybe back in North America. I wonder how they were doing, did this mean I have a mother and a father? Maybe siblings? As my mind raced, Tanvik didn’t say anything. In fact, he looked like he felt sorry for me. I realized what I got wrong from his look. I should’ve replaced “have” with “had”. My hopes fell faster than they rose, crashing down. “It’s okay, can’t miss what I never had right? Anyways, just go on with what you were saying.” I wanted to move on, fast. Nothing gained by lingering on this useless topic, right?

“Slave hunters usually take children, and commit horrible crimes. That’s what my father was. He was a monster, a slave hunter. He’s the one that forced me into being a slave pirate. Obviously, I couldn’t deny it. I didn’t have the option to. On the outside, he made me be the perfect son, and on the inside, I hated how slaves were

treated.” Tanvik looked outside, at the trees and hills. “I always wanted to be something other than a pirate. Not anything in particular, just anything else. Seeing how my father treated slaves, I wanted them to be free. They weren’t even born slaves. Well actually, nobody is born a slave, we’re born human. They were unfairly taken. Anyways, one day I witnessed him assaulting a slave and beating them. He wasn’t doing it out of punishment, just sadism. I had already known my father was a monster, but maybe it was the years of being a slave pirate and seeing what he’s done my whole life, or just my rage at that moment. Then I did something I don’t know if I should regret it or consider it a good thing, but I took my gun and shot him. The red coat he always wore was now combined with the red of his blood.

Now I felt bad for Tanvik, he shot his own father. Obviously not out of want but need and necessity. It had probably haunted him for years, and might’ve still haunted him. “I’m sorry.” Is all I could say. I don’t really know what I could say that could help either.

“Don’t worry about it, I’m okay. Although not everyone wants to be known as a father-killer. Anyways, back to the main point. That’s what I meant by that maybe the ship crashing was a good thing. I survived, you survived, which is good. Now if we find a way off this island somehow, you can be free, and I can leave being a slave pirate.”

“Couldn’t you just quit being a slave pirate anyway?”

“You would think that, but there’s one reason I can’t. The Captain. Zelos was one of my father’s closest aides, and then took over his ship. In the past, I had stupidly shown the desire to leave this career. Obviously, my father wouldn’t let me. So he threatened me by saying he would shoot and kill me if I decided to leave. He also told his aides, but nobody else has to keep his image up after all.”

“But Captain Zelos wouldn’t shoot you right? He seems like a nice person.” I said, Captain Zelos was kind to me, and almost seemed like Tanvik. Maybe he just had to do his job but felt bad for slaves too.

“Listen, about Captain Zelos-” Tanvik went to say, but he was interrupted by a gunshot, firing into the cave. My entire body flinched and Tanvik ducked, but the bullet went somewhere back into the cave.

Still surprised from the sound, our eyes shot towards the outside of the cave. There stood a man with tufts of hair ripped out,

ragged clothes, bloodshot eyes and a gaunt face. I looked closer at him. Kiggy?

“Jason, get down and stay down.” Tanvik said. My heart was beating hard with surprise and fear.

Tanvik stepped outside, hands up, and stared right into Kiggy’s eyes. It was obvious he was deranged from being on this island, no food or water.

“Tanvik! You piece of crap! Give me all your water, and food, right now. Right now!” Kiggy’s shaking hands clasped his pistol aimed at Tanvik’s chest. His eyes shot everywhere, and his breathing was heavy.

“Kiggy, just put the gun down, I’m your ally.”

“Ally? Ally?? You know, you’ve always annoyed me the most. Always acting nice to the slaves, and ordering me around. Where’s your water!?”

“I had some water, but we used it already.” Tanvik said, keeping his hands up and trying to be the least provoking he could be.

“We?” Kiggy’s eyes darted behind Tanvik, and straight into mine. “The slave survived?”

“Tch.”

“Great! That’s great!” Kiggy shouted, to my momentary confusion. Then he laughed hysterically, but still kept the gun pointed at Tanvik. “I get to kill both of the most annoying people on the ship in the span of a few minutes! That’s great!”

“Kiggy, why are you doing this?”

“You have no water for me, no food, and I dislike both of you. I’m also on an island, nobody else is here. What are the consequences? None.” Kiggy suddenly stepped forward and punched Tanvik. Despite his weakness, he still had surprising strength. Paired with the suddenness of it, and the fact that Tanvik’s hands were up, he knocked Tanvik to the ground.

“Tanvik!” I shouted from back in the cave, getting up. I don’t know what I would do, but anything that could at least help.

“Stay down, slave!” Kiggy shouted, pointing the gun at me, his finger on the trigger. Now, Tanvik saw his chance. He brought his right leg up and kicked Kiggy’s knee, knocking him backwards.

Before Kiggy could get a chance to recover himself and aim the gun, he got up with speed quicker than I could see and gripped the wrist that was holding the gun. He twisted Kiggy's arm to the left with his right arm, also serving to jerk Kiggy to the left. Then he used his left first and delivered a hook to Kiggy's face, finishing him. He was knocked out.

"Can't believe he was alive, and that he found us." Tanvik looked at the knocked out Kiggy, with a mixture of pity and dislike. "He must've been starving and dying of thirst. He's always taken things for himself first, just like he tried with the boat."

I realized that I could've gone that deranged if Tanvik hadn't found me. It was weird thinking about being in a state of mind you couldn't really control. "Is it over? Is he out?" I asked from back in the cave.

"Yeah, we're good. I'll be taking this." Tanvik took the gun which was now lying on the ground and put it into an empty spot on his belt. "And this." He had looked through Kiggy's inner vest, belt, anywhere where weapons could be stored and found a knife. It was just about 6 inches long, not including the handle. Tanvik went to put it into his belt, but all the spots were taken up by his own gun, knife, and waterskin.

"Why didn't you use your gun against Kiggy? You could've just shot him right there."

"If he saw me coming out with a gun he would've just shot. I don't think he was in a calm enough state to process that I might be able to shoot before his bullet reaches me. Plus if we both shot each other you'd just be left, and let's say you took care of Kiggy. You would have to either leave me behind or somehow give me medical aid." Tanvik twirled the knife, turning the handle towards me. "You should take this, just in case any wild animal comes. Now that we've seen Kiggy, and we're both alive, there's also a good chance that all the crewmates survived." Tanvik opened his waterskin over Kiggy's mouth. "I hope I was wrong about having no water." A few meager drops dropped from the waterskin.

"You're helping him? He attacked us, plus he's insane. He could get up and try to shoot us again. He won't suddenly be friends

with us.” There was only danger in helping Kiggy. I don’t see why he had to waste the rest of his water on Kiggy.

“I can’t just let him die Jason. Even if he tried to attack us, a life is a big thing to take away.”

“I.. guess”

“Anyways, we have to hope it rains to collect some water. We can’t really feed him right now, otherwise we could’ve gotten some water in his system from food.”

“Is there any other source of water, could you find anything on the island?”

“I don’t know, I guess we’d have to look, but we’d have to-” Tanvik paused, “Wait you’re right, this is an island. There’s probably coconuts here, and those hold water.” Tanvik got up, “There’s probably coconuts on the coast, if there are palm trees.”

“Palm trees?”

“Trees with long leaves, and they can grow tall too. People usually describe them as growing on the sand.”

“Oh, so that’s what those longleaf trees are called. I saw some of those near where I woke up.”

“Usually those have coconuts, which fall to the ground. If we’re lucky we can find one and crack it open.” I had never seen what a coconut was, so I was a bit lost.

“So those hold water inside? That seems pretty useful!”

“Yeah, hopefully they save our lives. We should get going right now since we don’t know how dehydrated he is.”

“Wait, do we know where the coast is?”

“I think so, luckily this cave isn’t too far from the part of the coast we found each other on. If the sun rises in the east, and it’s going down to our right, that means this is west.” Tanvik pointed to the right. “That means this is south,” he pointed in front of us, “and this is east.” Finally pointing to our left. “And the coast was about this direction.” Tanvik said, pointing a bit to our left and forward. “So we have to go around southeast.” Tanvik walked over to Kiggy, “We’ll have to take him with us.”

“But he might wake up, that won’t be fun to deal with in the forest.”

Tanvik thought about it, “You’re right, here, take his vest and tie it around his arms.” He sat Kiggy up, and gestured for me to come and take the vest. I did not want to be near Kiggy. Luckily there were no buttons so I could just take it off.

“There we go.” I said as I tied the vest around his wrists. He might be able to untie it by just struggling, but even so it might help for some resistance?

“We should be fine, I took his gun and knife after all.” Tanvik said as we started walking to the coast. Walking through the trees.

“I wonder what animals live here.” I said, trying to avoid a patch of mud.

“If I remember correctly there might be birds, crabs, lizards, and probably a lot more stuff.” After that, we walked through the trees and bushes in silence. Before long, we found a sandy area, the coast. On it were white feathered birds that could not stop squawking. I was alarmed at first, but then realized it was the many birds around the coast.

“Are those the birds you were talking about? What are they called?”

“Seagulls, kind of loud and annoying.”

“Kind of?” I said, which Tanvik chuckled at.

“Look around for coconuts on the ground. They’re brown spheres with stuff that looks like hairs you see any?”

“Not yet,” I said, looking around as we walked onto the sand. I saw that there were palm trees, with coconuts high up by the leaves. “Couldn’t we get those?” I said to Tanvik, pointing at the coconuts.

“We would have to climb up there, wanna try?” Tanvik said jokingly, nudging me.

“I’m good.” To which we both started laughing. The ocean was also calm and the sound of the waves going back and forth was relaxing. Maybe if we weren’t stranded on an island this would’ve been more enjoyable. I walked along the sand, looking around. I almost bumped into a seagull, but it flew away and honked at me. “Jeez my bad.” I kept looking under each tree for a coconut, until I saw one. “Tanvik! Over here!” I shouted and waved to Tanvik who was looking in the opposite direction from me.

“You found one? Good job.” He said, jogging over to me still carrying Kiggy on his shoulder.

I picked it up and tried opening it with my hands, but it was much harder than it looked. Then I tried punching it with the side of my fist, but with no avail. “This is harder than it looks.”

“You aren’t gonna open it like that.” Tanvik laughed as he put Kiggy down.

I handed Tanvik the coconut, “Hmph, you try it then.”

He took out his knife and stabbed a hole in the coconut, then put it to Kiggy’s mouth. “Now that’s how it’s done. We can eat the coconut itself as well.”

“We can eat the brown hairs??” I said pointing at the coconut. Those certainly didn’t look appetizing.

“No no, it has white flesh on the inside, you eat that. It’s sweet and very tasty.”

“Really? What does it taste like?”

“Well I don’t really know how to describe it, it tastes like coconut, you’ll find out!” He said, taking out Kiggy’s pistol and holding it by the handle. Then he placed the coconut on the ground, holding it firmly. Using the pistol like a hammer and cracking the coconut open as he rotated it. Now it cracked in half, the white part clearly showing. Tanvik started looking around the area, it seemed like he was looking for something.

“Anything wrong?”

“I need something to pry it open.” Tanvik now spotted a flat ended branch on the sand, “Pass me that so I can separate this from its shell.” I ran over and handed him the branch, which he used to separate the white part from the hard shell part, but there was still a layer of brown skin. “We can use the knife to peel it later, but for now just take a bite and don’t eat the brown part.” He said as he handed me one half of the coconut.

“Thank you.” I said, taking a bite into the coconut. It was soft, and tasted very sweet. “This is really good!”

“Yeah it’s really popular pretty much everywhere, and it’s naturally very sweet.” I would be able to eat this any day. “So do you

prefer breadfruit or coconut?”

“Both are good,” I said in between bites of coconut, “but I think I prefer coconut. Breadfruit tastes like well, bread, and is custardy. Coconut is sweet, and kinda.. Oily? It’s hard to describe.”

“I have pretty much the same reasons as you.” Tanvik said, enjoying the coconut. “I think we should get back after collecting a few coconuts. The cave is a good shelter, plus we can also start a fire there.”

“Makes sense to me.” Around 15 minutes passed as we went around finding and collecting coconuts. By the end of it, we had found 8 coconuts. 5 of which I carried by using my shirt as a basket. Tanvik carried the other three with his other hand, using his arm to hook them. Of course his other shoulder was occupied by Kiggy.

“I think this is good enough for now, we can always come back later if we need to.” Tanvik said as we walked back to the cave. Now that we were more familiar with the way we got back quicker than we had arrived. Now back at the cave, Tanvik laid Kiggy in the back of the cave while I placed the coconuts inside. Hours passed as we tried to find materials to start a fire for warmth during the night. We also looked for more breadfruit, since Tanvik said we could cook them. Tanvik had also found a spot between two rocks to fit his waterskin in. This way we would be able to collect at least some water if there was rainfall. Soon, the sun had set and we had the fire. It was fun to look at and see the flames flickering, but it required a lot of tending to. Following the night, my eyes had also started to tire and I was feeling sluggish. “You must be tired from today and you also faced the same thing Kiggy did too. Get some sleep if you can. I’ll tend the fire and keep watch.”

“I can stay awake, no problem.” I felt bad making Tanvik do all the work. He had wasted his water on me, given me food, now he had to keep watch.

“Don’t worry. You’re way younger than me, just a kid. Just leave it to me.” Tanvik said, smiling, and gestured for me to go into the cave. I’ll wake you up for the next watch. I reluctantly but at the same time gladly accepted. I felt bad, but it felt like everything wanted to just rest. Despite the cold stone floor, I immediately started to fall

asleep. I mean, not like I was used to warm beds anyway. My eyes closed and my senses faded as I fell asleep.

When I woke up, I was expecting the night. Yet I woke up to more sunshine and light. Had I not woken up to keep watch? There stood Tanvik, once again by the entrance of the cave. “You awake?”

I slowly got up, “I didn’t wake up to keep watch?”

“No no, I didn’t wake you up, don’t worry about it.”

“Didn’t wake me up?? Why? You stayed up all night?”

“You looked like you needed the sleep, plus I’ve pulled lots of all nighters before. Anyways, Kiggy is still out. We need to get food in his system but we have no way right now, so I’ve just been giving him coconut water. By the way, take this.” Tanvik handed me an opened breadfruit, “Breakfast.”

“Better than what I got on the ship at least.” A lot of the time slaves wouldn’t get breakfast. Just a single meager “meal” every day.

Tanvik laughed at my comment, “The island of luxury.” He had a breadfruit in his hand as well, “After we’re done eating, I’m going to go check the waterskin. There was some light rain last night. Maybe it collected some water.”

“Maybe it filled up the whole skin, that would be nice.”

“One can hope, one can hope.” Tanvik said as he sat across from me. We both ate and finished off our breadfruits, and Tanvik stood up. “Stay here just in case something happens, although it won’t take long for me to check the waterskin hopefully.”

“Got it.” There wasn’t much to say or for me to do, I was just supposed to wait. I watched as Tanvik exited the cave and jogged off to where he placed the waterskin. The spot wasn’t that close to the cave, it was about as far as the coast from here. Hopefully he comes back soon.

Chapter 8: CZ

I sat there staring at the bushes, nothing better to do anyway. My hand was resting on Kiggy's knife, nothing would probably happen but that didn't stop me from being restless. I spotted a few birds flying over, squawking as usual. I also kept checking behind me for any sign of Kiggy waking up, but so far there was nothing.

I might've felt safer with a gun, but then again I would probably end up shooting myself instead of the target. Not like I was experienced with a knife anyway, but it was better than nothing. As I was sitting and a minute passed, simply waiting for Tanvik to get back, I heard a rustle from the bushes.

Immediately my heart rate soared, and I gripped my knife, standing up. Then just as sudden, the rustling stopped. I assured myself that it was nothing, that it was just an animal that had run away after seeing me. Then again, I heard the rustle, and something told me I was being watched. It was like hearing noises in the middle of the night, and thinking something is there, except it's real. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to go forward and be threatening just in case something was there, or just keep watch. It couldn't have been another crewmate.. Right? "Is anybody there?" I tried to sound firm, but that went terribly wrong. My voice came out shaky, unsure, and fearful. Basically the perfect target.

Then the mystery being, or should I say mystery person now, came out of hiding. Arms raised, stepping forward. Not only was it a person, but this person was wearing a navy blue, gold lined, captain's coat. "Relax, Jason, it's only me." Captain Zelos said.

"C..Captain Zelos?" Not only was I shocked, I was also a bit relieved. Out of all the crewmates except Tanvik, Captain Zelos seemed like a nice person. I wonder if he had the same mindset as Tanvik? I lowered my knife to my side, no longer needing it.

“It’s a surprise, but a welcome one that you’re alive. I was watching from the trees, but I wasn’t sure if you were Jason, and I wasn’t sure if you would attack me. Is that a person in the back?” Captain Zelos directed his eyes towards Kiggy, lying down in the back of the cave.

“Yes.. sir, that’s Kiggy, he tried to attack us, but he was deranged.” I wasn’t sure if I should address him as sir, should I salute? Honestly, too many things were running through my mind.

“Us?” Captain Zelos asked. I had made the same mistake as Tanvik, although in this case it wasn’t really a mistake.

“Yes sir, Tanvik rescued me after I was starving, he went to go get the waterskin sir.”

Captain Zelos smiled, wide, “That’s very good news. You don’t have to address me as sir Jason, I’m on an island not a ship.” He said, putting his hand on my shoulder. Now that Tanvik and Captain Zelos were both alive, we had a chance of getting off this island. “Come Jason, let’s walk.”

“Walk? But Tanvik told me to stay here.” I wasn’t sure if I could go away from the cave, since Kiggy was here too.

“Oh don’t worry about it, I’ll let him know you’re with me,” Captain Zelos picked up a branch and dug two deep letters in the ground by the cave, “CZ, now he should know you’re with me. Now, let’s go, we’ll be fine.” We walked into the trees, heading away from the cave. The Captain’s arm was on my back as we walked. “So tell me Jason, what was your first day on the island like?”

“I woke up on the sand, and I was thirsty and starving, so I wandered through the forest.”

“Oh you poor thing, and did you find Tanvik then?”

“No s-” I paused, “I mean no, I had chased after a rabbit and faced hallucinations. I almost drank seawater on the coast, but Tanvik found me and saved me.”

“Well thank God for that, can’t have a bright young boy such as you dying.” I didn’t know how to respond to this line, so I just stayed silent for a while. Was I supposed to agree with him? Thank him?

“Thank you..” I said, unsurely.

“Jason, are you still nervous? We’ve technically known each other for months now. You could even consider me a friend.”

“A friend?” I said a bit too abruptly, and quickly clarified myself, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for it to come out like that. I was just surprised because I’m just a slave.”

“Just a slave? Jason, on this island we’re all equal.” I was a bit shocked at how nice he was being. Were slave ship captains usually this nice to slaves? I hope Tanvik knew the Captain was with me and we were safe.

-----T-----

I walked back to the cave where Jason was waiting for me. Luckily for us, some water had fallen into the waterskin, so I brought it back. I don’t know how many minutes had passed, but it took me longer than I expected to get there and come back.

I entered the slight clearing where the cave was, and I expected to see Jason sitting by the cave, but he wasn’t there. “Jason?” I said as I walked towards the cave. He could just be inside the cave. I was worrying for no reason. As I walked to the cave, I only saw Kiggy.

I had not spotted the letters on the ground, but as I walked up, it would be inevitable to see. CZ. Was this a message left by Jason? What did he mean? Couldn’t he have just waited until I got back? I looked at the message left, and noticed some footprints heading off from the letters. Sure, we had walked all over the place, but these were much fresher. I looked closer at them and realized that they weren’t the same size as Jason’s feet. In fact, Jason’s smaller footprints were up ahead, and walking away from the message.

CZ. Another person walked away with Jason. Jason also knows who they are. And then as fast as my confusion had appeared it went away, replaced with a far worse truth. A much, much worse truth. Captain Zelos was on the island. It was too obvious, C for Captain and Z for Zelos.

It was my fault, I left Jason back at the cave, and now Captain Zelos had appeared. How did he know where we were? Had he discovered us from before, and was just waiting for me to leave? My mind was racing with questions, with no answers. I needed to find them fast.

-----J-----

I continued walking with Captain Zelos, he was asking me questions and making seemingly random conversation. I guess there were just a lot of different questions to ask. I also wonder where he was taking me, we had walked quite a distance. "Is it ok to walk this far? What if we can't find our way back?" I asked.

"Don't worry, I purposefully walked in a straight line from the cave, that way we can go back. If Tanvik needs to find us then he can easily find us."

-----T-----

I looked back at the footprints, and where they lead to. Captain Zelos had taken Jason into the forest, but the prints seemed almost too obvious. They were walking in a straight line. How soon after I left had Captain Zelos approached Jason, I don't know, but I'm guessing soon. I just hope nothing happens. The kid doesn't deserve that.

I followed the footsteps, looking around to make sure they weren't a decoy. I hated that it wasn't a decoy, because all I had done was waste time checking. Even though Jason would be suspicious, Captain Zelos was tricky enough that he could get him to do that without being suspicious. I had to make sure, otherwise I could waste even more time. At the same time I wanted to rush, but I needed to stay calm at the same time, but I hated it.

I ran after the footsteps. This was all my fault.

“Captain Zelos? Are we walking somewhere or just walking and talking?”

“We’re walking somewhere Jason, I have something to show you. I just hope I can show Tanvik too.” Captain Zelos said with a grin. It must’ve been some surprise. My shoulder was warm, partly from Captain Zelos’s arm being on my shoulder, but the weather was also hot. Luckily the trees provided some shade for us, but this was very different from the much colder weather on the ship. On the ship, other fields like the lightning field helped divert the freezing wind and air pressure. Thinking about the lightning field, I almost shuddered. The memories of that scenario were terrifying. Everything was moving so fast, and death was almost certain. Yet somehow we survived on the island, and I was here right now. With the Captain even, and Tanvik too. Oh, and I guess Kiggy. I wonder if Bia and Liggy survived too? I don’t know if I would prefer them dying, especially after Tanvik’s words. Life is a big thing to take away.

I ran into the forest, and the footsteps just kept going. How far had they walked? Right now it was both Jason and Zelos’s footprints, and from the pattern it didn’t look like they were running. As I was running, I came to a halting stop from just my reflexes. In front of me stood, or should I say laid, a viper. It was slithering on the ground, but it wasn’t aggressive towards me. As long as I didn’t provoke it I would be fine, but the bad thing was it wasn’t moving fast. I needed to get through or around somehow, but anything I did could put me in danger.

I froze, frustrated but also fearful. I needed to get to where Jason was, but this stupid snake was blocking my way.

-----J-----

A few minutes passed, walking to wherever Captain Zelos wanted to take me.

-----T-----

After painstakingly waiting, I rushed past the snake, running even faster. A few minutes passed as I sprinted to where Zelos took Jason.

-----J-----

“Jason, remember the lightning field. You saw it did not redirect the lightning right?”

“Yes, for some reason it didn't work at all.” I saw it clearly, but I didn’t know Captain Zelos had seen it. I thought he was already blown off the ship.

“Consider that, my first present to you?”

“First.. Present..? What do you mean?” I wanted to say more, but suddenly I was flying across the air, and my breath was gone. I flew through bushes, the branches scratching my arms, and fell on the ground. “..What..was..” I croaked, unable to speak.

Captain Zelos now stood over me, the same grin that he was wearing before now displayed on his face. Yet instead of a warm look in his eyes, it was replaced by a bright, but sadistic look. “And consider this, my second.” He grabbed my face, and turned it to my right.

There, facing me, were two decaying but still recognizable faces. Bloody, pierced bodies, lying limp on the ground. “..Liggy? ..Bia?” My voice had still not come back. I looked at their faces, the disgusting image forcing its way into my brain. I gagged, vomit rising in my throat.

“Now, now, we can’t make you vomit can we.” He grabbed

me by the shirt, and lifted me up. Then, he swung his left fist into my gut, propelling me into a tree. Once more, I was winded, and gasping for air. Why was this happening? A mixture of pain and confusion were swirling in my stomach as if in a whirlpool.

Captain Zelos was standing there, now smiling hysterically. “Captain Zelos.. What... what happened to them?”

Captain Zelos put his hand to his forehead and started laughing like a madman. “You still don’t understand? I, me, happened to them. I killed them. Did I gain your trust that much? Slaves like you really are stupid. I killed them, I took the lightning field down.”

Now it started to hit. The one hitting me was Captain Zelos, and yet somehow my brain didn’t accept this sudden betrayal. I looked at Bia’s face, Captain Zelos’s sister, and yet she was dead. “Bu-”

“You think I care that she was my sister? She was useless, just like all the other crewmates. Every single one of them. Bia was always loud, annoying, yet nothing to show for it. Kiggy was stupid, and failed at everything. Liggy followed suit, they are twins after all. Tanvik, the slave lover, I know all about him. I don’t care if they die, it’s what? 6 lives?”

“5..?” Kiggy, Liggy, Bia, Tanvik, me, that’s five.

“Ah yes, my failed plan. You see, I had Tanvik not turn on the lightning field because I knew there was going to be a thunderstorm. Just in case he did turn it on, I tampered with the generator. The ship would crash. Yes, I would die, but at least I wouldn’t get caught. Then you see, we all got so lucky! Now on this island, I can kill everyone, and still live to do whatever I want. Before I killed those two over there,” Zelos waved in the direction of Bia and Liggy, “We searched for the crashed ship, because we wanted one thing, the Aerobolt crystal. The frequency of the crystal is registered with the countries we would pass by, that way they know we aren’t an enemy. Then I killed them. Now, I’ll kill you. I purposefully made it obvious where we were, so when Tanvik gets here, I’ll kill him too.”

I was angry, angry at being used, that this was happening. Angry that this was happening to me, so many things in such a short amount of time. But I couldn’t do anything about it. I had no power. Zelos was so much stronger than me. I couldn’t overpower him. He

walked over to me, holding me by the throat, but not choking me. Not choking me yet at least. “Why...why do this?”

“Because I love having the power. I can just take it away like that, and they’re never going to get it back. I also hate slaves. Not only are they inferior, but weak, stupid, and useless. I wish I could’ve played with you in my office. You see, whenever a slave left to go with their buyer, I’d take them into my office. And I’d violate their minds, and their bodies.”

-----T-----

Now I had found the end of their footsteps that were travelling in a line. It slowed down to more of an area up ahead. As I continued running, I heard voices. Zelos’s voice. I was sweating, and my fear was high.

I broke through the bushes, coming to see Zelos holding Jason by the throat. Beside them were Bia and Liggy’s dead bodies. I was shocked, but I had no time to be shocked. I could be surprised later. I was late, Zelos had already made his move, but Jason wasn’t dead.

“ZELOS!” I launched a straight punch at the right side of Zelos’s face, my anger coursing through my arm. I looked at Jason’s face and it was ridden with betrayal and fear.

-----J-----

Zelos had started putting grip into his fingers, now tightening his fingers over my throat. As I struggled against the hold, something caught my eye from my left. Tanvik? Before I could properly see his face, he had rushed towards Zelos, punching his cheek. Zelos fell to the ground, and I was free from the choke hold.

Everything was moving too fast, and I was still in shock from Zelos, but I was glad Tanvik was here. Yet moreso, I felt that he should have run away. “You shouldn’t have come, now he’s going to kill you too.”

“Jason, run away, there’s no being a hero right now.” Tanvik turned to me to speak, but was faced by a lightning quick jab from Zelos who had gotten up with insane speed. Tanvik certainly seemed the stronger of the two, but Zelos had strength hidden in his physique. Tanvik blocked this jab, and dodged the next fist thrown from Zelos. Now Zelos stepped back, unnervingly calm. He brought out his gun, aiming it at Tanvik, but then suddenly aiming it at me.

“You know, I wanted to kill Tanvik in front of you Jason, but it seems that you will have to do.” He pointed the gun straight at my head. I screamed, putting my arms in front of my face. As if that would help.

“Jason!” Tanvik shouted, lunging forward at Zelos. But we had both failed to realize that it was a feint. Zelos hit Tanvik’s face with the butt of his pistol, throwing him to the ground.

“Tanvik!”

“Run. Away!”

“How sweet, the bond you have.” Zelos put his gun back in his pocket, using his fists to batter Tanvik into the ground. I could only watch as almost every punch connected. He was on Tanvik, and there was no getting up. Tears welled to my eyes as I could only watch.

No, I couldn’t only watch. I could at least try. I had the knife in my side pocket, I took it with me when going with Zelos. I unsheathed the knife, but I couldn’t just charge him. I just needed to get him away from Tanvik. I gripped my knife with my right hand, painfully standing up. Zelos was only focused on Tanvik. I swung my right hand forward, staring into the side of Zelos’s face, right where I wanted the knife to be. The knife spun through the air, a ray of sunshine sparkling along the blade as it flew. Yet it was not the ray of sunshine that we needed. The knife flew in front Zelos’s face, and it looked like it served to do nothing.

However it distracted and scared Zelos, as a flying knife would do to anybody. And Tanvik was not out yet. Seeing Zelos pause for a second, Tanvik took his chance. While he couldn’t get up, his arms were free without having to face Zelos punching him. With his right fist, he delivered a striking blow to Zelos’s cheek. Zelos fell to

the left, stunned for a few seconds. Tanvik grabbed him by the collar, and threw him forward. I realized that he was trying to get the fight farther and farther from me. “Didn’t I tell you to run? GO!” He shouted, not taking his eyes off Zelos. He took his gun out from his belt, going to shoot Zelos, but Zelos was still kicking. In a swift movement, he kicked Tanvik’s knee with his heel, knocking Tanvik backwards. Then, he got up, jabbing at Tanvik. Tanvik used his left hand to block, stepping backwards at the same time. Zelos pressed forward with a flurry of punches and blocks. Jab, jab, left overhand, block. Tanvik was clearly on the defensive, but what I didn’t know was he was stepping in a direction opposite from me. Giving me an opening to escape.

Tanvik’s eyes flickered to me, clearly holding the message to run, but I was frozen. My knife throw might’ve worked, but after that Zelos could overpower Tanvik again. What would I do after I ran? I was still trapped on this island with Zelos. Could Tanvik beat Zelos? “Where are you looking?” Zelos had found an opening from Tanvik glancing at me. He grabbed Tanvik’s collar, pulled Tanvik towards him, swept his feet and moved to the side as Tanvik fell. Then he took his right foot and kicked Tanvik, rolling him over. The kick had deceptively strong power. Tanvik lay there clutching his side, he was almost finished. “After I kill both of you, I’m going to use the Aerobolt to contact authorities in India and any ships that might be nearby.” I remembered Zelos mentioning he used Bia and Liggy to find the crystal, but how was he going to use it? “All I have to do is shatter it in half, then it will release its energy into the air. But first, I have to get rid of you two. I would’ve preferred beating you to a pulp with my own hands, but Tanvik is too troublesome.” Zelos’s gun had dropped from when he was punching Tanvik into the ground earlier. Yet now, he reached into his vest pocket once more.

I realized what he was going to do. He had another gun, and was about to deliver the finishing shot. I broke out of my frozen state, glancing at the knife I had thrown at Zelos. It was on the ground, would I be able to reach it? There was no other thing I could do. Tanvik looked at Zelos reaching into his vest pocket and knew what was coming. He tried to move out of the way, but Zelos stomped on

his stomach, winding him once more. It was too late.

I desperately ran to the knife, diving and reaching it as Zelos found his gun. I rolled, now in a kneeling position. Zelos took out the gun, almost identical to the one he had dropped. For a moment, he had been distracted by Tanvik, but now all he had to do was point and shoot.

I aimed, I wasn't someone strong, just desperate. The knife flew through the air, an arc of potential hope, or absolute disappointment.

Zelos's eye caught the knife flying towards his face. The strike was true. Yet so was Zelos's skill, he blocked the tip of the knife with his gun, absolutely killing the momentum. "You've already tried that once, dear Jason. It won't work."

"Is that so?" Tanvik said, still slightly out of breath, but holding the knife with his left arm outstretched. Zelos looked down in surprise as the knife plunged through his clothing, and through his ribs. He staggered backwards and dropped his gun. As he clutched the knife, trying to get it out, Tanvik only pushed harder. Suddenly revitalized by this chance, Tanvik stood up, plunging the knife even deeper.

Zelos fell to the ground and layed there, blood leaking out from the wound. Was he dead? "Jason, close your eyes." Close my eyes? "You don't want to see this." I obeyed, covering my eyes. Out of my vision, Tanvik picked up Zelos's gun. Pointing the weapon almost used to kill him at Zelos, he aimed for the head. The gunshot that followed answered my questions.

Chapter 9: Lightning

Bang. It was over. Although I didn't understand why Tanvik shot him for a moment. I kept my eyes closed. I didn't want to see more blood and brains. "It was because while he was probably dead, I didn't want to take chances. It isn't just good guy bad guy. Life is important, but he took it from others." While the sight was certainly gruesome, although I hadn't seen it, I agreed with Tanvik. Tanvik threw the gun far into the trees, and walked over to me, getting me up and turning me around. "Let's go back to the cave, we can talk there."

I slowly got up, and we started walking back together. Following the same path Zelos had taken with me. He pretended to be kind, treated me like a normal person just like Tanvik. In the end all he did was hurt me, but why. "Tanvik.. Why did he do that? To me, to us, to Bia and Liggy? Weren't you guys part of his ship? Why did he pretend to be nice to me, and then hurt me?" I was overflowing with questions, and they came out as my voice cracked.

Tanvik was silent, he obviously felt bad for me, for what had just occurred. "I'm sorry that had to happen to you Jason." He sighed, "Zelos was a crewmate and student of my father. Back then he wasn't known as a Captain. This was before I was born, so this is just what I was told. In the past, he wasn't insane, as a child, as a teen, or when he became a slave pirate. Actually, he apparently only became a trader out of necessity, as he was sorely lacking in money to live. On my father's ship, he worked with the slaves, and at first dealt with them normally. However, my father abused the slaves, and he witnessed that. My father taught him that slaves were useless and weak, a lower species. That's when he started taking advantage of his power. Not long after, he started going on slave hunts with my father. He saw the brutality, the pain, and the fear in the victim's eyes. He also saw that the one delivering this pain, received no consequences. He found that he had a liking for committing such acts, especially since there were no consequences. The power went to his head, as it does with so many people. Soon he had become a man who wasn't afraid to kill and manipulate to see that pain inside. He had no sexual desire either, but

if those kinds of acts would get that pain, he would do them. That's what he would turn into."

I shuddered at the stages of Zelos, starting off as a seemingly normal person and transforming into a monster. "That's sickening."

Tanvik nodded, "Beyond sickening. I wish I could've told you earlier. Actually I tried, but I was interrupted, and on the ship we weren't allowed to tell the slaves anything." Tanvik put his hand on my shoulder. Reminding me of how Zelos had tried to use me, this very same way, but now I could tell the difference. This hand on my shoulder wasn't trying to hurt me. We walked in silence back to the cave, both of us still going through what had just happened. The silence was almost too contrasting to what had just happened.

"We're back, finally." I said now that the cave was in sight.

"Finally, for sure, let's go get some rest." It was morning, but I felt like going back to sleep. Kiggy was still lying there as usual. Every single time I saw him, I thought he was dead. We walked through the trees and bushes, into the cave. Now we were sitting in the cave, enjoying the calm. I looked out the cave opening in the direction we had just come from. Zelos's dead body was lying there, along with Bia and Liggy. My heart was still beating hard. It wouldn't be easy to calm down, that's for sure. Tanvik noticed my restlessness. Now we were sitting across from each other in the cave as usual. He reached over and put a hand on my shoulder. "He's dead now, we're safe." But we both know this wouldn't help much to calm either of us.

"Tanvik, he said he had found the Aerobolt crystal, and was going to escape. All we have to do is take it and shatter it to release the signal.

Tanvik considered this for a second, "He might've found the crystal, I'll go check after, but we cannot shatter it. Shattering it would release the energy, but no signal. He was lying to you. Probably because even if somehow things went wrong for him, which it did, he would be able to kill me and you would be trapped on the island."

"So there's no way to use the crystal to send a signal?" I had hope, but it started to recede.

"There is, but I don't know where we can find it. If you want to send a pulse all you need to do is send electricity into the crystal,

but where are we going to find electricity.”

So there was a chance, but it was still impossible. I looked out into the clouds as they passed by. Just as I had done on the ship. Trapped then, trapped now. The sky reminded me of something, something in my brain. It reminded me of storms, of lightning. That was it, lightning. The thing that had struck the ship down. Bringing us to this island. Lightning. “Wait, that’s it.”

Tanvik raised an eyebrow, “What happened?”

“Lightning, lightning is made of electricity right? Can’t we use that?” I said as my voice got more excited with each word. Maybe it wasn’t so impossible.

“Jason, you’re right.” Tanvik said, coming to the same realization. “It might be hard to find a storm, but it’s still very possible.” He lightly punched my shoulder. “Good job!”

“But how are we going to get lightning?”

“The aerobolt is conductive, we should place it somewhere high. Preferably by the coast. From then all we have to do is wait for a storm to come.”

“By the coast?”

“If a ship detects us, it’s easier for them to find us if we’re by a coast.” That made sense, and it seemed possible.

“That’s funny, the thing that struck the ship is now going to help us get off the island.” I said, making Tanvik laugh.

“You’re right! That’s too ironic.” We looked outside. Hope, and a plan, in our eyes.

Over the next few days we survived as we normally had. Tanvik found the ship. It was near where Zelos, Liggy, and Bia's bodies were. Intact, was the Aerobolt. A large orange crystal which we brought back to the cave. Next, we scouted along the coast of the island. We were looking for large hills to put the Aerobolt on. Tanvik said that the higher the place is the better, because lightning strikes higher objects. Thank God I wasn't tall. Anyways, we also discussed if we should move to the spot we would set up the Aerobolt in. In the end we decided that we should just incase a nearby ship, or the authorities found us at night.

Kiggy also woke up. Not all at once though, he was awake for a short amount of time, but you could barely call it awake. Tanvik fed him during those times, slowly and in small amounts. Over more days, he started to gain more energy. He was still very weak though, and slept a lot. I still found him annoying, and when he was awake I wasn't in the cave. We also had to be very careful around him because we didn't know if he was still insane.

More days passed, and I got more used to living on the island. Kiggy and I inevitably ended up having to see each other. To which we both disliked. Kiggy was still rude to me, and called me a slave. To which Tanvik reprimanded him whenever he was around. Over time we started to get used to each other too, but we still weren't friends. At all. No way.

I also started to get better at dealing with the heat of the island, and whatever tasks we needed to do. You could call me a wilderness expert at this point. I made myself not think about Zelos, but sometimes the thoughts intruded into my brain. There were multiple days where I had nightmares, waking up in the middle of the night. Tanvik was on watch though, so he calmed me down. This time he wasn't always on watch, because I made him sleep. It wasn't even possible for him to never sleep on the island.

One exciting day, I had found a perfect spot for the Aerobolt. High enough that it was much more likely for lightning to strike and close to the coast. Now all we had to do was take our stuff and move by the hill. There was an area covered with trees, and large boulders resting on the ground. It was no cave, but it would have to do for now. At this stage all we had to wait for was a storm.

A day passed, and it was raining. My excitement soared as the raindrops fell but it wasn't a storm. Tanvik assured me that a storm would come, and Kiggy teased me for being so stupid.

Another day passed but with no rain. It was easier to get breadfruit and coconuts being so close to the coast, but we also sacrificed the cover of the cave. Luckily because of the trees, we had cover from the rain.

On the fourth day, rain fell. This time I was still excited, but I still had to be prepared if nothing happened. The rain grew and grew, until it was a storm. It sucked to be in the storm, but if lightning struck it was all worth it. We kept waiting and waiting. Then while Kiggy and I were bickering once more, we saw flash, and a mere second later we heard the thunder.

Lightning had struck. Kiggy, Tanvik and I cheered, hugging each other and shouting random words. Kiggy and I realized that we were hugging each other and instantly leapt back, going back into the normal insulting mode. I think he was starting to realize that slaves weren't just slaves.

The rain continued pouring, and because of the volume we were getting wet too, but we had to endure it. By this point, night had fallen. Tanvik said the rain might not end until the morning, and I groaned. Though it escaped my mind after a while. I was just praying and hoping that the lightning had hit the crystal, and it had transmitted the signal.

The rain stopped in the middle of the night, and we went to sleep on the forest floor. Normally we would be around the fire, but obviously the rain had made the wood too damp. It was hard to sleep. Partly because it was humid. Partly because it was cold. Mainly because I was too excited and stressed about the crystal. We all were.

Morning came and Tanvik woke us up early. We would all go

to check the hill by the coast. We basically ran over, hoping. Tanvik had left his knife right by the crystal, making clear contact with it. If lightning somehow missed the crystal, it might be attracted to the metal on the knife. If it hit the knife the electricity could still pass into the crystal, and the knife would be damaged. If the lightning hit the crystal, then it would still generate a lot of heat. At least that's what Tanvik said. The heat would serve to slightly melt the knife.

Tanvik, Kiggy, and I made our way up the hill. We had just woken up and running up a hill was already difficult so Kiggy and I were breathing hard when we got up. Tanvik, however, seemed fine. We ran over to the crystal.

Sure enough, the tip of the knife was slightly melted. The part that had melted was solidified on the grass. The signal had been sent. Once more, we cheered, and sat by the hill waiting for the ships. If we were lucky, they would come by today. If not, we could always head back to our area. If we were unlucky, they wouldn't come.

Many hours passed and we went down to the coast to collect coconuts for water and food. I'll miss them if I ever get off this island. As I was picking up a coconut from the base of a palm tree, I heard Kiggy shouting hysterically by where he was searching. We had spread out pretty far, so I could barely see him. But what I could see very clearly was the fruit of our work. A ship had come. I stared at the ship in disbelief, not believing it was real. This wasn't the tiger again right?

Tanvik had heard Kiggy shouting as well, he was farther than I was but saw the ship too. He brought his coconuts with him, running to me. Then he realized that there was no point in bringing the coconuts. Him seeing it means it must be real. Now I started running towards Kiggy, who was jumping around and pointing at the ship which was landing and coming to a halt on the water. Running faster than I had ever done before, I reached Kiggy and Tanvik quickly. We stared at the ship which was now lowered, grinning like we were insane.

So many things have happened on this island. Terrifying starvation and dehydration, finding Tanvik, insane Kiggy and.. Zelos. Now, we will be leaving. We all watched as the rescue ship lowered a

boat with a person inside waving to us.

As we waved back, jumping and laughing, I thought something. Was this going to be what I dreamed about? Have I found it? Freedom?