

Pan, Fiction

A Short Story in Six Parts

By Daniel Roe

1

Jim sat on the beach and stared out at the ocean. He dug his fingers into the sand and squinted up at the bright sun, listening as the waves crashed against the shore over and over again.

He let his mind wander, and when he tried, Jim couldn't actually remember how long he had been sitting there.

The thought concerned him, and Jim worried that he had possibly spent the whole day doing nothing but sitting on the beach watching the clouds go by.

The sun gave him no clues, as he had no idea where it was positioned in the sky when he sat down in the first place.

The sounds of the waves had become white noise by now, and Jim could feel himself starting to nod off.

He shook his head awake and rubbed his eyes.

He tried to remember what he had been thinking about earlier.

The island.

Of course, it was the same thing Jim was always thinking about: what to say in his S.O.S. letter.

Jim pulled out the paper and metal pen from his pocket.

He uncapped the pen and began to scratch it on the corner of the page, trying to get the ink flowing.

It had become a ritual at this point.

Despite all his attempts to complete a S.O.S. letter, Jim had never been able to bring himself to actually put the message in the bottle and throw it in the ocean.

He did, after all, only have one empty glass Sprite bottle, and it sat in the same place every day, sticking out of the ground, waiting to be tossed into the water.

There was only one chance for someone out there to happen upon that message and come looking for him.

Not that it would do actually do anything, Jim thought to himself. The bottle would probably just wash back up on the sand in a few minutes or even a few days later or, even more likely, just be adrift at sea for so long that Jim would die stranded on the island before anyone came, hoping and praying all the while that someone had found it and was coming for him.

Jim brushed off the negative thoughts and looked at the blank page.

He was never sure how to begin the letter.

He had started it so many times before, but every single time felt more futile than the last.

Each time, just a little bit more than one before, it felt like he was bothering the world for trying at all to have something to be remembered by, as if the same person was seeing all the letters Jim wrote and and purposefully disregarding them.

The paper would always wind up getting lost, or wet, or, in the most recent case, torn to shreds by himself after reading over and hating what he had just written.

Jim had decided that he wasn't going to concern himself with how the reader perceived him this time,

Maybe he didn't even care about getting rescued from the island anymore.

If nothing else, he simply wanted someone to know about how he came to find himself marooned on a deserted island.

After scratching and scratching, the pen started to work. It always seemed to take forever.

Jim wrote the greeting to his letter and stopped.

How would he describe his situation? He thought to himself, for what might have been the thousandth time.

He didn't know where he was, only that he was on an island.

He didn't know where the island was.

He only knew that it was west of where he departed from, which, of course, he had now long forgotten.

Was it England? South America? India?

It was useless to try and remember.

They had been so many places.

Come to think of it, Jim wondered to himself, how long had he been on the island to begin with?

He had lost track of the days almost as easily as he had forgotten the hours of today.

There were no seasons and the weather was the always the same.

Had it been months? Years?

He was lost in thought, pen still on the page, when heard sand shifting behind him.

“Hello, Jim!” a voice said.

Still sitting on the ground, Jim turned and looked.

Not that he needed to, he recognized the voice immediately.

It was Will: a stocky, jovial man who had been on the ship with Jim when they crashed.

In the time they had spent together on the ship and after, he had come to consider Will a friend.

Hello, Will.” Jim responded, smiling politely.

Despite being stuck on an island together, Jim had not yet grown tired of Will’s company.

Although Jim did find his endless optimism a bit irritating at times, it was nice to have someone around to talk to occasionally and pass the time.

Jim would often mull over the events leading up to the shipwreck, and how it could have been prevented and what he would have done differently.

Will would always listen and concede that mistakes were made, but he never seemed bothered by any of it.

In all the time they had been stranded on the island together, Jim had never heard Will complain once.

“What have you been doing today?” Will asked Jim.

“Nothing much, just been sitting here thinking for a while.” Jim responded, squinting up at Will.

This was how most of their conversations began.

Jim folded up the paper and put it in his pocket along with the pen.

“Still working on the letter?” Will asked, already knowing the answer

“Something like that.” Jim replied.

Will plopped down next to Jim and the two sat in silence for a little while before Will spoke again.

“I found some shrimp for us to have for dinner.” He suddenly turned to Jim and exclaimed, as if he had just remembered.

He pulled out an object wrapped in paper from a fanny pack that was around his waist.

Peeling back some of the paper revealed a relatively large pile of shrimp.

It was more than plenty for the two men.

Jim raised his eyebrows.

Of all the things that had gone wrong leading up to, and since, crashing the boat, food had always been plentiful and accessible. The struggle for survival had involved very little struggle.

The island was home to all kinds of fruit trees and vegetable gardens, along with a variety of animals fit for human consumption.

“Shrimp is good.” Jim said, responding to Will. “Always a treat when we find some.”

“Yeah, I was thinking we could head to Pete’s and cook them up.” Will said.

Jim nodded, but didn’t respond.

He couldn’t stand that guy.

Pete had been on the boat that crashed on the island, along with Jim and Will.

They had been following Pete’s charts actually, and Jim made no secret about placing all of the blame of their predicament onto Pete.

Pete.

Jim even hated how his name sounded.

He didn’t even like being reminded of Pete’s existence much less that he was still sharing a deserted island with him.

“Pete.” Jim said, shaking his head.

A visible snarl appeared on his upper lip, making his mustache twitch.

“I know you don’t care for him, but the shrimp is really good.” Will assured Jim. “He knows that you like your own space, but he said you were welcome at his camp anytime. You should see what he’s done with the place. It’s incredible.”

Will was probably right.

Pete had a knack for resourcefulness and could fix almost anything, even he didn’t know how it was supposed to work in the first place, he would find a way to make it useful.

This, of course, only further infuriated Jim.

“It’s not personal.” Jim said, lying. “I just don’t care to camp with a man who got me stranded on an island in the middle of nowhere. Pete is perfectly fine in his own spot.”

“What do you mean?” Will said.

Jim glanced inquisitively at Will. “What do I mean about what? Do I have to like everyone?” He replied.

“No, you said ‘an island in the middle of nowhere’, what are you talking about?” Will clarified. “What island?”

“‘What island.’ Okay, Will.” Jim scoffed, not really finding his joke very funny or understanding what the confusion was.

He pointed at the ground. “This island. The one that we’ve been stuck on since your friend Pete got us lost in the middle of the ocean and we crashed here, probably thousands of miles away from anyone who knows we’re missing.”

Will’s eyes glazed over as he listened to Jim speak.

He was barely listening, and what he heard barely registered.

Will looked out at the water, as if he might find something that made sense of what Jim was saying.

Jim chuckled to himself.

Will was a nice guy, but it was difficult having conversations with him sometimes.

“Lets grab some firewood and skewers for this shrimp.” Jim said, changing the subject back to the issue at hand.

Will shrugged and didn't press the issue further.

The two men made their way away from the shore, towards the tree line that was the edge of a vast forrest that covered most of the island.

The beach was really the only way to navigate the land, as you could easily get turned around in the woods and find yourself right back where you started.

As he began to look around for some logs to burn and some thin sticks to skewer the shrimp with, Jim broke the silence this time.

“Actually, you're right. It is personal. I don't like Pete. He's annoying and he never apologized for crashing the boat.” He said, matter of factly.

Will chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah I know.” He replied wanting to end the conversation.

The two men were quiet again as they each searched for wood and sticks.

After a few minutes, Jim's arms were full and he started to make his way back to his spot on the beach.

He couldn't see or hear Will, so he assumed he had finished first and had already returned to the beach.

Upon reaching the tree line again, Jim noticed that Will was not there on the beach like he had thought, and he hadn't seen or heard any sign of Will on his way back either.

“Will!” He called out.

No answer.

This irritated Jim, as he really wanted that shrimp, and didn't want to have to wait on Will for long.

Will had the shrimp with him, and there was nothing to do but sit in the sand and hope that Will wouldn't be long, whatever he was doing.

Just then, Jim heard a strange noise.

It was soft at first, but slowly growing louder.

It sounded like something between a hum and a whistle, and he couldn't tell from what or even which direction it was coming from.

After a few moments, the sound had become a deafening roar that filled the air

Jim dropped the sticks and clapped his hands on his ears and scanned the horizon, looking for the source of the noise.

Jim ran back in the forrest, hands still on his ears.

“Will!” He shouted. “WILL!”

He was screaming as loud as he could, and could barely hear himself.

It was no use.

The noise was growing louder even still.

Just as he reached a clearing in the trees, from seemingly out of nowhere, Jim saw it.

In one moment, a giant object came flying over Jim's head from behind him.

The only thing that he could even begin to describe it with was a giant flying glass building.

Then as quickly as it appeared, it was gone, the noise dropping in pitch as the mysterious object flew deeper into the island away from Jim.

Jim was lost for words.

What had he just witnessed?

It had only been a moment, but it was surely some sort of vessel.

Jim had been around enough ships to recognize when things were designed to transport people.

It was rounded and black and shiny and had windows and handles on it, but it was beyond anything Jim had ever seen.

As soon as he could gather his thoughts enough to mutter “What...” to himself, the ground shook violently, for just a moment, and was still again.

The vessel had crashed on the island.

A pillar of smoke rose from the trees, pinpointing the crash’s exact location.

There was still no sign of Will, or the promised shrimp dinner, but this clearly took precedent.

Jim began to jog toward the smoke, now clouding up the area over the crashed vessel.

As he approached the crashed object, Jim again noticed how advanced it was.

Clearly designed for people, but it was simply beyond comprehension for someone like Jim.

On the side, in white paint on the black background were written the words. “Murmur Maids”.

Jim wondered what that could mean.

He quietly moved toward the vessel, but stopped suddenly when he realized a hatch was open on the back.

Someone had already departed.

Jim wasn't sure if he should hide in a bush, or run.

He took one step back in the direction he had come from, towards the beach, and felt a twig snap under his foot.

He held his breath and hoped it wasn't loud enough for whoever came off the vessel to hear.

It was quiet for a second and Jim let out a silent sigh of relief.

Not a moment later, Jim felt a slight sting on his neck, like a mosquito bite.

He winced and reached up to the spot to scratch it felt something hard and cylindrical poked in the side of his neck, more than half an inch long and barely a fingernail wide.

A dart.

Jim yanked the object out of his skin and began to run back towards the shore when he began to feel his knees start to give in.

A poison dart.

As his vision started to blur, Jim's legs gave out altogether and he hit the ground violently, right on his side with the pocket in which his pen and paper were being stored.

The last thing Jim felt was the metal pen digging into his hip, bending under his weight as he drifted off into unconsciousness, unable to do anything but let it happen.

2

Jean stared out at the stars through the above-facing window of the airship.

The flying engine hummed quietly and evenly.

She was lying on the floor of the storage deck, the top level of the massive machine.

There were plenty of other more comfortable places to relax on the ship, but this was her favorite by far.

She even had a favorite spot, tucked away in the corner, with a small couch to sprawl out on.

It was perfect for long journeys like this one.

She often liked to come up here and think or take a nap.

It helped that none of her bandmates knew about it.

She got along with all of them, of course, but it was nice to have some alone time every now and then.

Jean could spend hours watching the stars go by.

The ship was high enough in the atmosphere so that the upward facing window, despite it being the middle of the day, revealed a sky full of stars.

On the very east corner of the window, the sun shined brightly against the empty black sky.

Jean's band was called the "Murmur Maids", and usually they would have all been flying together.

This time, however, she had made a detour alone, while the others went ahead a couple days early to their next stop on the current tour.

Jean had taken the airship to her hometown to do a solo performance at the children's hospital, something she made a point to do every year.

It would always raise a lot of money for the hospital, which Jean was truly proud of.

It also didn't hurt that it vastly spiked her public image.

There was a noticeable jump in concert ticket sales after every annual visit mid-tour.

The performance had gone off without a single hitch.

Jean sang and played several solo versions of the Murmur Maids' hits, along with a few of her own songs she liked to do every now and then.

Jean closed her eyes and let her mind wander, the hum of the ship would often lull her to sleep if she wasn't careful to keep busy.

Usually, Jean or one of the other band members drove the airship. They would take shifts, letting the others sleep between performances.

She loved flying and did anytime she had the chance.

This time, the tour managers had hired a driver so Jean could rest before the next performance.

They were still several hours away from their destination.

Jean was almost asleep when she heard a stirring.

She looked up and saw an older man making his way around the storage room, poking around some pallets and boxes in one of the loading areas.

It was Ed, the temporary pilot the tour managers hired.

Jean had only spoken to him a couple times and wasn't really sure how to greet him.

They were the only two on board the vehicle.

Ed hadn't noticed Jean yet, and it became obvious very quickly that was his intention, as he checked over his shoulder to see if anyone had seen him several times in the few minutes that Jean had been watching him.

Jean was uneasy before agreeing to make the trip with the stranger, and now her suspicions were growing as she wondered what he could be getting up to.

He must have assumed Jean was in her personal quarters on the other side of the ship, because he seemed satisfied that he wasn't being watched, and began to dig through the contents of one of the shipping crates.

While Ed was occupied, Jean rolled off the couch and onto the floor careful to lower herself down to the floor without making a sound. Slowly, she pushed herself up and ducked behind the side of the couch.

When Ed reached further into the crate, his field of view was obstructed for a moment.

Jean didn't hesitate.

As quickly as she could, she ran for the door.

When she reached the handle, she turned it smoothly and jumped through the doorway, carefully swinging the door open and closed as to not make any noise.

Safely on the other side, Jean looked back through door window to see Ed still going through the contents of the crate.

She watched as Ed lifted a case out of a larger box and opened it.

The crate that it had come from had a strange insignia on it.

It looked like the graphic outline of a stereotypical Native American's face, feather headdress and all, but the outline was made out of the letters "NDNZ".

What could that mean? Jean thought.

From the case, Ed pulled out a angular black object and inspected it. Ed grasped the side of the object and pulled on it.

It clicked loudly and slid back into place.

Jean felt her heartbeat jump and the hairs on the back of her neck stand straight up.

It was a gun.

A million thoughts ran through Jean's mind.

She was not sure what do next, or what Ed was planning to do with the gun.

It had to have been for her though, as they were the only two people here.

Jean wasn't going to stay around to find out.

She prayed Ed hadn't seen her.

Jean ran down some corridors and flights of stairs, towards the cockpit.

She pulled the door open, stuck her head in, and glanced at the dash. On the main display screen, Jean could see that the autopilot was guiding the ship, and the navigation system said the journey had three and a half hours left to go.

That was more than enough time for Ed to do whatever he was planning.

Jean gritted her teeth.

Guess this is happening, she thought to herself.

She leaned over and flipped off the switch for the autopilot. The screen beeped and an alert popped up, instructing the pilot to take control of the vehicle. Only there was no pilot.

Slowly, the airship began to lean forward. The black sky slowly started to get lighter, then bluer, and in a few moments, turned completely blue as the ship entered the atmosphere again. It would have been beautiful, and it probably was very beautiful, if Jean would have been paying attention to something like that and not her increasingly impending doom. This was usually Jean's favorite part of the journey to watch, and she always loved to watch the sky turn colors again. She would have been watching this time too had it not been for the fast-approaching surface of Earth.

The airship was descending very quickly. Not only was the airship descending very quickly, but the angle that they were descending was still increasing as well, therefore the rate of descent was still increasing.

Jean started to slip forwards as the floor tilted even more. She realized, at that exact moment, that she didn't not have a plan. After a point of angling down, a light bulb on the dash started flashing and an alarm began to sound loudly. Perhaps she had acted too quickly, she thought to herself.

"What are you doing!?" Jean heard a voice out from behind her, just barely audible over the sound of the alarm blaring.

Jean looked back to see Ed standing in the doorway.

He was staring out the front window with a terrified look on his face.

The gun was tucked in the front of his pants.

“What are YOU doing?” Jean shouted back.

She pointed to the gun sticking out of Ed’s belt.

Ed didn’t answer.

He lurched for the the controls, but it was too late.

Even after yanking up on the steering stick, the downward momentum was too much to much to turn around at point.

Jean looked out the window and saw a shore line next to a large lake.

She couldn’t even tell how big the lake was, but the shore went as far as she could see.

The ground was approaching fast.

Jean jumped in the co-pilots seat and pulled the seat belt down and fastened it, just a moment before the ship slammed into the ground.

Jean blacked out for just a moment, then gasped as she came to a few seconds later.

She looked over at the pilots control stick, where Ed had been desperately trying to save the ship from it’s inevitable fate.

He was gone, but the gun was still sitting in the pilot’s seat.

I’ll take that, Jean thought to herself, slipping it into her waistband.

Jean stood up and made her way over to the main entrance to the airship, which was just under the cockpit.

She groaned and stretched her hands outward, still trying to shake off the landing.

The main hatch had opened automatically when they hit the ground as an emergency procedure, and light poured in from outside the ship.

Green leaves and brown tree trunks filled the entire doorway.

Jean was still dizzy from the crash, but she needed to find out where she was as soon as possible.

She needed to get away from Ed also, even if she didn't know where that was.

The thought crossed Jean's mind that she might have a concussion and didn't want to get too comfortable before the sun went down where it would be just her and Ed again.

Jean need to find help quickly.

Jean began to examine the area around the ship, taking note of the damage.

It might fly again, but the girls aren't going to be happy we have to go back to buses for a while, she thought to herself.

Jean looked at her surroundings.

It was just forrest as far as the eye could see.

The air was completely silent, and aside from the lack of people, was beautiful enough to be a resort or some kind of expensive cruise destination.

Just as Jean had stopped to appreciate the natural beauty of the location she found herself in, even for just a moment, she heard a noise from the trees.

A twig breaking.

The dread came rushing back.

Had Ed come back?

Jean pulled out the gun and pointed it towards where the sound had come from.

Had Ed found another gun?

She felt stupid for not considering before that there would be other weapons.

Jean held the gun out towards the trees and walked backwards, away from whatever had made the noise moments earlier.

She didn't see the tree root sticking up from the sand, and her heel hit it.

She shuffled backwards for a moment, regaining her balance.

“Ptt” The gun fired a single dart.

She looked at the gun.

She had pulled the trigger when she tripped.

Huh, Jean thought, its not a real gun?

It was a relief, but it still left just as many questions.

“THUD” Jean heard something hit the ground several feet away.

Jean had hit something, or someone.

Was it Ed?

She slowly made her way into the trees to see if he was conscious, careful to keep the dart gun pointed directly in front of her.

She made a point to not leave her finger on the trigger again in case it wasn't Ed she was approaching.

A ways into the forrest, Jean saw a figure lying on the ground.

She slowly got closer, and breathed a sight of relief when she realized it was not Ed.

A younger, scruffy man lay face-down on the ground.

His arms were awkwardly sprawled out mid-flail.
He was wearing a tattered t-shirt and khaki pants, and they looked like they hadn't been washed in ages.
He looked homeless, Jean thought, but healthy, aside from being knocked unconscious from a poison dart.

“Oops.” Jean said aloud, peering down at the stranger.
There was nothing else to do but hope Ed didn't find her and wait for the homeless guy to wake up.

If he wakes up.

Jim's eyes shot open and darted around.
He sat up and rubbed his eyes.
His head was pounding.
He groaned and rubbed his temples.

What happened again?
He had been looking for Will and then... the crashed vessel... and then... the dart.
It was still grasped firmly in his left hand.
Jim examined it again.
It was black with a red and white feather tail.
Jim tossed it into the trees as a blurry figure emerged from behind him.

“Hello! Wow, I'm really glad you're not dead.” A voice said.
Jim looked to his side and saw the outline of woman standing a few feet away.
His vision was still cloudy.

“Sorry about shooting you, I thought you were someone else, also I've never used this thing before.” She continued, pointing at the gun stilling out of her waistband.

“Um, hello.” Jim hesitated before continuing, “Who exactly did you think I was?”

“Our driver. I thought he was trying to kill me. He still is, maybe. I turned off the autopilot as a diversion, and I guess it worked a little to well.” The woman said.

Jim had no idea what this woman was talking about or what the word “autopilot” meant, but the woman appeared to be relatively normal, and not an alien or something, which he had been concerned about before.

She was wearing black, tight-fitting trousers with a white, sleeveless shirt.

“You came here in that?” Jim asked the woman, pointing to the vessel.

“I did. That’s our airship. We’ve been using this baby to dash around the globe for the last tour. Isn’t it great?” She said.

As the medicine from the dart finally started to wear off, Jim realized that it wasn’t his inebriation that was preventing him from understanding this person.

She was speaking in a way that Jim had never heard before, and he couldn’t place her accent or complexion, despite having traveled to nearly all the parts of the world.

Usually, Jim would have been fascinated to converse with a new person on the island, much less someone from somewhere he had never been, but a new realization quickly took precedent.

“A way off the island!” He exclaimed, gazing at the large airship.

Jean looked puzzled for a moment, “the island...?” She said, trailing off.

She continued, “Well, I’m not sure if we can get this thing running again, but I don’t want to run into Ed, he could be looking for me even as we speak.”

She pointed back in the direction the ship had landed from. “We came by over a lake on our way down, is that far from here?” She asked.

It was Jim’s turn to look puzzled.

“There aren’t any lakes on the island, just streams and creeks, but the shore is just back that way. I saw the landing. It was rough.” Jim said.

He pointed at the gun sticking out of the woman’s waist band. “Does that thing have any darts left?” He asked.

She pulled out the dart gun and examined it. “I think so.” She answered. “I got it from our driver after we crashed. I thought it was a real gun at first before I accidentally shot you.”

“Ok, good. We need to find my shipmates Will and... Pete.” Jim grimaced saying his name, but Pete would be the only one out of the three of them that could do anything about the broken down vessel. If anyone could get it running again, he could. “Pete is good at machines, he might be a help in getting it working.”

Jim shakily stood up, but quickly found his balance. “I’ll go get them and bring them back here. I’m Jim, by the way.”

“I’m not staying here by myself!” Jean replied. “And my name is Jean.”

Jim and Jean began to make their way through the trees and bushes.

“Do you know where they are?” Jean asked.

“I have a couple of ideas, but Will can’t be that far. We were together just before I saw your vessel earlier.” Jim continued. “How long ago did you crash? It felt like I was only unconscious for a moment.”

“An hour or so.” Jean replied.

They continued to walk in silence for a little while.

“Why would your driver have been trying to kill you?” Jim turned to Jean and asked as they continued to walk.

Jean shook her head. “ I have no idea. This was the first time we had used this guy, I guess the company didn’t vet him enough. I saw him snooping around the storage deck and then when he pulled out the gun, I panicked.”

Suddenly, a loud voice commanded “STOP.”

Jim and Jean stopped in their tracks immediately.

Jean quickly pulled out the dart gun and held her finger on the trigger, not sure where to aim yet.

Jim was terrified. First the air vessel, then the mysterious woman, now someone else?

Four men appeared from behind trees almost instantly, as if they had been hiding and waiting for Jim and Jean.

They were dressed fully in black, along with helmets and goggles and boots.

They all carried similar large black rifles, and were all aiming at Jim and Jean.

“DROP THE GUN.” The voice shouted again.

It was one of the four men.

Jean tossed the dart gun on the ground, and one of the men scooped it up.

“I thought you were the only ones here.” Jean whispered to Jim.

“So did I!” Jim whispered back. “Are these guys not with Ed?”

“I don’t know!” Jean said, order than a whisper this time

“QUIET.” One of the armed men said, a different one than before. Two of the men slid their guns onto their backs and pulled out pairs of handcuffs, one for Jim and one for Jean.

One of the men grabbed Jim’s shoulders and shoved him up against a tree.

Jim felt the pen in his pocked bend even more at his dug into his thigh.

The man patted down Jim’s legs and pulled out the pen and paper. He unfolded the paper and looked over it, then folded it back up.

Jim’s pen and paper and Jean's dart gun were then placed into a small sling box that the leader slipped out of his pack.

He tossed the objects into the box, snapped it shut and slid it into the bag, almost in one fluid motion.

“Please, do not make this more difficult than I needs to be.” He said as the handcuffs clicked shut on both Jim and Jean.

“A little late for that.” Jim said just as a black bag went over his head.

“Move.” The leader said.

Jim walked cautiously as one of the guards pushed his shoulder in some unknown direction.

He assumed Jean was getting the same treatment.

After a few minutes of walking the leader spoke again. “Right here.” He said as Jim heard a single click, followed by a mechanical hum.

The mechanical whirring noise came from the ground.

To Jim’s shock, the ground under him began to shift, and he realized they were moving straight down.

It was an elevator platform disguised as at the ground on the surface of the island, and could have been no bigger than 8 by 8 feet.

When they got to the bottom, the guard pushed Jim’s shoulder into a room and sat him down in a metal chair.

The blindfold was pulled off, and Jim saw that Jean was still sitting right next to him.

They were sitting in a small interrogation room across the table from a middle aged man.

He was wearing a short sleeved button down shirt, with a graphic insignia on the front, above the breast pocket.

“Ok so you do work with Ed. I think I’m starting to see what’s going on here.” Jean said, glancing at the symbol on the man’s shirt.

The man chuckled lightly. “I can assure you that you are not 'starting to see what's going on here.'”

He paused before opening up a manilla folder and began to read.

“I’m going to ask you a series of questions, please answer as

honestly as you can, there are no wrong answers. Question one, what year is it?”

Jim laughed at the question and the absurdity of the situation he found himself in, but was too overwhelmed to think of a clever retort.

He looked at the man as if he expected him to continue, but the man just stared back blankly, waiting for Jim to respond to the question.

Finally, Jim answered. “Well let’s see. When we departed it was 19...” he trailed off.

That was strange, not only did he not know how long he had been on the island, it seems he wasn’t sure what year it was when he crashed to begin with either.

“19?” Jean turned and looked at Jim. “Wow you have been here a while, I wouldn’t have thought you were old enough to have been here that long.”

Jim thought that was a strange thing to say, but maybe he was just confused. Surely he hadn’t been on the island for that long.

“I’m asking the questions.” The man said sternly, looking at Jean. He looked down and made some notes on the paper, then looked back at Jean. “Same question.” He said plainly. “What year is it?”

“I don’t have to answer your questions! I know my rights.” Jean said angrily.

“Rights.” The man said, chuckling and shaking his head. He made some more notes on the page, as if Jean’s refusal to answer the question was still sufficient.

“Question two.” He continued, turning to a new page. “Where are you?”

What a ridiculous question, Jim thought.

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t be here anymore. I thought me and Will and Pete were the only ones on this island.” Jim answered honestly. “I just met this lady a few minutes ago, and now you guys. I’m just trying to find my other friends and go home.”

Jim hated saying “friends” but it was quicker than explaining that only Will was his friend, but Pete was also there.

“An island, interesting.” The man made some more notes on his paper and turned to Jean. “And you?”

Jean was getting fed up. “I said, I don’t have to answer your questions, I don’t know who you people are but you’re gonna pay for crashing my ship. My bandmates are probably on their way here right now, and you know they’re gonna bring the best rescue team that money can buy...And what’s the Native American for anyways!?” She said, pointing at the man’s shirt.

This didn’t seem to phase the man at all as he continued to make notes in the manila folder. “Question three-“ he began to say.

He wasn’t able to continue.

Just then an alarm went off and a bright warning light began to flash over the door.

It sounded like a fire alarm except all the flashing lights were blue. The man looked up in surprise and quickly closed the manilla folder.

“We will have to continue this later.” He said, standing up. He quickly exited the room, shutting the door behind him.

Jim and Jean sat for a little while as the alarm contented to blare, still handcuffed to the desk.

“This is turning out to be a more interesting day that I would have cared to have.” Jim said.

Bella stared at the ceiling of her room.

She was lying on her bed, with her head leaning on a pillow that was awkwardly pushed up against the cinderblock wall.

She had been positioned this way for a minute and her neck was starting to hurt.

Bella rolled over on her side and looked out the porthole window across the room.

She saw the same thing she always did: water in every direction as far as the eye could see.

Even the sun rays beaming through the water revealed nothing more than the fact that it was the middle of the afternoon.

There was only ever just blue. All day, every day,

It used to make Bella sad that the only thing she ever saw was water. She would stare out the porthole and hope that some form of marine life would swim by, but none ever did.

She would hope and pray that anything interesting at all would happen, something to break up the monotonous and tedious life she had found herself in.

Bella used to dream of quitting and leaving everything behind, but lately she had a change of heart.

She was actually going to do something about it this time.

Bella was going to skip her shift take the day off to explore.

The facility Bella lived and worked in was her home, and all she had ever known.

She was born here, and she loved the people here.

Despite being a government testing facility, the employees of the NDNZ compound treated each other like family, constantly

checking on each other, giving gifts and having community get -togethers.

Even after her parents passing several years ago, Bella had always felt at home in the underwater facility.

Bella's job was a custodian, and while she didn't hate her job, she knew that her work could be easily replaced, especially just for a day.

The plan was simple: while no one was looking, she would sneak outside and spend the day exploring the area above the facility. Later, she would sneak back in and, if caught, simply face the consequences, most likely more work, and then move on with her life.

She would NOT let herself feel guilty for wanting to see life outside the facility, or at least that's what she told herself.

If someone saw her leaving, Bella would have to lie and not make it obvious she was abandoning her shift.

It would be really awkward trying to explain that she was basically planning on getting in trouble.

It just simply isn't what you do.

Bella got along with most all of her neighbors, some of them she would even call close friends, but it was time to see what else was out there.

Bella stood up and put on her standard-issued uniform.

The blue, sewn-on NDNZ logo almost shined in the poor fluorescent lighting.

All of her clothes were standard-issue uniforms.

Bella peaked her head out into the hallway of her room, which was located at the end of a long hallway of living spaces. All the other room's doors were shut and no one was in the hall, the coast was clear. Her neighbors were at work or busy in their own compartments.

She would have to go right now. Quickly but quietly, Bella tip-toed down to the end of the hall and through the doors. While she would normally turn right towards the main hub of this sector, where all the restaurants and shops were, along with her work station, she turned left and down a flight of steps. At the bottom of the steps there was a door that led into a tunnel, which would lead to another sector of the compound.

The facility was a labyrinth to navigate if you hadn't been to a particular area before. Even after living here her entire life, and frequenting less populated areas like this one, Bella found herself getting turned around from time to time.

Down this stairway, through these doors, back up this hallway, Bella continued to make her way towards one of the very few exits of the facility. She, of course, wasn't going to leave through the main exit, as she would surely run into someone she knew at that one. It was hard to avoid people she knew really anywhere in the facility, as there were only a few thousand people in total, and everyone pretty much knew, or had at least seen, everyone else. Even fellow NDNZ facility employees that Bella had never personally spoken to would be able to spot her in a crowd without much trouble.

The entrance Bella was heading towards was called the “visitor processing area”.

Bella hardly ever came down this way, as she had very little business ever dealing with visitors.

Finally Bella saw it: one of the exit elevators that led back up to the surface.

She was so close.

She had almost made it out without running into anyone she knew.

As she passed by one of the last rooms before the exit, Bella looked through the narrow window on the door and saw a man and woman in handcuffs and clothes she didn't recognize sitting at a table across from one of the security guards.

Two new visitors?, Bella thought to herself.

She wondered where they were from and how they had gotten to the NDNZ facility.

The security guard was Bill, one of Bella's neighbors.

While she didn't care enough for Bill to hang out with him, he would definitely recognize her immediately ask what she was doing in this part of the facility, and since he knew she was a custodian, she would have no good answer.

She ducked under the window as she walked by.

Outside the processing room, there was a white plastic table with a bag on it.

Next to the bag was a small box with the word “CONTAMINANT” written on it.

Bella was curious and couldn't help herself.

She had always wondered with kinds of things outsiders would have with them that they would have to give up when they entered the facility.

She reached over to the plastic case and popped open the latch.

Bella turned the box on its side and let the contents spill out on the table.

There was a gun, a pen and a piece of paper.

Bella unfolded the paper and read the first few lines.

A guy is stuck on an island? Bella scoffed to herself.

Childish, barely legible handwriting aside, the writing was a joke.

Most of it had been crossed out or written over, but even going by the most recent “additions”, there was no coherent point to the letter, just someone rambling on about how much he hates being on an island and someone named “Pete” for getting him stuck there.

The letter was pathetic, but the gun might prove useful.

Bella needed a diversion.

The entire compound was built with a high-tech water management system designed to keep everything and everyone inside perfect safe and dry.

If there were any compromises or leaks, alarms would go off and lights would flash until the entire area could be vacated and sealed off until the damage was fixed and all the water was pumped out.

The security team would be able to see the exact location of the leak and deploy the closest facility employees to fix it.

Bella knew all this as a custodian, of course.

Although she was technically the last line of defense, in the case that all the engineers and mechanics and chefs were preoccupied, she had to be fully trained in alert response systems just like the other jobs were.

Bella rounded the corner back away from the interrogation room. It was all coming together.

She would simply make a leak in one of the abandoned areas of the facility, then in all the commotion, slip out through the back door.

Bella found a room that was being used to store empty glass vats. At one point, there was testing going on in here, but not in at least several months.

Perfect.

Bella took aim at the window with the gun from the metal box and pulled the trigger.

“Ptt” it shot a single dart at the glass.

A small crack was left at the spot the dart hit, but otherwise there was no damage.

Bella looked down at the dart gun.

She had been sure it was a real gun before.

“Well that didn’t work.” Bella said aloud to herself.

Just then, as if her doubting had somehow willed it to being, the crack started to spread.

Like a spiderweb, it began to weave out from the middle, cracking as it made its way from the initial contact point to the sides of the room.

As it reached the corner of the room, the entire wall gave way as a wave of water rushed in.

It had worked much, much too well.

Almost as soon as the water touched the ground, the alarm began to sound, but Bella wasn’t paying attention as she was already running as fast as she could for the door.

Bella swung the door shut just as the wave slammed against behind her.

The room she had just been in moments before was already almost full, and the door wouldn't hold for long,

Bella sprinted back towards the the interrogation room.

She crouched under the table and hid just as there was a crashing sound followed by a whooshing sound as water poured into the room down the hall.

Just then, Tom burst through the door and ran towards sound of rushing water.

When he got to the corner and was immediately greeted by the rising flood coming down the hallway, he turned and continued to run back towards the center of the compound away from Bella and the interrogating room with the man and woman still in it.

As he ran off, Bella could hear him shouting in his radio: "Sector 4, level 2, water damage, send emergency repair crew immediately!" His voice trailed off as he turned the corner.

Now was her chance, but Bella couldn't leave the two strangers to drown.

It might be hours before they get the water under control in the sector.

She ran the room and immediately began to try and loosen their handcuffs.

The man and the woman both jumped at the sight of her.

"Whats going on?" The woman shouted over the blaring alarm.

"There'll be time for that later, where's the key to these things?" Bella shouted back.

There wasn't even time to look for a key.

Bella took the pen that was in the box and bent the pocked flap outwards.

She jammed it in the hold in the side of the woman's handcuffs and started to jiggle it around.

"Do you know what you're doing?" The man shouted.

Before Bella could answer, the cuffs popped off the woman's wrist. Bella went to work on the other wrist.

"Oh, okay, very good." The man said, nodding his head.

Water began to pool at their feet.

Bella got the cuffs off the woman and set to work on the man's handcuffs.

"Uhh, I'm Jim and this is Jean. We just met earlier today as well." Jim said. "I don't suppose you can tell us where we are?"

"I'm Bella. This is the NDNZ station." Bella stated. "This is a government testing facility, officially."

She was trying to concentrate on the Jim's handcuffs and started to get a little bit annoyed at the lack of urgency from the man and the woman.

"That explains the cool symbol." Jean said, pointing at Bella's shirt.

"Officially?" Jim asked.

Bella finished removing Jim's handcuffs. "It's time to go." She said, authoritatively.

The water was waist deep by now, and the three waded over to the door.

Bella peaked out.

“Ok, let’s go.” She said authoritatively.

They turned the corner and Jean pressed the call button for the elevator.

Since it was already on the same level, as it had just brought Jim and Jean down minutes earlier, the door opened immediately.

The three of them stepped on the platform and the door shut behind them.

After a few seconds, it started to bring them back up to the surface level.

The platform groaned and creaked.

It hadn’t been as well maintained as the other entrances.

“So who are you guys?” Bella asked Jim and Jean. “What are you doing here?”

Jim and Jean looked at each other.

Jean spoke first. “Uhh, my airship crashed here a few minutes ago... I’m in a band and I was on the way to my next gig when I thought my pilot was going to kill me... so I turned off the autopilot... then we crashed. Then I accidentally... bumped into him.” Jean pointed at Jim. “And then these guys brought us down here at gunpoint. Yeah that about sums it up.” Jean said.

The two women looked at Jim.

“I was stranded on a deserted island with my two shipmates, then she shot me.”

Jim pointed at Jean.

“Ah, I believe this belongs to you.” Bella pulled out the folded up piece of paper and pen and handed them back to Jim. “An island, huh? Real compelling stuff.” She said sarcastically.

Jim examined the pen.

It was almost completely bent into a crescent shape by this point. He had gotten countless hours of use from it, and was now it was almost destroyed within a day.

Just then, the ceiling above them opened up, and sunlight poured in the small room as the platform found its way to the surface of the island again.

When the platform reached the surface, the walls that were previously encapsulating the elevate receded into the ground. The ground of the island became fastened to the edge of the platform as it hummed and vibrated, distributing sand from the ground on top of it, perfectly camouflaging it with the rest of the surrounding area.

All the chaos from just moments earlier gave way to silence as the three stood in the sunlight wondering what the next move was. “Aw, man they’re gonna be really mad at me when I get back” Bella said.

“You did that?” Jim said to Bella, shocked. “Why?! We could have died!”

“I really didn’t wanna go to work today.” Bella responded.

Jim raised his eyebrows, the lowered them and shrugged.

The three began to walk away from the elevator when they noticed a strong savory smell wafting through the trees.

“Is that... seafood?” Jean said, excitedly. “Im starving!”

Jim narrowed his eyes and looked at the ground, then turned to Jean and Bell.

“Nope.” Jim said regretfully. “That’s Pete.”

Will whistled loudly as he hiked aimlessly through the forest. His left stride was slightly longer than his right, as the fanny pack full of fresh shrimp was fastened around his waist, and bouncing against his thigh with each step.

It was a beautiful day, he thought, but then again, every day was just like this.

Paradise.

He always tried to make a point to appreciate the little things, no matter how mundane they might be.

Will knew he was supposed to be gathering sticks to use as skewers, and wood to use as firewood, but it was so easy to get distracted on a beautiful day like this.

Even Jim would agree, if he wasn't so busy complaining about Pete all the time, Will thought.

Jim was always sulking and complaining about Pete.

Will wished his two friends would get along better, if for no other reason, so he wouldn't have to walk back and forth between the two camps to see them all the time.

He wondered what Pete was up to.

Pete would know a good way to cook the shrimp, Will thought.

He was just a short walk from Pete's spot, and Will wanted to be back before Jim started to get grumpy with him for leaving him to collect all the sticks and logs.

Jim got grumpy very easily.

Will decided he would head to Pete's and cook the shrimp there, and then bring it back to Jim ready to eat.

As he approached Pete's camp, Will saw the giant oak tree that hid the entrance.

What looks like a stump of a large branch, was actually a false door that opened up into the trunk of the tree.

The inside of the tree made many houses look small, and was better furnished too.

Will knocked on the "door" and called out. "You in there, Pete?"

"Come on in, Will!" Pete yelled back, almost immediately.

Pete pushed open the stump and crawled into the hollow tree that was Pete's camp.

It was a sight to behold, even for Will, who made frequent stops at Pete's camp.

One could almost forget they were outdoors.

Pete was ridiculously resourceful, and had turned every piece of their wrecked ship into something functional.

He had power and running water with a filtration system, working stoves and refrigeration, all humming quietly.

All the furniture was made out of different benches and beds from the boat, with the hull being transformed into cabinets and dressers.

Pete was pulling ingredients out of the refrigerator and setting them on the counter.

The young skinny man was wearing an apron and was clearly in the middle of making several dishes at once.

He didn't let Will's arrival interrupt what he was doing.

"Care to join?" He asked.

"Of course!" Will replied, pulling the pile of shrimp from his pouch.

"This was going to be for me and Jim but now its going to be even better."

“Just don’t tell him I helped, he probably won’t eat it.” Pete chuckled. “I have just the idea of what to use with that.”

Just then, a loud, mechanical, roaring sound was heard from from the distance, it went on for a few seconds, then stopped suddenly. The ground shifted ever so slightly.

Will looked at Pete and they both waited to see if there was any other sounds.

After a few seconds, they both shrugged and went back to the task at hand.

Pete then reached up and pulled a paper bag labeled “grits” from his cupboard.

Then he grabbed a pot that was hanging over the stove and filled it with water from his sink, then set it on the stove, slowly letting the water start to heat up.

While the water was heating up, he put another pan on the stove and turned to Will. “How about we fry up those shrimp?” He said, reaching into the fridge for the butter.

He sliced off a little bit with a spatula and let it slide around in the pan, it sizzled and spread to the edges.

It smoked a little bit and Pete sliced it into smaller and smaller sections as it spread around the pan.

Will dumped the shrimp on to the pan and they hissed loudly as they began to cook, the underside quickly starting to go from bright pink to light brown.

Pete was in the process of slicing up some onions and peppers when he noticed the water was starting to boil. “Go ahead and drop some grits in the water now, Will.” He said.

“On it.” Will poured grits into the water, being careful not to overfill the pot.

Pete put the onions and peppers in the pan with the shrimp and tossed the all the contents around, getting all the flavors shuffled with each other.

The smell was intoxicating.

He took a few cloves of garlic and smashed them with the side of a knife, then tossed them in the pan as well.

Will stirred the grits slowly and Pete shut off the heat to the stove. Then he took a block of cheddar and gently shredded a good amount of it over the grits, then stirred it all up thoroughly.

Finally, he scooped all the contents of the pan, shrimp and all, onto the top of the grits, and then poured the remaining butter and flavors onto everything.

Pete covered the grits with a lid and set it on a cool part of the stove.

Just then, there was a sound at the entrance to the tree.

The door swung open and Jim slid down the entrance, with two strange women following close behind.

Will and Pete both looked up, surprised.

“Hey Jim, where did you find these ladies?” Pete asked.

“Shut up, Pete.” Jim replied. “Alright here’s the deal, there’s actually an underground compound with some weird government

testing facility that she just escaped from and they might be coming to get us right now.” Jim said pointing at the shorter of the two women.

Jim pointed at the other woman.

This one was taller than the first woman, and maybe a little older as well.

“She just crashed on the island on a weird flying future thing cause her driver is trying to kill her and so we’re all gonna fix that vessel and get off the island,” Jim said.

The two women looked at each other.

Will looked at Pete.

Pete looked at Will and then they all looked back at Jim.

“The island?” Pete said.

Jim rolled his eyes and shook his head as if Pete asked just asked him if Thursday always came after Wednesday.

“Yes, Pete, and we need to get out of here as soon as we can.” Jim said, annoyed.

“Well can’t we eat first?” Will pleaded. “We just spent all that time making this delicious food.”

“This is a waste of time.” Jim said. “The men after us could find this camp soon. We smelled it from a mile off.”

The shorter woman looked at the taller one. “Why don’t show me this vessel, I’ve never seen one of those before.”

The taller woman looked out the door with a worried look. “I just hope we don’t run into Ed”, she said.

“I think we can handle him.” The shorter woman stated plainly as she pulled out a gun and presented it to the taller woman, who grinned and tucked it into her own waistband.

“Okay, but I’m not sure if I can even get my airship started right now.” The taller woman responded.

Pete jumped up. “I can help with that!”

Jim rolled his eyes again. “Ok. you three head to the ship, we’ll pack this food up and be there soon”

Pete and the two women made their way out of the tree. Will listened to their conversation as they walked off.

“Hello, I’m Pete.” Pete said.

“I’m Jean, this is Bella. We just met a few minutes ago, too.” Jean said.

“Hello Jean. What’s the Indian guy mean, Bella?” Pete asked, pointing at the young woman’s shirt.

“It’s a marine life government testing facility, but only officially-” Bella began.

Will stopped listening.

The hunger was becoming too hard to ignore.

Will tossed a few of the savory grilled shrimp into his mouth, chewing slowly and swallowing.

He closed his eyes and enjoyed the moment.

Jim interrupted him. “You done?”

Jim was in a hurry a lot for someone that usually just laid around all day.

“Oh and by the way thanks for leaving me all by myself to pick up sticks and logs for a fire we were building.” Jim said.

“Sorry about that, I was planning on being back before you noticed. I was going to cook the food with Pete’s stuff and bring it to you.”

“Ok, thats understandable actually, this does look delicious.” Jim receded. “Let get to Jean’s ship and get out of here.”

Jim started to head towards the door and turned around again.

“Ok wait, there’s one more stop.” Jim said, pulling the pen and paper out from his pocket.

“I’m going to finish it before we leave. The bottle is still in my spot.”

Will raised his eyebrows. “Right now? Can’t you just finish it when we get there?”

“I just wouldn’t feel right if I didn’t finish what I started before we left.” Jim replied.

“If you say so.” Will said, only wanting to get to eat as fast as possible. “Ok, where’s that woman’s crashed ship? I’ll head over there and you can meet us when you’re done.”

“Its just a ways inland from my spot, directly north. You can’t miss it.” Jim assured Will.

The two men made their way out of Pete’s tree. Jim pointed to a pillar of smoke in the distance.

“Look, its still smoking. There’s the crashed vessel. I’ll see you in just a little bit.” He said, before heading off to his spot.

Will adjusted the food in his arms and began making his way towards the pillar of smoke..

He pulled another shrimp out from the bag and ate it.

This food might not last very long, Will thought.

Jim reached the tree line between the beach and the forrest. He had arrived back at his favorite spot to sit on the beach. The empty glass Sprite bottle for his letter was still right where he left it, half buried in the sand.

Jim sat down and pulled out the pen and paper from his pocket. The pen, by this point, resembled a question mark after the beating it had taken recently. However, even after everything that had happened, the letter was still perfectly intact.

Jim unfolded the paper and wrote the rest of the note. He didn't edit and he didn't stop to think about how it sounded. He just wrote.

Finally, it was finished.

Jim didn't think it was very good, but he was glad to be done with it. He wasn't really sure what it was that he had finished, but he finally completed the one real thing he had tried to do since coming to the island.

As Jim rolled up the paper and slid it into the empty sprite bottle. Just then, Will's familiar heavy but lively footsteps in the sand we heard behind him.

"Hey, Jim." Will started. "Pete wasn't able to get that vehicle running. He already went back to his treehouse. Also, most of the food is gone, I... I mean they were really hungry."

Jim screwed the cap on the bottle tightly and gazed out at the water. The rolled up letter bounced around silently inside.

He turned to his left and looked down the shoreline, then to his right and did the same.

They both seemed to go on forever, disappearing into the horizons. It was impossible to know how big the island really was.

“Hey, Will.” Jim started, still looking out at the ocean. “Jean, that’s the woman with the crashed ship.”

“Yeah, that’s right, nice lady.” Will chimed in.

Jim continued, still squinting as he scanned the water. “After she shot me, and I woke up, I told her about how we got shipwrecked all that time ago and how we’ve been stranded on an island.”

Will stopped looking at Jim and looked out at the water as well, trying to see what Jim was looking at. “Okay...?” Will said.

“... and when I mentioned the island she looked at me very strangely, as if she didn’t understand what I was talking about. Then later she mentioned that as she was crashing on the way in she looked out the window and saw a giant lake.” Jim continued.

“Where are you going with this, Jim?” Will lifted his left eyebrow up.

“I’ve been almost everywhere all over this island. There’s all kinds of streams and creeks that feed into the ocean. But no lakes. A couple of ponds, maybe, but not lakes. I found it odd. I was wondering what you thought about that.” Jim turned and looked at Will.

Will looked to his left and then to his right, at the horizon to the north and the south, then back at Jim. “Honestly, I’ve never really given it much thought. Geography was never my strong suit.”

Jim looked at Will, stupefied, then chuckled, mostly at himself. “Geology.” He said, not that it mattered that Will knew the difference.

Getting off the island was his obsession, his only reason for waking up in the morning, and Will had never thought about it?

Jim stood up tucked the neck of the glass sprite bottle between his thumb and forefinger, reared back and launched it as hard as he could.

It flew through the air, spinning top over bottom.

Out of nowhere, a duck flew by in the direct path of the bottle.

The bottle shattered loudly, and pieces of glass rained down on the water below.

The rolled up paper immediately sank under the water, completely beyond recovery.

Whatever information that previously might have been deciphered was lost.

Both men stood in silence, unsure of how to react to to what they had just seen.

The duck shook itself off on the surface of the water and took flight again, struggling a little at first to regain its balance, then finding it and soaring off into the sky.

After a few moments of stunned silence, Jim clapped his hands in front of him once and turned back to Will. “Is there any of that food left?”

Will raised his eyebrows back at Jim. “There was still a little when I left.” he responded.

Jim scratched his mustache with end of the bent pen and slid it back into his pocket.

“Well can you bring me some? I’m starving. I’m not gong anywhere Pete is, he’s too annoying. It’s his fault we shipwrecked on this island.”

“I know. Jim.” Will said, rolling his eyes for probably the thousandth time.

Will walked off into the woods towards Jean’s crashed airship, or Pete’s overbuilt camp, or whatever else there was to find.

Jim sat on the beach and stared out at the ocean.

He listened as the waves crashed against the shore over and over again.