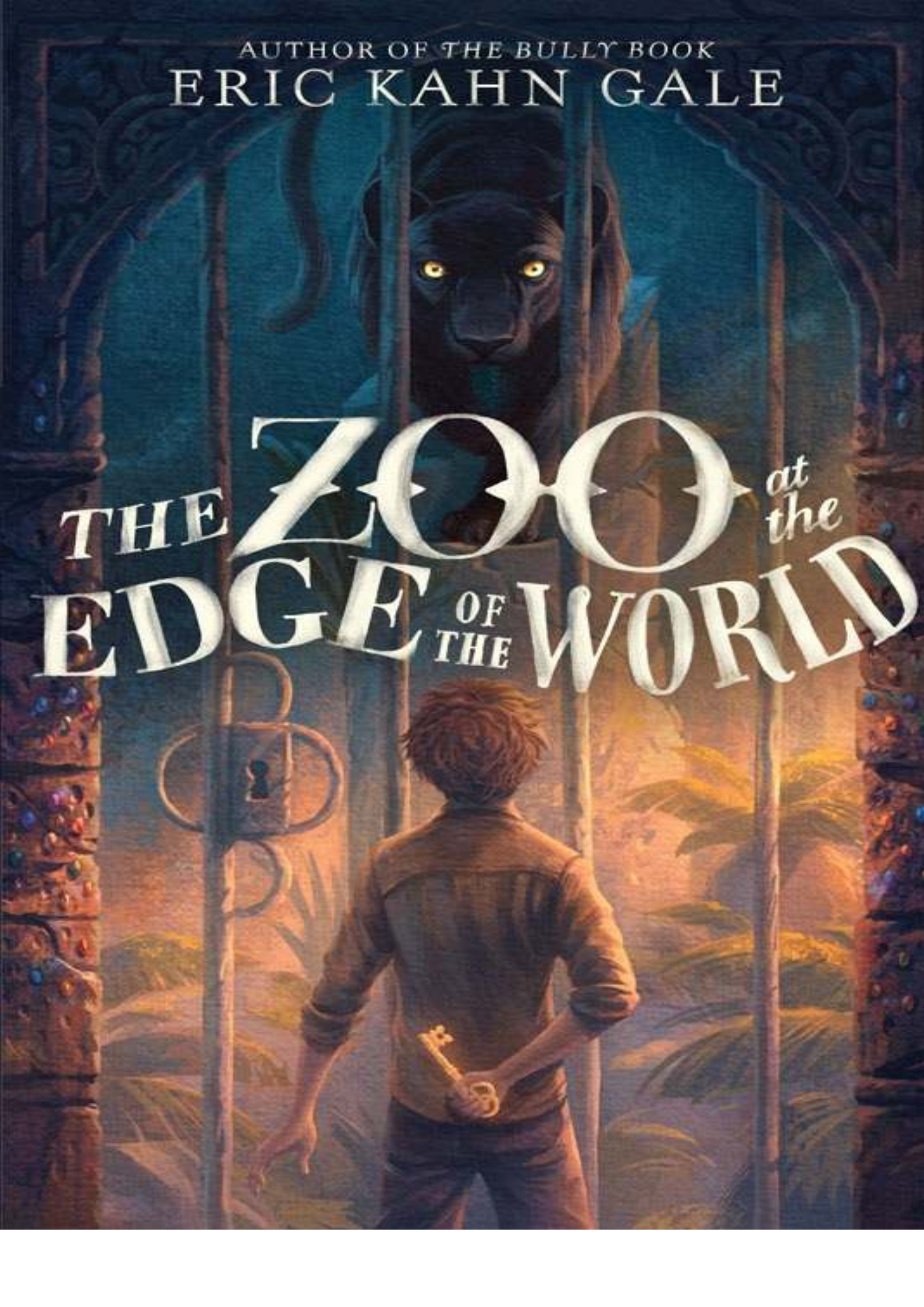


AUTHOR OF THE BULLY BOOK
ERIC KAHN GALE

THE ZOO *at the*
EDGE *OF THE* WORLD



THE
ZOO
at the
EDGE
OF THE
WORLD

by
ERIC KAHN GALE

Illustrations by Sam Nielson

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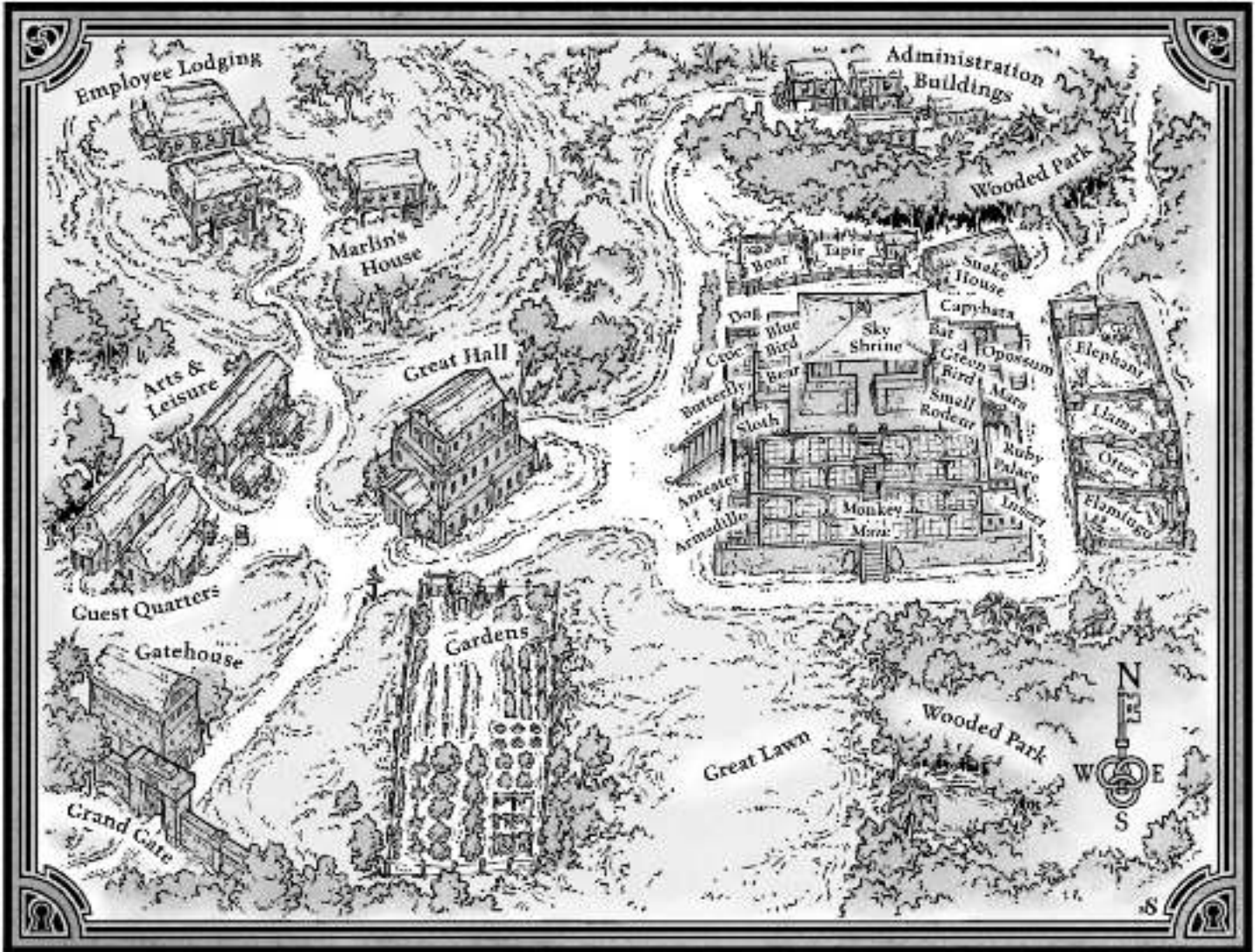
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First Day

Happiest greetings and most vigorous welcomes to the Zoo at the Edge of the World. The most deliciously exotic, delightfully luxurious, and ravishingly beautiful resort on earth.

Your five-day, five-night, all-inclusive excursion starts this morning, the minute you step off the riverboat *Saint of the Animals*. We hope you're well rested.

You will be met at the dock by the resort's proprietor, Ronan Rackham. You will recognize him as the famous adventurer known the world over for his thrilling exploits in South America, but here the Conqueror of the Jungle is only your humble host.

Our courteous and experienced staff will spirit away your luggage, and all the stresses and strains of your travel will melt away. Take in a leisurely lunch or freshen up in your luxury accommodations. A Grand Tour of the grounds, gardens, and of course the zoo itself will take guests to the dining hour.

After dinner, the real fun begins. Don your finest dress and join your fellow guests at the Welcoming Gala.

As the happy natives say here in British Guiana: Join friends, and be honored!



1.

I woke up with a knot in my stomach that I couldn't pin on anything I'd eaten. For starters, no trumpet had sounded announcing Father's return from his hunt. And today was Greeting Day.

He'd never missed a Greeting Day before. I decided what I was feeling might be dread.

Father had warned us days ago that if he wasn't back in time, Tim and I were to run the festivities without him, but he assured us it wouldn't come to that. I wondered what was keeping him and whether he was safe.

I was useless on Greeting Day for reasons I'll soon get to, and with Tim as the older brother and all, that placed him in charge of my life.

Yes, it was definitely dread.

"Monkey Talker, you awake in there?" Tim shouted through the door, rattling the knob. Thank God for bedroom-door locks, or else big brothers might take over the world.

"You better not be sleeping, you little peeve!"

I wiped the night gunk from my eyes and tried to tell him to go away. My lips puckered together in a spasm, and the air thickened up in my throat.

I winced, and "Guh—guh—ggg—gh!" is all that came out.

In the mornings, it sometimes takes a moment to remember I can't speak. I can always do it so easily in my dreams.

I gave up and instead rapped my knuckles against my bed frame to let him know I was awake.

"I expect you downstairs in five minutes. If you're late, I'll have you scooping up guano from the Bat House with a teaspoon."

Unmistakably dread.

Fortunately for me (though not for anyone within smelling distance), I'd slept in my work clothes. Yesterday's chores were written on my pants legs in dirt and dung, though I found a Brazil nut in my pant cuff and saved it for Kenji.

Tim was disappointed when I was down in under five minutes, and he told me I'd haul guano anyway.

"Demerits for dirty clothes. What kind of place do you think this is?"

"Ah zuh—zz-zuh . . ."

A zoo, I tried to say, but got stuck on the z.

I'm not a mute, and I'm not stupid like most people think. What I am is a stutterer, and a bad one. On a trip on the starts of words, my vowels get stuck, and *ums* wedge into everything. The only sound I can reliably get out is a sneeze.

I can manage a few words, sometimes, if the person I'm talking to is patient. Feeling rushed makes the stutter worse. I don't think Tim has ever stood still long enough for me to say hello, unless Father

forced him.

~~“Sorry, no time for sound-it-out.” He sneered. “We’re needed at the boat. You’d be kept out of sight of the guests if it were up to me, but Father pities you. Come on.”~~

As we marched down the hill from our house to the Golden Path, Tim kept stepping on the back of my shoe. If I tried to get away, he’d push me over and say it was an accident. So I let him have his fun.

The workers were out early today, sweeping the Golden Path and cleaning out cages. Everyone’s up before dawn on Greeting Day, because everything has to be shined and lined up just right.

Tim, my father, and I spend so much time in the sun that you can barely tell the difference between us and the dark-skinned Arawaks and Caribs who are natives of this land and who we employ in the zoo. Guess the only thing is that my family all has wavy brown hair, while the natives’ is thick, straight, and black. Or if you see us with our shirts off. We have monstrous tan lines.

Father puts the workers through their paces on Greeting Day, forbidding even a drop of dung in the animal cages. As though pooping isn’t the main thing these creatures do.

“Spiff up that brick!” Tim shouted at a group of workers sweeping between the cages. “You’re leaving it all spotty.”

As much as Tim wanted to get to the boat quickly, he never passed up an opportunity to bark orders at someone. He jogged ahead a few yards and made the group double back up the path to sweep and mop as he supervised.

There was a tug at my pants leg, and I looked down to see a little mustachioed monkey scaling my thigh. She chirped and thrust her hand into my pocket.

“Kenji!” I knocked my knees together and grabbed her. “You sneaky thief! I saved this nut to give to you, not to have it swiped!”

Maybe I ought to explain. Up until now, I’ve cast myself as unable to speak. Well, I’ll just say again, I am not a mute nor am I stupid. What I am is a stutterer. When I was small it was really bad. Tutors rejected me, saying I was hopeless. Father thought so too, and Tim still seems to think that way. But something changed when I turned five. Father heard of a Portuguese doctor passing through Georgetown, the capital city downriver from our zoo, who’d done studies on speech disorders. He arranged for an examination.

When you’re a little kid and everyone’s telling you you’re dumb, it’s hard not to believe them. And so that’s what I thought, until I spoke to Dr. Vincente.

First, he said there was nothing wrong with my mind. I wasn’t stupid. It was the way my mind worked with my lips, tongue, and lungs that caused the problem.

Second, he told me I was a stutterer and I’d always be a stutterer. But he taught me tricks I could use to improve my speech, how to improve my airflow and force my mouth into specific shapes.

As he was leaving, he told me one final thing. He said sometimes, a stutterer finds he may not stutter when he is alone and speaking to animals.

It sounds odd, I know, but it’s true. The doctor suggested to my father that I be given a pet.

My father’s name is Ronan Rackham, and he is an adventurer. He came to Guiana from England when he was just fourteen years old and never went back. He was the first Englishman to map the inland jungle, and he became famous for discovering new species of animals.

Heeding the doctor’s advice, Father went into the jungle to fetch me a gift. He captured a white and-gray tamarin monkey. She was the size of a small cat and had a red tail, beady eyes, and an enormous white mustache that grew wider than her face. She was a cute little girl, and while the zoo where I lived was filled with monkeys, I’d never had one as a pet before.

Remembering what Dr. Vincente said, I took her to my room and closed the door. There was a tin

2.

There was a metallic clatter in the pen to my left, and then a powerful snort.

Leedo Flute flipped himself over the railing of the Boar Den and rolled onto the Golden Path. He looked at me, spit, and then walked away.

Leedo is one of our native workers, and he must have had a tangle with Tuskus, our male fore boar. Tuskus had never liked Leedo, who held his dung shovel in the air like a meat cleaver, scaring the boars. Leedo wouldn't pay attention when I tried to show him the proper way.

Father might be back that afternoon, and if the Boar Den wasn't clean, there'd be a price to pay. So I unlocked the door to the den and found the shovel lying in the muddy pit. When I picked it up, I was sure to hold the blade downward like I was stirring a kettle of awful-smelling soup.

Tuskus lifted his head and snorted at me. He quickly trotted between me and the two female boars, Gray Beard and Belly Wart. Tuskus is very protective of those two.

"It's your poop I'm after," I said. "Not your girlfriends."

I went about my business clearing his business, and Tuskus began circling me. I let him sniff at my pants legs and shirt while Kenji hung tight to my neck, keeping a cautious eye on the boar. Finally, Tuskus whined and pressed his cheek against my thigh. I scratched his forehead and he grunted happily.

He's a piglet at heart. It's just that most people can't see past the eight-inch tusks we've named him for. I can't say I blame them for that.

"You stinky thing!" I said, as a great bubble of spit slimed its way onto my pants leg. "I come here to get you cleaned up, and look what you duh-dd-d—"

The words caught in my throat. I saw Leedo leaning over the fence, leering at me.

"Make friends with a pig, smell like a pig." He laughed.

I kept shoveling.

"How come you talk to animals but you won't talk to me, little Marlin?"

I didn't look up.

"Why's your brother making us clean everything when the boss isn't even back yet?" Leedo leaned over the fence and picked up a clump of wet dirt. He crumpled it between his reedy fingers. "Maybe the boss isn't coming back."

I stuck the shovel in the ground and faced him. Leedo was, without question, my least favorite employee. He was rude to the guests and always late with his duties. But no matter how often Ti complained, Father would never fire him. Father would say that everyone was good at something.

"He's c-cc-cuh-cuh—" *He's coming back*, I tried to say, but immediately regretted it.

"What's that, little Marlin?" Leedo laughed. "I don't speak your language."

I felt blood rush to my face. I wanted to take the shovel out of the ground and slap him on the side

of the head with it.

“~~Hunting jaguar is not like hunting a little boar,~~” Leedo continued, throwing a clump of dirt at Tuskus’s head. It spooked him and he jumped up snorting. “When you hunt a jaguar, he hunts you right back.”

I thought about opening the gate and letting Tuskus have his way with Leedo. But that wouldn’t be the right thing to do. Father was counting on Tim and me to act responsibly in his stead.

So I picked up the shovel and got back to work. Behind me Leedo cursed and walked off. *My father is Ronan Rackham*, I thought; *he is smarter and stronger than anything on earth. No one can kill him.*

Or so I hoped.

It was our employees’ fault that Father had to risk his life in the first place. Our zoo is built on an ancient pyramid, and we’d turned every part of it into an attraction except for one: the Sky Shrine. The biggest and highest point on the pyramid is set up like a stadium, with a large pit surrounded by stone benches. Father thought it would be an excellent place to make a circus ring and put on animal shows.

Construction was going fine until one of our cage keepers, Nathtam Leent, told everyone a secret from the Tribes had claimed the Sky Shrine was holy and it was sacrilege to make a circus there. “The Tribes” is what we call the various communities of Arawaks and Caribs that still live in their villages and do things the old way. Most of our employees are former Tribesmen as well, so Father gives the native communities respect. He even bought the fabric for the circus tent from the Tribes. That’s how they learned what he was up to.

We raised the tent last week, and Nathtam led a third of our employees on strike and into the jungle. They planned to rejoin the Tribesmen there.

Father was as angry about this as I had ever seen him. He was missing all through dinner and then appeared at my bedroom door at midnight, his eyes like stone.

The circus was going to be the most impressive part of the resort, Father told me, the centerpiece of the new zoo experience. It was the reason he would be able to raise the fees he was charging the guests for the coming season. He said he’d made some very expensive land deals recently, and if we had to close the resort for even one week, it could be disastrous.

I didn’t sleep well that night, fearing our zoo would close. All the animals would be released into the jungle, and I would have to return to Georgetown. I’d lose my friends and have only Kenji to talk to.

But the next morning our striking workers were waiting at the gate. They were all there, except for one.

They had made camp in the jungle that first night, but after sunset Nathtam had gone missing. It was a moonless night, and they couldn’t search for him until morning.

They found him just after sunrise. He was hanging from a tree. Or part of him was.

A jaguar had got to him.

When a jaguar turns man-eater, he learns a bad lesson: people taste good and are easy to catch. Whole tribal villages had been terrorized when a jaguar learned to hunt humans. That’s why the workers came back. They needed the protection of our walls—the protection only my father could provide.

Father opened our gates to the men, and let them have their jobs and quarters back with no punishments. When they feared for the safety of their families still living in the villages, Father told them he’d go out and kill the man-eater himself.

“We are Rackham men,” he told Tim and me. “And Rackhams always do what’s right.”

3.

Tim and I were at the boat only to greet the guests, but the employees did all the work, carrying luggage and directing everyone to their carriages. Father would usually make a big show of taking on a guest's luggage personally, often that of the most important visitor. Some of the richest and most powerful people in the world come to our resort. I've seen Father's account books, and what the guests pay for a week's vacation could get you a modest house in Georgetown.

As the guests came off the boat, Tim leaped right into Father's shoes, complimenting the sweating ladies on their beauty and slapping the overstuffed gentlemen on their backs. A wet sound, that slap. These rich ladies and gentlemen have no sense of proper jungle wear.

A lady in a drooping red hat tapped her husband on the shoulder and whispered, "That's them, right behind us!"

The couple stepped to the side of the gangplank and made a deep bow, and the other guests around them followed suit. I looked for the people they were talking about, but before I could see, Tim nearly pushed me over, pressing down my head.

When I looked back up, a family of three was slowly making their way toward the dock. The first was a giant white-haired man whose beard radiated from his cheeks into two perfect corners below his ears. He wore a dazzling vest with what looked like actual silver thread woven into the fabric. A gold watch peeked up from his pocket. His manner was stately and regal and was betrayed only by the fact that his linen pants were so soaked with sweat, it looked like he'd just sat in a bathtub.

Next to him strode a tall, elegant woman who I assumed was his wife. Her beauty was so striking I hardly noticed the rouge and mascara melting down her face in the heat.

And in front of them was a girl. At first glance I took her for a servant, because she was so out of line with the other two in both pace and demeanor. She walked with a broad step and had hitched up her dress and rolled up her sleeves to keep cool. I'd never seen a guest do that right off the boat before when they were still trying to impress the other guests.

She also didn't have the melting makeup problem, because she wore none.

"Duke, Duchess." Tim stepped between the family and me, and bowed. Then he turned to the girl who looked about my age, twelve or thirteen. "Lady Bradshire. I am Timothy Rackham, and I bid a warm welcome to the Zoo at the Edge of the World. Allow me to take your bags."

Tim reached out his hand and grabbed an ornate bag from the porter.

"What a gentleman!" the duchess cooed.

"You, my boy," said the duke as he shook Tim's unencumbered hand, "are the very image of your father."

I'd heard we had some noble family coming this week. Father said he knew the Duke of Bradshire from his brief time in the navy and that he'd be bringing his wife. He didn't say anything to me about

the daughter.

“And you’re a Rackham, too?” The girl pushed past Tim and curtsied for me. “You’re all famous back in England, you know.”

“Yes, that’s my younger brother, Marlin,” Tim said, smiling through his teeth.

“Oh!” she said, tittering. “You have no idea how boring life is back there. What’s it like to be an adventurer?”

She was speaking directly to me. None of the guests ever spoke directly to me. Her eyes were green and so innocent in their inquiring that I could tell she actually expected an answer. The last thing I wanted to do was stutter in her pretty face.

“That’s the dullard son,” the Duchess of Bradshire whispered behind her hand loudly enough for everyone to hear. She gave me a squinting smile through her melted makeup. The girl looked embarrassed and dropped her eyes.

A weight smacked my chest and I reflexively grabbed it. Tim had shoved the duke’s bag at me and was fighting with the devil to contain his laughter. He just managed to choke out, “Show them to the carriage,” before bolting off in a hysterical fit behind a donkey.

I slowly lifted my chin from the bag but made no eye contact with the duke and his family. I nodded in the direction of their carriage and led the way forward.

The length of boardwalk from the gangplank to the duke’s carriage was short, but the bag was large; even with my arms wrapped around it, my hands barely touched. It was a struggle to open the door without losing my grip on the bag. Once the bag was safely inside, I stepped back, bowed, and gestured for the duke’s family to enter. One by one I watched their feet walk by, until their daughter’s knobby knees stopped in front of my view.

I kept my head bowed until she tapped my shoulder.

“Would you like to ride with us?” she asked.

Tim reappeared from behind the donkey. “That’s not customary,” he said. “We walk up.”

The girl smiled at Tim. “He brought our bag to the carriage; why not see it the rest of the way?”

The dumfounded look on my brother’s face was delicious, and I wish I’d had more time to enjoy it, but as soon as she’d dismissed him, the girl took my arm and pulled me into the carriage with her parents. The door swung shut behind me, and then I was there with the Bradshire family, nobility of the country I’d never seen.

“Let the boy go about his business,” said the duke.

“What better business does he have than getting acquainted with us?” his daughter replied. “We are his guests, after all.”

With that she knocked twice on the wall of the carriage, and the driver set off.

We hit a bump, and the duchess nearly fell out of her seat. “You behave yourself on this trip, young lady,” she tried to scold the girl, but between the streaks of red and black makeup on her face and the way she clung to the walls of the carriage, she was hard to take seriously.

“Don’t be so stiff, Mummy,” her daughter chided. “We’re here to have an adventure!”

The duchess considered her grimly. Adventuring, I wagered, was not her cup of tea.

The girl looked at me happily from the opposite bench and squinted as though she were puzzling me out.

“My name is Olivia,” she said.

“Lady Olivia,” corrected the duke.

“Oh, you don’t need to say that part among friends. What’s your name? I don’t think I got it.”

“Livia! Stop torturing that boy,” said the duke as he tried to steady himself in the bouncing carriage.

carriage. "He's a mute."

My face heated up. Olivia looked away to hide her disappointment.

I closed my eyes and remembered the techniques the speech doctor had taught me in Georgetown. *Lips, tongue, teeth, air. I am not a mute.*

"Mmm-mm—muh, ma ma," I stuttered, and stopped.

The duke huffed, and the duchess shot a knowing look toward her husband. But Olivia sat still and considered me calmly. I started again, deliberately working the mechanics of my mouth.

"MM-mm—MUH—MUH—Marlin," I managed.

Olivia smiled. "Marlin! Good to meet you." She took my hand in hers and very enthusiastically shook it. Her hands were much softer than mine, and way more clean.

"I can't believe I'm actually meeting the world-famous Rackhams! This is my very first time in South America," she said. "Daddy's here to buy land for a sugar forest. He says we might move here."

The duchess kicked Olivia in the shin from across the carriage.

"Ow!" she cried.

The duke stiffened up. "I'm not sure where my daughter comes up with these stories."

Olivia opened her mouth to say something but seemed to think better of it, and sighed.

My father was born to a wealthy family like the Bradshires back in England, but he hated the stodgy life he led there. He longed for adventure in the colonies. So first chance he got, he hopped a ship for Guiana, Britain's colony on the South American mainland. But in the port city of Georgetown he found men not too different from the ones he was fleeing in England: merchants and landowners obsessed with reaping riches from the mines and sugarcane plantations around the coast. He spent the next thirty years traveling the jungles of the Amazon and writing dispatches for British newspapers.

On a rare visit to Georgetown, he met Marion Coates, the daughter of a ship's captain. They fell in love and she convinced him to give up his adventuring and settle in the city. They lived there together for three years, very happily. But Marion, my mother, died of illness soon after I was born. Neither Tim nor I have any memory of her.

Father wrote to his brother back in England with instructions to sell his estate there, and he used the money to move us upriver and into the jungle. That's where he built this resort, the Zoo at the Edge of the World.

The idea was to make a destination for the rich merchants in Georgetown, demonstrating the beauty of the natural world. But I suppose it caught the attention of the wealthy back in England as well, because soon loads of them were boarding steamships bound for South America just to visit us.

I can't tell you if we're famous or not, but the resort is always booked.

"Daddy, look!" Olivia squealed as the carriage pulled onto the Golden Path. "The Grand Gate! It's even better than in the books!"

4.

Sometimes I wonder why people who speak the most always seem to have the least to say.

The guests had had their tea and changed into more reasonable clothes, and were now being led around the grounds of the resort by Tim. He was pretty much bungling the whole thing.

“Our zoo is built on the ruins of a stone pyramid that is over one hundred years old,” Tim prattled to the assembled guests.

Over one hundred years old is technically correct, but the pyramid is actually over *seven hundred* years old.

“There are more than thirty different species of animals in our zoo,” he went on, leading the group down the Golden Path.

We have exactly eighty-seven species in our collection.

The great stone pyramid on which our zoo rests was a temple complex built by the native people at ancient times. There was once a great city here, and they built this pyramid as a tribute to their gods. Steps run up the pyramid on all four sides, and along those steps are dozens of shrines and chambers stacked all the way to the pinnacle.

The city must have been abandoned some time ago, because the jungle swallowed it up, leaving only the pyramid. Some of the structures along the temple shelf remained intact, while some were just pillars and fallen stone.

My father discovered the site on one of his first expeditions. It’s about fifty miles inland from Georgetown, but there is no road through this dense jungle, so the only way to get here is by oxcart or riverboat, *Saint of the Animals*.

Old shrines and chambers along the pyramid were fitted with bars to make them suitable as animal enclosures. My father captured most of the animals himself in the surrounding forest; the rest were shipped in from Africa and the Caribbean. The pyramid is nearly a half mile square, but not very steep, so it’s easy to walk the steps between the different animal attractions. We call the steps and the paths around the zoo the Golden Path, because the bricks are made from a kind of mud that hardens with a yellow hue.

Tim led the snaking group of guests up and down the Golden Path, all the time providing them with more misinformation.

“And on your left you’ll see Crocodile Corner,” Tim called out, “a stone enclosure where we keep three full-grown crocs”—*two adults and a baby, in truth*—“one of which I caught myself.”

Not a chance.

“Caught a crocodile!” The duchess tittered to Olivia. “That’s a boy you want to get acquainted with.”

Olivia blushed and smiled. She looked over at me, and I couldn’t help shaking my head, as if

say, *It's not true.*

I suppose I was jealous.

“Why are you shaking your head?” she whispered.

“Huh—hh-hh—h,” I stammered. *He didn't catch a crocodile!* I wanted to say.

But I couldn't. I never could. And so I stepped off the Golden Path and, with a quick flick of my hand, bade Olivia to follow me.

I took her on my own tour of the zoo and showed off my favorite animals. I showed her Longsnout and Bottlebee at the Tapir Pond, Minxy in the Sloth Cage, and Mala, the spectacled bear. All without words, of course; when she asked questions, I kept it to a shake or a nod. I wanted to tell her all the things I knew about the animals. I had funny stories about each creature, but I was afraid if I stuttered I'd look a fool.

We ended up at the Elephant Stomping Grounds to visit Dreyfus, our big gray. He was shipped over from Africa when he was just a youngling, and he'd had a major growth spurt recently.

I wanted to tell Olivia he'd nearly doubled his body weight in three months. But I wouldn't risk bungling the words.

“My God!” Olivia exclaimed as we came within sight. “It's an elephant!” She grabbed my collar in shock. “An elephant!” she said again.

I laughed. Most English hadn't seen half the animals we've got in their shoddy zoos. It's always fun to watch a guest's first encounter with a creature.

“He's marvelous!” Olivia moved toward the gate. “His trunk can move just like an arm! In all the books it's a dragging, hanging thing.”

Dreyfus was picking some greens out of a trough with his trunk and shoving them into his mouth. A two-ton beast that uses his nose like a hand was so commonplace to me that it took a moment to see what was so fascinating about it.

“How much does he weigh?” she inquired of me. Her face was alight with joy.

I opened my mouth without thinking and stammered. “Who—whoo—whaaaaa—”

My hand covered my mouth and stopped the noise. Olivia's smile wavered for a moment.

“He must weigh quite a lot,” she said.

All my stories were stopped up inside. Tim would have been a better guide: even with all his rubbish, he always had something to say.

Olivia leaned against the gate, pressing her face between the bars.

“Mr. Elephant . . .,” she cooed. “Mr. Funny Elephant, what are you munching on?”

Dreyfus looked up from his feed trough and trumpeted.

“Nothing for me, I guess!” Olivia laughed uproariously.

At that moment, I realized there was something I could do. I gestured for her to step away from the gate, and I pulled the brass key ring off my belt.

“Marlin, what are you doing?”

I smiled and found the key I needed. I opened the big creaky gate just enough to squeeze through. Dreyfus was easy to spook, so I closed the gate behind me and crept toward him to check his mood.

The big elephant was back at his trough in the center of the stomping grounds. He eyed me cautiously but kept on chewing. We were out of earshot of Olivia and I felt my tongue relax, my breath returning to my throat.

“Hello, pal.” I stroked his trunk. “I've got a visitor for you, if that's all right. She's a girl.” My voice dropped down to a whisper. “And she's pretty nice. I think she'd like it very much if she could give you a pat. What do you say?”

Dreyfus considered me from above, then went back to munching. I took that as a yes.

Olivia called to me, “Everything all right there, Marlin?”

I smiled broadly and waved her in. She pushed the gate slightly open and squeezed through. Perhaps too optimistically, she skipped toward Dreyfus, and I felt him shift his weight. Before I could tell her to slow down, she came right up to him and hugged his trunk like a pet.

I winced and braced myself for the worst, but the elephant just snorted and went on eating. “He’s gentle giant!” Olivia laughed, and I couldn’t help joining her. “This is wonderful, Marlin. Thank you so much—”

A bugling sound blasted through the air. Dreyfus reared up his head, and Olivia, still embracing his trunk, went up with it. She screamed and tumbled into the mud.

I ran to help her up and another bugle blast sounded.

“I’m all right,” she said, standing up from the mud. “What were those trumpets?”

I pulled her toward the elephant gate. I’d get in trouble if someone found us here. We weren’t supposed to bring guests into the enclosures. It was Father’s number one rule.

“Marlin, what is it?” she asked again as I locked the gate and dragged her toward the Golden Path.

“MM—mm—MU-muh—MMMM—” My tongue thickened up.

I pointed my index finger horizontal and set it beneath my nose.

“A mustache?” Olivia looked puzzled.

I straightened up and puffed my chest.

“Your father!” she guessed. She must have seen an engraving of him somewhere.

I nodded and pulled her desperately back toward the group, praying he wouldn’t find out I’d left.

5.

We spotted the rest of the guests heading down the bottom of the Golden Path on their way to the gatehouse. Some of them had already gathered outside the door.

“What are they all doing?” Olivia asked me.

I had no idea. The gatehouse was a small building attached to a stable where we housed donkeys. There was no reason for guests to be there.

“Livia!” the duchess shrieked when she saw us. “What happened to you?”

“What’s going on?” Olivia asked.

“You tell me, young lady. You’re covered in mud!”

“Oh my goodness, you’re right.” Olivia feigned surprise.

“You were with *him*.” The duchess snapped her fingers in my face. “Boy! Boy!”

“He’s not deaf, Mother,” Olivia said.

“Well, then he should be able to hear this clearly,” the duchess pronounced. Her face was sharp and beautiful, and very frightening when she was angry. “Stay away from my daughter.”

“Daddy!” Olivia turned to her father, who had been standing by ineffectually. For such a large and powerful man, he didn’t seem quite equipped to deal with an argument between the duchess and Olivia.

“Oh, Everly, there’s no need to be harsh,” the duke offered. “This boy doesn’t know what you’re saying.”

“Yes, he does!” Olivia said, now angry at both her parents.

I’d just been screamed at, insulted, and argued over in the space of about a minute, and I still had my own family to worry about. I decided it’d be best to bid the Bradshires farewell.

“Buh—bb-buh-buh—” I stammered as a means of excusing myself, and made all the necessary bows as quickly as I could.

“I’m sorry, Marlin,” Olivia mouthed as I waved and backed away. I nodded to show everything was fine but decided I wouldn’t be talking to her anytime soon. It was always best to leave the guests alone. Though I did need to push through a horde of them to get to the gatehouse.

“Little Marlin,” said Leedo Flute, who was guarding the door, “they just dragged your father back here on a gurney. Guess the jaguar got him after all.”

A hollow pain opened in my chest. “Wh-wh-WH-what?” I gasped.

Leedo’s grim face was beset by twitching. His right eye wrinkled involuntarily and his lip jerked up.

“Bah-ha-ha-ha!” he laughed uproariously. My face soured and I pushed him hard in the gut. He grabbed my arm with his strong, thin hands and easily tossed me to the side.

“I’m only joking, little Marlin. He’s right inside there and has been asking for you about a quart

of an hour. Where have you been?"

I pushed by him and through the wide wooden door. Leedo slammed it shut behind me.

Ronan Rackham turned around, his face tensed and eyes wide. All the nights in the bush had ravaged his nerves, and loud noises tended to startle him. I always thought of it as his Jungle Look.

Several days of stubble was shading his chin, and sweat from his forehead streamed into a bushy mustache. The khaki sleeves on his shirt were rolled up, and I could see the thick forearm veins that popped out even when he held a teacup.

My father was an old man. He had turned sixty just last winter, but he looked like men half his age. The only place his years showed was in the wrinkles near his eyes when he smiled. He liked to say that he'd lived an entire life before having children, and Tim and I were his second life.

The Jungle Look melted into a smile.

"Marlin!" he bellowed. "Where have you been?"

"Ay-ay-uh-uh-uh," I stuttered.

"Yes, where were you?" repeated Tim with a smirk, trying to start trouble. "Tell us."

Father ignored him. He pulled me close and mussed my hair with a dirty hand. Then he hooked both our heads into his elbows and drew us into his chest. "Boys, boys, boys!" he chanted as he smothered us in his shirt. We gasped for breath and giggled, relieved at his good mood. "You would have been eaten alive out there!"

Tim and I broke free and we mock battled him, punching his arms and shoulders as he pressed us backward by our necks.

"I wish you two had been with me," he said. "You'd be dead, of course, but it would have been a nice way to die."

"So you killed the jaguar?" Tim said, grabbing hold of his arm. "Can I have its skull?"

"Well . . ." Father gave us a small smile and glanced at Manray Lightfoot, one of our newest employees, who was carrying a chain into the gatehouse stable. "First I want to see that Paw. Have it out!"

The Paw. He never told us where he got it, or what it was, but that never mattered. It was a dry and crusty thing that looked something like a lemur's hand. Its tiny knuckles were balled up in a fist. The thing was ghastly to look at, and it smelled awful. But I would do anything to have it.

"Right here," Tim said, and pulled it out of his breast pocket. Tim always kept it close when he had it, which was most of the time.

"Good," Father said. "We're about to have a game."

Sometimes Father challenged us to do something that required bravery or smarts. The winner got to hold the Paw until he did something especially bad or the other one did something especially good. Then it was transferred again.

I usually got it only when Tim did something bad, and then I'd quickly lose it; I never had it for more than a day, because Tim won most of the games. He was stronger, faster, and braver. Plus he could talk.

"What's the game?" Tim asked excitedly. He'd had the Paw for the last two weeks straight. I tried not to drive myself crazy by counting, but Tim kept a count, and made sure I was duly informed every evening at dinner.

"The game is afoot," Father said, snatching the Paw from Tim. "And closer than you think."

Just then the door banged open.

"Mr. Rackham," Leedo complained. "it's mad out here!"

"Captain Rackham!" the guests called out. "Captain Rackham!"

“What do you want me to do?” Leedo threw up his arms.

Father gave us a knowing look. “Slight pause for interference,” he said. “We mustn’t leave a bunch of sweaty snobs waiting.”

“Yes, Father. You should go out there,” Tim said, feigning worry. “I tried to control the group as best I could, but Marlin abandoned us when we were on the tour, and it wasn’t easy leading the whole thing by myself.”

He threw me under the carriage, the tattler. I tried to put together a statement in my mind, explaining my absence in the fewest words possible, leaving out the bit about letting a guest be mauled by an elephant, of course.

But Father casually patted Tim on the shoulder and said with exaggerated patience, “You get better with experience.”

Then he winked at me and walked to the gatehouse door.

Tim’s jaw dropped. I knew he’d make me pay for it later, but it was worth it.

The gatehouse door opened and the red setting sun blazed behind the crowd, casting everyone in silhouette. They waved and called out, “Captain Rackham! Captain Rackham!” pushing each other forward for a better look. This was always my favorite part of Greeting Day. A special pride welled up in me hearing them cheer him. Tim and I stood to either side of our father, soaking up all the glory we could.

“Hello and welcome,” Father said quietly. “Thank you all for journeying to our zoo.” Immediately the chattering crowd went silent. I’d seen him use this trick before. Father never had to shout to get attention. “I’m so sorry that I wasn’t able to greet you properly at the docks. But I trust that my sons, Marlin and Timothy, hosted you admirably.”

Tim blinked hard and his mouth twitched. Father had said my name first.

“I would have joined you,” he went on, “but my latest expedition went on longer than I hoped. I promise I’ll make it up to you with the wonderful—”

“Another adventure, Captain?” a voice called from the crowd.

Father furrowed his brow and searched the silhouettes for the source of this interruption. A large, round, familiar shape separated itself from the others and approached us.

Slowly, Father unknitted his brow and curled his lips into what had all the features of a smile but was missing some vital ingredient.

“Your Grace,” Father said through his teeth, and dipped into a deep bow. The guests near the gatehouse bowed and tipped their hats too. The duke’s smile was genuine, and he laughed and waved at the guests.

“Good to see you, Admiral,” Father said stiffly. “And Your Grace. So many titles now, hard to choose just one.”

Guests in the crowd chuckled at this.

“I’ve brought my family with me!” the duke said loudly, as if he were onstage and performing a show for the other guests. He gestured to one short and one tall silhouette to my right. “Let me introduce my wife, Everly, the Duchess of Bradshire, and my daughter, Lady Olivia.”

Olivia and her mother made their entrances like they were accustomed to this sort of thing. They came to the front of the gatehouse and curtsied first to the crowd and then to my father. The duchess refused to make eye contact with any of us, but Olivia shot me a smile. My plan to avoid Olivia and the Bradshires was not off to a good start. But I smiled to let her know I was enjoying her mother’s discomfort as well.

“And these are my sons, once again, Timothy and Marlin,” Father said flatly. We looked at each other, not knowing what to do, until Father pinched us. Then we bowed.

“Beauties and the Beasts!” a guest wearing a green driving jacket called out. The duke chuckled this, and the rest of the group followed suit. I suppose our two families together did make quite a sight. One was the height of English society, and the other made a living running a zoo in the jungle. But Olivia, in her muddy dress, looked like she belonged more with our lot.

“We’re delighted to be here,” the duke said.

“And delighted you’re still in business,” added the duchess while looking over my father’s shoulder.

“Why wouldn’t we still be in business?” Father bristled.

“It’s a lovely resort, Captain Rackham,” interjected the duke. “Even more grand than in the pamphlets we’ve seen. We are just delighted to be here and—”

“You’ll have to excuse us, Your Grace,” Father said, much louder than necessary. “And to you all apologize as well, but I have urgent business to attend with my sons.” He shot me a look. “I will properly greet you tonight at the Welcoming Gala. Leedo, please show the guests to their cabins.”

Leedo sighed with exasperation, and Father gave him a quick kick in the shin.

“Captain—” the duke protested, but Father pretended he didn’t hear and pushed Tim and me back into the gatehouse. Leedo was unenthusiastically addressing the crowd as the door closed.

“England not big enough for them?” Father said to himself. “Have to lord over my land as well?”

He spun violently and punched the wall, cracking it.

Tim and I jumped back and locked eyes. Father stayed facing the damaged wall. I watched his enormous shoulders rise and fall as he breathed. Never once had Father turned his strength on either of us, but I’d seen him crack enough walls to imagine what it’d feel like.

“Don’t mind me, boys,” Father said. “Just a bit of business between me and that one is all. Come on, now.” Father slapped our backs. “Game’s afoot, and it’s a good one.”

6.

Slivers of light leaked from the roof into the stable, and my eyes took their time adjusting. I saw only dim outlines in the room, sweat gleaming off the shoulder of a worker, maybe Manray, as he walked by.

He was dragging a heavy chain across the floor, and I could hear the sound of metal pieces coming together and then clinking back together.

“Do you see him?” Father whispered.

“See what?” Tim asked.

“Over there.” Father pointed. “The end of the stable.”

Tim went absolutely frozen. He must have seen it before I did.

“Wuh—wuh-ww—” My eyes were just beginning to make out a shape.

“Holy . . .” Tim gasped. “You said you were going to kill it!”

Father laughed, loud and hard. It made me jump. When I opened my eyes again, it became clear to me.

“Our newest attraction!” Father said.

The shadows at the end of the stable coalesced, and I could see the black outline of bars on a mobile carrier. The wheeled cage was parked at the far wall of the room, and inside it was a smooth, flowing shadow.

I couldn't tell one end of the undulating mass from the other until it opened its eyes. Yellow orbs blinked at me.

“W—w—whu—why?” I managed to ask Father.

“Why bring it back alive?” Father said, and I nodded. “Why not, I ask you?”

“He's a man-eater,” Tim blurted out.

Father tipped his head. “That's true,” he said. “The beast did kill Nathtam. And with a taste for human flesh, it's not safe for him to be roaming around.”

“But then why'd you bring him here?”

Father turned to me to gauge my reaction. I couldn't hide that I wondered it too. Across the room the jaguar snarled.

“The beast doesn't abide by our rules, only the rules of the jungle. He ate a man because a man put himself in his way,” Father said. “I'm not happy about what happened, but I won't punish an animal for being an animal. Would you?”

Tim mumbled a nothing, and I shrugged.

“That's not why we're here, my boys. This zoo isn't just entertainment for the rich. We are showing that the wilds of the jungle can be conquered. That there is nothing to fear. Anyone can come here and enjoy these lands.”

“Yes, Father,” Tim said dutifully.

“Yeh-ye—yes,” I said. I couldn’t argue with what Father had said. The jaguar was just an animal doing what animals do. Even if it scared me.

“But if we want to show the world there’s nothing to fear,” Father said, motioning Manray over. “we must be fearless ourselves.”

Manray handed him two collar sticks, long metal rods, each with an adjustable noose at the end. “First one to collar him gets the Paw,” Father said, urging us forward.

“Are you serious?” Tim gasped, pushing back toward Father.

“Are you chicken?” Father laughed. “What about you, Marlin?”

Tim shot me an uncertain look. If we both refused the challenge, the game would be canceled and he could keep the Paw. I could avoid the shame of losing and stay far from the jaguar. But I didn’t know when I’d have another chance to win it.

I took the collar stick and started creeping toward the cage.

“Oh, curse it!” Tim griped, grabbing the other collar stick and coming up behind me. “You said you’d kill this bloody thing!”

“And miss this entertainment?” Father bellowed. “I’ve never made a better decision in my life.”

Tim came up beside me, and we advanced toward the cage with our shoulders touching. If he wanted to be first, he could have easily sped ahead of me, but we were both near petrified. If Father hadn’t been watching, I think we might have crawled. Or run away entirely.

The outline of the creature’s form filled in, and his terrible proportions became clear. The chest was narrow, and his limbs were lithe and thin. Enormous pads with two-inch claws capped each foot, and his mouth was wide with teeth.

The jaguar sat up straight and towered over Tim and me. We both sweatily gripped our collar sticks. I looked to Tim, but he pretended not to notice, focusing only on the jaguar.

Its yellow eyes rolled from him to me, like moons migrating across the sky.

“Give it a try, Marlin,” Father called. “Tim’s froze up.”

That did it. With a thrust, Tim shot his collar stick between the iron bars of the cage. The jaguar leaped back and the carrier shifted, causing the bars to tilt with the swaying ceiling.

Tim swiped the noose and missed. The jaguar pressed the rod against the bottom of the cage with his paw, bit down on it, and with one powerful flick of his neck pulled it all the way into the cage, the noose out between the bars on the other side.

Tim’s collar stick landed in a pile of donkey droppings. His hands were red from where the slipping of the rod had burned him.

“Going to try it again?” Father laughed.

Tim tensed his lips and looked back at him. “Marlin should have to try first.”

I adjusted the rod in my hand and glanced at Tim, who was backing away from the cage toward the safety of the wall.

The jaguar and I locked eyes, and a low grumble emitted from his throat. I couldn’t tell if it was a growl or a purr.

I gingerly slid the noose end of the rod between the bars of the carrier, keeping it low and nonthreatening.

“That’s it, Marlin,” Father mumbled from behind. “Easy does it.”

Gradually, I lifted the collar end of the stick off the cage floor and pressed it gently against the side of the jaguar’s foreleg. I left it there for a moment, applying slight pressure, to let the jaguar become acquainted with the collar and show him there was nothing to fear.

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