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## 6 Beast from Air

There was no light left save that of the stars. When they had understood what made this ghostly noise and Percival was quiet again, Ralph and Simon picked him up unhandily and carried him to a shelter. Piggy hung about near for all his brave words, and the three bigger boys went together to the next shelter. They lay restlessly and noisily among the dry leaves, watching the patch of stars that was the opening toward the lagoon. Sometimes a littlun cried out from the other shelters and once a bigun spoke in the dark. Then they too fell asleep.

A sliver of moon rose over the horizon, hardly large enough to make a path of light even when it sat right down on the water; but there were other lights in the sky, that moved fast, winked, or went out, though not even a faint popping came down from the battle fought at ten miles' height. But a sign came down from the world of grown-ups, though at the time there was no child awake to read it. There was a sudden bright explosion and corkscrew trail across the sky; then darkness again and stars. There was a speck above the island, a figure dropping swiftly be-

neath a parachute, a figure that hung with dangling limbs. The changing winds of various altitudes took the figure where they would. Then, three miles up, the wind steadied and bore it in a descending curve round the sky and swept it in a great slant across the reef and the lagoon toward the mountain. The figure fell and crumpled among the blue flowers of the mountain-side, but now there was a gentle breeze at this height too and the parachute flopped and banged and pulled. So the figure, with feet that dragged behind it, slid up the mountain. Yard by yard, puff by puff, the breeze hauled the figure through the blue flowers, over the boulders and red stones, till it lay huddled among the shattered rocks of the mountain-top. Here the breeze was fitful and allowed the strings of the parachute to tangle and festoon; and the figure sat, its helmeted head between its knees, held by a complication of lines. When the breeze blew, the lines would strain taut and some accident of this pull lifted the head and chest upright so that the figure seemed to peer across the brow of the mountain. Then, each time the wind dropped, the lines would slacken and the figure bow forward again, sinking its head between its knees. So as the stars moved across the sky, the figure sat on the mountain-top and bowed and sank and bowed again.

In the darkness of early morning there were noises by a rock a little way down the side of the mountain. Two boys rolled out a pile of brushwood and dead leaves, two dim shadows talking sleepily to each other. They were the twins, on duty at the fire. In theory one should have been

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asleep and one on watch. But they could never manage to do things sensibly if that meant acting independently, and since staying awake all night was impossible, they had both gone to sleep. Now they approached the darker smudge that had been the signal fire, yawning, rubbing their eyes, treading with practised feet. When they reached it they stopped yawning, and one ran quickly back for brushwood and leaves.

The other knelt down.

“I believe it’s out.”

He fiddled with the sticks that were pushed into his hands.

“No.”

He lay down and put his lips close to the smudge and blew softly. His face appeared, lit redly. He stopped blowing for a moment.

“Sam—give us—”

“—tinder wood.”

Eric bent down and blew softly again till the patch was bright. Sam poked the piece of tinder wood into the hot spot, then a branch. The glow increased and the branch took fire. Sam piled on more branches.

“Don’t burn the lot,” said Eric, “you’re putting on too much.”

“Let’s warm up.”

“We’ll only have to fetch more wood.”

“I’m cold.”

“So’m I.”

“Besides, it’s—”

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“—dark. All right, then.”

Eric squatted back and watched Sam make up the fire. He built a little tent of dead wood and the fire was safely alight.

“That was near.”

“He’d have been—”

“Waxy.”

“Huh.”

For a few moments the twins watched the fire in silence. Then Eric sniggered.

“Wasn’t he waxy?”

“About the—”

“Fire and the pig.”

“Lucky he went for Jack, ’stead of us.”

“Huh. Remember old Waxy at school?”

“ ‘Boy—you-are-driving-me-slowly-insane!’ ”

The twins shared their identical laughter, then remembered the darkness and other things and glanced round uneasily. The flames, busy about the tent, drew their eyes back again. Eric watched the scurrying woodlice that were so frantically unable to avoid the flames, and thought of the first fire—just down there, on the steeper side of the mountain, where now was complete darkness. He did not like to remember it, and looked away at the mountain-top.

Warmth radiated now, and beat pleasantly on them. Sam amused him-

self by fitting branches into the fire as closely as possible. Eric spread out his hands, searching for the distance at which the heat was just bearable. Idly looking beyond the fire, he resettled the scattered rocks from their flat shadows into daylight contours. Just there was the big rock, and the three stones there, that split rock, and there beyond was a gap—just there—

“Sam.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

The flames were mastering the branches, the bark was curling and falling away, the wood exploding. The tent fell inwards and flung a wide circle of light over the mountain-top.

“Sam—”

“Huh?”

“Sam! Sam!”

Sam looked at Eric irritably. The intensity of Eric’s gaze made the direction in which he looked terrible, for Sam had his back to it. He scrambled round the fire, squatted by Eric, and looked to see. They became motionless, gripped in each other’s arms, four unwinking eyes aimed and two mouths open.

Far beneath them, the trees of the forest sighed, then roared. The hair on their foreheads fluttered and flames blew out sideways from the fire. Fifteen yards away from them came the plopping noise of fabric blown

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open.

Neither of the boys screamed but the grip of their arms tightened and their mouths grew peaked. For perhaps ten seconds they crouched like that while the flailing fire sent smoke and sparks and waves of inconstant light over the top of the mountain.

Then as though they had but one terrified mind between them they scrambled away over the rocks and fled.

Ralph was dreaming. He had fallen asleep after what seemed hours of tossing and turning noisily among the dry leaves. Even the sounds of nightmare from the other shelters no longer reached him, for he was back to where he came from, feeding the ponies with sugar over the garden wall. Then someone was shaking his arm, telling him that it was time for tea.

“Ralph! Wake up!”

The leaves were roaring like the sea.

“Ralph, wake up!”

“What’s the matter?”

“We saw—”

“—the beast—”

“—plain!”

“Who are you? The twins?”

“We saw the beast—”

“Quiet. Piggy!”

The leaves were roaring still. Piggy bumped into him and a twin grabbed him as he made for the oblong of paling stars.

“You can’t go out—it’s horrible!”

“Piggy—where are the spears?”

“I can hear the—”

“Quiet then. Lie still.”

They lay there listening, at first with doubt but then with terror to the description the twins breathed at them between bouts of extreme silence. Soon the darkness was full of claws, full of the awful unknown and menace. An interminable dawn faded the stars out, and at last light, sad and grey, filtered into the shelter. They began to stir though still the world outside the shelter was impossibly dangerous. The maze of the darkness sorted into near and far, and at the high point of the sky the cloudlets were warmed with color. A single sea bird flapped upwards with a hoarse cry that was echoed presently, and something squawked in the forest. Now streaks of cloud near the horizon began to glow rosily, and the feathery tops of the palms were green.

Ralph knelt in the entrance to the shelter and peered cautiously round him.

“Sam ’n Eric. Call them to an assembly. Quietly. Go on.”

The twins, holding tremulously to each other, dared the few yards to the next shelter and spread the dreadful news. Ralph stood up and

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walked for the sake of dignity, though with his back pricking, to the platform. Piggy and Simon followed him and the other boys came sneaking after.

Ralph took the conch from where it lay on the polished seat and held it to his lips; but then he hesitated and did not blow. He held the shell up instead and showed it to them and they understood.

The rays of the sun that were fanning upwards from below the horizon swung downwards to eye-level. Ralph looked for a moment at the growing slice of gold that lit them from the right hand and seemed to make speech possible. The circle of boys before him bristled with hunting spears.

He handed the conch to Eric, the nearest of the twins.

“We’ve seen the beast with our own eyes. No—we weren’t asleep—”

Sam took up the story. By custom now one conch did for both twins, for their substantial unity was recognized.

“It was furry. There was something moving behind its head—wings. The beast moved too—”

“That was awful. It kind of sat up—”

“The fire was bright—”

“We’d just made it up—”

“—more sticks on—”

“There were eyes—”

“Teeth—”

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“Claws—”

“We ran as fast as we could—”

“Bashed into things—”

“The beast followed us—”

“I saw it slinking behind the trees—”

“Nearly touched me—”

Ralph pointed fearfully at Eric’s face, which was striped with scars where the bushes had torn him.

“How did you do that?”

Eric felt his face.

“I’m all rough. Am I bleeding?”

The circle of boys shrank away in horror. Johnny, yawning still, burst into noisy tears and was slapped by Bill till he choked on them. The bright morning was full of threats and the circle began to change. It faced out, rather than in, and the spears of sharpened wood were like a fence. Jack called them back to the center.

“This’ll be a real hunt! Who’ll come?”

Ralph moved impatiently.

“These spears are made of wood. Don’t be silly.”

Jack sneered at him.

“Frightened?”

“ ’Course I’m frightened. Who wouldn’t be?”

He turned to the twins, yearning but hopeless.

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“I suppose you aren’t pulling our legs?”

The reply was too emphatic for anyone to doubt them.

Piggy took the conch.

“Couldn’t we—kind of—stay here? Maybe the beast won’t come near us.”

But for the sense of something watching them, Ralph would have shouted at him.

“Stay here? And be cramped into this bit of the island, always on the lookout? How should we get our food? And what about the fire?”

“Let’s be moving,” said Jack relentlessly, “we’re wasting time.”

“No we’re not. What about the littluns?”

“Sucks to the littluns!”

“Someone’s got to look after them.”

“Nobody has so far.”

“There was no need! Now there is. Piggy’ll look after them.”

“That’s right. Keep Piggy out of danger.”

“Have some sense. What can Piggy do with only one eye?”

The rest of the boys were looking from Jack to Ralph, curiously.

“And another thing. You can’t have an ordinary hunt because the beast doesn’t leave tracks. If it did you’d have seen them. For all we know, the beast may swing through the trees like what’s its name.”

They nodded.

“So we’ve got to think.”

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Piggy took off his damaged glasses and cleaned the remaining lens.

“How about us, Ralph?”

“You haven’t got the conch. Here.”

“I mean—how about us? Suppose the beast comes when you’re all away. I can’t see proper, and if I get scared—”

Jack broke in, contemptuously.

“You’re always scared.”

“I got the conch—”

“Conch! Conch!” shouted Jack. “We don’t need the conch any more. We know who ought to say things. What good did Simon do speaking, or Bill, or Walter? It’s time some people knew they’ve got to keep quiet and leave deciding things to the rest of us.”

Ralph could no longer ignore his speech. The blood was hot in his cheeks.

“You haven’t got the conch,” he said. “Sit down.”

Jack’s face went so white that the freckles showed as clear, brown flecks. He licked his lips and remained standing.

“This is a hunter’s job.”

The rest of the boys watched intently. Piggy, finding himself uncomfortably embroiled, slid the conch to Ralph’s knees and sat down. The silence grew oppressive and Piggy held his breath.

“This is more than a hunter’s job,” said Ralph at last, “because you can’t track the beast. And don’t you want to be rescued?”

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He turned to the assembly.

“Don’t you all want to be rescued?”

He looked back at Jack.

“I said before, the fire is the main thing. Now the fire must be out—”

The old exasperation saved him and gave him the energy to attack.

“Hasn’t anyone got any sense? We’ve got to relight that fire. You never thought of that, Jack, did you? Or don’t any of you want to be rescued?”

Yes, they wanted to be rescued, there was no doubt about that; and with a violent swing to Ralph’s side, the crisis passed. Piggy let out his breath with a gasp, reached for it again and failed. He lay against a log, his mouth gaping, blue shadows creeping round his lips. Nobody minded him.

“Now think, Jack. Is there anywhere on the island you haven’t been?”

Unwillingly Jack answered.

“There’s only—but of course! You remember? The tail-end part, where the rocks are all piled up. I’ve been near there. The rock makes a sort of bridge. There’s only one way up.”

“And the thing might live there.”

All the assembly talked at once.

“Quiet! All right. That’s where we’ll look. If the beast isn’t there we’ll go up the mountain and look; and light the fire.”

“Let’s go.”

“We’ll eat first. Then go.” Ralph paused. “We’d better take spears.”

After they had eaten, Ralph and the biguns set out along the beach. They left Piggy propped up on the platform. This day promised, like the others, to be a sunbath under a blue dome. The beach stretched away before them in a gentle curve till perspective drew it into one with the forest; for the day was not advanced enough to be obscured by the shifting veils of mirage. Under Ralph's direction, they picked up a careful way along the palm terrace, rather than dare the hot sand down by the water. He let Jack lead the way; and Jack trod with theatrical caution though they could have seen an enemy twenty yards away. Ralph walked in the rear, thankful to have escaped responsibility for a time.

Simon, walking in front of Ralph, felt a flicker of incredulity—a beast with claws that scratched, that sat on a mountain-top, that left no tracks and yet was not fast enough to catch Samneric. However Simon thought of the beast, there rose before his inward sight the picture of a human at once heroic and sick.

He sighed. Other people could stand up and speak to an assembly, apparently, without that dreadful feeling of the pressure of personality; could say what they would as though they were speaking to only one person. He stepped aside and looked back. Ralph was coming along, holding his spear over his shoulder. Diffidently, Simon allowed his pace to slacken until he was walking side by side with Ralph and looking up at him through the coarse black hair that now fell to his eyes. Ralph glanced sideways, smiled constrainedly as though he had forgotten that

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Simon had made a fool of himself, then looked away again at nothing. For a moment or two Simon was happy to be accepted and then he ceased to think about himself. When he bashed into a tree Ralph looked sideways impatiently and Robert sniggered. Simon reeled and a white spot on his forehead turned red and trickled. Ralph dismissed Simon and returned to his personal hell. They would reach the castle some time; and the chief would have to go forward.

Jack came trotting back.

“We’re in sight now.”

“All right. We’ll get as close as we can.”

He followed Jack toward the castle where the ground rose slightly. On their left was an impenetrable tangle of creepers and trees.

“Why couldn’t there be something in that?”

“Because you can see. Nothing goes in or out.”

“What about the castle then?”

“Look.”

Ralph parted the screen of grass and looked out. There were only a few more yards of stony ground and then the two sides of the island came almost together so that one expected a peak of headland. But instead of this a narrow ledge of rock, a few yards wide and perhaps fifteen long, continued the island out into the sea. There lay another of those pieces of pink squareness that underlay the structure of the island. This side of the castle, perhaps a hundred feet high, was the pink bastion they had

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seen from the mountain-top. The rock of the cliff was split and the top littered with great lumps that seemed to totter.

Behind Ralph the tall grass had filled with silent hunters. Ralph looked at Jack.

“You’re a hunter.”

Jack went red.

“I know. All right.”

Something deep in Ralph spoke for him.

“I’m chief. I’ll go. Don’t argue.”

He turned to the others.

“You. Hide here. Wait for me.”

He found his voice tended either to disappear or to come out too loud. He looked at Jack.

“Do you—think?”

Jack muttered.

“I’ve been all over. It must be here.”

“I see.”

Simon mumbled confusedly: “I don’t believe in the beast.”

Ralph answered him politely, as if agreeing about the weather.

“No. I suppose not.”

His mouth was tight and pale. He put back his hair very slowly.

“Well. So long.”

He forced his feet to move until they had carried him out on to the neck

of land.

He was surrounded on all sides by chasms of empty air. There was nowhere to hide, even if one did not have to go on. He paused on the narrow neck and looked down. Soon, in a matter of centuries, the sea would make an island of the castle. On the right hand was the lagoon, troubled by the open sea; and on the left— Ralph shuddered. The lagoon had protected them from the Pacific: and for some reason only Jack had gone right down to the water on the other side. Now he saw the landsman's view of the swell and it seemed like the breathing of some stupendous creature. Slowly the waters sank among the rocks, revealing pink tables of granite, strange growths of coral, polyp, and weed. Down, down, the waters went, whispering like the wind among the heads of the forest. There was one flat rock there, spread like a table, and the waters sucking down on the four weedy sides made them seem like cliffs. Then the sleeping leviathan breathed out, the waters rose, the weed streamed, and the water boiled over the table rock with a roar. There was no sense of the passage of waves; only this minute-long fall and rise and fall.

Ralph turned away to the red cliff. They were waiting behind him in the long grass, waiting to see what he would do. He noticed that the sweat in his palm was cool now; realized with surprise that he did not really expect to meet any beast and didn't know what he would do about it if he did.

He saw that he could climb the cliff but this was not necessary. The

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squareness of the rock allowed a sort of plinth round it, so that to the right, over the lagoon, one could inch along a ledge and turn the corner out of sight. It was easy going, and soon he was peering round the rock.

Nothing but what you might expect: pink, tumbled boulders with guano layered on them like icing; and a steep slope up to the shattered rocks that crowned the bastion.

A sound behind him made him turn. Jack was edging along the ledge.

“Couldn’t let you do it on your own.”

Ralph said nothing. He led the way over the rocks, inspected a sort of half-cave that held nothing more terrible than a clutch of rotten eggs, and at last sat down, looking round him and tapping the rock with the butt of his spear.

Jack was excited.

“What a place for a fort!”

A column of spray wetted them.

“No fresh water.”

“What’s that then?”

There was indeed a long green smudge half-way up the rock. They climbed up and tasted the trickle of water.

“You could keep a coconut shell there, filling all the time.”

“Not me. This is a rotten place.”

Side by side they scaled the last height to where the diminishing pile was crowned by the last broken rock. Jack struck the near one with his

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fist and it grated slightly.

“Do you remember—?”

Consciousness of the bad times in between came to them both. Jack talked quickly.

“Shove a palm trunk under that and if an enemy came— look!”

A hundred feet below them was the narrow causeway, then the stony ground, then the grass dotted with heads, and behind that the forest.

“One heave,” cried Jack, exulting, “and—wheee—!”

He made a sweeping movement with his hand. Ralph looked toward the mountain.

“What’s the matter?”

Ralph turned.

“Why?”

“You were looking—I don’t know why.”

“There’s no signal now. Nothing to show.”

“You’re nuts on the signal.”

The taut blue horizon encircled them, broken only by the mountain-top.

“That’s all we’ve got.”

He leaned his spear against the rocking stone and pushed back two handfuls of hair.

“We’ll have to go back and climb the mountain. That’s where they saw the beast.”

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“The beast won’t be there.”

“What else can we do?”

The others, waiting in the grass, saw Jack and Ralph unharmed and broke cover into the sunlight. They forgot the beast in the excitement of exploration. They swarmed across the bridge and soon were climbing and shouting. Ralph stood now, one hand against an enormous red block, a block large as a mill wheel that had been split off and hung, tottering. Somberly he watched the mountain. He clenched his fist and beat hammer-wise on the red wall at his right. His lips were tightly compressed and his eyes yearned beneath the fringe of hair.

“Smoke.”

He sucked his bruised fist.

“Jack! Come on.”

But Jack was not there. A knot of boys, making a great noise that he had not noticed, were heaving and pushing at a rock. As he turned, the base cracked and the whole mass toppled into the sea so that a thunderous plume of spray leapt half-way up the cliff.

“Stop it! Stop it!”

His voice struck a silence among them.

“Smoke.”

A strange thing happened in his head. Something flittered there in front of his mind like a bat’s wing, obscuring his idea.

“Smoke.”

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At once the ideas were back, and the anger.

“We want smoke. And you go wasting your time. You roll rocks.”

Roger shouted.

“We’ve got plenty of time!”

Ralph shook his head.

“We’ll go to the mountain.”

The clamor broke out. Some of the boys wanted to go back to the beach. Some wanted to roll more rocks. The sun was bright and danger had faded with the darkness.

“Jack. The beast might be on the other side. You can lead again. You’ve been.”

“We could go by the shore. There’s fruit.”

Bill came up to Ralph.

“Why can’t we stay here for a bit?”

“That’s right.”

“Let’s have a fort.”

“There’s no food here,” said Ralph, “and no shelter. Not much fresh water.”

“This would make a wizard fort.”

“We can roll rocks—”

“Right onto the bridge—”

“I say we’ll go on!” shouted Ralph furiously. “We’ve got to make certain. We’ll go now.”

“Let’s stay here—”

“Back to the shelter—”

“I’m tired—”

“No!”

Ralph struck the skin off his knuckles. They did not seem to hurt.

“I’m chief. We’ve got to make certain. Can’t you see the mountain? There’s no signal showing. There may be a ship out there. Are you all off your rockers?”

Mutinously, the boys fell silent or muttering.

Jack led the way down the rock and across the bridge.

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