

Four Months After the Shipwreck

The lapping waves were cool against Crusoe's skin as he swam slowly out from the shore of the island. Above him the sun beat down with the force of something physical. The unremitting heat and glare were punishing. Usually, in the thick jungle that covered half the island or in the dark cave where he lived, he could escape its fierce attention, but here, out in the shallows around the shoreline, he felt like an ant beneath a magnifying glass. Every few minutes he had to dive beneath the water, just to cool himself down.

He could taste salt on his lips - partly from his own evaporated sweat but also from the seawater. He was thirsty already - physical exercise in that heat and the heavy humidity was instantly tiring - but he knew that drinking the sea water wouldn't help. During the long voyage out from England the sailors on the Rigel had warned him never to try and cure thirst by drinking water from the sea. The salt made a body need to urinate, and a person would end up getting rid of more water than they drank. In the tropics that could prove quickly fatal.

It was difficult to swim properly with the burden he was carrying. He could only really manage to propel himself through the water with one arm, while the other held it tightly to his side. It had taken him weeks of failed attempts to get it right, and he was determined to try it out. Losing it now would be a tragedy.

To his right he could see the end of the rocky promontory that characterized this part of the coastline. That meant he was near to where he was aiming. He dipped his head beneath the blessedly cool water again, but this time he glanced downwards, keeping his eyes open. The ocean was as clear as glass. Small fish with vividly-colored stripes swam a few feet below the surface. They seemed to randomly change direction every now and then but each one managed to always end up heading in the same direction as the others thanks to some invisible form of communication between them. As his shadow fell across them, however, however, they scattered away from each other for a few seconds before agreeing on a new direction.

Below the fish he could see the ocean floor, dappled with shifting patterns as the light from the sun passed through the waves.

Apart from rocks, sand and the occasional sea shell the size of his head, Crusoe could see nothing. He hadn't quite got to where he was going yet.

Somewhere around here was the wreck of the Rigel, the ship that had bought him to the island. The sandy shore behind him, where he had left his shirt and breeches, had been the location where things from the ship had been deposited by the tide: scraps of wood,

ropes, empty bottles and other things that he had scavenged over the course of months and for which he had managed to find uses. No bodies, though - living or dead. As far as he knew he was the only person from the ship to have made it to the island.

He could feel the heat of the sun burning his scalp through the hair plastered across it - much longer and more unkempt now than it had been back on the ship. He dived beneath the surface again to escape the burning rays. He kept his bundle tight against his side as his gaze tried to puzzle its way through the shifting patterns of light cast on the sand and rocks below.

Something moved across the bottom, catching his attention. He followed it with his eyes for a few seconds before seeing that it was a crab half-hidden inside a spiral seashell shield, scuttling sideways with its claws raised. Crabs were good to eat, but there were easier ways of catching them. This expedition had a different aim.

The crab suddenly vanished into a patch of shadow, and it took Crusoe a while to realize that it had taken refuge beneath a long, straight piece of wood. His heart started to beat faster as he discovered there were several other pieces scattered around. They were black, and partly-encrusted with barnacles. For a second he felt his spirits sink as he decided they were just tree trunks washed away from the shore, but they rose again as he understood the pieces were too regular for that. No, he thought with growing excitement, they were broken sections of a ship's mast.

What were the chances that there was more than one shipwreck in this harbour?

He stopped swimming and turned to face the shore, trying to fix in his mind. If he directed his attention to the top of the highest hill he could see then the furthest thing he could make out to his left without shifting his gaze was the end of the rocky promontory and the furthest thing he could make out to his right was a particularly tall tree that was leaning at an angle out over the ocean. That should be enough for him to find his way back here again and pinpoint the right spot.

He took the object he had been carrying from beneath his arm and held it out in front of him, checking to make sure it was still intact. It had started out as the guts of a small island deer that he had killed for food, but he had separated the stomach from the intestines and washed them both carefully, inside and out. The stomach he had sewn carefully shut, apart from a small slit through which he had blown until it was inflated. He'd sealed the slit shut, firstly with a wooden peg he had carved and secondly with gummy sap from the trunk of one of the island's trees which dried to form a waterproof seal. The length of intestine he had carefully stretched and filled with foot-long sections of thin branches which he had carefully

split apart and from which he had scraped the soft inside wood before tying the curved bits of bark back together again, leaving rough, hollow tubes. He had curled the intestine-covered wood tube up so he could carry it while swimming, but now he uncurled it again, careful not to get any water inside. One end was fastened to the sap-covered stitches on the inflated stomach. The other end he put into his mouth.

He took an experimental breath. He'd tried this back on land, but this was the real test. Would it work?

Air whistled in through the open end of the intestines, which was attached to the inflated stomach, then through the segmented tube that floated on the water and into his mouth. It tasted... unpleasant... but it was holding.

He sucked a few more deep breaths, just to make sure the intestines didn't rupture, and then he dived beneath the surface.

Above him, the inflated deer stomach stayed floating on the waves, keeping the far end of the tube clear of the water. His teeth clamped on the intestine-covered end of the last wooden tube. It didn't collapse under the pressure, and air kept flowing through it.

Triumph filled him, almost as buoyant as the air.

Down below him he could see more of the wreck now: curved sections of hull, and wooden barrels half-buried in the sand. He propelled himself deeper and deeper. Multicolored fish moved out of his way like a curtain continually parting in front of him.

He didn't even know what he was doing there. He didn't expect there to be anything left to salvage, and the last thing he wanted to do was to find the remains of any of the crew - or, God forbid, his father. It was more a case of feeling that he had unfinished business, that he had to see the wreckage for himself before he could move on. The shipwreck was a nightmare stuck in his mind, one that wouldn't go away until he did something to exorcise it.

He was still breathing easily through the tube as he reached the sandy ocean floor. Enough light penetrated down there from the surface that he could see pieces of broken wood scattered until they vanished into a blue-green haze. Just on the edge of visibility he thought he could make out the curved ribs of the Rigel's hull, upended so that the keel faced upwards. The whole thing looked like the breastbone of an enormous chicken carcass.

Cruse felt his heart unexpectedly lurch. This was where he had lived for months. This was where his father had died. This was where his life had changed forever.

Something glittered in the sunlight that caressed the ocean floor. He swam closer, curious as to what it was. Probably just a piece of bottle glass. It was lying half-buried in the

sand just beside what had to have been one of the Rigel's deck cargo hatches: a slab of half-rotted timbers fastened together by now-rusty iron nails.

It was a ring. A gold ring, uncorrupted by the sea. Set into the thick band was a white stone incised with a letter W.

He tried to swallow, and couldn't. There was a lump of grief in his throat that made it impossible. This was his father's ring. He recognized it. How often had he seen it on his father's left hand, the gold of the band contrasting with the callouses on his skin? The incised W sigil was red, he knew, with a green shadow behind it, although the play of light underwater made that impossible to see. Nobody else on the Rigel had possessed a ring like that.

Breathing heavily, on the verge of sobbing but knowing that he might choke if he did that, Crusoe reached out for the ring.

Just before his fingers closed on it, something uncoiled from the shadows beneath the hatch and wrapped itself around his arm...