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Leaves

by Ian Flynn

Howard attributed it to shock. The memories came back unbidden and at the same time evaded concentration. There was a distant rumble that couldn't be identified, but that was innately threatening. The growing whine as the engines died. The sense of tumbling vertigo that still made his heart race and his stomach turn even when he sat still.

There had been water. Terribly dark water. Like drowning in ink. Like the ocean wanted to devour him.

He couldn't remember when he reached the beach or how. He didn't remember the others finding him, or him finding them. They were huddled together at the edge of the tree line; just out of reach of the ravenous sea that pawed at them, but still able to see the explosion of stars above them.

He knew their names, but he didn't remember saying a word. He felt they were just as shaken – broken – as he was, but what was that based off of? Shock. It had to be shock. And that line of logic was more stable and welcoming than the solid earth under him.

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Morning came, and with it the dawning realization of what had happened. Howard did not move much. It was easier to watch the others and let them live out his life for him. Terrance began to theorize aloud what had happened. Stacy shrieked and cried at the water to bring back her baby. The surf was indifferent. Franklin stumbled away and began to weep. Brittany had said many things, tried to organize and rally them, then disappeared into the threadbare jungle.

Shock. That was why he didn't react. That's why he didn't move. It was a reasonable explanation. Eventually Terrance left to find Brittany. Franklin had gone quiet, curled in a fetal position. Stacy had long ago gone hoarse and rubber-legged in the sand and continued to threaten the ocean. The ocean had eaten their plane and the hundred or more souls aboard. It was satisfied for now.

Howard got up at some point and followed the sound of conversation and the smell of smoke. Brittany and Terrance were clearing a space in the jungle. She had made a fire and they were bending trees to make shelter. Howard must have agreed to look for fresh water because he found himself wandering towards the small, rocky mountain. When did any of that happen? Must've been the shock.

He climbed the black rocks. They were smooth on the surface but tucked their teeth out of sight. He couldn't find a grip without being bitten for it, and it helped remind

him what he was doing. Eventually the nips became the sharp metronome for the climb and he was very confused when he ran out of wall to climb. He was at the peak and the island was laid before him.

There was not much to see. The mountain was an indignant hill that fell off into the ocean where it fought with the sea foam like dogs. The jungle rolled out before Howard for less than a mile with a healthy corona of sand. He could see where Brittany and Terrance had made the trees bow to them.

The wind came by to remind him of the salt's sting and the rocks' slipperiness. Howard made his way down the opposite face until his foot failed to find any purchase.

Now he was very aware.

The rocks were biting into his fingers.

He had nowhere to go.

He would fall.

He would break.

There would be nothing to do about it.

He went to the left. To more rocks.

He let them bite him. The teeth would hold him.

There was footing. There was a way down. And he made his way down the rocks, the burn from his fingers becoming harder and harder to ignore. He descended until he found the mouth of the cave. From its edge the fall didn't look like it would've been so bad.

Inside was a treasure trove. The rain ran down the smooth rocks to hide inside the cave's maw, cool and shaded from the thirsty sun. Thick, leafy ears of some odd vegetation hung from the rocks, as if every corner of the cave was lazily razzing him.

The last thing he had eaten had been the lackluster slip of leather in gravy the flight attendant had called a "steak" with a smile designed to acknowledge the lie and keep you from challenging it.

He didn't blame her. She was dead. He had water and appetizing leaves. The bloody fingers were annoying, but not threatening. He was alive on a tiny jungle paradise.

Howard began to laugh. It was merry. Then it was cathartic. At some point it had become hysterical, and the cave saw fit to echo it for everyone's benefit. It was hard to suppress the giggles when Terrance and Brittany found him.

He said it was because of the shock. He said it was because he had found their salvation.

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Brittany was a survivalist. She was like that guy on the T.V. who ate all the nasty stuff, but she made it look less ridiculous. She had insisted they boil the water and to ration the fat leaves Howard had found. She had them weave and lace the palm fronds around the bent trees. By sundown they had a green domed shelter, clean water, and a meal. Howard remembered maybe half of this happening, but was no less impressed.

Terrance hadn't shut up about what might have happened.

Stacy had helped, whimpering and cursing softly to herself.

They had to drag Franklin over. He had hardly touched dinner.

Brittany asked Howard about the rocky hill. Whatever he said must have satisfied her, because she started talking about making a beacon and to flag rescuers in with smoke. Terrance couldn't wait to be validated. Stacy told him to shut up with many four letter words and what must have been racial slurs. Howard hadn't heard half of those words, and his father had been in the navy. Stacy apologized a short time later.

It was okay. The ocean ate her baby.

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The leaves were the highlight of the island. They snapped like a crisp apple, but chewed like a banana. They were fuzzy like a peach, but the skin melted like cotton candy. It was tasteless at first, but had a lingering sweetness that invited you back for more. Brittany couldn't identify it, and she cautioned eating too much without cooking it. Howard saw her sneak a bit herself. The rest of them were less stealthy about it.

The signal pyre was built and burning by the end of the day. The stones bit at them as they stacked them, but they were compliant when used for building. There was plenty of greenery for burning. But not the cave-leaves. Those were for eating. Just having one to chew on idly made the day brighter, the wind gentler, and the world generally better.

Even Franklin was moving now. Not talking, but he was helping. Howard blamed it on that darn ol' shock.

That night there was laughter. The fire seemed warmer, and their new home was comforting. Howard was noticing things. Like how bright Brittany's eyes were. How thick Stacy's hair was. How dark and smooth Terrence's skin was. How Franklin resembled a shark in profile.

Howard noticed the cuts on his fingers had already scabbed over. Thick scabs, too. Almost like calluses. They didn't hurt or feel unnatural, and they'd surely be rescued in a couple of days, so he wasn't worried. They had the leaves, they had water, and the fire. They had each other. They were fine.

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It might have been a week. Howard hadn't had the mind to keep track. That wasn't the shock. That was because he had to make sure his stash of leaves remained guarded. The cave was running out. There had been shouting. Everyone shouting except for Franklin, but that must have meant he had his own stash somewhere. With his long face and dark, little eyes he looked just like a shark. His hair seemed to be falling out too. Served him right for hoarding leaves.

Howard didn't want to fight. He wasn't the fighting type. But his callous-scabs had taken his hands now and they felt like tree bark. Bark from an *old* tree. He could slap someone, palm-flat, and do some damage.

Maybe not to Terrance. His skin looked like the rocks of the smoke-mountain. But Brittany's eyes would shatter like glass. They looked like big green windows.

Stacy was the worst. She said her hair was too long and thick. It had always been to her knees, Howard was sure of that. She said there was something in the leaves. She was crazy. The ocean ate her baby. That would've driven Howard crazy too. All he had was a mild case of shock. And very thick hands. And his leaves. He would be fine.

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Brittany went to live in the cave. She would come to see them at night but not say anything because nobody was talking to anyone anymore. She couldn't close her eyes anymore. They were glittering domes on each side of her head. The sun was too bright

for her. She and Terrance seemed to hate each other, but Terrance was saying less lately. Moving less. Howard had mistook him for a pile of the smoke-mountain's rocks earlier that day.

Only it was just the "mountain" now. Howard found the signal toppled. Stacy had said he'd done it, but he would've remembered that. She was just mad that she had run out of leaves. Or maybe if she didn't spend every waking hour cutting her hair off she wouldn't be so cranky. You could see it grow back as she cut it. Why did she bother?

Howard had never felt better. He was like one of those tree-people warriors in that movie about the little guys and their evil ring. He could still feel himself, warm and protected under his bark, so it was okay. His hands reminded him of gloves he had Halloween years back. Long and hooked. Like a predatory animal.

He thought he and Franklin should hang out since Franklin was a shark-man. He couldn't hide the teeth pointing out between his lips, and you could see the gills move when he breathed. Franklin didn't talk to anyone, though. And then one night he walked out into the ocean and disappeared.

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There were no more leaves. The water was low, but he didn't mind. Howard felt great. It was like the fire was burning inside him. That had gone out during that one storm that one time. Terrence didn't seem to mind. He hadn't moved in days. Howard knocked on his head and heard a hollow ring. That was funny as hell, man.

Brittany was no fun either. She lived in what was left of the water. She had gone pale and wrinkly. What was left of her head was still very pretty, like a geode. The flap that might have been her mouth was a little creepy, though.

Stacy had long since abandoned them. He saw her shuffling around the edges of the island, keeping her distance. She was like a big, headless rat. Howard was sure she had the last of the leaves tucked into her hair somewhere, like some kind of freakish chipmunk.

And, dammit, he was hungry. If she didn't have any leaves, though, that was okay.

He had some wicked claws.