On the Island: Chapters 1-2

William Golding sets his novel Lord of the Flies at a time when Europe is in the midst of nuclear destruction. A group of boys, being evacuated from England to Australia, crash lands on a tropical island. No adults survive the crash, and the novel is the story of the boys' descent into chaos, disorder, and evil.

As the story opens, two boys emerge from the wreckage of a plane. The boys, Ralph and Piggy, begin exploring the island in hopes of finding other survivors. They find a conch shell, and Piggy instructs Ralph how to blow on it. When the other boys hear the conch, they gather. The last boys to appear are the choirboys, led by Jack Merridew. Once assembled, the boys decide they need a chief and elect Ralph. Ralph decides that the choir will remain intact under the leadership of Jack, who says they will be hunters.

Jack, Ralph, and Simon go to explore the island and find a pig trapped in vines. Jack draws his knife, but is unable to actually kill the pig. They vow, however, to kill the pig the next time. When the three return, they hold a meeting. The conch becomes a symbol of authority: whoever has the conch has the right to speak. Jack and Ralph explain to the others what they have found. Jack continues his preoccupation with his knife. The boy with the clearest understanding of their situation is Piggy. He tells them they are on an island, that no one knows where they are, and that they are likely to be on the island for a very long time without adults. Ralph replies, "This is our island. It's a good island. Until the grownups come to fetch us we'll have fun." One of the "littluns," the group of youngest boys, says that he is afraid of the "beastie." The "biguns" try to dissuade him, saying there are no beasties on the island. However, it is at this moment that Jack asserts himself against Ralph, saying that if there were a beastie, he would kill it.

Discussion returns to the possibility of rescue. Ralph says that rescue depends on making a fire so that ships at sea could see the smoke. The boys get overly excited, with Jack as the ringleader, and all but Piggy and Ralph rush off to the top of the mountain to build a fire. They forget about the conch and the system of rules they have just made. At the top of the mountain, Ralph uses Piggy's glasses to light the fire. They are careless and set fire to the mountain. Piggy accuses them of "acting like kids." He reminds the older boys of their responsibility to the younger boys. At this moment they realize that one of the littluns is missing.

The Beast: Chapters 3-11

The story resumes days later with Simon and Ralph trying to build shelters on the shore. Jack is away hunting. When he returns, there is antagonism between Ralph and Jack. Jack is beginning to forget about rescue and is growing tired of the responsibility of keeping the fire going, a task
for which he has volunteered his choir. The growing separation between the boys is marked by Ralph’s insistence on the importance of shelter and Jack’s on the hunting of meat.

In the next chapter, Golding describes the rhythm of life on the island. By this point, Jack has begun to paint his face with mud and charcoal when he hunts. At a crucial moment, the fire goes out, just as Ralph spots a ship in the distance. In the midst of Ralph’s distress, the hunters return with a dead pig. In the ensuing melee, one of the lenses in Piggy’s glasses gets broken.

Ralph calls an assembly in order to reassert the rules. The littluns bring up their fear of the beastie yet again, saying that it comes from the sea. Simon tries to suggest that the only beast on the island is in themselves; however, no one listens. Ralph once again calls for the rules. Jack, however, plays to the fear of the boys, and says, “Bollocks to the rules! We’re strong—we hunt! If there’s a beast, we’ll hunt it down! We close in and beat and beat and beat—!” The meeting ends in chaos. Ralph, discouraged, talks with Piggy and Simon about their need for adults. “If only they could get a message to us. . . . If only they could send us something grownup . . . a sign or something.”

The sign that appears, however, comes when all the boys are asleep. High overhead rages an air battle and a dead parachutist falls to the island. When the boys hear the sound of the parachute, they are sure it is the beast. Jack, Ralph, and Simon go in search. Climbing to the top of the mountain, they see “a creature that bulged.” They do not recognize the figure as a dead parachutist, tangled in his ropes, and swaying in the wind.

When the boys return to the littluns and Piggy at the shelters, Jack calls an assembly. He calls Ralph a coward and urges the boys to vote against Ralph. They will not, and Jack leaves. Ralph tries to reorganize the group, but notices that gradually most of the biguns sneak off after Jack. The scene shifts to Jack, talking to his hunters. They go off on a hunt in which they kill a sow, gruesomely and cruelly. They cut off the pig’s head and mount it on a stick in sacrifice to the beast. Meanwhile, Simon wanders into the woods in search of the beast. He finds the head, now called in the text “The Lord of the Flies.” Simon feels a seizure coming on as he hallucinates a conversation with the head:

Simon’s head was tilted slightly up. His eyes could not break away and the Lord of the Flies hung in space before him.

“What are you doing out here all alone? Aren’t you afraid of me?”
Simon shook.

“There isn’t anyone to help you. Only me. And I’m the Beast.”
Simon’s mouth labored, brought forth audible words.

“Pig’s head on a stick.”

“Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!” said the head. For a moment or two the forest and all the other dimly appreciated places echoed with the parody of laughter. “You knew didn’t you? I’m part of you? Close, close, close! I’m the reason why it’s no go? Why things are what they are?”

Simon falls into unconsciousness. When he awakens, he finds the decomposed body of the parachutist, and realizes that this is what the boys think is the beast. He gently frees the dead man from his ropes.

Back at the shelters, Ralph and Piggy are the only ones left. The two go to see Jack and the hunters, and they find a big party. At the height of the party, a storm breaks and Simon arrives to tell them that there is no beast. In a frenzy, they kill Simon. Later, Ralph, Piggy, Sam, and Eric are alone on the beach. All the boys agree that they left the dance early and that they did not see anything. The four boys try to keep the fire going, but they cannot. Jack’s hunters attack the boys and steal Piggy’s glasses so that they have the power of fire. Enraged, Ralph and Piggy go to retrieve the glasses. There is a fight, and Roger, the most vicious of the hunters, launches a rock at Piggy, knocking the conch from his hands, and sending him some forty feet to the rocks in the sea below.
The scene shifts to Ralph, alone, hiding from the rest of the boys who are hunting him. The language used to describe the boys has shifted: they are now "savages," and "the tribe." Ralph is utterly alone, trying to plan his own survival. He finds the Lord of the Flies, and hits the skull off the stick. Ralph sees Sam and Eric serving as lookouts for the tribe and approaches them carefully. They warn him off, saying that they've been forced to participate with the hunters. When Ralph asks what the tribe plans on doing when they capture him, the twins will only talk about Roger's ferocity. They state obliquely, "Roger sharpened a stick at both ends."

Ralph tells the twins where he will hide; but soon the twins are forced to reveal this location and Ralph is cornered. However, the tribe has once again set the island on fire, and Ralph is able to creep away under the cover of smoke. Back on the beach, Ralph finds himself once again pursued. At the moment that the savages are about to capture him, an adult naval officer appears. Suddenly, with rescue at hand, the savages once again become little boys and they begin to cry. The officer cannot seem to understand what has happened on the island. "Fun and games," he says, unconsciously echoing Ralph's words from the opening chapter. Ralph breaks down and sobs, mourning Simon and mourning Piggy. In the final line of the book, Golding reminds the reader that although adults have arrived, the rescue is a faulty one. The officer looks out to sea at his "trim cruiser in the distance." The world, after all, is still at war.