

A struggle for survival in a savage new world...

JAMES AXLER

DEATH LANDS

Separation



GOLD EAGLE 62576

HERRING

She was black

In the days before the nukocaust, that had made a difference. Being in this community had put her back in touch with that lost part of herself, and that was good. But was it that great when it came to making her doubt J.B.? Besides the relationship they had built, there were more pressing issues: the companions had been through so much together, formed bonds of loyalty forged in fire. There were things that went deeper than age, race and sex: the knowledge that they would pull together without it even being spoken of or thought about.

And she was doubting that, denying it? There was a rift between her and the companions. But perhaps that was a good thing. It made her examine herself, her priorities and loyalties.

In the end, the ideals of the island were pitched against pragmatism and experience of reality in the world outside.

Some wanted nothing less than war. But who would make the sides in a war?

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Most people are *on* the world, not in it—
have no conscious sympathy or relationship
to anything about them—undiffused,
separate, and rigidly alone like marbles
of polished stone, touching but separate.

—John Muir,
1838–1912

THE DEATHLANDS SAGA

This world is their legacy, a world born in the violent nuclear spasm of 2001 that was the bitter outcome of a struggle for global dominance.

There is no real escape from this shockscape where life always hangs in the balance, vulnerable to newly demonic nature, barbarism, lawlessness.

But they are the warrior survivalists, and they endure—in the way of the lion, the hawk and the tiger, true to nature's heart despite its ruination.

Ryan Cawdor: The privileged son of an East Coast baron. Acquainted with betrayal from a tender age, he is a master of the hard realities.

Krysty Wroth: Harmony ville's own Titian-haired beauty, a woman with the strength of tempered steel. Her premonitions and Gaia powers have been fostered by her Mother Sonja.

J. B. Dix, the Armorer: Weapons master and Ryan's close ally, he, too, honed his skills traversing the Deathlands with the legendary Trader.

Doctor Theophilus Tanner: Torn from his family and a gentler life in 1896, Doc has been thrown into a future he couldn't have imagined.

Dr. Mildred Wyeth: Her father was killed by the Ku Klux Klan, but her fate is not much lighter. Restored from predark cryogenic suspension, she brings twentieth-century healing skills to a nightmare.

Jak Lauren: A true child of the wastelands, reared on adversity, loss and danger, the albino teenager is a fierce fighter and loyal friend.

Dean Cawdor: Ryan's young son by Sharona accepts the only world he knows, and yet he is the seedling bearing the promise of tomorrow.

In a world where all was lost, they are humanity's last hope....

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Chapter One

Black clouds of pain and despair washed over Dean as he began to surface from the mat-trans jump. Like being lost in a sea of black, brackish water that infested every pore, clogging him with filth and filling his mouth and lungs, it was a complete isolation and a slow death. Every muscle flooding with lactic acid, making any movement painful and difficult beyond imagining, he began to stir, swimming upward to try to strike the surface. There was a patina of light that washed across the thin skin far above, separating the air from the water. He moved toward the light with a determination born of the will to live.

He struck the surface, emerging from the icy thickness below into the weak light of the air above, gasping as the oxygen hit his lungs, the viscous liquid falling away from his skin, dripping off his hair.

That moment between unconscious sleep and awakening, that fraction of a second that seemed to move on into an eternity...that was the time when the hallucinations came, the time when the dreams and nightmares at the back of his brain were called forth to haunt him once more.

It was always this way for Dean Cawdor and, as he floated on the surface of the sea of consciousness, breaking for land, he drifted back to the world of his deepest fears and insecurities, the things that he dare not admit into his conscious mind.

Although not always the same in every respect, often it was always the same in essence. A young Dean—still the same strong, resilient youth, but still a boy—standing before his mother as she told him of his father, the son of a baron, not the man who was her husband and the powerful baron of his own ville. He could still see her face clearly. Sharona—Rona to him—had once been a beautiful woman. But that was something that lay in her past. She had been ravaged by sickness. Where once she had been slim and graceful, with feminine curves that had drawn the eye of Ryan Cawdor, she was thin and gaunt, her flesh nonexistent with seemingly only skin to cover her skeletal frame. Her once-attractive cheekbones were skull-like, her eyes sunken back into their sockets, resembling burning orbs in which the fire was slowly dimming. Her lank hair hung like hanks of rope tied into bunches to be pulled back from her forehead to stop irritating skin that was beyond pale. Ghostly and gray, her once-smooth complexion had broken out with sores in patches around her hairline and her bloodless lips. Her clothes hung like rags from her body.

“But why can’t I stay with you until you buy the farm—why can’t I be with you?” he asked, hearing himself as he was before his voice broke, the high pitch sounding alien to his own ears.

“Because it isn’t safe,” she answered simply. “When I die you’ll be all alone. I’ve taught you how to survive, but a little boy alone in the Deathlands doesn’t have much of a chance. Your future lies with your father.”

“If he’s so great, where’s he been when we both needed him?” Dean asked with disgust.

Sharona’s ravaged mouth twisted into a wry smile. “He doesn’t know about you.”

Even though there was a part of him that knew it was only a half memory, maybe a hallucination as the result of the mat-trans jump, he still felt that same heart-tearing burst of emotions he’d felt when he had been separated from her.

It had happened exactly like that, and it didn’t happen the same way every time the memory haunted his dreams, but it was still the same in essence. A woman came out of the shadows and took him by the hand, gently but firmly guiding him away from his mother, who stood and watched. As he was pulled farther away from Sharona, he could see that she was no longer the tall, graceful figure that

she had once been: she was bowed over by her illness, the sudden stabs of light illuminating the paleness of her face and hands, reflecting the moonlight with an equal deathly glow. Walking backward, he could feel the pull taking him away from his mother, could see her recede into the background, her eyes seeming to follow him, intense even as the distance between them increased.

And then the scenes changed, rapidly passing in front of his eyes. He was reunited with his father who had saved his life. He was in the Nicolas Brody school, then kidnapped, forced to fight for his very life in the ruins of Las Vegas as part of a gladiatorial contest for the entertainment of warring barons. He'd been rescued by his father and the group that had become his friends and family.

Since he had joined the companions, he had forged strong bonds with all of them, particularly with Ryan, his father. But there was something within him that was still empty, still missing. Sharona had taught him to survive. She was always with him; he could never forget. Yet time had pushed her to the back of his mind. She came to him in his jump dreams, and he remembered her fierce love, a mother comforting touch.

The light was closing in on him, the brightness hurting his eyes, burning into his retinas, becoming almost a physical force that made the blood pound in his ears as his eardrums threatened to blow. He felt his sense of balance lose any equilibrium it may otherwise have contained. His guts turned, the bile rising as he felt the wave of nausea about to crest.

Dean screwed his eyes tight, trying to block the light and failing as he opened his mouth and felt the contents of his stomach spill out in front of him, everything forgotten in the wrenching pain.

The pain of regaining consciousness.

“CAREFUL THERE, my boy, or you may tread softly on my dreams...or at least, vomit upon them, which is perhaps no more than they deserve.”

The soft voice drifted into a high-pitched giggle that faded like a last breath, indicating that the speaker may have little or no energy of his own.

Dean's eyes hurt, the muscles around the sockets cramping. It was only then he realized that he was holding them tightly shut. He relaxed and opened his eyes slowly, slit-peering at the area around him as the outside light burned into him. As his eyes adjusted to the brightness, he could see that he was in the mat-trans chamber, face to the floor. The disks beneath still held the faintest of glow of the activity of the jump, giving the floor a depth that made the nausea return. It wasn't helped by the stench of his own vomit pooled around his head.

Shutting his eyes to stem the nausea and turning onto his back, away from the vomit, Dean slowly opened his eyes again, adjusting more quickly this time to the light. The armaglass walls that enclosed the companions were white, shot through with the faintest tinge of blue. Doc Tanner was the nearest to him, which explained why he had responded to the projectile vomit that had splashed near his legs, speeding his awakening. Doc's lion's-head swordstick and LeMat percussion pistol were by his side. Dean instinctively reached out to grasp his own Browning Hi-Power, which he had placed by his side before the jump.

As he grasped the blaster, a head appeared above him, framed by plaits secured at the ends by beads that draped down over him and partly obscured the face. However, there was no mistaking the warmth in the brown eyes that ran over him with an expertise to assess his condition without hesitation.

“How're you doing, Dean?” Dr. Mildred Wyeth asked, the traces of hardship etched into her skin breaking into laugh lines as she smiled.

“Terrible,” he managed to croak.

Mildred's hand moved over his face, her thumb gently lifting his eyelid to expose more of the eyeball. “That's very yellow there,” she said half to herself, “and you're sweating badly. By the look

of what you've puked, I'd say you were dehydrated, which sure as hell isn't going to help you get over a jump that easily."

Dean raised himself up onto one elbow, then grimaced as the chamber spun around him. "It doesn't usually hurt this bad," he whispered hoarsely.

Mildred turned away from him for a second. "John, have you got any water?" she asked.

"Sure." J. B. Dix came into view. Like Mildred, he was in full control of his faculties and was walking easily, suggesting that they had both recovered from the jump sometime earlier. The Armorer handed a canteen of water to Mildred and she proffered it to Dean.

"Drink, but take it easy or you'll just bring it back up," she told him.

Dean took the canteen from her and took several small sips, feeling the water slide down his throat. He didn't feel any better immediately, but he knew he would after a short while.

Mildred took the canteen. "Take it easy. Just let your balance come back before you move too much. I've got to see how Doc and Jak are doing. The old buzzard's getting as near to normal as he ever does, but Jak's still out."

Dean nodded and watched her move toward the prone old man. Because of the immense stresses that his body had been put through during his two trawls through time, which had seen him dragged from the nineteenth to the twentieth century and then beyond into the world of the Deathlands, Doc Tanner looked far older than his actual years. At times his mind was as fragile as his body appeared to be. He had regained consciousness, but his words and laughter toward Dean were an indication that he was still severely disoriented.

Dean felt his head begin to steady as he looked around the chamber. His father was in conversation with Krysty. Their voices were low and he couldn't make out their words, but he felt a surge of relief through his veins that they weren't only conscious but once more unaffected by the jump. Because, despite the fact that they had so far made many mat-trans jumps with no casualties, the old technology was erratic and its residual and cumulative effect on the human body was still an unknown.

Ryan Cawdor had already shouldered his Steyr rifle, and stood erect, his muscular frame topped by the tumbling curls that were so like his son's, the handsome face distorted by the scar that ran down his cheek to his jaw from the empty socket hidden beneath his eye-patch. Next to him, Krysty seemed small, although the woman was tall and carried her curves on a muscular frame. Her mane of Titian-red hair curled around her head protectively when her mutie sense told her of danger. At the moment her hair hung loose and free, suggesting that they were, for the moment, safe.

To one side of them, J.B. hovered near Mildred and Doc, waiting to see if there was anything he could do to assist as she gently nursed Doc back to reality. She was talking to him in a mixture of soothing tones and insulting words, cajoling him in the manner that he would expect from her as she tried to root him into his everyday reality.

Dean could see that Jak Lauren was still curled into a fetal ball. Despite the strange jump dreams he usually endured, Dean often snapped out of unconsciousness fairly easily and was very rarely as ill as he had been this time around. Jak, on the other hand, always seemed to suffer badly; his thin and wiry frame illequipped for the specific rigors of a mat-trans jump. Although in the outside world he was a strong and resourceful hunter, he was always one of the last to come around, and nearly always vomited heavily in the same way that Dean had a short while before. The youth allowed himself a rueful grin; he figured that at least he had an insight into how Jak suffered.

"Yes, yes, it all becomes clear now. Once more unto the breach, my dear friend, once more unto the breach."

"Yeah, still a crazy old coot, but at least crazy like normal," Mildred said with satisfaction as she stood and moved away from Doc to close in on the still-prone Jak, who was twitching as the first vestiges of consciousness began to stir within him.

Doc's eyes, surprisingly clear and piercing considering his state a few moments before, met Dean's.

"A strange world, is it not?" he asked simply.

"Sure is, Doc," the young Cawdor replied.

He moved his gaze to watch Mildred bend over Jak, with J.B. waiting patiently near. Continuing on, his eyes rested once more on his father and Krysty.

He had the strangest feeling. Something had been eating at him from the back of his brain. Something that had to do with family and the feeling that he had to search for something—or someone. It had been there before the sudden breaking of light and the wave of nausea had washed over him to wipe out everything.

But it was gnawing away, trying to make itself known again.

THE REDOUBT WAS EMPTY. The companions adopted standard tactics for exiting the chamber and securing the immediate area. Because of the opacity of the armaglass and the function making soundproofing thickness a necessity, it was always hard to tell if the area immediately outside the chamber door held any threat. So it was a matter of course to adopt triple-red status until safety was revealed.

From that point it was simply a matter of sweeping through the corridors to ascertain their status. A simple task in this instance, it seemed that the redoubt had been unoccupied for some time and the entrance had either never been discovered or breached by anyone from the outside. Because of that, the redoubt was still as fully stocked as it had been before the nukocaust. The companions were able to sleep easily and comfortably for the first time in ages, and also to shower and change their clothes. For Mildred, it was an opportunity to restock pharmacy supplies. For J.B., the chance to replenish stocks of ammo, grens and plas ex. The kitchens allowed them to plunder some self-heats. The canned food, which combusted with enough heat to warm the food on opening, was far from ideal. But when it was difficult to find any kind of game to hunt, self-heats came into their own and kept the companions fed until they were able to find something more palatable.

"ARE WE READY TO HEAD OFF?" Ryan asked as he shouldered the backpack containing supplies plundered from the redoubt, one of several such bags they had filled from the well-stocked base.

He was greeted with assent from the companions, who hoisted their own loaded backpacks and shouldered their newly cleaned and refilled weapons.

"Let's hope that the reason we've found this undisturbed isn't because the entrance is under a ton of rocks," Doc commented dryly.

"You don't even want to go down that road, my friend," Mildred said before adding, "Not that you could, if it was under a ton of rock."

Her good humor reflected how the companions felt. After two days' rest in perfect peace, and the added bonus of a shower and a change of clothing, they felt more than ready to face what may lay ahead.

"Okay, let's get going," Ryan stated.

They made their way in line through the echoing and empty corridors of the lower level to the elevator. Having already tested the car during their brief stay, they knew it could carry them to the top level. They entered the elevator and traveled up in silence. Leaving the car as it came to rest, they walked briskly along the winding corridor until they arrived at the final set of sec doors, which was a barrier that separated them from the outside world and whatever it may hold.

Ryan, at the head of the line, paused before initiating the procedure that would open the door. As did the rest of the companions, he scanned the walls and ceiling of the tunnel, searching for any sign of stress that may have resulted from earth movement, indicating that the door could be in any way

impeded.

It was Mildred who voiced the general opinion. “Doesn’t look like there’s any problem so far—this tunnel looks as smooth as the day it was built,” she said softly.

The sec door began to rise, a cool breeze wafting in through the widening gap. As the viewing space increased with the ascent of the door, they could see that the redoubt was positioned at the summit of a small hill. A road twisted its way down the incline of the slope until it reached the edge a beach, then veered off to the left behind the circumference of the hill. The beach was short, leading into a stretch of water that was about two miles long before hitting an island that looked to be only a few square miles in size. Beyond the island, the sea stretched toward the horizon.

“They didn’t exactly try to hide this one, did they?” Doc commented.

“I don’t know,” J.B. mused. “Facing away from the mainland, would anyone have come around this side of the hill? There’s only that island and not a lot else.”

“Yeah, I can figure that before skydark, but what about after? How come no one coming down the peninsula has searched this out, especially as it’s so open?” Mildred asked.

Krysty shrugged. “Could be—if there are no villes near—that no one wants to come down the peninsula, even if they’re in search of shelter. After all,” she added, looking out to the sea on either side of the hill, with only the distant coastline to break the view, “it’s not as if this is even much of a peninsula.”

“Best to wait to see what it’s like when we get around the other side,” Ryan said. “Keep on triple-red, and string out. We’ll follow the road.” He looked around. “There isn’t much cover for us or for anyone wanting to attack us, so I guess we should be okay as long as we keep alert.”

The one-eyed man signaled them to move with a wave of the Steyr rifle that he held in his right hand, and began to walk down the road that curved along the slope of the hill. Following him down, it was easy for the rest of them to see that he was accurate in his assessment of the territory. The hill was a verdant green, with only small rocks and pebbles poking through the covering of topsoil. There was little in the way of vegetation to provide any sort of cover on the hillside, and Krysty’s hair flowed free down her back, indicating that there was little in the way of hidden danger to alert her mutie sense.

The road had a rough shale-and-gravel surface that crunched under their marching feet, the loose rock shooting across onto the grass and down the slope of the hill toward the beach.

As they descended, Mildred looked at the island that lay only a couple of miles out across the narrow channel. It was fairly flat and seemed to be well covered by vegetation and trees. The environment on the small piece of land seemed to be better equipped for supporting life than the barren hillside of the peninsula.

They reached the bottom of the hill and followed the road, most of them glancing out at the channel. It seemed calm as the waves lapped gently along the shallow beach, but as their glances strayed farther out, they could see patches of white water that pointed to a crosscurrent that could be deadly to the unsuspecting. It was likely the island was isolated and uninhabited because of it. Despite the proximity to land, negotiating the narrow channel would be a dangerous task.

Looking up, the entrance to the redoubt could be quite plainly seen and once more it crossed Mildred’s mind to wonder why the predark base had been left so completely undisturbed over the past century.

Rounding the hill, the companions found that they were immediately ascending once more, the land on the reverse of the hill narrowing to a band of rock that formed a sharp slope that led upward to form a bridge between the hill and the mainland. The tides around the coast had to have eaten away at the rocks over centuries, chipping away the land until it formed little more than a narrow causeway. The topsoil that covered the hill became more sparse, slabs of rock showing through and coloring the

landscape a slate gray.

"I've got a feeling I know why the redoubt has been left alone," Mildred said as they climbed, the incline becoming steeper with each footfall.

It was a rhetorical statement. They could all quite clearly see what had happened. The centuries of tide had worn the rock to a narrow bridge, the shift in the landscape fashioned by the post-nuke nuclear winter rendering a causeway at its narrowest point. Jagged shards of rock fell abruptly away from the razor-sharp granite below, which was consistently being lashed by the current as the tides forced water into the narrow channel. Across the divide, which seemed to be about ten yards in length, the causeway reappeared with the same jagged disruption in the pattern of the dark rock face. It was as though the tide and the earth movement beneath had caused a great chunk of the natural bridge to be ripped wholesale from the causeway and just tossed away, isolating the hill completely from the mainland. Beyond the divide, the causeway widened to join the rest of the coastline, where the greenery was lush and the land looked fertile and verdant.

"Fireblast," Ryan whispered softly. He knew that if there was some way to bridge the divide, they would reach a landscape that offered the promise of good living and perhaps a friendly ville. To their back lay only an island and the barren hill, with the possibility of a quick mat-trans jump to another place—always assuming their constitutions could take another jump so quickly. Knowing how Doc and Jak were always affected, and from the way in which Dean had suffered with this particular jump, it didn't seem a viable option this soon.

Jak joined the one-eyed man at the head of the divide and looked down onto the razor-sharp rocks. The albino looked across toward the far side of the gap, screwing up his red eyes to get a better view in the wind that whipped through the hole left by the missing rock.

"If bit shorter, would say try climb down, mebbe get across, then make rope across."

Ryan nodded briefly. "String some across, then hand-over-hand. Half, mebbe three-quarters, of the distance and we could all make it. But this is a bit much for Doc, mebbe for Mildred and Dean, as well. Anyway, who could get down this side, across and then up the other?"

Jak shrugged. "Mebbe me, if water not run strong down there."

Ryan cast his eye down to the cross-tide as it crashed on the razored rocks. He grimaced. "Yeah, try to get across those rocks with no tide and you could probably just about make it. But if one of those waves catches you, you're fucked."

Jak nodded once. "Cut you up like the sharpest knife."

"Nothing to do except go back, then," Ryan stated.

The other companions moved to the edge of the rock for a better view of the channel. Looking along the coastline that lay behind the hill and peninsula, they could see that the drop from the top of the land to the sea below was sheer for as far as the eye could see. Small strips of sand here and there ended in a sheet of rock that would impede any progress, even assuming they had a craft on which to sail around the hill and the causeway. The rock bridge, so violently severed, was their only practical hope of reaching the mainland.

"I fear this may turn out to be something of an anticlimax," Doc said woefully.

"Mebbe not," J.B. told them. "We've got two choices—go back to the redoubt and get the hell out..."

"Or?" Dean asked.

"Or we try to get to that island, see what it's like there. Mebbe there's some life of some kind, or mebbe just a place we could rest up for some time."

"Life?" Mildred questioned. "John, how the hell could anyone live on there, cut off from anywhere else?"

The Armorer gave her a rare grin. "I only said mebbe, Millie," he countered.

They turned and walked back down the incline of the road to the base of the hill.

“What do you think, Dad?” Dean asked. “Reckon we could get out to the island?”

“Not keen on making another jump so soon?” Ryan queried.

Dean tried to keep the darkness out of his voice, but couldn't stop it crossing his brow as he spoke. “I can't say as I'd be too happy about having to do that,” he said simply.

“That is something on which I think many, if not all, of us would agree,” Doc muttered.

“Rather chance water than go back to mat-trans so soon,” Jak added.

“I figured you'd mebbe all feel that way,” the one-eyed man said as they hit the road base and rounded the circumference of the hill. They came to the thin strip of beach that petered out into nothing at the bend of the land.

Ryan looked toward the island, judging not so much the distance or the terrain as the state of the water that lay between. For about half a mile or so the water was quite calm. It also seemed to be calm as it neared the shore of the island. However, there was about a mile of rough sea between these two points, the white water pointing to a boiling rage of current beneath the almost-calm surface.

“Do you think we can make it across that, especially with no raft of any kind—and nothing that I can see around here to build one?” J.B. asked.

Ryan shook his head. “It's a hard call,” he mused. “I figure we're all strong enough to make the distance. The only problem is just how much of a bastard that current in the middle is going to be.” He continued, pointing to the white water that speckled the surface, “And how deep is this channel? Are there rocks under the current like the ones we've just seen, waiting to rip us to shreds if we get pushed onto them?”

“That's an awful lot of maybes,” Mildred mused before a grin creased her features. “I'll tell you something, though. We should go back to the redoubt and have a look around. There may just be something we can use in there.”

“I doubt that,” Ryan said with a resigned tone. “I can't remember ever seeing anything like a raft or boat in any redoubt we've ever been in.”

“Yeah, but when was the last time we landed up in a redoubt so close to the ocean?” Mildred countered.

Ryan paused and thought about that. “Not any time I can recall,” he said finally.

“Exactly,” Mildred said. “The way I see it, there's a chance that whoever used that redoubt before skydark might have had something, even if only for their off-duty hours.”

Ryan's face broke into a grin. “Now that's something that I hadn't thought of.”

The group turned and made its way back up the shale-and-gravel road that led to the sec door. They moved freely and quickly, knowing that they were safe from attack, and with a sense of purpose engendered by the search for a craft of some kind to take them across the channel to the island.

As they reached the crest of the hill and the small recess where the sec door lay, Mildred paused to look over her shoulder and across to the island. For just a second she felt a cold shiver run up and down her spine, rippling the muscles and causing a pool of cold sweat to gather in the small of her back. She frowned, wondering why she should have such a portent.

“That's usually Krysty's department,” she muttered.

“Did you say something, Mildred?” the red-haired woman asked, moving back to where Mildred was staring across the channel.

“Oh, nothing...” Mildred replied, turning from the sea to walk through the now-open sec door and into the redoubt tunnel with Krysty. They walked in silence, Krysty puzzled as to what Mildred had really meant, and Mildred pondering why she had suddenly felt as if something of significance was about to happen.

By the time Krysty and Mildred had caught up with the rest of the companions, they were already

in the elevator.

“Hurry up,” Dean said urgently. ~~“We need to scour the dorms and the storage areas.”~~

“Why hurry?” Krysty questioned. “The island’s not exactly going anywhere, is it?”

Dean shrugged. “I know, but I just don’t like being stuck on a lump of rock in the middle of nowhere.”

“Fair enough. I guess I know what you mean.”

The elevator doors closed and they descended to the lower level of the redoubt, where the living quarters of the long-since-deceased-and-deserted inhabitants had been situated. It was here they were to begin their search.

It was thorough and systematic. Grouping into pairs—Ryan and Krysty, J.B. and Mildred, Dean and Doc, with Jak operating on his own—they searched the storage and dorm areas looking for a boat or for something that they might be able to use to construct a raft.

It was Jak who hit paydirt. Joining him in response to his shout, the companions found the albino teen in a storage room that contained a lot of sports equipment, as well as three inflatable rafts, two canoes and some paddles. It was obvious from their design that they weren’t of military origin, and had more than likely been used by long-gone soldiers for recreational trips onto the sea during off-duty hours.

“What you reckon?” the albino asked, smiling as he dragged the two canoes from under a mass of equipment and separated the rafts from a tennis net and two basketball nets.

“I reckon those are a no-go,” Dean said, pointing to the canoes. “You can only get two of us in each, and there’s no way we could keep any of the supplies balanced.”

Ryan agreed. “Those, on the other hand,” he added, indicating the rafts, “could probably take three or four apiece when they’re inflated, as well as being able to ballast the supplies.”

“Only thing we have to do is find something to inflate them with,” J.B. commented.

Mildred shrugged. “If they were used here, then the odds are there are some gas canisters somewhere. Guess we just need to look.”

Jak rooted around, and located canisters of gas that had been used to inflate the rafts in predark days.

“Hope there’s enough in there to still do it,” he commented as he dragged the canisters from beneath some boxes.

“Only one way to find out,” Ryan said. “Let’s get these bastard things down to the channel and try to inflate them.”

Chapter Two

They carried the rafts and canisters to the strip of beach, not knowing if the containers held enough gas to inflate the rafts. What they would do if the inflatable craft remained uninflated was a problem. They had the two canoes, which they had left in the redoubt, and Dean wondered if it would be possible for them to travel in relays across to the island. As the canoes took two people, two would set off, then one would return to pick up another person. With two canoes and only seven companions, it would take a couple of journeys.

Ryan, however, was unsure about the relays. However it was organized, one person on each canoe would have to make the trip twice. Looking out at the choppy sea where the white-water currents ran, with who knew what lying beneath the surface, he thought it would be too much to ask of any of them—even himself or J.B.—to make the trip for a second time in rapid succession.

“Then what do we do if these rafts stay this flat?” Mildred asked, taking the yellow plastic of a raft in one hand and holding it, noting how fragile the material was for the task it was about to face.

“We think of something else,” Ryan replied. “But it looks good so far.”

J.B. linked the canisters to the valves on the sides of each raft and released the tap that allowed the pressurized gas to pass into the raft.

The yellow plastic gradually began to unfold and to spread out across the sand as the hollows within ingested the light gas. The rafts began to increase in size and strength, the tubular sides becoming harder to the touch.

Ryan and J.B. stood back to let the craft inflate. Jak, Krysty and Doc joined them.

“It would seem that there may well be enough of the mixture within to give us some hope,” Doc commented.

“Looks like,” Krysty added. “It’d be worse to see the rafts half inflated and then the gas run out. More of a disappointment.”

“An understatement if ever there was one,” Doc murmured wryly.

However, there was little cause for such disappointment as, both rafts now fully inflated, Ryan and J.B. moved forward to disconnect the canisters from the valves.

J.B. cursed as he wrestled with the aged valve, creaking and stiff from lack of use. “Dark night, if this all leaks out while I try to seal it...” The canister came away easily but he could hear the gas escaping through the valve opening. Closing the valve with a minimum of delay, the Armorer tested the tubular sides of the raft to see if they had lost any of their tautness. The plastic was still hard to the touch, almost like a solid block of wood.

Ryan, having similar trouble, swore to himself as he secured the valve on his raft. As had the Armorer, he found the valve to be stiff from age and lack of use, but, thankfully, the gas had leaked at such a low rate the raft was still solid to the touch.

“Okay, people,” he said, standing back, “guess we’re ready to go for this. J.B., you take that raft with Jak, Doc and Dean. I’ll take this one with Krysty and Mildred. We’ll divide the baggage so that we get slightly more in this one,” he continued, prodding the raft with the toe of his combat boot.

“Sounds about right,” the Armorer replied, casting an eye over the assembled companions before polishing his spectacles in readiness for the journey ahead.

The division of personnel and supplies was based on the size and weight of the individuals concerned. With seven people and two rafts, one would have to take four and one three. The problem

was how to divide the personnel so that the weights would be roughly equal in each craft. Given that Ryan would pilot one craft and J.B. the other, it made sense to put the three lighter people in with the Armorer—who was himself wiry rather than muscular like Ryan—and to take the two heavier individuals with himself. Krysty and Mildred were both muscular for women, whereas Jak and Doc were very light for men. Dean was still—in this sense—a child. This arrangement would leave the weight distribution a little uneven, with the emphasis on the Armorer having the heavier boat. But by taking more of the supplies on with Mildred and Krysty, the one-eyed man would be able to balance the weights more successfully.

The two parties divided and loaded the rafts before carrying them to where the waves gently lapped at the shore.

“Take it out some way before launching,” Ryan yelled to J.B.

The Armorer agreed. “Figure that this tide is deceptive—could push us back easier than we think. Go up to the waist?”

“Yeah, that’ll make getting aboard real easy,” Mildred said to Ryan.

The one-eyed man grimaced. “I know, I know. You figure how we can get past the wave limit, and I’ll go along with it.”

Mildred chuckled. “Yeah, okay, boss. I know we don’t have a choice, I was just moaning some.”

Krysty raised an eyebrow. “Oh, that? Yeah, I think you’re speaking for me, as well.”

The good-natured banter helped take their minds off the fact that the seawater was icy cold on their legs as they moved deeper into the tide. The current tugged at the sodden clothing around their limbs, flooding the boots on their feet. It had been a conscious decision to not shed these, in case they became separated at some point from the rafts and thus lost their invaluable footwear. It was just that right now it felt as though that very same footwear was weighing them down as the waves washed over them, trying to tug the raft into shore as they pushed out.

J.B.’s estimate had proved correct. By the time the water washed around the waist of even the tallest of them, they had passed the point where the gathering waves tried to take the raft back to shore. Now they could mount the crafts to begin the short journey in earnest.

As the raft bobbed on the water, Ryan held it steady as Krysty and Mildred climbed in. They found it hard to get purchase on the slippery plastic, which gave too easily beneath them, allowing seawater to pour into the shallow basin. Both cursed heavily but managed to balance the raft as Ryan heaved himself over the lip and into the main body.

“Fireblast, I hope this island is worth it,” he breathed heavily. “You wouldn’t reckon on something this simple being so damn hard.”

“Gets harder, lover. You take first pull at the oars,” Krysty said slyly, handing him the paddles and pointing in the direction of the island. “Shouldn’t take too long.”

Ryan took the oars from her without comment and began to pull toward the island.

Meanwhile the other raft had proved to be less problematic for Dean and Jak, who were light enough to mount the raft without much trouble. But Doc had more of a problem, slipping in the water as he tried to thrust himself over the lip, nearly turning it over. It was only J.B.’s hand at his back, pushing him up, that stopped him from slipping back into the water.

“My apologies,” Doc gasped as he settled himself and lay back to help balance the raft for J.B.’s entry. “I fear that the sea is an environment I find all too alien.”

“Not the only one,” Jak commented, barely suppressing a shiver as the icy cold of the water still chilled his bones.

J.B. took the oars and began to row, with some distance to make up on Ryan. His muscles knotted as the sea gave hard resistance to his strokes, making the tendons stand out as he gritted his teeth and gave more effort.

Both Ryan and the Armorer discovered that, despite the seemingly calm exterior, the tidal currents beneath the surface were strong and pulled in different directions, countering each other and attempting to shift the rafts first one way and then the other. Progress toward the island wasn't as swift as they would have liked, every stroke forward also taking two from side to side. If the sea was to prove this difficult when it appeared calm, how would it be when they hit the white water, the area where the turmoil beneath the waves was actually visible on the surface?

"Here it comes—better hold on tight," Ryan warned as he looked over his shoulder to see the first rearing horses of white water approach.

In the other raft, it was Jak who sounded the alarm. "Real bad sea coming...."

If anyone had had the time to reflect, it might have been obvious that the patch of choppy sea was caused by a tidal stream that ran through the middle of the channel. A tidal stream with a current so strong that it cut through other crosscurrents as they pulled the direction of the water every which way—This tidal stream was stronger than any force that any of the companions could exert on the oars.

"Bastard!" Ryan yelled suddenly, his voice whipped away on the wind that now blew hard and harsh across the channel.

As the raft reached the white water, the first blow of the erratic and dangerous tide took him by surprise. He had been ready for something, but not this. The water moved beneath the raft like a solid floor, suddenly shifting direction and lifting it onto the crest, pulling the oars from the water and tugging them almost out of the one-eyed man's grip. It took all Ryan's strength to hold on to the oars although they were next to useless as they paddled thin air. The raft was thrown up by the white water and spun in a semicircle before hitting the sea again with bone-jarring force. It was all that he, Krysty and Mildred could do to hold on to the ropes ringed around the tubular structure, curling them around their wrists as much as possible to gain a better purchase.

No sooner had the raft hit the water than it was pitched sideways by another conflicting current. It spun across the surface, almost hitting the raft piloted by the Armorer.

Not that J.B. was having any better luck in his attempt to control his craft. The first patch of choppy water had pitched the raft from underneath, upsetting the balance of the raft and almost overturning it. Water washed over the sides and filled the bottom, making it difficult for J.B. to pull on the oars. Dean and Jak immediately started to bail, but were stopped by the next buffet that lifted them up and propelled them forward. At least it was in the right direction. It did, however, bring them into direct collision with the other raft.

"Dark night! If I ever get off this crappy sea I'm never getting wet again," J.B. muttered as the water forced the two crafts together, the hard, inflated plastic tubes crunching together and forcing his craft into a strange angle from which it was all the occupants could do to keep hold. For the briefest of moments the Armorer caught a glimpse of Mildred, their eyes meeting across the spray of water that washed into the bottom of each raft. He could see primal fear—the fear of buying the farm—in hers, and he was damned sure that she could see the same in his.

And then they were apart again.

"Fuck it! There's more than just water underneath us!" Ryan exclaimed as the bottom of the raft hit the sea once more and bulged in a shape that was gone before they could even attempt to identify it. The shape appeared again at the side of the raft, where it slammed into the side and sent it spinning once more.

"Oh my Lord, what's that?" Mildred whispered as a lithe, black shape moved out of the water and reared up before falling once more into the waves with an impact that sent a huge wall of water washing into the raft. The water hit them in the face like a rock, forcing its way up nostrils and into mouths, making it hard for any of them to breathe.

"Hold tight. If it hits us, we're over," Ryan gasped, securing his wrists to the ropes along the side

of the craft, any thought of saving the oars long gone.

No sooner had he spoken than the creature reared up in front of them. Whatever it was, it was obviously annoyed they had crossed its path and impeded its progress, and it was now going to make them pay for it.

Whether by accident or design, the creature faced the raft, its black, empty eyes staring. It was blue-black, the sea glistening off its skin and scales to give it a smooth look. The eyes were like black marbles. There was no glimmer of any anger, pain, desire. Unlike any predatory animals they might have encountered on land, this creature of the sea showed nothing of whatever it felt inside...even if this was anything other than merely the mildest irritation.

“Oh, shit, this is going to be bad,” Mildred whispered to herself.

Ryan gritted his teeth and tensed his muscles, expectant of an imminent impact.

Krysty pushed back into the side of the raft, her arms entwined with the ropes in the same way her hair entwined her neck, the sentient red tresses coiled close to her scalp and around her neck, reflecting the severity of the danger they all faced.

The creature seemed to hang in the air for an eternity, surveying them with an almost dispassionate and detached air of calm. It seemed as though the sea was suddenly as calm, the tides slipping away. There was no sound, no spray, no movement of any kind. It was one second stretching out forever. The moment of anticipation. The moment for which they were prepared, but which they hoped would never come.

And then it did. Even though their consciousness had slowed to let them absorb and prepare for the situation, there was still nothing they could do.

With a screech that may have come from the creature itself, or may just have been a trick of the winds and their imaginations, the creature rose, pulled back and then crashed down on the raft.

Even though it had seemed that the moment preceding had lasted forever, the impact was still unexpected. There had been no time to prepare. Mildred felt the thundering impact drive the air from her lungs as the raft was plunged beneath the water for a moment, the creature's downward motion driving them into the swirling currents that plucked at their clothes, pulled at their limbs in opposing directions and tried to force the freezing salt water into their mouths and nostrils.

Krysty and Ryan clung to the ropes securing them to the body of the raft, muscles aching and on fire from the effort of holding on grimly, the nylon ropes burning into their flesh, the salt water stinging the torn skin.

And then the raft raced to the surface as buoyancy carried it upward, the giant eel continuing downward as the slippery raft slid from beneath its body, the flesh of the creature sweeping across Mildred and crushing her into the plastic as she passed. The raft broke the surface on a white water crest, the force of the tide adding to its momentum, throwing it up and out of the water.

The fragile plastic shell flew up, the canvas bags stored on the floor long since gone, the three companions secured only by the ropes they had used to tie themselves to the tubular body. The ropes holding Krysty and Ryan held firm, scoring their flesh but keeping them secured to the plastic shell as they hungrily gasped in air, unable to take in their situation but thankful for the ability to breathe once more.

Mildred wasn't as lucky. The ropes on one side of the raft had been scored through at some point in the distant past and, although nylon didn't fray or rot, she knew that the fibers twisted for the rope had been weakened. The weight of her body being flung back and forth had weakened those fibers that still connected. The upward thrust of the raft as it was thrown out of the water, combined with the momentum of her own body, was too much of a strain for the fibers. As she gulped air into her lungs, she was dimly aware of the rope suddenly giving way. Before she truly had a chance to register what was happening, she was flung from the craft and sent spinning through the air. Ryan and Krysty,

barely conscious, were unable to see or to comprehend what was occurring. They were only aware of the jarring impact as the raft hit the water once more.

The occupants of the other raft had been bewildered spectators.

The whole process had taken only a matter of seconds and there was nothing that J.B., Jak, Dean or Doc were able to do about the events unfolding in front of them. They watched in helpless horror as the creature drove the raft beneath the waves, and in dismay as the tide tossed it back into the air, flinging Mildred out and away from them.

“Shit, we’ve got to do something,” J.B. whispered.

Jak was more than equal to the challenge. “Ryan, Krysty, okay. You tired, let me and Dean row,” he snapped, shifting easily in the raft, his balance sure despite the current tossing the raft around like a toy. Dean, not wasting his breath on speech, also moved around so that he and Jak were side by side.

The albino youth took the oars from the Armorer and handed one to Dean. “Take this. On count three, start pull. Count three each time,” he ordered.

“Okay,” Dean replied.

J.B. snapped out of his awe at seeing Mildred thrown up in the air like a rag doll and moved across the floor of the raft to counterbalance Doc, making it easier for the two rowers to pull through the water.

Jak counted, and the two young men began to pull at the oars, feeling the water struggle against them before yielding. Not only were they fresher than J.B., who had brought them this far, but they were two pulling where only one had pulled before. Their progress was swifter and more sure. The raft moved through the water across the current, heading for the drifting raft and the unseen figure of Mildred Wyeth, who lay somewhere beyond.

J.B. continuously scanned the water in front of them. There was no movement from within the raft although he could see the arms of Ryan and Krysty entangled in the ropes. They were either unconscious or too stunned to move, but they were as safe as anyone could be on this sea while they were in the raft. He cursed as he tried to look beyond, his vision obscured by the spray that splattered on his spectacles, making the whole vista seem blurred.

He couldn’t see Mildred anywhere.

At that moment the woman lay on her back in the ocean, tossed lifelessly by the current. She had barely been able to take in what was happening as she had flown through the air, knowing only that she was able to breathe again after her immersion. Idly, somewhere at the back of her mind, it had occurred to her that she was weightless and could no longer feel the ropes around her arms and wrists. But before she had a chance, in her dazed condition, to assimilate what that could mean, she found herself hitting the surface of the ocean with an impact that knocked all consciousness from her mind and body. Now limp and seemingly lifeless, she was at the mercy of the currents.

It was Doc who spotted her. Mildred’s light-colored jacket contrasting with the black of her braids spread out around her on the water.

“John Barrymore, I see her! Over to the nor’west,” the old man yelled above the sound of the crashing waves.

J.B. scanned the area Doc had indicated. They knew the island lay northwest of the coast, and there was land in view to the left. Desperately, hope lifting in him, J.B. ran his eyes over the surface of the ocean.

He saw her. Her jacket had spread beneath her and the air that had been trapped beneath the folds of the fabric was keeping her buoyant. It was imperative that they reach her quickly.

“Steer to the right,” the Armorer yelled at Jak and Dean, knowing that would take them to the left as the two rowers were in a reversed position. Jak and Dean didn’t waste breath on a reply, instead putting a stronger effort into their attempts to reach Mildred.

In the other raft, Ryan and Krysty were recovering sufficiently to realize what had happened.

“Fireblast and dammit,” Ryan said huskily, his throat blocked still by the unwanted onrush of salt water. He struggled into a more upright position, trying to unscramble his brain and to get a better view of what was happening. All he knew for sure was that Mildred wasn’t where she should be, two hanks of frayed and broken rope evidence of what had occurred.

Krysty struggled around. It was impossible to tell how her mutie sense felt about the situation and the imminent danger to Mildred, as her hair was plastered to her head thanks to the buffeting it had taken from the sea. But she didn’t need a doemie to see that unless Mildred was recovered from the water soon, it would be too late.

Particularly as an ominous black shape was bucking and rising from the water. The giant mutie eel, still not satisfied with the damage it had wrought, and perhaps in some way able to sense the danger and vulnerability of its enemy, was ready to return for the kill.

Ryan tried to disentangle himself from the ropes; but those that had served so well to keep him secure were now working against him, tangling and knotting as his still-weakened muscles couldn’t summon enough strength to pull his arms free. He wanted to wrestle the Steyr rifle and to fire at the creature. Perhaps its scaly hide would be too thick for the creature to be chilled, or even severely injured, but at least it would distract the creature from its intended target.

And that target was obviously Mildred.

The eel was moving purposefully across the water, its slithering motion taking it beneath then over the surface of the water. It was moving with a greater speed than Jak and Dean could muster between them, certainly a speed too great for the frustrated Ryan to take aim and fire at such a range, even if he had been able to reach the rifle. With no oars to row, no strength to row with and unable to even reach his blaster, he watched in frustration as the creature moved out of his range and toward Mildred’s prone figure.

“Someone blast the fucker,” he croaked.

Jak and Dean’s raft had passed the drifting raft occupied by Ryan and Krysty, and although it was gaining on Mildred with enough speed to save her before she lost buoyancy, there was no way they would reach her before the eel. It was moving too fast and its diagonal course would take it to her long before them.

J.B. was on the far side of the raft. Although he had untangled one arm from the ropes and pulled free his M-4000, which with its charge of barbed metal fléchettes would be sure to at least cause the beast enough damage to slow and distract it, there was no way he could get a clear shot at the creature without the risk of clipping one of the other occupants of the raft, particularly as the waves continued to toss the raft from crest to crest, making a steady aim almost impossible.

Doc seeing the frustration in the Armorer’s face, and realizing what lay in his way, decided to take action of his own.

“Have no fear, dear John Barrymore, I have a clear view,” he yelled, untangling his arms so that he was able to move freely. Changing position with a speed born of urgency, he moved around on his knees, swaying wildly as the floor of the raft moved beneath him, but determined to follow through his avowed course of action. Pulling the LeMat percussion pistol from its secure place in his belt, where he had also secured his silver lion’s-head swordstick, he spread his knees and rooted himself as firmly to the floor of the raft as was possible. Holding the LeMat in both hands to try to attain a steady aim in such hostile conditions, he fixed his eye on the eel as it moved swiftly and smoothly through the water. With each stroke of the oars they were closing on Mildred and the eel, but the creature was closing in on her with more speed.

“By the Three Kennedys, you shall not have her you foul creature of eldritch imaginings,” he yelled before letting loose with the shot charge. The recoil, in such unsteady conditions, threw him

back on his haunches. He pushed forward and let fly with the ball-charge barrel before having a chance to aim properly, knowing that there wasn't enough time and that he couldn't guarantee another moment of steady aim in these conditions.

Doc's trust in his instinct was justified, although he couldn't have foreseen the consequences. The shot scored the creature on its side, up near the point where its head almost seamlessly joined with the sinuous length of its body. The smooth blue-black scale was ripped apart by the shot, tatters of skin exploding to show white flesh and blood that began to pour into the sea as the creature suddenly changed direction, blind fury and pain causing it to twist in the water as it tried to locate the source of its pain.

Turning was the worst thing it could have done. As its head shifted, the ball charge sped toward it hitting the marbled black eyeball with a force that exploded the dark, expressionless orb, the viscous contents splattering out to mix with the spume from the waves as the ball shot continued through into the creature's brain. All functions ceased other than the purely motor, which took a little while longer before the eel's nervous system finally lost the last spark of life. This was barely more than a few seconds, but long enough for the creature to wreak one last piece of havoc.

As the raft powered by Jak and Dean came closer both to the creature and to Mildred's prone body so it came within range of the falling body of the eel. As the creature twisted in its death throes, its downward trajectory brought it in line with the craft.

"Oh my sweet Lord," Doc breathed as the creature hung for one moment in the air before lifelessly plunging toward them as he jammed the LeMat back into his belt.

J.B., at the rear of the raft, had time to yell, "Take cover, it's coming down!"

The Armorer secured himself to the ropes as Jak and Dean dived for handholds. But Doc seemed transfixed, still on his knees.

"Doc!" J.B. shouted helplessly as the sun was blotted out by the falling creature. Then all sense was lost as the corpse of the eel fell heavily on the raft, thrusting it beneath the waves and throwing Doc from the interior as the other three occupants held on for dear life.

Ryan and Krysty watched in despair, unable to do anything to help, and yet there was a chance consequence that was of some benefit, at least. As the corpse of the creature drove the other raft under the sea, the impact combined with the conflicting tidal currents to lift the raft with the one-eyed man and the red-haired woman onto a wave that swept them onto a collision course with Mildred, herself lifted up on the current and pushed in a random direction.

"Grab her, quick," Krysty said through salt-crusting lips, her voice a hoarse bark. Ryan moved as quickly as he could and joined her at the side of the raft, reaching for Mildred as she was swept past. She was still unconscious, but between them they were able to grab her coat and then get a grip on her body. As the woman was weighed down by the water in her clothes, and the deadweight of her senseless state, it wasn't easy for Ryan and Krysty to haul her into the raft, particularly as their muscles were battered, bruised and weakened by the assault that had taken Mildred from them initially. However, with much cursing and no little effort, they were able to haul her into the raft.

Sinking back, Krysty sighed. "Thank Gaia for that—but what about the others?"

Ryan, still gasping for breath after the last effort and scanning the ocean surface as he clung grimly to the ropes around the raft, could see no sign of the other raft. Then, just as he was about to speak, his breath was taken away by a sight that defied belief. The raft with Jak, Dean and J.B. shot up from the depths, having squirmed free from beneath the falling chilled flesh of the creature by its natural buoyancy. It cleared the surface of the water, and, having avoided being caught by a wave, righted itself with less of a bone-jarring crunch than Ryan and Krysty had experienced.

"Dark night, what was that?" the Armorer spluttered, trying to clear his mouth and lungs of salt water, coughing heavily.

“Fucker chilled now,” Jak rasped. “Look for Doc more important.”

“Over there,” Dean retched, pointing to where Doc was visible as he bobbed up above the waves.

The oars had gone from the raft, but the current was pushing them roughly in the right direction. Doc had hit the water from less of a height than Mildred and had been able to keep conscious. He was weakly striking out toward them with as much energy as he could put into the breaststroke. Jak leaned over as Doc got within range and took hold of one of the older man’s hands, using all the strength in his wiry frame to pull the old man toward the raft. Dean leaned back to counterbalance as J.B. joined Jak in helping pull Doc into the raft.

Both rafts were now adrift without oars, at the mercy of the tidal currents. Waves brought the two rafts close enough for the occupants to be able to shout across to each other.

“What the hell do we do now?” Ryan yelled. “No fireblasted paddles.”

“What can we do except hope?” J.B. shrugged. “Is Millie okay?”

Ryan shook his head. “Still out cold. I’d feel happier if we could get her on dry land, warm and dry. But how the hell do we get past this bastard current?”

“Sea take us over this,” Jak pointed out, indicating the fact that the waves had now swept them across the bulk of the choppy waters. “Mebbe we hit tide, take us into island,” he added.

“He’s right, lover,” Krysty whispered hoarsely to Ryan. “Look.”

The white water was now behind them. The tidal current that swept toward the shore of the island had now gripped them and, slowly but inexorably, the sandy strip of beach was moving closer.

Chapter Three

Twilight's last gleamings faded into the darkness of night as the two rafts were gently wafted toward the shore. Once free of the crosscurrents, the tidal flow around the island was gentle, the waves small and slow, lapping at the sands. Each flow took them in toward shore, each ebb, back out a little, making progress without the oars to assist a painful and slow task.

But for the inhabitants of the rafts, there was little inclination to hurry in any way. In one, Jak, Dean and Doc were lying in a state of half wakefulness, their attention drifting in and out with the ebb and flow of the tide. J.B. was more watchful. He was concerned that Doc had taken more of a buffet than he could stand, and if the older man didn't get warm and dry soon, there was risk of pneumonia. Even with Mildred's skills, there was no guarantee that he could be saved if that occurred. And on a more communal level, it would make matters difficult to carry a sick Doc if the environment on the island were to prove in some manner hostile. And then there was Mildred herself. With little communication between the rafts, even shouting precluded by the weariness and salt-sore throats of the companions, there was no way for him to judge Mildred's condition or its seriousness. He was worried about her.

So, while the others dozed, the Armorer stayed awake, unable to rest as his aching limbs commanded, his brain racing. What if it was a hostile environment? What if Doc got ill? What if Mildred bought the farm? What if...He knew that it was an extreme weariness and hurt that caused his brain to race feverishly in such a way, but he felt unable to stop it. He looked toward the shore. It seemed to be farther away than ever.

In the other raft, Ryan and Krysty had disentangled themselves from the ropes around the sides of the craft and had moved into the middle. Bailing as much of the loose water as they could from the slightly concaved floor of the raft, they had stripped off Mildred's jacket, which was soaked with seawater, keeping her cold and wet. Krysty checked Mildred over. She was breathing regularly, although her eyes were still rolled up into her skull; it was likely the impact of the sea had concussed her. Her pulse was regular and strong. The important thing was to try to keep her warm until they reached shore. The only way they could do this, marooned in this manner, and soaking wet themselves, was to huddle next to her to try to impart some of their own body heat to her.

"Thank Gaia, Doc was able to chill that thing!" Krysty husked the words out through a hacking cough, choking on more seawater that came up from her lungs.

Ryan nodded, almost imperceptibly. It hurt his aching neck muscles to even move his head. "Wanted to blast that son of a gaudy myself," he croaked, "but it didn't occur to me until just now that I couldn't have."

Krysty gave him a puzzled look that he could barely see in the half light of the moon and stars above.

A grin cracked his salt-caked lips. "We'd already been under...blasters are fucked by the sea. They hadn't been under—they were the only ones who could do it. Now they can't."

The full implication of his words hit Krysty. The seawater had jammed the mechanisms of the blasters they carried and the other raft had been immersed. So chances were that their blasters were now also next to useless until such time they had been dried out, oiled and cleaned. Which left them, apart from the knives carried by Ryan, J.B. and Jak, next to helpless...even assuming that they were strong enough to defend themselves against any threat that may arise when they hit the shore.

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