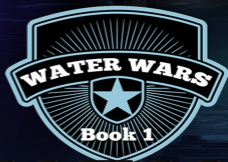


GUY S.
STANTON III



JOURNEY
INTO
THE DEEP

JOURNEY
INTO THE
DEEP

Book One
of
Water Wars

Guy S. Stanton, III

Words of Action

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*“As it was in the days of Noah, so it
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Matthew 24:37*

Chapter One

Warning Given

I blew the dust off before I unsnapped the clasps of the old trunk case. Anticipation built up inside of me at what I might find within. My hopes of discovery took a nose dive though as the lid of the old trunk came up.

Nothing but musty smelling underwear and piles of rag cloth. The Great Depression era of the nineteen twenties had been bad, but had people living during that timeframe really needed to save their old rags and ragged

underwear? Apparently they had thought so.

I let the lid fall back closed and looked around the attic of the old house in disgust. What a waste of time!

Not to mention risking my life, I thought darkly to myself, as I noticed yet another old dry snakeskin laying on the grimy wooden floor of the attic. So far I hadn't come across any live ones, which was good, but just seeing the evidence of prior existence had put me under strain all morning as I had worked at discovering the past.

I had jumped at every sound or movement. I wasn't overly afraid of snakes, but the philosophy of the only good snake is a dead one was a tenant of belief that I had adopted since childhood, when I had awakened from a

nap with a snake coiled up in my bed.

That experience had left an impression on me even at an early age and I was eager to be out of the attic, even as I was frustrated with not having found anything of value. This was the last house on the list and it was a flop just as the other eleven had been.

I stood up forgetting the low angled ceiling and cracked my head off of a rafter. In place of a choked back curse, I kicked the old trunk at my feet savagely. I abruptly forgot the pain in my head and my frustration with the day.

The old trunk had barely moved when I had kicked it. The trunk was sturdily built, but not that sturdy. The rags couldn't be weighing it down that much.

Quickly I knelt down and reopened the lid of the trunk. I had been so excited to

find the trunk in the first place, because it had matched the time era perfectly that I was interested in.

I pulled the rags and the even more raggedy underwear out to spill over the sides. I was already relishing the hot shower I would have after I was clear of this place and its musty remains of past paranoia.

The trunk was clear of the rags and I felt along the bottom of the trunk. It had a false bottom and I found the cleverly concealed release mechanism to either side. Excitement built within me as I flipped the levers and released the false bottom of the trunk.

I'd done it!

I'd found the Orlanis Star!

The false bottom clattered to the floor as I stared down into the trunk at what I

had revealed.

The star resembled the pedals of a sunflower, but were broken apart into individual pieces laid out on a strip of blue velvet with the center array stone in the middle that looked to be made of pure crystal surrounded by a shiny alloy of metal infused along its edges. The pedals and the outer rim of metal surrounding the crystal were studded with what appeared to be gems of priceless value.

The star was beautiful, but it wasn't what I had been expecting at all.

I had thought to find a cleverly designed mechanism to help me find where the wealth of the South had been stored offshore during the Civil War awaiting a British convoy, but what I was looking at was a piece of art crafted

into a form that hinted at a symbolic use, of which I could only speculate.

The pieces of the star at the bottom of the trunk looked nothing like what I had imagined the American Civil War era device to appear as, instead it seemed like I was looking at something that dated far older than the Civil War. The level of craftsmanship and the gemlike crystals bore no relation to a piece that would have been crafted as a mechanical map to find a treasure offshore without the use of charts. This had to be the Orlanis Star though.

This house was one of the twelve places known of that Captain Roger Jamison, the sole survivor of the mission to enlist Britain's aid to coming in on the side of the Confederate South, had stayed at during the remaining years of

his life. This trunk had to have been his and if it had been his, than this must be the fabled Orlanis Star.

I got a feeling as if someone had walked across my grave as I stared at the curiously designed petals and its center stone of pure crystal at the bottom of the trunk. There had to be more to the story than even I had known, but what it could be I didn't know.

In 1864 the Confederate South desperate for British aid in their struggle for survival against the North's advances had enacted a desperate strategy that little was known of. Before and during the Civil War the South had tried to enlist the aid of the British to join in on the war against the North, but the British continually refused because they did not support slavery. There were

many though, that wished to aid the South, because England was the main buyer of the South's cash crop, cotton.

The rumor was that a deal was struck for England to come in on the South's side, although widely criticized by historians as simply not true. But the fact remains that under great secrecy a large flotilla of ships was congregated together in one of the few port cities remaining to the south. Details of this armada were very sketchy, as in the fact that there were practically none.

The fighting was expected to get worse before it could get better with the help of England so the wealthiest plantation owners and financiers packed their wives and children along with all the wealth meant as a payment to England for joining the war, onto the

ships that made up the armada gathered in the harbor. As an added bonus it was rumored that the ships were piled high with the cotton that had been stacking up on the docks for years.

One day the armada was at anchor and then in the midst of a foggy overcast storm system the armada had disappeared from port. It was commonly believed that the Union commanders of the Yankee navy blockading the harbor had been bribed to let the armada pass uncontested, but there was no proof to back that up. From there the armada had simply vanished.

All of the ships had been steam powered, but navigation had still been an issue, which is where the Orlandis Star had come into the legend. It was rumored that the South had made a

technological leap forward in terms of maritime navigation.

They had created a device that plotted their course for them so they could steam away through the densest of fogs without the need for chart navigation or for looking at the stars by night for plotting their course. What lay in the bottom of the trunk did not look like such a device, but it had to be.

The rumor was that the armada was to rendezvous halfway to England with a British warship convoy, which would validate the authenticity of the payment in gold and silver, as well as the bales of cotton as meeting with the terms of the alliance agreed upon by both sides.

Nothing was ever heard of the armada again though. The mythical British convoy never met them and the armada

never reached England. Some who believed in the legend proposed that the British plundered the wealth and sank the armada. Others suggested that the navigation device referred to as the Orlanis Star had led them astray off course and that they had been lost in a storm.

Twenty years later the wreckage of one of the ships in the armada was found stranded along the northern coast of Africa. There had been only one survivor, Captain Rogers.

Where the ship had been for twenty years was a mystery and Captain Rogers said nothing upon being questioned further. It was reported that he'd had an artifact with him when he had been rescued. Again the name, Orlanis Star, had come up.

Captain Rogers had quickly disappeared from the public eye never staying in one place for too long. Reportedly he had lived sparsely and alone for the rest of his life taking his secrets to the grave with him.

I was a treasure hunter pure and simple. I had stumbled across the legend and it had seemed to have some substance to it so I had dug deeper, particularly into Captain Rogers's life and my research had led me here to the place where he had once lived.

My hopes were that if the Orlanis Star really was the navigational device that it was purported to be, then perhaps it could be followed backward to trace the route of the armada and find where it had gone down. The treasure would then be split between me and my crew and

we would be as wealthy as kings, at least for a little while anyway.

The device in the trunk while breathtaking was also a letdown, as there appeared to be nothing mechanical about it.

I reached into the trunk and picked up the central crystal piece of the star. It was heavy and if nothing else it would bring a good price as a mysterious novelty that would more than pay for my time spent researching this legend.

I wasn't at all sure what the slightly oxidized metal around the crystal was made of. It wasn't gold. And what I had taken at first to be gems were really crystals. Although not gems the crystals appeared real and nothing like I had ever seen before.

Something caught my eye and I

glanced down. There was a folded up paper where the crystal centerpiece had been sitting on the velvet bottom of the trunk.

I set the crystal down and picked up the paper carefully and unfolded its weathered page. Something chilled inside of me as I read the note evidently left by none other than Captain Rogers.

“I tried to burn it in a blacksmith’s forge, but it wouldn’t melt. I tried to smash the crystals, but they wouldn’t crack or shatter. I thought about burying it, but it would only be found again as it was by us. So I left it here in this attic in disguise to rot peacefully in hopes that someday it would be thrown out with the trash and lost forever. Whoever may be reading this

note one day be aware for I speak of a danger to men's souls. Do not use the star for it is cursed and has led many to their deaths and hatred is its mark. You've been warned, but I fear it is too late and the temptations grip before you too strong to overcome. You see the treasure before you, but beware the serpent's bite by which causes men to murder and to do evilly one to another. Black or white it does not matter the sin is the same and the curse of those who are dead and shall not rise is oppressive in how it corrupts all flesh to put on the mantle of darkness and join in with the unholy host. Be wise and listen to reason gained from the insight of one who didn't, otherwise may God have mercy upon your soul poor wretch that you will be, if you let

the star become a key and forfeit your kind to a monster's appetite that hungers for the everlasting destruction of your soul.

Sincerely,

Captain Rogers Jamison”

Wow! That was a good scare you away from the treasure note, but it wasn't the first time I had been threatened with curses.

I'd taken an artifact here and there that had supposedly been under the threat of a curse and I was still here, but I couldn't deny that this was the most chilling gloom and doom threat to date. Oh well, treasure was treasure wherever one found it.

I brought my bag close and began to carefully stack the metallic petals and

then the central crystal display into it. I threw the note in with the pieces as an afterthought.

Getting up I quickly made my way down the rickety stairs with my now heavy bag slung over my shoulder. I closed the wooden door on the second story securely and locked it with the key I had been given from the homeowner. I made my way down to the first level and returned the key to the old woman who owned the house.

She gave my dusty appearance a speculative look and asked, "Did you find anything of value then?"

"I did." I said and then I paid her three times what I had said I would for allowing me to dumpster dive through her attic.

I suppose it was still thievery,

because what I was taking was of great value, but she'd said I could have anything I wanted in the attic for five hundred dollars and I had paid her fifteen hundred dollars. My consciousness would just have to live with that.

I got into my jeep and left the historic landmark community of Winchester Virginia like I was leaving the scene of a crime.

I didn't feel good about this. Something was off about the whole situation.

Was it the curse?

I quickly banned that thought aside, as I had no place within me for such things anymore. It didn't really matter. I didn't really care if I lived or died so whether

there was a curse or not it was the same to me.

Being a treasure hunter and living in dangerous circumstances was just what I did to feel alive part of the time. The rest of the time I was lucky if all I felt was numbness. Numb to everything.

It was a good way to be, if you didn't want to remember how good life had once been or two care about anything in the present. Adding another curse to my growing list of wrongs was par for the course the way my life was going.

I drove home anxious to get back to my boat. My boat was my home away from the world. I drove into Charleston in the early morning light and quickly bypassed the city as I headed for the marina where my boat was docked.

Celestia's Prize was still there

moored offshore and a part of me relaxed at the sight of her clean lines, as the sun began to shine off her white painted surfaces. I parked the jeep and grabbing the bag I headed down to the wharf and jumped into a dinghy that was tied off to a post. I cast off the line and fired up the little eggbeater and headed out across the still waters of the harbor.

It was a beautiful morning. It was Sunday morning and a pang of remembrance shot through me, but there was no going back to the way things used to be. That bridge had been burned.

Ortega's head popped over the railing as the dinghy grew close to the ship and a line was thrown down. I shut the dinghy's motor off and pulled the dinghy in close to the side of the ship and tied it off. We'd have to haul it up before we

left port, but I would let the crew worry about that.

I climbed up the rope ladder quickly, the weight of my bag not holding me back a bit in my quick ascent. Ortega was the only one on board, as he never left the ship, while we were in American held territory.

I'd never asked the El Salvadorian as to why that was and I didn't intend to now. It was enough that he was faithful to me and that I had someone I could trust to watch over the Celestia's Prize while I was away.

He greeted me with his characteristic open smile and spoke in broken English, "Your trip a success yes?"

I smiled and unslung the pack off into his waiting hands. His eyes lit up appreciatively with the feel of the

weight of the pack.

“You have brought something then! It may only be lumps of pig iron, but it is something at least.” Ortega said enthusiastically.

Pig iron?

I gazed at Ortega as his unwitting words jarred a memory of something in relation to the slightly oxidized metallic surfaces of the device in the bag. Ortega gave me a strange look and I patted him on the back and reclaimed the pack, as I stepped past him briskly headed for my quarters aboard ship.

“Call everyone in. We leave port in two days.” I called out over my shoulder to Ortega.

Ortega said something that I didn't hear as I made my way below. When I reached my cabin I stripped off my filthy

clothes stained with snake dust and jumped into the shower.

I was tired and the hot water made me even more so. Once done with the shower I left it to tumble into my narrow bed to be overcome by sleep.

Chapter Two

Tough Love

My eyes blinked open and I lay awake staring at the ceiling for a moment as the images faded from sight within my mind. I glanced at the clock, it was two a.m. I had slept the day away, which was unusual for me.

I sat up and put my feet on the floor, as I wiped the sweat off my face and held my head in my hands for a long moment. I had needed sleep, but I could've done without the last part of my session of restful unconsciousness.

I shook my head and got up. I was awake now and I might as well be productive with my time.

I walked across the dark cabin to my laptop and pulling the lid up I flipped it on. When the computer was ready I hacked into someone's wireless link and gained access to the Internet.

It took me about thirty minutes of searching before it finally clicked in my head where the memory of 'pig iron' seemed to fit in with my mysterious device. I typed in 'Delphi Pillar' and came up with lots of interesting articles on the mystery of the solitary pillar located in India.

The date of the pillar's creation was uncertain at best, but now I remembered what had really stood out to me at the time I had read about the pillar some

time in the past, which was the pillar's composite element makeup.

The Delphi Pillar was one solid piece of cast-iron. It differed however from other iron objects most notably in that it did not rust. The pillar had long been a marvel to the scientific and metallurgical communities as to how it could be composed of iron and yet not rust in the humid subtropical environment that it was found in.

Analysis of the pillar had determined that whoever had created it had smelted iron ore that was low in sulfur and had treated the outside of the pillar in such a way that the normal elements at play within iron were realigned in a form that resisted oxidation. There was a thin layer over the outside veneer of the cast-iron pillar that oxidized only slightly

like copper, which inhibited the rest of the pillar from experiencing the normal process of iron rusting when exposed to air and water.

The capability of doing such a process was beyond any Indian ironworkers of the antiquity era. Rumors abounded as to the makers of the solitary pillar monument. Most attributed its creation to the mythical land of Lemuria, which was the South Pacific's version of Atlantis.

I rubbed my eyes hard. What was I getting into?

I'd been on the hunt for a sunken Civil War cargo laden with treasure and now I was getting mixed up in fabled lands and technologies of long-ago mythical island kingdoms. Lemuria was in the Pacific, but its twin center of learning and advancement according to popular

thought was in the Atlantic where my treasure legend originated from.

I sat back in my chair thinking it all out. Did I perhaps have the key to finding Atlantis in the bag over by the door?

I hoped not!

Atlantis was the prize on every treasure hunter's radar, but it wasn't on mine. I wanted nothing to do with the insane wealth and prestige that finding Atlantis could bring me. I was content as things were.

If I could find the wreck of the Southern treasure fleet and do well enough to recover ten percent of its wealth I'd have enough money to pay off what I owed on the Celestia's Prize, pay my crew a little extra and put away a little money in a bank for a rainy day.

I would be content with that. Finding Atlantis would be a different story.

I'd have every cutthroat there was not to mention every nation bordering the Atlantic Ocean trying to hone in and claim a share of the prize. I didn't want that, but what was I to do?

I had to pay the bills somehow. This ship wasn't free. Even sitting stationary in harbor was costing money. Money I didn't have to spare.

I glanced at the bag on the floor. Was I getting ahead of myself?

Maybe. But then, maybe not.

Something was evident though in the mess that my legend had become, the Confederate South had not had a technological breakthrough in maritime navigation.

That truth was made evident by both

the condition of the device's older creation and by Captain Rogers's note. He had said that the South had found it. He'd also said that he'd tried to destroy it, but had failed.

It was clear to me from his note that the warning against finding something to do with treasure was about something other than the treasure that the fleet had been carrying. Could the warning be real?

I stood up and went to the bag and rummaging around inside I found the captain's warning note and took it back to the computer. I sat down and read the warning message again feeling the corresponding chill course through me that I had the first time I'd read it.

Something leaped out at me this time. Part of a sentence in the note seemed to

line up with a verse that I had read in the Bible.

I glanced at a drawer of my desk and debated about opening it and looking through the worn Bible the drawer contained. I hadn't opened the drawer in a long time. Three years to be exact.

I left the drawer handle untouched and turned back to my computer. It would be quicker to find the verse I wanted with an online search than to comb through page after page on my own through a physical copy of the Bible and there was no need to relive old experiences.

I typed in the phrase from the captain's message, '*they are dead and shall not rise*'. A verse match came up instantly in response to my query. It was a verse from the Old Testament Book of Isaiah.

I read the full verse and the verses before and after as I searched for the context of the meaning of the phrase within the Captain's note. Who was the verse talking about? It was unclear from the translation of the Bible I was reading so I changed the translation to one of the oldest available sources of the Old Testament, the Septuagint.

The verse came back up slightly different and I stared at the screen in shock. What a change one word could make!

I set the old brittle paper of the note down on the desk, as if it was burning my hand. I swallowed as I glanced over at the bag on the floor and then back to the verse on the screen. I knew too much to ignore the warning I saw before me.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt I now

believed the genuineness of the Captain's note, but what could I do about it?

Better yet what should I do with the pieces of the Orlanis Star?

I pressed my hands to my suddenly throbbing temples. I needed a second opinion.

I lowered my hands as the thought came to me of who I could enlist to help. It would mean an extra stop up the coast a ways, but a visit to an old friend might clear up all the uncertainty and perhaps provide some meaningful clarity to the situation.

As it stood at the present I didn't even want to speak as to what was going on in my mind. Instead I much rather wanted someone to tell me so I didn't think I was going insane. I was close enough to

the brink of insanity as it was.

It was getting light outside and so I got dressed and started to head topside. I was on my way, when my gaze fell on the pack still resting on the floor. I went to it and drug it to the ship's safe a short distance away and began to spin the dial a few times. I cranked the safe open and shoved the pack inside. I locked the safe back up and stepped back from it.

It was a temptation to leave port and find a deep hole and toss the safe and all it contained overboard. I would've done it to, but I needed the money. I turned and left the cabin the decision I had already made inside weighing heavily upon me.

My crew arrived one by one later in the day. Captain Flynn, as he liked to be

called was the first to arrive.

Captain Flynn was the cook and general all around fix-it man whether it was an underperforming mechanical engine or a deep cut that needed stitching. In a word he was indispensable to the smooth running of the ship. He was on the north side of sixty, but as of yet he had no plans to retire from his life at sea.

He'd told me once that he'd spent twice as long at sea as he'd ever walked upon dry land and I believed him. He was the closest thing I had in the form of a friend that I would actually confide in, even though I never had.

His old weathered face wore a speculative cast to it as he studied me with his sea green eyes as his sparse white hair ruffled about in a seaward

breeze, “We be in for a time of it this little jaunt out to sea aye?”

Old sailors had a way of sniffing out the undercurrents of change in the fabric of normal events. I said nothing one way or the other, as I was content to let him figure it out on his own.

He gave me a crusty smile and I saw the excitement in his old seadog eyes light up, “Reporting for duty I is Captain! Ready to sail wherever it may be to claim the prize and plunder the booty that be there.”

I let a small smile crack out in response to the old man’s sly weaseling away in an attempt to ferret out the facts of the situation. The old seadog knew somehow. He chuckled as he passed by slapping me hard on the back.

He stopped and peered back at me to

ask, “Should I see that old Bessie’s in working order then Captain?”

“It wouldn’t go amiss to give her a look over and don’t forget to check up on the Children while you’re at it.”

He gave me a sharp piercing look then at the mention of ‘the Children’ before he continued on his way saying, “Aye aye Captain.”.

I heard him call out to Ortega in his usual derogatory manner, “There ye be ya hateful half troll son of a baker’s daughter. What’s this I see with my own bleeding eyes? Rust it is! Rust! What have you been doing but seeing the south end of your sack?”

Ortega’s response was fired back hotly in Spanish and I just shook my head as the long-running amicable feud between the two continued on without let

up.

Big Jim was the next to arrive on board. As his name suggested he was in actuality quite big. He was a native born Samoan with the menacing facial tattoos to match and he spoke even less than I did.

Big Jim's back-story was a mystery, but I trusted him. He was my main man in the water, being himself an excellent swimmer, as well as a diver. Neither of us said anything to each other with our only nonverbal communication being a head bob and a brief meeting of the eyes.

An hour later my last crewmember arrived, only she wasn't alone. She had a younger girl with her and my lips tightened at the sight of trouble on the horizon. Now what?

Serena came up the ladder looking a

bit nervous, but determined. The younger girl, who I put to be in her mid teens, followed and it was apparent that there was some family resemblance involved between the two women. I'd probably already lost the fight, but I kept my face sternly disapproving anyway.

Serena stepped up in front of me and resolutely said, "It's like this Captain, my sister, remember I told you about her, well she lives in....."

"Serena." I said firmly cutting off whatever roundabout description she'd been about to untangle before me.

She sighed loudly and cut to the chase, "She's my niece and she needs to get out of town for a while."

"This could be a tough trip out Serena, with no place for an inexperienced girl to be of help." I said in a tone that

brook no response.

Serena went on though, “She’s gotten mixed up with a gang leader and her mother asked me for help. What was I to do? Please Captain!”

I glanced from Serena to the girl, who couldn’t be much more than sixteen, if that. The girl’s arms were folded across herself and she had a rebellious look to her.

“Serena this isn’t a daycare facility for horny teenagers without any common sense!” I said in a heated tone.

Serena’s fingers reached out and she squeezed my arm imploringly, “Please Captain! I promised my sister.” Serena said begging softly to me in a personal tone that I couldn’t ignore.

I sighed loudly as I admitted the battle lost.

“She has to bunk with you. I’m not kicking any of the men out of their berths!”

“Perfectly fine Captain! We’ll be as snug as two bugs in a rug.”

I nodded and approached the girl, who watched me come toward her a bit trepidatiously. She didn’t move away though and I gave her credit for having some courage.

I was imposing to most people I met and smaller than only a few, such as Big Jim.

“What’s your name?” I asked a little harshly.

The girl stayed mutinously silent. I needed a rope. One was lobbed through the air at me from Big Jim. He and I had our own connection of thought at times.

I made a loop and lassoed it over the

girl and then jerking her to the opening in the railing I tipped her back over the side and held the rope with one hand as her haughty look disappeared to be replaced with naked fear. Her arms were bound to her sides by the loop of rope and she was helpless to avoid falling if I should let go of the rope.

“What is your name?” I repeated.

“Christina!” She was quick to respond with looking very much terrified by the sudden change of events.

“Christina while on board my ship you will be a model citizen. You will do as you’re told, when you are told to, without any backtalk. Do I make myself clear?”

The girl nodded her head vigorously as her feet were poised on the edge of the ship’s platform, while the rest of her

hung over into space above the waters of the harbor.

“Yes Sir.” I said.

“Yes Sir!” She quickly stated and I pulled her back upright and let go of the rope, which she hurriedly stepped free of in her movement to get away from both me and the opening of the ship’s railing.

Giving her one last hard look I turned away and said, “Pull up the anchor Big Jim and start the engines Ortega. We’re headed out.”

Christina stood rubbing at her arms where the rope had cut in as she watched the tall black man that was the Captain stride away along the deck. There

wasn't one doubt in her mind that he would have let go of the rope if she'd been smart with her response.

Selena stepped up and patted her niece on the back, "Welcome aboard."

Christina gave her a glare in return. None of this had been her idea!

"Thanks a lot dear Auntie! You and Mom have really done it to me this time! I'll be lucky to survive a voyage with Captain Ahab over there!" Christina said hotly.

Selena looked after the Captain, "He can be hard, but he's still a good man at heart. He won't let any harm come to you."

Christina snorted derisively in response and Selena smacked her hard with her hand across the face.

"Ow!" Christina exclaimed looking at

Selena with shocked hurt in her eyes.

“Welcome to life at sea Christina. You’ll learn soon enough that I won’t tolerate anymore from you than the Captain will.”

Selena started off then and Christina quickly whined out, “How long will we be at sea?”

Selena shrugged, “Who can tell, only the Captain knows that.”

Selena disappeared from view and Christina grabbed a hold of the railing as the Celestia’s Prize took off from the harbor with power. She was so sorry now for whatever she’d done to make her mother hate her so much to do this to her. She’d be lucky to come back alive from this trip.

Chapter Three

The Shadow Beckons

We made our way up the coast to Baltimore. It was evening by the time the ship was all squared away in the bustling harbor of the Chesapeake Bay. I headed for shore alone in the dinghy. When I had left I had seen Christina at the railing staring at the wharf in the distance like she was contemplating swimming for it.

Poor girl had been nothing but seasick ever since we had left Charleston. I had almost debated about taking her along with me to shore and giving her some cash so she could make her own way home, but it wasn't my place to do that.

Tough love was one thing, but I hoped that the girl's mother reconsidered the next time about the wisdom of abandoning her child to the mercy of the sea. That was if there would be a next time.

I tied the dinghy off and slung the heavy pack over my shoulder as I stepped up onto the dock. A feeling of foreboding significance haunted my steps, as I made my way up the boardwalk to hail a taxi at a nearby street.

It took a while to escape the

congestion of the city to make our way into the more posh suburban neighborhoods at its periphery. The taxi stopped outside of a Georgian style house at the end of a cul-de-sac in one such posh neighborhood.

I gave the taxi driver enough money to wait and got out with the bag in tow. The evening was a noisy one with the sound of cicadas and other insects filling the evening breeze with their cacophony of sound.

I made my way up the paver driveway and then up the walkway that led to the pretentious looking pillared entrance of the house. I knocked heavily on the door and waited. After a moment the door opened to reveal my former brother-in-law, Matthew Reese.

He gazed at me in shock for a moment

before pushing the glasses back on the bridge of his nose as he recovered from his shock somewhat. In a dazed tone he asked, “What’s it been Eli, three, four years now?”

“Six.” I said.

I’d never particularly had an invested relationship with Laura’s brother, but he was good at what he did, which was anything to do with the field of archaeology.

He stepped back and held the door open wider and I stepped in. I’d been here once before and while the exterior was the same the interior of the house surprisingly wasn’t.

I glanced around surprised at the bare rooms empty of furniture and embellishment. The house appeared as if its contents had already been moved

elsewhere. I hadn't pictured Matt as the moving kind.

I glanced questioningly at him and he shrugged, "I lost my job at the University two years ago and I couldn't find another one. Cindy left me six months ago and with the divorce now final I have to sell the house."

I looked around again at what had once been a home in better times.

"I'm sorry to see it come to this between you and Cindy." I said with genuine regret.

He nodded and looked choked up for a moment before he looked away. He looked back to me with a mask firmly in place and with a hint of curiosity pervading his voice he asked, "So what's in the bag?"

I looked around for a table and he

gestured into another room that was dark. I stepped toward it, but stopped dead, as he flipped the light switch on and revealed the big oaken dining room table that the room held within its confines.

The one time I'd been here before had been for a Thanksgiving dinner. I'd had my family with me then.

"I'm sorry Eli! I wasn't thinking! I've got a table in another room we can use." Matt said apologizing all over himself.

I broke free of my trance and headed to the big table, which I unloaded my bag onto, as I concentrated on getting my emotions firmly in check.

"This is for your eyes only Matt. I'm trusting you to keep what you see in the strictest of confidences." I said firmly.

He nodded eagerly, as he pressed

closer to the table.

I started to take out the five petal pieces followed by the central crystal piece, which I sat down in the middle of the petals already arranged on the table.

“It’s the....”

“Orlanis Star!” Matt said finishing for me in a daze, as he stared down at the artifacts on the table.

He shook his head back and forth, “It’s not at all what I expected!”

“Me neither. I found them with this note from Captain Rogers in the attic of a house he once stayed in.” I said, as I handed the note over to Matt and watched his eyes go big as he read.

He reread it through several times before glancing up at me, “My friend I fear you’ve traded one treasure quest for another.”

I sighed bitterly at the confirmation of my thoughts.

Matt shook his head at me smiling wryly, “I swear you must be the one man on God’s green Earth that would react just so to finding out that your Civil War treasure hunt just became one of a far grander scale.”

“So just to confirm you think that this could be a clue as to the whereabouts of Atlantis?” I asked hanging on to my last hope for simplicity, but he nodded in confirmation dashing all of my hopes of the simple treasure salvage operation I had envisioned.

Matt talked then as if to himself, “I wondered how that ship could come out of nowhere like that after twenty some years had gone by. There must be a gateway and this is the key.”

“Key?” I asked, as I remembered what was said in the note about a key in the most gloomiest of overtones.

“Yup.” Matt responded abstractly, as he picked up a petal of the star.

“What kind of a key and a gateway to where?” I asked growing more perturbed by the moment.

“Couldn’t say, but that ship was somewhere for twenty years.”

I glanced at the note laying on the table before asking, “What do you know about Atlantis?”

Matt glanced at me and then at the note, “I know many things, but separating fact from myth and legend is what’s difficult. However I would say this note, if it’s to be believed, is rather full of clues. Did you catch this line here?” He asked pointing to the line I had looked

up.

“Yes I did. It’s part of a verse in Isaiah.”

“And what did the word ‘dead’ translate across as?” Matt asked knowingly.

“Rephaim.”

He nodded having already known the answer.

“It would seem of all the available myths of Atlantis and for that matter Lemuria that the one that rings with the most truth is the darkest of all. A story that is a far cry from the romanticized version in the imaginations of those who came after. If we wish to go down the mythical road to Atlantis from the route that this note suggests than the legend would go like this. The legend as a whole takes and is understood from a

Christian bibliographical understanding. Constantine was the first Roman Emperor to convert to Christianity. He soon thereafter made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. Now up to that point there were many canons of Holy Scripture, which were taken to be inspired by God. Now Constantine took issue with one of the books and declared it to be not of Divine inspiration. That book was the Book of Enoch. His reasoning for his decision was because he thought the heavy mention of angelic influence and behavior found within the Books of Enoch were too hard to understand and presented a picture of the origin of strife and contention before the great flood that was not true. Many early church fathers insisted he was in error to remove the

Books of Enoch from the canon of Holy Scripture contained within the Bible. Some churches still have it in their Bibles, namely, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Many of the oldest surviving manuscripts are written in an early Ethiopian area language. Anyway compared against the body of Holy Scripture, the Book of Enoch, seems to have no contradictions with what is viewed as Divinely inspired, but what it does do is go into the detail of the state of the world before the Genesis flood and why things had gotten so bad that God was moved to destroy His creation. It contends that it wasn't just commonplace wickedness that led to man's downfall and straying from God, but rather fallen angels were of primary blame. At several points in the Bible it

is clearly copied down of the transgression of some of the heavenly angels having intimate relations with the daughters of men and creating an offspring referred to as the Nephilim. The Nephilim were the giants of old and it was with them, along with the fallen angels that helped corrupt both man and man's pure bloodline to the point that God even repented that he had made man. It wasn't just man that the fallen angels corrupted, but all of creation including the animals and the plants. Now the Book of Enoch goes into the actual names of the angels involved in this lustful falling away. Not only according to Enoch did these angels commit the sin of lusting after human women, but they gave secret knowledge to humanity that God had not intended

for them to have. So you can see according to this extra Biblical view into the past how such a civilization such as Atlantis could've happened. If you go into the more secular tale of Atlantis and examine it through a Biblical lens some compelling clues are revealed as to who the Atlantean's were. Now according to the Greek mythology, in Plato's story of it, long ago there was a large island continent, which the god Poseidon came down to. It's helpful to remember that from a Biblical perspective that all the false gods of the ancient world were personified after either fallen angels or demons, with the latter being the spirits of the offspring of the fallen angels and human women known as the Nephilim. This Poseidon of Greek lore, who is linked to one of the angels who lusted

after the daughters of men, saw the daughter of Cletus a human woman and married her. She bore him ten sets of twins, which ruled as king's over both Atlantis and surrounding satellite kingdoms. All of her sons were giants according to Plato's account. Atlantis then was a place of giants. They were fed information in the form of an angelic being, who set himself up to be worshiped as a god. The Holy Scripture clearly points to the giants as a race of beings at sharp enmity with the race of mankind. They even fed upon mankind, which lines up with what we know of Atlantis being a nation always at war with the ancient world around them. The demise of Atlantis and all of its great knowledge is telling. According to Plato, Atlantis is defeated in battle by

the Athenians, who will one day become the models of gods like Zeus and Hercules. Through some corresponding unfortunate weather patterns Atlantis is flooded and lost forever beneath the waves. Now Biblically speaking, throw out the Athenian part of the story, because that's just more preening being done on the part of demons in the guise of false gods and focus in on the one truth of the story, which is Atlantis sunk beneath the waves. What they're not telling you is that everything else was also sinking beneath the waves during the Genesis flood. Now extensive research has been done today to find the remnants of both the island continents of Atlantis and Lemuria, without any luck. Hence why one might need a key to unlock a gateway or channel.”

I held my hands up, “Whoa Matt! Everything you’ve said up to now is at least somewhat believable given a little faith, but do you seriously intend to try to convince me that this device is the key to getting to other worlds?” I asked skeptically.

“Not at all.” Matt replied before tapping his foot on the ground symbolically.

I glanced down and then it clicked in my thinking. He couldn’t be serious?

“Oh but I am. Jules Vern got quite a few things right after all. Something else that you should consider is that there is a lot of Biblical evidence to suggest that there is a body of water at the Earth’s core or near it anyway. Many times it is mentioned of the water beneath the Earth being separate from the water bodies

above. In one of the verses in Psalms it actually mentions that God laid the foundations of the land on water and then of course there's the Genesis flood where the fountains of the deep are broken up and extra water came from somewhere below.”

I stared at Matt in shock. I had never imagined anything like this even being remotely possible.

“So you think that the actual landmass of the island that Atlantis was on could've sunk down to this inner body of water at the Earth's core?”

“I think it's a plausible theory to explain why we don't find any evidence today of the landmass existing where Atlantis was supposed to have. We know from fables that Atlantis had a volcano and that they supposedly tapped

into the thermal energy to run some of their advanced technology. To have had a volcano Atlantis would've had to of been located on a hotspot. Today we have the Atlantic tectonic coastal ridge, which is the site of where Atlantis was reported to have been. It's possible that the oceanic plates opened up briefly and Atlantis's island continent sank through into the void below. The same could've happened to Lemuria in the Pacific and to other landmasses. One thing is for sure, we have a Captain Rogers who turns up with the Mary Belle twenty years after the voyage of the treasure fleet. Where was he and the ship for over twenty years and why would he leave a note that has a symbolic tie in with Atlantis? It's clear that this device is not of Southern Confederate

manufacture, but much older. The scrollwork here on the petals is reminiscent of the earliest Babylonian writings and design patterning. No, I'd say you have a very believable working hypothesis and it would seem that you even have the key to unlock the truth whether the mystery of Atlantis is fact or fiction once and for all. In either case count me in for the expedition. When do we start?" Matt finished on a resolute note.

This was getting completely out of hand! First it had been the girl and now my estranged brother-in-law that I hadn't seen in six years.

I started to voice my objections, but Matt held up a hand forestalling me, "Think about it, if the objective is to find Atlantis then it would be very helpful to

have someone like me along with you to help interpret any clues or puzzles that there might be, which are rooted in antiquities' past. I could be very useful if.....”

“Matt my goal is not to find Atlantis! I don't want anything to do with the nightmare hassle of what something like discovering Atlantis or a whole new realm of the Earth would bring me!” I said in hot anger, as I felt myself being closed in on by a box of someone else's fabrication.

“Be that as it may dear brother-in-law the fact stands that the Southern treasure fleet you are in search of in order to continue eating and living a perpetual life at sea is likely to be found with Atlantis. Find Atlantis and you will find your treasure fleet.”

“Now how can you claim to know that?” I exclaimed in exasperation.

Matt looked at the pieces on the table contemplatively, “As you know I am a lover of history and this is not the first time you’ve brought up this treasure scheme to find sunken Confederate treasure. It’s been an idea that you’ve batted around for a long time. Do you recall what I told you the first time eight years ago?” Matt asked leadingly.

“You said my theory of the fleet being an actual reality was faulty, because under no circumstances or amount of bribe money were the British going to join in on the side of the South and even if they had whatever help they could have provided would’ve been too little and too late to do any good.”

I said remembering Matt’s putdown of

my theory quite well.

“I continue to hold firm to that opinion of mine as well.” Matt affirmed.

“Then where was such a fleet headed for?” I asked.

“Why to Atlantis of course.” Matt said matter-of-factly.

I blinked.

That idea had never occurred to me and Matt now built on the seed he had just planted, “The South in late 1864 knew they had no chance of winning the war even with British aid. They only fought on into 1865 for pride’s sake. Something else that stood out to me about this mythical fleet was that the few dock manifests that are available suggest a very different cargo than that of a fleet intended as a treasure convoy. There were a lot of passengers. Entire families

of high class southern plantation owners, but they only made up roughly half of the human cargo. The rest were slaves. Now why would they take slaves that would only be set free by the British authorities upon their arrival in Great Britain? They weren't all house slaves either. They were field slaves. I think they knew the significance of the Orlanis Star and where it would lead them. The island of Atlantis for them represented a chance to escape from the threat of losing the life style of wealthy plantation owners that was ingrained in them from birth. On the island of Atlantis they would be able to set up a new plantation empire untouchable by the Yankees. Perhaps even find the technological ability to return and win the war for the South. I think it's a plausible occurrence given

what evidence we do have that the intention of the fleet was never to reach England, but rather the island of Atlantis.”

I stared at the pieces on the table thinking it all over for a long moment.

“Do you think they could still be there living out their utopia like setting?” I asked wonderingly.

Matt shrugged, “I suppose it’s a possibility, but I’d say from the nature of this message that something ill willed befell them and then there is the matter of Captain Rogers escaping this island realm with the key to finding it in tow. He never made it public that he had a key to such a realm, which makes me think that he wouldn’t have brought the key back with him if there hadn’t been a good reason to remove it from the land

below.”

There was silence for a while, which Matt broke, “You know Eli, if they really are still there living their plantation dreams out there will be no treasure for you to salvage and you will be seen as no better than a slave.”

Now there was a sobering thought.

“It wouldn’t be the first time in my family I suppose.” I commented reflectively.

“I suppose not. Which side of your family traces its roots back to slavery in the South?” Matt asked inquiringly.

“My mother’s side.” I said not really caring about the past.

I glanced up from the pieces of the Orlanis Star to Matt and was very honest for a moment, “My boat is paid out for three more months. I have only enough

money to pay my crew for one month and I don't have any available salvage jobs other than this treasure quest. If I don't make some dough I'm done for and since Laura and the kids....." I looked away as emotion rose up to choke me.

Matt reached out and squeezed my shoulder. I looked back to him feeling ashamed of the tear sliding down my cheek, but Matt's eyes were equally watery.

"Look around you Eli. I'm at the end of my rope too. There's nothing left here for me, but empty memories. This expedition on my part would be a source of excitement to help me forget all this and for you it would be the ability to keep your free roaming love affair with the sea. Both of our needs can be answered by taking this plunge into the

unknown. I say we go for it and live life a little on the wild side and maybe we'll both forget for a little while what once was."

I nodded and he patted me on the shoulder before saying, "Let me get my toothbrush."

He wandered off into the barren house and I proceeded to pack up the pieces of the device, while I waited for his return.

Matt was back in five minutes and together we headed for the door. I opened it and waited as I watched Matt write out a brief one sentence note.

I read what he had written as he let the page of computer paper flutter down to the tiled entryway. "You can have it all Cindy, since that's what's most important to you."

I glanced from the page on the floor to

Matt, “I’m not planning this expedition as a suicide run Matt.”

He grinned big and slapped me on the back as hard as his academic styled frame could muster, which wasn’t very convincing and said, “Just how do you define suicide Eli? We’re about to embark on an ocean voyage using a navigation tool that’s probably cursed and of demonic origin to find a path through the sea and Earth itself to invade a hidden realm within the core of the Earth where I’ll likely be lined up and shot as a Yankee sympathizer, while your chained to a plow and given a taste of the whip each day along with your morning gruel.”

I shook my head, “You make it sound so homey. Why don’t we just shoot ourselves and be done with it?”

Matt chuckled, “Cheer up my friend! Instead of those grim fates I just mentioned maybe we’ll go a long way to satisfying a giant Atlantean’s appetite.”

“Are you sure you’re not leaving your depression medicine behind or something?” I said only half jokingly.

“No my friend, if everything goes well you’ll find enough gold to buy a bigger boat and outfit it to the nines as they say and stay at sea for life. Meanwhile I’ll finance my own Biblical archaeology digs and live at home in ancient dirt.” Matt rejoined.

“Now that sounds like a plan!” I said, as I held the door of the taxi open.

Matt stopped, “Thanks for letting me come Eli.”

I smiled ruefully, “Did I have much of a choice about it?”

Matt grinned and got into the taxi and I piled in after him feeling excited about something for the first time in a long time. It was hard to say whatever we would find, but it promised to be an adventure of some kind.

Matt went ahead of me up the ladder and I quickly followed. Reaching the top of the ladder I was greeted by Serena, “Ready to cast off Captain?”

“Hold off for a moment. I need to speak with you in private.”

She looked surprised, but followed me over to a secluded part of the deck. I stopped and turned to her, “Serena we’re about to embark on an expedition that will be very dangerous from which we might never return.”

Serena’s face split into a smile,

“That’s every day with you Captain.”

“No Serena. This trip is much more off the beaten path than all our other excursions around the globe I assure you.”

Her smile went away, as she sobered up to the seriousness of what I was saying.

“Serena I think it would be best if Christina went home. I’ll pay her way there that’s no problem, but this trip is far too dangerous to take a young girl like her on.”

A spot of moisture came out of Serena’s eye to wet her eyelashes as she bit her lip.

“What is it Serena?”

Her voice rough with emotion Serena said, “I don’t have anything to send her back to. Two weeks ago my sister got

diagnosed with stage IV pancreatic cancer that's already spread everywhere. The doctors only gave her six weeks to live. She asked me to look after Christina. I'm all she has!"

I looked out at the quiet harbor for a long moment before responding, "Well I guess she stays then."

"Thank you Captain!" Serena said giving me a brief hug and a kiss on the cheek before she hurried off.

I stared moodily out at the dark water. May God forgive me if something happened to Christina on this expedition, because I'd never forgive myself for putting her in harm's way!

Chapter Four

Decision Made

I waited till we were two days at sea, before I disclosed what we were after. The only one of the crew not shocked was Big Jim. I don't think anything could ever truly shock him.

I watched Ortega's and Flynn's eyes light up like Christmas lights at the sound of Atlantis. Serena looked worried, while Christina actually looked a little excited.

I didn't tell them about possible encounters with giants upon our arrival

to the core of the Earth or that we could possibly discover our deaths in boiling hot magma. That would all come in time. For right now all I had to do was figure out how to get there, which I had no clue how to accomplish.

I designated that chore to Matt. He had the job of figuring out the crystal and the metallic petals and how they could be used as a navigational guide, while I took us along the general path that the fleet would've had to of taken, at least, initially.

Three long days later saw Matt no closer to solving the riddle of the Orlanis Star. I was in a thunderous mood and I kept to myself to avoid lashing out at anybody. Ortega made the mistake of approaching once and I wasn't nice.

I had a very bad temper and this endless sailing around, while precious time wasted away, was doing me no good. I left the bridge and went to my cabin to be in seclusion, only there was nothing to do.

I craved peace of any kind, but there wasn't any to be found. I glanced at the drawer of my desk and contemplated its contents for a moment. It certainly couldn't hurt.

I went to the desk and ripped the drawer open and took out the worn Bible and lay down on my cot and began to read in Psalms. I found a measure of peace as I went through psalm after psalm, as if I'd found an old friend I hadn't seen in a long time.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

I jumped out of my cot startled and the Bible that had been lying open on my chest went flying, but I caught it before it hit the floor. I set it down on the desk as I went to the door. I hadn't meant to fall asleep, but apparently I had.

I opened the door to see a nervous looking Christina cower back from me slightly. I focused on looking calm as I didn't like the fact that she saw something in me to be scared of, "What's the matter?" I asked.

She pointed upwards and said, "Matt thinks he solved it."

I quickly moved past her and went topside. I found Matt in the wheelhouse and strangely for someone who had just solved an ancient riddle he looked rather low-key even perhaps depressed.

Apprehension rose up in me as I asked, “What is it Matt? What’s wrong?”

He shrugged expressively, “Well I’ve solved it, I think.”

I stepped up beside him to see that the petals of the star were slightly glowing. I hadn’t seen them do that before. Matt picked up the crystal centerpiece and brought it out over open space and let it go. The piece hovered in midair.

Four of the five petals rose up off the chart table and hovered out to fan around the central hovering crystal. Matt picked up the fifth pedal, which was slightly different than the others, another thing of which I hadn’t noticed before.

He brought it near to the metallic outer ring of the central crystal and it snapped to the side of it magnetically. He pointed

to the four outward petals that floated a foot away from the central crystal.

“These four stand for North, East, South, and West. The fifth petal is your navigational heading indicator, which I’m assuming to be targeted on Atlantis.”

Matt leaned close to the central crystal and spoke one word definitively, “Atlantis!”

The central crystal lit up at the spoken name and scrollwork letters lit up in the metallic alloy surrounding the crystal. The text was different than the text etched in scrollwork on the petals.

“The writing is from a later time period, but still of very early Babylonian origin. I was able to translate it roughly.” Matt said sounding for all the world as if he was thoroughly unexcited about what was a monumental

discovery.

He handed me a tablet and cautiously I took it not understanding the level of reserve that he was manifesting. The words leapt off the page at me as I read them aloud,

“To lovers of wisdom and seekers of the hidden things, I welcome you to the halls of enlightenment. Once they were proud and full of those who sought the wisdom of the angels, who rebelled so that they might come and live among us sharing what it was meant for us to know, but was kept from us by a petty and jealous God, who would have us live our lives out in ignorance and fail to attain the immortal knowledge of the first angelic rebel, who saved the world from a corrupt power-hungry dictator of a God. The halls are no longer

proud, because of the actions of a jealous God, but wisdom is still to be found as well as power. Power to become a god of your own making. Listen to one who became mighty against God and king over all the Earth. Adopt the ways of the seed of the first rebel and you like me will be enabled to make great effort in our common war against God so that we might be free and constrained no more and able to kill even the very concept of one God as we all will become gods of our own making and thus free to choose our own way. Our ally in this fight for freedom and quest for knowledge is Satan and all his angelic host along with the spirits of those mighty ones who came before. Pledge your soul to him as a fitting sacrifice

and we shall win as we reject God's authority over us. I, Nimrod, mightiest upon the Earth and greatest of all kings have spoken. Bind yourself to the path of knowledgeable enlightenment and the sea lanes will be opened up unto you, even as they were to me and I became great and if you are worthy so can you."

I glanced up from the written words to meet Matt's eyes. He met my gaze and shook his head negatively as he said, "I can't agree to do that and I want no part of such an unholy agreement, but your Captain of the ship."

There was silence for a moment which was broken by Big Jim who spoke up deeply, "They should be thrown into the sea! I no serve darkness anymore, because my Jesus saved me!"

He pointed at me and said, “I work for you for free! I no need the money!”

The big man had spoken and he'd said a lot.

“He's right Captain!” Serena said chiming in.

I glanced at Flynn and Ortega and both surprisingly nodded in agreement. I hadn't given either of them that much credit in terms of moral religious virtue.

I glanced from the crew around me to the pieces of the Orlanis Star hovering in the air before me.

I would lose everything.

Sometimes it didn't matter and this was one of those times. I grabbed the central crystal piece with its blasphemous wording and chucked it out the open wheelhouse door and into the sea. The other pieces soon followed.

“Take us back to port Serena.” I said roughly before leaving the silent wheelhouse.

I made my way down the ladder quickly towards my quarters needing to be alone, as I was embarrassed as a Captain for my inability to provide for my crew just as a father would have been to see his children go hungry or go without what they needed.

The pieces of the Orlanis Star splashed into the water heavily, but only for a moment did the pieces begin to sink. As one the pieces boomeranged backward toward the Celestia's Prize's hull under the water.

They chased through the water after

the ship, as she turned around and motored for port. With loud audible snaps they magnetically clicked onto the metal plating near the propeller shaft just above the waterline.

Christina stepped backward from the railing completely creeped out by what she had just seen. What power had driven the pieces of the star to attach themselves to the ship the way they had just done?

Everything going on was just too weird and she was scared. She didn't say anything to anyone. She just wanted this whole ill begotten experience to be over with and be back on land again so she could get on with her life and apologize to her mother for being a brat.

I sat down on my cot and held my head in my hands as all the what if's and negative possibilities began to run through my mind as to how bleak my future now seemed and how it was about to become my reality. I grew weary in the attempt to remain positive about the future.

I had made the right decision poor excuse of a Christian that I still was. It didn't seem to matter though as my mind was filled with negative doubts and fears that were becoming realized.

I pressed hard on my temples and groaned out, "God make it stop!"

I fell back on the bed feeling like my fight for survival was over. My quest to remain in control of my fate and sanity was out of my hands. I felt raw, open,

and exposed.

Tears came and I whispered into the stillness of the room, “God help me, because no one else can!” Strangely then I fell asleep and I dreamed.

Chapter Five

Faithful Servant

I heard laughter. The giggling sound of the merriment of children at play was suddenly very close and yet so far away in a sense. Beautiful melodies of sound that enriched my soul with joy, as I recognized the sound of my daughters.

“I have not failed to keep the innocent young souls of your daughters or the soul of your first love who put her trust in Me. I am ever faithful even as you in the weakness brought on by your self-imposed distance from My

strength and comfort have been faithful to Me once again. Well done thou good and faithful servant!”

“I’m not faithful! I ran from you God with all my might!” I exclaimed in brokenness.

“Yes you did and yet you did not outrun My grace. Are you not tired of being away from My comforting presence? Do you not mourn the loss of My presence, even as you continue to mourn the loss of your family? Stop and know My love for you has never diminished. Come back into My presence Eli and let Me heal your pain and mend your heart and cause a new day to dawn in your life filled with new joys and a new purpose. Stop your wondering in the wilderness of your desolation and feel My peace, even as I

lead you to a good place. Allow yourself to fall in love with Me all over again and be no more alone or haunted by what once was, but is no more.”

Crying and jerking with emotion I fell off the cot onto the floor. I pressed my face into the floor and choked out, “Please let it be so Lord of my life! I can’t go on like this anymore! I would rather die in this instant than go on one more moment feeling empty and barren of life, because I’m not right with you!”

I felt the warm presence of love pressed down from above fill me. A love I had been so long without and I cried all the bitterness’s of my life out into the floor, until I was spent with exhaustion.

I don’t know how much later it was as I lay collapsed of all energy upon the

floor, but I felt the impression of the Creator of all life once more upon me as I heard, *“That which your hand finds to do, do with all your might.”*

I swallowed and asked, “What is it you want me to do Lord?”

“Loosen the bonds of those who are afflicted. Give the people that have no place to lay their head a home of their own. Abolish the ways of wickedness and find a place of your own in the land that I will show you even as I deliver your enemies into your hand thou righteous servant of the Most High. Only be faithful as you were today and I will do all this and more for I am faithful to deliver those who put their trust in Me, even as I will give you a place of honor in the Kingdom to come.”

“Why me Lord? Surely there is someone who is better than me!”

“Who is better than you, a man humble in spirit, but faithful in purpose. Eli, Eli, there is nothing that I cannot do through you, if you will only give me your freedom of choice as you did this day. Now get up valiant warrior for it is I, the Ancient of Days, who has given you strength and insight to accomplish what I have purposed for you to do. Even as I have purposed it, so shall it be done!”

I was thrust up to my feet from an unknown source and propelled toward the door of my cabin, even as a voice of Divine authority said, *“Follow the star that I have provided to show you the hidden places of the Earth.”*

I exclaimed in horror, as if I felt guilty

of a great crime, “I threw it away into the sea Lord!”

“That childish bauble cursed from its creation and inscribed with man’s vanity! It is not a star, but only a cheap thing of no importance! Behold I have given you a true star to light your path! For do not I command the hosts of heaven even as I do the seas and the beasts of the earth?”

“Yes Lord!” I said in awed obedience, as I was driven from my cabin and up the ladder and out into the night air.

I grasped the railing, as I stared up into the sky full of stars overhead, but one stood out more than all the rest and it seemed low in the sky. It was moving steadily away from us.

I turned towards the bridge to see Big

Jim manning the wheel alone in the dark, “Follow that star!” I cried out.

He nodded and surprised me by saying, “Yes my Captain!”

The Celestia’s Prize hauled back around in the night as Big Jim spun the wheel to line up with the star that seemed to pause briefly for us in the night sky as if it was waiting for us to catch up. The star started to move again and Jim opened up the throttle to full and the Celestia’s Prize surged forward slicing through the waves in pursuit of the star that kept pace ahead of the ship.

Like sleepwalkers the rest of the crew emerged out onto the deck to stare at the provided wonder in the night sky ahead of us. Matt came up alongside of me and I glanced at him to see him mesmerized by the star.

He said without looking at me, “I had a dream and now I’m awake only to realize that my dream is going to become a reality!”

I patted him on the back as new life and new purpose swept into both of our lives. I was glad to share this experience with him.

“What’s happening?” Christina asked in a scared voice.

I turned to her, “Nothing to be afraid of Christina. Instead watch and be amazed by what God can do!”

The star was getting closer to the surface of the sea and Divine instruction came to me.

“Flynn!”

“Aye aye Captain?”

“You and Ortega start closing all the topside hatches and the port and

starboard window covers. Tie down everything else.”

“Aye aye Captain!”

Matt and Serena went along to help and I moved over to Christina, who held the railing with a death grip. She was staring at the falling star like it was a harbinger of doom.

“What do you believe in Christina?” I asked calmly.

Her horrified gaze drifted to me and she blinked and started to cry as she said, “I don’t know!”

On an emotional cry she asked, “Am I going to die?”

“Christina we’re all going to die at some point, when that is I can’t say. Your sister has faith and she’s a good role model for you. Start figuring out the important things and start asking the

tough questions, because tomorrow is guaranteed to no one. I pray that you have time to decide what your choice will be in life Christina, but be warned of this. To choose not to make a choice or to play around and only half commit is making a choice. The wrong choice Christina!”

She was crying and in general she was petrified, but she wasn't yet ready for more. She was getting quite the show to help her believe in the miraculous though.

I pulled her tight grip on the railing free and led her inside the wheelhouse as the star really started to plummet downward.

I stepped up beside Big Jim as he manned the wheel. He gave me a big open faced grin. Jim it would appear

was full of surprises lately. For starters I'd never known that he exhibited a Christian faith, as he'd never talked of religion, just as he never talked in general.

“This is the best trip out yet Captain!” He intoned deeply looking as if he was having the time of his life.

I responded to his full smile with one of my own. I had a feeling that there were bigger and better things to come, but for right now it was nice to smile again and really mean it.

The smile left me though as the star came down and streaked across the water ahead of us. A channel of water rolled back and we were in the channel's bottom, as we watched the sea split backwards away from us to either side.

Up ahead the bright heavenly body that had been our guide swung sharply to the right and then seemed to pivot around in a circle and then was gone from our sight. Jim and I shared a meaningful look and quickly we stood to either side of the wheel ready to help each other.

I saw it only moments before we plunged headlong into it. The upturned waters of the sea had been turned into a gigantic whirlpool!

“Turn the wheel!” I yelled, but Jim had already spun the wheel from his end, as I pulled from the other end. The Celestia’s Prize swung to the right and plunged downward around and around the whirlpool of cylindrical flowing water that went down and down and down into the depths of the sea.

It became so dark that all we could

see was the faint light of the star that we had followed here far far below us. It was as if we were in a long train tunnel and the outside light was just a brief dot of color in the distance.

The ship was beyond steering and we were all thrown around the wheelhouse as the ship's wheel spun free making its own way down the mad white-water course. Overcome by the dizziness of our spiraling descent there wasn't one of us that was able to keep from retching horribly as we tried to grasp a hold of anything we could latch onto in our desperation to find a solid purchase of some kind in our fast-moving world of spinning fright.

Fear began to rise up in me that we could never survive such an event as this. Somehow this had all been a

terrible mistake. It had to have been.

I grasped a hold of the threads of my spinning consciousness and jerked them to stop, because what I had dreamed and seen was real and it would come to pass even as God was not a liar. Armed with that faith I looked ahead out the forward windows and almost lost my faith for the second time.

There was a lot of light ahead of us now. Red light glowed eerily up at us through a hazy mist. It appeared like we were plunging straight to hell!

The smell and steam of boiled seawater pervaded into the wheelhouse so thickly that we could hardly see each other as we coughed on the somewhat acrid fumes. I wiped at the condensation of the wheelhouse window and briefly saw a vision of what hell must look like.

Columns of red magma rose all around us as the seawater rushed around the hissing landscape of molten fire as we plunged down through a gap in the mantle of the world. The red was suddenly gone after it seemed like it had been there for an eternity and breathing became easier for only a moment, until it became clear that we were all freefalling through space.

We started screaming and then abruptly stopped as we were slammed hard into the deck of the ship as the Celestia's Prize connected with something roughly. It felt like we were in a fast river of some kind.

I wiped at the windows again as Jim managed to grab a hold of the wheel and steady its course. The ride was smoother, but we were moving

unbelievably fast.

The window was partially clear of condensation and both Jim and I were able to see that we were on a fast-moving current of water headed downward at a sharp angle. Up ahead of us the current of water culminated in a big kick up of sea spray where the waters of the above world were connecting with the waters of the interior.

A lot of things were trying to fight their way through within my mind. Such as the reality that this hidden inner world really did exist, but those thoughts were put on the back burner of my consciousness as the kicked up white-water ahead of us got closer and closer.

I left the window to brace against the wheel with Jim. We hit the white-water

hard and both of us were thrown from the wheel. I somersaulted through the air to land with a smack against the wall and for a brief moment I was able to open my eyes, but something drove me under and I blacked out against my will.

Chapter Six

The Storm

I blinked a couple of times and then I reached up to feel at my very sore head. Someone had wrapped a bandage around it and the smell of dried blood was heavy in my nostrils.

I was still in the wheelhouse, but no one else appeared to be. Alarm at that helped drive me painfully up to my feet.

I clutched onto the wall for a moment as I'd risen too quickly and the world was spinning. I suppose it was still spinning wasn't it? Or did the world

above spin upon this inner world?

It occurred to me that I didn't know as I didn't know much about any of what was happening. I didn't know from where all this light was coming from for instance.

I stumbled out of the wheelhouse holding onto the railing as I went. Looking up I had my answer as to the source of the light and yet I didn't.

I could see where the light came from now, but I couldn't explain how it was being generated. We were upon a sea and above us was a vast dome like ceiling of clouds. How high up I couldn't say, but it was high.

The top of the dome like enclosure was a mass of shifting clouds that strikingly resembled the Aurora Borealis or northern lights of the northern

hemisphere. Instead of the blues and greens though the colors shifted from yellow to orange and then red.

The light given off wasn't as bright as the sun, but it more than lit up the place with a hazy twilight glow. I would never have believed that such a place as this was possible, but seeing is believing.

I could only guess as to the makeup of the clouds overhead and the curious reactions taking place causing them to give off the shifting colors that they were. Perhaps gases interacting with the heat of the magma above, who knew, but what I did know was that we weren't in the dark without light. I was grateful beyond words for that, even as I was pressed for words to describe the shifting beauty of the clouds overhead.

The others had all been gathered

outside and I walked up among them as they all stood staring upward.

“Beautiful isn’t it?” Matt said, as I came to a stop beside him.

The sea around us had a hushed awe to it as if the calm before a storm. I didn’t care for that sensation, but ignoring it for the moment I nodded in response to Matt.

He tore his gaze away from the mesmerizing clouds overhead to me, “How’s that head?” He asked.

“It hurts!” I said in response.

He patted me on the back, “You’ll be fine. You always have been such a healthy animal.”

He was silent for a moment before saying, “Thank you for bringing me along Eli. This right here is worth seeing.”

“Don’t thank me just yet Matt.” I said grimly, as I followed where Serena pointed to something behind us on the horizon.

Serena called out in concern, “I think a storm is coming!”

Everyone else turned and gazed at where she pointed. In the distance the orange clouds had turned gray and then a blue electric beam of light streaked out through the clouds branching out like the outstretched many fingered arms of a tree, until the whole horizon was lit up by one fragmented bolt of electric sizzle, whose endless repercussions echoed loudly out across the water at us.

It was the most indescribably beautiful lightning event I’d ever seen in all my years at sea and it was also the most horrifying. I wanted no part of such

a storm that lit up the entire horizon with just one lightning bolt. The percussions of thunder that rolled across the waves at us sounded like World War III had just begun.

“Ortega get our engines started up so we can make a run for it!” I called out.

Ortega scurried off quickly followed by Flynn. Heavy wind hit us in the face all of a sudden and it soon became clear that we were in for a hard time of it all over again. I hadn't recovered from falling through the Earth yet to suffer through a new ordeal of this magnitude, but that was the fickle way of the sea.

I had never seen a storm move so fast as this one did. We were underway as the Celestia's Prize gave all she had to keep us running ahead of the storm, but

she wasn't fast enough. The storm overtook us and a new horror revealed itself in the clashing waves that rose up vertically all around us.

I did my best to steer through the troughs and then the sudden rises, but how could you handle the ferocity of a storm that had cyclones touching down everywhere?

Funneled cyclones of swirling power radiated down out of the clouds to plunge into the sea and stirred it up to an even greater ferocity. I'd never seen anything like it and I lost the faith to believe that I could survive through it.

Lightning streaks plunged all around us through the shifting maze of twisting cyclones and vicious waves. I came down into a trough and almost immediately a wave three times the

height of the Celestia's Prize rose up on the starboard side.

There was nothing I could do as the wave spilled over and came down on the boat with deadening force. The Celestia's Prize under the overwhelming force of the water hitting it amidships heeled over and dipped into the water off the port side until it was on the verge of capsizing.

I hung onto the wheel as my feet left the ground and every window was busted out of the wheelhouse. The room filled with seawater and I held my breath underwater as slowly like a drunken sailor the Celestia's Prize righted itself.

I blinked and sputtered, as I tried to focus on the path through the swells up ahead of us as the water drained out

from the wheelhouse. Why wasn't Jim helping me?

I could barely hold the wheel against the force of the waves on the slippery floor of the wheelhouse. I glanced around blinking my eyes trying to clear them of the burning sea spray being blown in through the shattered windows at me.

Everyone was gone!

I glanced the other way and saw Big Jim and Matt by the port side doorway. The door had been blown away by the force of the water.

Jim had one hand gripped onto the corner of the door frame, while Matt further inside the wheelhouse held onto him desperately with both hands. Jim's other arm was stretched out and I saw that he gripped one of Christina's ankles.

My horrified eyes traveled along out across Christina's stretched out form to where she held on to Serena's hands, who was suspended in mid air well out over the edge of the ship as a cyclone waterspout tugged at her. How Jim was holding onto them I could not fathom!

There was nothing I could do but watch. I couldn't let go of the wheel or we'd all be in the water.

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Christina's fingernails were drawing blood as she held onto her Aunt with everything she had. Her leg felt like it was about to be ripped off at the hip and the hard grip on her ankle was agony itself, but she wasn't letting go. Serena was all she had.

No one had told her about her mother's condition, but they hadn't had to. It had been plainly obvious that her mother didn't have long to live. Serena truly was all that she had now.

Nothing could be heard over the roar of the wind of the storm that raged all around, but Christina saw Serena's lips move and she read their meaning, "Let go."

Christina's scream of "No!" was lost in the wind.

Serena's lips moved again, "I love you. Everything is going to be all right."

Serena twisted her wrists free, as she let go of Christina and it was too much for Christina to overcome as the wind ripped Serena away and into the whirlwind and out of view. Christina was abruptly hauled inward by Big Jim



and Matt.

She was completely inconsolable with grief and Matt pulled her into a corner holding her tightly as he rocked her like he would've done for one of his own children, if he'd ever had any.

My heart was bleeding as I gripped the wheel. Christina's wails of loss behind me pierced through me with awful force, but the worst was the sight of the big Samoan crumpled over on his knees by the broken door sobbing his heart out.

I don't think Serena had ever noticed the secret attraction the big man had shyly kept to himself for her, but I had noticed it. I had hoped he'd get the courage built up to tell her how he felt for her, but he'd remained quiet locked up in reserved shyness and now it was

too late.

The big man's even bigger heart was breaking and I felt his pain even as I had myself once and still did.

“Jim?” I called out to him.

He looked over at me his eyes reflecting the raw misery that he felt. I gestured for him to come to me.

Slowly he got up and came to me. I took his hand and put it on the wheel and met his eyes and let him see the commiserating emotion I had for him.

“It helps to stay busy.”

He nodded and grabbed a hold of the wheel with his other hand, which was bloody from where he had been holding onto the doorframe. I stepped away and let him have the wheel as I moved back to help Matt with Christina.

Just as brutally quick as the storm had

come upon us claiming the life of one of my friends it departed from us and the water was calm once more as the clouds began to glow brightly overhead again. It was as if the storm had never been, but my battered ship and wrecked heart of the girl sobbing against Matt's chest were living testimony to the savagery of the storm that had left its mark forever.

Where was God in this horrible life occurrence? Why did such a thing have to happen?

Had God tricked me into making this trip into the deep?

Was He really planning a harsh destruction of me and what little I had left in repayment for my harsh words and rebellious heart of the past seven years? Was the death of my friend my punishment?

I could almost believe the negatives to all of my questions if it weren't for one thing that I knew beyond a doubt. God loved me and knowing that wrote in the corresponding answers and opened up my understanding.

The offenses and tribulations that come in the course of a person's life are not God's fault. Mankind made a choice to rebel from perfection over six thousand years before with a bite out of the fruit of a tree that was forbidden to eat from.

The reproach of sin and all the suffering caused was mankind's fault and not God's, but God's love showed through in that He hadn't just left us to perish in our sin. He had made a way through the sacrificial slaying of His perfect Son in order to make a way for

us to once again enter into harmony and experience the perfection of what was lost in the Garden of Eden.

God didn't need to do that, but He had and it testified of His great love for mankind in doing so. Serena's faith had been a sure thing as evidenced by how she had defined her life in her belief in her Savior. Instead of her life just being over without hope of more she was even now experiencing eternity in the loving rest prepared for her by God in a body eternal that no storm could ever tear apart.

As bad as the loss of her was to those of us still living, God had just gained another soul for all of eternity. To accept such an insight meant to accept the same in regards to my own wife and the lives of my two daughters taken from me

before the age of accountability.

I knew where my daughters were. Even knowing that it still hurt, but it was better than no hope. It was good to know that they weren't hurting.

That's what was most important, but it was still hard on those of us left to pick up the pieces and go on living. As people made in the image of God we were fashioned to need relationship and the loss of it was awful, but instead of embracing the negatives in this moment I was making the conscious choice to fall deeper into my relationship with God rather than curse Him and die alone without hope.

By my best calculations the storm had driven us off in a different directional heading than the one that we'd had when

we first arrived to this inner world. I literally had no way of finding my way in this foreign place.

There was no sun or stars to navigate by. I did my best to sail straight hoping that we would find land and a way of navigating about in this strange land beneath the land above.

We soon figured out that time was a hard thing to measure. The overhead canopy stayed the same brightness level all the time. I sailed on having faith that something would occur to help me accomplish whatever purpose it was that I and my crew had been sent to this inner world for.

## Chapter Seven

# Strength of the Sea

I ambled up the gangway from my cabin, Bible in hand. The Celestia's Prize had taken a beating, but the damage was largely cosmetic. She still ran well and hadn't sprung any major leaks. It hurt though to see the paint scraped off her and her railing and salvage equipment all mangled up.

My abilities to mount a salvage operation were next to nothing, because of how much of my equipment had either been washed overboard or was damaged



beyond repair. I had gotten the impression though that our purpose here wasn't for salvaging Confederate gold off of the seafloor.

I stepped up to the railing beside Christina. She had been silent for two days now. When she wasn't sleeping she was here at this spot where her Aunt had been ripped away from her.

She glanced at me from her bruised eyes and then at the Bible in my hand. She stared at it for a moment before looking back out to sea.

I wasn't going to preach at her, but I was going to extend an invitation to her. I extended the Bible out to her, "Would you like to learn more about what you're Aunt believed in and perhaps find some hope and closure for yourself as well?"

She stared at the sea a moment longer

before nodding her head as I saw her start to cry again. I pulled her to me and held her for a long moment.

I set her back a little from me and said, “Christina I wish I could take your pain away, but I can’t. There is One who can though. I encourage you to build a relationship with God and let Him heal and comfort you. Don’t be like me and run away from the answer for years on end piling up bitterness.”

I left her then confident that she would pursue faith for herself. Even in death Serena was an individual worth being like and I could see that determination in Christina’s eyes. I prayed for her the rest of the day hoping that in the moment of loss that she would get it right where I hadn’t. It had been a mistake that had cost me seven years of my life.

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Christina sat down with her back against the forward cabin. She looked at the Bible in her hands, which she hadn't opened yet. A shadow fell across her, but she knew who it was without looking up. It was Big Jim.

He found her two or three times a day always to do the same thing. The big man got down to his knees and tenderly took her shoe off and pushed her pants leg up to reveal the ugly swollen bruise that encompassed her ankle and lower calf muscle.

Tenderly after dipping some kind of ointment out of a can he began to massage it into her bruised skin as he pushed the fluid away from the swollen

area in order to promote healing and prevent the formation of blood clots.

He glanced up briefly at the Bible in her hands and surprisingly commented out loud, “You should read that.”

Christina didn't say anything for a moment, but then asked off topic, “You loved her?”

Jim looked up and nodded before letting his head drop back down.

“Can I talk? I need to talk! I have no one to talk to now.” Christina said, as the ever present tears came back up to the surface.

Jim glanced back up and gazing deeply into her eyes he said, “I will listen.”

It was like the opening of a set of floodgates as Christina spoke all that was on her mind of the insecurities that

she had as a teenage girl with nowhere to go in the world and no place to call home.

Jim listened to all of it attentively. He massaged her other foot just to have something to do in order to give her the time to unburden herself. Finally she came to an end as her pent up burden of words emptied her of anything else needing to be said.

Sorrowfully she commented, “I don’t think we’re ever getting out of this place. It wouldn’t matter anyway, as I don’t have anyone back there waiting for me now.” Christina hugged herself tightly the Bible laying forgotten on her lap.

Jim looked up from putting both of her shoes back on and said, “I will take care of you. I will protect you and care for you as if you were my own daughter.”

Jim moved to sit back against the bulkhead beside Christina. He then looped an arm around Christina and pulled her to lean against him. Christina relaxed against the strength of the man beside her in complete trust as she gave the man holding her the part of her heart a girl gives her father, until the day comes when the right man asks to have what the father has safeguarded.

Jim reached out with his free hand and opened the Bible up. He leafed through until he found the book of Psalms, "I always liked this one." He said before he began to read out loud.

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Matt stepped up beside me as I stood in the wheelhouse manning the wheel.

He glanced out the broken window and smiled a little at the sight of Christina fast asleep against Jim's side further up the ship.

“Nice to see something positive come out of all this.” He said softly.

I nodded in affirmation.

It was a touching scene that I'd watch unfold for hours. The big man hadn't been quiet this time. He'd read to Christina for hours flipping back and forth throughout the Bible, while engaging her in conversation with answers to the questions I saw her ask, until she'd fallen asleep an hour ago.

It was a God thing that there was one less orphan in the world tonight. At least it felt like it should be night, even though it was as light as day all around us.

I glanced at Matt, “Still glad that I let

you come?” I asked.

Met shrugged and smiled ruefully, “I could’ve done without the storm. I..... what’s that?” He asked pointing off to the side.

My eyes swung in the direction of his pointing finger. After a moment of shock I managed to get out, “That is our first sea monster sighting it would appear.”

The sea monster in question consisted of a long neck with a small head that stuck up above the waves a good distance of perhaps about ten feet.

“I think it’s a plesiosaur!” Matt exclaimed.

I wasn’t sure what that was and I asked in order to verify the alarm I felt, “Is it friendly?”

No sooner had I asked that than the small head attached atop the long neck



lashed out threateningly at the boat's approach. It bared its teeth, which were menacing to behold and snorted viciously. Oh this was not good!

Flynn came storming into the wheelhouse his eyes wild, "Should I break out Betsy?"

"That sounds like a good....." I swallowed the rest of my words, as the elongated necks of more monsters rose out of the water all around the ship.

"What do we do?" Ortega asked clearly panicked, as the longnecked sea creatures came closer hissing and lashing their long necks.

"Pray!" I said.

Oh God we need you now! Show me You have a purpose for bringing us here other than to destroy us!

The boldness of my words gave me

fear of censure, but I felt none given. It was about to get bad as the snake headed monsters got closer to the Celestia's Prize.

The onslaught of the strange looking beasts, which I had no doubt could rip and smash the boat apart, abruptly halted their snarling as they swiveled in the water to face outward from the boat. I breathed a sigh of relief at the loss of being the source of the monsters interest, but something else was up and I began to mentally gird myself against whatever was to come next.

All of a sudden all the sea monsters heads dipped below the surface. The water began to boil all around us with underwater activity and the Celestia's Prize was rocked around like a cork in a bathtub.

The surface of the surrounding sea broke apart as great marine bodies rose to the surface with blasts of water and air. The first thing that I saw break the water were tusks and I thought of narwhals, but then the mass behind the tusks became unmistakable as that of a whale. Whales with tusks!

What would be next, sea snakes as thick as trees and a football field long?

Oh God I hoped not!

I grabbed a hold of Matt to keep him from falling as the boat pitched up and down, because of the disturbed water all around us as the whales surfaced. This was just all too wild!

These whales were like none I had ever seen before. They were big and very tough looking. Their gray blubbery sides were scarred and literally chewed

up with the signs of war. One whale's tusk came out of the water only to reveal the gored through body of one of the snake headed creatures that had been about to attack us.

The whale rose up out of the water impressively far and then with a drawn back twisting jerk release of its head the whale sent the impaled sea monster the size of a large elephant soaring over top of the Celestia's Prize. Blood and seawater rained down upon the boat, as the dead carcass of something most likely thought extinct sailed up and over to the sea on the other side, only it didn't reach the sea.

Another whale on the other side rose up out of the water and caught the carcass in its mouth with one massive toothed bite. The sound of bones

snapping and water splashing was drowned out by the sudden uproar of squeals given off by the congregated whales that sounded almost like cheerful applause!

My jaw had long since fallen open, but now it fell wider. They were playing!

What did these whales do when they were angry?

*“They are your guides to land. Follow those whom I have set as the rulers of these waters for they will not lead you astray.”*

Humbled, I clutched onto the wheel as the pod of thirty or more whales broke away from the boat as one and began swimming in a spread out formation away from us. Obediently I eased the wheel over and began to follow after

them.

Matt looked at me incredulously, “Are you crazy? Let them go!”

I shook my head negatively and said, “Can’t.”

“Why on Earth not?” Matt exclaimed.

“Because God said so.” I said wondering what his reaction would be.

He gave me an odd look and then looked forward at the whales I was keeping a safe distance from. “Whales it is then.” He said commenting softly.

After a moment he asked, “Did you ever think you would experience anything like this in life?”

“Can’t say that I did.” I responded truthfully.

He glanced over at me, “God has laid something on your heart to do hasn’t He? That’s why the sea lane was opened up

to us wasn't it? And why we're following the whales?"

I nodded.

"That's a big change for you." Matt said studying me further.

"A needed one." I said in reply.

The whales swam on and on and I faithfully stayed back in their wake following their every move. I didn't even let anybody else have the wheel.

Flynn eventually butted in between me and the wheel and said, "Take a load off your feet Captain. When we get into the action you'll need something to still fight with."

Reluctantly I stepped back and let the smaller man takeover.

Curiously I asked, "You're expecting a fight Flynn?"

He didn't take his eyes off the whales ahead as he answered, "I've been at sea a long time Captain. After a while you have a way of sensing when a storm's brewing. Storm's coming Captain and we need to be ready for it."

I looked out at the mangled equipment on deck. I hadn't asked before, but now I did, "how did everything fair through the storm?"

"Betsy's all mangled up, but the Children are still here." He said stoically.

I nodded grimly. It would have been good to have had the fifty caliber machine gun, but now we would have to manage without it.

I didn't go to my cabin, instead I stayed in the wheelhouse and lay down on the floor. Surprisingly I fell asleep.





## Chapter Eight

# Landfall

“Captain!”

I jerked up slightly into a half rise at the urgency in the voice rousing me awake.

“Captain you’re gonna want to see this!” Flynn said and I quickly got up and came to his side.

The first thing I saw were the clouds. It seemed as if the clouds had come down to the surface of the sea and formed a misty veil of glowing effervescence. The whales ahead of us

abruptly dived and disappeared from view. They didn't resurface.

In a way I found myself missing them. They had been in a way a source of encouragement sent by God and now that they were gone I was left alone with my faith once again to fill in the gaps of my courage.

*"I Am is still here. I've gone on before you and the way is clear."*

The words from within felt like a promise and they helped build up my courage once more to face the unknowns of this world and be confident that I could weather through them with God as my strength. I gripped a hold of the wheel and Flynn relinquished it to me.

"Unlock the handguns and give everybody one. Give one shotgun to Jim and keep the other for yourself. You and

Ortega will remain on board the ship.”

Flynn eyed me speculatively, “Determined to go ashore then, are you, upon this strange coast that I feel lies ahead of us?”

“It’s why we came Flynn. Hate to break it to you, but there might not be any treasure to be collected while we’re out this time.”

Flynn laughed, “Who needs money when you have adventure like this! Besides I knew it was a one-way trip when I signed on to this little venture.”

I patted him on the back as he turned to leave. I had been blessed with a singularly great bunch of individuals to make up my crew. I couldn’t have asked for better people.

I kept the Celestia’s Prize headed for

the glowing fog bank ahead. The fog didn't glow as much as the overhead canopy, but it obscured whatever lay beyond it. Time passed by as we blindly headed forward toward whatever destiny God had put in place for us.

Christina stepped into the wheelhouse and I glanced down to the gun on her hip. I smiled warmly at her as I asked, "Flynn show you how to use that?"

"Jim showed me." She said sounding nervous about something.

"What is it Christina?" I asked, as the fog started to dust over the ship's surface and visibility became zero.

"I'm to go ashore then with the rest?"

"Yes."

"Why? I don't know anything about fighting or much of anything really!"

I patted her shoulder in a fatherly

gesture, “It’s a good time for you to start learning. You’re one of us now Christina. I know you’re scared and I know you doubt your capabilities, but you’re wrong to do so Christina. You are a strong young woman and I wouldn’t be having you come along with us if I didn’t think you were up to it.”

She straightened under the weight of my hand slightly and I didn’t say anything more for a while.

Lost in the fog the Celestia’s Prize forged onward.

I was proud of my ship. All the abuse it had taken and yet it was still together in one roughed up piece giving me all it had. A man couldn’t ask for more from his boat. ‘Graceful degradation’ I believe was the terminology for it.

Graceful degradation was the term

used to describe how much damage and loss of operating systems a fighter jet could suffer and still remain in the air and be operable. The Celestia's Prize wasn't a forty million dollar fighter jet, but she was still floating and under power ready for the next adventure.

The fog was starting to break up and I prepared myself for the view of an island crowned with an imperial city populated by Atlantean giants. With baited breath we pulled free of the last of the fog and the island was revealed.

There was no grand imperial city dominating the mainland. All I saw was a lushly forested island that had crop fields here and there. Some deep part of me relaxed at the sighting of no ancient city of advanced technology, but I re-tensed at what I thought for sure to be the

signs of agriculture upon the land.

The Southern treasure fleet really had made it here and set up a colony. Was I about to be made over into a slave?

Time would tell on that one. I did know one thing. If white plantation owners were still enslaving people of my color then I was going to do something about it. What that would be was still a mystery, but God had brought me here for a purpose and if He wanted it done then it would be done.

It appeared to be a large island, but not the island continent of ancient fables. Perhaps it had broken up into smaller pieces when it had fallen through from the world above.

Maybe it wasn't Atlantis at all, but the lone volcano spout lifting above the tall forests of the island seemed to testify to



the fact that this was the remnant of the landmass that had been Atlantis at one time.

A harbor became prominent as I picked out the outlines of ships, houses, and even more evidence of cultivation. I wondered again curiously for the hundredth time as to why the whales had left us and hadn't escorted us into port.

It took us over an hour for the details to start standing out to us and when they did it became apparent that we had been noticed as well. The ships in the harbor were what one could expect of the great sailing era of the seventeen hundreds and a little later.

I saw no ironclad battleships among the moored vessels. There had been several to make the voyage with the Southern fleet, but in retrospect I

reasoned that they had probably rusted out long since. Even the wooden ships at anchor looked of a more recent construction than a hold over remnant from the Civil War era.

It had been roughly 150 years since these people had come here, but technology had seemed to stand still and didn't appear to have progressed any. That was strange I thought to myself. Had all of Atlantis's vast technology been destroyed along with everything else in the great flood?

It would seem so, at least, from outward appearances. I had half expected to have alien looking gunships hovering in the air all around us as we were threatened with being blown apart by death rays.

While I was glad that wasn't the case

I was surprised. Had these plantation owners really just been growing crops all this time?

They didn't even have a market to sell produce to!

Or did they?

There were a lot of questions to be answered.

I could see people lining the docks in the distance. As we got closer I saw something in the water beside one of the ships at anchor. It was a whale and it was dead.

There were people up and down the length of the whale cutting it up and harvesting the carcass for meat and blubber. I looked around at the other ships at anchor. Each ship had a figurehead ornament of a whale tusk mounted to its prow.

I wasn't opposed to the practice of whaling, but there seemed something off with this setup. All these ships were whaling ships. What need could there be for so many whaling vessels?

Why kill whales who appeared to not have it out for humans, but instead protected them?

I was starting to get uneasy about my decision to make a bold approach into the harbor. Maybe we should have just tried to slip ashore unnoticed somewhere and test the waters first.

Oh well, we were committed now. It was up to God to deliver us if I had made a mistake, as I even now feared that I had.

Matt looked along the dock and those gathered upon it in shock, "I can't believe what I'm seeing! Eli I didn't

expect this!”

“Me neither.” I said grimly, as I felt my own shock at what the gathered crowd of spectators along the docks was revealing.

Irony couldn't come close to describing the current of events that must've occurred in this colony at some point in the past.

“Maybe you should stay on board Matt.” I said, as I continued to look at the perplexing makeup of the crowd.

Matt shook his head stubbornly, “No, I'm going. You were willing to risk slavery coming on this quest and now it would seem that I must as well attempt a similar fate.”

I started to speak again, but Matt patted my shoulder and I remained silent.

I watched as the white slaves parted away from the dock to give way to their black masters dressed in the finery of plantation owners. It was an odd sight to behold and not a good one.

Slavery had been wrong the first time it had been implemented and to see things reversed wasn't empowering to me, but rather it was one of the saddest sights I had ever seen. Instead of abolishing the yoke that people of my ethnic background had been burdened with they had continued it on in a spirit of petty vengeance against their former Masters, who they had made their slaves.

Perhaps vengeance could have initially been understandable, even excusable, but not now. Not a hundred and fifty years later.

The slaves I saw, which bore evident signs of abuse had nothing in common with the sins of their plantation owner ancestors of the old South. These white slaves were hopelessly caught up in a cycle of abuse and belittlement even as my ancestors had been.

There was nothing deserved or justified by the enslavement of these people for something their ancestors had done worthy of such a judgment. If anything, the reversal of roles in the sunken world was one of the strongest arguments ever to attest to the equality of all mankind regardless of skin color and ethnicity, because the same atrocities could be perpetrated equally measured by all colors of people against each other.

I fought against the overwhelming urge

to just turn the ship around and leave this island that bore evidence of man's fallen nature and petty hatreds of the past, but I couldn't. What if the sixteenth president of the United States had decided not to push forward, not only with a costly Civil War, but also with an Emancipation Proclamation for a group of people that weren't of his own skin color?

Did I in turn have any more right than Abraham Lincoln to turn away from the suffering of his fellow mankind, whether they be of my color or of a different color?

No, I did not.

I brought the Celestia's Prize up alongside the dock, as I made the promise to myself to be a holy agent of change to affect the freedom of people



under bondage.

“Shut her off Ortega. You and Flynn are staying on board. Don’t let anybody else on board!” I said briefly into the ship’s COM system.

I let go of the wheel and stepped free of the wheelhouse followed by Matt.

“It’s not too late Matt.” I said in an aside, as I fell back to walk beside him, as each of us was the subject of several hundred stares by master and slave alike.

Matt shook his head wryly and said, “This reminds me of the black hat brigades who fought for the North. If they were captured by the South they were shot on the spot instead of being taken prisoner, because of their Negro heritage. I knew this was a one-way ticket when I signed on Eli.”

I nodded in affirmation. Matt was showing me a special kind of courage that I would never have guessed was to be found in the quiet academia professor that always had his nose stuck in a book.

Big Jim stood with feet shoulder width apart as the shotgun in one hand trailed down to point at the deck. Christina stood slightly off to the left and behind him looking scared, but resolute at the same time. She'd back up Jim's play should he have need of it.

Above all else, no matter what happened to the rest of us, I wanted to see those two free and clear to go on living.

I stepped up onto the dock as the silent crowd moved back from us. Matt stepped up beside me and together we waited.

An older black man stepped out from the crowd. His eyes flickered from Matt to me before he addressed me, “You are from up there?” He asked pointing upward with a finger.

“We are.” I said.

“How did you manage such a thing? It is an impossible journey to get to this place!” He exclaimed.

“And yet you yourselves arrived here at one point in time.” I responded succinctly.

He nodded, “This is true. Tell me why have you come?” He asked subtly.

The truth was always the best answer, but in this case I just wasn’t going to tell him all of it.

“I’m a treasure hunter. No offense meant, but I was hoping to find a sunken Southern fleet with quite a few boxes of

gold lying around for the grabbing.”

The man tipped his head back and laughed. After a moment he sobered up and said, “What a disappointment on your part this must be then. Perhaps we can find something of value laying around to make your journey still a profitable one. It would be a tragedy on your part to have to come so far and have nothing to return with to show for all your troubles. I do assume that you can return to the world above if you should wish to?” The man asked craftily.

I smiled and my fear was that the fakeness of my smile would shine through as I responded with, “That’s the plan.”

I didn’t care for the man and I wasn’t about to reveal more to him of our purpose for being here then needed to be

said.

His smile in response smacked of equal insincerity and it seemed that we both had come to a mutual agreement to keep our true intentions a secret from the other.

“The Governor wants to meet the first ever recorded visitors to our inner realm.” He infused gregariously.

“Lead on.” I said in response.

He started away from the dock and the crowd parted. I started after him. I glanced back to see Christina quickly step in behind me and Matt as Jim brought up the rear of our little group.

I looked beyond Jim to where Flynn sat cross legged on the deck of the ship staring down the hard eyed stares of the black overseers glaring at him from the dock. Flynn was not a man easily rattled

and the shotgun cradled across his lap bore testament to his ability to back his own play should he need to. My concern for my boat was nonexistent with him on guard.

There is a loyalty that runs deeper than skin color or even the blood of a brother. It's called a friend and I was waking up to the fact that I had more friends than I had realized.

It was a good thing to know, but it was a bad thing to know how much danger I'd put us all in.

“Fascinating!”

I turned my attention back to Matt beside me who went on, “It's like we stepped into a time capsule!” He said as he glanced all around.

I couldn't but help agree with him, but I didn't feel so much wonder at the sight

of a bygone era in working order around us. The sight of a white man's scarred back, who was working a rudimentary water pump helped take any wonder there was at finding this community still rooted in the past away from me.

Matt saw the man's back and visibly winced. Some of the wonder left his eyes and he glanced around with a new perspective.

"Not a very pretty sight is it?" I said.

Matt glanced at me, "No, it's not."

We continued to follow our self-imposed guide up the dusty lane as it picked up in elevation. In the distance I saw mansions arrayed against the hillside in the shadow of the dormant volcano that rose up massively beyond.

Matt spoke, "you haven't said what you think of all this Eli. I'm curious."

Off to our right I saw a slave girl shoved hard against an old-fashioned butter churn that she had momentarily stopped operating in order to watch us go by.

“Do you mean do I feel that the role reversal taking place around us is justified?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“No, I do not.”

It was a small statement to express how not okay I was with all this. No one deserved forced servant hood like this. What I couldn't figure out was why there was the need for slaves at all?

Matt kept his voice low as to not be overheard, “The South attempted to biblically justify their enslavement of the black man. Did you know that Eli?”

“No I did not, but it doesn't surprise



me. I'm curious though, how did they go about that Matt?"

"They believed that black people were descended from Noah's son Ham and they went off that line about where because of him seeing his father's nakedness he was relegated to serve his brothers."

"You're serious? They got ripping apart people's lives and using them for their own gain out of that line of the Bible!" I exclaimed under my breath.

"Yep. Ridiculously out of context isn't it. They also used the example of the children of Israel having slaves to justify their practices, but there's no resemblance. Israel's so-called slavery was basically indentured servant hood. If a slave was mistreated he was to be set free by Jewish law. If he was killed

by his owner his owner's life was forfeit in turn. All slaves were also to be let loose every seven years and their lands restored to them. So you can see there really is no comparison between the old South and the biblical Israel.”

“And yet I wonder how these black masters have justified their role as the lords of this place?” I said reflectively and Matt nodded in agreement.

There likely was some half-baked justification for the continued use of slavery, but it likely didn't make any sense just as the first round of excuses hadn't in the old South.

Matt and I saw a group of slave women washing clothes off to the side of the trail and Matt reacted with surprise. Two of the five women were as black as I was and one was of a soft chocolate

color in terms of skin color, while the remaining two were white.

I already knew the answer to his unasked question, “In the South if it was believed that a person had so much as a drop of Negro blood in their ancestry then they were considered black no matter how white they may have appeared. They were thrown in right along with all the other slaves. It would appear even that aspect of the old South has been copied over.”

The mansions were growing closer and all signs of slave housing were falling away behind us.

“Because of your ancestry did you ever feel like you were entitled to some version of justice or payment to make up for what was done to your ancestors who were slaves?” Matt asked softly.

“Never!” I said roughly.

“I make my own decisions and walk my own path. I want no part of entitlement and I have no use for those who think they’re owed something. You need to stand on your own two feet in life and earn your own way. My girls were perfect, but to these people they’d be nothing better than slaves. In the old South they would have been slaves even though Lacey was as white as your sister!”

Matt squeezed my arm and I glanced at him and saw understanding in his eyes as he said, “Your girls were perfect Eli and so was my sister!”

I nodded not trusting myself to speak for a moment.

“Yes she was!” I said finally.

I looked around, “She was not a slave

and neither am I. No one should be!” I said my voice trailing off with the disdain that I felt for everything around me that had been built upon the affliction of people, who were looked down upon as less by others.

“Amen.” Matt said.

It was a town of mansions and the question as to the need for slavery was soon answered. Nobody with a skin color matching my own was doing anything or should I say they weren't doing anything that could be called work. This too must've been how the old South had functioned.

It was pathetic whichever color side you picked. How was I going to put a stop to this?

I was just one man with a small crew.  
Every Old Testament Bible story

pertinent to such a thought of inadequacy came up to remind me that it wasn't going to be me doing anything in order to break the cycle of bondage, but rather it would be God and I was just a willing instrument to be used as part of the process.

One mansion stood out from the rest and it was to this we were led followed along by our ever present gawking crowd of onlookers. I started up the stairs taking in the women arrayed along the railing up ahead of me decked out in the fine trappings of southern belles, only these southern belles weren't white.

They whispered feverishly among themselves and some even giggled behind their lace embroidered fans. I felt myself the subject of intense scrutiny and a lot of admiring interest.

I wasn't interested, but I had manners when I wanted them and I bowed slightly in passing before I was ushered into the expansive mansion decked out in opulence.

There were more important looking men of this little colony on the underside of the world inside. Questions were abuzz as they flew about the expansive foyer in hushed masculine undertones. Our guide cleared a way through the crowd before coming to a stop before a wide spiral staircase.

He turned to me and pointedly addressed me only, "If you would come with me, while your crew waits here." He said smoothly, but I read between the lines.

He might as well as said, "While your low class slaves wait here for you."

I was about to object, when I caught Matt's slight negative shake of the head. He was right. Best to fly low for the moment. I started for the stairs alone.

“And leave your weapon behind as well.” The guide said in an ingratiating manner.

I found the man contemptible, but I stuck to the plan. Deliberately I turned and handed my pistol to Matt, whose eyes twinkled with repressed glee.

Symbolically I was handing my weapon to a slave in the eyes of all those around me, which gained us an aggravated murmur of dissension from them. I turned back to the guide to see his fake smile had hardened at the edges.

I smiled coldly at him and gestured to the stairs beyond him, “Shall we?” I invited and stiffly he turned and started



climbing even as I took inventory of where I had knives stashed on my person should the occasion arise that I might need to use them. I also had a boot pistol.

When I reached the lofty second-floor I glanced back to see my little multicolored crew surrounded by a crowd of disapproving and even menacing black people. I'd never been so disappointed in a group of people my own color before as I was now.

To think such an inconsequential thing as skin pigmentation and differing ethnic backgrounds could divide humanity so!

Would there ever be a day when unity would be achieved or would there always be this infighting and innate hatred of differing physiological differences?

For some perhaps, but not for me. Not for people like Matt or Jim either, but they were exceptions to the norm.

Some people just had to hate each other and skin color was a good excuse to start the rivalry.

My guide opened a door and I stepped through it. Everything was beyond compare in terms of color and artistry within the room. The tiled floors of the room were so clean I wouldn't have given a second thought about eating a meal off of them.

I was led through a series of rooms until I stepped out onto a veranda that had an ocean view. Traveling along the white railing I came to a table with two chairs. One was occupied by an older man, who rose stiffly as we drew near.

He extended out his hand in the most

genuine act of welcome that I had experienced yet and I took it and shook the old man's hand that had a surprisingly firm grasp to it.

“Winston Riley at your service, and who might I have the pleasure of speaking to?” The old man asked.

“Eli Warner.” I responded in kind.

He gestured to the second chair and said, “Won't you have a seat and enjoy my ocean view?”

I sat down as I continued to study the older man. He seemed like a genuine individual, even a likable sort.

The governor, for that was who I took him to be, turned slightly to the guide and said dismissively, “You won't be needed any longer Morgan.”

Morgan looked hesitant to leave, until the old man gave him a sharp glance that

had some steel in it. Morgan hastily left and the governor sat back down in his seat.

He glanced after Morgan's retreating form for a moment before switching his gaze to mine and asking, "Tell me stranger does that man annoy you half as much as he does me with his presence?"

I couldn't help it. I genuinely liked this man and I let it show in the smile that creeped out in response to his question.

He smiled in return, "I see I have my answer."

He glanced out at the sea and asked as a slave girl approached out of seemingly nowhere with a tray of drinks on it, "Well, you've been here all of about an hour now, what do you think of our colony beneath the world above?"

I glanced up at the slave girl dressed in the garb of a housemaid. She was very attractive and very much black. She again must be one of the unpure ones that had some white blood in her.

She didn't meet my gaze, but instead she stuck very well to the servile nature of her task and position in life, even though I sensed it was not in her nature to be so.

I answered the governor's question as I watched her walk away as silently as she had come, "Not very highly I assure you." I said in complete honesty, as my eyes left the girl to meet the governor's.

He nodded and glanced back out to sea before asking, "Tell me what happened up there in the world above. Are black men still slaves?"

"The North won, if that's what you

mean. The South was dealt with harshly and slavery is no more in the sense that it was. The country is united and while there's still tension over color, time to time, for the most part it gets settled and the different sides get along and even intermix with each other. You could benefit from that lesson down here." I finished bluntly.

He regarded me in depth for a long moment, "You don't pull your punches do you." He said smiling a little.

"No, I don't. I was never very good at lying or stomaching injustice when I've seen it."

The Governor nodded, as the girl came back with a tray of food and set it down. There was something about her face. What was it?

"Thank you Mandy." The governor

said and the girl nodded before leaving again.

My eyes met the old man's and his face took on a somber look as he said, "She's my granddaughter."

His granddaughter!

He looked away at the sea again as he explained, "My son raped a slave woman. I don't hold with such practices, but many do it. I am but a voice in the wind against such occurrences, however regrettable they may be."

He looked back to me and said matter-of-factly, "Everything I just said sounds terrible doesn't it?"

"You know it does!" I said with emphasis.

He nodded, "I fear we've become even more barbaric than our former masters. Just as I fear that is the case I

also fear that there is no changing it. It's true what I said about being a voice in the wind."

"That is still not an excuse to do nothing, when you know what's right."

He nodded his head and looked out to sea again, "I knew this day of change was coming. Whether it will be a good one or not I cannot tell."

"What happened here?" I asked, as I was curious to know.

The Governor launched directly into the tale of this colonies origin, "The Southern fleet sailed guided by some device for many days and then as the account goes the fleet fell down through the world to land here in this inner sanctum. By all accounts it was a harrowing experience. Several ships were lost, but the bulk of the fleet



remained intact. The navigation guide brought them here, which is where they commenced to build their utopia away from the threat of Yankee aggression. Twenty years went past and a sickness befell the white people. Almost all of them were laid low with it, which is when our slave ancestors took control as we were not affected by the illness. Many of the whites were brutally murdered. About a third of them managed to flee. The remaining ones were made over into our slaves as we took the position of master that they had lorded over us. That was fitting justice, but my granddaughter? Where is there any justice for her powerlessness over her own fate that she did nothing to deserve?"

He was silent for a moment and I said

as if he didn't already know it, "There isn't any."

He glanced up at me knowingly, "You didn't come for any treasure of the South or for the ancient antiquity of this island did you? You came to free the slaves didn't you?"

I wanted to refrain from it, but the truth came out anyway, "Yes." I said.

I expected him to call out for the guards then, but all he did was nod again.

"What can I do to aid you in your efforts?" He said and I blinked in response.

"Are you suggesting that you're willing to betray your own people?" I asked incredulously.

He shook his head no, "My people have betrayed themselves. What's the

worst that can come to them of this other than they'll have to learn how to work for themselves again.”

I gazed at him doubtfully, “Okay, say you're on the level about this. Do you really think your people are going to give up their slaves anymore than what the South was willing to do? They fought a civil war in which over six hundred thousand soldiers died about just this very thing.”

He didn't look put down by my skepticism, but instead replied with, “No, they will not give up their slaves and live in equality with them. They are too well ingrained in their leisure lifestyles just as the old South was. No, you will have to help the slaves escape.” He finished with matter-of-factly.

I wasn't sure what kind of a miracle

worker he thought I was, but I think he was overestimating my abilities

“Escape to where?” I asked.

“The surface is not an option left open to you?” He asked inquiringly.

“No, I’m pretty sure it was a one-way trip here.”

“Oh well then it will have to be a harder road to freedom. Better a hard won freedom though than a life spent in oppression.”

“Care to explain what freedom you’re speaking of?” I asked, as some part of me still couldn’t believe I was having this conversation with the Governor of the island no less. Strange were the ways of God, but magnificent too.

“Why, to the sea of course, to join the Whale People.”

“The Whale People?” I asked

leadingly.

“Yes, it is what we call the group of whites that managed to escape to the sea during the great slaughter and flee in the ships that brought us here. I doubt they would have survived at first if it had not been for the whales that help them, hence why we call them the Whale People. It’s the desire of every slave to escape to the sea and join them. Hence it is also the cause of the only real work that my people do, which is done in order to keep their slaves so they don’t have to do the rest of the work. My people have built a navy, whose sole purpose is to kill whales and any whale people they may find and thus extinguish the hopes of the slaves of ever escaping their lot in life as a slave. Rather reminiscent of how runaway slaves were hunted down

and tortured in the old South isn't it?" He finished somewhat sardonically.

"Surely you're not the only one of your people to see the similarity for the injustice that it is?" I exclaimed.

His eyes were sad, "Some days it feels like it. No, there are others, but not enough and not the influential ones at that. I'm not guiltless in this. I was much the same as the majority of my people for my uncaring attitude of the lot in life of a slave, until Mandy came along that is. It's not right and as you've said something has to be done about it. My Mandy deserves the right to look someone in the eye as an equal without being struck for it or to be pulled down and gang raped by some men who have grown tired of what their wives have to offer and see nothing wrong with

crushing the life of a slave to suit their own lusts! I do not want that for my granddaughter. She deserves better! They all deserve something better, just as my people did when we were slaves.”

I studied him for a few moments. There was no denying his sincere passion on the matter, but how to make it all come about?

“So how do you propose the slaves should escape?” I asked.

His eyes sparkled, “By the same way we go to sea to kill the whales. Escape on the whaling ships and then ditch the ships at sea.”

“Won’t your people just build new ships?” I asked.

He smiled, “Building a ship requires a lot of work. By the time they’ve

completed one ship I think they'll rethink their strategy and perhaps start doing all the work for themselves instead of attempting to chase down slaves on the open water. In addition to that I'm not sure my people would be very good at building a boat to begin with. They rely on the slaves, who have the passed down knowledge to do all the skilled labor required of shipbuilding.”

I leaned back in my chair, “It would seem that you have it all figured out then. Tell me how you propose to distract your people long enough for the slaves to escape to the ships? Not to mention how such an event could be coordinated, as it would need to be in order to be a success.”

He smiled broadly, “I was hoping that you could take care of those details for



me. I have after all given you the keys.” He said, as he tossed a ring of keys across the table at me, which I caught one-handed.

“All the slaves are locked up underground at the end of the work hours on the south side of the island.”

I turned the ring of keys over and over in my hands as I contemplated strategy.

“What’s our cover story for being here?” I asked.

The Governor got up stiffly and said, “Why I’m sure being the adventurers that you are that you’ll want to investigate the ruins in the forest. Not to mention letting it drop of your willingness to open up travel between the surface and this place for the purpose of trade. I think both will be quite plausible reasons for continued existence here for

the time being. Well now I shall leave you to plan a mass escape and rejoin your crew as you have much to think about.”

He started to leave but then stopped, “If you do go to the forest to look over the ruins be careful of the Salria.”

“The Salria?” I asked.

“Yes, they are a spur off group from my people. They went back to the old tribal ways and among other things they practice the superstitious arts as well as black magic. Slave children who have wondered too close to the forest have gone missing before so be careful. They are a strange people and we do not have much to do with them or they us.”

“Thanks for the warning.” I said and he nodded and walked away.

I fingered the keys again. Was all this

an elaborate trap of some kind?

I got up and walked back to the room I had come through to reach this veranda and slammed the door shut; only I was still on the veranda. I slipped quietly across the veranda and stepped behind a pillar and waited.

The girl walked by and I cleared my throat slightly. At the noise she spun around ready to fight or run whichever the case may be.

“Easy! I’m not going to hurt you, okay.”

Her breathing slowed a bit and she nodded shakily.

She gazed at me in fear, even as she did her best to cover up how afraid of me she was.

“I’m not going to hurt you. I just want you to answer some questions for me.” I

said softly in as nonthreatening a manner as I could manage.

She swallowed hard before nodding. She had a look to her of extreme apprehension as to what I might ask her about.

“Mandy was the Governor telling me the truth about everything?”

Her eyes darted off to the side and she said something low that I couldn't hear.

I tipped her face back to me with a finger gently and said, “I didn't hear you.”

“Mostly.” She said a little louder than before.

“What did he lie about Mandy?”

She tried to move her face away again, but stopped to meet my eyes as I spoke, “He's not your grandfather is he?”

“He never had a son.” She confirmed softly.

I judged her to be about eighteen years old. Some sins have a way of working on an individual as well as being hard to admit to.

“Has your father the Governor ever made mention of his plans to you before?”

“No, he hasn’t.”

“Is it common knowledge that he’s your father?” I asked.

“No.”

I held the keys up to her that the Governor had given me and her eyes got big.

I was going on instinct here, “I want you to hold onto these for me Mandy. Don’t use them unless you have to. Have you ever seen a firework go off

Mandy?”

She nodded.

“When you see something like a firework go off head for the west side of the island with all the other slaves, until you reach the beach.”

Her eyes grew wide in alarm, “But we would have to go through the forest where the Salria live!”

“I know. It’ll be unexpected of you and we need the unexpected if there’s to be a chance in getting away.”

“But what about the ships in the eastern harbor? How will we make it without them?” Mandy asked puzzled.

“The ships are a death trap. They’ll expect you to go for them and many of you would be killed. I don’t think your father is as mindful to the fate of the other slaves as he is for your

livelihood.”

She nodded affirming my character read of her father.

I bent down and pulled my boot pistol out. Her eyes got big again and I reached out to pull one of her hands open and place the small pistol into it.

“I’ve seen some guys caring around old pistols. This is a pistol too only much more modern. It works the same way though. All you have to do is pull the trigger right here. See this little lever here? You need to flip this back until the red dot is showing or it won’t fire. The gun will fire nine times. All you have to do is disengage the safety and press the trigger. Okay?”

She nodded even as tears ran down her face. She slipped the small pistol into a pocket in her dress under her

apron and then she surprised me by hugging me hard for a long moment.

Awkwardly I returned the hug, until she stepped back from me and said as she wiped at her tears, “Thank you! Even if we don’t succeed and we all die or something worse happens to us I thank you for the hope that you’ve given me!”

She hurried past me then and I made my way back through the rooms to the stairs and the crowd below. Nonchalantly I made my way back down the spiral staircase the subject of intense scrutiny by all.

“Everything all right?” Matt asked worriedly.

“Yes, couldn’t be better actually.”

I glanced around at our interested spectators and asked, “Anyone here an authority on the ancient ruins in the



forest?”

No one volunteered anything so I decided to sweeten the deal.

“Who’d like to go visit the surface and see the sky, as well as the latest fashions?”

I’d said that last part for the women, who instantly joined into a muttering mob pushing their men forward toward us. I had neglected to tell the southern bells decked out in lacy petticoats and brocaded dresses that the current fashion on the surface pretty much consisted of a slutty T-shirt and a pair of jeans that looked like they’d been pressed molded onto them. What they didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them though.

Apparently a lot of them liked the idea of going topside. I might even share that desire with them some day, but the

reality was that none of us were going topside, unless God willed it so.

Captain Rogers had made it back, but he'd used the Orlanis Star device. I didn't have the device for one and for two I wouldn't use it even if I did have it. I owed my allegiance elsewhere so we were figuratively stuck down here. Not that we had much time left for us to worry about our exile from the surface.

I didn't give us much of a chance in surviving the odds against us down here. Hopefully we could accomplish something notable with what little time we may have left to us though. That was my prayer anyway.

## Chapter Nine

# Into the Forest

These trees were truly massive. I craned my head back to look up the length of one. I couldn't see the end of it.

It was quiet in the darkened forest. The forest floor was devoid of plant growth save for a smattering of ferns growing here and there.

It was too dark of a forest for my tastes as I preferred more diversity in terms of habitat. The trees were of a kind I had never seen before and they appeared to be devoid of any use other

than as something to feed a fire or build a ship out of.

It seemed a rather lifeless forest. Impressive, but cold was how this forest registered to me.

Matt was having a field day combing over the remnants of the long bygone past that were upthrust here and there along the forest floor. The resilient architecture was made out of the same iron compound as the Pillar of Delphi.

Atlantis the city had not survived the cataclysmic event of the great flood and its fall through the earth's crust. Thankfully that meant none of its supposed giant offspring had either.

Our guides had been with us for several hours now and they looked hesitant to go any further into the forest with us. They were shifting from foot to

foot and becoming startled by every little noise that sounded out in the forest around us. Finally they refused to go no further and actually left us their guideless in the forest.

I watched them go and with them our cover for being here. We needed witnesses to verify our interest in the ruins in order to allay suspicions of our presence here.

I was debating about what to do when a feeling I didn't care for crept over me like someone walking across my grave and I turned around to see a man standing there not ten feet away. His smile of welcome did nothing to relax my tensed up muscles. Where had he come from?

I glanced at Jim to see him as tensed up as I was by the sudden appearance of

the man. This man by his dress must be of the Salria people that the Governor had warned me about. He wore nothing like those in the colony did.

The members of the Salria people seemed to have gone back to their tribal traditions entirely. Was human sacrifice one of those reawakened traditions?

Looking at the man I could believe it of him. There was something innately cruel behind the smiling eyes that gazed upon us knowingly.

He spoke, "Don't worry, none of you are children so you are safe from the evil clutches of the Salria." He tipped his head back and laughed uproariously at his own words, as if in great jest at a joke that the rest of us had missed the punch line for.

I glanced around at the others.

Christina looked about to run for it. Matt looked beyond tensed and I saw Jim's finger tense on the trigger of the sawed off shotgun he still held in one hand.

I mouthed out, "Play it cool!" And surprisingly masks of calmness fell over all three of their faces, even Christina's. She certainly was a tough girl.

I turned back to the stranger just as he finished from his hearty mirth that chilled rather than warmed me.

I forced a genial looking smile, "It would seem that we've lost our guides to superstition. I don't suppose that you would mind taking over for them would you?" I asked.

The smile never diminished on the other man's face. He was almost as big as Jim. "Nothing would please me more! Come I will show you the wonders of

the past.”

He turned and started off through the forest and I followed after him. The others hesitated for a moment, but then followed along reluctantly.

The man I followed was unquestionably under the influence of evil as just being near him disquieted my soul. I was confident though that if need be by faith in Jesus I was more than a match to bring him down if it had to be done.

I wanted to see what this forest may still hold of Atlantis and to see if it was going to be a threat to my plans.

Our mysterious guide led us for more than an hour through the forest. Here and there a bit of architecture would poke up through the forest floor, but nothing major. All of a sudden the canopy of the



forest opened up and there were a lot of moss covered ruins to be seen.

Matt walked past the whole group as if irresistibly drawn to the antiquity of the past. The rest of us followed him.

There were sections of the ruins that still stood several stories tall. It was easy to see from just this one part of the ruins that the city had to of been vast and quite built up in elevation.

A half hour passed during which Matt hadn't ceased to stop babbling about this or that in terms of archaeological significance. Truly I could care less, but the sight of something so ancient was fascinating.

I walked into an alcove of sorts and was immediately drawn up short by the sight of the stone altar in the middle of the place. I approached it slowly as did

Jim and Christina.

“What’s the attraction guys? I.....”  
Matt’s voice trailed off; as he caught up with us and saw the altar made of stones.

The stones of the altar were stained red as was the ground around it. Jim stooped down and picked up a small bone out of the dust and glanced at me in quiet horror for the bone was that of a child’s.

I’d seen enough, it was time to leave!

I turned to go when something stung my neck. I reached up to my neck and my hand came away with a wooden dart no bigger than a toothpick. I stumbled against the altar as the world seemed to slide away from me.

Christina had already fallen to the ground and Matt was on his knees about to join her. Big Jim reeled back and

forth on his feet as he tried to bring the shotgun up. All I could hear was laughing.

Blinking my eyes I saw through my blurry vision members of the Salria all around us laughing uproariously.

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! I lambasted myself with deep self-reproach-meant.

I'd really blown it this time!

My desperate grip on the altar let loose and I was falling toward the bloodstained ground with the sound of laughter ringing in my ears.

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Flynn continued to sit against the bulkhead shotgun at the ready to repel boarders if need be. His audience had shrunken considerably, but there

remained a few in attendance on the dock for him to continue staring down.

If they thought they were going to make a slave out of him then they had another thing coming. It was called buckshot and he'd see that they got plenty of it in ample supply.

He glanced off to the headland of the island beyond the dock worriedly. It had been a long time. Too long.

Something had gone wrong ashore. The Captain would never have let so much time go by without checking in.

It was hard to judge time as the sky covered in fluorescent clouds never changed. He hated to admit it, but he was growing tired.

Nothing, but a helpless old man anymore, Flynn grouched to himself disgustedly.

He hadn't heard any shots or sounds of commotion on shore, but all the same something was wrong.

Something bumped against the bowel of the boat and Flynn leaped up to his feet surprising the onlookers who'd almost all drifted off to sleep. Keeping a wary eye on them Flynn moved up the boat towards the sound ready to blast away at anything that stuck its head up.

Reaching the side of the boat that the sound had come from he looked over, but saw nothing. He glanced back at the awakened crowd of onlookers and made his way up to the wheelhouse never turning his back on the crowd on the dock.

Something was going on and he wanted no part of it. The Captain had charged him to look out for the ship and

that was just what he would do.

Flynn backed up to the wheelhouse wall and out of the side of his mouth he whispered, "Ortega?"

"Si?"

"Speak English for pity's sake! This ain't Mexico or wherever it is that you come from!"

"It's not America either Senor!" Came Ortega's smart response through the broken window of the wheelhouse.

Flint gritted his teeth hard for a moment before he had to ruefully acknowledge that the Salvadorian had a point.

"Give it a good ten count and then give the Celestia's Prize all the throttle she's got!"

"I will do it Senor!" Ortega responded with.

Flynn stepped away from the shattered out windows of the wheelhouse and made his way along the side of the boat moored to the dock nonchalantly slicing through the mooring ropes with a sharp knife he pulled from his belt.

The front end of the Celestia's Prize fell away from the dock and it became obvious what Flynn was up to. He raced for the last rope and sliced through it as the on looking crowd came unglued and started for the boat in mass intent to stop it from its unplanned exodus from port.

The Celestia's Prize roared to life and jolted forward like a runner off the starting block. The shotgun blasts were a rhythmic percussion of sound as hot lead spewed forth scything through the onrushing crowd in an unexpected display of firepower.

Free of the dock the Celestia's Prize kicked up a foamy wake as it surged out for the open sea beyond the harbor. Two of the whaling ships attempted to break free of anchor and unfurl their sails to give pursuit, but the task was made bulky and untimely given the limitations of a maritime ship of a bygone era in comparison with a modern design not reliant on wind power for propulsion.

The Celestia's Prize was a dot on the horizon, with any hope of catching her gone as she began to be cloaked by the permanent fog bank that lay offshore. The two whalers heaved to and re-anchored in defeat.

The water of the shoreline broke and

then sheeted off the form of a man who slogged the rest of the way through the tide pool to reach dry land. Once on the beach the man looked back at the harbor in disarray and laughed throwing his head back to the clouds to let his laughter echo out of his empty soul as he held up the central crystal of the Orlanis Star triumphantly.

He began to chant out in an old language best left forgotten and the runes carved into the metal surrounding the crystal began to glow.

Chapter Ten

Darkness Resisted

I shook my head trying to clear away the cloudiness even as I tried to get a handle on why I seemed to be swinging. My wrists hurt.

I glanced up and saw that they were tied to a pole and then glancing down I saw that my ankles were tied to the same pole, hence the swinging motion. The image of a pig being roasted over a fire in this manner came to mind and grimly I acknowledged it as a possibility.

I think I would've preferred being

eaten by a sea monster rather than be a sacrificial slaying to some demon inspired deity.

As I swung back and forth I saw the others being brought along after me in similar fashion. Where were we anyway?

All the men walking to either side had torches in their hands. The torches weren't lit yet.

I suffered through a hard jolt as my carriers started up a series of steps. I craned my head around and saw that we were at the base of a mountain. Make that a volcano on second thought.

There was a doorway leading into the volcano itself just ahead. It was a very large doorway and it looked to have been purposely built that way.

Maybe everything hadn't been

destroyed after all. I swallowed hard at the possibilities that could represent. This was bad!

We were inside and the torches flared up and I saw a glimpse into the grandeur of the past as it lay all around me covered in dust. Sculptures engraved into the basaltic walls of the volcano loomed out at me as my bearers hauled me up yet more stairs.

The sculptures were of gigantic proportion and I feared they had been modeled off like sized individuals in the distant past thus validating the theory that Atlantis had been a kingdom of giants. Giants endowed with advanced knowledge from their angelic fathers.

Forbidden knowledge that was not to have been shared with mankind and which had helped lead to the corruption

of mankind and creation itself.

“Oh God help me destroy this place!”
I said.

I heard the laughter again and I glanced to the side to see our former guide keeping pace with me grinning like a Cheshire Cat.

“There is no God in this place as we reject His authority even as we become like gods ourselves!” He said all smiles.

“And just how do you plan to become a god?” I asked skeptically giving the man a once over.

He wasn't put down by my sarcastic perusal of him, “We will unlock the hidden knowledge and become mighty as man once was before. All we needed was the key, which you have unwittingly supplied us with!” He said on a gleeful note, as he held up the central crystal of

the Orlanis Star.

Something inside of me despaired and he laughed uproariously with relish as we were jerked upward through a scene of man's past, which would have been better off destroyed and never re-found by anyone.

A central cavern opened up that was lined with the sculptures of the handiwork of fallen stars, who had wrought evil with mankind.

I was dumped to the floor and abruptly kicked in the stomach several times. The ropes binding me were cut and I was roughly hauled to my feet and dragged over to a wall, which I was tied to before I'd had much of a chance to resist.

Regaining my breath I glanced to the side and saw Matt and Jim likewise

trussed up further down the wall from me. Where was Christina?

I looked around wildly in search for her only to see her being dragged kicking and screaming toward a central stone pillar that dominated the cavern. I jerked away from the wall, but I was held back by my restraints.

I turned my head to the other side to see my chuckling tormentor with the cursed piece of crystal that had somehow followed us here and harshly I said, “If you sacrifice her I swear I’ll kill you!”

He laughed again, “I have no intention of sacrificing her! That’s what children and useless people like you are for!”

“What are you going to do with her?” I asked in dread.

He stepped closer and tapped a finger

to my head before glancing at Matt and Jim and saying, “You three are worthless of value, as you have limited yourselves by yoking yourselves to the great dictator of the universe, instead of embracing freedom as we are about to. She however is still free to choose, an open vessel if you will. When we’re done transforming her the first meal she’ll have will be you!”

He dissolved into insane laughter again and walked away into a group of about a hundred individuals who began to rhythmically dance as they chanted something in a language I did not know and that I wished to never have heard for the dark quality that it lent to the air was a chill to the soul. The dancers twisted and cavorted on the floor of the cavern against each other as they cried out

making awful sounds some of which didn't even sound like a human.

I did not want to be here in this place to see such incarnate evil of a magnitude that I had never before encountered!

The place was heavy with darkness as the people before us cried out for more of the oppressive quality that pervaded the space with every passing moment. It even seemed that it was almost hard to get a breath because of a forming dimensional pressure. I felt completely overwhelmed.

In that moment I prayed to be gifted with the strength of Samson so that I would be able to pull this place down on top of us, but my wrists remained bound to the wall to either side of my head. I saw our chief tormentor press up against Christina where she was tied off to the

central pillar.

“Oh God help her!” I said, as my heart cried out for mercy from this nightmare we had been thrown into.

Christina screamed and swung away as far as her chain would allow and our former guide continued on across the cavern. He lifted the crystal piece up above his head triumphantly and was greeted by a raucous uproar of those gathered within the cavern as if he was a rock star.

He mounted the stairs at the other end of the room to a raised dais and reaching out he placed the crystal into a slot that looked like it had been made for it. The walls of the room came alive as runes were highlighted in patterned sequences everywhere the eyes strayed.

The gathered people screamed out

jubilantly, as if a great thing had been revealed, but all I saw was more darkness of thought. I hadn't known this level of depraved evil even existed, but now I was neck deep in it and I felt powerless to be rid of it.

There seemed to be no way to redeem the current situation. It felt like hell itself was opening up and spilling its foulness into the lives of those eagerly seeking its influence and control over them.

The crowd before us began to twist in circles as they moaned and groaned in what sounded like pain and yet to look at their faces as their eyes rolled back into their heads you would've thought they were experiencing the greatest pleasure of their lives.

“This is bad! So bad Eli!”

Matt's voice barely registered above

the awful din of all the ecstatic screaming going on in the place.

I turned my head to him and screamed out in impotent fury, “Do you think you have to tell me that? I’ve got eyes!”

Matt just shook his head, “No, you don’t understand how much worse this is! Remember the message I deciphered on the device that was from Nimrod the first emperor of the world after the flood?”

“Yes?” I said impatiently.

“Well when it talks about him it says that he “began to be” mighty before God. The word for it is the same Hebrew word used to describe Goliath and giants in general and the contextual wording of the verse implies immoral sexual rights having been performed according to some Jewish scholars.”

“You’re saying Nimrod was a giant!”
I exclaimed.

“It’s worse than that. Yes, I believe the Holy Scripture accurately shows that he was a giant, but he started out as a man.”

I stared at Matt utterly horrified at the possibilities that were leaping to mind. Were all these worshipers of darkness going to become giants?

Despair filled me as never before and I saw a matching look mirrored in Matt’s eyes.

“Both of you shut up and listen to me!”

Somewhat shocked Matt and I looked over to Jim, who was in the most furious bout of anger I’d ever seen him in before.

“Look at you two! You have the truth of righteousness even now within you

and yet all I see is despair and dread in the face of darkness that has already been defeated because of what my Savior did on a cross by offering Himself as a sinless sacrifice for all mankind! This is nothing for our God to overcome! Is not our God the Creator of both man and angel alike? Does He not have power and authority over all life? Where's your faith in this moment of trial? It is time to do mightily against the enemies of our God who enables us to through His Holy Spirit! It is time to believe and have faith! We have been given the power from on high to bind things on earth and even heaven itself, wherever two or three of us are gathered together in prayer. So let us pray and put fear behind us even as we find out how God will intervene on behalf of us for

He is faithful to keep all His promises!”

I was shaken by how overcome I had allowed myself to become by the parlor show of darkness that was spiraling around me in full action. I knew the truth, but I had allowed myself to be blinded by what I saw and fear had consumed me, when rather I should've remembered and had faith as a redeemed child of God should.

“God is faithful.” I said and Matt said much the same as we accepted the reproof of one more steady in his faith in a time of affliction than we had been in ours.

I then began to pray in unity of thought and need alongside Matt and Jim. We may be bound and helpless in the physical, but our God was strong and mighty to intercede for us for we had

faith, in our Maker.

Christina twisted away from the cloying touches that she felt from those pressed around her even as something darker and more invisible assaulted her in an endless barrage of temptation, half-truths, and veiled threats of pain and loss.

She couldn't bear it and fell as far as her wrists tied above her head would allow her to as she cried brokenly. She was without hope in this moment that seemed endless. Surely this must be hell!

A place of no hope and only torment that increased steadily in fervor against her until she felt like she was being roasted alive in hellfire itself. She didn't

want any part of this!

“Oh Jesus I don't want this! Please!”

There was no peace at her words as those around her touched her as they chanted dark things even as they frothed at the mouth losing all the glory of their created form in exchange for a twisted manifestation of the seed of Satan. When had she ever known peace?

She remembered Jim reading to her. She remembered the Captain's words. She remembered the unshakable faith of her Aunt. If there was an answer to peace it lay in the faith of the most influential people in her life.

At the top of her lungs Christina screamed, “Jesus I need you now! I need you! Oh God don't forsake me, because I believe! I believe!”

Silence fell over the place as all there

turned to snarl as crazed animals at the weeping girl experiencing peace and freely given salvation that swept through her dispelling all darkness's hold over her body and spirit.

A roar of rage horrible to hear rent the place with its dark sound as the lead tormentor began to explode upward in height. He rose above the floor until he stood nakedly majestic above all those in the room. He was easily three times the height of the tallest man in the room.

He strode forward towards the solitary pillar his steps shaking the room. Reaching it his fist snaked out and pulverized the pillar to broken rock. Reaching down then his hand engulfed Christina and he brought her up to eye level.

The massive mouth set on a face of

grotesqueness fell open to reveal double rows of teeth as a demon's spirit spoke having been given bodily form by a foolish man who had squandered away his priceless soul for a taste of power only to find out it had all been a lie.

“Foolish girl to deny us inhabitation! Do you not see what I can do to you? It is in my power to crush you! Revoke your vow and join us or I eat you now!”

The words were terrible to hear in both sound and quality of meaning, but Christina looking mature beyond her years gazed back into the glaring visage before her without fear and said, “if I perish I perish. Do your worst for I have life beyond any power of yours to ever take from me.”

The giant roared and looked for a moment as if he was about to bite her

head off, but instead he pulled his arm back and threw Christina towards the far wall of the cavern as one would chuck a river pebble to see how far out it would land in the pond.

Christina screamed midflight, but before she made impact with the wall of stone a body stepped between her and the wall.

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I watched as Jim was hurled back against the wall with the force of catching Christina, as I finished cutting Matt free. Somehow Jim had muscled his way through his bindings grabbed one of my hidden knives sliced my restraints before running over to act as a cushion for Christina as she was lobbed

by the giant at the rock wall.

Matt was free and I ran for the crumpled up pair on the floor of the cavern. Christina was unconscious but alive. I slung her over one shoulder as I tugged upward on a groaning Jim, who looked to be both in pain and out of breath.

Matt yanked on his other arm and together we had him on his feet. I left him for Matt to help as I turned for the stairway taking them two at a time in my dissent downwards.

It appeared as if I was abandoning my friends and in a way I was, but I knew they understood my reasoning for doing so. Matt, Jim, and I were all in our early forties. We had lived and experienced life. We'd had our tragedies and our good times, but Christina had only had

sixteen years in which to experience life and that by all accounts hadn't been that good.

It was more important that Christina live to celebrate her seventeenth birthday than for any of us has-beens to have another year added to our lives. Christina needed to meet a boy, fall in love and have children of her own yet.

I'd only known her for less than two weeks and yet like Jim I had adopted her as a daughter and I would gladly die if it meant she'd go on living. I was pretty sure Matt felt the same way about things.

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The group of worshipful hopefuls screamed out in rage at the escape of their prey and made to chase after them

when the voice of the giant boomed out over all of them.

“Leave them! Finish the rite of inhabitation so that you can become strong and mighty even as you see that I am. When we are fully realized in greatness then we shall go out and reclaim Atlantis and feast on the flesh of mankind! Now sing and dance and welcome my brethren into your hearts so that you may be transformed and understand the secret knowledge, with its bountiful pleasures that we have in store for all of you who seek to be gods of and in yourself.”

The gathered worshipers listened and all those within the room threw themselves into abandon in their desire to achieve what the giant had promised.

The giant tilted his head back and

laughed. The laugh echoed up through channels and cracks until it radiated out loudly from the mouth of the dried up volcano itself. The sound was heard for miles and people everywhere on the island glanced toward the volcano rising above the forest with dread as the sound of an ancient predator chilled the marrow of their bones.



## Chapter Eleven

# The Children

I had a plan. A wild hope, that is, at least.

I'd had a backup plan prearranged with Flynn. Instead of running back through the forest I dodged down through the ruins toward the beach that was nearby. I thanked God as I saw the small craft bobbing offshore under anchor.

If we hadn't come back to the dock in time Flynn was to leave the Celestia's Prize's life rafts stationed off of the North, East, West sides of the island.

The Celestia's Prize had two air boats and one six foot dinghy. It was the dinghy I saw offshore bobbing as its white paint gleamed in the orange glow.

How was I going to reach it with Christina unconscious?

I was a strong swimmer, but I wasn't that strong. I heard noise and I turned prepared to defend Christina or risk the swim if need be.

I relaxed as I saw it was Jim and Matt. Jim didn't look so good, but he was still moving. Matt looked completely drained of energy in his efforts to help the big Samoan along. I looked beyond them and saw no visible signs of pursuit, which was odd.

"Aren't they following you?" I exclaimed out in question.

Matt shook his head negatively as he

was still too out of breath to speak, but Jim mumbled out “I think they’ll want to finish the rite first.”

He was probably right. I helped steady him as he looked about to fall and Matt helped him to sit down on the sand and then I laid Christina down so that her head was resting on his lap.

“You guys stay here. I’ll swim out and bring the boat in close.”

I left running into the surf, until I had to swim for it. It had been one never-ending adventure ever since we’d landed in this inner world and I was tired, but the prospect of my friends being eaten on the beach by giants had me swimming for the dinghy in record fashion.

Reaching it I barely had the energy to pull myself up and over its high side. I

fell into the boat cracking my head painfully off the bottom.

I crawled aft and pulled in the anchor buoy. Then I pulled the cord to the little prop engine and it fired to life faithfully.

I cut the rudder over and let the throttle all the way open as I aimed for the beach still devoid of monsters. Pulling up in the shallows I watched Jim painfully get up to his feet carrying Christina as Matt protested for him to stop. Jim didn't listen though and kept walking into the surf every step looking like it cost him a year of his life, but he held Christina's head above the waves.

I reached over the side and took her from him. I laid her on the floor against the other side of the dinghy before I turned back to Jim. He gave me a pained look that said he couldn't do it.

“Oh yes you are! The girl needs a father and I need a good friend!” I said roughly in denial of his look of defeat.

He tried and I grabbed a hold of his belt from behind his back and pulled as Matt pushed from below. Jim tumbled over the side to join Christina on the bottom of the dinghy and I turned back for Matt.

It was actually harder for me to get him on board than it had been for Jim. Both Matt and I were totally spent and run out of adrenaline, but after a bit of a struggle Matt was on board too.

He sat down shakily as I crawled back to the prop and got us the heck away from this godforsaken island. I'd take my chances with the sea sooner than I'd set foot on this island again!

I leaned back and let the little prop

engine do the work of taking us out to sea. The plan was to get out to sea and on the edge of the fog bank where we wouldn't be too noticeable and wait for Flynn and Ortega to circle back around the island and pick us up.

We were halfway to the fog bank when the unwelcome sight of two whaling ships tacking around the headland came into view. We wouldn't reach the concealing fog in time to escape from them!

Matt pointed and I looked straight ahead to see the Celestia's Prize come storming out of the fog bank where we had been headed for. There was no time for them to pick us up and even then it was doubtful that we'd be able to out run the two whalers under full sail.

They'd harpoon us to a standstill and

board us at will. To make matters worse the Celestia's Prize couldn't have much fuel left by now by which to even make a run for it.

All that must've occurred to Flynn as he didn't head for us. He headed for the two whalers, which in turn broke off from us to focus on the Celestia's Prize.

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Flynn held the wheel and squinted as he watched the two whalers turn to meet him. What he wouldn't do for a chew of tobacco right now!

It was a nasty habit and he was glad that he'd given it up before it had been the death of him. The thought of that irony almost made him laugh out loud given the present circumstances, but

people thought he was crazy enough as it was already without adding sudden outbursts of laughter to the cuckoo list.

The actual truth was that he was crazy, but he wanted to keep that a secret for the time being. The proof of his lunacy was that you'd have to be crazy to try what he was about to.

“Ortega where are you, you sorry son of a sea cook?” Flynn growled out.

“Right behind you dog.” Ortega said succinctly.

Flynn smiled grimly, “Break out the children.”

Ortega left on the double as Flynn chuckled to himself. The Captain was going to be so mad! He was going to completely miss out on doing the honors that now fell upon Flynn as interim Captain.



Flynn watched as Ortega ran forward with a bar and began prying the deck boards up on either side of the ship's prow. He grimaced at the sight of the splintering wood, but it couldn't be helped. The Celestia's Prize didn't have much seaworthy time left anyway, Flynn acknowledged darkly, as he glanced down at the fuel gauge.

Glancing back up he saw that Ortega had done well at removing the decking, not that he ever intended on giving Ortega any praise for it. No, he liked to egg on the Mexican, as much as possible, but there was no denying that Ortega was an excellent sailor despite his derogatory comments to the contrary.

Ortega was at the hoist and he flipped the manual control over to divert the hydraulic power over to a secondary

hoist apparatus that rose up out of the two shattered sections of the deck. As the twin secondary hoists rose they carried along their burden with them, which for all the world looked like a nondescript section of pipe.

It was a pipe with a purpose though. The twin pipes to either side of the front of the ship were makeshift torpedo tubes and they were loaded. The tubes themselves along with the hydraulic hoist mechanisms were custom-made by none other than himself.

The only part of the process he hadn't built were the torpedoes. They were Russian-made.

Four years earlier the Captain had been salvaging a cruise liner that had run aground on a shallow coral reef, when on a dive he'd discovered a second

wreck in close proximity to the first. An antiquated Soviet attack sub had run afoul of the same reef in the past and had one side of it completely sheared off.

The torpedoes had been among the debris littering the floor of the ocean near the sub. The Captain had brought them aboard but had decided they would be a too hot ticket of an item to sell, as he didn't traffic in weapons. He'd kept them though and devised this ingenious defensive system, which Flynn had been only too willing to construct.

Now the pressing question was, would the torpedoes fire from their modified firing harnesses?

Along with that unknown was the all too real possibility that they might just blow up and explode when activated. They'd gotten an expatriate Russian

engineer in Singapore to do the wiring of the tubes, but the man had been half drunk at the time.

Flynn pushed on a panel of decorative wood paneling off to the side of the main controls and it slid away to reveal two buttons. Holding his breath he pushed both simultaneously.

No explosions followed. He breathed in again shallowly as he noticed that both buttons now glowed red. The torpedoes had been armed successfully. Now came the tricky part of timing them so that their trajectories would be on target.

Flynn centered the Celestia's Prize to pass in between the rapidly approaching whalers. The whalers kept a distance apart from each other and looked only too pleased at Flynn's decision to go

between them.

Why was that, he wandered abstractly to himself?

Whatever the reason it didn't matter now because he had committed the ship to the course of action at hand. Before he drew abreast of the two whalers he spun the Celestia's Prize hard to starboard and leading the Whaler on that side by about a boat length Flynn pressed the button to the starboard torpedo.

With an express of air the torpedo shot out of its tube to begin racing through the water for its target. Flynn pulled the wheel hard over cackling all the time at the grand time all this was.

The Celestia's Prize hung over in the water as she tacked over to a head on course once more with the other two ships. A giant harpoon plowed into the

water where the Celestia's prize had just been before it had made its turn back to center.

Ortega looked back at Flynn in alarm and Flynn nodded, as he registered the threat of the harpoons.

The plan of the two Whalers then was to harpoon the Celestia's Prize and drag her to a standstill so she could be boarded. Not today!

Flynn spun the wheel hard to port with a sense of urgency. They had to get the second torpedo off before a harpoon landed.

Flynn had to almost come about as he turned in order to lead the second Whaler for the torpedo to be just right. There was a terrific explosion at Flynn's back and he registered the sound of a confirmed kill with glee, even as he

hammered the other button-down.

Success would've been complete this day only the second torpedo didn't leave the tube!

Flynn hammered the second button again, but the result was nothing once again.

The Celestia's Prize shuddered hard as a harpoon slammed into the prow on the port side. There was a brief moment of nothing and then the Celestia's Prize was hauled around to make it a complete circle as it was towed after the Whaler by the harpoon stuck fast just above the waterline.

The force of the jerk bringing the boat all the way around knocked Flynn off his feet to the wheelhouse floor. He had just started to raise up when the metal shaft of a harpoon punched through the

wheelhouse wall and shattered the wheel to pieces.

Flynn fought his way back up to his feet, only to see more harpoons coming. These harpoons have no anchor ropes attached to them. They were being shot off free with the intent to kill those aboard the Celestia's Prize before they could repeat what they'd done to the first Whaler, which had been reduced to burning wood fragments drifting on the water.

Flynn saw Ortega run along the deck carrying something very heavy from the starboard side as a rope trailed out behind him. What was the man up to?

Then Flynn recognized what it was that he was carrying. He had the backup ship's anchor in his arms!

Ortega tossed the anchor over the port



side and almost went in with it from his exhaustion of carrying it. Harpoons whizzed past him, but he didn't seem to care. He stumbled to the port side torpedo that had failed to release even as rope ripped out over the deck railing to fall into the seawater after the anchor plunging into the depths.

Ortega picked up a sledgehammer and for the first time he looked up to the wheelhouse where Flynn was starting to put two and two together. Flynn nodded affirmatively and waited as did Ortega.

It took a few moments of fast disappearing rope during which time Flynn almost saw Ortega harpooned. Ortega stood where he was though ready with the sledgehammer.

The boat jerked hard as it was pulled down in the water both forwards and aft.

The back end of the boat was pulled out toward the port side and when it did the torpedo tube came in line with the bowel of the Whaler ahead of the Celestia's Prize.

Ortega swung the sledgehammer down to connect solidly with the back end of the torpedo tube at the same moment that Flynn hammered down on the red glowing button once again. With a protesting screech of metal the torpedo shot free of its canister and streaked out through the water ahead toward the Whaler.

A second later the rope with the anchor snapped under the strain. A piece of it whipped back to knock Ortega off his feet to land heavily on the deck. Flynn bailed out of the wheelhouse and down the gangway ladder towards

Ortega as he knew what would happen next.

The torpedo smashed into the rear of the Whaler and exploded magnificently. The whole back end of the Whaler was completely blown away, but the line holding the Celestia's Prize prisoner remained taut.

The sailing ship ahead reared up and sank bowel first sliding backward and down as sailors jumped free of it or at least tried to.

The rope binding the Celestia's Prize was too thick to saw through in the time available and so Flynn did all he could in the moment. He grabbed up Ortega whose face was tight with pain and headed for the ship's railing. They managed to both jump over the side into the water.

The Celestia's Prize swept past them as it groaned under the strain of its tether that soon drug it beneath the waves and out of view as its second victim took it along for the ride down to the briny depths of the inner sea.

Flynn struggled to keep Ortega's head above water and latched out desperately for a piece of driftwood from one of the whalers. Catching a hold of it he laboriously pushed Ortega's upper body onto it until Ortega was able to hold himself there.

Flynn latched on to the other side and sputtering on seawater said, "I'm too old for this!"

"Si, you is a very very old man Senor." Ortega huffed out.

Flynn gave him a look and Ortega's mouth split open to reveal a pearly grin.

Flynn shook his head trying to bite back a smile of his own as he said, "I should've drowned you while I had the chance!"

"But you didn't Senor and for that a senorita out there is very much grateful."

Both men became aware quickly that they weren't the only survivors in the water.

"We may get drowned yet Senor." Ortega said darkly, as with a yell several swimmers headed for them.

Flynn nodded grimly, as he and Ortega watched their executioners approach. Suddenly the surface of the water boiled as something shot to the surface from below. It was the snakehead sea monsters!

They popped to the surface everywhere throughout the carnage of the

two whalers. Screams rang out as Ortega and Flynn watched themselves exchange one fate for another. They were forgotten at least temporarily as the sea monsters ripped into the vengeful swimmers that had been headed their way.

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“Need a lift there?” I asked.

Both men in the water craned their heads around as I brought the dinghy up alongside of them and their piece of driftwood. With Matt’s help we hauled the two men out of the sea. Ortega had some nasty bruising going on, but seemed alright otherwise.

I waited for Flynn to catch his breath before asking, “So Flynn how was it to push the button?”

His face broke out into a grin as he launched right into it in ribald fashion, “You remember how it was Captain when you had a wom.....” Flynn’s voice trailed off as his eyes found Christina’s who had regained consciousness.

Flint swallowed the words he had been going to say and substituted, “It was a real dream moment Captain!” He winked at Christina upon finishing and she smiled and shook her head.

Flynn instantly sobered up as a look of heartfelt contrition came across his features, “Sorry about the boat Captain. I know you loved her.”

“She was a good boat, but I have everything that matters right here in this boat. I have a great crew and you’re what I don’t want to lose most.” I said.

Matt tapped my shoulder and gestured out into the water. I was steering us away from the destruction of the two Whalers, but off to our right was a lone swimmer. I pulled the prop over and came up alongside of the man.

The man stopped swimming and treaded water for a moment. From the look on his face I could tell he expected us to kill him.

“I’m not going back to shore, but you’re welcome to come with us if you like.” I said.

The man shook his head negatively, “I’ll take my chances with swimming.”

I glanced off to the shore a long ways off. I reached down and unsnapped a life preserver and tossed it out to him. As it splatted down beside him in the water I said, “It’s a long swim my friend. You



might need to rest every once and a while.”

The man reluctantly grabbed a hold of the life preserver out of necessity's sake before asking, “Why you do this for me? We were trying to hunt you down and kill you!” The man exclaimed looking uncertain as to what was taking place.

“We don't have to be enemies. That's not what I want. Best of luck with your swim.” I finished with before turning the rudder and heading out toward the offshore fog bank once more.

The man in the water watched us for a moment before beginning to swim toward shore again tugging the life preserver along after him.

## Chapter Twelve

# Adrift

“So your plan consists of setting out to sea and nothing else?” Matt asked skeptically sitting beside me.

I shrugged, “We have nowhere else to go and we need an ally in this fight if we hope to free the slaves.”

“You really think that these Whale People exist and that we’ll find them?” Matt asked doubtfully.

“I think they exist and if we’re meant to we’ll find them. I trust God to provide us with what we need.”

Matt was silent, but I detected he still had doubts.

That conversation had been five days ago now. We'd run out of water almost two days ago.

My face felt cracked and dry and my lips were bleeding. I was the only one still conscious in the boat as I manned the rudder.

My faith was being tested there was no other way about it. Either I was guilty for the murder of all those on board or help would yet come in some fashion.

The prop engine died, as it ran out of gas. In a way it had been a relief to empty the last of the gas into the engine this morning. Believe it or not but to drink the gasoline had been a temptation I'd had to fight against.

Thirsty as I was it didn't make any

sense, but the body's need for fluid caused desperate thoughts to come to mind that should never have even been rationally considered. We were dying of thirst surrounded by a sea of what we needed to survive.

Even the seawater was tempting, but I'd seen what that could do to a person. Better to die of thirst than die of insanity.

I could rationalize why seawater was not an option, but reversely I'd been considering gasoline as a substitute for it. I'd already gone insane it seemed or just crazy with the need for water.

I closed my eyes as the boat drifted in the flat emptiness that surrounded us. I slumped against the prop engine and husked out, "It's all yours God. I don't know what else I can do."

There was something wrong with

what I had just said. What was it?

*“You should’ve given it to Me from the beginning. This task was always too hard for you, but I will make a way because I AM that I AM and I will be praised. Trust Me and lean not on your own understanding, fear and seek Me first and it will go well with you.”*

If I could have cried I would have. I’d messed up again!

I was getting bailed out again. I didn’t deserve it miserable believer that I was, but I was grateful beyond expression for mercy to be extended to me once again.

*“I am always faithful and I will never forsake you Eli.”*



Movement. I felt movement.

I opened my eyes and beneath me I saw water. Why was I not in the water, but rather suspended above it?

My fingers curled into something. Netting?

I lifted my head and the first thing I saw was a pair of toned calf muscles. I closed my eyes again. Had I lost my mind?

I opened my eyes again to see the same pair of toned legs not over five feet in front of me. My eyes traced up the calves and on upward to the ratty edge of a dress like garment that came to mid thigh.

My eyes focused in on a very femininely proportioned derrière for a long moment before I glanced on upward to see a long slender back halfway covered by a mass of dark black hair

that lay in beaded ringlets. I couldn't see the woman's face, but I wanted to.

I glanced around the oddly shifting platform made of netting and rope. My eyes took in both Christina and Jim sitting back against the netlike sides of the place I found myself in. Both of them wore matching expressions of smugness, which clearly indicated that they had noticed my appreciation of an artfully crafted female rear.

I felt myself flood with embarrassment. I hadn't meant to stare, but waking up disoriented with it right in front of my face..... what man wouldn't have?

Matt, Ortega and Flynn were still out. I sat up feeling stiff and Christina crawled across to me with a jug of something that I hoped was water.

It was clear to me that I had already received moisture of some kind given my alertness level, but I wanted more. I took the odd animal skin like bag from Christina and drank from it, but not too much.

I handed it back to Christina, as I relished the taste of water that had something sweet in it.

I felt at my lips. A gel of some sort had been spread over them and they felt better.

I glanced at the woman who still stood facing forward. She had to have done it as I saw no others upon the unique craft that we sailed upon.

Christina had a cheeky smile as she leaned in close and whispered into my ear, “Her name is Keturah and she’s very nice. Just thought you’d like to



know her name boss.”

I gave Christina a hard look and whispered back, “You know you’re not too old yet to still be spanked.”

Christina scuttled back out of reach to the safety of Jim’s side, but she was still smiling.

I didn’t need anyone playing matchmaker for me, least of all a sixteen-year-old girl.

I grasped a hold of the rope that formed the backdrop for the netting surround and pulled myself upward. I was a little dizzy when I got to my feet from a combination of lingering weakness and unsteady footing on the flexing net underfoot. A strong hand grasped my forearm and helped me steady my footing.

My eyes met the eyes of the woman

who had saved all of us, “Thank you! Thank you for saving us!” I said trying not to be too mesmerized by the charming smile that she gave me as she half ducked her head in embarrassment at my thanks.

Her voice was throaty and had a rich accent to it, “We have not received visitors to our sunken world that I know of ever before. It is my honor to have been of help to you.”

She was a mixture of bashful beauty with an underlying cheerfulness of spirit that washed over me like a soothing balm over an old wound. I blinked a couple times as I realized how badly I was losing control.

I asked the first thing I could think of and it came out terribly, “Your black?”

I could’ve slapped myself, but instead

of taking offense at a perceived racial slur she laughed and responded with, “As are you”, she said giving me a thorough going over with her eyes.

I held up a hand apologetically, “What I meant was, I thought the Whale People were all white.”

She smiled at me charmingly in a way that said I was off the hook. She had a very gracious demeanor about her that I found addicting the more I was exposed to her.

“The Whale People are one people. Many are white, some are black, but light chocolate babies and black babies with blue eyes are born every day. To survive out here we must be a family who shares and gets along with each other. The Whale People are a people of equality and mutual respect as all people

should be regardless of color or previous ancestry. Do you not agree with this?" She asked speculatively.

"I do agree!" I quickly affirmed.

"I'm just surprised that former slave masters would willingly view people of color like you and I as equals."

She smiled richly, "Survival has a way of breaking down such barriers. We all bleed the same color out here Mister.....?" She asked, as she cocked her head to the side inquisitively.

"Eli." I said trying not to lose any more control than I already had in just a few minutes of being in this woman's presence.

She had lushly full lips and it was hard not to be impacted by them as they curled apart in another generous smile, "Welcome to Undersea Eli. Now if

you'll excuse me I'll get us underway.”

As she moved past she brushed up against me and gave me a quick smiling look of warm welcome that had an entirely innocent sensual undertone to it that left my mouth dry. It was clear to me that she knew I was attracted to her and it was just as clear that she openly welcomed my attraction to her.

For all her lushness of physical form and enticing personality I didn't take her to be a loose woman. Intrinsicly I knew that she had integrity, but she was openly showing interest in me. She had gone past simply being interested in a stranger to something more serious. Why?

Matt came up to the railing to stand beside me. I'd been too focused on the girl to notice that he'd come back to

consciousness. She was like an intoxicating drug in terms of her impact on me.

Matt tapped my finger and I glanced down to see that he had tapped my wedding ring, “Might be a good time to take this off Eli. I think you’ve worn it long enough.” Matt said with a serious look in his eyes.

Hot anger coursed through me and I had to refrain from hitting him. I think he knew the raw nerve he’d hit even though he foolishly didn’t move away from me.

Reason returned after a few hot and heavy moments of repressed emotion, “I’m not ready to do that Matt. I’ll never be ready!” I said with finality.

“Do you think that’s what Laura would have wanted Eli? She would have wanted you to be happy and you know

it.”

I nearly hit him then. The only thing that held me back was that what he had said was the truth. Laura had told me as much just before she had died.

Vainly I searched for a way out of this predicament that was beginning to feel like a trap.

“She’s just a kid Matt for heaven sakes!” I said testily as I tried to shut him up without the use of a fist.

He wasn’t to be dissuaded though, “You’re forty-one Eli, not sixty-one and from where I’m standing she looks all grown up to me.”

“Go plague somebody else and leave me alone Matt!” I said meaning it.

He patted me on the back and leaned in close to say, “Don’t be so hard on yourself for noticing and being attracted

to a woman after seven years of nothing.”

I gripped the rope railing hard and was about to retort with something, when gratefully he moved off. He made it sound like I was a eunuch or something!

The truth was I'd been attracted to a lot of women in the past seven years. Staying at sea for long periods of time had helped, but not cured the problem through the years.

The problem with this girl was that somehow with just a few smiles she'd completely worked her way under my skin and gotten up close and personal, which was awful!

No one understood. They thought it was just guilt that held me back from being romantically inclined with another



woman and perhaps in a small way it was, but it wasn't the primary reason. If I was to involve myself with another woman it would have to be for real with all systems a go. I couldn't do a relationship any less than to give it my all, but to do that I'd have to let go of the past entirely and embrace the future and whatever it may hold.

The thought of doing that and leaving the comfort of my memories was petrifying and yet it seemed like I was being pushed into doing just that.

I didn't want things to change and that was final!

I let my eyes take in the craft that I found myself on for the first time. It was modeled in a way after a catamaran of sorts. There were two runners held together in a parallel orientation by a

crisscross framework of beams that culminated in a central mast supported over the seawater by the adjacent twin narrow hulls that appeared as enclosed dugout canoes.

The mast was rigged with a sail that appeared to be made out of thinly scraped leather, which hung idly in the calm that we seemed to be caught in. Between the two dugout canoes was stretched a netting made of some ropelike material that was borne up by the underpinning that supported the central mast. All in all it was a rather seaworthy vessel and I was impressed with its construction greatly.

Trailing behind the catamaran was the dinghy. I glanced back to the girl who was moving around busily. Truthfully she wasn't exactly a girl, as I placed her

somewhere above twenty, but just barely.

She was strong. Somehow she had tugged all of us out of the dinghy and onto her craft. How had she managed that by herself?

I weighed in at just over two hundred pounds and Jim had another forty or fifty pounds on top of my weight.

“I was conscious and I helped her.” Jim spoke up from beside me.

I shook my head wryly, “I hate when you do that!” I said in response to him seemingly reading the unspoken thoughts right out of my mind.

He gave a small smile, but said nothing.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Better. When do we go back to free the slaves?” He asked somberly.

I shrugged, “That kind of depends on her people.”

Both of us watched curiously as Keturah began to make way, only she wasn't. She expertly let the sail furrow downward and secured it with some tie offs. Jim and I glanced at each other blankly. We weren't going anywhere without the sail up!

Granted we hadn't been going much of anywhere with it spread out to catch what meager amount of wind that there was, but at least we had been moving slightly. Jim appeared to be in the dark as much as I was as to the girl's motivations.

I was curious about a lot of things. Where did the wood for this boat come from? Why was a beautiful young woman like her out here alone?

Was she to be trusted?

Something deep inside of me said yes.

She was at the forward prow of one of the dugout canoes that lay beneath the netted platform we were on, when she suddenly bent down at the waist to pick up what looked like a leather plaited rope. My eyes quickly darted away from her, but unfortunately I glanced in Jim's direction and his eyes were full of unexpressed mirth at my expense.

He looked about ready to say something, but I reached out and touched his arm, "Not you too old friend. Please!"

The mirth in his eyes went away and he nodded to indicate that he understood the torment that I was under. Maybe he did. I knew very little about Jim's past before he'd come to work for me.

Both of our attentions were pulled back to Keturah as she spiraled around in an arching curve and let go of the leather plaited rope, which sailed out through the air to land with a splash in the water in the distance.

I blinked appreciably at the distance of the splash down of the rope and idly wondered if I could've thrown it so far myself. That had been quite the toss, but for what purpose had it been done?

I tried to get past my attraction for this girl of the sea for a moment in order to better understand her. This was most definitely her boat as her familiarity with it testified to long use of it.

She was both a tested sailor and a survivor. This survival of a constant life at sea was a threadbare existence.

There was little laying about the boat

to build a picture of her. Her very attire was threadbare to say the least.

The half shift dress that she wore was nothing but one leather patch on top of another. The sails of the boat looked better than her dress did and yet despite her worn attire she was still captivatingly beautiful.

Silently I admonished myself for falling prey to her charms yet again.

She seemed satisfied with the heaved to condition of the boat and turning forward I saw her reach into her dress at the neck and pull out a necklace. On the end of the necklace was what appeared to be a wooden whistle.

It was a whistle, as she held it up to her lips and blew through it. I heard nothing, which meant that the whistle was emanating an extremely high

frequency.

Was she really doing what I thought she was?

Was she calling in a whale?

Slowly I walked forward to stand beside her and give her a speculative look. She blew on the silent whistle again and then as if satisfied by some sign I couldn't discern she nodded and stowed the wooden whistle back inside the top of her dress.

Her eyes met mine and again I was taken aback by the ready warmth of her gaze. What was it about me that caused her to be so open in her intent?

“Yes?” She asked leadingly with another smile.

I felt awkward, even shy, for goodness sake in the face of her open interest for me. I gestured out to the calm



sea, “Your calling in a whale aren’t you?”

“Dimbo.” She said nodding.

“Dimbo? What kind of a name is that?” I asked.

She played the part of being mock affronted by my question and in a way I was ashamed of myself. What business was it of mine what names she chose to give to animals?

“You don’t like my name selection?” She asked as demurely as any southern bell could ever have and I backpedaled fast.

“I ah..... It’s different, but original. I can’t say that I’ve ever heard it before. I.....” My voice trailed off as she laughed again.

The fingers of one of her hands closed over my arm in a light grasp in a point of

contact that turned my thinking processing fuzzy.

She smiled richly, “You’re right of course. It is an odd name, but still I like it.”

“I’m glad you like it.” I mumbled out not sure at all how I had gotten surrounded by enemy forces and forced to surrender ingloriously.

Her fingers trailed down my arm to leave my skin at the wrist as she turned to face the sea just as it broke apart as a massive tusk breached up out of the waves. Dimbo was a jumbo sized whale, incredibly I saw the loop that had been at the end of the rawhide rope securely placed around the base of the giant tusk.

I had only a moment to take in the great bulk of the tusked whale in

alarmed wonder before I was completely taken off my feet as the catamaran was yanked forward. A soft weight fell on top of me and took away most of my air in the process.

Blinking against the suddenness of events I stared upward into the flashing eyes of my whale girl rescuer. I knew what she was going to do before she did it and yet I seemed powerless to stop it.

Her lips pressed down over mine in a wet full-fledged kiss that she held nothing back from. I was startled by the passion of her and angry at being so taken advantage of all at the same time.

She pulled back from the kiss breathing hard and I asked in obvious aggravation, "A little sudden don't you think?"

She didn't seem to hear the harshness

of my tone, because she gave another of her characteristic smiles that left no doubt as to her intentions.

“Among the Whale People we have a saying, ‘When fortune floats by grab a hold of it because the current may never pass by again.’ I want to be your mate and I don’t mind making a fool of myself to prove it.”

The boat was surging along the wave tops at an unbelievable speed that came in surges that matched the beat of my heart. In savage desperation I said, “Well I don’t want you for a mate!”

Again she didn’t seem off put by my anger in the slightest. She gave me a knowing look before she shifted slightly and let a thigh fall between my legs to rub up against me. Her look was potent seduction as she said, “Your body tells

me otherwise Eli.”

“I don’t make decisions based on what my body would like or not like!” I responded heatedly unable to deny the attraction for her that she could feel.

She leaned in close again and I thought she was going to kiss me, but she diverted to my ear to whisper directly into it, “I would not want you as a mate if you did. The next time we kiss it will be you kissing me.”

She rolled off of me and away from me a couple feet in distance on the netting. Even with her gone I still felt out of breath.

I glanced over at her to see her looking at me with her head propped up on her arms as she lay on her belly on top of the deck netting. I was a hard person to startle or surprise and she’d

done both in a matter of seconds.

“You’re awfully sure of yourself aren’t you?”

She nodded silently as she continued to watch me.

I craned my head around to see if I was even now the subject of embarrassing witnesses, but I saw no faces. They’d all been thrown flat too and I had come to the forward area of the boat and was now sunk down in the netting out of view of the latter part of the boat.

She may have been entirely wanton in her primal attempt at claiming me as her mate, but at least she’d had the good graces not to make a fool out of me in front of the others. She seemed awfully quiet now given her recent primal outburst and declaration of intent to be

my mate.

I looked back to her and despite the oddity of the situation and the rampant confusion on my part I said as honestly as I could to her, “Look Keturah, you need to get something straight. I’m not right for you. Find someone else. I have bad luck written all over me and I’m not available anyway.”

Her gaze fell from mine to the ring on my finger.

She stared at the ring for a moment before she glanced back to me and said, “I guess I’ll have to wait until you are available then.”

In frustration I asked, “Why would you do that? You don’t even know what kind of man I am! How can you be so foolish?”

She was quiet for a moment before

saying, “You’re the man I’ve waited and saved myself for all my life and the honor of being your woman will be mine. You’re the foolish one here to think to resist my heartfelt resolve to be yours.”

I half sat up to regard her in complete consternation, “Are you crazy or something?” I exclaimed.

For the first time since I had met her I saw the evidence that I had truly hurt her and I cringed inside as I saw a little of the zesty life dim out of her eyes as she flatly responded with, “It’s been said of me many times. While it may be entirely good fortune on my part to have found you the opposite could be said of you I’m afraid.”

I started to say something to recant my use of the word ‘crazy’, but she cut me



off.

“Get some sleep. It will be many hours before we get where we are going.” And with that said she turned over and faced away from me.

I felt rotten and I didn't even know why.

I was the one who'd been sensually bushwhacked and then taken advantage of!

The right was on my side!

I lay there for a moment gritting my teeth, but eventually I lost the battle. Nine years of lovingly committed marriage wouldn't let me just lay there and let a wrong go by when I had the power to correct it.

“Keturah?”

No response.

I reached out and grasped her

shoulder and pulled her over flat onto her back. She looked a little surprised and guarded all at the same moment.

I glanced down at the netting as eye contact right now was too much, “Of the two of us Keturah I’m the crazy one. I was crazy to come to this place and I’m crazy to attempt to free the slaves on the mainland and no doubt they’ll be something else that I do which will be crazy. Anyway what I’m trying to say is, I don’t mind being labeled as crazy, but apparently you do. I’m sorry that I evidently hurt you. It was my intention to hurt you and for that I’m doubly sorry. My wife died seven years ago and since then I have been a man full of bitterness and anger and somebody simply not pleasant to be around. You’ve stated in bold fashion that you want to be my

mate. It's an unanticipated occurrence on my part and I don't think you quite understand the ramifications of it, but if it happens I genuinely hope the best for you because you're not getting much in return. I think you should seriously reevaluate whatever decision-making process that has led you to this point and find yourself a younger man that is not so jaded and has more life left in him than I do."

I looked up to see what impact if any my words had on her. The smile was back both in her face and in her eyes and that meant I had failed to dissuade her from seeing me as a poor catch.

"Thank you for apologizing, but I'm not reconsidering my choice of having you for a mate. I'm yours when you want me."

I sighed heavily and glanced away and upwards towards the shifting clouds overhead.

Was God setting me up with this girl or was she just a distraction to be powered through and ultimately ignored?

I honestly didn't know.

All I knew was that the painful and very personal process of facing my past and perhaps healing from it had gotten a lot more complex and perhaps eminently more painful.

I glanced back over at Keturah to find her already asleep with a smile on her face as she now faced me instead of facing away from me. What made a beautiful girl like her willingly shackle herself to a has been like me?

What did she see worthy enough about me that would cause her to take such a

leap of faith? Or reversely was she really crazy?

Time would tell and unfortunately my reawakened libido was playing favorites against me.

“God help me.” I whispered out softly as I drifted off to sleep under the impetuous of the rhythmic surge forward followed by a slight lull before surging forward again.

Blinking I sat up and looked around. I didn't think I would ever get used to this constant light. All in all though I felt surprisingly rested.

I glanced to the netting beside me, but Keturah was gone. Something was different. We weren't surging ahead anymore.

I got up and located the others who

were awakening as I had from the lack of the steady expected motion of the whale tugging the boat onward. In alarm I searched the open expanses of the catamaran, but saw Keturah nowhere!

Where was she?

Matt came up alongside of me and pointed out to sea at something. I turned to see the massive whale that been pulling us like a trusty steed through the waves for hours basking on the surface, only he wasn't alone!

Keturah was sitting on the front end of the whale's snout and appeared to be in deep conversation with the giant beast. Crazy came to mind but then I had to admonish myself some as I remembered how my wife had talked to her pet cat as if it understood all of life's troubles. Admittedly the cat had seemed to

understand some of it or perhaps it had just been a world-class faker.

A pet cat was one thing, but a pet whale?

Everyone else on board was standing beside me now as we watched the girl and her whale. Keturah seemed to notice our gazes all of a sudden and abruptly stopped talking to Dimbo. Was this why she was called crazy?

It was extreme, but I didn't think it was crazy. Well maybe a little, but it wasn't alarming anyway.

Keturah said something and the great bulk of the whale shifted in the water without hardly a ripple. The whale came towards us and it was hard to hold onto courage as it came at us slowly head on. Where were we going to flee to anyway?

Its great tusk that had to be close to

fifteen feet in length rose out of the water until it was suspended just over the side of the ship's netting. Keturah slid down the scarred rubbery snout to the tusk and gracefully walked the broad length of it barefoot.

That tusk had been rammed through countless sea monsters no doubt, but Keturah showed no fear. She stepped down onto the deck netting and the whale drew back as graceful and as calculated as the swish of a cat's tail.

Keturah smiled a little nervously and quickly stepped through our shock and awed ranks to head for the mainmast of the boat. She was obviously embarrassed over having been caught talking to an animal. She really had been scarred by someone into believing that she was crazy.



I looked from her at the mainmast back out to the sea. I was somewhat startled to see that the whale had come silently broad side of the vessel and its great eye was directly in front of me. It stared at me with an intensity that was undeniable. Just how much intelligence had God given to these creatures?

I knew that whales had their own language much the same as dolphins did, but I felt like I was getting a stern lecture through the one eyed glare of a higher significance. I got the message. Don't hurt his pretty master or there will be consequences.

Message delivered the whale dipped down silently beneath the waves and was gone from view.

Matt glanced from the still water to me with a knowing smirk, "Well you're

still here so I guess he approves.”

I gave him a dirty look and turned back to see what Keturah was up to. There was more of a sea breeze than there had been before and Keturah in the absence of my attention had already unfurled the sail and made the necessary tie offs of ropes attached to it. She really was a superb sailor and I respected her as such.

I stepped aft and undid the directional sail swing boom. So lost in the repetition of her timeworn habits Keturah was reaching for what I had just done when she saw I had already done it. She gave me a ready smile that had real pleasure in it.

“I hope you don’t mind.” I said, as the wind caught the sails more fully.

She quickly shook her head no as her

smile got richer. It seemed that all her smiles and attentions were just for me. She was so giving of herself.

First she'd offered me her body whenever I wanted it and now she was handing over the reins of her boat, which had to be her one pride and joy in life. When it came to me she seemed to be nothing but joyful surrender. It was humbling, confusing, and utterly annoying.

I didn't want to like her, but I did. It would have been somehow easier to resist the lush temptation of her if I hadn't liked her.

The wind was catching the sails now and I had to admit that this makeshift catamaran was a joy to navigate. Keturah indicated to follow the wind and I let the boat go to chase after it and

we really picked up some speed.

Christina cried out nervously as the right dugout canoe boat dusted up off the waves and the platform heeled over to the left to coast on just one canoe pontoon. There wasn't anything wrong with what was happening. She just wasn't used to what real sailing was like.

It had been a long while for me too, but it came back to me now along with the free roaming joy of it. Something occurred to me then. I glanced around to see what had become of Keturah since I had taken over the ship.

She stood leaning back against the mainmast her knotted braids whipping around in the sea breeze. She was smiling as usual only she had a look of pure contentment to her face now. Like it

or not my taking over stewardship of the ship had been a symbolic gesture on my part.

Handling her boat and mastering it through the waves was a close thing to doing the same thing with her body as her mate. It was clear from the look she was giving me that she recognized the progression in our relationship as well as for what it was a sign of interest on my part for something more.

Change was terrifying, but it could also be exciting.

An hour later the color of the water changed. I relied on Jim to tell me what was different about it other than the color.

He came back to me and said, "It's shallow. There's a coral reef or something like it down there."

I motioned to Keturah and she came closer to me and I asked, “There are other islands?”

“Yes, but they are very small. The whale people get the wood they need for our crafts from the islands and they grow food on the beaches.”

Jim and I gave each other a disbelieving look. They grew food on the beaches?

Keturah seemed to sense our quandary of mind and said, “The water of the inner lagoons is sweet. You can drink it. It’s not salty.”

“How’s that possible?” Jim asked with curiosity rarely known for him to express.

Keturah shrugged to say as if she didn’t know before saying, “The water comes from below. It has lots of bubbles

in it. Some can even swim in it without coming to the surface for air for long periods of time, but that is very dangerous.”

No kidding I thought to myself before asking, “Why? Don’t they drown?”

Her face was serious as can be as she said, “That’s why it’s dangerous. One has to drown little bits at a time and fight down one’s own panic for it to work and not be fatal.”

Matt had come up to us and he stated what both Jim and I were struggling with to comprehend, “I know I just heard her speak clearly, but I don’t have any idea what she’s talking about. Do you?”

I shook my head no and Jim did to.

Breathing bubbly water as if it was air?

Everything was so different down

here.

The coral reefs got more numerous and ran even closer to the surface. I even saw where they crested out in spots.

Keturah took steering the ship back over as she expertly sailed in and around the underwater obstacles as if she knew the way like the back of her hand.

Crazy came to mind again as the pontoons of the boat sliced through the waves perilously close to outcroppings of coral above and below.

“Shouldn’t we take some sail down?” I asked finally as I chickened out.

What we were doing was akin to playing Russian roulette. She gave me a sideways glance full of mirth followed by a deep chuckle to match.

“Scared?” She asked her voice full of playful teasing.



I had the immediate knee-jerk reaction to lie and protect my masculinity, but I told the truth instead, “Yes!”

Jim to his credit nodded affirmatively as well. Matt and Christina were beyond words and had stopped looking outward from the ship, but instead they sat huddled together with their eyes crammed shut. It was tempting to join them but my last vestige of pride resisted such a notion.

Keturah gave Matt and Cristina a sympathetic look and then gave me one, “I’m sorry, but it is the only way. If we take sail down we’ll lose speed. If we lose speed we’ll sit heavier in the water and hit the rocks.”

I nodded grimly.

“This is the only way into these islands?” Jim asked in exasperation.

Keturah's eyes dodged away as she said, "There is another way through, but it is several hours away."

She glanced to where Matt and Christina were huddled and softly admitted, "Perhaps we should've gone that way."

I stared at the back of Keturah's head my emotions wrathful. Forget mating the girl, as I might strangle her first!

I heard one pontoon scrape enough to give everyone a healthy jolt of fear and I was about to lash into Keturah for being so stupid, when Jim's hand gripped down over my shoulder warningly. He leaned in close to my ear and said, "She was just trying to impress you. Cut her some slack Captain."

I turned to him with disbelief, "You too!" I exclaimed.

He shrugged and smiled briefly. Everyone it seemed had made it their mission to hook me up with a hot date.

I stepped away to the side and was lashed in the face by kicked up sea spray as I stared at the obstacle course that still lay ahead of us. We weren't out of the rough yet by any means.

I glanced at Keturah in anger and was arrested by the sight of the trail of a crystalline teardrop making its way down her smooth cheek. My anger died at the sight of the tear.

I glanced at Jim and he nodded his head strongly indicating I needed to do something. I stepped closer and brushed the moisture from off her cheek. Her eyes came to mine and she mumbled out, "I'm sorry!" before hurriedly looking back ahead to the fast approaching reefs.

I nodded and said, "Pride gets the best of even the finest of sailors at some point."

Her eyes reflected relief at my tolerant tone and I realized at that moment that I had the ability to crush this girl with just my words alone. I didn't want to do that.

"I think she'd maneuver better with a little less sail." I said, as I caught several strands of beaded hair that had fallen across her eyes and brushed them off to the side with my fingers.

"Okay with you?" I asked.

She quickly nodded, "Whatever you think best."

I headed forward and Jim followed and together we took down a little sail, which did help us make a way through the patches of coral a little easier.

Keturah was a lot like my oldest daughter had been I realized as I worked on the sail. To yell at her when she'd done something wrong did little good. Instead she would freeze up emotionally and not hear a word of instruction. I would need to refrain from yelling at her if at all possible, as it would do more harm than good.

I shook my head at my own thoughts. Why was I even worrying about such things as her emotions?

About fifteen minutes later we pulled free of the last of the coral reefs none the worse for wear. Ahead of us lay a series of twenty to thirty islands.

Keturah had been right. The islands were tiny. More fascinating than that were the floating wood platforms here and there that constituted a floating

village upon the crystal clear water of the lagoon surrounding the islands.

Keturah been right about something else too. The water of the lagoon was bubbling. Out of curiosity I leaned over the side and tasted it. The water was literally sweet to the taste.

As long as I lived I doubted that I'd ever find better tasting water than this.

Matt had been one bubbly being of discovery once we had pulled free of the coral reefs. He was fascinated by the water of the lagoon as much as I was. How did one get fresh water in the middle of the sea?

It wasn't just any freshwater either. It was the best tasting water I'd ever had and I actually felt like I was better off physically since I'd been drinking it.

"It's not methane that's for sure." Matt

said introspectively.

“What’s not methane?” I asked.

Matt glanced up, “The bubbles in the water. I’ve seen water bubble like this before in the Gulf of Mexico, but there it was because of methane gas escaping from pockets in the ocean floor. If all these bubbles were methane if someone so much as started a fire the whole lagoon would go up like a fireworks factory.”

“What is it then? What’s causing the bubbles?” I asked.

“I think its oxygen Eli, believe it or not. It’s like a big fish tank with highly oxygenated water. Perhaps that’s how people manage to survive without breathing regular air when they’re in it.”

“Why is it so pure and sweet when we’re surrounded by a sea as salty as the

one topside?” Jim asked.

Matt turned to him and said, “It’s a matter of pressure concentration really. The same thing happens with the Amazon River in South America. The pressure of the freshwater flowing outward pushes the saltwater back. It’s possible to still drink fresh water from the sea two hundred miles off the coast of Brazil at where the Amazon River flows into the Atlantic. Here I imagine the coral reefs help keep the salinity of the sea at bay as well. As to the water’s sweetness I think it’s high in pH value, which might mean that it’s circulated and purified through metal deposits below that raise the pH level of the water.”

“Don’t those expensive water treatment systems you can buy topside rely on platinum for their purification?” I



asked speculatively.

Matt grinned big, “Yes they do and it’s a good guess that the Earth’s core is made up of such metallic metals and alloys. Who knows if we do get a chance to get out of here we might leave as wealthy as kings after all. Platinum brings more than gold on the market.” Matt finished with exuberance.

I didn’t really care about the possibility of a lucrative trade in platinum or some other rare metal or mineral. In fact I really didn’t care to return to the surface with all its technological chaos and lack of positive virtues at all.

More and more I was coming to realize that I wanted to stay here and continue to explore this new inner world. Here I had a purpose even a

destiny perhaps whereas on the world above I was just a washed up has been, who was now deeply in debt, without a boat to show for it.

I glanced at Keturah and self acknowledged that I even had a beautiful mate if I wanted her, by which to complement my new standing in this inner world. I did want her, but I warred within myself against the forbidden desires that attacked my remembrance of the past and threatened to overwhelm them with something new.

# Chapter Thirteen

## Goodbye

We were drawing steadily closer to the floating settlement and we had attracted a lot of attention. A crowd of varying textures from black and white to in between made up the crowd that greeted us. The biggest difference from the island of Atlantis being that no one appeared to have the mantle of a slave pressed down about them. It was an encouraging sight.

I felt a peace settle over me as I took in the apparent unity of the gathered

crowd. These people it seemed had finally gotten it right at least for a little while.

Jim grasped a hold of a line that was thrown out to us and moments later Ortega and Flynn caught lines of their own and slowly the catamaran was pulled into the dock and tied off. The crowd eagerly made way for us as we stepped off the boat onto at least something that resembled dry land.

I looked back to see that Keturah hadn't followed us.

"Aren't you coming?" I asked curiously.

She shook her head no as she quickly untied the mooring ropes and let the catamaran drift off from the dock a ways before she threw an anchor overboard. That certainly was odd behavior.

I didn't have time to dwell on it though as a spokesperson for the interested crowd had emerged.

It was an older woman whose auburn hair had begun to gray in places. She was as white as white can be and yet she looked at me in the eye without any condescension of any kind.

“Welcome to our colony of survivors brave strangers! You are from the surface aren't you?” She asked inquisitively.

“Yes, we are.” I said speaking up.

“Why, if I may ask, have you come so far to our inner world?” She asked.

I decided to be unflinchingly honest with her, “At first we were in pursuit of the treasure we expected to find in the sunken fleet of the convoy of ships that brought you to this inner world. We

didn't know this place existed, until we basically fell into it. We had decided not to come, because the spiritual cost would of been too great, but then a way was set up for us through the supernatural and we came through to your world under the influence of God. I'm not sure how, but I've been led to believe in a vision that somehow my little crew is to be used instrumentally in a great plan of the Creator's orchestration to bring freedom to all the peoples of this inner land."

The woman smiled and a murmur of excited anticipation broke out and swept through the gathered crowd. The woman touched her heart with a hand as she said with reverence, "You don't know how long we have held out for such a hopeful day and now that it has, what is there to

be said but welcome!”

I held up my hands in a gesture meant to forestall the growing jubilation of the crowd at large, “Wait there is more to be said. I do not know how, but a device of dark knowledge made its way back into the inner world when we came to it.”

There was a collective gasp from the crowd and the woman moaned out in question, “The Orlanis Star?”

I nodded.

“We thought we had freed ourselves from the curse our ancestors had enacted upon themselves to reach this hidden world!” The woman said on a hopeless note of anguish.

I felt like some cheering up was in order as the group before me that had been all smiles had suddenly turned as

somber as death.

“Your ancestors may well have welcomed a curse upon their heads, but I believe having been sent here by God that He is desirous of us delivering you from the curses and mistakes of the past. Why else would we have been sent here? I can testify to you beyond a shadow of a doubt that we would not be standing here before you if it had not been for the hand of God preserving us through trial and close calls one after another!”

The woman wiped the tears that had fallen off her face and straightened her shoulders with resolution as many within the crowd did as a little hoped flowed back in.

“Tell me what have they done with that wretched evil device?” She asked.



I told it to her straight, “They used it to unlock some dark Atlantean knowledge that enabled them to complete a satanic ritual wherein they welcomed demon possession and put on the manifestation of the giants of old.”

If it was possible her already white skin paled even further. She asked, “What is to be done?”

She’d spoken softly, but her voice sounded out loud in the hush that had befallen the crowd, who looked among themselves in fear.

I looked around at the crowd at large, “We’re all going to have to fight if we are to survive this ancient scourge, but more importantly than fighting we are going to need to trust God to win this one for us, because without His help we don’t stand a chance.”

The Whale People took the news we carried hard, but they showed resolve for the coming struggle. They were brave people to survive as they had and they weren't backing down from the fight that had been a long time in coming.

They agreed to help rescue the other slaves. It stood to reason that in the coming fight it would be good to have greater numbers on our side. I just hoped that there were still slaves alive yet to rescue.

There was no telling what had been transpiring on the mainland since our absence from it. I had to believe though that there were still slaves alive as I had been cast to free them like some sort of a proverbial Moses.

The symbolism of that last thought hit

me abruptly and I groaned aloud. I had been tasked with the leadership oriented task to lead people out of the bondage of dark self-imposed generational curses and the bondage that drew blood at the bite of the whip. It was alarmingly parallel with the task appointed to Moses and his second wife had been named Keturah. She'd been black too.

Some might say that the coincidence stopped there because Moses was brown and I was black, but they would be wrong. My great ancestors from Africa hadn't been taken captive and turned into slaves in West Africa like most in the American South and the Caribbean had been.

Instead they had been captured and enslaved along the east coast of Africa just off the shore of Ethiopia. My

ancestors had been partly Jewish by heritage. One from the tribe of Naphtali and the other from the tribe of Levi.

On the voyage over to America they bore a son who they named Levi after the father's Jewish ancestry in an attempt to hold onto their heritage and they had. My father had died five years ago, but he had ever been the historian. So much so that to reaffirm history he had named me, his only son, Levi, after the boy who had been born into captivity on the journey to America, in his attempt to assert that the captivity of the past was over.

I went by Eli, because I'd been embarrassed by my real name. I'd never wanted to be seen as someone special or unique because of my Jewish ancestry that could trace its lineage back to the likes of Moses' own tribe of Levi.

Moses had been on the back side of the desert in the land of Midian for forty years without a true purpose in life before he'd been called and pressed into duty by God. I'd been lost in a desert at sea for seven years, which was the number of completion.

The day we'd come through the hole in the ocean had been the seventh year anniversary of my families passing, which had been partly to blame for my supremely bad mood leading up to that event. My mood always took a nose dive southward that time of the year.

There were just too many coincidences to be ignored. God had been setting this one up in symbology for a long time and I felt humbled to know that I was part of an overall process that went well beyond the years of my life

and experiences.

“What are you thinking about?” Matt asked as he nudged me in the side with an elbow.

I looked up from my mostly uneaten food at his verbal prompting and shrugged off having to answer his question. I felt too raw inside to talk about what I was going through.

The Whale People had thrown quite a feast in our honor, but my mind had been quite absent from it. I wanted to know something about my whale girl sitting all by herself out on a worn pile of boards and threadbare netting.

I got up leaving my food behind and looked around for the head lady. I found her standing off to the side of where many had begun to dance in an upbeat spirit. I wasn't sure what they were

upbeat about, but they were.

I came up alongside of the woman whose name was Elizabeth. She turned to me and stepped away from the merriment of those behind her and asked, “How can I be of help to you Eli?” She inquired softly.

I looked around to see if anybody was listening, but they weren't as they were too focused on having a good time. “What can you tell me about Keturah?”

The old woman's eyes crinkled knowingly and I felt myself blush slightly.

“What would you like to know Eli?”

“Everything”, I responded and it was the truth.

“Well I'll tell you what I know and it's not much. Hers is a sad story. She was born on the mainland to the tribal

clan that now has the Orlanis Star. The ones you say have now become giants.”

She paused and I said, “Go on.”

“Well she saw a lot of terrible things and when she was four she was offered up as a sacrifice to the water spirits that the tribe worshiped.”

“How did she escape?” I asked breaking in.

“She didn’t. They tied her to little more than a wooden board and sent her out to sea on the evening tide. Two years later she came to us.”

“What?” I exclaimed.

Elizabeth nodded and held up a hand, “I don’t know how she managed to survive for two years out on the open water and she’s never told anyone.”

“How did she find you?”

Elizabeth shook her head in



dumbfounded awe and I could see that she was reliving imagery from the past as she said, “The whales have always been friends to us and we to them. It was the whales that led us to the haven of this lagoon and its islands that supply our needs. No whale has so befriended one of us though as that big oaf of a one that she named Dimbo has her. He came riding high in the water right down the channel with his snout tipped back and her sitting on the base of this tusk. The two of them have been inseparable ever since. He very much is her guardian and her outlet for communication.”

“Why does she stay on that raft?”

Elizabeth sighed sadly, “There is a man that resides on this very platform village. He has not left his room in twenty-five years. He is scared to the

point of death to even attempt leaving his room. Keturah is the same way. She walks the nets of her boat. She'll ride Dimbo and swim in the water, but she won't step foot on dry land or the relative stableness of this village platform. It's very sad how she spends her life at sea alone. Some have said things about her being.....”

“Crazy.” I filled in for her and Elizabeth nodded sadly before commenting, “There's nothing crazy about her other than she can be a bit impulsive at times. The bad thing is that I think she's starting to listen to what's being said by the small minded among us. I've done what I can to stop the talk, but the rumor continues on. She is a very sweet and passionate young woman. She would make any man a worthy wife, but

of course such a man would have to have a penchant for spending most of his time at sea and have a tolerating patience from time to time.”

Elizabeth was looking at me and the message of her words was resoundingly clear as to who she thought that man was. I turned away to go.

“She likes fruit. Doesn’t matter what kind it is she loves it.” Elizabeth called out softly.

I started to move forward again, but stopped as a sudden commotion erupted within the village. I made my way through the crowd to see what had caused the stir.

Another boat was coming in and was just now docking up as we had earlier in the day. The boat had an exotic passenger to these parts on it.

Christina took off screaming for the boat, “Serena! Serena!”

Christina practically knocked a laughing Serena off of her feet when she slammed into her with exuberance. The two hugged and cried and laughed all at the same time it seemed.

Flynn came to a stop beside me and glancing at him I thought his eyes unusually moist.

He quickly blinked rapidly before saying, “Looks like we got the crew back together Captain.”

“Looks that way.” I said affirming his positive statement, but my attention was elsewhere. I was looking at Big Jim standing off a ways with Matt.

The big man was twisting his hands together as his facial muscles twitched repeatedly in a nod to a private war

going on inside of him. I made my way through the crowd and grasped him by the shoulders.

He tore his eyes off of Serena to look at me. I felt overcome by emotion all of a sudden and I couldn't help the few tears that fell as I said, "Second chances to be with the one you love don't come by often. Take it from me that you would be a fool to let this opportunity slip you by."

Jim nodded slowly and moved past me toward Serena. The big man had more courage than two men put together, but in this moment you would've thought he was a coward.

He came to a stop at a respectful distance from the hugging Aunt and Niece. Christina drew back slightly as she looked from one to the other.

Quietly I prayed out under my breath, “Come on spit it out!” Even from here I could see Jim’s jaw muscles ticking a million flicks a minute.

Jim’s mouth opened, “I.....”

Literally that was all he had managed to say before Serena burst out with, “I thought you’d never ask!”

She vaulted forward as if she had springs in her feet. Her legs curled around Jim’s waist and crossed over at the ankles behind his back even as she seized his face with both hands and began to kiss him with a wild abandon of pent-up passion that would not be denied any longer.

Her actions mirrored that of a lover without inhibition, who wanted to express how deep her love was unmindful of what others around may

think. Jim responded in kind by gripping onto her and kissing her back with all the hidden passion he'd built up for her through the years they had crewed together.

The crowd of surrounding onlookers in general were a mixture of open smiles and envious looks. Christina laughed nervously, her face completely flushed as she happily glanced from one to the other of the two people she loved and respected most in life.

Figuratively speaking she was theirs to finish raising and while their openly displayed passion for each other was embarrassing it was also a source of relaxation and instruction for her. It was relaxing because the passion of the kiss and embrace reaffirmed the strength of the bond between her guardians. It was

instructional because it showed her what true passionate devotion looks like and how it was reciprocated in kind, which would go far in keeping her from wasting a kiss or much less the use of her body on a boy that she could never exhibit the same amount of passion for.

Sometimes it took years of waiting before one found the right one, but from Christina's perspective as she watched the two of them together it was clearly worth the wait.

I turned away from the very happily entranced couple and made my way out of the crowd to a quiet spot by the railing of the platform village. The imagery of the two together had brought back a lot of memories. Good memories. Memories that I would always have and cherish.



“Your advice to Jim was good, but I can’t help but think that you would be best served if you took a little of it for yourself. Second chances may be rare, but new beginnings are perhaps rarer still.”

I glanced toward Matt, but he was already walking away. I turned back to the bubbly waters of the lagoon. Idly I wondered what mysteries the waters may hold within their depths.

This new land had been a constant revealing of mysteries with new ones around every corner to be discovered. I wanted to discover more of them, but I had to start out right.

I slipped my wedding ring off and holding it up to my lips I kissed it, “Goodbye Laura.”

I held the ring for a moment longer

before I let it slip from my fingers to watch it disappear into the crystal waters of the lagoon.

## Chapter Fourteen

# Innocence Preserved

I eased the ketch in alongside of the catamaran's left pontoon and tied it off. I looped the sack over my shoulder and climbed up onto the netted deck, which swayed beneath my weight.

I caught sight of Keturah sitting with her knees drawn up on the forward part of the catamaran as she watched the party on the platform unfold from a

distance. I don't think she'd heard me and there was a good reason for that.

She was crying. A better way of putting it was that she was sobbing her heart out.

I stepped closer to her across the netting and gently said, "They tell me that you like fruit so I brought a selection of it along with me."

Startled she jerked up to her feet and almost tripped on the netting and fell overboard. Her eyes were puffy and awash with tears and her nose was running. I'd been the one to completely startle her this time.

I stepped closer and set the sack of fruit down. She seemed to be in shock, which abruptly seemed to coalesce into the need to escape from the embarrassment of being caught unawares

during an emotional moment.

She started to turn away from me, but I gripped a hold of her upper arm and held her still. I brought a rag up and wiped at her cheeks and then her nose.

Holding the rag to her nose I said, “Blow.”

She looked supremely embarrassed but she obeyed. I tossed the rag overboard, as I eased my grip on her upper arm to a caress of her soft skin.

“You didn’t think I was coming back did you?” I asked already knowing the answer.

“I..... I.....” She stuttered to speak and I kissed her cutting off further effort to pronounce anything other than to conform her lips to the heated pressure of mine.

I drew back after a moment to see that

her look of shock had only increased at the suddenness of events. Her mouth had fallen open and it was a real temptation not to kiss her again. The kiss despite her shock of it had been sweet. In a way everything about her was sweet.

I pulled a fruit from my pocket that resembled a plum, but tasted much differently and placed it against her open lips. Reflexively her teeth closed down and broke the surface of the sweet fruit. I smiled and let go of her arm and moved away to sit on the netting and then lay back with my hands behind my head.

I stared upwards at the canopy of shifting clouds for a moment as I heard Keturah come closer and sit down beside me as she continued to eat the fruit that I had given her.

Not looking at her I said, "I miss the

stars in the night sky, especially out over the ocean where there is no competing light to take away from the effect of their brightness.”

Keturah lay down beside me and I glanced over at her to see her gazing up at the clouds overhead with real fascination.

“What’s it like up there?” She asked softly.

“I’ll tell you.” I then started to explain all the created cosmos above the limits of her sight. I explained about the sun and the moon. The planets in orbit and the stars further out. I talked about a lot of things as I sought to fill the curiosity she had as one who had never seen the common things that I had so often just taken for granted.

At some point during my lengthy

discourse her fingers had inched over closer and closer to mine and eventually I took her hand and held it as we talked back and forth for hours. At some point I fell asleep still holding her hand.

---

Keturah's elbow was tired and a little painful from where the netting bit into it, but she continued to ignore both ailments as she leaned on it to gaze down at the sleeping man beside her. Her man.

Her whole personality warmed at that transforming thought and all manner of thoughts occurred to her of how different her lonely existence upon the waves was going to be because of what this man would bring to her life and already had in so many ways.



The best moments of her life had been when he had lain awake for hours as he described the wonders of the world above to her. She'd never had such a companionable moment with an individual before and she loved him for giving her the gift of his time and interest in just her and nobody else.

Her gaze fell onto the curiously indented ring of flesh on his left hand and her eyes got wet again. She'd cried quietly for more than an hour earlier, when she'd seen the absence of the ring on his finger.

She wouldn't have minded at all if he'd kept it for she knew what it symbolized, but somehow him removing it meant so much more. She'd learned from the one called Matt all about Eli's family.

It was no intention of hers to ever replace the significance of his dead wife, she had only wanted to share what was left. And that would've been enough to be content with. Never in her wildest dreams would she have ever expected a man like Eli to fully commit himself to someone like her, but that was just the kind of man that he was.

She was a lucky woman. The Creator had smiled down on her for some reason unknown to her.

Being the woman of such a man gave her significance in life. She was significant now, at least in her own eyes. It was an odd concept to realize about herself.

Maybe she'd always been significant and it had just taken this further blessing by the Creator to make known to her the

truth of the matter. She'd dreamed about this man for years and now he was finally here on her boat. It was almost too good to be true.

He'd kissed her and then talked for hours and while he hadn't said in so many words that he was committed to her his actions had. She glanced around speculatively. For the most part everyone on the village platform was still asleep. Even then the two of them were almost invisible as it was from those on the platform anyway.

She glanced back to Eli. Perhaps they could take things a little deeper than just a kiss?

Her fingers went to the laces at her shoulders that held her dress-up, but she stopped and let her fingers fall away. He should be the one to instigate something

deeper and not her.

She stared at him in frustrated yearning. She so wanted him!

She wanted his lips on hers again so badly she could taste it.

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“I’m not going to bite.” I said with humor.

Keturah’s startled eyes jerked up to mine and I smiled warmly at her as she squeaked out, “What?”

“You look like you’re in desperate need of a kiss. If you want one go ahead.”

Slowly her lips lowered to mine and our lips touched softly for a moment.

When she pulled back nervously I smiled at her and asked, “You’ve never

kissed anyone before me have you?”

She got an even more embarrassed look on her face, “Is it that painfully obvious?”

I pulled her chin up, “Innocence is not a bad thing. It’s a very good thing. A precious thing.”

Her embarrassment died down and we stared into each other’s eyes for a long moment. There was something I had to ask as my consciousness was killing me.

“How old are you Keturah?”

“Twenty-three.” She responded a little defensively.

“Keturah I’m almost twice your age. It’s not too late to call this off. Are you sure you want to be the wife of an older man?”

The look in her eyes was intense, “I want to be your woman and not any other

man's or I wouldn't have waited! As for age what does it matter! You are not old, and even if you were I would still want to be yours! In a way I have an assurance that other women do not have."

"What's that?" I asked in surprise.

Her eyes got teary and she touched my finger absent of a ring, "You loved your wife very much didn't you?"

I nodded emotionally.

"And yet you gave up your bond to her in order to be fully committed to me did you not?"

My voice was thick with emotion as I responded truthfully, "You don't deserve to only have half a man."

Keturah's tears landed to splash on my hand as she smiled tremulously and said, "See, how many women can know the proven quality of a man's

commitment to them like I do with you?”

I reached my hand up and brushed the wetness of her tears off her cheek with my thumb.

“You are very special Keturah.”

With passion she said even as she pressed into the stroking caress of my thumb, “I’m yours whenever you want me!”

I tamped down the allure of her passionate offer to instead grasp her face with both of my hands tenderly, “Patience.” I said softly.

I saw frustration in her eyes at my statement of a virtue ever hard to master and so I explained to her the reason for why patience was needed.

“I have a rescue to plan and a war to win. When those two things are accomplished I promise you that I will

make you mine. Deal?”

Reluctantly she nodded her head in acceptance of my wishes.

I pushed her over to her back and rolled over on top of her imprisoning her hands with mine beside her head as I did so. I watched her eyes get big even as I captured her lips with mine.

“How about we kiss for an hour or two before everyone starts getting up?” I asked teasingly.

“Do you have to ask?” She breathed out on a shaky breath.

I smiled, as I glanced at her hands that I held imprisoned against the netting even as her body lay beneath me captive, “No, I don’t suppose I do.”

I kissed her enjoying the innocence of her lips that still didn’t know quite what to do. There was another reason that I



was holding off from consummating our union together.

In the coming struggle there was very much a real possibility that I might die. If that happened I wanted Keturah innocent virgin that she was to still have a gift to give to the man I prayed that God would bless her with if I wasn't to be around.

## Chapter Fifteen

# Glory to God!

I stood with one hand on the mast fondly remembering my kissing experience with Keturah of several hours ago, even as I vainly tried to muster the seriousness that the situation involved I be under.

Elizabeth was on board as was the rest of my crew. Elizabeth had something she wanted to show me. Something she thought might help us in the war against the giants.

We sailed in and around the tiny

islands scattered throughout the lagoon, until at Elizabeth's word we heaved the boat to a complete stop. I looked about the bubbly surface of the lagoon and the two tiny islands that lay off to either side of us completely puzzled as to what could possibly help us combat giants.

I looked to Elizabeth for some direction and she gestured to the water, "Look beneath the water."

I gave her an odd look, but I got down on my belly and leaned out over the water to stick my head beneath it feeling very much like I was being made a fool of. The water was crystal clear and my eyes found the shapes of two vessels almost immediately.

I blinked and did a double take. It wasn't possible, but it was!

I pulled my head up out of the water

and wiped the water from my eyes. I glanced around the subject of the expectant looks of my crew.

“Take a look Flynn.” I said trying to hold my glee in and look serious.

Flynn got down and did the impersonation of a duck just like I had done for a long moment. His gray head popped above the water and sputtering water he turned to me and said, “Blimey! But what good will they do us? Their sunk and beyond that they’ve got to be rusted up beyond any use!”

Elizabeth broke into the conversation, “Metal for some unknown reason does not rust when submerged in the waters of these freshwater lagoons. The ships were starting to rust above the waterline so that is why our ancestors sunk them here in order to preserve them. This is

the shallowest spot in the lagoon.”

“Gunpowder and fuses?” I asked in hopeful earnestness.

Elizabeth nodded, “They were sealed away in watertight barrels and boxes.”

Flynn interrupted in exasperation, “What good does black powder and fuses do us when the boats are sunk? Their sunk!” He repeated as he pointed to the water with emphasis.

I saw Elizabeth and Keturah share a knowing look between them. I turned to Flynn and with a growing inner sense of jubilation I said, “Whales Mister Flynn! Whales.”

“Whales?” He asked completely dumbfounded as to what I could possibly be referring to.

I turned to Elizabeth and asked in barely repressed excitement, “When will

the whales be here?”

Elizabeth smiled and pointed beyond me, “They are already here.”

I turned to see a huge pod of whales that had to number at least a hundred or more strong entering the mouth of the lagoon’s main entrance to the sea beyond. I clapped my hands together gleefully and turned towards Ortega who was looking at me as if he thought I’d lost it mentally. The truth was that I hadn’t had this much fun in years!

“What do you know about steam driven propulsion Ortega?”

“Nothing other than that it’s been extinct for a long time.” Ortega said slowly.

“Ahh there’s where you’re wrong my good man. It’s about to come back in style!”

I turned back to the approaching whales only to see countless catamarans similar to Keturah's had joined in on the scene. The Whale People were coming to help raise the past back to life.

I lifted my hands skywards, "Glory to God in the highest for You are a God that provides!" I said as my voice boomed out over the lagoon in my exuberance, as I felt an inner song of joy ripple through me like I hadn't in ages.

I turned to the others, "Ladies and gentlemen it looks like we're finally going to put some Confederate ironclads to good use!"

Matt turned to a widely grinning Jim and elatedly asked, "Could this trip get any better or what?"

Jim brought Serena's hand to his lips and kissed it, "No it could not."

Serena's eyes were all sparkles and her smile reflected true joy as she stared at her secret admirer of many years now turned man of her life for evermore.

I had to hand it to the Whale People's forbearers for doing a quality job of storing their ships away for a rainy day. They hadn't just opened the scuttle cocks and let the boats sink of their own volition.

Instead they had sunk them gradually and with precision down onto a wooden receiver apparatus that had been attached to the hulls of the two boats. As a result the two ships rested slightly stilted up from the floor of the lagoon, which enabled ropes to be threaded back and forth beneath the hulls of the two ships.



I was treading water next to Jim and I couldn't help the grin I still had on my face in attempting this whole endeavor. I glanced at Jim, "Guess we're going to have a bit of a salvage operation out this time anyway."

"Sure looks like it boss."

I waved my arm up above my head to Keturah and the other whale riders. Keturah waved back and dove into the water from off Dimbo's back. The other divers jumped free of their whales into the water in like fashion.

The whales submerged downward into the crystal clear water with us. It was awe-inspiring and somewhat terrifying to be in the presence of so many big monsters as there were congregated in a small patch of water.

Never could I ever have imagined that

I would experience anything to compare with this underwater scene I was experiencing. It was both odd and awe inspiring to witness the interplay going on between the gigantic whales and their tiny human counterparts.

These whales ate dinosaurs for breakfast and yet they seemed as eager as puppies to heed the instruction of their riders. I credited Keturah the most for the success of what was happening.

She more than any of the other whale people seemed best able to communicate with the whales or at least Dimbo. She showed him what was needed and he went through the motions of lining up. The water suddenly danced with squeaks and pinging noises delivered at high frequency as Dimbo conveyed what to do to the other whales who soon

followed in like order and took their positions.

The whales turned away from the larger of the ironclads and waited patiently at the bottom of the lagoon with their bellies rubbing the seafloor as they waited on their riders. Teams of divers pulled the heavy ropes out from beneath the hull and swam past the bulk of the resting whales to hook the loops of the rope ends over the tusks of the whales. Through it all the whales remained still their big eyes moving only, as they curiously took in the scene.

With the ropes all in place Keturah signaled Dimbo and once again the water vibrated with percussive clicks and warbles. In unison the whales all began to rise.

They didn't launch into their burdens,

but rather they eased their way there as the ropes grew taut with tension. Once tension was achieved then they began to work hard at the game of tug-of-war.

There were two whales per rope only they were on opposite ends and facing away from each other with the ship in between. There were fifteen such pairs of whales with two solitary whales tied off at the forward prow and one at the rudder.

The ironclad began to rise ponderously, as the whales chugged relentlessly upward toward the surface of the lagoon. It was hard to see anything because of all the stirred up sediment and the perfusion of bubbles in the water.

I clung to the deck of the ironclad, as it grudgingly lifted up through the water.

I was in grave need of air to feed my oxygen deprived lungs, but I wasn't about to attempt what the whale divers had done.

They'd done that drown a little bit at a time thing until they breathed the oxygenated water of the lagoon as if it was air. No thanks! That was for the birds in my opinion.

The ironclad crowned out of the water reborn after a hundred and fifty years below. Water sheeted off everywhere and I gasped for air for a few brief moments before making my way below decks for the open scuttle cocks near the rudder even as Jim went for the one at the forward prow.

It was dark, but I knew what to feel for. Soon I had the job accomplished and I made my way back up out of the water

below decks to suck down more air topside. In my absence Matt and his crew had climbed on board.

Matt was already directing how the manual bilge pumps worked that would free the boat of the remaining water even as more helpers went below and started bailing water out open gun ports. The whales with their tusks to the sky had risen out of the water as far as they could go.

The whales let off and sank downward, but the ironclad though heavy laden with water stayed afloat. A cheer went up all around and I began to be the recipient of many exuberant backslaps.

The good mood was infectious and I returned some equally exuberant backslaps of my own.

Gaining control of myself I called out an end to the celebration, “All right, that’s enough for now. We’ve got another ship to raise.”

The second ship went much easier and quicker as it was half the length and less in diameter than the first ship had been. I was back on the first ironclad that was now free of water.

I was standing in the boiler room with Ortega and Flynn. The expression on Ortega’s face was comical as he stared about the foreign environment with a sort of dread filled curiosity.

I slapped him on the back good naturedly and said, “Well I’m sure that with enough tinkering around you’ll find out how it all works Ortega. Everything depends on you getting this working

Ortega so don't let me down.”

I left the room grinning at the dead eyed look he'd given me in response to my last comment.

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Ortega turned back to the boiler, his brow furrowed in concentration, as he tried to put a foreign language of parts into a readable context he could understand.

Flynn patted his shoulder surprisingly sympathetic for once, “Well, they really stuck you with a tough nut to crack this time old son.”

Ortega rubbed at his temples with both hands, “I don't even know where to start Señor!”

Flynn looked around before

commenting, “Well this thing is supposed to run on steam power right?”

Ortega nodded.

“Well let’s make a fire and boil some water and see where that gets us.” Flynn said objectively.

Ortega gave him a wry look, “I am thinking it is a little more complex than that old son, but I suppose it’s a place to start.”

Matt, Jim, and Serena seemed to have things well under control. I walked to the edge and dove off into the water in search of my pretty mermaid.

I found her with her whale, of course. She was rubbing his nose and jabbering away underwater.

She noticed me and stopped talking. I drew closer and gestured upward to where her catamaran floated on the surface. She seemed to sigh before nodding obediently.

She patted Dimbo once more, while I was given the stern one eyed stare all over again. I did not want this whale as my enemy that was for sure, but he was going to have to learn to share his mistress's affections with me.

I beat Keturah to the surface and hauled myself out of the water and onto the low-lying netting quickly. I got ready to help Keturah as I had been told what she would be having to do. She'd breathed the water in and now she would have to expel it.

Her head crested the water and I caught her hands and hauled her up onto

the netting. She lay on her belly and began to hack out lagoon water even as she choked on it.

I rubbed my hands rhythmically up her back trying to help her expel the water from her lungs. It was painful to just be a bystander.

I could only imagine what she was experiencing right now. It had to be like drowning all over again.

She was starting to breathe better and I relaxed at the sound of it. The girl mattered to me. She mattered an awful lot!

I didn't want to ever lose her. In my heart she'd become mine, but there was yet a battle to face.

I was momentarily distracted by the realization of how far up the raggedy edge of her dress had slipped up. The

desire to push it higher was overpowering for a moment, but that wasn't the plan right now.

Reluctantly I tugged the worn edge of her dress down to mid thigh and rolled off of her to lay on my back beside her. Not wanting to, but feeling a need to I glanced over to her to see if she had noticed my silent war against going too far.

Her head was turned to me and she said smiling, "I wish you would've." Her voice was kind of hoarse sounding, but her meaning was clear.

I lay one of my arms across my eyes and said, "I wish I would've too."

Suddenly I very much wanted to survive a battle that before I might have mercifully used as a means of putting an honorable end to my life and the pain

that it had brought me to keep on breathing. Life wasn't such an empty emotional vacuum anymore.

Unwittingly my mind dwelled on my companion's luscious form and how badly I had wanted to take things further a moment ago.

First the battle. Kill the giants. Rescue the slaves. Escape the island and then..... then I would lift the hem of that dress as high as I wanted to!

I still felt guilty inside, but not enough to keep from making a new life with Keturah. Laura had been a special person and so was Keturah. How did I rate having two such women in my life?

Keturah's fingers grasped my arm and pulled it aside and pressing closer she kissed me. She drew back quickly from the kiss with a horrified look and

pressed one hand to her mouth.

Curious at her reaction to the kiss I asked, “What’s the matter?”

“I was just throwing up! I’m so sorry! I.....”

Reaching up I speared the fingers of one hand through the beaded mass of her hair as I pulled her hand from her mouth with my other hand and roughly said, “Like I care!”

I pulled her head back down to mine for a kiss that reflected all the passion that I felt for her.

Chapter Sixteen

Something of Value

It was hours later now after my passionate exchange with Keturah and faced with the current situation I wished that time with her had not ended. Flynn and Matt were undergoing a face-off of sorts. I let my gaze slip over to Keturah only to find her watching me hungrily. I stifled my own groan of yearning and focused on the task at hand.

In a tone that had no bend in it Flynn said, “I call dibs on the big battle wagon!”

“Well that’s fine! I don’t want that one anyway.” Matt stated with equal tenacity.

Flynn appeared shocked and it was reflected in his tone when he asked, “You don’t want the big one?”

“And give up speed and rotational calibration I think not! No the smaller battle wagon as you put it will fit my needs quite nicely.” Matt said.

I spoke into the setting before anything else was agreed upon, “Well then that settles it. Flynn captains the big gunner. Ortega you man the boiler. Jim will manage the gun crews. Matt will take the smaller ship, while Serena and Christina will accompany me and the Whale People on their boats. Now I suggest that you practice your gunnery crews for at least some length of time before we ship

off tomorrow.”

Everyone nodded in consensus and the large group broke up into smaller divisions. I managed to navigate a surprised Keturah quickly out of the eyes of the others into a hidden doorway.

Pressing her back up against the door I asked, “Could you please explain this intoxicating effect that you have on me and the need to always have more that you so innocently inspire?”

Her mouth split wide into a grin as she leaned back against the wooden door my all too willing captive. Her eyes were a tease as her hands rose to encircle the back of my neck.

“It’s a secret, but come closer and I’ll give you the solution.” She said seductively.

Husky voiced I said, “I do believe that

you've graduated.”

Her eyes implored me for more than just a kiss but I shook my head negatively and said, “Soon.”

She sighed, but then rose up on her toes to say against my lips, “Then if this is all I can have for now then this I will take, but I want more Eli! So much more!” She breathed out as her lips pressed over mine with renewed passion.

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Matt caught up with Elizabeth as she was making her way towards the center of the village platform, “Elizabeth could I have a word with you?”

She turned back to him, “Why certainly! What is it?”

Matt looked around, but no one was listening, “I was wondering if there were those among the Whale People who don’t have much of anything to live for. People who might not mind dying too much if you know what I mean.”

Elizabeth swallowed and looked deeply into his eyes for a moment before asking, “Why would you want such people?”

“I need them for my crew. I don’t want people who have families or obligations to others. Understand?”

Elizabeth nodded slowly and said, “Several months ago we had a bad disease break out on one of the platforms. Several families lost their children and a few men lost their wives as well.”

“Could you send them to me

Elizabeth?”

She nodded and started to leave, when Matt restrained her arm and said, “It would be best if you didn’t say anything of this to anyone.”

Elizabeth nodded, as a single tear made its way down her cheek.

“Oh and before I forget again I need you to send all the pieces of metal that you can find to my ship. I need anything small enough to fit down the barrel of a cannon. Knives, forks, tin soldiers, even pieces of porcelain or glass balls and beads will work.”

“I’ll see what I can find.”

Three hours later numerous satchels filled with metallic odds and ends were carried below the iron plated deck of Matt’s ship.

“That should do the job I’d say Elizabeth. Thank you!” Matt said.

“Wait!” Elizabeth said.

Matt turned to the older woman questioningly.

She struggled for a moment to pull something off one of her arthritic fingers. It came after a moment of tugging and she quickly put it into Matt’s hand.

“I can’t blow your wedding ring out the barrel of a cannon Elizabeth! It wouldn’t be right! Here take it back! Please!” Matt exclaimed.

Elizabeth wouldn’t take it back, but instead she hugged Matt tightly for a long moment before drawing back and wiping at the tears on her face as she said, “It isn’t right for one to stand by and offer nothing of value when there are those willing to give everything. May God

keep you!”

Matt in return hugged her to him for a long moment.

# Chapter Seventeen

## Fire!!!

If I kept up with these underwater breath holding contests I was going to get lungs of steel!

It felt like it had been ten minutes instead of the two my watch's luminescent dial recorded to have passed by. Thirty seconds later the whales stopped just below the surface of the water, as we all felt the rhythmic action of the waves.

I glanced at Keturah and she nodded. This was as far as the whales would

take us.

Glancing down to the sea floor I could see that they had taken us in pretty far. There was no more than ten to fifteen feet of water below us.

I let go of Dimbo's tusk and floated up to the surface with Keturah. Thirty some others floated away from their whales and up to the surface with us.

I felt the swish of the underwater movements that signaled that the whales were leaving without ever having surfaced except that is for Dimbo, who still waited below for Keturah. We were about three hundred feet out from the beach. Treading water I glanced at Keturah and was taken aback momentarily by the raw emotion being expressed on her face.

“Hey! It's alright!” I exclaimed trying



to calm her.

She latched on to me with one hand desperately and said, “Please come back to me!”

“I will!” I said in firm response to ease her fears.

I really didn't have the authority to either know, much less claim that I would return, but above all I wanted to allay her fears at all costs.

She surged out of the water briefly to give me a salty kiss, a kiss that didn't last nearly long enough before she let go and sank beneath the waves to her trusted whale companion. Dimbo would take her back out to where the entire fleet of the Whale People were congregated together in the fog bank waiting for the signal.

The swim to shore went quickly and

like some special forces team we slid out of the surf and sprinted across the beach to the cover of the forest. We paused just back from the forest's edge to catch our breath. Once done I motioned to a man, who had been a slave up until a year ago, when he had escaped, to take the lead.

Three of the thirty of us were as black as I was. The rest of them verged from brown cream to white, but we all appeared black as the whiter ones had been rubbed down with a black tar resin.

We were on a mission to save a people who were oppressed. Color had nothing to do with it.

We started out after our guide through the foreboding stillness of the forest. I had once been in awe of these strange majestic trees, but now all I wanted was

to be free of them and this island with a dark history that had come to life once more.

A fantasy flashed across my mind's eye for a moment. It was simple and yet profound in its meaning.

The fantasy was of me and Keturah sailing along across this inner sea beneath the world above. Just sailing. There was something so peacefully fulfilling about the imagery of that fantasy.

Oh to God did I pray that it became my reality!

Our guide suddenly stopped and held up a hand to us in a sign to stop as well. We stood crouched over as only our eyes moved as we listened for a sound, any sound.

My head jerked off to the side as I

heard what the guide must've sensed. Somebody was in the forest and it sounded like they were crying.

The others looked to me silently and I made an inclusive hand gesture to indicate to scatter out and surround the source of the noise.

They nodded and filtered out to the sides silently as I approached the noise head on. A few carefully silent minutes later I found myself standing behind a man who looked to be one of the plantation owners.

He appeared to be alone and completely petrified. He was crouched down next to a hollow in a tree stump as if he was prepared to dive into it at a moment's notice. He was making a lot of noise as he shifted from whimpering to carrying on a cryptic conversation with

himself.

I slipped an arm around his throat from behind and clamped down. He tried to scream but couldn't. The others closed in quick and we had the man restrained on the ground in a matter of moments.

The man actually looked relieved to see us. Well me anyway.

I took my hand from off his mouth and he was instantly babbling, "Please take me with you back to the surface! Oh please don't leave me here in this cursed place! Please I....."

I held up a fist to hit him, "Shut up!" I whispered out sternly.

His rambling pleas came to a halt as he fearfully swallowed down his latest calls for mercy.

"Now what's been going on since I

left the island?” I asked softly.

The man swallowed hard and looked as if he was accessing a memory of unimaginable horror, “The giants came. We’d always heard the stories about the sculptures in the ancient ruins, but never did I expect to see such creatures brought to life. They’re beyond horrible! The very sound and sight of their faces is enough to kill one from fright!”

“What happened?” I said interrupting him.

“They came to the colony. They laughed at us as we ran in fear from them. Those who resisted like the Governor, they ate. Their hunger seems to know no bounds! All they do is eat it seems!”

On a sob the man said, “They ate my fiancé! Pulled her apart like she was a

play toy and then ate her like she was candy as they commented on how sweet her flesh was.”

The man began to cry his eyes out again and I had to say that I could see why given such a sight one would have that reaction. I'd most likely go crazy too.

“What have they done to the slaves?” I asked breaking into the man's emotional outpouring.

His expressed emotions of sorrow abruptly switched to something much more aggressive in nature, “The slaves!” He exclaimed.

“They haven't so much as eaten one of them! They make sport of us and yet the slaves haven't even been touched!”

“And why is that?” I asked, but I thought I already knew the answer.

“Because they make the food. That’s all these monsters seem to care about is food. They’ll have everything and everyone eaten off the island within a year. They may be eating us now, but the slaves will be next, mark my words! It’s only a curse that they didn’t start with them in the first place!”

The man then looked up at me pleadingly and begged once more, “You have to take me with you!”

I stared at the frantic man’s face in contemplation. I didn’t like the man, but did that justify leaving him behind to be fed upon?

The man abruptly gasped painfully and gazed at us in shock for a few tense moments before the life left his eyes. I let my gaze leave the wide-open staring eyes of the man on the ground to the



knife slipped in between the man's ribs and the hand of our guide who had put it there.

I met his eyes and the question of why was in my gaze upon him.

The former slave pointed down with a finger accusingly at the dead man, "This man begs for mercy and yet he was without mercy himself! He was one of the worst of the field masters. I felt the sting of his whip many times, but I could forgive perhaps that. But I cannot forgive what he did to the little slave girls!"

A tear made its way down the man's cheek as raw emotion shown out of the man's eyes as he went on, "Little girls no older than four and five he carried off into the bushes to rape and abuse. Do you know what it's like to hear the cries for help and screams of pain from those

who are innocent and be powerless to do anything to stop it? This man deserved no mercy!”

I nodded my head in understanding and got up.

We headed off through the forest leaving behind the carcass of a man that had been as much of a monster in life as the monsters who were terrorizing the island even now.

We met no one else along the way through the forest. It was trickier once we cleared the forest, but these were the sleep hours and no one appeared to be out and about.

We reached the caves where the slaves were held, but drew up before stepping out into the open because of an unwanted sight. A giant was sitting up

against the side of the wall just to the right of the cave that had iron bars running across the front of it.

The giant's loud snores rent the still air in an awful way.

I looked from the giant to the iron bars and back again. It was apparent that the giants did not want a potential upcoming food supply to escape from them.

I stared silently at the giant in contemplation of what the best way to kill him would be. He was liable to make a fuss, perhaps even overpower us before we could deliver a killing blow.

It was best that we waited for the diversion to begin and I said as much to those around me. Hopefully once the commotion in the harbor started up the giant would rush off to investigate and leave his post wide-open.

I felt that it was our best hope for success, because if we tried to kill the giant in his sleep and he was able to get out a bellow then all of the giants would be down upon us like a stampeding herd of elephants. I wanted the slaves to know what was up though before everything got started.

As quietly as I could I crept up to the bars of the cave cell alone. It was dark inside and I couldn't see anyone, but I didn't want to call out for fear of waking the giant. Then suddenly a figure materialized out of the darkness and coming closer I recognized her as Mandy.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Mandy and some others pressed up against the bars to hear what I had to say, "Do you still have the keys

Mandy?” I whispered out.

Wordlessly she pulled them out of a pocket with a soft jangle.

“Good. Now this is going to be difficult, but I need you guys to wait in here a little longer, because we have to get rid of him.” I said gesturing to the giant who could have sawed mature redwood trees in half with the force of his snores.

I told them about the diversion that was going to take place in the harbor and I watched as the hope lit up in the tired avenues of their worried faces.

“When he runs off to investigate unlock the doors and all of you head for the forest. You’ll all have to work together. The young will need to be carried and those unable to keep up will need to be helped along, because we

have to be fast about this! Boats will be waiting at the shore of the old ruins when we get through the forest. Everything clear about as to what needs done?" I asked.

The small group nodded as one.

Hands that ranged from black to white reached through the bars to touch me with reverence as I watched their faces quiver with suppressed emotion.

"Everything is going to be all right and soon you're all going to experience freedom!" I said confidently before I crept back to the opposite end of the clearing where the men who'd come with me waited in concealment.

Settling down in the bushes we commenced to wait quietly. It was all that we could do for now.

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Flynn looked through the narrow wheelhouse window at the harbor ahead and smiled grimly. Just like old times. Recent times anyway.

He was starting to become quite the pirate in his old age. He patted the wheel before him that still bore evidence of crustacean growth. She was old and damp from being drowned, but she was still a fine ship.

They were heading into the harbor with a fine head of steam built up. There was just one more thing to do to complete the picture and put a seal on the best moment of his life spent at sea.

He rooted around in his pocket and came out with the stub end of a mostly burnt cigar. He'd been saving this for

just such an occasion. Taking his last match he lit it up and puffed on the cigar for a moment before rolling it to the side of his mouth.

“All right me mates it’s time to give ’m a taste of hell!” Flynn said before laughing maniacally for a brief moment.

The moment of hilarity was abruptly ended as he choked on the smoke of the cigar. The cigar fell out of his mouth to the floor and he stamped it out with a foot, even as he hacked out a piece of it that he’d accidentally bit off and half swallowed.

“Bloody things will kill you!” He muttered out sourly, as he glanced forward again out the narrow window even as he heard Jim’s voice bellow out of the recesses of the ship, “Open gun ports!”

Flynn smiled again before looking behind him with a scowl to see if Matt had been able to keep up. Matt's little barge was still there surprisingly.

Flynn shook his head in consternation as to Matt's specific choice of the little ship versus the larger one. What man in his right mind would pass up this ship with all its canons for that little pea shooter back there with just two canons?

So what if the two canons were mounted on a rotational turret! In a fight like this firepower was the only thing that mattered.

Matt had even had the gall to name his little gunboat the USS Nathanael, after the Revolutionary war hero Nathaniel Hale. Flynn rolled his eyes at the thought of that injustice.

Naming ships after past heroes wasn't

necessarily a thing of bad taste, but in Flynn's mind every ship was a 'she'. He'd named his ship Polly.

It was a good ship and Polly had been a good woman. The two went hand-in-hand to his way of thinking. Treat a ship well like you would a woman and you'd be rewarded. Treat her mean and there'd be no living with her.

Flynn saw a flurry of activity upon the five remaining Whalers that were in port, as someone on board noticed the Polly and the USS Nathaniel steaming into the harbor. They looked like ants in their activity as they were driven to their tasks by the bellowing roars of giants little better than overstuffed cockroaches.

"Well, cockroaches and assorted vermin, time to feel the boot heel!"

Flynn called out in glee.

Jim gazed out the open gun ports judging the distance and the trajectory needed. They were all lined up.

A harpoon shot out from one of the mounted launchers on one of the Whalers. The harpoon dinked off the side of the heavy iron plated ship and everyone within the gun bay chuckled.

“Stand at the ready!” Jim called out.

A moment passed before the order was given.

“Fire!!!” Jim bellowed out and the canons went off belching flame as gunpowder smoke acridly filled the gun bay.

The two rows of canons leaped

backward in their traces even as their gun crews went back to work in the process of reloading them. Maybe the actions of the gun crews weren't as polished or as quick as their counterparts in the distant past may have been, but they were getting the job done.

The wet swab meant to extinguish still simmering embers was shoved down the cannon barrels with a hot hiss of sound as water came into contact with hot metal. The powder charge was rammed down it followed by a cannonball tapped into place, even as a new fuse was stuck into the breach.

“Fire!!!”

The second salvo went off more intermittently than the first as some gun crews were faster than others, but the barrage of heavy lead had the same

damaging effect as before. Two Whalers were sinking. One had its mainmast down and the Polly was headed for the other two who were attempting to cut anchor and escape the harbor.

Jim saw the wildly gesturing form of one of the giants high lined on the ship that was dismasted. He ran down the line of canons before stopping at one that had just gotten loaded.

“Out of the way!” He said.

The gun crew peeled away from the canon as the big Samoan muscled the heavy cannon over a little as he targeted in on the giant. After adjusting the cannon up slightly he pulled the cord. Smoke filled the gun bay and Jim peered through the portal to see if he'd had a successful hit or not.

The cannonball whizzed by mere

inches from the head of the giant and Jim smote the cannon barrel in frustration with one fist. The giant's head whipped around to stare at Jim as if knowing somehow that the shot had been a personal thing.

The giant reacted and with a blink of startlement Jim lunged off to the side as a manually thrown harpoon slammed through the open gun port to lodge deeply into an interior wooden beam.

That had been a close call.

Jim glanced through the gun port quickly to see if any more harpoons were on their way from the apparently very ticked off giant. All Jim saw was the tail end of the splash up as the giant dove into the sea heading for the ship.

Jim couldn't help but think that was not a good thing.

Flynn had seen the interchange with the giant occur and now he turned Polly's wheel over sharply to line her up with the fast approaching swimmer in the water. He gritted his teeth with the determination to split the giant's skull with the keel of the ship.

There was a loud thunk followed by a roar that brought a savage smile to Flynn's features. The smile however was wiped off though at the sight of the bloody giant suddenly standing fifteen feet tall at the end of the forward deck.

An awful bone chilling cry erupted from it as it thumped its chest like a challenging ape and started off across the deck in a pounding run straight for

him.

Flynn had no options that he could see to avoid being pulverized and eaten. Shame of a way to go out on the formerly best day of his life he thought abstractly to himself as he saw the giant draw close.

The giant was in midstride when its flesh shredded apart in a bloody rain of torn parts. Flynn blinked and then glanced off to the side to see the USS Nathaniel had come broadside and was even now rotating her twin guns away in search of a new target. The Nathaniel had saved his bacon with their highly accurate salvo of homemade grapeshot.

Flynn lifted a hand in thanks, but he doubted any of Matt's crew saw it. Perhaps the little boat wasn't such a worthless pee shooter after all.

Flynn corrected to a course that would bring him up alongside of the remaining two whalers, which were putting on sail in an effort to escape port. There would be no escape today if it was up to him.

Chapter Eighteen

No More Bullets

The sound of loud cannon fire echoed up from the harbor and jarred the sleeping giant awake. Stumbling up to his feet the giant looked around dumbly in search of the noise.

More cannon fire echoed from the harbor and with an enraged roar the giant took off for the sounds of war.

The giant now gone we broke cover and rushed for the slave cave. Before we even reached the cave's mouth the iron gates clanged backward as former

slaves barreled out of it as a massed group heading for the trees in the distance.

I waited by the cave entrance to see the last of the slaves free of it. They ran with a will born out of fright and the basic human desire to live free. They left none behind to face the wrath of the giants.

Mandy had stayed back with me and she now confirmed, "They're all out."

"All right let's go!" I said grasping her arm and beginning to run after the others.

A loud roar of outrage punctured the scene of escape and I saw that the giant had returned perhaps thinking better about leaving his post. People screamed and ran harder at the sight of the giant who looked absolutely unhinged with

rage.

His intent was to kill and maim, but he looked confused as to where to start in the fast-moving line of humanity. I let go of Mandy's arm and shoved her on after the others as I diverted off towards the giant.

He didn't see me as I was coming up on his blindside. I reached behind my back and pulled the flare gun from the dinghy out. I stopped running and taking aim upward I pulled the trigger.

The giant had just started to move forward when the flare burned into the back of his right shoulder. I'd never heard such a caterwauling screech as I did then.

I'd been aiming for his spine, but the giant had moved at the last moment. His right arm hung limp and I took comfort in

the knowledge that at least he was maimed up some.

I popped a new flare cartridge in as the giant turned to me with glaring eyes of hatred.

“That’s right big boy I’m over here.” I said, as I pulled the trigger again.

The flare whizzed off, but the giant dodged out of the way and then lunged for me in the next moment. I sidestepped quickly away, as I fed my last cartridge into the flare gun, even as a giant arm swung through the space where I had just been.

I fired off my back foot as I started to fall over because of my over commitment to dodge away from the giant’s arm. The flare fizzled brightly as it bore its way into the back of the monster’s thigh. I hit the ground and

flipped on over and without a backward glance took off in the direction of the trees confident that the giant was too maimed to follow us now.

Something took my right leg out from under me and I went tumbling. In the process of falling forward I hit my head off a rock and saw stars for a moment.

Blinking I tried to clear my head as some corner of my still functioning brain broadcasted the need for alertness. I glanced over my shoulder to see that the giant under sheer force of will had limped up to me and was even now lifting a hammer hard fist into the air with which to pulverize me into the ground.

I guess this was where things ended.

Shots rang out and I watched blood splatter all over the giant's face as the

bullets hammered out one after the other. One bullet must've found the brain through an eye socket, because the giant went limp and started to fall forward.

In a panic I rolled off to the side to keep from being crushed by the giant's bulk. The giant hit the ground hard and I coughed on the kicked up dust.

Glancing upward I saw Mandy standing there with my boot pistol still clutched in her hands as she pulled the trigger over and over.

“Mandy?”

She seemed to shake free a little from her trance to glance at me.

“No more bullets honey.” I said gently.

The pistol fell from her hands as she rushed over to help me up. It was painful, but nothing was broken. I could

walk perhaps even run if it meant getting off this miserable island.

With an arm about Mandy's shoulders we started off for the nearby forest in the direction that everyone else had gone.

I squeezed Mandy's shoulder, "Thanks for saving my life back there." I said half out of breath because of the pain that I felt with each step forward.

She glanced up and gave me a quick smile, "I could say likewise, but the truth is that you've given me more than just a reprieve from being a monster's snack. You've given me freedom. Freedom is more valuable to me than life!"

I squeezed her shoulder again lightly, "We're not out of the woods and home free yet honey." I said cautioning her gently against any possible letdowns that lay ahead.

She shook her head, “Even if I yet die in trying to get off this island I will die free! Thank you Eli!”

“You’re welcome.” I said with a grimace, as I eased forward into a painful jog.

Chapter Nineteen

Gunpowder

The Polly touched off both escaping Whalers with two broadsides to each. The USS Nathaniel had been busy too. Of the two ships it was the more proficient of the two at giant killing.

Matt and his crew had polished off the giant watch guards on the two other sunken ships. There appeared to be no giants on the two ships that had tried to escape the harbor. Those ships could have been let go if it weren't for the fact that it would have been a possible means

by which the plantation owners or the giants could have come hunting the Whale People with.

Flynn glanced toward the shore and didn't like what he saw. It looked like all the giants were drawn up in a group watching what took place within the harbor as they conferred as to what to do among themselves.

Suddenly all of their heads whipped back to look inland. That wasn't good at all!

They must've heard something to do with the prisoners escaping. Something harsh was said by the one who appeared to be the leader of the group whose bellow echoed out across the bay. He and half the others tore off for the hills while the other half ran out into the sea towards them.

Flynn cranked the wheel over and turned broad side to the beach and Jim read his mind by firing off a salvo aimed at the group of giants headed for the hills. Three of the giants fell to the exploding cannonballs, but that was all. The rest never even looked back. Eli was on his own now.

Flynn looked at the giants in the water and turned the wheel hard for the open sea. It would be a near thing for them to escape given the fast rate at which the giants could swim at.

The Polly headed forward at top speed, which wasn't all that impressively fast. Flynn wasn't worried about the Nathaniel as it was faster than Polly by a good bit.

Maybe that's why Matt had picked it Flynn thought darkly, as he felt the

pressure of the swimming giants trailing in his wake.

Come to think of it where was the Nathaniel?

Flynn glanced around, but didn't see it anywhere. He glanced behind and in horror saw that the Nathaniel wasn't following, but was rather closing in on the giants in the water as her twin guns were depressed as far as they could go, as they continued to spew out the deadly grapeshot that was turning the water red. They were killing giants, but they didn't stand a chance!

As one the surviving group of giants seized a hold of the Nathaniel and vaulted their way aboard to land on the flat iron clad deck. They as a group were universal in their desire to rip the ship apart and devour its occupants.

They tore away at the heavy steel plating in an effort to make a way through to the ship's interior.

Matt picked up a torch, as did the rest of the crew gathered together around him, as the sound of protesting nails and splintering wood infiltrated the interior space loudly. The giants would soon be inside.

Matt looked around the somber group and said, "To slightly paraphrase on what a great man once said I say this, 'I regret that I have but one life to give on behalf of my friends!' For freedom!!!"

"For freedom!!!" The others echoed out loudly, as they all tossed their torches onto the open casks of

gunpowder that lay all around them.

The explosion rocked the harbor with its deafening crash of force and flame. The attacking giants were obliterated by the outpouring of shattered metal and wood splinters.

The USS Nathaniel was no more than scattered pieces of driftwood afloat upon the harbor's surface.

Flynn turned away from the grisly sight and back to steering the Polly forward out to sea. He had entirely underestimated the little professor with a love for history. Now he would never forget him.

Chapter Twenty

Not Forsaken

I stumbled out onto the beach to see that half of those gathered there had already been loaded up onto the boats steered by the Whale People that had come in close to shore. We were going to get away with this!

‘Hallelujah!’ Was my prevailing thought. These people, who had been born into bondage, so deserved a chance to experience freedom.

I pushed Mandy away towards the surf, “Go get on a boat! Get out of here

before something goes wrong.”

Screams rang out all along the beach where people were yet to be loaded aboard. The people in their fear backed away from the beach into the crashing of the waves, as those on the boats worked double time to bring them aboard.

I turned around to face what I knew I would find. Some thirty or more giants came walking out from the forest's edge onto the beach. So much for the escape being a rousing success.

At least some would escape, but would those surviving giants not just use their technology to build crafts of some kind by which to hunt the Whale People down to wherever they fled to? It was the most likely scenario that would occur.

Despair loomed inside of me at the

knowledge that we really hadn't won or achieved anything of noteworthy value this day, until all these giants were dead and no longer a threat to anyone. But how to do it?

It was beyond any capability of ours to overcome such demonic aberrations personified in the flesh. It would have to be a God thing, if we were to survive.

“Oh God please help us! You brought me here and You've helped me deliver these people to this point and even find happiness for myself again where there was none before. Please hear my prayer and finish what You started and have helped out all along the way. I commit myself and the future of these people that you've tasked me to lead into your safekeeping, as I step out in faith.”

I limped out across the sand towards

the approaching giants.

“Oh God do not forsake me now!” I whispered out.

“I never have and I never will.”

Came a deep response into my innermost being that brought peace and the courage to potentially walk straight into my death, if it was what God had willed to be.

Something buzzed by my ear and I looked to the sound to see a hornet hovering in the air beside me. I smiled, as I remembered the stories of Israel and their conquest of the Holy Land, a land filled with giants, recorded down in the Bible so long ago for all to read. God was the same yesterday, today, and forever more.

I continued smiling, as I looked up at our formerly traitorous guide, who

seemed to be the ringleader of the group. He had draped the central crystal of the Orlanis Star as a necklace about his neck.

Speaking loud enough for my voice to carry up to their lofty heights I said, “You’re not taking another step to stop these people from experiencing their freedom gifted to them from the God of heaven and earth.”

The giants looked among themselves and abruptly began to laugh so hard that it shook the air. Their leader boomed out with cruel mirth, “And who is going to stop us? You?”

“No, not me. In defiance of the natural order of creation you were made by those who fell from the heavens, who forsook their seats of righteous honor bestowed upon them by the Master of all

creation. By the Creator's hand you will be blotted out once again even as your kind was in the past.”

“Blot us out! You are mad puny human to think to overcome us! We have the strength of god's and knowledge so infinite that your weak minds could never grasp a hold of it! We are superior in every way to you! We are the new order of the day and there will be none to stop us! We will leave this prison and reenter the world above and increase in number once again, until we overrun the planet and have consumed all of humanity, even as we corrupt them with the temptation of dark knowledge as in the days of old. We are the Rephaim, the seed of old, and our hunger for revenge has never been greater!”

“And yet I say unto you that you will

be driven out as your kind was driven out of the Promise Land. God uses the weak things to confound the mighty and those who think themselves wise. The beginning of wisdom is to fear God, and yet you mock His Divine Authority. Even as you are proud and of a haughty spirit so you will be cast down to suffer an eternal ruin without any hope of a resurrection. Behold you are dead and you shall not rise!”

The giants roared in a display of hellish hatred as all mirth at my direct confrontation of them was gone.

The leader spoke, as he took a big step forward toward me, “It’s time that I feasted on your impudence little man!”

A shadow fell over the beach obscuring the orangey glow of the overhead shifting clouds for a moment.

Everyone looked up to see a dark moving cloud that buzzed. Hornets. Seemingly millions upon millions of them.

They slammed into the giants like they were avenging a hive of larva that had been stepped on. The giants beat at themselves as they screamed in agony, but the stings just kept coming.

The giants stumbled and fell. They rolled on the ground and knocked their heads off tree trunks, but there was no respite from the teeming horde of winged stingers that stuck to them like glue. One by one the giants became still as they lay on the sand of the beach.

I still stood where I had been when the hornets had attacked. Not one hornet touched me or any of the former slaves still gathered on the beach behind me.

Our deliverance had been a God thing and not accomplished by any act of man.

I looked among the contorted bodies that lay swelling grotesquely on the beach. Where was the leader?

Keturah stared in open faced wonder from the deck of her catamaran. She'd seen it all now!

To think such a thing could be possible. Little pesky hornets that she could squeeze to death between two fingers had taken down giants and her man had stood firm right in the midst of it all. Pride swelled in her for the man she was blessed to belong to.

Her pride filled moment however was brutally interrupted as a giant hand came

out of the water to grasp her around the middle tightly. She started to scream, but abruptly fell silent as her head smacked hard off one of the pontoons.

I turned to face the giant covered in sting welts that trudged up out of the sea triumphantly as he held Keturah unconscious in the cruel grip of one hand. The giant looked upon his fallen brethren for a moment before glancing to me with a look of cunning.

“Think you’ve won haven’t you? You’ve won nothing! I have the power to make you question the very belief that you have in your God by simply squeezing the life out of your mate and leaving you with her mangled remains.

Now that is victory! You'll hate your God and I will have succeeded in achieving my master's purpose of the destruction of your eternal heavenly state.”

I shook my head in denial of the giant's words and said, “Your master is a fool to have forsook the seat of excellence that he was given in order to be as God, but you are a fool in this moment for picking the wrong girl to hold hostage.”

A tidal wave erupted behind the giant leader, but before he could turn to discover its source he stared downward transfixed in horror at the huge tusk that had gored through his middle. He screamed out in a sudden agonizing fear of death and dropped Keturah to the wet sand as he grasped at the firmly rooted

tusk.

The Orlanis Star necklace pendant was pulled from his neck by an unseen hand. The central crystal that wouldn't crack for Captain Rogers shattered into nothingness within the grasp of the unseen hand. Meanwhile the surrounding metal ring inscribed with dark thought heated up to a cherry red.

The giant's horrified face abruptly clamped shut in terror. His mouth was yanked open by unseen forces and the red glowing metal was thrust inside as the giant's jaw was then shut beyond any ability to ever be opened again.

The giant's eyes bugged out of its head in a desperate plea for mercy almost too terrible to comprehend, but no mercy was given. The giant's feet left the ground and then he went sailing out

into the ocean as Dimbo twisted his snout in a hard jerk that was reminiscent of the time I had witnessed the whales playing catch with the snake head dinosaurs.

I rushed up to Keturah and kneeling down I lifted her head into my lap. Her eyes blinked open and she mumbled out, “What happened?”

“Nothing you need to worry about honey. You’re safe!” I said, as I held her close to me cradled in my arms. Her eyes fell back closed as her cheek rested against my chest.

She was safe! Thank God she was safe!

“Thank you Lord!” I whispered over and over even as I felt peace overwhelm me. I’d come so close to having to relive the past again and yet my worst fears

hadn't been realized. God is good!

Dimbo looked to be thoroughly beached, but with some twisting and wiggling of his large rubbery mass he managed to worm his way back into the water with the help from some gentle nudging of a second smaller whale who looked to be a female.

I got up with Keturah in my arms as Dimbo slid the rest of the way free of the sand. He headed out for deeper waters with his mate close to him, even as I held mine to me in equal protectiveness.

“Sir?”

I turned to see a large group of people come from the trees and advance onto the beach. By their dress I took them to be plantation owners.

It was a woman who had spoken. She spoke again in the cultured voice of a

southern bell, “May we come with you? With the Whale People?”

I paused for a moment as to what to say. I wanted to deny the request, but where was the forgiveness in that?

“There will be no slaves where we roam or any man or woman esteemed higher than another.” I cautioned.

“We want no less than that ourselves. We never wish to return or remain in the mistakes of this place. We welcome equality, as it was always meant to be and should have been.”

I nodded, as she finished talking and then I said expansively, “Find a spot then and come along if you want. There is always room for more out on the open ocean.”

I turned then and walked out into the surf holding Keturah above the waves.

Some of the former slaves and Whale People held Keturah's boat steady, as I lifted her up and onto the netting. I pulled myself up with some helpful pushes from those gathered around and I went about seeing that Keturah was first stable and as comfortable as I could make her before I went about the business of getting under sail.

If felt good to be free of the land again, especially the land of the fabled Atlantis.

I had wanted treasure initially when I'd come to the island of Atlantis, but I'd received a Divine calling on my life instead. Now I was leaving the island for the mysteries of the sea instead and I had the greatest treasure a man could ever ask for in the form of a woman lying asleep on the forward netting. I

was a blessed man and glad of it!

The Polly was offshore by itself and instinctively I knew what that meant in regards to the USS Nathaniel. I'd known something was up even before we left the lagoon when I'd seen Matt's crew stealing extra gunpowder from Flynn's ship.

When traveling through the forest with Mandy I'd heard the explosion that was larger than all the others and intrinsically I'd known that I'd just lost a good friend in a very noble way. That was Matt for you. Few have the choice of how they exit life, but I think Matt got his wish in that he got to go out in the flames of glory, so to speak, just as the fabled characters of history's past had that he had studied and lectured about to

classrooms of students either too bored to listen or too unimaginative to comprehend that the answers for the present can often be found in the deeds and mistakes of the past.

I pulled in beside the Polly and Jim peered down over the side at me. I wanted to be free of people and the responsibilities of leadership for a while. A honeymoon if you will, as well as the first vacation I'd had in a very long time.

“Throw me some tools down Jim.”

He nodded and disappeared for a little while. Coming back to the side he threw down to the netting just what I needed. There went Jim reading my mind again.

I glanced up to see him smile and say, “Have fun boss.”

Serena came to the railing to link her arm with Jim's and I smiled in return, "You too, Jim."

I shoved away from the Polly then and headed out away from the flotilla of little boats in the shadow of the ironclad that was now headed for the distant lagoon.

Soon it was just me and Keturah. The fantasy of several days ago that I'd had was coming to life in an even more vivid reality.

Chapter Twenty One

I Burnt It

Keturah was starting to stir where she lay on the floating board and trepidation filled me at what lay ahead of me to convince her to come off of it. What I was about to attempt could go so badly and I almost backed down again from attempting it, but Keturah needed to be free and I wanted to help her become so. I just wished my methods weren't so brutal.

Her eyes opened and she abruptly sat up and looked around in fright.

“Where am I? Where’s my boat?” She exclaimed in question her eyes frantically imploring me for answers.

“You’re on a little island off by itself with its own little lagoon.”

“My boat?” She broke in accusingly.

She was clearly panicking and I regretted my decision to enact this strategy all over again, but there was no going back now. I had to commit to the task, because if successful the prize would be worth it.

“I burnt it.”

“You what!!!” She screamed coming up to her knees on the tiny raft I had made for her.

I’d tied three small logs together. The raft was barely big enough for her to lay down.

“Why?” She screamed out

hysterically, as she visibly unraveled before my eyes emotionally.

She didn't wait for my response but continued with, "You marooned us on this island? You're a fool!" She screamed out as tears started to fall.

"No Keturah, I am not a fool."

I pointed to a pile of tools further up the beach near the tree line, "Look Keturah. See those are tools. In specific there the tools we need to build a bigger and better boat than your old one and we have all the timber we need to do it right here on this island."

Her eyes went from the tools to the trees and the level of fright in her eyes went down a little.

"I need you to help me Keturah. I need your help to build a boat that both of us can share and be proud of, but to do that

I need you to get off the raft and come ashore.”

She immediately glanced down to the shallow two feet of water that the raft floated on and said, “No!”

“Keturah honey I need your help. Please come ashore.”

She looked up with misery showing clearly in her eyes, “You don’t understand!” She screamed out with raw emotion.

I kept my voice calm and loving, “What don’t I understand honey? Talk to me darling.”

She gazed down at the raft and said, “You know that I was offered by my own people as a sacrifice to the water gods when I was a child?”

“Yes. Elizabeth said they tied you to a board and sent you out to sea.”

Keturah nodded and said, “I floated for a long time and then there was a storm. A terrible storm!”

I could well imagine the kind of storm she was talking about as I’d lived through one.

“When I woke up the board was gone and I was laying on the beach of an island even smaller than this one.”

She paused for a moment and then with her voice raw she said, “I was marooned on that island for two years. I was six years old! I didn’t know how to do anything like build a raft or successfully fish. The island had one fruit tree on it and that was how I survived along with whatever I was lucky enough to catch in the water. I couldn’t take it! I went crazy or at least I lived in fear of going crazy. Finally one

day I decided to end it, because I couldn't take living on that miserable little island even one more day! I swam out of the lagoon and into the sea. I swam till I exhausted myself too much to be able to return to shore.”

She stopped talking and gently I interjected, “That’s when Dimbo found you isn’t it?”

She nodded, “I thought he was trying to eat me instead of save me. I don’t know why it mattered as I was trying to kill myself anyway.”

She looked up at me miserably, “Do you think I’m crazy?”

“No honey I don’t think you’re crazy.”

She looked back down as she said, “So now you know why I can’t come ashore with you. Every time I’ve tried to go ashore it overwhelms me and all I

can see is the island I was so miserable on as a child. I'll stay on this raft while you build the boat." She finished in a small voice.

I wasn't letting her get off that easy. "Do you know how my wife and two girls died Keturah?"

She glanced up looking surprised that I would bring that up at a time like this.

"Matt said they died in a bad accident and that there wasn't anything you could do."

"That's a very mild way of putting it Keturah. We were at Matt's house for Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is a holiday up on the surface. When the day was over we left in our car to go home. A car is like a box on wheels that goes very fast. Its how a lot of people get around on the surface. We were driving along

and another car came along and hit us. Its driver was drunk. My car flipped over a bank and tumbled down a ravine and landed on its side. The engine came back into the car and had my legs pinned against the seat. My back was thrown out as well and I couldn't move my arms. I was helpless. My wife's head had been hit in the crash and she was unconscious. She was hung up above me by her seatbelt. For hours I felt her blood drip down onto me, but there was nothing I could do. She regained consciousness briefly and we talked for a little while before she died. My oldest girl's neck was snapped at the moment of impact, but my youngest girl was alive and crying. I listened to her cry all night long as I told her everything was going to be all right. It was very cold that night and

she died of shock and exposure an hour before the rescue crew got there. I went crazy Keturah. I was in a psych ward for six months under constant surveillance to keep me from taking my own life. For the next seven years up until recently I've been in a prison in my mind every bit as bad as the two years you spent alone on your island Keturah. I know what it's like and I don't want you to stay there any longer! For years I've fought to keep the memories of my family both good and bad fresh in my mind because I thought that if I lost the connection that I'd lose everything and really go crazy. I lost my faith the night of the accident and it's taken me over seven years to get it back. Seven years of my life that I've wasted and can't get back. It wasn't until I came to this inner

world that things began to change and I actually started to notice that I was breathing. You have been a large part of that change in me Keturah. More so than you know. You have helped me so much and I am so grateful to you! I want to help you Keturah. I want to help you like you've helped me. I want you to be free to experience life like I am right now. Keturah, honey, get off the boat and come to me.”

I held my hand out to her. She was crying and her head was jerking in a negative rhythm to my spoken request.

“If you won't do it for me then do it for yourself. The sand is warm. I know you'll like it.”

For the first time I saw her waver a little and I pressed with more encouragement, “I know how hard it is

to face your greatest fear Keturah, but let me tell you there's fresh air on the other side. It's worth it. For me a future spent with you is worth letting go of what's long since been gone from my life."

She then looked up at me and before she could let herself think otherwise she slid off the raft to stand in the shallows of the lagoon. I could see it then, her immediate knee-jerk reaction of panic with contact of the sand beneath her was to get back on the raft.

"Keturah stop! Look at me! Look over here!" I said, as I clapped my hands loudly and the sharp sound seemed to jar her enough out of the panic of the moment to glance at me.

I stepped to the side and pointed up towards the tree line to something I had been blocking from her view.

“Do you see that Keturah?”

She glanced to what I pointed to and then back to me puzzled looking, “A bed?” She asked.

“That’s right a bed. I’m going to make love to you on that bed, but first you have to come to me right where I’m standing and then I’ll carry you the rest of the way, I promise darling!”

She looked from me to the bed with such a look of longing that it was heartbreaking to behold.

“Don’t you want to make love with me Keturah?”

“Yes!” She screamed out striking the water with a fist.

“Then take a step forward honey.”

She moved. I’m not sure you could call it a step, but it was movement. Any movement as long as it wasn’t backward

was a good thing.

I kept my voice warm and even, while inside I was panicking with the lack of what to say next to keep compelling her forward. I never broke eye contact with her though, “You know you were right about something Keturah. I’m a man experienced by the love of a great woman and thus you have the assurance of just how lovingly I’m going to treat you all the days of your life, because I understand just how rare truly great women are in this life.”

She took a step forward and I rejoiced inside, but kept talking as my brain scrambled for what to say next.

“Some may call you wanton for the way you’ve offered yourself to me ever since we met each other, but I don’t. Sure you want to experience my touch

and possession of you, but it goes deeper doesn't it?" I asked rhetorically.

"You're desperate! Desperate to not be alone. You've never had anyone that truly stuck around before have you? Well now you have me and I'm never going to leave you Keturah!"

She took another step, as I fished around for what to say next.

"Companionship and the loving touches of a mate are beyond wonderful on a daily basis, but all those positive feelings and loving touches have a way of paying dividends. Tell me Keturah do you want to feel what it's like to have a new life of a special baby boy or girl take form and grow within your womb?"

"Yes!" She screamed out unknowingly clutching at her lower abdomen in time with her declaration. She'd taken two

steps forward and now a third one.

“I bet you do! I bet you ache to share your loving and nurturing spirit with children of your own so that you can give them the love, attention, and security that you never had as a child.”

She kept walking now.

“A committed relationship for life, between a man and a woman is a special thing, but it really steps up a notch when children become a part of the bond you already have with your mate. Two of the proudest moments of my life were the births of my daughters, Keturah. I want to experience moments like that again. I want to experience those moments with you, just-very-special-you, Keturah.”

She started to run to me then, but stopped with a gasp, as she looked down to see her bare feet in the kicked up dry

sand of the beach. She looked up at me in shocked surprise and I held out my arms to her, “Don’t stop now honey! Not when my love is waiting to share the rest of my life with you!”

She launched forward into my arms and almost knocked me over backwards into the sand. I held her as her arms clamped around me like a vise even as she shook me from the force of her emotional sobs.

I kissed her ear, as she stood with her head buried against my chest sobbing and said, “You’ll never be alone again and neither will I!”

Her face tilted back to reveal her teary eyes full of more joy than I’d ever seen in any person’s eyes before, “I love you Eli!” She said with a passionate depth of meaning.

“I love you more!” I said, meaning it.

Her full lips split into a smile, as her eyes danced with the excitement of being free and in my arms. “Prove it!” She said tauntingly.

I smiled in response and said, “It would be my pleasure.”

We kissed each other at the same time then. Her hands held my face to hers with passion, even as I slipped her body meant for loving up into my arms and turned to head blindly for the bed that I had made further up the beach.

I'd been figuring it would take me about a month or two to build our new boat, but I was going to have to revise that estimate upwards dramatically given the living distraction that I held in my arms. I didn't mind. I didn't have anywhere to be or bills that needed to be

paid. I was wonderfully past all that life draining bother now.

My first life had been worth the living and now at the rebirth of a second life I could say the same about it too. God is good and life is worth the living just because He lives.

Guy S. Stanton, III

A few things about me



I live in the country. It's the best place to be
I'm
thinking. I share my life with my beautiful wife,
Beth,

my three children and one cat named Herman.

When I'm not lost in a daydream the most
likely

place you'll find me at is flower gardening
or at the movie theatre. I use to think I was
strong, but

now I freely admit that I'm weak. My new
reality is

okay because Jesus Christ has me covered.

It's better that way trust me!

