



STRANDS OF SORROW

JOHN
RINGO

New York Times Best-Selling Author

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Strands of Sorrow – eARC

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As always

For Captain Tamara Long, USAF

Born: May 12, 1979

Died: March 23, 2003, Afghanistan

You fly with the angels now.

Acknowledgements

The first major acknowledgement is that I didn't mean to write this book. But like the rest it just sa "write me." I'd really hoped I was finished with the main story of the Black Tide universe with book three: *Islands of Rage and Hope*. As the book said at the end, "The Beginning." I really did not and could not see it as the ending of *Alas Babylon*: "And they stared into the thousand year night." Better words were from the chorus of "Last Ride of the Day": "This moment the dawn of humanity."

However, after finishing book three I couldn't stop pacing. Finally my wife Miriam more or less forced me to sit down and write this one. It's all her fault.

The second acknowledgement is to a group of "friends" on Facebook. When I started thinking about how to proceed on the east coast, I asked on FB about coastal facilities. I've never been in the Navy or Marines, just Army, which is why I occasionally "glitch" on Navy and Marine stuff. The Black Tide first readers, many Navy, Coast Guard or Marine, have been invaluable in finding those glitches and correcting them. But Captain Steven "Wolf" Smith would have his people as well as the Hole to draw upon to figure out where to go now that there is some hope for the future. So I, as well, had to draw upon support from friends to figure out where to go. Blount Island had been nowhere on my radar screen until the *invaluable* Jon De Pinet (former USMC embarkation specialist) pointed out that just about *anything* you could want was there and it was entirely clearable.

Byron Audler, resident of Mayport, for directing me to info on HELMARSTRIKERON 40 with the very appropriate name "Air Wolves." That is probably what kicked this over the edge. Sigh.

Last but oh so certainly not least, Captain Kacey Ezell, USAF. (Who has no resemblance whatsoever to Captain Kacey Bathlick USMC, AKA Dragon, in the Keldara books. None. Really.) Kacey has been my regular technical consultant on helo ops over the years. My writing in this novel on the subject simply proved that an occasional ride in the cargo compartment of a Huey Blackhawk many year...err...decades ago does not an expert make. When it became apparent that I couldn't write helo scenes in detail to save my butt, Kacey graciously (and rapidly) stepped forward and thoroughly rewrote them. For which I am eternally grateful.

Kacey has also already submitted her short story for the upcoming Black Tide anthology. Yes, that was a plug.

Prologue

“This is so wrong,” Lieutenant Lyons said. “I’m trying to count the ways this is wrong.”

Commodore Carmen J. Montana, nee Lieutenant General Montana, nee “Mr. Walker” nee s many other AKAs even his redoubtable memory couldn’t remember them all, Commander in Chief Pacific Forces, had decades before come to the philosophical conclusion that anyone who said “I have never failed a mission” rarely got the sort of missions that were his forte.

The first mission of his career in special operations was called “Operation Eagle Claw” and was *spectacular* and very public failure. He wasn’t in charge or anything, but it was still a failed mission. It was also where he had earned his first award for heroism while pulling air-crew out of a burning chopper. Operation Urgent Fury, a cake-walk for most, had been for his team another high-body-count failure which resulted in his first DSC. Mogadishu: another spectacular, and public, failure had earned him his *second* DSC. He had, personally, failed to stop Osama Bin Laden from escaping from Tor Bora. But let anyone guess which of two thousand, mined, trails the bastard was going to use. Trying to get that Soviet physicist out of the middle of Siberia, those two days in Shanghai, that thing Berlin...And, oh God, if he never saw Beirut again it would be too soon...

But Navy Base San Diego was starting to get *right up there* in his personal best of utterly fucked up missions.

There were various military bases scattered all over the San Diego valley. Miramar, playground of the Airedales. Pendleton up the road, playground of the Hollywood Marines. NAVSEA based deep in the heart of Dago. Then there were the three main attractions: Point Loma, North Island and Navy Base San Diego.

NBSD was out of the question. It was on the city side of San Diego Bay. You might as well try to clear New York City. Given enough time, Subedey bots and helos... Well, they’d do it eventually. Heck, even Trixie might have a chance. But it was never on the original game plan.

Point Loma, home to most of the submarines, was equally out of the question. It was peninsula that was backed by a sprawl of sub-urbs and really didn’t have much of interest.

North Island, on the other hand... Had looked doable. Bad points. It was attached to the mainland by both a bridge and a narrow causeway. It had a vast sprawl of housing. Good points. It was *only* attached to the mainland by the bridge and a narrow causeway. And the causeway was both long and went to a, relatively, uninhabited area. Relatively because this was, after all, southern California and nowhere was exactly “uninhabited.” There was limited water. By all that was holy, they should have only had to deal with the infected that were the survivors of the base personnel. Those that hadn’t already died of thirst. Couple, few, thousand. Close the bridges and the causeway, get some of the survivors oriented, get some of the landing craft up and going, go clear Pendleton and he’d be CINCPAC in more than name.

Should have. Probably. If only.

They’d been informed there was “a light.” Satellites had detected “heavy infected density.” He noted the same thing before he’d left from the Atlantic. But... Sigh.

It was worse than Mog. Every freaking street was packed. It looked like naked Mardi Gras. Half the population of San Diego and Tijuana seemed to have moved to North Island. Because, well, there was “a light.”

Specifically, the Seawolf Class Submarine, *USS Jimmy Carter*, SSN-23, was alongside North Island. And under power. And shining a very powerful spotlight almost straight to the heavens.

Which light had drawn every freaking infected in the San Diego region.

~~“As I recall, all the Seawolfs are supposed to be based in Bangor,”~~ Montana said, looking over Lieutenant Commander Halvorson.

“Yes, sir,” the commander of the *Michigan* said. “That is where it should be.”

In the Nineties, with the nation facing “multi-access threats” that often required more fines than destroying cities with nuclear weapons and new strategic arms agreements limiting the number of nukes subs could carry, four of the older Ohio Class ballistic missile submarines, notably and hilariously, the *Ohio*, *Michigan*, *Florida* and *Georgia*, were reclassified and repurposed for “littor insertion” of special operations and “cruise missile” support by converting some of their missile spaces into housing for SEAL teams, with special lock-out arrangements, and modifying the rest to hold an absolute slew of Tomahawk cruise missiles on rotating launchers.

The admiral in charge of the program, rather clueless on modern acronyms, initially dubbed the the “O-M-F-G Program” for “Ohio-Michigan-Florida-Georgia” until it was pointed out that the initials were probably not the best choice and the program name was changed. Nobody, however, could remember the new program name: The acronym stuck. Given they could fire up to 15 Tomahawk Cruise Missiles in less than five minutes, it was entirely appropriate. The absolute barrage of cruise missiles that broke the back of the Libyan Army’s response to the “pro-democracy” uprising came from *one* OMFG.

“So that’s one thing,” Montana said. “And isn’t the sub base at Point Loma?”

“Yes, sir,” Lieutenant Lyons said. “So I would suppose the next question is why is it snuggled up to the *Ronald Reagan*?”

“Those two *never* got along I’ll tell you that,” Montana said with a snort. “In fact, if there was any rationale to the universe either the *Gipper* would have crushed the *Jimmy* by now or they’d be forced apart by mutual loathing.”

The conversation was taking place on the sail of the guided missile class submarine. So the commodore had to look up, then look up again, to see the open hangar deck of the *Ronald Reagan* and the flight deck above. Both of which were packed tight with infected. Occasionally one would slip over the side from the crowding. Looking down it was apparent that the sharks were enjoying a regular bounty. Not only sharks.

“Lieutenant Lyons,” the commodore said. “I have a very extensive, most people would describe as exhaustive, knowledge of just about, well, *anything*.”

“I’ve played you at Trivial Pursuit, sir,” Lyons said.

“But you are from this area and used to occasionally play in these waters.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So what the *fuck* are *those*?” Montana said, pointing at the boiling water’s surface where large hooked, tentacles occasionally flailed.

“That is something you don’t usually see in San Diego harbor, General,” Lyons said. “Those are Humboldt squid. I didn’t think they could or would come in here. Generally they’re only found in deep pelagic areas. Deep. They normally only come up to the last couple of hundred feet at night. About ten feet long including tentacles and nasty as they come. Frankly, I’d rather fight a shark.”

“If you used to swim within a thousand miles of those things you are a braver man than I,” Montana said. “And that’s saying something. Commander Halvorson. Refresh my memory again. That light has been burning for better than nine months, the boat has got to be under power. Correct?”

“Yes, sir,” Halvorson said.

“And the *Topeka* already went active trying to wake up the reactor watch.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Which means no reactor watch.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is there any reliable data on how long a reactor can continue to run, safely, without someone at the controls?” Montana asked.

“I think the answer is ‘somewhere around nine or less months or possibly more depending on when the reactor watch died and when this reactor finally goes critical,’ sir,” Halvorson said. “In other words...”

“This *is* the test case,” Montana said. “This is probably as long as any reactor has ever gone without someone manning it.”

“Yes, sir. And the generators, sir. Rather... amazing, sir. I’d have said impossible for more than a few hours. And terrifying. ‘Active reactor’ and ‘no reactor watch’ are two phrases no one in their right mind wants to hear.”

“Duly noted,” Montana said. “Go Navy. A real credit to your nuclear reactor designs and SOPs. But unfortunately it has made North Island a bit of a pickle. Right. Let’s find a good spot to open fire and have Leuschen rig The Beast. We certainly have enough targets.”

“Aye, aye, Commodore.”

“Frankly, I’d say just hammer it with your payload but even with this swarm there might be survivors,” Montana said. “And we need the personnel, gear and materials. Not to mention a full reload on one of these boats is a major Congressional Line Item. Eventually we *shall* have a Congress again and I do *not* want to explain firing off four hundred *million* dollars worth of cruise missiles. So... Rig The Beast!”

“COB,” the skipper said over the 1MC. “Tell Leuschen to rig The Beast.”

* * *

The Beast was the sort of weapon you’d only get in a zombie apocalypse.

It looked a bit like a large machine gun. A bit. Or possibly a large paint-ball gun, which was closer to its actual form and function. There was a long, fairly flimsy looking, barrel that had obviously been hand-machined from some sort of tube. There was a breach. There was a butterfly trigger. There was even a bit of a sight. So far so good. Pintle mount that hooked into a lock on the deck. Even the most modern submarines in the U.S. fleet retained provisions for a deck gun which in this case was to the good.

Then there were the odd bits. Instead of a belt feed, there was a large vaguely conical hopper on top. There was an air hose running from a fitting on the deck to a similar fitting on the breach.

There was the seaman first class pouring two-inch steel ball bearings into the hopper.

“Loaded, sir!” Petty Officer Second Class Leuschen said, beaming for all he was worth. As the inventor, designer and creator of The Beast, it was universally judged that he should have first crack. There were others onboard crazy enough to try it out but they mostly spent their time these days trying to chew through the straps. “Permission to open fire?”

“Commodore?” Commander Halvorson asked.

“Oh, why not?” Montana said. “Fire at will, Commander.”

“Open fire!”

The chosen target area was the northeast corner of Quay Drive on North Island. Maneuvering the *Michigan* in close quarters, without tugs, was no picnic but the XO had managed to get it right in position. And The Beast had plenty of customers. The infected were as dense there as they were everywhere on the God forsaken island. And shore side. And Point Loma. Normal humans would have

mostly succumbed to dehydration and starvation at this point. But not the infected. Oh, no, not the infected.

At least some were about to succumb to The Beast.

The sound was surprisingly muted. Accustomed as he was to gunfire, Commodore Montana was unsure at first if it was even firing. The sound was an odd *whip, whip, whip...*

But then the ball bearings reached their targets.

The concept of The Beast was simple. It was, at heart, nothing but an oversized, insane overpowered, paint-ball gun. As Leuschen had pointed out, the one thing a nuclear submarine has in near infinite supply is compressed air. Replace paintballs with steel ball bearings and what you get was a brutal and extremely efficient slaughter-machine.

The infected were moving more or less randomly on Quay Drive. Generally the densities they were looking at would only have occurred with a true alpha swarm. They weren't shoulder to shoulder but they were often bumping each other. Which occasionally erupted into fights and even small riots. Infected did not get along with each other much better than the rest of the world.

The point being there was no clear view down quay drive from their position. Which meant "aiming" was sort of moot. And the ball-bearings could hardly miss.

Infected started to drop and Leuschen didn't even bother to walk from side to side. There was always another target straight ahead. And infected were going down. An infected hit by a two inch ball of steel going not much under the speed of sound is going to die nine times out of ten. Though far less spectacular than the water-cooled fifty-cals used by Wolf Squadron, it was at least as effective.

"Now if we just had a hundred of them," Commander Halvorson said. "I can get to work on more, sir."

"The choke point isn't weapons, Commander," Montana said. "The choke point is bullets. We have only ten thousand ball bearings. And while I suspect that Leuschen's concept of using small cylinders made from machine steel is sound, at a certain point we'll have to either cannibalize your submarine or run out of steel. Nonetheless, with a successful test do start making more. But quit while The Beast has used up seventy percent of its ammo. We're sure to need it somewhere else."

"I'd suggest we need to find more ball-bearings, sir," Halvorson said.

"I'll put it on the agenda," Montana said. "We first need to get that damned light turned off. Preferably with extreme prejudice. Lieutenant Lyons."

"Take a boarding team and get the light turned off, aye, sir," Lyons said.

"Anyone onboard familiar with the Seawolf Class, Commander?"

"The COB served on them, sir," Halvorson said. "And Petty Officer Gomez."

"Take them and a security team," Montana said. "And put that light out. Take a hammer. Break it if you have to."

"That would be tricky, sir," Halvorson said. "It's recessed and extremely robust to withstand pressure. I would suggest the lieutenant take a small explosives charge, instead."

"Already on my list, sir," Lyons said.

"Betraying my lack of knowledge of all things sub-nautical," Montana said. "What in the hell do you use something like that for?"

"Hull shots," Halvorson and Lyons said simultaneously.

"And helping lost SEALs find their way back to a submerged boat, sir," Halvorson added.

"Quite quite helpful in that regard," Lyons said. "If somewhat untactical."

"Technically it's a standard navigation light," Halvorson added. "That's how it's listed in the white papers, anyway."

“Love to have seen that line item,” Montana said. “And we need a navigation light that can light up the moon!”

* * *

A RHIB was duly deployed, the boarding team boarded, carefully given the reception committee in the water, and headed over to the *Jimmy Carter*.

However, before they even began to board, they came to the furious attention of the infected crowding the hangar deck hatches and the flight deck.

“This might not be good,” Commodore Montana muttered as the first few infected dropped from the flight deck.

In the case of the increasing shower of infected from the flight deck, it was, as it were, hit or miss. The flight deck loomed out and over the smaller submarine. Thus the infected who were not so much jumping off as being pushed trying to get to the RHIB were aiming at water. It was sixty-six feet, as any Naval Aviator knows, from the flight deck to the water line on a Nimitz class carrier. Sixty-six feet is survivable under some conditions. It is approximately the same height as a twenty-meter diving board in the Olympics. However, surviving the impact is one thing. Surviving conscious is another. Absent careful entry, water at that speed tends to feel somewhat like landing on concrete. Thus the “miss.” The waters of San Diego Bay were home to not just the Humboldt squid but the Great White as was *immediately* apparent. Conscious or not, there were not going to be many infected surviving the fall.

Some, however, were aimed more or less at the RHIB. Thus the “hit.”

“Back up!” Lyons said as the first infected landed on Petty Officer Gomez. The infected didn’t survive not to mention it wasn’t all that great for Gomez. And the impact very nearly tore the bottom out of the RHIB. Which would have made it, very briefly, an “IB.”

The COB threw the outboard into reverse and backed up as fast as the boat could manage as the water around it started to churn with impacting infected.

“Zombilanche!” the Michigan’s chief of boat shouted, then cackled madly. There was essentially a *wall* of infected falling off the flight deck.

“Just get us out of here, COB!” Lyons shouted, then, “Incoming!”

The remaining crew dove to the side as an infected impacted square in the center of the RHIB.

“I don’t know how many more of those we can take,” Lyons said. “Jefferson, Garcia, toss those over the side.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” Seaman Jefferson said, grabbing the legs of the infected. Who, as it turned out, was sufficiently cushioned by Gomez and the previously impacted infected to survive. Albeit with two broken legs. “Sir!”

“Got it,” drawing and giving the infected a “Mozambique tap” to the chest and head. “Now toss it.”

“Aye, sir,” Jefferson said, gulping. He and Garcia tipped the dead body over the side, then reared back. “JESUS!”

A particularly greedy great white had not even waited for the body to fully hit the water. Its teeth sunk into the body and ripped it out of Jefferson’s hands.

“Think we need a bigger boat, sir!” Garcia shouted, nervously.

“It’s like feeding the dolphins at Sea World,” Jefferson said quaveringly. “But way, way, way grosser.”

“Which is probably how the fish feel,” Garcia said.

“Just toss the next one,” Lyons said. “Carefully.”

Fortunately, the COB had backed the RHIB out of the “zombilanche” and slowed it as the show continued.

“Oh, that’s just wrong,” the chief of boat said, shaking his head. “Look at the *Jimmy*.”

The hangar deck openings were lower and more in line with the *Jimmy Carter*. Most of the infected being shoved out as the mass tried to reach the RHIB were landing on the deck of the submarine. Or the sail. Or the fairwater planes. All of which were very hard steel. Most of them were surviving but only with severe orthopedic trauma. Which was exacerbated when another infected would land on top of them.

The top deck of the *Jimmy* was also curved, somewhat slippery and seemed to be the primary territory of the Humboldts. As the writhing mass of screaming, broken, infected would discharge a member, the giant squids would reach up *out* of the water and pull them in with claw covered tentacles.

“That is a behavior never before witnessed,” Lyons said. “And it just put swimming off on the southern California coast for *my* lifetime at the very least. These things have been proven to be smart, adaptable and to have very good memories. Some indications they even learn socially. Which means this behavior might just be passed down generations. Okay.” He keyed his handheld. “Commodore?”

“*Just come back to the boat,*” Montana replied. “*Back to the drawing board...*”

“Are we there yet?” Gomez asked, groaning.

* * *

“The positive aspect to this latest debacle is that Lieutenant Lyons found an easy way to kill zombies in job-lots,” Montana said.

“Pull a boat up and let them avalanche?” Lyons said.

“Got it in one,” Montana replied. “The tricky part is making sure the boat crew survives.”

“I’d prefer not to bring this boat in any closer, sir,” Commander Halvorson said.

“They wouldn’t recognize it as a target, anyway,” Montana said. “But using the RHIB again is off the question. We need a better boat.”

“This is San Diego Harbor, sir,” Lyons said. “Even with people punching out due to the plague there are plenty of boats available.”

“However, this is an untenable objective at the moment,” Montana said. “We’re going to drop back and punt. We need a base and to start building personnel. Let’s fall back to the NALF for now. See about clearing that first.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” Halvorson said.

* * *

“More infected than I’d expected,” Lyons said, looking at the shores of the barren island.

San Clemente Island was a twenty-one-mile-long brown, barren bit of rock sticking out of the Pacific Ocean about ten miles from the California coast. Part of it was an impact range but on the north end was a support facility and the Naval Air Landing Field. And there were infected. Not as many as North Island. *New York* didn’t have as many as North Island. But quite a few. Most were clustered near a few of the large buildings on which, yes, there were clear survivors. Quite a few of those as well.

“If you start rhyming every statement I *shall* have to find a new aide, Lieutenant,” Montana said.

“Noted, sir,” Lyons said, looking through a stabilized scope on the sail. “And the relatively high number of survivors as well as infected is now explained.”

“Oh?” Montana said. “Don’t keep me hanging.”

“I recognize people on the buildings, sir,” Lyons said. “Looks as if NavSpecWar moved...”

* * *

“Damned right we moved.”

Captain Owen Carter was the former commander of Navy Special Warfare, Basic Underwater Demolitions/SCUBA School, universally referred to as BUD/S. It was the West Coast’s SEAL school normally based at Coronado on North Island.

The good part about the introductions was Carter recognized him. There were no questions raised as to why a former Army lieutenant general was now a commodore and CINCPAC. Nobody in Special Operations questioned his competence. Now if he could just figure out a way to take *anything* on the land side...

“Holding Coronado was untenable, sir,” Carter said. “Freaking infected were coming over the fences. Most of the teams were out trying to control the infected. I obtained orders to move the dependents, instructors and students to San Clemente. Various others joined as they had transport. Pretty much the entire Special Operations boat contingent moved over when it all came apart along with some civilians and Team survivors. We moved sufficient supplies for a long siege, especially given the loss rate due to infection. What we did *not* bring is enough ammunition to deal with all the infected. I’m not sure there’s enough in the world.”

“And we, too, are about out,” Montana said, trying not to sigh. The Beast had shot through the last of its ball bearings and all the subs in the area were about shot out on machine-gun rounds. But they had a land base and an infusion of fighters. “Commander Halvorson.”

“Sir.”

“Have the *Hampton* and *Topeka* do a run back to Gitmo or Blount, whichever Captain Smith prefers. Pick up more ammo. See about ball bearings. They might have found some on Blount. Vaccine. Medical supplies if they have spare. General supply run.” For better or worse, most of the pregnant female dependents seemed to have already given birth so he wouldn’t have to repeat the nightmare that had been Gitmo when the baby wave hit.

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Captain Carter,” Montana said, looking at the small beach by the NALF. Drawn up on the sand or anchored in the tiny cove was an amazing cluster of just about every type of small boat imaginable. There were Special Operations Boats, yachts, off-shore inflatables and “hard” hulls, there was even one ten-foot inflatable dinghy that must have been a real joy to maneuver across the strait.

“Sir?”

“Any of those SOCs still operational?”

The 81-foot “Special Operations Craft Mark V.1” were just the ticket to handle a zombilanche. They should even be robust enough to handle the impact.

“Unsure, sir. They’ve been parked for the better part of a year.”

“Well, time to *get* them operational,” Montana said, humming “Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner.” “The FAST boat guys have a new mission...”

* * *

“Ball bearings?” Isham said, looking at the video transmission.

Commander Halvorson gave a brief précis of The Beast.

“That makes so much sense I don’t know why Steve didn’t think of it first,” Isham said. “Okay, I’ll put the word in to Survey and Salvage to keep an eye out. There might be a container or so on Blount Island. There might be a container of the Holy Grail for that matter. But I’ll add ball-bearing

to the list of critical items...”

* * *

There was more to do. Zombie bodies had to be dealt with since they needed the facilities. There were some backhoes. More boats were gotten operational and spread out to see about at-sea rescues. They'd used up most of their machine-gun ammo but husbanded their small-arms rounds. Clearance happened. The nice thing about finding a bunch of BUD/S instructors and students was the instructors were specialists at clearing boats and ships. All they needed was a bit of touch-up on the “Wolf-Way.” On the other hand, it wasn't much different from normal SEAL clearance techniques. Although they were occasionally trained to sneak aboard boats, once they were onboard they rarely bothered to keep quiet. It was all about fast and hard. The only thing they had to be retrained on was “bring the zombies in your killzone, don't go into theirs.” And Lyons had spent enough time around the Wolf Marines to be able to hum the tune.

But the land. Oh, the land...

CHAPTER 1

“Once again, let me congratulate everyone on the mission to London,” Steve said. “You did an exceptional job. So you get the usual thanks for a job well done. Another one.”

Captain Steven John “Wolf” Smith, Commander Atlantic Fleet, had been a high school history teacher prior to the Plague. At this point there were any number of professional submariner officers who had far more experience and could easily take over as Commander Atlantic Fleet. The reason that no one has so much as broached the subject is that the only reason they could now take over was due to the efforts of one Steven John Smith, his redoubtable family and the massive and almost entirely volunteer rescue effort called “Wolf Squadron” that had allowed them to finally climb out of the steel cans.

“As I remarked to Stacey, now we can really get started. The question, of course, is start what?” Steve continued. “And the answer is: Triage.”

“I don’t really think we’re up to repair, sir,” Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton said.

Craig Hamilton was another rescuee of Wolf Squadron. The Marine lieutenant colonel had been the senior surviving officer at Guantanamo Bay when a ragtag fleet of yachts, liners and trawlers converted to gunboats had sailed into the harbor. Since then the Infantry branch former interrogators had been running the Wolf Marines doing various clearance operations. Including commanding, up to a point, the near debacle in London.

“No, we’re not, Colonel,” Steve said. “But we have to figure out where to start working the problem of clearing the mainland. My initial plan was to start with Key West and simply work north. There are arguments for it. It keeps us on one vector. It is, how to put this, fair? Start at one place and work towards another and that’s it. People can’t complain that we overlooked them. That plan may still have some validity. However, there are problems...”

He paused and considered the ceiling for a moment.

“The continued clearance of London is going slowly,” Steve said carefully. “The reason being that Prince Harry cannot decide between saving people and training more helo pilots. Captain Wilkes,” he said, nodding to the Marine captain, “and the prince, of course, recovered some helos from Wattisham. All good. Parts? Crews? He’s having to make his own.”

“As we have, sir,” Hamilton said. “And trained them as we went. Sophia is coming along well as a helo pilot.”

“Thank you, sir,” Sophia said, rubbing her new wings.

Sophia Smith, oldest daughter, had made ensign at fifteen. She was just turned sixteen when she made her first “pilot in command” flight on a helicopter. It helped that her father was LantFleet. Not to mention that they were in a zombie apocalypse. But mostly she had done both those things because she was a founding member of Wolf Squadron and just that damned good. The main argument for “just that damned good” was commanding a rescue yacht for nearly a year and making that first “pilot in command” flight on an MH-53 “SeaDragon,” arguably one of the hardest helicopters in the world to fly.

“Which is why she wore her stupid flight suit,” Faith said.

Lieutenant Faith Marie Smith, USMC, was two years younger than her sister and already had more combat hours than most grizzled gunnery sergeants. She had come to the conclusion her dad made her a Marine officer not so much because she was an over-the-top crazed zombie-killer

because her Devil Dogs worshipped her for it but because he knew she'd go for the Marines as boys' friends and he was putting as many as possible off-limits.

"Lieutenant," Colonel Hamilton said.

"Aye, aye, sir," Faith said, smiling faintly.

"Frankly, I'd love to have some of my original Marines back, sir," Captain Wilkes said. "The new crews are..."

"Spotty," Steve said. "We'll work on that, Captain. Some of the sub crews are going to be transitioning to helo mechanics. And they're about as good as you're going to find in any world, much less this fallen one. But don't expect Januscheitis back any time soon. The point is...there are no specific personnel or material targets going up the peninsula that way. Boca Chica has virtually nothing that we need. Notably, we need helos, helo crews and helo parts."

"With due respect, sir," Hamilton said, frowning. "You can't kill all the infected on the continent with helos, sir. Nor save everyone."

"On the first point, you'd be surprised," Steve said. "I'm still keeping some cards on my chest. On the second point, you're correct. But we can save many. Especially those in land-based material points. Not to mention accessing them. However, all of that is moot."

He brought up a satellite image and dialed in.

"Before I zoom much more," Steve said. "Lieutenant Smith?"

"Sir?" Faith said.

"You are specifically ordered not to squeal," Steve said. Then zoomed in more.

The image was of a large island. That it was on a river near a city was all that was clear. As the image zoomed in more, it revealed a huge mass of military material, including M1 tanks.

"Squeeeeeeee!" Faith squealed, then clapped her hand over her mouth.

"And, no, Faith, you don't get a tank," Steve said, grinning. "Probably."

"You didn't get me a present for Christmas, Da," Faith said, grinning back.

"Enough," Steve said. "But that is your next objective."

"That is Blount Island," Colonel Hamilton said. "Correct, sir?"

"Yes," Steve said. "This is one aspect of not being, admittedly, a professional. I was entirely unaware of Blount Island until it was brought to my attention."

Faith nodded sagely for a moment, then threw up her hands.

"Okay, I give up," Faith said. "Do the other newbies get to find out? Sirs?"

"Blount Island is an MPF support and conditioning facility, Lieutenant," Colonel Hamilton said. "Are those MPF alongside, sir?"

"Yes, they are," Steve said. "They were drawn into port at the beginning of the plague to change out their equipment and, well, never managed to leave. The same was done with all the other MPFs."

"MPF, sir?" Sophia said, raising her hand.

"Mobile Positioning Force, Ensign," Captain Wilkes said. "Three ships carrying all the material to support a Marine Expeditionary Unit for thirty days. Roll-on/Roll-off capable. Also capable of loading or unloading on unsupported ports."

"So... geared freighters tack ferries with lots of military equipment and supplies," Sophia said. "Thank you, sir."

"Their usual mission was to float around somewhere off-shore for months at a time, waiting for an emergency," Steve said. "If they had done that, they'd probably be uninfected. Instead, they were brought in to switch out some of their combat gear for disaster support materials. Bad call on someone's part. As it is, they are all alongside. Somewhere. Notably Blount, Diego and Guam. The

problem being, as usual, mass. As in too much of it. However, that is better than not having what you need. And it should be quite clearable. Blount Island only has two access points. Half of it is military, the Marine pre-po base, the other half is civilian, a container and car port.”

He slewed the image around to the civilian side.

“No problem finding wheels,” Faith said sarcastically. There were about a hundred thousand cars parked in the port. “Threat, sir?”

“Some infected were spotted on the one pass that’s been caught,” Steve said, zooming in again. He hit the play button and it was apparent there were infected roaming both the military and the civilian side of the port. They seemed to be clustered around certain buildings. And on at least one of those there were some clothed, thus noninfected, people.

“Survivors,” Colonel Hamilton said. “Which would be useful. Just finding your way around Blount Island is a chore.”

“There is one other issue,” Steve said. “Minor. There is a POL point. But it is accessible to the infected and, frankly, way too large to clear and get into operation. So we’ll be depending on Stadia for the time being. The *Alexandria* poked its head into the St. Johns River channel and it’s clear enough to get the *Grace* in with care. Not as bad as the Thames, that’s for sure. So, mission of Kodiak Force: Clear Blount Island and prepare to get it back into operation as a forward logistics and support base. You’ll be augmented with Navy submariners as well as some nugget sailors from here who have been halfway trained. Usual odds and sods. You’ll also be augmented with your usual divisions of gunboats for this mission since you’re not going to have to cross the Atlantic this time. Your mission after that will be Mayport, which we’ll get to later. Questions, comments, concerns?”

“Fuel,” Captain Gilbert said. The civilian captain of the *Grace Tan* was merchant marine but it was hard to tell the difference these days between civilian and military. “And parts. We’ve got some issues cropping up.”

“We’ve replenished POL stores here from Stadia in your absence,” Steve said. “And there are still all the other stores here. You’re scheduled to replenish this evening. You’ll want to take on extra aviation fuel since you are, hopefully, going to need it. And we’ll send the *Ho Yun* up with more when you’re getting low. Anything else?”

“No, sir,” Colonel Hamilton said, looking around the group.

“Again, good job on London,” Steve said. “Enjoy Jacksonville.”

CHAPTER 2

This is Devil Dawwwg Radio, coming to you live from sunny Guantanamo Bay! An here's yer hourly sitrep, Devil Dogs! Those of you Devil Dogs in the Great White North may not like to hear about our sunny weather and tropical days, but that cold's biting the hell out of the zombies! We're starting to get reports from across the northern tier of the U.S. and into Canada of breakouts by survivors! Oorah! Keep 'em coming! U.S. Navy forces under the command of Lieutenant Arnold Trim recently made a port call in Rockland, Maine, delivering critical medical supplies and ammunition for the locals. Some requested to be evacuated but a small cadre stayed behind. With Portland still reporting scattered infected, Rockland is the designated secure point for Maine and Upper New England. The flotilla will continue support and clearance operations in support of Operation Mayflower...

Master Sergeant John Doehler, NCOIC, Imagery and Overhead Analysis, Strategic Armaments Command, started at the sound of a phone ringing.

He was the Duty NCO in the Hole and, it was the middle of the night, there were no major crises and he was thus trying not to nap. Until the phone rang.

Phones just didn't ring. Every communication they were getting these days was on computer terminals. There might be a polite *ping, ping, ping* but not the harsh sound of a bell. Now there was phone ringing.

He looked at it. It had a light coating of dust. The label on it said: "Topside Security Station."

He picked it up.

"Master Sergeant Doehler, Duty NCO, Strategic Armaments Command, how may I help you, sir or ma'am?"

"Master Sergeant, Sergeant Williamson, Base Security. Infected numbers have dropped enough we've staged a breakout. We are in the process of ensuring top-side security. What is your status if I may ask, Master Sergeant?"

"Nominal," Doehler said. "Uninfected so until we can get some vaccine we're locked down."

"Roger," Williamson said. "Orders?"

"Survive and clear," Doehler said. "Look, don't try to maintain that position all night. Have someone there tomorrow at zero nine hundred hours if security situation warrants. I'll get someone to brief you then. And congratulations on your breakout, Sergeant. Really good news."

"Can I get a quick status update, Master Sergeant?"

"Broadly, the whole world was shut down by the infected," Doehler said. "There are groups getting organized. Main force, currently, is LantFleet and primarily Wolf Squadron. Long story. There are also civilian groups ground-side organizing, mostly in northern zones, but there has been no broad movement. Most are waiting for the spring to start moving beyond local areas. Do you have sufficient supplies for the time being?"

"Now that we've gotten out of the warehouse," Williamson said. "We've accessed another. We were getting short."

"Just hang in there, Sergeant," Doehler said. "And get someone back to the phone at zero nine hundred. Call us. I'll have someone more senior available to brief you and give you any orders."

"Roger," Williamson said.

"Hole, out," Doehler said, then hung up the phone.

“Huh,” Doehler said, making a note in his log. “That’s a hell of a thing... Must be cold as witch’s tit topside...”

* * *

“Not as pretty as the Caribbean,” Faith said, looking at the low, scrubby shoreline of the river entrance. “Better than fucking London, though.”

February in Jacksonville was significantly colder than in Guantanamo. While not a patch on London, there was a biting north wind under an iron gray sky. It reminded Faith a lot of when they left Virginia so many months before.

They’d taken up a position on the side of the bridge of the *Grace Tan* to observe their new objective. Neither was particularly impressed.

“Not much,” Sophia said, gesturing.

The Naval Station was just inside the harbor mouth. They could see the masts of a few Navy ships, probably frigates, tied alongside. What was immediately apparent, though, was that the fuel storage bunkers had burned to the ground. The fire had also consumed what looked like a trailer parked right at shoreline.

“Survivors,” Faith said, looking through binoculars.

“Where?” Sophia asked.

“Big warehouse in by the docking areas,” Faith said. “Think that’s the same building. See the top?”

“Got it,” Sophia said. “Well, that’s a target, then. That’s a stores warehouse for the squadron that was based here.”

“And more fuel tanks,” Faith said, pointing west. “Amazingly not burned.”

“That’s the aviation fuel,” Sophia said. “It’ll need to be re-refined but good to see. The airfield is over there.”

“I can figure out where stuff is on a map at this point, Sis,” Faith said. “So seems like you’re good for av-fuel. As long as we can clear this sucker and hold it.”

“*Ensign Smith to ready room,*” the tannoy blared. “*Ensign Smith to ready room.*”

“And so much for sightseeing,” Sophia said. “See you later.”

“Try to keep it in the air, Sis,” Faith said, still looking through the binos.

* * *

“Lookouts detected some survivors on a building in the base area,” Captain Wilkes said, putting on Nomex gloves. “Time to rig up.”

“Yes, sir,” Sophia said. She’d started training in helo operations in England since Dr. Shelley had the vaccine production well in hand. Actually, she’d started on the trip over when she borrowed one of the captain’s flight manuals as something to read on the voyage. Then in England she’d taken some very quickie tests and acted as a copilot, switching between the three “trained” pilots. In two weeks of clearance over burned-out London she’d gotten eighty hours of “copilot” time, then soloed. They left the Seahawk in London and brought back only the Super Stallion. On the trip back, she’d continued to fly, including dropping in some SAR and salvage crews on ships in the Atlantic. She was still a little unsure in winds like today, but she could manage to keep the bird in the air most of the time. “How did anyone told the rest of the crew, sir?”

They had one Marine, Sergeant Christopher L. “Smitty” Smith, who was a qualified Aviator Crewman. Oddly enough, he was considered more useful for his proven clearance skills than flying around in the back of a helicopter. Especially given some of the missions after the London Research

Institute battle. Much of those hadn't been just "search and rescue," but "combat search and rescue." Then there were the two liner clearances the Marines and Gurkhas had performed. And, of course, Faith had gotten her titties in a wad about losing "her" Marines. Smitty was a grunt for the foreseeable future.

Shortly after returning from London, they'd picked up a medically retired Air Force flight engineer, what the rest of the services called a "crew chief." His name was Eric "EZ" Ezell, and he was a veteran of the storied 20th Special Operations Squadron, which had flown the MH-53J/M. General consensus was that he was a godsend. The Super Stallion needed a flight engineer to do the kinds of missions they were doing, and EZ was fully trained, albeit on the Air Force version.

"EZ's got them at the bird already," Captain Wilkes said, putting on his bail-out harness. Almost as soon as he'd arrived, EZ had taken on the task of training up their inexperienced back-end crew. As a flight engineer, he'd explained, he had one of two jobs. He'd either sit in "the seat" behind the pilot and monitor the aircraft's systems and run the crew, or he'd be in the right door, running the hoist and generally, manning a mini-gun. Therefore, he was in the best position to teach their baby gunners the jobs. Though he was diplomatic about it, it was clear that in his world, the flight engineer ran the show, second only to the aircraft commander. It wasn't quite the way that the Navy and Marine Corps had operated, but no one could deny that EZ was getting results with the gunners, and so Wilkes let him do his thing.

Sophia reached for her own survival harness, letting out a mental sigh. She was of two minds about the survival gear. If they survived at all, it would be useful. It included, among other things, a lifting harness so they could be airlifted out.

But they were flying over zombie infested territory. Their survival if they went down was measured in how fast how many of the infected humans could close on them. Then they'd be eaten.

And since they were the *only* qualified helo pilots around, being airlifted out was currently a moot point.

She'd never even mentioned those thoughts to Captain Wilkes, though.

She was putting *her* faith in her 1911 if they went down. She squirted CLP into the action and worked it several times before holstering it on her chest.

"I'd say you carry an insane number of magazines for that," Captain Wilkes said. "But probably not."

"If we ever go down, there's going to be no such thing as 'too much ammo,' sir," Sophia said. "I'm still figuring out where to rack two Saigas in the bird."

"Ask EZ," Wilkes said. "I'm sure his pilots at the 20th did something similar with their M-4. And anyway, we won't be feet dry for long this time. Just a quick hop."

"I saw the survivors when I was up on deck, sir," Sophia said, grabbing her helmet. "Agreed it's a short hop."

"I'll still be checking your pre-flight," Wilkes said. "You can die on a take-off, especially off of this monstrosity."

* * *

The helo platform on the *Grace Tan* was just about the highest point on the ship, sitting incongruously above and forward of the bridge. The only higher points were the radio and radar masts. Just walking out onto it required a fundamental lack of fear of heights, and since you could only approach from the bow, taking off and landing were interesting, especially when the ship was moving.

While the task force had been on the London mission, the M/V *Boadicea* had been modified to support helicopter operations. A portion of the aft sun deck and marquee deck had been cut away. The

pool had been removed and a large helo platform had been mounted at the bridge deck level. It would have made a better spot as a primary platform for the helo, as it was way less nerve-wracking to climb out on, but the *Grace Tan* was where all the mechanical support was located.

Sophia couldn't deny, however, that the view from the *Grace Tan*'s helo deck was spectacular. She could clearly see the skyscrapers of Jacksonville in the distance as well as their objective, Blount Island. And their companion craft. The *Grace* was preceded by three divisions of small craft, fishing trawlers converted into gunboats and yachts that had once seemed large to her, as well as the *US Alexandria*, a nuclear attack submarine, which had, carefully, checked the channel using both state-of-the-art sonar and small boats using old-fashioned hand-lines. It was immediately in front of the large oil platform supply ship, guiding it into its anchorage. The ship was followed by two tugboats to make sure it could get into the right spots. Behind the tugs was the cruise liner *M/V Boadicea*, brought along in the hopes that they would find enough survivors to make it worthwhile. In all it was about half the "throw-weight" of the entire "Atlantic Fleet." At least if you didn't count the subs, which she was still getting used to.

She did the preflight slowly, and with great care, conscious of the watchful eyes of both Captain Wilkes and EZ. The flight engineer had already checked everything she looked at, of course. His own training demanded it. But she needed to know the aircraft systems for herself, and neither she nor Wilkes was willing to dispense with the ritual of "seeing for themselves." The survivors would be fine for the time being. They'd survived this long, they could wait another ten minutes, she thought.

She glanced over at the flag they used as a primary wind indicator. It whipped from right to left, indicating gusty and variable winds. That was another thing. She was not looking forward to trying to take off in this wind while the ship was moving. In fact, she'd "protest" if it was suggested. The aircraft was longer than any of the boats she'd captained and damn near heavier. A nice stable platform for take-off and landing that wasn't stuck out in a constant stream of dirty, turbulent air was high on her list of birthday wishes.

"Some day, I might actually be able to fly one of these things off of a ship that's designed for it," Sophia said as she completed the pre-flight in the cockpit.

"Well, think of this as good training," Captain Wilkes said. "Although, I'm taking this take-off and landing."

"Please," Sophia said. "I'm worried about the winds, sir."

"Did worse in England," Wilkes said, shrugging. "Finished?"

"Yes, sir," Sophia said, keying the intercom. "Crew, you up? Port?"

Following tradition, and because it made sense to minimize intercom chatter, the aircrews used the shortest, clearest, callsigns internally. Sophia's normal handle of "Seawolf" had been cropped to "Wolf." Captain Wilkes's callsign was "Tang" for no reasons he was willing to admit. In the case of the rest of the crew, they answered with either their position or their personal callsign, though EZ tended to insist on the former.

"Port ready to roll, Wolf," Olga said from the rear. "But I'm sort of disappointed we're not arming up. There are zombies to shoot."

"Not on this mission, Legs," Captain Wilkes replied. "Just hoisting ops."

"Starboard, you up?" Sophia said.

"Ready to go, Wolf," Gunner Apprentice Leo Yu replied. He generally handled the hoist while Olga rode the cable down. A trained person was required on the ground to hook the survivors to the hoist or handle a "basket" if they needed that support. Generally, that would also be a specialist, since there were also "issues" with hovering close to the ground. But they just were still that short of personnel.

“Tail?”

“Tail’s up, Wolf,” Anna “Wands” Holmes said. The British once-child-star of the Wizard Wars movies had been picked up on St. Barts where she’d been participating in the *Celebrity Survivor: St. Barts* reality show. She’d decided immediately that she was firing her agent as soon as she got done with the truly inane show. It wasn’t like she’d needed the coverage, unlike the rest of the celebutants and “famous for being famous” women on the show.

Then it had turned to *Celebrity Survivor: Zombie Apocalypse Shit Just Got Real* and dear, sweet thoughtful Anna had turned out to be the only one in the storage compartment with the guts to strangle the members who’d “turned.”

After which, she found it much easier to hang out with people who understood what it meant to take a human life: notably Sophia and her even more violent Faith.

“Engineer,” Sophia said.

“FE is Set and Checked,” EZ replied, mild disapproval in his tone. He sat in his seat and had his plastic sleeved checklist open in his hands. A quick look around the cabin to the three crewmembers reminded them that checklists had proper responses, and they were to be used appropriately. “Starting Engines Checklist when you’re ready, Pilot.”

They’d briefly considered changing EZ’s callsign to “Moshe” after the one-eyed Israeli general Moshe Dayan. EZ had been medically retired after a “green on blue” incident in Afghanistan where the Afghan interpreter on his aircraft had “accidentally” shot him in the back of the head, blowing out his right eye.

While having a flight engineer with two working eyeballs would have been great, in a zombie apocalypse, having a *trained* flight engineer was something to cry happy tears over. However many eyes he might have. And sitting in the seat didn’t require the same binocular vision that manning a weapon did. He mostly had to keep an eye on the instruments and run checklists, which he did just fine with one.

“We appear to be up,” Sophia said, holding up two hands with crossed fingers.

It was only after she’d started training on one of the most complex, largest, and most difficult to fly helicopters in the world that anyone had mentioned it also had the record for most accidents per hour of flight.

“God spare us this day from wayward mechanics,” Captain Wilkes said, bowing his head and clasping his hands. “As well as the vagaries of airflow dynamics. Amen.”

“Amen,” Sophia said as the captain hit the start button.

“Go with checklist,” Wilkes said. EZ stepped him through the start sequence, and as Wilkes hit the ignition button, the three massive turbines whined to life. “So far so good,” the captain said. “Thank you, God.”

* * *

“Gunner First Class Olga Zelenova, sir,” Olga shouted over the beat of the rotor wash. She threw a half salute to the tip of her smoked helmet visor as her feet touched down. “U.S. Navy at your service!”

“We thought you were just going to pass us by, there, Gunner,” the Navy lieutenant commander waiting for her said. He stood back and made no move to grab the cable as she unclipped from his harness. As soon as she was unclipped, Yu began to retract the cable in order to clear the line.

“We were headed up to anchorage, sir,” Olga shouted. The group on the roof looked to be about half Navy and half civilian. A couple of the women were carrying newborns, and most of the rest were pregnant. “We’ll send up the people in the basket, first. Then those who can use the harness.”

“Roger,” the lieutenant commander said.

~~When the basket was down, he helped get one of the pregnant women into it and strap her down.~~

“You seem familiar with this, sir,” Olga said, giving the three tugs on the cable that signaled Y to begin hoisting the basket up.

“I’ve been in the Navy a few years, Gunner,” the commander said. “Lieutenant Commander Lloyd Wiebe, by the way.”

“My training consisted of ‘Here’s how you hook up a harness. Here’s how you run the hoist. Here’s how you hook up a basket. Good luck, hope you survive,’” Olga said, chuckling. She stepped out of the way of the swinging basket and let it touch the ground and ground out before pulling it over and waving the next woman in. “I was a model before the Plague. Long story. Sorry, long story, sir. Still not totally up on that.”

“I’d wondered about the civilian ship,” the commander said, frowning. “Is this U.S. Navy?”

“Sort of,” Olga said. “And yes, sir. Controlling legal authority and all that. But it’s about handling a civilian and it’s been pick-up ball the whole time. You’ll get the full story later, sir. Right now, next customer...”

* * *

“Kind of bouncing around, there,” Wiebe said, looking at the slack cable dancing on the ground as they hooked up the first harness lift.

“You can tell when Sophia’s on the controls,” Olga replied, tugging on the cable above the slack. The slack came out and the survivor’s feet came off the ground relatively smoothly. “Sorry, sir, that would be Ensign Smith. She’s still learning. And Captain Wilkes was a Seacobra pilot from the *Iwo*. We use whoever and whatever we find, sir. Best anyone can do these days.”

“Well, as long as we’re getting the job done,” Wiebe said.

“Just a matter of finding the people to get it done,” Olga said, shrugging. “Only a few thousand of us, still. And we just sent a bunch to the Pacific.”

“What is the mission?” Wiebe asked. “Besides general rescue? Or is that it?”

“Right now, get Blount Island up and going,” Olga said. “As a support base on the mainland. Then do clearance and rescue ops on this base. We’re really hurting for helo personnel so we’re hoping to find some here. We’re hoping to be able to get *this* base cleared and under control. We’ll see if that’s possible. After that, up to LantFleet. And you’ll get the story of who LantFleet is and when you get to the boat, sir. This isn’t the pre-Plague Navy...”

#

The gigantic helicopter was capable of lifting all the survivors on the rooftop. It just took awhile. Finally, the last survivor, Commander Wiebe, was loaded and Olga followed.

“All the chicks are in the nest,” Yu said over the intercom.

“Roger,” Captain Wilkes said. “Copilot’s controls. Return to the *Boadicea*.”

“Roger,” Shophia said as she wrapped her hands around the cyclic and collective. At a point she nudged on her shoulder from the direction of the engineer’s seat, she repeated the call. “Copilot’s controls.”

“Co’s controls,” Wilkes reconfirmed, amusement in his tone.

Sophia eased forward on the cyclic, bringing the aircraft’s nose down, and simultaneously added to the collective, which resulted in a powered forward climb. You could, technically, go straight up if you had to do so. But with this amount of weight on board, there was a real possibility of asking more from the aircraft than it was able to give. When power demand exceeded power available, the biplane *would* descend, and that could be catastrophic. That was just one of the reasons why taking off from

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