

Prologue

“I’m not here to hurt you!” Allen tried to keep the hunger out of his voice. He held up the bag of pills, shook it noisily. “I want to help!”

Allen could see the small cluster of bedraggled men on deck; he could even see the ones with scoped rifles that thought they were hiding. He could smell them all as well, but he did his best to ignore that. There was one woman in the cluster, and he could smell her most distinctly. She smelled delicious; not in a sexual sense, but in a purely cannibalistic way. One of the men on deck gave a signal, and three shots rang out. A bullet ricocheted off the water behind Allen’s small rowboat with a splash. Another ripped through his shoulder; at the same time, the third punctured the boat. The force of the blow threw him backward to the floorboards.

Cold salty water splashed in his face. Allen twisted sideways, still lying down, and tried to shove a rag in the hole. Water trickled in around it, streaming in every direction from the puncture. When he didn’t get up right away, a collective cry rose from the little ship.

“Idiots,” he grumbled under his breath. “You can’t kill a howler with bullets.” He looked down at his shoulder; there was no wound, no scar, no hint that a bullet had passed through it moments earlier. Allen smiled. Being a zombie had its perks.

Allen sat up quickly and grabbed at the oars. Their voices died, and three more reports sounded. Two bullets ripped through the boat, each leaving two holes behind. One started squirting water right away; the other three would follow soon after. It appeared that every man on deck had a firearm. They'd had them holstered or shouldered as he approached; now they raised them and began firing. He couldn't see the woman anymore.

Rowing with all his might, Allen could feel the little vessel dip lower in the water. His feet were getting wet, and one more of the holes had started to stream water into the sizable puddle that had already collected. The others spurted seawater at him whenever a wave hit the side of the boat. A barrage of bullets came his way as he pushed and pulled at the oars. Most of them rained into the sea all around him, but more than one struck him soundly in the face or the ribs. Tugging on the oars was barely moving him at all, and the little boat was looking more like a little bathtub with each passing moment. The bag was floating, and Allen snatched it and tied it to his belt. More holes let in more water, and a bullet struck the clamp holding one of the oars.

It sprung from his hand, swinging wildly past his reaching grasp.

Watching the oar float away slowly, Allen banged at the other clamp in an attempt to free the remaining paddle. His razor talons were too long for him to close his fingers into a proper fist, and they bit into his palms as he beat against the metal. The water was past his ankles now, and the boat was tipping forward precariously. Another bullet glanced off his heavy brow, and Allen was laid back once again. His head splashed into the cold water, and this time he stayed down.

A few more shots sounded, and one bullet zinged past

what used to be his nose; then all was quiet. The water sent cold prickling tingles through his brain and body, and Allen took a nice deep breath as water lapped at his fleshless face. For a full minute he lay still, letting the boat sink beneath the surface and twist with the drifting current. He swam deeper, until the pressure pounded at his iron skull and the sunlight became a distant glow. Then he swam for the ship, long powerful strokes that pulled him rapidly closer.

There had never been any reason to wonder if he could survive long underwater. As he stroked toward the dark shadow on the surface above him, Allen realized that he didn't need to hold his breath. Three little slits opened up at the base of his throat, and he breathed in easily through the gills. For a moment he mused that Mother Nature had designed zombies better than people; then he realized it was so they could eat those that fled by sea, and he put his mind elsewhere. The last person he wanted to think about, now or ever again, was Mother Nature.

Once he was directly under the vessel, Allen let himself drift upward. He grasped the underside of the boat as silently as possible, sinking his claws into the wood just enough to hold him there without effort. There was no need to worry about sharks, or other underwater predators or scavengers; nature knew death when it smelled it, and they all kept far away. In a little while it would be dark, and he would board the ship and do what he could to make friends. Allen ignored the gnawing in his gut that told him that his best bet was to eat some of them.

That was just the hunger talking.

Chapter 1



“We killed that thing,” Jack grumbled.

“I think you’re wrong,” Lauren said quietly, but firmly. “First of all, ‘it’ wasn’t an ‘it’; ‘it’ was a ‘he’. Second, I don’t think you killed him.”

“Based on what?” Jack hissed.

Lauren shrugged. “Based on the fact that you weren’t using cannons, or high-powered rifles. Even then, you have to shoot them in the eye exactly the right way. I’m not saying you’re bad shots, or that you didn’t hit him. I’m saying guns don’t kill howlers.”

“Bullshit!” Jack spat. “I saw it go down. It wasn’t moving.”

He got right up in her face, and put his hand on the butt of his revolver. Lauren let her hand hover over her holster, reminding him of the two times she had already outdrawn him. Inwardly she sighed. Jack had been nothing but trouble since she had picked him up three days ago.

“Back off,” she warned. “If you don’t like the way I run my ship, you are free to leave any time.”

“Your ship!” he retorted. “Nothing belongs to anyone anymore. What makes this your ship?”

“The organization that I belong to made me captain,” she said. “They sent me out to rescue anyone I could find. They also gave me the authority to handle any dangerous or violent refugees in any manner I see fit. That means I can

kill you if I want, or put you in one of the cells below deck until all the others are filled with rambler and howlers.”

“Zombies?” Jack looked around for other frowning faces. “You want to pick up zombies?”

“I have gone over all of this with you before.”

“I was dehydrated, hungry,” Jack said. “I would have agreed to anything. Are you really saying there’s no place for a democracy here? Your boat, your rules? What if I want to be the captain?”

“Well, first you’ll have to kill me, or put me in a cell,” Lauren stated calmly. “Then you would have to figure out how to override the security measures that prevent anyone but me from entering the captain’s cabin or accessing the ship’s control panels. You would need my live fingerprints and retinas, as well as all of my passwords.”

Lauren looked him up and down, and smiled.

“I don’t think you have the ability to complete any of those tasks, or get any of those things,” she said lightly, “but I am kind of hoping that you try.”

“Pretty brave behind your fancy quickdraw,” he sneered.

Slowly, Lauren unbuckled her belt. The pistol fell to the floor.

She spread her hands. “And now?”

Jack went for his gun, and she went for his throat. A short blade appeared in her hand as she moved, and all three inches disappeared into his throat four times in the space of a breath. Jack fell to the floor, his eyes open and lifeless, and lay there unmoving. His pistol was still holstered at his hip.

Lauren knelt and retrieved her firearm. The knife had disappeared.

“Any other questions?” she asked, letting her eyes roam the room.

“Why didn’t you shoot at the zombie?”

“I don’t think he was a hostile,” she said. “I know for

sure that the shooting began before we knew for sure. That will not happen again. The next person who draws their firearm or shoots anyone will answer to me.”

Lauren looked down at what used to be Jack. She let a long moment pass before she spoke again, to give everyone a chance to see what it meant to answer to her.

“Someone cut off his head, and throw it and his body overboard,” she said. “We will be looking for friendlies, howlers and rambler and people. We will not take aggressive action unless there is a clear need, and I give a clear command. Anyone willing to help me on this mission will be greatly appreciated. Anyone who would stand in my way, or disagree with how I captain this ship, can stick to their quarters or stay out of the way. I will give you food and drinking water, but I will not tolerate any form of insubordination. Is that understood?”

Most of them murmured under their breaths, or nodded. One man stepped forward. “I second that, Captain. You’ll get only support from me. Anyone who wants to challenge this brave badass young lady, come to me first. I’ll see to it that you see the light, one way or another.”

He towered over her, which didn’t intimidate Lauren in the least. She knew that big guys who don’t know how to handle themselves are as likely to get tangled up in their own long limbs as short fellows like Jack are to get caught up in their own egos. Studying him, she knew he was not one to get tangled up in himself. Lauren couldn’t tell what style of fighting he had trained in, but some discipline had soaked into his every movement. To an ordinary bystander, he may have looked like a pretty open and relaxed guy. He was armed, but everyone was armed these days; often a collection of weapons strapped to a modern man or woman spoke more of superior raiding skills than any actual fighting ability. Lauren suspected every gun and

blade in evidence on his body had belonged to him long before the fall.

She nodded her gratitude to him, and her respect. "I'm Lauren."

"I know," he nodded in return. "I'm Nick, Captain, and I am at your service. If you would step back a bit, I'll take care of this mess for you."

Nick unsheathed one of the long twin blades at his back. Lauren stepped back, along with the others. Her eyes went wide as the blade flashed. Three sudden strikes, and Jack's head rolled at her feet. Nick bent and picked the body up. He nodded at the head, and then at the cluster of men.

"Somebody grab that, and follow me," he said.

Two of them moved. One grabbed Jack's head by the hair, and they both trailed Nick above deck.

"Look over the side when you toss the body," she called out after them. "See if that howler is lurking nearby."

"Yes, Captain," Nick's voice drifted back to her. "Good idea."

They were back a few minutes later, and it was much less tense in the cabin with the body gone. The remaining blood had mostly soaked into the floorboards.

"No sign of him, Captain," Nick reported.

"Thank you," she responded. "Now that you're back, it might be a good time to reiterate what I told each of you when you came aboard. We will fill this vessel with friendlies, and then we will return together to safety. Then we can go back; but not until then."

"Back where?" someone asked. She couldn't remember his name. "Who exactly do you work for?"

"I don't work for anyone," Lauren answered. "The organization I belong to does not have a name. Neither does the place we are going. It was protected from the pulse, and the outbreak. It is a safe place, and we have plenty

of room and food for everyone that remains. All that are willing to live without violence are welcome to stay with us as long as is necessary. It is an underground city capable of supporting several thousand people. It was built long ago by the organization I belong to, and the few hundred of us that live there are dedicated to its purpose and its upkeep.”

Chapter 2



Christina watched the pile of bodies burn, saw the stinky tendril of smoke drift to the sky. She turned to look at the fresh turned soil not far from where the bodies burned, and her heart twisted in grief.

Everything had been fine until someone had died. They had all watched news reports, but the floating island had not been touched by the zombie outbreak. Then a fisherman had got caught in his own net and drowned. Death had barely closed his eyes when hunger opened them, and he had infected three others before the situation had gotten under control. They had nowhere to house prisoners, and no way to contain their hunger. As with everything on the island, it had been put to a vote.

She watched the bodies burn. It was both a relief and a horror. They had been her friends, her peers. Christina had respected every one of them enough to invite them to the drifting paradise, and they had all contributed more than their fair share. Now they were dead, twisted beheaded versions of the brilliance they once were dripping to featureless flesh in the flames. For all the times she had shared credit for her own great work, Christina felt fully to blame for their deaths.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Jason said quietly. They didn’t look at each other. He stood at her side, staring into the flames, sharing in her sublime grief. The crackling of

the fire was loud, and they were close enough to smell the stench. She had heard him over the noise of the burn and the turmoil of her thoughts, and he knew it. Even if she hadn't, she would have heard his next words.

"You're wrong," he murmured. "This is not your fault. You know what is your fault? The rest of us still being alive. Do you not see what this all means? You may have saved humanity with this island. You at least gave a few hundred of its members a fighting chance. Take responsibility for that, if you're going to take responsibility for something. Or take responsibility for me being happy and in love like I never thought possible. But not this. We voted on this. We share responsibility for this."

"We need to find some way to contain these things," she said quietly. "We need to get ahold of some of those pills. This can't happen again."

Christina felt his hand reach out to take hers. Her eyes drifted to the freshly turned pile of dirt again.

"I miss Penny," she said, even more quietly. It didn't matter. Jason didn't have to hear; he knew her thoughts.

"She was the soul of the island," she said. A tear drifted unnoticed down her cheek. "Since she died..."

"You're the soul of this island," Jason said, correcting her lovingly once more. "You keep everyone fueled with your unfailing positivity and your inexhaustible brilliance. We all need you as much as you need us."

He squeezed her hand. "Some of us more than others."

Christina nodded, turned at last to look at something other than flames or sorrow. She met every pair of eyes with her own before she raised her voice.

"This won't happen again," she said. "If another one of us falls victim to this outbreak, I want to save that member of our family. That means we need to build containment cells, and find a source for the cure. I need help. Any ideas?"