



# The Queen

**ERIC S. BROWN**

**"As always, Eric S. Brown has delivered a gripping zombie tale wrapped up in human drama. Zombie fans shouldn't miss this one!"**

**-Jacob Kier, Permuted Press**

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by Eric S. Brown

**Naked Snake Press**

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**High Praise for Eric S. Brown:**

Scott Nicholson, Author of *The Manor*

*"Eric S. Brown delivers his grim worldview like a razor-fisted punch to the gut. Brown explores the darkness within us all and leaves you shivering with dread. The pages scream with pain and energy. Brown is well on his way to making a name for himself in dark fiction."*

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*"Zombie fans looking for tight short horror fiction, look no further. Eric S. Brown is a master of the sucker punch, a dark dreamer with a promising future."*

**J.W. Schnarr, Hugo Horror Newsletter**

Brown has a gift for narration, and his ability to paint both strange landscapes of alien worlds and common, everyday places alike put him at the top of his game."

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## **Introduction**

I grant that some of you already know what to expect from an Eric S. Brown story. It is, after all, the reason you purchased this book. For lucky newcomers, *The Queen* is a fine introduction to this author's work and the beginning of a pulse-grinding addiction to Eric S. Brown's shadowy and fertile imagination.

From the start, I will tell you, I hate zombies. They terrify me. It is the stuff of nightmares, the oldest and most heinous of nightmares, to encounter a trusted loved one: friend, wife, husband child or mere stranger, only to find that person gone, vacated from the human body and what has moved in is unspeakably evil, intent on passing on the disease so that you are the next to fall under the puppeteer's dance.

I believe the idea of zombies especially frightening when our world harbors its own forms of zombiism. Alzheimer's Disease, Senility, Insomnia and Insanity are just a few inflictions that rob us of who we are. The zombie is a metaphor for all that we fear to lose of ourselves whether it be memories or free-will. While reading a well-written zombie tale, we cringe, holding one eye closed while we squint at the text with the other, unable to fully look away from what mesmerizes us as it freezes our blood.

One can hardly explore the idea without shuddering with dread. The danger of losing some portion of ourselves is real. Everyday we fight to retain who we are, ethically, morally, physically and mentally, so that within our literature the emotional envelope must be pushed to the limit of what we

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can bear. And like the masters of the craft, Eric S. Brown goes beyond the simple probe; he dissects and studies and, like a modern day Dr. Frankenstein, brings it to life.

That is what makes the zombie story so frightfully authentic. Some authors just make it more authentic than others. The evidence is in your hands.

Enjoy.

—Susanne S. Brydenbaugh

October 2005

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1

The air stank of filth and human waste. The summer heat heightened the smell but Scott had long grown accustomed to the stench. Sweat glistened on his sun burnt, bare chest and shoulders. He reached up running his fingers through his short brown hair. They came away wet and covered in grime. He couldn't remember for the life of him when he'd last been allowed to bathe. There was a large tube of water in the center of the pen where the prisoners were kept. Scott eyed it not yet so thirsty that he was willing to expose himself to the germs and bacteria it contained.

Eleven other men shared the small fenced in pen with him. Most of them sat around lost in their own thoughts like he was. Buck and Hank played cards with a tattered deck they'd been able to bribe the guards for. Hank had traded a section of the flesh from his left thigh in order to get it. The bandage he wore was yellowed and Scott guessed that soon Hank would succumb to infection from the wound and die. Scott had seen a lot of men die over the three weeks he'd been trapped here. The guards didn't seem to care, as long as they had one or two healthy males it would be enough for their purposes.

The women that had been taken alive were treated much better than the men. Scott had never been inside their actual quarters but he knew that it was inside the compound of the breeding center and out of the sun. It had plumbing, and was kept clean and free of disease. Unlike the pig slop the men



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were fed, the women also were given real food. It all made sense in a sick kind of way. The men were disposable in a fashion where as the dead guards needed the women to make babies. Each woman could give birth to numerous more "cattle" for the pens and the dead's food supply where as you only needed one man to knock them all up.

Of all the men in the pen with Scott only David stood at the fence, peering through it at the hills beyond the compound. He was a newcomer to the breeding center and still hoped that someone would come to rescue them. He dreamed of escape. It was a dangerous thing. There was no way out other than death, Scott knew, it was just a question of how one died and ended up on the other side of the fence.

If someone died in the pen while the guards weren't around, Scott and the other prisoners made damn sure they didn't get back up even if it meant repeatedly bashing the corpse's head with a stone until they were covered in blood. The newly risen dead weren't always as evolved as the guards and often went on a feeding frenzy among the men. Stopping that from happening was worth the lashing the person who did it received. All the men took turns so that no one person was overly punished or outright put to death for the deed. It was Scott's turn now and he figured it would be Hank's skull he was bashing open when the time came.

The guards mostly stayed inside the compound proper. Whatever force had raised them from the dead also greatly reduced their rate of decay but not to the point where it stopped it. Being outside in the ninety-degree plus heat of the summer was unhealthy for them in the long run. Scott

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watched as "Hole in his neck" peeked out the compound door for the hourly check of the pen. The dead man had gotten his name from the way his throat was torn open and his rotting windpipe dangled out of it. "Hole in his neck" was one of the few guards who couldn't still speak but he held a high rank among the dead and was easy enough to get along with along if you stayed out of his way and didn't cause trouble in the pen. The dead man looked over the pen, his gaze lingering only for a moment on David who still stood at the fence obviously discontent with the way things were, then he popped back inside closing the door to the air-conditioned compound behind him.

Tired, Scott pushed himself to his feet, wiping his hands on what was left of the pair of tattered black jeans he wore, and headed over to where David stood. David didn't notice his approach.

"You've got to stop doing this," Scott warned.

David jumped at the sound of his voice. His bloodshot eyes stared at Scott in shock. "Doing what?"

"Hoping," Scott answered with a single word. Then he added, "If you don't, they'll likely have you for dinner soon. It makes them nervous when one of us shows any bit of spirit left. Just be thankful you're not one of them already and get over it."

David started to respond but Scott had already turned his back to the newcomer to the pen and was headed towards his spot to sit for a while longer and wait on the cool of the night.

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The dead were getting closer. Riley ducked farther down in the brush on the hill above the gravel road below. Two jeeps, flanked by a number of creatures on foot, crept their way up the mountainside. The whole scene was very troubling to Riley. Just how desperate were the dead getting for food if they were sending hunting parties this far out and did it mean that all the cities had fallen at last? The hunting party seemed to be sticking to the road so far and he doubted that they would stray into the woods as yet but his cabin was only a few miles north of the road. Their presence here put him on edge. He counted eight of the things altogether counting the drivers, all heavily armed. There were simply too many of them for him to face alone and even if he somehow miraculously took them all out more would come in search of their brethren. They would surely find his place then and likely in even greater numbers. Riley kept still and waited on them to pass by. When they were well out of earshot, he began to make his way quietly back the way he'd come.

Little Brandon was playing in the tall grass of the cabin's lawn as Riley reached home and emerged from the trees. Brandon's face lit up at the sight of his father. He dropped the stick he'd been hacking at the wild flowers with and ran towards Riley with his tiny arms open. Despite his worries, Riley couldn't help but smile as he swept Brandon up from the ground, clutching him tight to his chest.

"Where's Mom?" Riley asked cutting off his son's litany of questions about his scouting trip. Crestfallen, Brandon motioned towards the cabin while keeping one arm propped

on his father's wide shoulders. "She's getting ready to cook dinner."

Riley frowned and placed Brandon back on the ground doubling his pace for the cabin. The last thing they needed was a cloud of black smoke pouring out of the cabin's chimney today. The dead were too close by and might notice it.

Brandon followed as Riley walked up onto the porch and stuck his head inside the kitchen through the cabin's open front door. "Hi honey, I'm home," he called out trying not to let his concerns show in front of Brandon. Hannah looked up from the vegetables she was chopping to greet Riley with a smile that died on her lips as she saw the fear in his eyes. "It's time isn't it?" she asked.

Riley nodded. "We both knew this day would come sooner or later."

"How long do we have?" She said moving to Brandon's hand in her own.

"I don't know. An hour, a week, there's just no way to know. They may never find this place but they're close enough now for us to be better safe than sorry."

Hannah leaned down and kissed her child on his forehead. "Brandon, honey, would you please go play in your room for a few minutes? Mommy and Daddy need to talk, okay?"

As Brandon marched off deeper into the cabin, Hannah got back to her feet and turned to face Riley. "Where are we going to go?"

Riley shrugged his shoulders. He had no idea.

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It had been a tough decision but ultimately Riley had chosen not to take the truck. It was in great shape, perfect for off road travel, and there was enough fuel stored for it to fill up its tank twice out on the road. The problem with the truck was not the vehicle itself or its ability to function but rather the attention it would attract. The dead controlled the roads everywhere now and it was too risky to even use the truck out here in the isolated wilderness. It was better, Riley knew, to set out on foot. Their rate of travel would be slower and it would greatly lessen what they could carry with them but it would be far safer. On foot, they could stick to the trees, stay clear of the roads entirely, and they would be nowhere near as noticeable should they come across a group of the dead.

Hannah prepared them some rations and the family divided the load of food and water between themselves with even little Brandon carrying a canteen of his own. Riley also let Brandon carry a hunting knife though Hannah had protested it. The knife would be of no use against the dead as Brandon didn't have the strength or the skill to drive it into someone's skull but it made the boy feel safer and that was what mattered to Riley.

Hannah carried an old-fashioned .30-.06 rifle that once belonged to her father and a .38 revolver strapped to her hip. Riley, himself, wore two holstered .45 automatics, an M-16 he'd bought illegally before the world fell apart, and numerous spare clips for all three weapons in his backpack.

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Leaving this place wasn't easy for any of them. They'd been up here alone for the full three months which had passed since the dead first began to rise. In a lot of ways, it'd felt more like home than the house they'd lived in for years and left behind when they'd fled for the high country.

Riley watched a tear slide down Hannah's cheek as she looked back at the cabin behind them as they made their way into the woods. It cut into his heart like a blade. They still had no idea of where they were headed. There was no logical place to head for so Riley and Hannah had merely decided to set out east for the coast and hope for the best. If nothing else, maybe Brandon could see the ocean once before the dead found them and they all died. Riley swore to himself the dead would never take his family alive even if he had to kill them himself.

4

It was feeding time in the pen. The sun had long sunk beneath the surrounding mountains. Two of the dead guards emerged from within the compound carrying a large bucket filled with slop that had the consistency of runny cream corn. With the help of a third guard, the bucket was emptied over the fence onto the ground of the pen. The human prisoners dove onto it like hunger-maddened animals, scraping it up from the dirt with their bare hands. Scott and David were not among the others fighting for their share of the evening meal. David remained at the pen's far side staring at the roadway that led up into the breeding center. Scott sat Indian style on the ground with his arms across his legs; palms open facing

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up towards the star filled sky. His eyes were closed and his breathing slow and steady. Scott would find food later somehow, whether it was leftovers or by fighting with the flock at the morning meal. He doubted if David had any thoughts in his head about food and he didn't care. Let the newcomer starve if he wanted to. There were worse ways to die.

All that mattered to Scott at the moment was finding a shred of peace. Meditation could take him away from this place and the horrors it contained. Earlier in the day, he'd told David to stop hoping. That it was a lost cause. But now he wondered, was he himself not doing the same thing by leaving the pen if only in his mind? He sighed and opened his eyes. The guards were already headed back inside the breeding center and the frenzy among the men for the slop was dying down. Scott slowly got to his feet ignoring the taunts of his fellow inmates that he'd missed the meal and made his way to David once more.

This time, David saw him coming. Anger blazed in the young, blonde man's glance at Scott before he turned back to face the fence again. As Scott reached his side, David spoke, "How dare you tell me to stop hoping?" he whispered. "Hope is all that's left to any of us now."

Scott accepted the stinging words as if he deserved them. Scott nodded towards the road leading out of the compound. "What exactly is out there that you want so badly? There's no place left to go. The dead are everywhere. In here, we know we're not going to cut open and chewed on."

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"What's the point of being alive if you can't live?" David shot back.

"Hank and Buck, those two rednecks over there, would argue with you that we are living. They get fed, have their friendship, and once every couple of days they get to have the orgy of their wet dreams with the ladies the dead have locked up inside."

"But would you argue with me?" David pointed out.

"No," Scott answered, "No, I wouldn't."

"Then what are we going to do about that?" David grinned. Scott offered David his hand. "I'm Scott. Scott Burgess."

David took the offered hand and shook it. "You can call me David."

"I know," Scott laughed, "Well, David, it looks as if we have a lot to talk about."

5

Steven placed the half full bottle of whiskey atop his desk. It called to him as if reaching out for his very soul. All he wanted in the world was the feel its fiery embrace as the whiskey slid down his throat but he couldn't bring himself to open the bottle. Too many people were depending on him. He hadn't asked for this job but *The Queen* was his ship. She was all he ever loved in his life and when the time came he'd go down with her. He knew every inch of her like the back of his hand and yet she'd changed so much over the last months he barely recognized her. Once upon a time, she'd been a gleaming beauty of magnificent white hulls, a floating paradise, where dreams of love and adventure thrived. Now



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her hull was spotted with makeshift plates of armor and the scars of battle. Gun emplacements lined the length of main deck on all sides. Where once, she'd held hundreds of vacationers she contained a band of barely one hundred tired, frightened, and desperate refugees.

A knock sounded outside the open door of the captain's quarters and Steven noticed O'Neil standing outside in the hallway. O'Neil shifted uncomfortably. "Sorry to disturb you sir," he said in a strained voice, "but I have the completed inventory of our supplies that you asked for."

In one fluid motion, Steven swept the bottle off the top of his desk and placed it back in its drawer where it belonged. He motioned for O'Neil to take a seat across the desk from him. "And how do things look? From the report, I mean?"

O'Neil slumped into the offered chair. "Not as bad as we thought. The last dock we raided gave us enough fuel for another two weeks or more."

"And it only cost us the lives of six men," Steven added bitterly.

O'Neil continued with the report, "Our ammunition stock piles for small arms are holding up remarkably well and Luke assures me that the new torpedo tubes he set up on the forward hull will work if we need them. Our only real pressing concern is food. Even with the reduced number of passengers and crew onboard, with a rationing system in place, we'll be out again in less than a week. The priority of the last raid was fuel for *The Queen* so we didn't have the time to stock up like we needed."

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"They came crawling out of the woodwork," Steven chuckled.

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"The dead, Mr. O'Neil, regardless of where we put into port; they're always there, waiting. We never have enough time."

"Yes, sir," O'Neil agreed, "I don't like the thought of touching land again anytime soon."

Silence lingered in the room for a moment before O'Neil finally prompted, "Well, sir, what are we going to do?"

"Pray," Steven answered, "pray our little hearts out ... And while we're at it, bring me a map of the area we're in now. Going back ashore is really our only option isn't it, since the damn fish are just as dead as the rest of the world. Besides, you know that even if they weren't, we couldn't catch enough to feed everyone onboard this ship. It's just not possible with our limited equipment and resources."

O'Neil left in search of a map leaving Steven alone in the darkness of the room just as he'd been before.

6

There were no stars in the sky. Thick, dark clouds let loose what seemed a never-ending shower of rain. Brandon slept peacefully under the small tarp Riley had set up for him. Hannah rested against a tree drenched to the bone. Her long red hair clung heavily to her neck and shoulders. Riley leaned over and put his arm around her. To him, she was beautiful no matter what the circumstances.

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"How far do you think we made it today?" she whispered, trying not to wake Brandon.

"A pretty good distance despite the weather," he assured her. "We're safe here for the night I think."

Hannah's .30-.06 rested beside her, propped against the same tree. "Riley, do you think there's anyone else left?"

"Sure, honey. Sure. There has to be. If we've made it this long, it just makes sense somebody else, somewhere, has too."

"It's not fair," she muttered with a fresh wetness sliding down her cheeks. "Brandon doesn't deserve this. He should be in school or playing video games. Think of all the things we took for granted Riley, things that Brandon will never know except from our stories. If there are other people out there, we have to find them for his sake and start over somehow."

Riley listened to the rain as it bounced off the leaves of the trees around them. "Hannah," he said softly, "I'm sorry." "Sorry, Riley? It's not your fault that the dead woke up or that we're living through the end of the world. If it weren't for you, Brandon and I would be dead. I'm grateful for the time had in the cabin. How many other people even had a chance like that? To pretend things were going to be okay? Those months were like heaven. It's just ... It's just Brandon." She wept. She nestled her face into Riley's chest and sobbed hard against the muscles she found there. Riley's arms encircled her. "I swear Hannah, if there is a place to start again, we'll find it or die trying. We just have to hold it together for a while longer. Rain or no rain, we'll start moving again in the

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morning." Riley shut his eyes and thought only of his wife's body pressed against his until the dawn.

The clouds broke as the sun rose. Riley checked over their weapons to make sure the dampness hadn't damaged them as Hannah made a game of packing up and preparing to get on the move once more with Brandon. The three shared stale granola bars for a quick breakfast with water from their canteens then set out in the direction of the sun.

7

Scott didn't like David's plan. In fact, he loathed it, thinking it was insane. He had nothing better to offer in terms of ideas however so he went along with it. They'd carefully selected which guard to make their offer to and the chance to do it had arrived. The guards were out in full force today as it was time for the prisoners to be rounded up for a breeding session. "Hole in his neck" was in command flanked by six more of the dead. Each carried some type of automatic, military weapon should the prisoners get out of control. The gate to the pen was opened and the men led out of their fenced in area by his subordinates.

Scott having been a captive long for weeks knew how things worked. He gave "Hole in his neck" the sign that he wanted to make a trade. "Hole in his neck" studied Scott then motioned for his men to leave Scott behind for the two of them to talk. When the others were all outside of the pen, "Hole in his neck" stepped inside alone with Scott and waited for the human to make his offer. Scott could swear he saw the hunger burning in the dead man's eyes.

"Screw it," Scott mumbled, he hoped too quietly for "Hole in his neck" to hear. He cleared his throat and said, "David and I don't want to go inside today."

A look of utter confusion settled on "Hole in his neck's" features. A human male who did not want to get laid was beyond his understanding.

Scott saw the look and misread it. "David's the new guy. The one you just brought in."

"Hole in his neck" signed the question "Why?" Clearly he thought Scott had lost his mind and was toying with the thought of dispatching the human then and there. He needed more help on the inside tending to the women's needs anyway. A new dead body walking around would help with a lot of things with his duty roster.

Scott gritted his teeth steeling himself for what he was about to say. "Look. We're gay okay. We just want to be by ourselves for an hour to *breed* in our own way. Just this one time," he added hastily.

"Hole in his neck" smiled. A sick wet sound came from what was left of his windpipe as he tried to laugh. He shook his head "no" and grabbed Scott, shoving him towards the pen's gate.

"Wait!" Scott urged. "You haven't even heard what I'm offering in return."

"Hole in his neck" paused. It was not permitted to feed on the prisoners unless they broke the rules or offered non-crucial pieces of their meat freely. Scott had been anything but a normal prisoner and Scott could see that "Hole in his

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neck" enjoyed the way he was begging for such an unnatural and shameful thing for a human male to ask for.

"You could send of your people with us, to make sure we don't escape. I'm only asking for an hour."

The dead man gestured asking what he would get in return and indicating that it'd better be worth such an affront to the rules.

"My legs," Scott said firmly. "Both of them. All yours. I don't need them to breed and if I die from you taking them, you can stick me out here so you'll have a permanent watch dog over the others until I rot away to nothing from the heat."

"Hole in his neck" held up his fingers saying two guards would go with them, not one. Then he added in hand speech that this would be the only time, one way or another.

Scott breathed a sigh of relief as the commander of the watch went to fetch David and the guards who would take them to the woods. Maybe, just maybe, this was going to work after all, Scott thought.

8

Bullets sparked and pinged off the asphalt as Riley ran for cover. He half fell, half rolled behind the carcass of an abandoned truck. The spray of bullets followed him thudding into the metal of the truck's frame. Hannah and Brandon were nowhere to be seen. Riley had been cut off from them when the jeep full of dead soldiers appeared, catching him off guard. Riley cursed himself for leading his family here. No matter how safe it had seemed they should have kept to the

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trees, but the road itself was a mystery. There shouldn't have been a road here at all, not this far out in the country, much less a real one littered with the ruins of cars and trucks which had apparently been left here since the first days of the dead plague. Riley didn't have the faintest idea where it could lead to. The only things that should be up here were trees and dirt trails. He hadn't felt like they'd had the time to follow the road and maybe cut around it somehow and he was paying the price for that choice.

He heard the crack of Hannah's .30-.06 somewhere in the distance to his left. "Damn the woman!" he thought. If she and Brandon had reached the trees, they should've just kept going not stop and try to save him. Left with no alternative, he leaned around the end of the truck trying to see what was happening on the road. One of the dead stood several yards away, its attention and AK-47 now focused at the tree-line. Riley's military training took over and seized the chance the moment provided. His M-16 opened up sending a stream of rounds into the dead thing's chest which worked their way up its torso until with a wet popping sound the thing's rotting head burst like a melon sending brain matter spewing onto the road below its feet from the unrelenting gunfire. Its body spun, headless, and dropped. Riley was on his feet running towards it seeking a better vantage point before the corpse hit the ground. There were just three of things that he'd seen and he figured he could handle them as long as he knew Hannah and Brandon were safe. But that was the problem wasn't it?

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Riley felt fire tear its way into his shoulder as he was knocked from his footing by the impact. His rifle went skidding away from him as he tumbled. Out of the corner of his vision, he saw the dead man who'd fired the shot. The thing had its rifle lowered and was charging towards his fallen form with some kind of blade attached to the end of the weapon. Riley didn't move or make any attempt to dodge the attack. He waited to the final possible second and grabbed for the weapon as the thing tried to spear him with it.

Close combat with the dead was extremely dangerous. A bite, sometimes just a scratch from their nails, was enough to infect a person with the lethal virus or spirit or whatever it was that gave the dead life.

His move took the creature by surprise as he ripped the weapon from its hands and sent the creature sprawling onto the pavement beside him. It rolled at him, its hungry mouth open and hands clawing for his flesh. Riley was faster though. The thing never saw him draw the .45 automatic that blew it brains out the back of its head with a single shot.

"Hannah!" Riley screamed praying for an answer. Instead he heard the jeep the things had ridden in on roar to life. He turned to see it streaking away back the in the direction it had came with the last of the dead soldiers at its wheel. Otherwise, the road was silent. Blood strained the front of his shirt leaking from the wound on his shoulder but he didn't feel it. He bolted, his legs pounding beneath him, to where he'd heard the shot from Hannah's rifle moments before. He skidded to a halt as he reached the tree-line. Hannah was in the dirt kneeling over Brandon. Riley's heart felt like it



stopped beating inside of him as Hannah looked up at him with tears streaming down her cheeks and her hands wet with blood. A puddle of red was growing around Brandon's fragile form where it lay. Spots appeared in Riley's vision, which grew into darkness as Hannah watched him collapse.

9

Scott and David put on a show for the two guards accompanying them outside the breeding center. They held hands and acted eager to reach a place in the hills where they could be together intimately. The guards led them about a mile and a half from the compound proper before the group stopped and one of the dead men pulled out a stopwatch from its pocket. "This is as far as we're going," the guard informed them and started the watch. "You better get to it if you're going to. The clock is ticking."

"You're going to watch us?" David said horrified. "That wasn't part of the deal."

"Tough," the other guard grunted. "Get to jerking each other or whatever so we can get back."

"What's the matter?" Scott laughed. "Are you horny too? Wanna join us?"

The guard blinked his single eyelid while the other laughed at his stunned comrade to whom the offer had been made. Scott sprang forward striking out with the flat of his palm. His blow drove the laughing guard's nose bone up into its brain killing the creature instantly. The remaining guard swung up the barrel of his weapon at Scott to try to get a shot but David was there. He threw himself onto the guard and they

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went down in a mess tangled limbs as the guard's rifle blazed away.

Scott instinctively ducked out of the path of the awkward gunfire snatching up the rifle of the guard he'd killed. He whirled to see David laying atop the guard the young man had tackled with his intestines scattered about everywhere. The burst from the thing's weapon must have gutted David as the pair had fallen. Scott's finger squeezed the trigger of his rifle and held it emptying the clip into David's corpse and the guard. Scott tossed the rifle aside. Neither David nor the guard would be getting up again. He felt a pang of loss and guilt over David's sacrifice but didn't have the time to really think about it. The whole compound he knew must have heard the brief battle. Scott sprinted away from the scene into the trees without looking back.

10

O'Neil and Captain Steven studied the map spread out on the table before them. Steven stabbed at a point on the map with his finger. "We'll put in here."

"South Carolina?" O'Neil asked.

"Why not? This port here is out of the way in terms of the old commercial traffic routes and it's close enough for us to reach it within two days."

"It'll still be guarded. If nothing else there'll be those things all over the docks," O'Neil commented. "I don't like the idea of taking *The Queen* that close to land again."

Steven smiled. "We're not. Not this time. We'll sail in just close enough for the lifeboats to make it ashore."

O'Neil looked at the Captain completely baffled.

"Stealth, Mr. O'Neil. It's something we haven't tried before. If we go in at night instead of all guns blazing, *The Queen* herself may still face an attack but the dead may not notice our smaller boats until they've had time to do everything they need for once." Steven saw the way O'Neil was glaring at him. "Yes, it's more of a risk to the raiding party if they do notice them and it'll mean less supplies brought back overall because we won't be loading straight onto *The Queen*. But I'm willing to take the gamble in hopes that it will save us some lives. If it works, it'll give the raiding party a better edge than they've ever had before and well, if *The Queen* does become engaged I think she can handle herself. We have before and will do so many more times before we're done I'm sure."

"Sir, I think you should know most of the crew and the people onboard still just want us to take some little island, put down some roots, and finally get off the waves." O'Neil informed him.

Steven grinned. "No," he ordered flatly, "Our mobility is what's keeping us alive, Mr. O'Neil. Perhaps you should remind these people that if we lose it, we've lost the war."

O'Neil changed the subject, avoiding an argument. "How many men will be needed for the lifeboats in this plan of yours?"

"I was thinking about sixteen, total. That should give them the firepower and the free hands they'll need."

"But who's going to lead them?" O'Neil asked.

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Scott hadn't stopped moving for nearly twelve hours. His underfed and exhausted body was being pushed far beyond its limits. He nearly fell into a tree, grabbing hold of its bark to keep his balance. His head swam and he felt sick. He dropped to his knees vomiting onto the wet grass. So far, he'd seen no signs that his pursuers were catching up with him. When he'd first started running, it'd been like something out of a nightmare. Jeeps full of the dead had come roaring out of the breeding center complex. The first two hours of the chase had been the roughest, ducking in and out of the trees, zigzagging his path, and praying as he eluded both those chasing him and the normal patrols the dead kept posted in the area. He hadn't seen or heard a jeep or dead man in the past seven hours though and he couldn't force himself to go anymore at this point anyway. He needed rest desperately.

Scott wiped the vomit from his lips with the back of his hand and rolled over onto the ground, stretching out. The noise of a bullet being chambered inside a rifle snapped Scott out of his thoughts. A woman stood over him with the barrel of a .30-.06 aimed at his chest. She was covered in blood not her own. She appeared healthy and well fed but every inch just as tired as he felt. Long red hair was matted to her face and shoulders by sweat, blood, and dirt.

"Hello?" Scott greeted her weakly.

"Are you a doctor?" She asked in a voice filled with both brewing anger and a deep sadness.

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Scott's mind raced. What the hell was he supposed to say? "I know a little," he answered quickly lying very still so that the woman didn't feel threatened.

She took a step away from him and ordered, "On your feet. My husband and son are hurt. They need help."

"Okay," Scott pushed himself despite how much his whole body ached. The woman led him about two tenths of a mile to the east. Scott knew instantly something wasn't right even before they entered her makeshift campsite. He could see a small form tied to a tree straining against the ropes knotted around its body and the body of a man lay stretched out nearby. Scott wondered if the woman had kidnapped the child that was tied up until he saw the massive gunshot wound on the child's chest and began to realize just how much trouble he was in. Thank the lord the woman appeared to have had the sense to gag the child thing. Scott forced himself not to stare at it as it twisted itself under the ropes tearing its flesh as it tried to get free and turned his attention to the man. He knelt down beside him. The man was alive, just barely.

"Can you help them?" The woman pleaded, the barrel of her rifle still aimed at Scott.

He doubted very much he could fool the woman into letting her guard down. She was too on edge. "Why did you gag the boy?" He asked hoping to lead her mind back to the truth of the things in front of her.

Fresh tears rolled down the woman's reddened cheeks. It was clear there was no way she could rationalize doing it and continue to believe her son was alive. "He ... He was just gibbering. Saying horrible things. I couldn't take it anymore."

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"Was he really your son?"

"Yes," she answered not bothering to correct the word "was".

"And this is?" Scott asked placing a hand on the man's arm.

"Riley. He's my husband, Riley."

"He's going to die just like your son did," Scott said bravely, staring down the madness in her eyes. "He's lost too much blood. There's nothing we can do for him out here."

"Liar!" the woman howled, her finger tightening on the trigger as she shoved the barrel of her .30-.06 closer to Scott's face.

"Whoa! Careful there!" Scott begged, his hands held high in the air. "I'm sorry lady. I just call them as I see them."

The woman hesitated lowering the rifle's barrel slightly. Scott made his move grabbing for the weapon. Too bad for him, Hannah was faster.

12

Hannah spun the rifle in her hands and smashed its butt into the man's face as he snatched at it. He fell backwards, cursing and bleeding from his nose. The things he'd said had cut her like a razor. Something inside of her woke up and realized her son was dead and her husband was dying. She'd be damned if this filthy punk was going to take her dad's rifle too. Snapped the rifle's butt back up against her shoulder and braced it. The weapon barked as the shot smashed open the skull of the thing that had once been her son.

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The man was eying her as if she were more dangerous than ever. He raised a hand cover in blood from his nose at her. "Please," was the word he said.

"What's your name?" Hannah asked.

"Scott," he answered then added, "Ma'am, I don't mean any disrespect but your husband just quit breathing. I don't suppose you'd be kind enough to shoot him too?"

"Riley!" Hannah wailed and flung herself down beside Scott, throwing herself over Riley's corpse. Watching her grief, Scott couldn't bring himself to take her weapon though she'd cast it aside. Instead, he moved to save her live pulling her off her husband's body before it could reanimate. Scott shoved Hannah aside as Riley's eyes opened. Scott pulled a .45 from the corpse's own holster and put an end to it. The shot seemed to echo in the air.

Hannah turned her face away from the gore, sobbing though she had no tears left to cry. Scott made no move comfort her as he popped the clip out of the handgun and took stock of the number of rounds left in the clip. When he was done he snapped the clip back inside the gun. He picked up a backpack that appeared to have belonged to the child and began to sort through it. Whoever this woman was, her family had obviously been well supplied. He opened a granola bar from the pack and tore into it unable to control himself. Scott couldn't remember the last time he'd had any kind of real food and it tasted like heaven, stale or not. "Where are you from?" he mumbled through the nuts in his full mouth.

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Hannah ignored him. Scott finished the bar in a second bite. "How have you managed to stay alive this long?" He asked trying to reach Hannah again.

"What does it matter?"

"Well for one thing, you have food. You're well armed. Hell, I even saw some antibiotics in this pack. If you're from some kind of settlement or shelter that survived I'd sure as hell like to know about it."

"Where are you from?" Hannah shot back.

"Trust me lady, you don't want to know," Scott snickered ripping into another ration bar. "I've been locked up by the dead in a camp straight out of hell."

"A camp?" Hannah was stunned. "Why didn't they kill you?"

"Where have you been, sister? How do you think the dead get their food these days? There aren't enough of us left out there for them to just round up and slaughter for dinner anymore. They're trying to breed us like cattle, livestock, so that they'll always have food."

Hannah stared at Scott in horror.

"Yeah," Scott nodded, "It's all that and worse. I still want to know where you came from. You sure as hell weren't in a camp."

"My husband and child are dead."

"I'm sorry," Scott twisted the top off of a canteen helping himself to the water it contained. "Seen a lot of people die. One of my friends died just so that I could make it out of there. It looks like your husband died trying to take you somewhere better too. Better get used to it, people dying."



That's how things are with the dead ruling the world. Speaking of which..." Scott closed the canteen. "We need to get moving. Staying in a single spot for a while can be suicide. Who knows who or what heard those shots."

13

Luke was anything but your typical engineer. Long black hair with spots of gray hung over the purple flannel shirt he wore. He sat crouched on the knees of his worn blue jeans fiddling with a homemade torpedo casing. He heard O'Neil enter his workshop but made no move to stop fine-tuning his current project. Instead, he said, "I'll have two more live ones by tomorrow morning."

O'Neil sat on Luke's unused workbench. "Why do you always work in the floor?"

Luke smiled. "The freedom," he answered simply, "It helps me think."

O'Neil grunted. "Whatever works I suppose, as long as you don't blow a hole in the bottom of the ship."

"You didn't come here to talk about my work habits, Mr. O'Neil. What's up?"

"The Captain's planning to raid a port in South Carolina tomorrow night. I've got the usual crew ready and I'll be in command of the operation. I thought I'd stop by and see if you'd come up with anything new."

Luke curved his head around to glance at O'Neil behind him. "If you're talking about understanding the dynamics of what makes the dead get back on their feet with hungry stomachs," Luke used his pointed finger to press his glasses

up from where they'd slid down on his nose, "No, I haven't. That's Doc Gallenger's area, not mine."

"I thought you were helping him."

"Sure when I have the time. You might have noticed I have been rather busy lately what with keeping this old girl running and designing these new toys for the Captain."

"It's not that I don't trust Gallenger's doing his best Luke, I just thought..."

"What? That having nine degrees in everything from pathology to physics makes me superhuman? That I am supposed to be able to wave a magic wand and save your ass? I wish," Luke shrugged. "I ain't God, ya know."

"I didn't say that you were. God has a social life." O'Neil teased the rail thin scientist.

"You want me to go with you tomorrow?"

"Hell no!" O'Neil protested. "Steven would have me shot if I let you off *The Queen*. You're the only real brain we've got."

"So you say," Luke challenged. "There are plenty of people on the boat who could do what I do around here."

"Maybe. But not one of them could do it all," O'Neil got up from the bench. "Just promise me you'll get to helping Gallenger okay? We need a way to stop the dead more than we need the weapons to keep running."

As O'Neil turned to leave, Luke muttered, "Be careful out there you idiot."

"I always am," O'Neil responded with a flash of his teeth, then he was gone.

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Scott figured Hannah was whacko after what she'd endured, with every right to be, so he left her to her brooding as they walked. The woman insisted on traveling east to the coast, so they were. Scott had managed to obtain a few hours of blessed sleep under her watch, counting himself lucky she hadn't killed him while he slept. But when he'd woken up she'd just been sitting there adrift in her own mind like she'd been when he first zonked out. It'd been impossible to get her to move earlier short of carrying her when he'd said they needed to get on the move again but after his nap, she'd been up on her feet and ready to go faster than he was. Her only requests were that they bury the bodies of her family and that they set out in this direction.

"What the heck is that?" Scott asked suddenly as he noticed a building up ahead of them. Hannah paused beside him. "It's a cabin," she said and then continued on towards it.

"Whoa. What are you doing?" Scott grabbed her by the arm. "We don't know if anyone's in there."

"There's not, not alive anyway."

"How can you be so sure?"

Hannah pointed through the trees. "The door's been busted open. The windows are shattered. And that appears to be dried blood smeared all over the outer walls."

Given little choice, Scott followed Hannah on into the clearing in front of the cabin. Several bodies, all dead from head wounds, littered the grass around the place.

"Looks like somebody put up a good fight," Scott commented as Hannah headed straight for the main door without slowing. It dangled barely attached to its hinges.

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Hannah stepped by it and into the building. A partially devoured body missing its legs and arms watched her enter. Old blood stained the area about its mouth and chin. Hannah was sure its tongue had been cut or bitten out otherwise the thing would have been screaming obscenities at her. Its eyes burned into her as she glanced about the remains of the simple room. Someone had taken shelter in this place seeking safety in the wilderness just like her own family had done; only these poor people must have been discovered before they could run.

Hannah jumped as a gunshot split the air sending the limbless monster on its way to hell once more. Scott shrugged as she glared at him. "It was creeping me out, okay?" He offered in way of apology.

The pair carefully searched the place over for others of the dead or anyone miraculously left alive to find they were alone. They met back in the cabin's main room.

"We'll take what we can. Food, ammo, whatever but we're not staying," Hannah informed Scott.

Scott was too delighted to be put off by her air of superiority. "You're not going to believe what I found out behind this dump!" He smiled. "Come on, I'll show you!"

15

The cabin had been a godsend. Scott couldn't believe their luck. With their stock of replenished and stomachs happily full of dried tomatoes and corn from among the cans they'd looted, they started the journey east again much richer. Hannah still carried her .30-.06 refusing to let it go but she

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also now carried a functional AK-47 assault rifle. Scott had added a pump action twelve gauge to his arsenal. Their best find however had been the bike. It allowed them to continue traveling off road while giving them a much faster rate of travel and mobility.

Scott held onto Hannah's waist as she kept the gas flowing hard to the small bike's engine. She jerked the handlebars from side to side dodging trees as they bounced over the forest floor at over forty miles an hour. Scott wasn't sure but he thought for the first time since they'd met he saw the slightest hint of a smile on Hannah's lips.

"If you don't mind if I ask," he yelled over the bike's roar, "Why the hell are you so set on going east?"

Much to his surprise, Hannah answered him. "I want to see the ocean one last time before I die!"

Scott mulled over this revelation for a second. "Works for me!" he shouted as the ground sloped ahead of them and Hannah took them charging down the tiny hill.

16

*The Queen* sat in the harbor motionless and far from the docks. No organized attack had been launched against her yet. Henry O'Neil admired her as the lifeboat he sat in drifted toward the shore. There were four boats each carrying an equal number of members of the raiding party. O'Neil's heart pounded in his chest. A long time had passed since he'd been in the "heat" of things on shore. Sure he'd fought numerous battles aboard *The Queen* or venturing onto a dock to help hold back the hordes of dead as she set sail after a raid but

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this was different. He was both excited and scared shitless at the same time. An African American man named Roy sat across from him loading a shotgun. O'Neil didn't know Roy well, but he knew him to be a veteran of raids like this one.

The plan was simple. Land on the beach near the warehouses along the dock, hit the shore running, and stock up on whatever nonperishable foodstuffs they could get their hands on, then steal some means of transporting both it and themselves back to *The Queen* from the boats that lined the port. This operation would cost them the most of what remained of *The Queen's* lifeboats but if they could steal some decent motor boats that still worked, it would be more than a fair trade.

Jennifer and Jason also shared his lifeboat. The twins were inseparable. Jennifer was the warrior of the pair. Muscles bulged from underneath the jump suit she wore. In addition to the rifle and sidearm she carried, she hefted a machete. She was something of a legend among *The Queen's* "raiders". Just looking at her confidence, made O'Neil feel safer. Jason by contrast, though he shared his twin's frame, was not well muscled. He was the party's medic and served as an assistant to Dr. Gallenger onboard *The Queen*. The young man's brow was creased in thought as he checked over the med. kit he carried. O'Neil was sure the young man hoped he wouldn't need it or any of its contents tonight.

O'Neil held no official rank having come aboard *The Queen* after the plague started and the world begin its descent into the hellish nightmare it had become. Yet everyone knew he was second only to Captain Steven and treated him with an

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air of respect. He hoped he lived up to it out here where it mattered the most.

The lifeboats reached the sand of the shoreline. O'Neil screwed a silencer onto the barrel of his pistol and stepped off the waves. His land legs were clumsy initially but he soon got the hang of it as he raced after the others towards the docks. The party split up, each heading out for a different section of the warehouses to loot expect one group who went off in search of their much needed means of escape and transport back to *The Queen*. There was no sign of the dead but O'Neil knew it wouldn't be long.

Within minutes, suitable transport for the return voyage was located. Already crates of freeze-dried and canned foods were being loaded onto to the pair of small motor boats, which were the only ones around that appeared still functional. That's when the shit hit the fan. One of the raiders named Gary screamed, "They're coming!" Before O'Neil could open his mouth to shout orders the docks were ablaze with gunfire and the dead were racing at the raiding party from the town beyond.

17

The would-be raiders quickly found themselves pinned down and outnumbered. "It's a trap!" someone shouted. O'Neil cursed whoever it was for being an idiot. The dead hadn't had anyway of knowing they'd be here, there were just that many of the creatures everywhere these days. Jennifer shoved O'Neil from his feet as a bullet whizzed through the space he'd been standing in. "Better keep your mind on the

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fight, sir!" she advised him, raising her M-16 and holding the trigger squeezed as she swept her line of fire across the ranks of the charging dead.

O'Neil hated the dead. Why couldn't the dead be unthinking, slow moving automatons driven purely by instinct alone like in the movies he'd seen as a kid, he wondered. Life freakin' sucks he thought as he pushed himself up and took aim at a creature running at the team of raiders with a hole through its ribs and a butcher knife raised above its head ready to strike. With a single shot from his pistol he dropped the dead thing permanently to the ground.

The dead were attempting to push around the raiding party, to flank them and cut them off from the docks where the half loaded motor boats waited. O'Neil knew if that happened they were all screwed. He bolted, running for the team's only way out as he saw Jennifer wrestling with a dead woman who'd made it past their wall of fire. Jennifer's rifle was gone and she struggled to bring her machete into play against the woman. She never got the chance. The woman lashed out with something that looked like a straight razor. Jennifer's throat opened, spraying blood.

As O'Neil reached the boats, Roy was there waiting for him.

"We've got to get the food back to the ship!" O'Neil shouted. Jim nodded. Most of their party was already dead or dying and they couldn't risk trying to save the others. Too many people on *The Queen* were depending on them. If they failed a lot more would die than just those here on the docks.



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"What the hell is that?" Jim yelled, pointing at something behind O'Neil. O'Neil turned to see a dirt bike zigging and zagging its way towards them through the midst of the battle. Two human shapes rode it, one clearly a woman at the handlebars. "Fuck that," O'Neil swore bringing up his pistol to take a shot at her. If the dead thought they could send a suicide bomber on a damn dirt bike crashing into the motor boats they had another thing coming.

Jim struck O'Neil's arm, knocking his pistol's barrel downward to fire into the wood of the dock as he pulled the trigger. "Why the..." O'Neil started but Jim cut him off. "Those ain't dead folk," the older man snarled.

O'Neil glanced at the bike again as Jim leapt off the docks into the more heavily loaded of the two boats and fired it up. The bike skidded to a halt a few yards away from O'Neil. A haggard looking young man with lashing scars covering his naked back jumped off the rear of the bike and said, "Going our way?"

O'Neil felt his breath leave him, ignoring the young man's joke, as he gazed into the green eyes of the woman who stood before him. "Get in!" Jim screamed from the boat below and O'Neil stood watching this woman, this angel, dart by him and leap off the docks into the boat. The shirtless man shoved O'Neil off the dock as he moved for the boat himself. "I think he means you too!" The young man laughed as they crashed into the boat near Jim together. Jim kicked the boat into high gear and left a trail of waves in their wake. The docks and the nightmare of it all faded into the distance behind them as a few desperately shot rounds thudded into

the sides of the boat and the dead howled in vain at their escaping prey.

18

"Who are you people?" Scott asked, "And what was all that back there about?"

The taller, redneck looking black man answered, "I'm Jim and this is Mr. O'Neil. We're from *The Queen*."

The man identified as O'Neil just kept staring at Hannah as she asked, "What's *The Queen*?"

"That," Jim pointed out into the water in the direction they were speeding for.

"Holy shit," Scott muttered. *The Queen* was a ship and a damn big one from the looks of her. She was as long as a battleship but certainly not military in nature or at least, she hadn't started out that way. Her overall hull was a tarnished white spotted by the odd piece or plate of wielded on armor. Jury rigged gun emplacements ran the length of her decks from port to stern. She'd definitely seen better days but even with the tiny amount Scott knew about ships he could tell she had a lot of power left in her yet.

Jim piloted the motor boat right up to her side. Heavily armed men and women threw down cables from her deck to haul up the crates of supplies the raiders had returned with. "Too bad we can't keep this baby," Jim said mournfully to no one in particular, "She's a fine little boat in own right."

"We're keeping her fuel," O'Neil ordered as he finally snapped out of the stunned haze he'd been in. "Make sure you drain her tanks before you go up." Then O'Neil turned to

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Scott and Hannah. He caught one of the ropes that were raining down around them and handed it to Hannah.

"Welcome aboard, ma'am," he said with a sincere smile that lit up his face.

Scott and Hannah scurried up the rope into the crowd of people on *The Queen's* main deck. Both were overwhelmed by their welcome. Hannah couldn't remember the last time she'd seen so many real, living, breathing people. O'Neil pulled himself up behind them and was barking orders at the crowd before his feet even hit the deck proper.

"Let's get loaded up quickly people," he yelled at the top of his lungs over the chaos, "We need get out of here before the dead get it together and come sailing after us."

19

A yeoman named Pete led Scott and Hannah to their quarters. Two Spartan bunkrooms side by side on the same hall. "I know it's not much," Pete apologized, "but here you're going to be safe."

Scott was still trying to absorb it all. "You mean you guys have really been sailing about out here since it all started?"

Pete nodded. "*The Queen* was at sea when the dead woke up. We haven't put to port yet except to raid places for food or supplies yet. The Captain figures we're safer on the waves."

"Have you heard from anyone else, other survivors like yourselves?" Hannah asked.

"I hate to say it, ma'am, but ... well, no. Benson, our communications expert, stays at it around the clock though.

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We've never come across more than few like yourselves at a time. We're always glad to see new faces and I'm sure you'll fit right in among the crew. Either of you have experience sailing or know anything ships?"

Together Hannah and Scott shook their heads in the negative. Pete waved a hand dismissively. "No worries, I know we'll come up with something for you to do. We try to pull our weight on this ship." Pete looked them over again and stopped. "You need to get some rest. I'm sorry. I'll leave you to it. The captain will want to meet you tonight. He likes to welcome everyone to the ship personally and see if you know anything about what's left out there that we don't. You'll be having dinner with him in about five hours. I'll be back to get you and show you around until you know how to navigate *The Queen* yourselves

Pete shook Scott's hand again and bowed to Hannah. Then he was gone, vanishing around the corner of the corridor. Hannah and Scott looked at each other as if each were asking the other if they really wanted to be alone. Silence lingered in the air until Scott finally made a move. "See you at dinner then," he said stepping into the room he'd been assigned and shutting the door behind him. Scott plopped onto his bunk and fell instantly into a deep sleep. His dreams were dark but his exhausted body didn't care.

20

Steven shook his head in disgust. "We lost fourteen hands and gained two. We can't keep up this rate of attrition.

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Perhaps you're correct, Mr. O'Neil. Maybe we should think of finding an island and starting over."

O'Neil couldn't believe what he was hearing. Captain Steven was agreeing with him after months refusing to even consider the possibility of such a venture, let alone, acting on it.

"There is an island not far from here, sir, that one I've told you about. I think it was called Cobble or something like that. It was just a tourist trap before the plague. You could only reach it by boat or helicopter. I doubt we'd find much resistance there and it's in a temperate zone so we could grow a wide assortment of food stock between the winters." O'Neil was getting excited as let out all the details he'd been plotting, "I bet there's even a fuel depot there, at least for the smaller boats. We could leave *The Queen* just off shore and she'd be well within reach if we needed her again."

Steven smiled at O'Neil's passion over the idea. "Sounds like you've really thought this out. Alright, Mr. O'Neil. We'll try it your way. Plot us a course for this island as soon as we can be sure those creatures from the docks aren't pursuing us and have those two new folk brought up here. I'm eager to hear news of the mainland."

"I think you'll find the new woman rather captivating sir," O'Neil commented.

Steven pulled a cigar from his desk and lit it up with an old fashioned wooden match. "Do I detect a bit of personal attachment in your voice Henry?"

The younger man blinked. The Captain rarely called him by his first name. Most people didn't. It put him on edge though

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he knew the Captain was only teasing, trying to provoke a response. "No sir. I just ... I thought you'd like to be prepared is all."

"Oh," Steven snickered, "I see."

Hannah lay on her bunk staring at the ceiling. She'd tried to get some sleep but she couldn't stop thinking about Riley and Brandon. Brandon would have been so happy on this ship. *The Queen* would've been like a paradise to him, the adventure of the high sea and children his age to share it with. It would have been like something out of a story book. And Riley ... She missed Riley so much. Without him, she felt hollow, incomplete. A piece of her soul had died with them back in the mountains just like the world had died long ago. She'd adjusted to the world's destruction but the pain of loss for her family was fresh and it stung at her heart.

Someone knocked on the door of her quarters. Forgetting herself, she reached for her rifle, sliding a shell into its chamber as the door opened. Pete stood in the doorway with a horrified look on his face as he gazed down the barrel of the .30-.06 at her. "It's okay," Pete said slowly, taking a step back. Hannah lowered the rifle. "I'm sorry," she shrugged. "Old habits die hard."

"Better them than me," Pete joked uncomfortably. "The Captain is waiting for you to join him for dinner."

Hannah followed Pete out into the hall where Scott was waiting. Scott was clean-shaven and had gotten new clothes from somewhere. His whole appearance was different on many levels. He actually looked handsome and if possible, even smugger than he usually was. "About time you got up,

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sleepy head," he teased her as the trio made their way along the corridor and up to the Captain's quarters on the level above.

Captain Steven and O'Neil greeted Hannah and Scott as they entered. Hannah looked the Captain over. He was in his later forties, his hair mostly gray, yet there was no mistaking the strength he carried in not only his character but also in his short, burly frame. He looked like a man who'd seen hell first hand and beaten it back by the sheer force of his will. The necessary introductions were made, and then Pete and O'Neil seated everyone at the table. "Will there be anything else sir?" O'Neil asked.

"No thank you," Steven reached for a napkin to drape across his lap. "That will be all."

O'Neil and Pete left the quarters closing the entrance behind them.

The table was set with real china dishes and expensive, regal looking silverware but it was the food that held Hannah and Scott's attention. There was glazed salmon, fresh baked bread, a spicy brown rice of some type, stuffed crabs, and bowl full of red apples placed along side a salad of cabbage and chopped carrots. The Captain must have noticed their hunger. "Please, help yourselves," he offered. Scott wasted no time in loading down his plate with everything in reach and a double portion of the stuffed crabs.

"I assure you, we don't eat like this all time," Captain Steven informed them. "We can't afford to. Most of our meals are of much simpler fare but tonight it seemed fitting to have

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this feast not only to welcome you but celebrate a much needed change in *The Queen's* plans for the future."

"The future?" Scott mumbled through a mouth full of fish and bread.

"Yes," Steven continued. "The future. We can't go on living as we have up until this point. I refuse to continue to sacrifice the lives of my crew and those under my protection to keep us on the sea. It's time we found a new home and try to reclaim some of what mankind has lost to the dead."

"Do you really think that's possible?" Hannah butted in. "The dead are everywhere. No matter where you go, they will find you eventually."

"But their numbers are dwindling too," Steven explained. "Their bodies rot. Time takes its due. We have only to last a couple of years perhaps before we may outnumber them once more. Then we can truly retake the world as our own, as it was meant to be."

"How can you know the dead are dying? Have you discovered what brought them to life to begin with?" Hannah argued.

"Our crew may be made of refugees, Hannah, but some are rather extraordinary people. We have two medical doctors on this ship and one real scientist who've been studying the plague of the dead since the moment they came onboard. We still don't know the nature of the force or whatever it is which reanimates the tissues of those who die but we do know that it does not stop the decay of their flesh, it merely slows it. So in time, nature itself will destroy the ranks of the dead for us." Steven changed the subject, "but enough of this. I want



to know about you two. Who are you? What did you do before the dead walked?"

"Do you really want to know?" Scott asked, suddenly forgetting about the food. Steven nodded.

"I was a professional killer." The table fell silent at Scott's disclosure. "I killed anyone for the right price. I worked for the government when I started out, then went freelance. I couldn't guess at how many people I put bullets in before the CIA caught me. When the plague started, I was rotting away in a federal prison cell and that's where the dead found me, alone, unarmed, and locked up behind bars. Obviously, they didn't kill me. Maybe I was so starved by then I didn't have enough meat on my bones to be worth their trouble, who knows, so they merely took me to a new kind of prison that they had created. It was called a "breeding center". It was a place where they herded us together like cattle and breed us for food."

Hannah's mouth still hung open from Scott's announcement of his old job and Steven appeared bothered by it as well, though not as much as he was by the concept of the "breeding center".

"Well," Steven ventured, "I don't suppose it matters now what you did in those days. You're one of us now and I hope you will make the most of this fresh start." Steven turned his body in his chair to address Hannah. "And what of you?" he asked her.

"I..." Hannah began and her voice cracked, "I was a mother."

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As the days past aboard *The Queen*, Hannah found work in the ship's daycare. There were a couple of infants as well as nearly a dozen children that the ship had picked up over the last few months who either had no parents at all or who's parents held jobs aboard the ship which occupied much of their time. The daycare served the needs of those children and Hannah found happiness in her work with the kids. Jessica, a young woman barely out of her teens was the sole other adult worker, and while Hannah liked her as a person, Hannah didn't know how Jessica had handled the children by herself before she had come along. Jessica was a hard worker but she lacked the emotional connection with her wards that Hannah developed instantly. Jessica, without resentment, let Hannah lead in how the children were handled. Things changed a great deal as the children took to Hannah's new lessons in crafts and educational projects with zeal. Hannah, despite herself, began to let go of her past and embrace her future. The memories of Riley and Brandon would always be with her but she felt hope swelling in her again. These children needed her and there was so much she could offer them beyond just keeping them busy and out of the way.

Scott, on the other hand, was assigned to the nearly depleted group of the Queen's raiders and defenders. He worked closely with O'Neil whom he grew to hate more and more with each passing day. O'Neil took a more military approach to organization and training where as Scott taught the man the "dirty" tricks he thought they needed to know to stay alive in the new world of the dead, discipline be damned.

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It wasn't long until Scott met Luke through his work with O'Neil. The eccentric genius and the occasionally psychotic former hit-man became fast friends. They'd attended some of the same schools in the old world and both had done work for the governments on black-op projects though Luke's involvement was purely from a research and development stand point. Scott wasn't anywhere near Luke's level, but he was sharp and a fast enough learner to keep up with Luke when he droned on about his theories of this and that.

As the sun sank beneath the waves, Scott and Luke relaxed atop the highest point of *The Queen* above the command center in matching lawn chairs. Scott sipped at the glass in his hand admiring the potency of the drink Luke had whipped up for them this evening. It had the punch of whiskey without the burn.

"What was it like?" Luke inquired.

"What?"

"To kill people for money, man. How did you cope with it?"

"To be honest, I just never thought about it. A job's a job, ya know? Besides it's not that much different than things are today. Everybody has had to kill somebody to stay alive and keep breathing; whether it was by a bullet through the brain or watching someone you care about throw away their life so that you could get away."

Luke leaned forward and sat up on his chair. "So what do you think about Captain Steven's new plan?"

"I don't think it matters, Luke. We're all living on borrowed time. Whether we die out here on the waves or settle down and wait for the dead to come to us, they will get us

eventually. We lost the war the moment they started thinking like we do." Scott sat up too looking over the edge of the railing at the water below. "You're the resident genius. You tell me, have you ever figured out what brought the dead back to life?"

Luke shrugged. "Not really. It sure wasn't radiation or a virus as we know them like something out of those old B movies about the walking dead though their bites are infectious just like in those films. Nothing about the dead makes sense. They shouldn't be able to move let alone reason like they do. Sometimes a body will reanimate with partial memories of its life before death and other times it's like there's a whole new entity in the host body. They're all hungry for us though memories or not. It doesn't matter if they know your name and who you are because they'll eat you anyway."

"So where does that leave you since science has failed and can't explain it?"

Luke's face flushed. "Science hasn't failed, Scott. Just because I don't have an answer today doesn't mean there isn't a plausible, quantifiable explanation to all this. It just means I haven't found it yet. I don't believe in spirits or judgment day. There is a sane reason for the plague and I will find it one day. I'm sure."

"And you'll just keep searching for it, huh?"

"Damn right I will," Luke laughed. "As long as I have to."

Steven bolted onto the bridge of the ship. The whole area was a mass of activity. His crew darted about double-checking the data they'd just gotten. O'Neil spotted the Captain and made his way to Steven. "It's true then?" Steven demanded as O'Neil approached him.

"I'm afraid so, sir," O'Neil said grimly. "There are five vessels closing in on our current location as if trying to surround us."

"Jesus," Steven flipped through the stack of reports O'Neil handed him scanning their contents. "Look at the size of them."

O'Neil nodded in agreement. "Some of them are military in nature for sure. This one has to be," O'Neil pointed at a blip on a nearby radar screen. "We think it's an aircraft carrier and the two flanking it from the east and west are most likely destroyers. It looks like they've finally got us where they want us."

"Nonsense, Mr. O'Neil," Steven corrected him. "We've been in tight spots before. We'll get through this one too." Steven weighed their options in his head before he continued. "Can we out maneuver them and make a run for it?"

"We can try. I don't think the largest one can match our speed but I don't know anything about the two smallest ones. However if the two flanking the large ship are destroyers, they'll be able overtake us even at our top speed."

"Change course and burn the engines at their maximum." Steven ordered. "And in the meantime, sound the alarm. I want to be ready if we do have a fight on our hands."

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"Aye, sir," O'Neil replied and punched a button which set sirens squealing throughout *The Queen*.

A state of panic broke out on the ship. *The Queen's* raiders who were also its defenders rushed to their battle stations, Scott among them. People and families ran for their quarters locking the heavy doors of their rooms against the growing terror outside. The daycare was in chaos. Hannah and Jessica tried to calm the children and assure them everything would be fine while at the same time attempting to deal with frightened parents who showed up demanding their children. Hannah had left her .30-.06 in her quarters but she carried a concealed .38 revolver she'd looted from the ship's armory thanks to Scott in the pocket of her jacket. Weapons weren't permitted in the daycare center but right now Hannah was damn glad she'd been breaking the rules. She'd watched her own child die helplessly and swore inwardly that these children under her care would not share his fate.

Dr. Gallenger prepared the sickbay for the wounded to start arriving in case the coming battle couldn't be avoided. Luke darted through the corridors of *The Queen* attempting to reach the main decks with a short, black, metal tube gripped tightly in his arms.

O'Neil and Captain Steven watched from the bridge as the destroyers crossed the horizon and came into view. The ocean itself seemed to shake as the destroyer coming in from the east fired its main guns at *The Queen*.

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The shot from the enemy ship impacted with the water off the Queen's port side sending waves crashing against the side of ship though it didn't strike so close as to do actual damage. *The Queen* lacked any sort of truly long-range weapon to return fire except for her jury-rigged torpedo launchers which at the moment were facing away from the closing enemy vessels. Captain Steven knew he had to do something. The destroyers were too fast to outrun and at present, *The Queen* was a sitting target for their guns even pushing her beyond their limits of endurance. Closing with the two enemy ships for direct combat was a near suicidal option but it was also the only one left available to him if there was to be any hope of *The Queen's* survival.

"Bring us about!" he shouted. "Get us between them. Maybe they aren't stupid enough to take the chance of hitting each other with their main guns!" Steven turned to O'Neil. "As soon as you get a shot with one of the launchers, take it!"

Scott and *The Queen's* defenders stood helplessly at their machinegun emplacements as *The Queen* veered to engage the enemy. The destroyers were still not in range of *The Queen's* heaviest guns but from the looks of things, they would be soon. Scott readied the massive weapon in front of him, shoving a belt of ammo into its side, and began to pick a target for when the time came.

"Fire one!" O'Neil ordered. A torpedo flared to life, dropping into the water. It raced towards the lead destroyer as O'Neil ordered the remaining torpedo launched in its wake. Moments later, the torpedo struck the destroyer just below the water line with the sound of shredding metal sending

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waves of fire and water up onto the military vessel's decks. The second torpedo got lucky. There was no better term for what happened. Whatever it collided with in the destroyer did far more damage turning the ship into a blazing wreck drifting on the ocean as secondary explosions tore the vessel apart.

Cheers went up on the decks of *The Queen* and on the bridge alike as *The Queen* shifted course again slightly angling towards the remaining enemy ship. The second destroyer's guns fired. This time *The Queen* was hit dead on. The blast ripped a hole in her side killing many of her defenders instantly and causing damage to *The Queen* internally as well.

"Damage report!" Steven snapped, knowing *The Queen* would be facing a new problem now and not just the damage to the ship. Those killed by the blast or mortally wounded would soon reanimate, giving the dead soldiers on *The Queen* as surely as if she had been boarded. "No damage to the engines!" O'Neil reported. "The hull breach is being contained. We're not taking on water!"

Luke reached the deck of *The Queen* and positioned himself to get a shot at the enemy ship. He extended the black, metal tube like device he was carrying and slashed out a section of power cables on the wall near him hooking the weapon into it. He knew what he was about to do was going to literally cripple *The Queen* in some respects and he certainly wouldn't survive this course of action but the way things were going it was worth the risk. With the power hooked up to the invention he'd spent the last few months refining in his free time he aimed at the tube at the destroyer.



As he pulled the trigger a bunch of things happened at the same time; a beam of energy leapt from his weapon striking the destroyer's ammo storage compartment where the shells of the ship's main guns were kept. The energy melted through the destroyer's protective armor as if it weren't there and reduced the enemy ship to a ball of flames which lit up the sea even under the midday rays of the sun. Luke, his weapon, and a large chunk of *The Queen* around where he stood were vaporized from the energy weapon's backwash. People screamed both inside and on the deck of *The Queen* as her engines blew from the strain the weapon had put on her.

"What in the Hell was that?" Steven cried.

"I don't know!" O'Neil yelled back over the chaos on the bridge. "We've lost main power and the engines are burnt out. Power is out everywhere on the ship. The backup generators are keeping the internal comm. system and the emergency lights working but that's about it. We're dead in the water, sir!"

"Shit!" Steven whirled about to the officer at the radar station. "What about the other three dead ships?"

"I ... I don't know sir," the officer stammered. "It looked as if the big one was keeping back, maybe even changing course away from us before the screen went dead. The two smaller ones were still on an intercept heading. They should be on us in the next few minutes, tops."

"Somebody tell Luke, I want those fucking engines back on-line now!" Steven raged.

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Dr. Gallenger got to his feet, or at least tried to. As he attempted to stand up the fractured bone of his left leg tore through his flesh, buckling under his weight, and he hit the floor hard. He felt no pain as he examined the rest of his body and saw the piece of shrapnel protruding from the right side of his chest. He had to get up. He could sense that his brethren would be here soon and he was hungry, hungrier than he'd ever been. He deemed the shrapnel irrelevant and snapped his broken leg back into place. He used the materials scattered about the demolished sickbay to fashion a splint for it. Then he did get up. He hobbled across the room to check on Nurse Jones and found her lying in a pool of blood. Tilting his head like an animal would as he observed her, he watched her newly opened eyes flutter, darting this way and that, as she realized she couldn't move. A huge medical cabinet lay on top of her broken body. Apparently her neck had been snapped as it had fallen on her and bashed her into the floor. Taking pity on her, he picked up a piece of debris and smashed it in her skull. "What point was there in even un-life if it brought you nothing but pain?" he mused. Gallenger found the remains of his desk and the .45 he'd kept in its drawer. Feeling suitable armed he left the sickbay. Soon he would taste flesh for the first time.

Everyone on *The Queen* had been tossed about as the destroyer's shell had hammered into its hull. Hannah was sent sprawling and struck her head against one of the children's lockers in the daycare center. She awoke with blood in her eyes and her skull pounding. As her vision focused, she became aware that she was still alive. She hurt too much to

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be dead. Jessica, her fellow caretaker of the children, must have taken them and fled for somewhere safer in the ship. Hannah felt a twinge of anger at Jessica for leaving her for dead but then realized she would've done the same. It was the kids that mattered, not them. Hannah's hand dug inside her jacket and produced her .38. She had no idea how the fight outside was going but she knew Jessica would need help. Jessica, like the old saying said, was not the sharpest tool in the shed. Hannah didn't trust her to see the children through this battle. Hannah pulled herself up and headed out of the daycare, running down the corridors. "Jessica!" she screamed hoping the woman was still in earshot.

Hannah rounded the corner of the passageway coming face to face with a dead man dragging his insides behind him on the floor. He lunged at her, grunting. She narrowly sidestepped his attack and shoved him as he went by her. He toppled to the deck and twisted about, already trying to get up and come after her again. She popped off three rounds into his forehead spraying his brains out the back of his head onto the wall. Hannah stood a moment, her breath coming in ragged gasps, as she tried to collect herself and calm down. She could hear *The Queen's* machine guns chattering above so she knew the fight hadn't been lost yet. She took a deep breath calming her frantic breathing and set out in search of Jessica though much more cautiously.

The two yachts had swept in quickly managing to survive and mostly evade the fire from *The Queen's* defenders as they closed with her. Both of them came up along her port side, floating close enough for the dead to attempt to scale

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*The Queen's* hull as they traded small arms fire with those left alive on her decks. *The Queen's* gun emplacements were useless with the yachts so close. They couldn't be angled downward to engage the dead so Scott had abandoned his post spraying the climbing dead men and women with AK-47 instead. One, a middle-aged man covered in burns, lost his hold and plummeted into the water as Scott's rounds peppered the man's back. A creature hauled itself onto *The Queen's* deck beside Scott as Jim's twelve-gauge thundered and sent it careening over the side of the ship. Scott motioned his thanks to Jim then returned his attention to the dead as he loaded a fresh clip into his weapon.

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The struggle for control of *The Queen* raged on. Her entire exterior deck was a war zone and smaller battles filled her corridors. Captain Steven took it all in from his vantage point on the bridge. If there was hope left of making it out of this confrontation, it was fading quickly. "Sir," O'Neil said trying to draw the Captain's attention away from the carnage below them. "Captain, we can't hold her. *The Queen* is lost. We need to give the order to abandon ship."

O'Neil's words jarred the Captain out his own thoughts. Abandon *The Queen*? Had O'Neil gone insane? He turned to argue as the door to the bridge opened and Doc Gallenger came staggering inside. Before anyone had time to react, the good doctor's corpse raised the .45 in its blood-smeared hand. The first shot slammed into Steven's shoulder. The second and third shots buried themselves in his chest

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knocking him back to slide down the bridge's wall into a heap on the floor. Benson, the communications officer, took a round to his throat before O'Neil managed to draw his own sidearm and send the doctor to the hell he'd crawled out of with a carefully aimed shot to his face. O'Neil rushed to Steven's side, squatting beside him. Steven coughed blood up onto his lips as he spoke. "Leave me," he ordered. "I'm staying with *The Queen*."

The other command personal were fleeing the bridge as O'Neil stood up. Most of *The Queen's* lifeboats were gone. Finding a way off the ship was going to be difficult but not as difficult as surviving afterwards. The dead would be waiting.

Scott and Jim were holed up in a corner of the Queen's port side main deck. They'd taken shelter behind one of *The Queen's* large, metal cooling pipes and were running out of ammo fast. "Jim, you're a good man," Scott said, "but how would you feel about leaving all this and not looking back?"

Jim could see the gleam of an idea in Scott's eyes. "I reckon," he answered, "What's gotta be is gotta be. I'm guessin' you have something in mind to save our asses."

Scott grinned. "You could say that. Come on!" Scott yelled charging across the deck through the ranks of the dead and the few humans left alive alike. Scott reached the side of *The Queen's* deck and didn't stop. He hurled himself over the side landing on the yacht below to the utter bewilderment of the five corpses still aboard it. He hosed them with his AK-47 on full auto cutting them where they stood.

Jim followed Scott but skidded to a halt at the railing on the side of *The Queen's* deck. "Crazy mother fucker!" he

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shouted and took the leap over to the Yacht on the waves below. He landed with the sound of snapping bones.

O'Neil dispatched a corpse blocking his way in the corridor. He figured he had three rounds left in his pistol if he'd counted his shots right. It was beginning to sink in that was royally screwed. He jerked open the hatch to the exterior deck as someone called his name. Hannah came running up to him. She threw herself into him wrapping her arms around his body. He hugged her back tightly then forced himself to push her away despite how much he wanted to hold onto to her forever. He knew she didn't feel the same about him; they barely knew each other yet she'd won him over the night he'd met her on the docks giving him more purpose to his life than anyone or anything ever had. "The Captain's dead," he informed her. "We've got get off the ship if we want to stay alive."

A dead woman came darting towards them through the open hatchway, a raised piece of glass held like a knife in her rotting hand. O'Neil tried to get a shot but Hannah was faster. She emptied the remaining rounds in her .38 into the woman's neck and face. O'Neil moved to lead them outside onto the deck but Hannah grabbed his arm and held him back. "Wait! What's that noise?"

"Oh God no," O'Neil stuck his head outside and looked up at the sky. "It can't be." However, it was. An F-16 fighter roared over *The Queen*. Its wings were wobbly and whoever was flying it was certainly not an experienced pilot. O'Neil and Hannah stepped outside to watch as the jet turned and streaked back at *The Queen* on a collision course.

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"Would this be a bad time to tell you that I love you?" O'Neil asked as they watched the plane racing closer.

"No, I don't suppose it would," Hannah tried to smile weakly as she took his hand in hers.

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Scott could still remember the death throes of *The Queen* after the jet had plowed into her. The way the flames had danced over her frame as she sank into the waves. The image haunted his dreams at night. He remembered Jim as well. The black southerner had been as tough as they came but with two badly broken legs and the meager amount of worm-infested food they'd found on the yacht, Scott had no choice but kill him. Jim had been alive when Scott had shot him in the stomach with his own shotgun and dumped him overboard before he could reanimate and become one of the dead.

Only a week had passed since their flight from *The Queen*, but it felt like months to Scott. He lay stretched out on the top of the yacht's cabin and stared up at the stars. The yacht's engines were shot and he was thirsty. Sweat glistened on his bare chest in spite of the coolness of the night air. He knew he was sick whether it was from the rotting food he had been eating or just the fact that his body had finally suffered all it could take and given out. If he could make it to land, he might be able to pull through. Proper food, some medicine, some rest, and he might be his old self but those things he needed seemed like pipe dreams in the face of what the world had become. He felt his eyes close then forced them open to

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glance at the shotgun propped up on the deck near him. Scott started to consider *all* his options again as a gentle rain began to fall and the heavens wept.



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