

CAVE WORLD

The background of the cover is a dark, textured cave interior. A bright, glowing opening in the distance illuminates the scene, casting a warm orange and yellow light. In the foreground, a jagged, rocky ledge or cave floor is visible, partially lit by the light from the opening. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and adventurous.

Kerry Burns



This story is set on a colonial planet. Except for one isolated island, all of the men on the planet are bad tempered and unable to have sex because of a universal addiction. Alex, an 18-year-old boy, is kidnapped from his home on the island by unknown strangers. After a shipwreck, he is sent into exile with a hundred lonely, baby-hungry women. How do the women and Alex cope with this situation?

Cave World

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CAVE WORLD

KERRY BURNS

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ISBN 978-1-62646-448-3

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2013

First Edition

Chapter I

SHIPWRECK

Alex huddled below deck to stay dry. This was the worst storm he had experienced since he'd been kidnapped and taken from his home. In the two turns he'd been at sea, the ship had only been in port three times, then only for a few hours to take on supplies and water.

He had no idea what the purpose of the ship was. He had no social relationship with the men on board, no particular assignment, but helped out wherever he was asked. As a result, he knew a great deal about the ship and how it functioned, but he was forbidden to go into the steering room or the map room. He had nothing but a few clothes which had been provided by the ship's commander. He slept in the hold on bales of some kind of soft fabric that had been there since he came aboard.

Alex was disoriented because of his isolation and rarely thought of the world beyond the limits of the ship. As the storm grew more violent, Alex wedged himself between two bales to keep from being thrown around.

Is this how I end? I'm lost to everyone and everything I ever knew. Oh, Sara, we might have been parents by now if only... Now to sink in an unknown ocean with no one.

He drifted into a fearful sleep. Sometime in the night there was a resounding crash which brought him back to reality. Water was flowing into the hold. Above deck, he could hear the crew shouting. The bales of fabric had shifted, and he was tightly wedged and couldn't free himself. There was then

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another grinding crash. He could see nothing, but could hear the ribs of the ship breaking and cargo banging.

Alex buried his face in the bales and waited for the end, but there was no end. As the ship broke apart, the tightly bound bales floated free of the ship. When it was light, Alex raised his head and looked around. There was no sign of the ship or the crew; an empty ocean with a few bales of fabric floating near him. On the horizon, which he was drifting toward, he could see land jutting up.

These bales are floating pretty low. I hope they don't sink before I wash ashore. I need to get myself free of these damned things and be ready. I might actually have a chance of surviving.

As the fabric soaked up water, it expanded and squeezed him tighter. After a frantic struggle, he got his arms free and his shoulders out, and then inch by inch he wiggled himself out.

There are the breakers; it won't be long now. I've got to be ready.

He crouched on his bale and waited. The breakers rolled the stacked bales over and threw Alex into the ocean. Some careful and determined swimming brought him to shore. He staggered up the beach above the high tide line and lay down under a shrub to organize his thoughts.

From a prison ship in a storm to solid land in the sunshine in one night, what now?

The country was barren with some minor sea cliffs about a quarter of a mile back from the ocean. Alex remained under his bush trying to regain his composure until his clothes dried. His boots would be wet for a while.

I'd better look for food and water. At least there was that on the ship.

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The sun was well up when Alex bestirred himself. He took a close look at the fabric bales that had saved him. With his small ship's utility knife he cut open a bundle. The material was finely woven and thin, but a uniform dull brown. On impulse, he cut off a piece large enough to make a cloak. He stuffed it in his shirt and turned his back on the sea and headed for the cliffs. They were broken in many places, and there were numerous paths to the top, except it wasn't the top. Behind the cliffs were additional hills and behind them gently sloping mountains with thick forest cover and occasional rock exposures.

An hour or two into his walk he came upon a small stream, barely a trickle, but he was able to wash the salt out of his mouth and off of his face and hands.

There's no way to take any water with me, but there's no use staying here. If there's no water further on, I'll have to come back.

It was well past noon when he came to the forested country and the mountains. He found running water and a familiar type of berry bush.

Well, it won't be like mother's berry pies, but it'll have to do. A nice meat stew would help a lot too.

He sat down and ate his fill knowing that in a few hours this many berries would go through him in a rush. After a rest, he continued on his way. The trail became steeper as he climbed into the mountains. On a high limestone cliff to his left was a large cave opening.

That might be a good place to rest and get out of sight, although there doesn't seem to be any people in this area.

That thought brought a blast of fear that almost dropped him to his knees.

On the other hand, it doesn't seem like good idea. I'll get on up the trail.

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With that, the tightness in his stomach eased and his heart slowed and Alex continued on. By late afternoon, he was deep in the forest. He was on a trail up a narrow canyon, and he began to see signs of human presence; a tree stump cut by an ax, or a log thrown across a stream. The trail was better and not only a game trail, although he'd seen no game and only a few birds.

Near the head of the canyon, he came upon a small glade where he decided to spend the night. His feet were sore from walking in wet boots. The sun was setting, and he could feel the cold creeping in.

There's a tree full of nuts. I wonder if they're fit to eat. I guess I'll find out.

He picked up as many nuts as he could carry and walked over to a large downed tree. His favorite berry bush was growing nearby. He made a feast of foul tasting nuts and delicious berries. When it got dark, he covered himself with his fabric and some leaves next to the tree and went to sleep. Sometime later he awoke with a severe pain in his stomach. He barely got his pants down in time to keep from soiling his clothes, but he would need a bath sometime soon. He was up and down the rest of the night. He would have left his pants off, but it was too cold.

This hasn't been a good day for me, but I'm still alive, and I can only hope tomorrow will be better.

After the sun had been up awhile and the air warmed a little, he washed himself in the cold mountain stream.

I'll skip breakfast unless I find someone cooking bacon and eggs. There must be people around here somewhere. There are more signs all the time.

Alex continued up the trail which led him out of the canyon and over a pass. From there he could see a few more mountains and hills and then a plain stretching into the hazy

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distance. He had only walked a few miles when he met by a group of mounted men.

“Hey guys, good to see you. I wasn’t sure there was anyone around here.”

“What are you doing here? This is part of the King’s forest. No one is allowed up here without permission,” the leader answered.

“I was shipwrecked yesterday and barely made it to safety. I’ve been walking inland to find some people and some food.”

“Oh ho, a smuggler or a spy, they all say they were shipwrecked when they try to sneak into the country. There’s no food for spies. You won’t need it anyway.”

“No sir, I’m not a spy or anything like that. I don’t even know where I am. I was a sailor’s helper on some ship. They captured me and took me away from my home.”

“Where are your identity papers and where are you from?”

“I have no papers. I don’t even know what that is. My home was on Andra Island before they took me away.”

“Well, I think you’re a spy, and I never heard of Andra Island. What’s that under your shirt?”

“It’s a piece of cloth I salvaged when the ship went down. I’m going to make a cloak for myself when I get the chance.”

“Let me see it. It may be contraband.” Alex pulled the fabric out of his shirt and showed the questioner, but he kept a firm hold of it.

“I think I’ll execute you here and now. I’ve never seen the likes of this cloth. I’m sure there’s nothing like this in the entire kingdom.”

Another rider rode forward and said firmly,

“I think not sergeant. There’s more to this story that we need to learn.”

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“As you say Captain,” the sergeant replied backing his horse away.

“You said something to the effect that you were pressed into service on a ship that you don’t know anything about. How long were you there?”

“I don’t know, sir. There was no way for me to keep track of time; probably a couple of turns. I was fifteen when they took me. I couldn’t understand their language, and they wouldn’t teach me. We never came to port except to get food and water. I slept in the hold, and the cargo never changed.”

“I don’t want to believe you, but I will for the present. Hang on to your cloak. It may save your life. Sergeant, have the men rearrange the loads on the pack horses to free one up. We’re taking this boy to see the king. Do you know how to ride a horse boy?”

“No sir, I never saw a live one until now. We had pictures of them at home.”

“Home? Where is Andra Island?”

“I don’t know how to tell you, sir. It’s in the bottom half of the world far away from all other land. I’m sorry, but I can barely think. I haven’t been able to talk to anyone for a long time.”

“Tie him on one of the horses and give him a slab of dried beef to chew on. Have a detail take him back to our base. We can send him down to the plain tomorrow. He knows things the king will be interested in.”

Two men were assigned to lead Alex and his horse back to their base and hold him until the Captain could make arrangements to move him to Kingston.

And I thought yesterday was a bad day. What is this all about anyway?

As they rode along, Alex repeatedly tried to strike up a conversation, but his guards were reluctant to answer him.

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“Could you at least tell me what turn it is?”

“It’s the ninth month of 91. Have you been at sea that long?”

“Yes sir, I have. It was three of 89 when they took me. They’d never talk to me. Now I know I was 18 last month.”

“That’s too bad. Now you’ll be subject to the law as a man not a boy. Are they having babies on your home island?”

“Well yes, as far as I know. Don’t they have them here?”

“Not here, boy, but that’s enough talk. I’m not supposed to tell you anything. The Captain said the King will tell you what you need to know.”

They arrived at the base late in the afternoon. It was located in a small farming village, tucked between two hills. Alex could see livestock grazing on the sides of the hills. He could see people walking around going about their business. The younger women were provocatively dressed, and since he hadn’t seen a woman in over two turns, Alex was intensely interested.

“Why are they dressed like that?” he asked his guard.

“I’m sure you’d like to know, but you don’t need to. Now get off your horse, and I’ll put you in your cell.”

Alex nearly fell when he dismounted, and his muscles screamed in pain as his guards helped him up and led him downstairs beneath the office building into a nearly dark cell. He was given water, a waste bucket, and a piece of dried meat. There was a small window at the top of the cell which looked out into the street where scantily dressed women paraded by. Alex tried not to look.

Are things getting better or worse? I guess I have a few days to live until the king decides what to do with me. In some ways this is better than the ship. At least I kind of know what’s going on, and there are girls to look at.

After three nights in the cell, the Captain appeared.

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“We’re taking you to the King today. Be polite and tell everything you know to the King, and don’t ask dumb questions, it may save your life. Do you understand that it’s a death sentence to be in the kingdom without permission?”

“Yes sir, I’ll do my best, but I’m not hopeful. Things haven’t gone well for me the last few turns.”

“Come then. I’ve a cart for you. You won’t be up for the long ride. Do you have your cloak?”

“Yes sir.”

Alex was led out of the building and into a closed in cart. Two young women smiled and waved at him as he was locked in. There was about a foot of straw in the bottom of the cart which made the ride a lot more comfortable. It took two days to reach Kingston. When they arrived, Alex was put in a cell near the palace. The palace was little more than a large frame building with stone floors and a stockade around it. The cell was made of stone with a slate roof and heavy doors. There was no opportunity to watch women walking by. He was instructed to bathe and wash his clothes in the vat of water provided, and be ready after the morning meal.

“Good morning, boy, let’s see what the king has in store for you. As of now, he has no knowledge about you. I’ll do what I can for you, but it’s up to you to save your own life,” the Captain told him as he led him from his cell for the audience.

The king was a man in his fifties with graying hair and a hard scarred face. There was no one in the room but four armed guards standing behind him. The Captain appeared to know the King. After the formalities the Captain repeated to the king the story Alex had told him.

“Call my scholar Jimson. He may know something of this Andra Island. I’ve not heard of it,” the King said to one of his guards. “Now boy, let me see this cloak of yours.”

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No one asked his name, nor did any of them give their names. This rankled him a little, but he said nothing and pulled out his cloak material from under his shirt.

“Here it is, sir. The Captain said I should hold on to it.”

“I should say. This material is from the home world. I have one little piece hidden away as a keepsake. This piece would buy you a large estate and a fine home if your situation were different. Where did you get this, boy?”

“The ship I was on had ten large bales in the hold. I slept on them because they were so comfortable. When the ship broke up in the night I rode one of them to the safety of the shore. I saw that several other stacks washed up on shore. I thought the fabric might make a nice cloak so I pulled a piece out and cut it off.”

“I see, and you had no idea of their value or their use.”

“No sir, they were always there in the hold as long as I was aboard ship. I’m a boy from a small fishing village. I don’t know much about this world.”

“If you’ll freely give me this fabric, I promise I’ll give you a serviceable cloak and not have you executed.

“Yes sir, I will. That’s a better deal than a large estate.”

“Did you, by any chance walk by a large cave on your way from the sea to the place where you were arrested?”

“Do you mean the one up on the side of that big cliff?”

“Yes, did you investigate it?”

“Oh no sir, I thought about it, and then I was scared out of my wits.”

“Ok, Captain, we know where he came ashore. Can you get to that beach quickly by land or sea?”

“I’ll try, sir, but I have little time. The fall storms will soon be here, and they could wash everything out to sea.”

“Then ride now, Captain. There’s a great deal of wealth and other advantages for you and the entire kingdom.”

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The Captain bowed and left without another word.

Damn, I thought I had a friend.

Jimson, the scholar, walked in as the Captain left. He questioned Alex closely about the ship and the crew and even the language they spoke. He clearly knew nothing about those people or their ships.

“I’ve heard of your island, and I found it on my maps, but I didn’t know it was inhabited. I’m told no litro grows there. Tell me what you know of this island.”

“I was born there. My mother told me the family and many of our neighbors had been there since 04. There are about a dozen villages that I know about. People are fishermen and farmers. Ships rarely come to call.”

“How many children are there in your family?”

“There are six of us. I’m the oldest.”

“And how many children do you think are on the island?”

“I never thought about that sir, I suppose a couple hundred at least in the communities I know about.”

I don’t think they need to know I got Sara pregnant before I was taken away. There’s something funny about these questions.

“Alright Boy, here’s your sentence. It is the best I can do for you since you’ve broken our basic law. You can’t stay in the kingdom even though the Captain has requested you to be one of his soldiers. You’ll be deported to a place so that you can’t return here. I’ll hold you in your cell until we have a ship for you,” the king announced.

Jimson leaned over and whispered something to the King. “I’ll give you one leniency. You may have visitors, and you’ll be fed well while you wait.”

Jimson leaned over again and whispered something else to the King.

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“One other thing, Boy, You’ll not be allowed to have any litro in any form.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Do you know what litro is, Boy?”

“No sir, I never heard of it.”

“Good enough, take him away.”

As Alex was leaving, Jimson whispered in his ear, “Don’t eat or drink any litro no matter who offers it. Your future depends on it. I’ll explain later.”

Alex was led to a cell which had a softer bed, a table and a comfortable chair. When lunch came, it was served by a young woman with almost no clothes on. She offered him more than lunch, and he accepted. When supper came, the woman was somewhat older, but with the same offer which he also accepted.

I guess the King is showing his appreciation. I’m not sure what’s going on here, but it’s been such a long time since I have been around any women.

There was a woman for every meal. Each gave him her name and called him by his. It was the first time he had heard his name spoken by someone in over two turns. At lunch on the third day his server was a thirtyish woman who identified herself as Alisha, the King’s daughter. She was a married and experienced woman who treated him with kindness and enthusiasm. On the morning of the fourth day there was no breakfast and no server. Instead, a fat, sweaty jailer informed him that his ship was ready, and he’d be deported within the hour.

Of course, it wasn’t a ship, but his closed in cart which would take him to the port five days away. He received his prisoner ration and the cart door was locked. There was a chilly wind blowing. The season was changing, and it would

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soon be cold. Apparently, the King had forgotten to provide him with a cloak as he had promised.

I don't understand what that was all about, but it was fun. I don't think I could have lasted much longer. There were so many. Eight, I guess, and what were their names? Tanya was first and then Marie, and then a bunch in the middle, Alisha the princess, and the last one was Sonja. I doubt I'll ever see them again. I'd have liked seconds with some of them. All of this craziness, and then back on some ship.

His cart slowly rolled by the farms and the woods. At night there was a warm cell in some unnamed village with no friendly server, and back in the cart the next morning. He thought vaguely of escape, but knew there was no real hope in it even if some generous lady decided to take him in. On the afternoon of the fifth day they came to a larger town, and he smelled the salt air and rotting fish. He was taken out of his cart at the dock, put aboard a large ship, and locked in the hold. There were no nice bales of fabric to sleep on, but in the darkness he was able to find a place that was dry and comfortable.

Sometime in the night the ship put to sea. He awoke to the familiar rocking motion, gave a relieved sigh and went back to sleep. A voice jarred him out of his sleep,

“Come topside if you want breakfast, otherwise, you’re locked down until supper.”

Alex got up and climbed the ladder to the deck. One of the seamen led him to the galley. “What did you do to get yourself exiled, lad?” the seaman asked.

“I was in the kingdom illegally. I was shipwrecked and walked through the countryside looking for food and people, and I was arrested and thrown in prison. The King said I was to be deported, and here I am.”

“Well, you’re lucky you weren’t shot on sight.”

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“Yeah, I know. There were a bunch of strange things happened that I don’t understand. I was a captive on the ship as a seaman’s helper, but none of them spoke our language. The Captain and the King were really interested in that.”

“Then you could probably lend a hand if the sea gets really rough.”

“You’d have to teach me stuff. This ship is different in a lot of ways.”

“We’ll worry about that later. You’ve a good many weeks with us. Keep in mind you’re under guard, and I can’t risk being friendly with you.”

“I’ll do my best, but I haven’t been able to talk to anyone for so long that I can barely hold myself back.”

“Normally, you could talk with the others being deported, but for some reason we were sent on this voyage with you as the only exile. Now here’s the mess. You can eat with the rest of the sailors, and then one of us will escort you back to the hold. If you cause trouble, you’ll be locked in the brig.”

“Oh, one thing, I was ordered by the King’s scholar to never consume litro in any form on fear of my life.

“That’s a strange order. Every man I know eats it. Okay, let’s find a ship’s officer and see what he says about that.”

The ship’s officer didn’t receive the request well from an exiled prisoner, but after some discussion, agreed to talk to the Captain.

“If this prisoner doesn’t want to eat litro, then he doesn’t have to. Don’t make any preparation exceptions for him. Give him only those things which have no litro in them, and lock him in the brig so he won’t be exposed to any.”

“You’re down to salt meat and dried fruit, but I’ll do what I can for you,” the seaman said as he led him to the brig.

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I don't think the King's reliable. First he forgets to give me a cloak, and then he doesn't tell the Captain about the litro.

A month passed and then part of another. Alex had only been on deck a few times to help with minor ship repairs, and one time he filled in for a seaman who was ill.

“Well Alex, get ready. The ship’s officer says tonight is the night you to leave the ship for your exile. The land is harsh, but what you need to know is that to the north, on your right, is the territory of many of the men who are exiled. They live violent and bitter lives. On the left there are some rocks and caves and a limited habitable area. You’d do well to try for that area at least until you get an understanding of your environment. The tribe of men will have spotted the ship by now and will be waiting for you. I’ll tell the crew in the dingy to drop you off as far south as they dare,” his friendly seaman instructed.

About midnight Alex was taken from his cell and put over the side into a small dingy which had four rowers. He was given a generous packet of dried beef.

“Good bye and good luck, Alex. We’d have liked to have you as a crew member, but the Captain said we didn’t dare since this was the King’s business,” the ship’s officer told him.

“Be quiet. Often sounds travel over water, and we could be heard,” one of the rowers said softly.

Alex waited disheartened and frightened. The sea was quiet with only low rollers headed for the shore.

Chapter VII

NIGHT FIGHT

After two days the skies cleared. Alex decided this was the opportunity to get the boat. They waited for evening darkness at the back door. They'd seen no men on the beach since the morning after the rescue. Alex, Leona, and three fisher women made their way down the pillar followed by Anna and the guard squad. The tide was going out.

"No talking, grunting, giggling, gasping or any other human noises until we're out in the water," Alex instructed in a whisper.

They went into the cave to get the boat and could feel the dark pressure from somewhere. With four on each side, they picked up the boat and walked quickly out of the cave. There was enough starlight that they could make out the gap between the rocks. In a couple of minutes, they were at the water's edge.

"Leona, you four get in the boat quietly, and I'll help push into deeper water," Alex instructed softly.

Alex pushed the boat out shoulder deep while four stood guard on the beach. Alex climbed in, and they began to row. The ebbing tide drew them out.

"Steer away from the rocks as best we can. I can't see a damned thing," Alex said. The soft swishing of the small breakers washed out all sound from the shore.

"Don't worry about it Alex, I know these waters; pull on the oars and keep a sharp ear for waves on the rocks. Alex set his feet on whatever was in the bottom of the boat and put his back into rowing.

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“Not so hard Alex, the other side isn’t as strong as you are. You’re pulling us toward the rocks. Did anyone think to bring a fishing pole?” Leona asked.

All she got was some muffled grunts for her effort. When they could no longer hear the water splashing against the rocks, Leona steered south.

“I know there are some rocks out here, but I think the tide is still high enough to hold us above them,” Leona said as the bottom scraped on something.

The next surge lifted them off, and they continued. Before long, the stars in the west told them they were past the rocky point, but Leona continued to steer south. Two small lights appeared on the shore.

“Is that our light?” one of the rowers asked.

“The agreement was three lights. We’ll wait.” Leona responded.

When no third light appeared, they made their way to the new fishing rock.

“It’s been nearly an hour, we need to do something,” Alex suggested.

Leona docked the boat against the fishing rock. The women took their spears and got out, and Alex followed with his knife.

“Leona, stay on the boat and pull away from the rock.” Alex requested. “Ok, ladies let’s go quietly to the narrow pass in the rocks, and see what we can learn.”

They crept along the path to the narrow crack in the rocks that Alex had made. There wasn’t a sound but the soft lapping of the water. Susan grabbed his arm and pointed to the dark outline of a person standing about twenty feet away.

“That’s not one of ours. See the way he stands,” Susan whispered in his ear. Alex nodded and pointed it out to Kathy.

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She looked and then nodded in agreement. He drew them back a few feet.

“We have to take him. Any suggestions?”

“He is standing very near the edge of the path. If we rush him, we may be able to push him into the sea,” Kathy suggested.

“That’s good, but we need to seriously wound him, or he’ll make a lot of noise. We creep through the crack. Susan, you guard in case there’s another. Kathy and I’ll rush him. Helen, stay here and guard the crack. Let’s creep along the other side of the rocks until he hears us. You charge first with your spear, and I’ll be right behind with my knife. Try to not go over the edge if you miss him or he dodges.”

“We should’ve brought some security; I’m not very well trained for this.”

“Neither am I, but I know how to gut a big fish. He won’t be able to see us,” Alex replied. “Let’s go.”

They silently worked their way through the crack and edged along the big rock until they were only about ten feet away.

I certainly hope they’re right and this isn’t one of our girls.

As if in answer to his wish, the shadowy figure turned toward them and grunted,

“That you Todd?”

Alex patted Kathy’s arm, and she launched herself toward the figure; Alex followed a step behind. He didn’t see either of them until it was too late and was driven over the edge. He made only a brief shout before he hit the rocks and water below.

“Damn, I lost my spear; I couldn’t get it out in time,” Kathy hissed.

“Alex, help me over here. There’s another one.”

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Alex leapt toward the sound of her voice, but he couldn't see anything. He crashed into the struggling pair. Susan was on the ground, and "Todd" scrambled to his feet to meet his attacker. Alex regained his balance and slammed his knife on the man's arm. He swung wildly again and hit something solid. Alex began to stab in a frenzy, sometimes hitting flesh and sometimes the big rock behind them.

"If you hurt her you bastard, I'll chop you to bits for fish bait."

"Calm down, Alex, I'm alright. You got here in time, and he doesn't seem to be moving. Stay alert Kathy, we made a bunch of noise."

After he recovered his composure, Alex dragged the man out to the path, stripped him, and rolled him over the edge to join his companion.

"He should have a knife and a spear here somewhere."

The knife was found lying next to Susan, but they had to crawl around awhile and found the spear and another knife where Todd had apparently been sleeping.

"Are you okay for sure, Sue?"

"I am. He was going to cut my breasts off as souvenirs and let me bleed to death. He was still cutting my gown open when you got here."

"Here's a spear for you, Kathy. Would you check on Helen? We need to move forward? Hold on to each other and not a sound."

They crept along the path they knew well. They couldn't see anyone hiding in the rocks to their right. They came to the basalt blocks and worked their way around. They were close enough now to hear occasional shouts and curses ahead of them. Alex stopped before he stepped through the narrow opening in the rocks.

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On almost a whim, Alex said, “Pssst, it’s Todd, I’m coming through.”

A dark hulk detached itself from the shadows and moved to the opening. Before he could say a word, he got two spears in the belly. Alex stepped forward and finished him off with his long knife. He did manage to shout in surprise as he collapsed.

They waited.

Is someone else hiding near waiting for us to move? Maybe there are men farther on who are coming this way. How could they know we were moving the boat tonight?

There was darkness with only a little starlight. On the beach there was the noise of people moving around. Alex picked up the guard’s sword, and they started quietly forward. Someone rushed them but stumbled over Kathy who had kneeled down and set her spear. She missed, but the other two women were on him, hacking and stabbing in the darkness, and making a lot of noise. They were at the old fishing rock and it was fifty yards to the tunnel entrance.

“Over here at the little cleft,” Alex whispered, and led them to the lava blocks on the left. They waited, almost afraid to breathe.

“What’s going on out there? Hugh, are you alright?” a voice called out. Silence.

Alex let out a wolf-like howl that reverberated off the surrounding rocks.

“What the hell was that? Hugh, are you there? Jack, are you on the lookout?”

“I’m here Ed and you’re making a hell of a lot of noise. Why don’t you shut up and listen?”

“I think something got Hugh. There was scuffling, and then he didn’t answer.”

CAVE WORLD

“You want me to come and hold your hand? You’re turning into a big pussy.”

“Come down and help me check this area. I’m sure there’s something or someone here, and it’s too dark to see anything.”

“Alright, there isn’t any action near here right now. I’ll help you check.”

Jack came down from the lookout, and they started a circuit of the fishing area.

“I can’t see anything. We could walk right past some attacker and not know it. Maybe it was some kind of sea beast that crawled up and killed Hugh, maybe dragged him into the ocean, or maybe it’s still lurking,” Ed said.

“Well, I don’t know about a sea beast, but if it’s women, you could smell them. Women always smell bad. Now shut up, you’re giving away our position. Whatever it is can’t see us, but it can hear us.

“Do you want to slip over to the beach, or should we take them out?” Alex whispered.

“We can take them; with a little luck, they’ll never know what hit them,” Susan answered.

They could hear the crunch of their feet on the rocks as Ed and Jack worked their way toward Alex and his companions.

“As soon as they step by, out and on them; be careful not to stab anyone of us. I’ll give the signal,” Alex murmured.

When the two of them passed, Alex gave a call like a hungry sea bird which froze the men for a couple of seconds. That was all that was needed; the sword and spears found them, and they went down with only a few grunts.

“Always smell bad, you sorry bastard; you’ll smell worse tomorrow.” Kathy fumed.

“What now? Should we go to the beach or go to the tunnel?” Helen asked.

“Let’s have a look at the tunnel, it’s close,”

Alex answered as he gave both the down men a kick. There was no groan or movement. They crept to the tunnel still not sure of their safety. The door was closed.

Well, that’s a relief at least they didn’t get inside.

Susan knocked a complicated series of raps on the door. In a few minutes the door opened a crack.

“Who’s there?”

“Alex and the boat party, we disposed of the sentries here. What’s going on?”

“Come in quick,” The door swung a little and they wedged their way through.

“Where’s Leona? She was in your party wasn’t she?”

“She’s with the boat.” Alex then explained what had happened.

“What is going on here? There were men everywhere, and it sounds like some nasty activity on the beach,” Susan asked.

“We think this is a revenge attack for the killing the other night. We barely kept them out of this tunnel.”

“You can send word to Hilda that the point is secure, and we could probably attack the men from behind,” Alex suggested. “Two of us could go up on the rocks and hold the path to the beach, if she wants to bring in some fighters.”

A signal from the apparent leader and one of the women ran into the tunnel.

“Alex, why don’t you and Susan take a first watch on the beach path and---My God Susan, what happened to your smock? Lift it up; are you cut?”

Susan lifted her smock. There were several superficial cuts which bled down her abdomen and legs. In the light Alex could see the smock was soaked in blood.

CAVE WORLD

“Alex saved me. That bastard was going to butcher me, but he got a knife in the belly instead.”

“You’d better rest. You and Kathy shouldn’t have gone on the boat mission anyway. Helen, you go with him for now.”

“I’m fine. They’re mostly scratches, and I’m kind of in the mood for revenge,” Susan protested.

“You know the Council decided no pregnant women could go on outside missions. Why did you take them Alex?”

“I didn’t know. Neither one of them told me a thing. Anyway, Helen, let’s get to the top of the path before someone else comes along.”

They slipped out the door and were once more in complete darkness.

“I know the way; I’ve been up this path a lot of times. I want you to understand I’m not a good fighter, and I’m not brave.” Helen whispered in his ear.

After some feeling around, they found the path which was like a rock staircase.

Alex led the way and as he neared the top, he said in a low voice. “It’s Hugh. Is there anyone there?” The only answer was the dark silence. About ten feet down the beach side, there were a narrow couple of steps between two large blocks.

“This is what I was looking for. We can watch from here. No one can get by me. Helen, watch that no one surprises us from the other side.”

They sat in silence for a couple of hours. There were noises on the beach.

“Alex, Helen, are you here?” a voice shocked them to high alert.

“We’re here, but who are you?”

“It’s Anna with about thirty fighters; can we pass?”

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“Come on over, Anna. We need to talk.”

Alex and Helen could make out her dark shape against the sky and then it disappeared as she moved down.

“Where are you?”

“Right here, about three feet away. Have you been down this path before?”

“Once a couple of turns ago in the light.”

“I was afraid of that. It’s only fifty feet to the beach, but it’s steep and rough. Helen, can you lead them? The men may be guarding the bottom so stay alert.”

Helen said she’d go first with Anna behind her; she brought her fighters into position.

“One hand on the person in front of you, and hold your spear with the other for a walking stick. Any movement off the path is the enemy. Let’s go slowly and carefully.” Anna ordered.

Even with a step every five seconds, it didn’t take long until the first of the group was at the bottom.

“Who’s there,” a male voice asked.

“Come and find out, asshole,” Anna replied.

“I will, bitch. We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Don’t rush,” Alex said softly, “you’ll get hurt and not be able to fight. Go at a steady pace.”

All Alex could hear was some scuffling as the last of the fighters passed through the narrow place. He waited. After a while he could hear someone coming up the path.

“It’s me Alex,” Helen said in a weak voice. She came through and sat down.

“Are you alright?”

“I am, but Anna got hurt. Those rocks are so big and rough down there, but we won. There’s no way to know if we got them all. Can I go back to the tunnel?”

CAVE WORLD

“Yeah, go and get our relief. I’ve had about enough for tonight. I’ll watch until they get here.”

Helen ran up the path to safety. It was a half hour until his relief arrived.

“Ho, Alex, are you there?”

“I’m here, come on down. It’s only about ten feet past the top.”

Four figures passed the skyline toward him, and he noted it was getting light.

“Helen said that Anna was hurt, have you heard anything.”

“No, it’s been quiet since Helen left and quiet on the beach. We ought to go down and find her.”

“Ok, you and I can go down, and if she’s there, we can bring her back.”

Alex led the way to the beach. The dim light was enough to see where they were.

“Who’s there?” a female voice asked softly.

“Alex and Jennie,” his companion answered.

“We came to find what happened in the fight. Helen said Anna was hurt.”

“She’s dead. Took a spear in the chest and fell backwards into a hole in the rocks. I could barely get down to her. We killed six of them; damn I hate fighting in the dark. The rest of the squad left us here to guard the trail and went the beach. There hasn’t been a sound since. There may be a couple hiding in the rocks for all we can tell.”

“You two keep watch, and Jennie and I’ll see if we can get her out,” Alex said.

The guard pointed where Anna fell, and the two of them worked their way to the bottom. Her crumpled body lay wedged between two jagged rocks.

This is going to be tough; I wish we had a rope.

Her body was still warm, and completely limp.

“Get up above me, Jennie and hang on to her arms. I’ll lift and you hold her until I can get new footing.”

They pulled, gasped, and struggled for twenty minutes to get her up ten feet. Finally, Jennie was able to get a hold under her arms and drag her out. Alex looked around to see it was light. He saw bodies scattered all the way to the end of the rocks.

“It looks like it’s over. I don’t see anyone alive out there,” one of the guards said.

“If the beach is safe, I need to bring in the boat. I presume Leona is waiting for us. Someone needs to tell the guards at the little door to be ready for us.” Alex said. “I’m going back to the tunnel and get a crew that can row us in. The peninsula should be safe, but I’m taking no chances.”

“We’ll send a runner as soon as we get word.”

Alex and Jennie started up the trail leaving Anna’s body for the troops. They stopped to brief the lookout guards. When they got to the tunnel, the door was open.

I hope that’s a good sign; we cleaned them out on the peninsula.

The tunnel was still controlled by the women, who were waiting for the sunrise.

“I need three people who can row and who can fight if necessary. I have my mission to accomplish.” Susan and Kathy were sleeping, and three were quickly found.

“In about a half hour send out a party to gather weapons and anything of value on the dead men, and make sure they’re dead. There’s a chance there may be others hiding, so watch. Two guys went in the water near the new fishing rock. They were well armed. Try to recover their stuff,” Alex ordered.

The four of them left to find Leona and the boat. In the daylight it was only a fifteen minute walk to the new rock.

CAVE WORLD

There were no signs of life along the way. Leona was sitting in the boat a hundred yards off shore. They hailed her, and she rowed back.

“Watch behind us. It’s possible some of the men are waiting to capture the boat. I won’t feel safe until this thing’s in the tunnel,” Alex said.

The seabirds were flying, looking for food and the morning breeze had started, but there was nothing else. Leona brought the boat in close to the rock and the three women quickly jumped in. Alex took one more look and climbed in. They picked up the oars and rowed out into the bay.

I don’t think they knew about the boat. We picked a bad night to move it.

“Do you want to take it in now?” Leona asked.

“No, not until we get a signal. There was a fight on the beach last night, but our side won.”

They rowed out for a direct run to the little door and waited for a signal. Finally, they saw three people waving what appeared to be lights, but the sun had come up over the ocean and washed all other light.

“That’s it; let’s go. Hit it rowers,” Leona ordered, and they pulled for the shore.

These three don’t know the first thing about rowing, but it’s not that far now.

Alex and Leona gave the new rowers instructions as best they could, but they weren’t strong and had a hard time coordinating their strokes. Alex could see some of his last night companions waving from the peninsula. Even though the tide was going out, they had some assist from the waves as the water grew shallow.

“Row until we run aground, and then get out, and we’ll carry it ashore,” Leona commanded. “We’ve a greeting party, but they look friendly.”

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Then they heard the grating of the sand on the bottom. A little wave gave them a lift and pushed them onto the beach.

“Ok, everybody out,” Leona ordered. They were met with a lot of help.

“Let’s get this in the little door as quickly as we can.” Alex said.

“Will it fit? The boat looks awfully big for that little entrance,” one of the volunteers asked.

“Hilda said it would, and if it doesn’t, she’ll have to find a way. I’m done with this expedition,” Alex answered. As it turned out, Hilda was waiting at the door.

“Set the boat down right there. We have to move this large rock first,” Hilda ordered.

Some wedge rocks were removed, but it took four of them to turn the big slab. The boat went in easily; they pushed the slab back and drove in the wedge rocks.

“Alex, you’re covered with blood. What happened; are you hurt?” Hilda asked.

“I’m not hurt at all. This is from the men who were guarding the peninsula.”

“Well, don’t let Carmen see you like that. She sat in the dining room all night worrying, fussing, and crying. You’d better wash up or she’ll go into shock.”

“Ok, as soon as I get somewhere. Right now I want to see what the King gave us. Let’s carry all this stuff to the dining room where there’s better light.”

“Here, Alex, I’ll trade you smocks. Mine doesn’t have any blood on it,” said one of the rowers and whipped off her only article of clothing.

“Are you sure you want this bloody thing?”

“Yes, now take it off; I want to see what you look like.”

They exchanged garments.

CAVE WORLD

“Now hold still, I’ve some water here, and I’ll wash your arms and face so you don’t look like a gory mess,” Leona said as she stepped forward.

The women picked up all of the packages and bundles in the boat leaving Alex nothing to do but follow behind with Hilda.

“Alex, when do you want to do the debriefing? I was thinking about midday.”

“Before supper. We don’t even know if everything is over, and we have a lot of people outside on recovery. How about a short while before supper? I need some sleep, and I’ll need to spend some time with Carmen. I want see what the King sent us, and inventory in consultation with the new exiles before we all meet.”

“That sounds fine to me. You’re right; there are quite a few loose ends to tie up.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that Susan and Kathy were pregnant? They shouldn’t have been allowed to go on any mission. Susan was almost killed and they were both severely stressed. It was a hard and scary fight.”

“Let’s deal with that at the debriefing along with everything else.”

“How many women were killed?”

“I don’t know, more than ten. Don’t ask me any more questions about last night until later.”

They entered the dining room and piled their loot in the corner, and sat down for breakfast. Alex walked to where Carmen was sitting.

“I don’t know whether I hate you or love you. I died or wished to a hundred times last night. Please tell me you won’t do that anymore.”

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“I can’t promise. This is my main job. You knew you’d have to accept my obligations, and if you couldn’t, we shouldn’t get together.”

“Then I should hate you, and we can stay apart. I’m better off alone.”

“Every wife of every fisherman who went to sea went through this. Every time he sailed away, she didn’t know if he’d come home, and many didn’t. He didn’t know if she would be there when he returned without him to care for her, sometimes she ran off with another man, died, or was killed in an accident. So fisher families say, ‘We have today, let us make the most of it, and if one of us is lost, the survivor will have the memories’.”

“I know you’re right, but the first day after we got together was a little soon. I’m not very tough. I can’t hate you, but I can hate this prison we’re in. Will we have time to be together today?”

“Yes we’ll have breakfast and then we can go to our room. I need to rest. There’ll be debriefing late this afternoon. I’m worried about my friends, but it’ll have to wait.”

They were about to leave after the meal when Susan came up to Alex and kissed him firmly.

“Thank you for saving me; it was close. I’ll have nightmares for a long time.”

“I’m glad I could do it, especially now that I know your condition, but your gown needs changed since it’s blood soaked and hanging wide open.”

“I’ve got to see the medic, and then I’ll have a bath and change. Then I’m going to bed. I’ll see you at the debriefing.”

Alex explained what had nearly happened to Susan as they walked hand in hand back to their room. Behind them was a certain amount of clapping and cheering.

CAVE WORLD

Late in the afternoon, the community assembled to discuss the events of the previous evening. Hilda led the discussion.

“We were attacked yesterday evening near the little door by a large number of men. The thing that upset us was we were waiting for Alex and his boat. The men didn’t know we were moving the boat. We were unprepared and were forced back inside, and into the rocks. We were able to send a signal which we hoped would stop the boat. The struggle went on all night. Alex and his crew killed seven men in clearing the peninsula. We killed eleven others on the beach, but in doing so we lost eight. When we were able to attack from the fishing port, we were able to drive them off the beach. By daylight they had retreated back north. The boat and its goods are safe. Alex and his crew were unknowingly coming right into the middle of a major attack. The things we got from the boat were two good bows with arrows, knives, clothing, a letter, and a good cloak from the King for Alex, a variety of personal items for our six exiles, a pair of binoculars, and a number of hand tools. The personal items and clothing for the six exiles were mostly for Alisha. We collected twenty spears, eighteen knives, five swords and a variety of armor and other metals from the men who were killed. As a result of this battle, we are much better armed than we were, but we must grieve the loss of our fighters, Anna, Erica, Julie, Calli, Anita, Eva, Marlene and Greta. We’ll hold services for them tomorrow. Again, I thank Alex and his crew for their brave and effective clearing of the peninsula. The men have taken some serious losses in the past week, and I’m not sure what they’ll do next,” Hilda related.

She called on various individuals to tell their part of the story. Susan and Jennie left them stunned. Leona told of her long night in the boat off shore unable to do anything but

protect its contents. After everyone had spoken, there were few questions beyond what was to be done next time. Hilda assured them that with the new weapons that there would be additional training for a more offensive posture.

Alex took his letter and stepped next to light to read it. ‘Alex, take care of my daughter and her companions as best you can. There was no safety for her or you in the kingdom. It appears that our attempts to send supplies to the women have met with failure. I guess the ships crews send the supplies, and exiles where they want. We’ve had almost no communication we could trust with either colony. Try to let me know if the babies come out ok.’

Well, that redeems the King some in my eyes, but he still takes litro.

“What did Daddy say?” Alisha asked. She had followed him and was standing near as he read.

“He said to take care of you and your group and to let him know when the babies are born. What he really said is we need to find a way to communicate with him that doesn’t go through the sailors.”

“Well, I don’t think there’s any way to do that. It’s a long way to the kingdom.”

“I have a couple of favors to ask of you.”

“Glad to, if you’ll do me a favor once in a while, but I guess not for now.”

“I know you were educated some, could you draw me a map of the world, so I could get an idea where Andra is and where the kingdom is, and tell me the names of your companions. I never did get them straight in my mind.”

“I can do both if there’s something to write on. The six of us are me, Tanya, Marie, Ellen, Ruth, and Sonja. If things settle down, maybe we can all sit down together and get to know you since you’re the dad.”

CAVE WORLD

“That sounds like fun, and I’ll bring Carmen. She needs to get to know you. Ask Hilda where to draw the map, maybe a tunnel wall will work.”

Alex started back into the dining room when he met Susan.

“Maxine said I was okay and the baby was happy. I have to be careful to not get the cuts infected. Can I eat supper with you?”

“You can if you want to share me with Carmen. She’s my mate, and the rest of you have to be only friends and work companions. Carmen needs to be your friend also.

“She is, but after last night, I want you to understand how much you did for me. I could be dead out there on the rocks, but now I have a chance to see my baby.”

They walked into the dining room and sat down by Carmen.

When supper was over, Hilda sat down across from them.

“Alex, I need to talk to you my office. We have a new event and sorry ladies, I’m not going to talk about it in the dining room, but you’ll know soon enough.”

Alex left his two companions at the table and went with Hilda. She closed the door to the office.

“We captured a man on the point. He had fallen in the dark and wedged his leg in the rocks. So far he has been pretty docile. Should we kill him?”

“You’re the leader here, and I was told that killing was your rule, but then you made an exception for me. On the other hand, he might be willing to tell us things we need to know about the men’s settlement.”

“How would we do that? They seem to be pretty defiant.”

“Lock him in a room, immobilize him, give him food and water, but don’t give him any litro, or maybe give him a little in return for information. If men get as desperate as I have

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heard, he'll be willing to tell all. In the end we might find out if men can be weaned off litro. In any case, he can't ever leave our compound."

"That sounds cruel; maybe we should give him the choice of being a prisoner or death."

"No, from what I've seen, he'll choose death, and we'll learn nothing. The cruel thing was when they were addicted to that stuff."

"Do you want to question him?"

"No, at least I don't think so. I'm not sure how he would react. At the beginning he should have no knowledge of me. I can suggest questions, but all of you know more about these men than I do."

"Fine, we'll do it that way, but there has never been litro inside the compound, and most of us are afraid of it."

"Then have Maxine handle and administer it like a deadly poison, and no one else is to be allowed near it, especially me and the pregnant women. We probably won't need more than a half dozen small bulbs. This may take several weeks."

"Ok, I'll tell her. Another small thing, If Carmen is going to sleep with you every night, when will the rest of us get a turn?"

"You're the leader here. I'm not going to get involved in that decision as long as you treat me right. It would be best to find a time when Carmen is working in the garden. She'll know what is happening, but won't have to watch me go with another woman. Why don't you give us a week or so together before you decide."

Alex left and went back to the dining hall where Carmen and Susan were still sitting talking.

"Ok Alex, what's up," Carmen asked.

"I can't say right here, but I'll tell you both privately."

CAVE WORLD

“Let’s all three of us go to our room and we can talk about it. Susan and I have been friends for a long time, but we haven’t had much time together lately.”

While they were talking in their private room, Janice, Angie and two other guards brought the bound and blindfolded prisoner in on a makeshift stretcher.

“First we strip him completely, and then we’ll get Maxine to look at his leg,” Janice ordered.

“What’s your name, man?” Angie asked.

“I’m Mike, Mike Acheson. I don’t know why you care; you bitches are a bunch of man haters.”

“Well Mike, you’re going to be here for a while. If you cooperate, there’ll be less pain,” Janice told him.

After his clothes were taken, he was carefully tied to the bed. “We’ll get you a smock to keep you warm later.” Angie told him. “If you do anything violent, you’ll be tied spread eagled, and you can lie in your body waste.”

Later, Maxine came in to examine the prisoner. “Hello, Mike you don’t look as good as you did. You were a handsome boy when we landed thirty-eight turns ago.”

“We’ve both been through a lot since then. You don’t look so good yourself, Maxie Johnson, and we both got ourselves exiled here,” Mike spat.

Maxine examined Mike’s leg. “You’ve a bad bruise, probably clear to the bone, but the leg’s not broken. We’ll keep you off of it for a while.”

Mike growled.

“There’s water within reach, and you can relieve yourself in that bucket. There’ll be food in the morning.” Maxine then left him in the darkness and barred the door.

Susan left her friends late in the evening. Alex had a feeling that she and Carmen had reached an understanding with regard to sharing him.

KERRY BURNS

I'm not sure that I'm comfortable with that, but it may be the best way to do it.

The following morning, Alex and Carmen were walking to the dining hall when they passed part of the guard patrol taking breakfast to the prisoner. Mike had not moved in the darkness, but the squad was ready if he had managed to untie himself.

"Here's your breakfast, Mike. Fish and bread, like the rest of us got. We're a little short on the fish since our fishing got disrupted yesterday." Janice announced.

Mike struggled to a half sitting position.

"How can you stand this darkness; it's like a grave and not a sound. I thought a couple of times I could hear something coming for me."

"You get used to it after a while," Estelle answered.

Mike began to eat, and after a few bites he stopped. "I can't taste any litro in this."

"That's because there isn't any in it. Litro has never been permitted inside the compound. You'll have to get used to it." Estelle replied.

"But I'll die without it. Men can't eat food grown on this world without litro to counter the poisons."

"That's a bunch of nonsense. There are men on this world who don't use litro and never have. There are babies born on this world. I happen to know about these things from personal experience. Litro is only a nasty addictive weed. You'll be better off without it."

"What about withdrawal symptoms. I've seen some men in terrible pain when their litro was withheld."

"We'll work with you on that. You might want to think about what you have to offer in exchange."

CAVE WORLD

“You dirty bitches, what do you want? You’re all probably pretty hard up without any man to take care of your unending needs.”

“Think about it, Mike. Now finish your breakfast; we’ve a lot of other duties to attend to today.”

Mike finished his food and the squad left him in darkness. Estelle stopped at the dining room and sat down with Alex and Carmen. She had a wicked, self-satisfied smile.

“Hilda will make an announcement today. As you know, there’s a large group who absolutely want no men in the compound, and they’d hit the roof if they thought we’d bring in litro. We’re softening him up already,” she whispered in his ear and then went back to her squad.

“Maybe I’ll stay out of sight for most of the day. Carmen, do you want to help me refill the fertilizer pond?”

“Sure, but aren’t we going to wait to see if our seeds grow in fertilized soil?”

“Oh yeah, let’s go out to the green house and see if anything is coming up, and after that I’ll go down to the weapons room or maybe go fishing.”

“Surely my warrior hero isn’t afraid of thirty men-hating women who saw eight of their friends murdered.”

“Surely I am. I might win them over in due time, but I don’t want included in with the litro takers. I want them to cool down for a while.”

They went outside where it was cloudy and warm. There was no sign of green in the rows yet. Carmen closed the door to the greenhouse and wrapped herself around him.

“There isn’t enough privacy here. I want to kiss on you all of the time, but I know I shouldn’t. We both have work to do. If we only have today, let’s make it count.”

I know I’m still holding back a little, but I can’t let this romance interfere with my duties. There’s too much to be

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done. Before I know it there'll be ten babies and who knows how many more exiles.

“Ok, Carmen, a few kisses and then we need to check our potted plants. It feels awfully good to have you tight against me like this.”

Little stems and leaves had pushed up out of the dirt in the fertilized pots. The vegetables planted earlier were up and putting on second and third leaves.

“The weather will be safe in another week, and we can plant these. If the others thrive, we can fertilize later,” Carmen suggested.

“If you or your gardeners have time, look at every square inch in the court yard as a place to plant food. A few small rocks to build a place to hold some soil will grow a couple of onions or a tomato plant. Even up by the cistern, there are some potential places. It'll be a lot of work, but we need the food.”

“That sounds like a lot of trouble for a plant here and there, but I'll take a look and see how much land we're not using.”

“Ok Carmen, I have to go to the weapons repair area and inventory what we got, and see if I can find uses for it. I want to look at those bows the King sent us. Jean is alright, but she isn't very imaginative.”

“Well, she can imagine you as her permanent lover. That's probably all she's thinking about these days.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Alex, everyone knows everything. They probably know when and where you go to the toilet.”

“Oh, I've heard that before, but I've never lived in this kind society. I'll see you at supper if not sooner.”

Alex left the greenhouse and noticed there were two women working in the garden near the windows.

CAVE WORLD

I guess she's right about spying on people, especially me.

Alex hurried to the weapons repair room; the bows had barely been unwrapped. Alex picked one up and bent it to hook the bowstring. It was a very stiff bow. He looked around for arrows but didn't see any.

"Jean, where are the arrows for the bows? The King wouldn't have sent only the bows."

"I don't know; what do they look like?"

We need someone else here who knows something about weapons.

"They're round shafts of wood two to three feet long with feathers on one end and a point on the other."

"I saw something like that in a bag somewhere. I don't think they got here."

"Well take some people and find them. It's important. If they fell out of the bag somewhere, pick them up. Check every tunnel they've been in all the way to the boat. We can't afford to lose a single one. I don't have the wood to make new ones yet."

"Well, you don't have to get mad about it. We don't know anything about arrows, besides, you shouldn't be giving us orders. You're not our boss."

"No I'm not, but I'm going to find Hilda right now, and I'll watch for loose arrows along the way."

Alex picked up a small lantern and walked out into the tunnel ignoring Jean's protests. He found a small open bag with a half dozen arrows about half way back to the dining hall, and four more loose ones on the way. Hilda was consulting about the prisoner when Alex entered and gave her his report.

Hilda turned to Barbara, "Detail several women to search everywhere those weapons have been and watch the floor if they fell out. There should be a lot more than ten unless the sailors took them. Alex, I want you around for the prisoner

announcement this afternoon. You'll need to answer some questions. We don't want the man haters suspicious of you."

"It's a little late for that. I'd rather not attend this announcement, but if you ask, I'll be there. Barbara, what's the condition of the prisoner?"

"I'm guessing he's two to three days without litro. His leg is swollen, and he can't walk far. Also he's afraid of the dark. I'd say three more days in that cell, and he'll tell us anything we want to know. I'll send a small detail out to pick some litro, probably tomorrow."

"When will there be burial service for our friends? Anna was the only one I knew, but it's a big loss to us," Alex said.

"I'm not sure. If we do it before the announcement, there'll be a lot of anger and objections to the prisoner. If we do it after the announcement, the reaction could be even worse. We'll have to wait a few days. They're in a far tunnel, so it won't get too stenchy here." Alex sat down in the dining room to wait on the arrow searchers.

Nothing seems to get done easily here, but at least we have two real bows.

Sonja came and sat down by him. "Do you remember me, Alex?"

"Yes, you were the last one the King sent, but it was so dark that I barely could see you, and I wasn't in very good shape either."

"Maxine said she thought we'd deliver in a month. I don't know much about this baby business except what my mom told me. I calculate twenty days. What do you want me to name the baby?"

Alex went pale and took a deep breath. "Name the baby, damn. I don't know; what do you think?"

CAVE WORLD

“The tradition in my family is the father always names the first born and the mother names the second. After that they have to agree. Should we have three?”

Alex groaned and laid his head on the table at the implications; Sonja giggled.

“You can’t have him Sonja,” Carmen said as she sat down. “He’s mine, and in your condition, you can’t even borrow him.”

“Oh, I know, Carmen. I was asking him what name he wanted for the baby, but he’s not taking it well.”

“Well Alex, you’d better come up with twelve names fast, six for boys and six for girls. Oh yes, you’d better have a couple of spares in case there are twins,” Carmen advised. “After all, if you’re going to mess around with all of these women, you need to be ready for the consequences.”

Alex was saved from more harassment by Barbara who reported that the search party had returned.

“We now have a hundred arrows, a couple bundles of clothing for the new exiles, and some wood working tools that were left in the boat. They found a big roll of fishing line under one of the thwarts.”

“That’s a relief, we need those arrows, and I need to train a couple of women to make more as soon as we get some decent wood. They can practice on drift wood. What tools did we get?”

“I don’t know what you call them. They have sharp edges and handles. I think one is a file.”

“Sonja, why don’t you take the clothes bundles and have your group check them out. I’ll take the tools and arrows back to weapons repair.”

“Don’t be gone long. We’ve a meeting this afternoon that you’re ordered to attend,” Barbara reminded him.

KERRY BURNS

“I’ll be back for the mid-day meal. I presume she’ll do her thing after we eat when everyone is here.”

He gave Carmen a little hug and went to find the loot. The tools included a shave, a small saw and an arrow straightener among others. He gathered up everything and headed for the weapons repair room.

I need to establish a wood shop separate from the weapons. We need a lot of things, and I have to protect these tools.

Jean was waiting for him when he returned. “You didn’t find anything did you?”

“Yes, between me and Hilda’s search crew we found a hundred arrows, some wood working tools, some clothes for the new exiles, and a big roll of fishing line. The women who carried the stuff weren’t careful. These things are valuable for our safety. Who has charge of that little tunnel where the old tools were stored?”

“That belongs to weapons repair. Once we were going to use it as a weapons storage room, but we never had enough to store. Would you show me the arrows?”

“Sure, I’ll show you how they work too.” Alex took out an arrow and fit it to the string on the bow. “You draw back this bow, which takes a lot of strength. When you let go of the string, the arrow goes flying. A good bowman can kill at a hundred yards.”

“Can I try it? Maybe I could shoot arrows.”

“You can pull the string, but no arrows inside. They would shatter on the rocks. We need to make some practice arrows first.”

Jean tried to pull the string, but was only able to pull it back a few inches.

“This is hard and the string hurts my fingers. I guess it’s not for me.”

CAVE WORLD

“It may be, but it’ll take some training and strength building, and then a lot of practice. We need to get ready and train a number of security people.”

“Why did you ask about the other tunnel?”

“We need a wood shop where we can make arrows, some additional bows, and a bunch of other things that you can’t make out of rocks. The King sent the things I was hoping for. But, down to business, do you have a count on all of our new weapons either from the king or what we got from the two battles?”

“Well, not exactly, but we have a bunch of new stuff, Swords and long knives and clubs, and spears with really good points on them. There’s some stuff coming in still. I heard Leona fished those guys out of the bay, and they’re diving for their weapons.”

“If you would, Jean I need a complete list of what and how many of each weapon for Barbara, and I need to know what to make or fix.”

“I’ll do my best on that Alex; I hope you’re not mad at me from earlier, but I can’t stand a man telling me what to do. I had enough of that from before.”

“I’ll try to remember, but weapons repair is going to turn into an armory, and accurate records will be needed. Whoever’s in charge will have to be careful about what we have. I hope you can do the job, but if you can’t say so.”

A horn call echoed down the tunnel.

“Mid-day soon, let’s go, and we can deal with this later,” Jean suggested.

They walked together through the tunnel to the dining hall where Alex left her and went to sit with Carmen and the six exiles.

“Guess what?” Alisha asked. “There were baby clothes that some of the older women made for us. Thank you for

making sure we got these. I don't have a clue about babies or even what they look like. Maxine will have her hands full."

"Maxine had better start some classes for all of you soon. The world is a little short on babies and we certainly don't want to lose any out of ignorance."

"And you'll need some daddy classes soon also. Six or more babies all at once might be a strain on you," Carmen interjected. "And don't try to tell me you won't have time for fatherhood."

I suppose that's true; I wonder what my real mission is? I can't be going into danger all of the time and still be a reliable father, if that's what I'm supposed to do. I lost my father because of his dangerous job.

"With all of these babies overloading me, you shouldn't be having any. That might be one too many," he said to Carmen.

The laughter at the table soon brought Barbara, Kathy and Susan. It was clear to Alex that the mothers to be were bonding and Carmen put herself in the group.

"Well Alex, you don't have enough self-control to prevent it," Carmen fired back. The banter continued until they all lined up to get their meal.

We need more dishes. There aren't quite enough to go around, and soon we'll be eating in shifts. I wonder if we could make wooden plates."

When the meal was finished, Hilda stood up and called for attention.

"I have an important announcement. It's decided and not open for debate, so listen. We captured a man after the battle on the beach. He's in a cell waiting questioning as well as his eventual fate. He's nearly three days without litro. We expect him to be very cooperative before long. We'll also find out if men on litro die without it."

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“Kill him now!” a voice shouted “One man in here is more than enough.”

“Torture him; you don’t have to kill him right away. Let him suffer like we did.”

“Don’t contaminate our home with one of them or with litro,” another shouted.

“Where is he? I’ll take him out myself,” from someone else.

“Calm down. This is a security decision. We don’t know where the men live, how many there are, how they protect themselves, how many women they have in captivity, or what their plans are for us. We can learn a great deal from him. When we know these things you can go out and kill men and free our sisters. Alex, give them your view.”

Alex walked to the front of the room not knowing what he was going to say.

“Please don’t put me in with them. Men for the most part are not bad, but those who take litro are mentally damaged and not safe to be around. I’ll have sons in a few weeks who’ll grow into men; I hope without litro. If we’re to have any kind of life beyond this prison, we must drive the litro men away or destroy them if they can’t be taken off the litro. We need more than these rock walls for a life with children and learning. The King was good to us, and perhaps he’ll be again if we can find a way to contact him. As you know, he’ll soon have a grandchild. The man in the cell will only be here a few weeks, and he’ll most likely die. If he can get off the litro, he might be a usable person. Give us time to learn these things.”

Alex stood waiting for questions, but there were none.

Finally, a voice said, “I’ll give you three weeks to resolve this. If he gets out of his cell, we’ll kill him.”

KERRY BURNS

“Fair enough. We all feel that threat. In fact, if he gets out of the cell and learns anything about us, he must die immediately,” Hilda answered.

Alex turned to Hilda and asked softly, “what’s the ‘we’ business. Is there a separate group in the community with some kind of authority or leadership?”

“Talk to me later. I’ve some things to learn about it.”

Alex walked back to his group of friends and sat down.

“That defused them for the moment, but it looks like we have to guard our prisoner two different ways. Three weeks may not be long enough if he tells us lies. I hope there isn’t an attack or a ship load of exiles to distract us,” Barbara commented.

“Who is the ‘them?’” Alex asked.

“I told you when you came here there are about thirty man haters in the community. Since you’ve been here, they’ve formed into a group determined not to let any more men inside. They’ve left you alone since you’ve been really helpful, but they don’t trust you. Of course, now they don’t trust Hilda and me either.”

Alex stood up to leave and one of the exiles came over to him and embraced him. “I’m Ruth. I served you supper one night. I guess you don’t remember since you’ve never talked to me. I want to get to know you better.”

“You’re right; those three days were kind of a blur. It was dark in the cell especially for supper and I couldn’t make out anyone’s features. I’ll try to remember your name this time.”

Another young woman came up to him. “Do I get a hug too? I’m Ellen.”

“Sure, I remember you. You came to me with lunch one day,” Alex replied giving her a warm hug.

That’s the one I’d have taken seconds with. She was a lot of fun. I’d better be careful here.

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“Young Alex, I found the maps in Hilda’s office, and we’re making some cloth to put a copy on for you. I hope you don’t want to rush off too quickly,” Phyllis said as she pushed through his admirers.

“I hope not for a few days. There’s too much going on, but thank you for your efforts. If I don’t have the map, then I don’t have to go.”

“You probably don’t remember me either. I’m Carmen, and I’m supposed to be your lover, so come with me now.” She took his hand and led him out of the dining hall.

“I like most of those women, and I’m not being jealous, but you were having way too much fun. What are you doing this afternoon?”

“I don’t know. I have my hand in so many projects that I run from one to the other. I want to talk to Hilda about setting up a wood shop separate from the weapons repair room, and I’d like to get some time with one of those bows. They’re really stiff, and I need to build up strength in order to use them. I don’t know if any of the women will be strong enough.”

“There are some bigger, stronger women among the man haters. It might be a good gesture to see if they’re interested in taking a protective role.”

“That’s a good idea if they don’t decide to shoot me once they’re competent with a bow. There’s a question about their loyalty now.”

“I suspect we can find a few who aren’t totally radical and would enjoy hunting game outside the compound including some we’d eat.”

“Ok, this is your idea, so take it to Hilda and see what can be done. If she finds some who want to do this, we can work out the training details. I still don’t know who’s going to replace Barbara.”

Chapter XII

SEA MONSTER

After the evening meal, Alex and Carmen were ready for a passionate bedtime when the shout went out.

“A ship, a ship at the back door, everyone to their units and take your weapons.” Alex grabbed his long knife and ran for the squad room where his unit assembled.

Barbara was waiting. “Alex, would you please lead this squad. I have no one trained. It looks like they’re going to come in a little ways north of the last one. I’ve no idea if they have women exiles or not. We’re not letting them have any more women if we can help it.”

“I’m not supposed to be a leader here giving orders. I’m not trained for this.”

“Squad, will you accept Alex as your leader tonight and obey him in any combat.” There was a resounding yes. Most of them knew him from his stay in the squad room.

“That’s it Alex. Now take your squad and run for the back door, and don’t get killed. These babies will need you.”

Alex shrugged and nodded to them, and they took off for the little beach. When they got to the back door, they had to wait in line to descend.

I don’t like this. If the men force us to the pillar, we can’t escape up the steps fast enough.

Hilda was waiting at the bottom of the pillar to give directions.

“Alex, do your thing and intercept the boat before it lands like you did before.”

“I’ll try, but it depends on a number of things. What if it’s all men?”

“We’ll leave them alone and retreat.”

“Understood. Now get your butt up the steps and inside. Pregnant women aren’t supposed to be outside. You’re putting my kid in danger. Those are direct orders from our leader.”

Hilda sputtered to say something, but Alex turned away and took his squad toward the opening in the rocks. She’d have to wait awhile to get her turn to go up the steps. There were several squads ahead of him that were taking up positions as they neared the expected landing place. There was no sign of the small boat or the men. The sea was a little rough and the waves were too high to wade out very far.

“Angie, let’s do it like last time if we can, but be careful not to get sucked under. Estelle, watch for our safety and don’t let them creep up on you. Our night vision is better than theirs, and that’s an advantage, but keep things quiet. The sea is pretty noisy tonight.”

Alex and Angie pulled off their smocks and boots. Alex tied his long knife scabbard around his naked waist, and they waded in only to be promptly washed ashore.

“Let’s spread out down the beach and watch. Estelle, see if the other squads will watch inland.”

They waited. It started to rain and the wind came up.

“There it is, straight out from us. They’re really struggling,” Janice announced.

“We swim out you on one side and me on the other. I’ll talk, but don’t be afraid to speak up.” The swim was a struggle, but they were able to meet the boat.

“Ho, the boat. How many women do you have aboard,” Alex called out.

“What the hell’s it to you. You’ll find out soon enough if you’re still alive.”

“Don’t get smart with me or we’ll sink your sorry asses. You’re barely staying afloat now. Throw the women

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overboard and we'll take it from there, Alex shouted and slammed his knife into the side of the boat. One of the rowers half stood and swung an oar to hit at him, but the sea conveniently pitched him overboard. Alex quickly dispatched him.

"Next try, you'd better make up your minds quick. I'm out of patience."

About that time, Angie gave out a harpy like shrill scream.

"What the hell was that?"

"We're here for you; you'll never make it back to the ship. I need red meat to feed my young."

"Throw two of those bitches overboard, and row, the shore isn't far away." One of the rowers grabbed the oar and started to pull when Alex slammed his knife down on the oar. The rower let go and drew back.

"Two aren't enough, I want them all," Angie screeched. Four shadows splashed into the water, two on each side. Alex grabbed the nearest one.

"Is that all of the women?"

"Yes, four of us, are you going to eat me?"

"No, you have safety waiting on the beach, can you swim?"

"Yes, but I don't know about Dora."

"Then grab her and tow her to shore if you can. I need to deal with the boat.

"I can swim a little," a waterlogged voice choked out.

"Stay together and drift to the left. The shore is near; shout if you can't make it."

"I have them; my young will feast tonight," came a keening cry from the other side of the boat. Alex swam to the back of the boat and began to rock it.

KERRY BURNS

“Drive that thing off before it sinks us,” Someone commanded.

“I’m not going back there; did you see the claws on that thing?”

“You pussy, I should’ve thrown you over with the women. I’ll do it myself.”

Someone, obviously not a seaman, stood up and grabbed an oar and stepped to the back of the boat. Alex had let go and drifted to the right side out of range of the oar.

“Where are you monster? I’m not afraid of you.” The pitching boat overbalanced the man, and he fell and dropped his oar in the water. The other two men were busy watching and not keeping the boat straight. It slewed around crosswise to the waves and filled with water. Alex grabbed the oar for support, and drifted away from the boat.

“Now you die, you bastards, and I’ll feast as my mate shall. Only spears await you at the shore,” Alex screamed.

“We stand a better chance on shore rather than a sea monster. Turn this thing before we’re totally swamped.”

The two rowers tried but the next wave washed over them and filled the boat.

“We’re sinking, what should we do?” screamed one of the rowers.

“Over the side and hang on to the boat. We’re close to shore.”

“But what about the monster?”

“Then drown you dumb shit,” the other answered and went over the side.

The next wave boosted them on to the shore. The three men staggered onto the beach and faced a row of spears.

“Run to your right or die now,” Janice snarled. After momentary confusion the three men ran north along the water

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line. Alex let out a final scream of despair and guided the boat onto the sand.

“Did the four women make it to shore?” Alex asked.

“We have Angie and two.”

“Check to the south. There should be another pair. I told them to swim in. I need four to help me with this boat.”

Alex looked around for his smock, but could see nothing. They dumped the boat to drain the water, but managed to keep the cargo. Alex threw in his oar.

“Ok, pick it up, three to the side and head for the back door as fast as you can go.”

“We found them on the beach, Alex. They’re in bad shape. Come with me,” Estelle said quietly. Alex followed about a hundred yards down the beach.

One of the women was sitting up. “I think Dora drowned. She couldn’t keep her head above water.”

Alex turned her over and began to push the water out of her lungs. After what seemed like forever, Dora began to cough and gasp. The wind was blowing hard driving a heavy rain.

“Estelle, take one side and we’ll get her to the back door before the men find us. The rest of you keep your spears ready.”

Dora was still unconscious, but breathing some. With one on each side of her shoulders, they got her half upright and dragged her up the beach. They had to stop and rest several times. At least the ever increasing wind was at their backs. A few yards before the opening to the little beach, they caught up with the boat carriers who were sprawled in the sand exhausted.

“Another crew, pick up the boat. It’s not far now. Get up ladies before the men get here. Where are the other squads?”

“They went in ahead of us,” one of the tired women said.

KERRY BURNS

“Janice, take over here. Get the boat and the rest of the women through the rocks. I need one strong woman and the new woman to help me with Dora.”

They picked her up and started for the rocks. It was too dark to see the opening. They came to the rock wall.

“Right or left? I’m not sure where we are,” Alex asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve lost all sense of direction in the dark and rain.”

“Then keep her breathing. I’ll check.”

Alex ran along the rocks toward the sea until he came to the familiar cleft.

“Oops, wrong way.” He turned and ran back, but he didn’t come to his comrades. When he got to the gap, they were waiting for him.

“Is everyone in?” he asked.

“Yes but, it’s hard to get a good count in the dark,” Janice replied.

“Ok, everyone to the pillar. Let’s get out of this wind.”

Alex slumped down beside the big rock and called his mentors.

“Can we hide the boat in the dark opening like before and take Dora through?”

“You can store the boat as before, but as for Dora, solve the problem.”

Alex shook his head wondering what to do.

“Dora’s cold and shivering and barely breathing. I’m afraid we may lose her,” Estelle reported.

“Have them throw down several dry smocks and get her warm. Get about four guards on the rock opening, preferably from one of the squads that came in early. Check the boat to see if there’s any rope in it, and then have a crew put it in the forbidden tunnel. We have to get Dora up to the back door somehow.”

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The smocks came floating down behind the pillar; Janice picked them up and with the help of one of the new exiles, wrapped Dora.”

“Alex, we carried the boat in and turned it over to get the rest of the water out. There was some stuff in the bottom, but it was too dark to see. There wasn’t any rope,” someone told him. “It was creepy in there, and we didn’t want to stay any longer than we had to.”

Alex took a deep breath. “Ok, how much traffic is there on the steps? Nobody else go up until I give the word. I’m going up and consult with Hilda and Maxine.”

Alex realized he was still naked when he put his bare feet against the rock steps.

I wonder what happened to my smock and boots. I hope Angie picked them up.

He climbed to the top quickly and jumped across. Hilda was waiting for him.

“We have a nearly drowned exile, and we have to get her up and into the tunnels so Maxine can do something. We did get her breathing started.”

“I heard, we have some light rope but I’d be afraid to try to lift her with it. We pulled up supplies with it recently.”

“Here’s my plan. Get me fifteen to twenty of the strongest women we have. They can wedge themselves on the steps and carefully pass her up. We can tie the rope around her waist as a kind of safety line. If she or anyone else slips they could take down everyone below.”

“Ok, let’s try it. Some have been up and down these steps a lot of times.” Hilda replied and sent one of the women to get the rope and started recruiting people. Someone had thrown some of Alex’s planks across the four foot gap which made the wet crossing a lot safer. When they were ready, Alex led

sixteen women to the bottom along with one end of the safety line.

“Place yourselves on about every other step and wedge your backs so you can handle the weight. Arrange yourselves with the strongest at the top and on down. As soon as Dora is above you, come down and get out of the shaft. Keep the safety line clear so they can keep it tight. Call out when everyone is in place.”

“Alex,” Jean said. “The reason Dora is in such bad shape is that they stabbed her when they threw her overboard. We have some light here, and we can see the blood.”

“Those fuckers, I should’ve finished off the other three. I hope they get lost and drown. As soon as you’re ready, get her over to the bottom of the steps.”

The process of passing Dora up the steps went smoothly. She was conscious enough to be of some help as they passed her from one to the next while the rope was held tight. As the load went off, the relieved women moved down the stairs and out of the pillar.

“We have her,” came a shout from above.

“Ok, everybody up the steps. Guards, pull in if you don’t see anything.”

Alex went up last after a final look around. By the time he was in the tunnel, Dora was on her way to the clinic.

“Well, Alex, that’s a very nice outfit you have on,” Jean said.

“Angie, did you pick up...” Angie stepped out and also had nothing on.

“Oh I was hoping you got my smock and boots.”

“Sorry, I had to shepherd these other two. I was hoping that you got everything,” she replied.

“I’ve got another smock, but I hate to lose the boots. I can’t replace them.”

CAVE WORLD

They closed the back door and barred it, and the entire group started for the living quarters. Before they got back, Carmen appeared with a replacement smock.

“Put this on Alex, before you’re attacked by these lonesome women.”

Alex slipped on a dry smock and retied his knife scabbard. They assembled in the dining room hoping the cooks would appear with hot drinks, which they did.

“Here you are, Alex. One of the women picked your things up when she stumbled over them on the beach. Yours are here too Angie; we wanted to get a good look at you, but Carmen ruined that.” Estelle said handing him his smock and boots.

The three exiles were introduced as Hannah, Elizabeth, and Jane. They nodded and smiled, but were pretty stunned, by the events. Hilda sat them down and explained what had happened and where they were. Alex gave his report to Barbara and explained that they had let the other three male exiles go.

“Why did you do that? They’ll come against us sometime in the future.”

“My mentors said they didn’t want any unnecessary killing, so I let them go. I’m hoping for an accident, or maybe a sea monster got them.”

“Is there anything we need to pick up on the beach at daylight?”

“Not much, I killed one guy who might have some weapons and there might be an oar washed up. There was no way to know if the boat was supposed to go back to the ship, or it was intended for the men. From what I can tell, no men from the exile settlement were on the beach.

KERRY BURNS

“Oh Alex,” Angie said putting her arm around him. “That was so much fun playing sea monster. I bet those men all dirtied their pants.”

“Alright, Alex, you’re having too much fun again, it’s time to go to bed. Good night Angie.” Carmen said and led him back to their room.

There wasn’t any time left for a passionate evening or even a long sleep.

The next morning at breakfast Alisha sat down with her two babies.

“I have the map sketched out as I remember it. Maybe some of the other women can help me with the details. Nobody told me that babies were so much work. I’m glad Phyllis and some of the others are pitching in, or I wouldn’t get anything done.”

“As soon as we eat let’s go look. I remember a few things, but our books in school weren’t in focused on the rest of the world. I’m about done; do you want me to hold one of them?” Alex said. Carmen offered to hold the other.

“Is this Anna or Julie?” she asked.

“That’s Anna. Julie has a crooked nose. Something happened when she was born.” After they finished eating they went to check the map.

“One thing I realized as I was doing this map was almost every place has volcanoes, but Andra Island. There are a lot of them here and quite a few in the kingdom.”

“Andra Island is far away from everything. How did they ever find it or you? How did people even end up there?” Carmen asked.

“The story is that the transfer shuttle from the mother ship developed a problem on the way down and crashed on the island. Due to the good work of the pilot, most of the colonists survived, but everyone assumed they were dead, because the

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communications were damaged. No one has known about us for about ninety turns.”

“Does that mean that the original inhabitants, cave people, are somehow tied to the volcanoes? I realize the tunnels here are from volcanic rock, and those at home are too,” Carmen said.

“That may be the case, but there was the big cave in the limestone cliff.... I was just told that it’s none of our business and we shouldn’t worry about it,” Alex answered.

“Do they spy on us all of the time?” Carmen asked.

“I suspect me and Hilda, but I could be wrong on that. We’re living in their home,” Alex said. Carmen handed the baby back to her mother.

“I have to go to work. This is the garden season,” she said giving Alex a warm goodbye kiss.

“This is a really helpful map, Alisha. We can refine it as time goes on, but now everyone can kind of understand where we are.” Phyllis came and took Julie from Alex.

“Hilda wants to talk to you in her office, as soon as you can get free of your domestic duties.”

“Depending on what you mean, I could never be free of all my domestic duties. I’ve got kids whose names I barely know, and a girlfriend who never gets quite enough affection, and mind you, I’m not complaining one little bit.”

Alisha gave him an affectionate kiss and Alex headed for Hilda’s office.

“Alex, we have the boat problem once again. The new exiles think there are weapons and tools in the bottom. The sailors fully intended the boat to go to the men. There were only exiles on it. It’s nasty on the beach and there’s no sign of men. Jean and three others went out and found the oar and the body. He didn’t have any weapons on him. What do you want to do?” Hilda said.

KERRY BURNS

“Jean or I had better go see what’s in the boat while it’s light. If it’s worthwhile stuff, we can pull it up to the back door like we did the weapons finds, and take the boat around in a few days. I wonder what the men are thinking.”

“Do you have any plans for the two boats? We’ve never taken the first one out.”

“You’re the leader, what are your plans. I appreciate being consulted, but you know far more about this community and its needs than I do.”

“Maybe you should be the outside leader, and I should be the inside one. You were right last night, I had no business outside.”

“No, I was told when I came here that I shouldn’t be giving any orders. I haven’t been good on that, but don’t make it official. You’re getting toward late stage pregnancy. How much longer can you effectively lead us?”

“Well, I was hoping to keep going with a few days off for delivery. Do you think I shouldn’t? Who would I pick as a replacement?”

“You keep asking me leadership questions. I’m not in charge here, and I don’t want to be. I’m glad to help out when I’m not on some project, and I’d like to have help when I need it.”

“Dam it Alex, I’m asking for advice; I need help? I’m getting more indecisive as you stir things up outside. Where’s this going?”

“I’m not sure where things are going. The time has come when we have to get the exiled men away from us, or we get away from them. I told you the other day that I can feel the south coast calling. I’m feeling my way forward on that issue. As for leadership, if you and Barbara hadn’t rushed to get pregnant we’d have good leadership. You’d both better start training some prospects, and think about whether or not you

CAVE WORLD

can be mothers and do your jobs with things changing as much as they are. Phyllis can help you until you get some women ready to take responsibility. It's been weeks and Barbra hasn't named a replacement. I had to lead the squad last night."

"Alright, I'll try to get some women recruited to help with leadership. I had good prospects until that group went out and got themselves killed. What are you doing for the rest of the day?"



This story is set on a colonial planet. Except for one isolated island, all of the men on the planet are bad tempered and unable to have sex because of a universal addiction. Alex, an 18-year-old boy, is kidnapped from his home on the island by unknown strangers. After a shipwreck, he is sent into exile with a hundred lonely, baby-hungry women. How do the women and Alex cope with this situation?

Cave World

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