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Dreamland: Armageddon

Dale Brown & Jim Defelice

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DREAMLAND
DUTY ROSTER

LIEUTENANT COLONEL TECUMESH 'DOG' BASTIAN
Dreamland's commander has been mellowed by the demands of his new command – but he's still got the meanest bark in the West, and his bite is even worse.

MAJOR JEFFREY 'ZEN' STOCKARD
A top fighter pilot until a near-fatal crash at Dreamland left him a paraplegic, Zen runs the Flighthawk program and has now accumulated more air-to-air kills than any other active pilot in the air force. But he's got a grudge bigger than the wheelchair life has confined him to.

CAPTAIN BREANNA 'RAP' STOCKARD
Zen's wife has seen him through his injury and rehabilitation. But can she balance her love for her husband with the demands of her career . . . and ambitions?

MAJOR MACK 'THE KNIFE' SMITH
Mack Smith is the best pilot in the world – and he'll tell you so himself. He left Dreamland to reshape the Brunei air force in his own egotistical image.

CAPTAIN DANNY FREAH
Danny commands 'Whiplash' – the ground attack team that works with the cutting-edge Dreamland aircraft and high-tech gear. Freah's wife and friends want him to run for Congress. The war hero would be a shoo-in – but does he want to give up the excitement of Dreamland?

JENNIFER GLEASON
Computer specialist Jennifer Gleason is one of the creative geniuses at Dreamland, responsible for the multi-mode combat computer that helps control the Flighthawks. She's also Dog's lover – but her emotional and intellectual sides don't always get along.

JED BARCLAY

The young deputy to the national security advisor is Dreamland's link to the president. Barely old enough to shave, the former science whiz kid now struggles to master the intricacies of world politics. Zen Stockard is his cousin – and Zen still can't figure out how the skinny kid who used to follow him around on a tricycle grew up and got a real job.

LIEUTENANT KIRK 'STARSHIP' ANDREWS

Starship flew through flight school and was on the fast track to a career flying the air force's frontline interceptors, like the F-15 and F-22. But family commitments made him change his plans. Now he has a post at Dreamland flying the U/MF-3 Flighthawk robot planes, where he's finding that no amount of training can prepare him for real combat.

AND IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC . . .

PRINCE PEHIN BIN AWG

The nephew of the sultan of Brunei and the unofficial protector of the air force, bin Awg has an enviable collection of Cold War aircraft – and a well-earned reputation as a partier. Can he mature in time to save his uncle's realm . . . and his own neck?

CAT MCKENNA

A one time Royal Canadian pilot, McKenna has found work plying the skies for a shadowy Russian arms dealer. But when her paycheck bounces, she looks for a new job – and ends up locking horns with Mack Smith.

CAPTAIN DAZHOU TI

Years ago, Dazhou's Chinese grandfather was disinherited by the sultan of Brunei. Now he wants revenge – and has a secret Malaysian warship to insure that he gets it.

SAHURAH NIU

A devout believer, Sahurah is convinced that he has a place in Paradise – and is willing to kill thousands to reach it.

I

Paradise

Malay, Negara Brunei Darussalam
(State of Brunei, Abode of Peace)
6 October 1997, (local) 1302

Breanna Stockard tossed her backpack to the ground, put her hands on her hips, and took a deep breath. The Pacific Ocean spread out before her, a blanket of azure silk. A few white clouds wandered casually in the distance, drifting across the sky like a pair of vacationers easing across a solitary beach. Civilization might lay in the distance – there were oil derricks somewhere offshore, and merchant ships did a brisk trade at the nearby harbor – but from where she stood Breanna had no hint that she and her husband Jeff 'Zen' Stockard weren't the only people in the world.

This is what God looks at everyday, she thought to herself. Paradise.

Breanna took another deep breath. A month ago, she had found herself stranded in the Pacific during a fierce storm, tossed back and forth in a tiny life raft. It seemed impossible that this was the same ocean now.

Maybe it wasn't. Maybe that hadn't even happened. Ten days here in the wonderful paradise of Brunei – helping

train pilots to fly the EB-52 Megafortress 'leased' to the kingdom as part of an eventual three-plane arms deal – had purged her of all unhappy memories.

One more week and it might even be impossible to have an unpleasant thought ever again.

Zen had surprised her yesterday by turning up for a weekend visit. They had twenty-four more hours together before he had to return to Dreamland, their base back in the States.

Breanna smoothed out the blanket she'd borrowed from the hotel and spread it down on the white sand next to the path. She dropped her bag and Zen's small backpack and turned to go back up the path.

'I'll bring down lunch, then I'm going to take a swim before I eat,' she told her husband, who was negotiating the bumps down from the parking area in his wheelchair.

'Yup,' said Zen.

'You don't sound very enthusiastic,' she said.

'Yup.'

'Jet lag getting to you?'

'I'm fine.'

She leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek, then trotted up the hill for the rest of their things.

Before the accident that had cost him the use of his legs, Zen had considered going to the beach a useless waste of time and a dreadful bore. In his list of things to do, it ranked right above lying spread-eagle on Interstate 15 at rush hour.

Now it ranked somewhat lower.

He had tried talking Breanna out of the idea back at

the hotel, when Prince bin Awg had called to say he and his family couldn't join them on the planned picnic. His Royal Highness Pehin bin Awg was nephew of the sultan, a royal prince and government minister; he owned the beach and had insisted they use it. Zen liked bin Awg, the country's unofficial patron of the Air Force – he had an enviable collection of Cold War aircraft and could talk about them entertainingly for hours and hours. Like many Bruneians, he was also generous to a fault. But his baby daughter was sick and he had been called away on government business. Zen loved Breanna and wanted to spend as much time as he could with her; he just would have preferred somewhere other than a beach.

A Lakers game, maybe.

It wasn't so much the fact that beaches and wheelchairs didn't go together. Truth be told, wheelchairs didn't really fit smoothly anywhere. Much of everyday life in the A-B world – as in 'able-bodied,' a term not used by the handicapped without at least a touch of sarcasm – was a succession of physical barriers and dignity-stealing obstructions. Going to the beach was probably no worse than going to the grocery store. And the fact that this beach was a private, secluded refuge meant there were no people to gawk at the geek in the wheelchair – or worse, take pity on him by 'helping.'

No, what bothered him was deeper than that. There just seemed to be no point, existential or otherwise, in lying on your belly and watching water lap against the sand.

'My, but you're a slowpoke,' said Breanna, returning with their coolers. 'Need a push?'

‘No,’ he said stubbornly, gripping the wheels of his chair and half-sliding, half-rolling off the hard-packed pathway and onto the sand. Surprisingly, the chair wheels sank only about a quarter of an inch, and Zen was able to pull over right next to the blanket. There he started a well-practiced if inelegant lift, arch, and twist routine, sliding himself down to the ground.

‘You coming in?’ asked Bree, kicking off her shoes.

‘Yup.’ Zen pulled himself up, sitting next to the cooler with the beer. He took out a Tetley’s Draught – an English ale that might be the last vestige of Britain’s influence on Brunei – and popped the top. A satisfying hiss and fizz followed.

‘“This can contains a floating widget,”’ he read from the top of the can. ‘What do you think a floating widget is, Bree?’

‘An excuse to charge two dollars more,’ said Breanna, who had complained earlier about the high price of beer. As an Islamic country, Brunei officially frowned on alcohol consumption, and between that and the fact that the beer had to be imported from a good distance, the six-pack Zen had purchased through the hotel concierge had cost over twenty-five dollars, American.

But some things were worth the price.

And others couldn’t be bought for any amount of money: Zen watched as his wife stripped off her jeans and T-shirt, revealing a red one-piece bathing suit that reminded Zen there were *some* good reasons for going to the beach after all.

‘Mmmm,’ he said.

‘Don’t get fresh.’

‘What? I’m talking about the beer.’

He ducked as Breanna tossed her T-shirt at him.

Despair’s black hands took his throat, and Sahurah Niu struggled to breathe.

The prince’s wife and infant daughter had not come to the beach. His informants had been wrong.

Sahurah pushed his fists into his arms, struggling to calm himself. It was of vital importance to remain in control in front of his men.

The commander had made clear that he must complete the mission today. They had discussed the possibility of taking other hostages if necessary; clearly that was his course now.

The two people on the beach were Westerners – Australians, he thought, though Sahurah Niu was not close enough to know for certain. Undoubtedly they were guests of the prince, or they would not have been allowed here on the private beach. They would do.

One was in a wheelchair. A pity.

Sahurah was not without a sense of mercy: he would be killed rather than taken.

‘What are we doing?’ asked Adi, the little one. He handled the Belgian machine-gun they had obtained two months before from their brothers across the border. Despite his small size, Adi had learned to handle the weapon and his body well enough so that he could fire

the gun from his hip. This was not easily done; the others and Sahurah himself preferred to fire prone, as their instructor had first taught them.

'We will go ahead with our plan,' said Sahurah. 'Tell the others be ready.'

The water felt like a mineral bath, balmy and thick against her skin. Breanna stroked gently across the small bay in front of the beach. The salt water tickled her cheeks, and the sun felt good on her back and shoulders. She took a few strokes parallel to the beach and looked back at Zen, who despite being crippled was a strong swimmer.

'Are you coming in or not?' Breanna yelled.

'Later,' he said.

'Oh come on in!' she yelled. 'The water is fantastic.'

'I'll be in,' he said, sipping his beer.

The shoreline was crescent-shaped and slightly off-center to the east, bordered on both sides by strips of jungle. To the west, a pile of rocks formed a small mini-peninsula about a hundred and fifty yards from the mainland. The rocks were just barely above the surface of the water, and they weren't very wide; there looked to be just about the surface area of a good-sized desk there. Still, it was a destination and Breanna turned and began doing a butterfly stroke toward it, her old high-school swim team warm-up routine popping into her brain.

Zen dug through the cooler, sorting through the food they'd taken from the hotel, looking for something that might seem at least vaguely familiar. He took out what seemed

to be a roast beef sandwich – meat stuck out from the edges – and then leaned toward the backpack to get a plate. As he did, he caught a glint of something in the trees to his right, well back in the jungle off the beach by fifty or sixty yards.

Zen put down the sandwich and opened the cooler again, pretending to fish for something else while looking surreptitiously into the jungle. He hoped he'd see a curious child, a teenager copping a cigarette or some such thing, looking at the intruders with curiosity. But instead he caught the outline of a short, squat man with a large gun.

Someone sent by the prince to protect them?

Zen closed the cooler. Sliding his arm through the strap of the backpack, he sidled to the edge of the blanket, estimating the distance to the water.

Twenty feet.

They didn't have a radio or cell phone. The Brunei air force was so ill-equipped it barely had enough survival radios for its flight crews; American cell phones didn't work here. And besides, this place was paradise – nothing ever went wrong here.

Breanna was about thirty yards out, stroking steadily for a little jetty or rock island at the edge of the cove.

'How's the water?' he shouted. Then without waiting for an answer, he added, 'Maybe I will come in. What the hell. Might as well have a quick swim before lunch.'

He twisted around on his elbow, turning to drag himself toward the water.

If he'd had his legs, Zen thought to himself, he'd have confronted the son of a bitch beyond the trees, gun or no

gun. But he didn't have his legs, and the worst thing he could do now was let the bastard know he saw him. He went slowly toward the water, lumbering like a turtle.

As he reached the water line, something crashed through the brush above. A strong shove brought Zen to the edge of the surf; a second got him into six inches of water.

On his third push he felt his body start to float. Salt water stung his face, pricking at his nostrils.

Something rippled near him. He heaved his body forward and dove beneath the waves.

As Breanna watched from the water, the brush behind the beach opened like a curtain. Three men came out from the trees, and then a fourth. Two had rifles.

Zen was at the water – Zen was in the water.

They were going to fire at him.

'No!' she shouted. 'No!'

Sahurah Niu grabbed the tall one's arm as he fired.

'Wait,' he told Abdul, first in his own Malaysian, then in Abdul's native Arabic. 'Don't waste your bullets while he's in the water.'

'He'll get away.'

'This will not be so. He is a cripple.' Sahurah Niu repeated his command not to fire so the others could hear. 'Wait,' he added, pointing to the horizon. 'The boat is coming. Do you see it?'

Zen pushed his head up for a quick breath, then dove back down, stroking toward Breanna. The world had narrowed

to a tiny funnel in front of him. He could see rocks on the bottom of the ocean, twenty or more feet below as he pushed downward.

Where was his wife? He pulled his body in the direction of the rocks she'd been heading for. In the back of his mind he heard himself yelling at his body, as if they were two separate people, coach and athlete:

You've gone further and faster than this in rehab. Push, damn it, push.

The pressure in his lungs grew and finally he came up for a gulp of air. Bree was a few yards away.

'The rocks!' he told her. 'That island on my left!'

She hesitated.

'The rocks,' he repeated.

'What's going on? Who are they?'

'Come on.' He took hold of her, pushed her down under the water, then took a stroke away. When he was sure she was going in the right direction he dove down, following.

They reached it at the same time. The rock furthest from shore was shaped like a giant turtle shell and tottered at the top of a deep pile. Zen pushed around to the other side, opening the backpack as he did. He wedged his stomach against the side of the rock, balancing as he pulled the Ziploc bag with his service pistol out from the bottom of the knapsack.

'What the hell is going on?' Breanna asked.

'Trouble in paradise,' said Zen. He heard the sound of a motorboat. Turning, he saw a black triangle approaching from the eastern horizon.

'You're going to have to go for help,' he told her.

'I'm not leaving you.'

'You have to,' Zen told her. 'Swim down the beach line to the spot where those houses we passed were. They can't be more than a half-mile.'

'God, Jeff, it'll take me forever to swim a half-mile. They'll get you.'

'Get going then.'

'Come with me.'

'If we both go, they'll just follow in the boat. Besides, I can't get ashore.'

'I'll carry you.'

'Just fuckin' go, Bree. Now!' He pushed her away awkwardly, holding the pistol, still in its plastic bag, up out of the water.

The look she gave him wounded him as badly as any bullet, but she ducked down beneath the water, stroking away. Zen pulled himself up against the rock, waiting to see what the men on the shore would do next.

Sahurah put his hand to his forehead, shading his eyes. The two tourists were huddled at the edge of the cove, foolishly thinking it would protect them.

They had rehearsed this. The next steps were easy.

'Abdul, go through the trees and then to the first rock. Do not go into the water.' It was necessary to tell the Yemen this because he was a very simple man. 'When you see that we have them, come back and meet Fallah at the edge of the beach, there.'

Sahurah pointed to the eastern edge of the protected area. 'Fallah, you will guard that side, in case they attempt

to swim away. You may shoot them, but only if they are more than ten meters from us. Ten meters, you understand?'

'Of course.'

Adi looked at him expectantly. The motorboat was now approaching, moving toward the beach at a good clip, precisely as planned.

'You and I will go in the boat,' Sahurah told the short one. 'We will have to wade. Make sure the weapon does not get wet. If they do not come easily we will need it.'

Breanna pulled through the water, propelled by her fury. She was angry at Zen for sending her away, angrier still at whomever it was who was trying to kidnap or rob them.

Brunei was a paradise; how could this happen here?

The houses they had seen were no more than a mile away: 1,600 meters. One of her events in high school.

She'd never finished higher than third in it.

Breanna continued her stroke, falling into the rhythm, willing away everything, even her anger, as she plunged through the water.

Zen watched as the boat cut its engines and drifted toward the shore. The thugs on the beach had rolled up their pants and started to wade out. One of them had a largish rifle, possibly a machine-gun like the M249 or Belgium Minimi, a squad-level weapon that fired 5.56-millimeter ammunition from magazines or belts, which could be held in a plastic box-like container clipped beneath the chamber area just ahead of the trigger.

They moved almost lackadaisically, obviously not seeing him as much of a threat. More than likely they didn't know he had a gun.

The closer they got, the better his chances at hitting them with the pistol. On the other hand, the closer they got, the more difficult it would be to swim away.

But that wasn't an option. They had a boat. He'd never outswim it in the open water. Nor would there be much chance of surprising them from the sea.

His goal wasn't to escape. It was to distract them long enough that Breanna could escape. He would let them get close, then take out as many of them as possible. He'd target the man with the machine-gun first.

Sahurah put his hand down on the gunwale of the speedboat as it came next to him in the water, trying to steady it before he pulled himself over the side. His ancestors had been fishermen, but Sahurah himself disliked boats; no matter how big, they seemed flimsy and unprotected against the awful power of the sea.

The two men in the boat looked at him with puzzled expressions, but did not speak. Unlike the others, the men who had been selected from the boat were Indonesians with a limited command of Malaysian and no knowledge of Arabic; he had to use English so they would understand.

'There has been a change in plans,' he told them, grabbing onto the back of one of the seats. 'The people we have come for are there.'

He pointed to the rock. One of the tourists was treading water next to it; the other must have been hiding behind him.

‘There?’ asked the man near the wheel of the boat.

‘Yes,’ said Sahurah. ‘Take us there.’

He took the machine-gun from Adi’s hands, cradling it against his shirt. While it was heavier than the AK47 he had first learned to shoot as a boy, it was surprisingly small for a gun that could fire so rapidly and with so much effect. Sahurah had only a pistol himself, strapped in a holster beneath his shirt.

Adi took the gun back greedily as soon as he was in the boat.

‘We will not shoot them unless it is necessary,’ Sahurah reminded him.

Adi frowned, but then set himself against the side of the boat in a squat, holding the weapon’s barrel upward and protecting it from the spray as they turned and started toward the rock. The helmsman brought the boat around in an arc, circling around from the west.

The man at the wheel cut the engine when they were twenty meters from the rock. Sahurah reached to his shirt for his gun; he would fire a shot and then tell the tourists to surrender. He would use sweet words to make the idiots believe he meant no harm. The Westerners were, without exception, cowards, eager to believe whatever they were told.

Adi tensed beside him. Sahurah knew he was about to fire. He turned to stop him, but it was too late: the gun roared. Sahurah turned and saw Adi falling backward as the machine-gun fired – he thought the little man had been pushed back by its recoil and tried to grab him, but both Adi and the gun fell off into the water. Stunned, Sahurah

reached for him when he felt something punch against him, a stone that tore into his rib. He grabbed for his weapon and found himself in the bottom of the boat, finally realizing that the man on the rocks had a gun.

Zen's first shot missed, but his second and third caught the man with the machine-gun in the head. He fired three more shots; at least one struck the man next to the gunman. The boat jerked to the left and roared away out to sea.

Zen lost his grip on the rock as the wake swelled up. He couldn't keep the gun above the water, let alone himself – he slid down and then pushed up with his left hand, clambering up on top of the rock.

The boat was headed off. Thank God, he thought to himself. Thank God.

Something ricocheted against one of the rocks about thirty feet from him. Zen threw himself into the waves, still clutching the pistol. He pushed around to the seaward side of the rock then surfaced.

There was a man on shore about fifty yards away with an AK47. Zen went down beneath the waves as the man aimed and fired again. The rocks would make it almost impossible for the gunman to hit him unless he came out on the isthmus. A second gunman stood near the brush on the eastern end of the beach; Zen paddled to his right, finding a spot where he couldn't be seen from that angle. He was safe, at least for a while.

Then he heard the motor of the speed boat revving in the distance. They were coming back.

* * *

When Breanna saw the object in the distance, she thought at first it was a large crocodile. She stopped mid-stroke, frozen by fear.

Then she saw that it was bobbing gently and thought it must be a raft. She started toward it, and in only a few strokes realized it was part of a dock that had been abandoned ages ago and now sat forlornly in the water. Abandoned or not, it was the first sign of civilization she had seen since setting out and she swam with all her energy, kicking and flailing so ferociously that she reached it in only a few seconds. She pulled herself against it to rest. As she did, she saw a small skiff maybe seventy-five yards away, the sort of small boat a fisherman might use to troll a quiet lagoon on a hazy afternoon. An old American-made Evinrude motor, its logo faded, sat at the stern. Breanna threw herself forward, stroking overhand in a sprint to the boat. She got to the side and pulled herself up.

The boat sat about five or six yards offshore, a line at the stern anchoring her. The shore here was lined with trees; Breanna saw a path at the right side, though it wasn't clear what was beyond it.

'Hey! Hey!' she yelled. 'Help! Help!'

She couldn't see anyone. Breanna turned to the motor. It was old, possibly dating from at least the 1960s, with part of the top removed. It had a pull rope.

She grabbed the rope and yanked at it. The engine turned itself over but didn't start.

Breanna stared at the motor, which had been tinkered with and repaired for more than thirty odd years. The motor seemed to be intact, without any fancy electronic

gizmos or cutoff switches; even the turn throttle seemed to work. She tried the rope again and this time the engine coughed twice and caught. The propeller growled angrily as Breanna got the hang of the jury-rigged replacement mechanism that set the old outboard properly in the water. The boat jumped and started to move forward; she just barely managed to turn it in time to keep the craft from sailing into the rocky shore. She realized she hadn't released the anchor – the boat groaned, dragging the rock along. She couldn't steer and reach the line at the same time; since she was moving forward at a decent pace she didn't bother pulling it in, concentrating instead on getting her bearings as she sped back to rescue her husband.

Zen pushed himself backward from the rock, ducking down under the water and swimming to the west. He stayed below for as long as he could, the pressure in his lungs building until it became unbearable. As his face hit the air he heard a cacophony of sounds – the motorboat, guns firing, a distant jet. He gulped air and ducked back, pushing again. He didn't last as long this time. When he surfaced the boat was nearly on top of him. He pushed down and waited, the wake angry but not as close as he feared.

When he resurfaced, the crack of a rifle sent him back underwater with only half a breath.

Where was the infidel bastard? Sahurah leaned against the side of the boat, searching for the tourist in the water. The

man had gone beneath the waves somewhere around here; he couldn't have swum too far away.

Sahurah knew that it was the cripple who was shooting at them. How exactly he knew that – and surely that was not the logical guess – he couldn't say, but he was sure.

So the moment of pity he had felt on the beach had been a grave mistake. A lesson.

He heard one of his men firing from shore and turned toward the east. A head bobbed and disappeared in the water nearby.

'There,' shouted Sahurah, momentarily using Malaysian instead of English. 'There, over there,' he yelled. 'Go back. Get the dog. Run him down!'

Breanna stretched forward, trying to grasp the knotted line holding the stone while still steering the boat. She was about three inches too short; finally she leaned her leg against the handle, awkwardly steadying it, and grabbed the rope, pulling it back with her as she once more took control of the motor. The anchor turned out to be a coffee can filled with concrete; she pulled it up over the side and let it roll with a thud into the bottom of the craft.

A boat circled in the distance offshore. Breanna bent down and held on, steadying herself as she made a beeline for it.

Sahurah brought up his pistol to fire. His first three shots missed far to the right. As he shifted to get a sturdier position he felt the pain in his side again; the bullet had only creased the flesh but it flamed nonetheless.

He would have revenge. He aimed again, but as he fired, the boat jerked abruptly to the north.

'What?' demanded Sahurah, turning toward the helm.

The men pointed toward the west. A second boat was coming.

For a long moment, Sahurah hesitated. He felt his anger well inside him. Unquenchable thirst – frustration – rage.

He had failed.

'Get the others,' he said finally. 'Get the ones on shore. Quickly.'

This time the pressure to breathe was so fierce Zen started to cough as he broke water, his throat rebelling. His body shook with the convulsions and he found himself twisting backward in the water, unsure where he was.

He'd saved Bree, at least, he thought. They might have gotten him but his wife at least was safe.

Zen heard the boat behind him. Surprised that it was there, he pushed his tired arms to turn him in that direction. But instead he slipped beneath the waves, his energy drained.

Breanna saw that the other boat was going in to the beach. She cut the throttle back but even at its low idle setting it still pushed the boat forward. She dared not pull the ignition wire or fiddle with the eccentric controls too much; instead, she put the boat into a circle, taking some of its momentum away before approaching the rock, about two hundred yards away.

She didn't see Zen.

Did they have him already? Was that why they were going to shore?

'Zen! Zen!'

Something bobbed to the left, about thirty yards away.

'Jeff! Jeff!'

It was him. He started to swim for the boat, but he was moving in slow motion, not swimming as strongly as he normally did. She maneuvered to the left and right, but couldn't quite get close enough on the first pass and still didn't dare to turn off the motor.

'I'll circle around. Grab on!' she called. 'This is as slow as I can go.'

Breanna pushed against the throttle switch on the engine, managing to slow the speed a little more but still not entirely cut it as she came around. Zen grabbed the side of the boat, clamping his arms against it like a hobo pulling himself onto the side of a freight car.

'What are you doing?' he yelled as she pushed at the throttle, trying to get it to increase speed gently. 'Let me get in for cryin' out loud,' said Zen, pulling up against the side.

'Wait,' she told him, fighting to keep the boat balanced and moving in the right direction as the engine began churning the water faster.

'They're going away,' Zen told her. 'It's all right.'

'It's all right,' she repeated, not quite ready to believe it.