

Extinction

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ONE

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A line of ships darkened the horizon. But it wasn't a convoy; they were too close together for that.

As the helicopter approached the floating mass, the pilot pulled on his collective control to gain altitude. The aircraft ascended and now the passengers could see that the ships in the stationary caravan were chained together, bow to stern.

'Go higher,' shouted the sergeant. 'They might open fire.'

The pilot again lifted the collective control and the big United Nations Sikorsky rose another 1,000 feet through the cold air. Now they could see that the line of vessels was merely the edge of a vast floating platform. They already knew it consisted of countless hulks chained, roped and lashed together to form a huge island of rusty metal. Decommissioned oil tankers, bulk carriers and container ships – all streaked with corrosion, some showing evidence of collision or old shell damage – had been linked to each other, creating a hinged carpet of groaning steel floating on the surface of the ocean. Even from their increased altitude of over 2,000 feet it was impossible to make out the vast platform's far edge.

'Jesus, will you look at the size of that thing!' exclaimed Michael Fairfax from his window seat behind the pilot.

'Let's fly a circuit,' suggested the sergeant over the headset intercom, pointing to his left.

The helicopter banked and, careful to remain just out of the potential range of small-arms fire, the pilot began to fly around the eastern edge of this hulk leviathan.

They were almost at the bottom of the world, in the Southern Ocean, 1,500 miles south-east of New Zealand, having been forced to wait in Auckland for six days before a suitable break in the vicious May weather had occurred. This close to the Antarctic the autumn storms could continue for weeks on end and the conditions here did not benefit from any of the climate-management techniques that were now routinely applied to the wealthier regions of the planet.

'It's about thirty miles wide,' said the sergeant, twisting around from the co-pilot's seat to address their only passenger. 'And about the same in length. It'll take us an hour to go all the way round it.'

Michael nodded, then lifted the powerful image-recording binoculars he had brought with him from San Francisco. Adjusting the barrels to fit his eyes, he zoomed in and frowned as the image was electronically stabilized.

The entire visible surface of the giant platform seemed covered in sepia dots – like some old half-tone newspaper image. Then Michael realized that he was looking down at countless brown, cream and yellow faces, crowded together like mushrooms on a dark woodland floor. All of them were upturned towards the beating rotor blades.

Further in, he saw the bright flash of welding arcs as men worked on the old ships and, to his surprise, he saw propeller wakes streaming from a few of the ships at the outer edge of the platform; he had previously understood that none of these hulks retained any engine power. In the far distance, an inner section of the vast hinged platform rose on a giant swell that travelled slowly underneath the whole steel city, lifting twenty or thirty of the huge vessels at a time.

In the front co-pilot's seat, the sergeant – a volunteer seconded to the UN from New Zealand's special forces – kept his own field glasses trained on the scene, scouring the huddled masses for any trace of a shoulder-mounted rocket launcher or other missile-firing system. It was what visitors to these drifting metropolises dreaded most. Even though their passenger today was due to be welcomed by the hulk community's leaders – and despite the Sikorsky's clear UN markings and seven-ton cargo of

much-needed food aid and medical supplies – there would still be some who might be tempted to vent their anger and frustration on these representatives of the rich world.

Michael lowered his binoculars from the scene of dispossessed humanity. Despite appearances, the multitudes of environmental refugees on board this hulk city – and the millions more who were forced to live on other, similar, groaning platforms of despair – were the most potentially valuable group of clients that Michael Fairfax's legal firm had ever had the chance to represent. A growing cultural awareness of the immense wrongs that had been inflicted on them by governments and the multinational corporations promised that.

Once again he lifted his field glasses to scan the far edge of *Pacifica One*, as this particular floating refuge had been dubbed by the media.

The day was sullenly overcast and he glimpsed lightning illuminating the interior of grey clouds on the far side of the artificial island. Here and there, light was reflected from golden minarets, crosses, spires and cupolas that the faithful had erected over makeshift mosques, churches, temples and other places of worship. From all across the undulating metal raft, narrow columns of smoke rose into the air; thousands were cooking their midday meals on open fires.

'Task force at ten o'clock,' observed the sergeant. He had now retrained his binoculars in the opposite direction, towards the east. Michael followed his gaze and saw an old-fashioned aircraft carrier and half a dozen grey warships cruising slowly in the far distance. As if on cue, the radio crackled into life. The pilot pressed his transmit button to confirm their aircraft's call sign and flight plan.

'The USS *Vincent* and support vessels from the ... Australian ... Japanese and ... British navies,' the sergeant called out to Michael as he identified the ships' markings one by one. 'They just steam round and round these hulks to make sure they don't try to break out and head across the Pacific – they block any who try.'

'Worst posting in the world,' added the pilot as they left the naval force behind.

Michael turned his attention back to the drifting city and noticed a large, irregularly shaped white mass floating a few hundred yards off the platform's perimeter.

'Looks like an iceberg,' he observed. 'Isn't that a hazard for the outer vessels?'

'They collect them,' explained the sergeant. 'It's their only source of fresh water – other than any rainfall that accidentally comes their way. They set off in tenders to get a line on to one of the smaller bergs, then tow it back and secure it to the main platform.'

Michael nodded and tapped out a brief note to himself on his communicator. He could now see six or seven other icebergs tethered around the hulk city's extensive perimeter. Lashed to one of them was the upturned and disembowelled carcass of a whale; it seemed that the icebergs also served as floating refrigerators.

'There are often skirmishes about fresh water between those who live in the middle of the city and those around the edge who have better access to icebergs,' added the sergeant. 'It can sometimes get very bloody down there.'

Suddenly a loud, clanging alarm filled the cockpit.

'Incoming!' shouted the pilot, banking the aircraft violently to the left. Michael felt a double *whump* as decoy flares and missile-killers were fired from the rear tubes of the chopper's defence system.

The aircraft dropped through the air, as if thrust downwards by a giant hand. Michael saw the pilot wrestling to maintain control as he carried out an emergency descent, and then there was a sudden explosion high overhead as the surface-to-air missile was detonated by one of the defence systems.

Now flying at full power only 200 feet above the waves, the pilot levelled off and scanned his display screens for any further missile signatures.

'Not a very nice welcome,' he said over the intercom, once it became clear that no further SAMs had been fired.

'It's become almost traditional.' The sergeant shook his head. 'That'll be some headstrong kid with an itchy trigger finger.'

They regained altitude and flew on, now two kilometres

further out from the edge of the metal island. Minutes later they noticed a separate and smaller raft, also composed of ship hulks, which was loosely attached to the central mass by scores of ropes and chains. The surface of this platform was quilted with rectangular patches of green, yellow, white and brown.

'That's one of their marine farms,' explained the sergeant. 'They collect topsoil from spots in Antarctica where the ice has melted and then bring it here to grow some crops of their own.'

Michael noticed that four rope bridges had been rigged between the main platform and the floating farmlands; each was lined with tiny figures who had ceased their scurrying to and fro in order to stare skywards.

'Why do they keep those farm-ships separate?' he asked.

'So they can untie them and tow them towards any convenient rainfall,' his security escort replied. 'They've got a couple of working tugs which can pull these floating farms hundreds of miles out in search of rain. Judging by the activity down there, it must be harvest time for one of their crops.'

'So they're self-sufficient?'

'Each ship also maintains its own fish farm,' said the sergeant. 'They get by, just about.'

After they had completed a full circumference of the artificial island, they followed the navigational instructions that would supposedly provide them with a safe flight path to land on this metal landscape. Turning inwards, they flew at a level 2,000 feet for fifteen minutes. Michael noticed more welding activity, and more propeller wakes churning deep between the endless rows of lashed-together ships. There seemed to be an air of intense activity everywhere.

Finally they executed a defensive descent - rapid and almost vertical - towards the white-painted deck of an ancient crude-oil mega-tanker situated at the very centre of the ferrous settlement.

It seemed that this particular outsize vessel served as the community's heliport, communications centre, hospital and administrative headquarters, all combined. It extended for a quarter of a mile, had a bridge 200 feet high, and was the only giant carrier in the whole floating platform that was not covered with makeshift dwellings. It also seemed as if the former *Prince*

Sahid was the only ship in its vicinity to have seen a coat of fresh paint recently.

Descending onto its cold, wind-scoured deck, Michael was greeted by the three leaders of the community's ruling council: Rattin Alix, Hoy Soon Juan and Chanda Zia, originally from the Seychelles, the Philippines and Bangladesh respectively - all lands now lost to the risen seas.

Ringed in a distant circle around the perimeter of the flight deck were at least 200 young men, all of them carrying some sort of semi-automatic weapon. Unlike the official greeting party, their attitude did not seem particularly friendly.

'Welcome - *namaste*,' intoned Chanda Zia, pressing his hands together in front of his face, lifting them to his forehead and then bowing deeply. The council leader was wearing a white brimless hat and an old grey Nehru suit.

'*Namaste*,' responded their exotic visitor - a tall white lawyer from the rich world over the horizon, a man who claimed he could provide help to these stateless and status-less unwanted people. Counsellor Michael Fairfax's visit to this hulk city had been set up only through a process of careful and prolonged negotiation by *Médecins Sans Frontières*, the global medical charity, with logistical support provided by the local UN office in Auckland.

The sergeant pulled two large flight cases from a baggage compartment in the helicopter's deep hull as a dozen of the waiting men rushed forward to begin unloading the main cargo of aid and supplies. Then the visitors were quickly escorted to what must have at one time been the captain's stateroom.

'For you,' announced Michael, nodding towards the metal flight cases that the sergeant was placing carefully on an old dining table. The lawyer stepped forward, snapped open the clasps and lifted each lid in turn.

He was presenting the refugee community with a state-of-the-art, solar-powered, global-coverage satellite communications system: all multi-sensory, all ultraband, complete with twenty miniature all-weather cameras linked by a local-area wireless network.

The council members gathered around with interest, lifting

out components of the sophisticated communications network and turning them over in their hands.

'This technology is essential because I'll need to keep in touch with you as our case progresses,' explained Michael, as his hosts examined the rugged communications equipment. 'I will also need each of you to sign these agreements,' he continued, unfolding two formal documents and placing them on the well-used table.

The three men scrutinized the papers carefully. The first was the crucial document of appointment, a contract giving Michael's firm exclusive rights to the refugees' compensation case. The second was a legal writ. With the lawyer's help, Chanda Zia translated the key passages for the benefit of his colleagues.

'I'll need to apply for special permission to put your claim before the court,' Michael explained. 'Normally they'll only hear requests brought by citizens of recognized nation states, but I intend to argue that your community here deserves to qualify as a nation. There certainly seem to be enough of you in terms of numbers.'

Chanda nodded and quickly bent to add his signature to each document. After a brief discussion, the others also signed their names painstakingly.

When the sergeant had witnessed the signatures, Michael refolded the documents and carefully returned them to an inside pocket. His face remained impassive but he had just secured the right to represent what was likely to become the largest civil case for compensation in all legal history.

Michael now had the opportunity to try and improve the lives of millions of the world's poorest inhabitants – human detritus referred to by the more fortunate as 'environmental refugees' – people who had been forced to flee their former homes because of flood, drought or famine. But the member states of the United Nations still refused to grant these masses any rights to asylum, rights from which so-called 'political' emigrants benefited automatically. These refugees, all victims of extreme global warming, were the 'unofficials' that no nation was prepared to welcome onto its shores.

The business transaction now completed, Michael's new

clients led their legal representative out to begin his tour of inspection.

In blustery wet winds that failed to deliver sufficient rainfall to be usefully collected, he was led across a succession of slippery gangplanks and up and down treacherous ladders as they crossed from one groaning hull to another. Michael's sub-miniature lapel cameras captured everything he witnessed.

Each huge deck seemed to be crammed with its own ragged population, their driftwood huts interspersed with pitched tents between which tattered washing flapped and billowed wildly. Everywhere mangy goats and chickens ran about amidst this makeshift accommodation, nibbling and pecking at any available scraps.

Whole tenements had also been built beneath the main decks. Inside a former petroleum tanker, Michael bent his lanky frame, entered a low corridor and emerged into a main hold to find that layer upon layer of dark and airless accommodation had been constructed within its cavernous expanse.

Endless rows of cubicles, made from wood, cardboard, fabric and waste plastic, were strewn with pallets on which lay a sighing, moaning, coughing mass of bodies that could not or would not be coaxed up into the topside cold to meet their important visitor. Michael noticed several television sets dotted incongruously about, all tuned to satellite channels and all powered by a single sputtering generator. When Chanda asked if he would like to penetrate still deeper into this stinking labyrinth, the lawyer declined politely, forcing himself not to gag on the stench.

Everywhere he visited, he was struck by the silence of the hordes who gathered to watch their progress. The men stood, sullen and mute, some armed with knives or ancient automatic weapons, just staring at this interloper from the rich civilization over the horizon. Though simply dressed in navy sweater and jeans, his thick brown hair covered by an old woollen hat, Michael was aware that his shining whiteness alone marked him out as belonging unmistakably to that other world.

At each pause he was announced to them in their own language as the American attorney who intended to fight for

their rights to official refugee status, for their unhindered rights of passage across the seas in search of better weather conditions, and eventually for the basic entitlements of immigration and resettlement. But, equally importantly, he aimed to win for them all some financial compensation for what they had suffered at the hands of the giant energy corporations.

But after three hours of exhausting progress, he realized that all he was hearing in return were the dreams they harboured of finding sanctuary in his own rich, unflooded, well-fed world. It seemed that these people didn't want to fight global capitalism; they merely wanted to join it.

'United States? We go to United States - America.'

'England, please.'

'Canada, my brother is there.'

'Please, Germany - I have friends to live with. I work hard.'

Only one person, a short, teak-coloured man in early middle age, raised an alternative subject. 'We need rain, proper rainfall,' he insisted. Michael caught the trace of a Western education in his voice.

'I have already arranged some real rainfall,' he announced loudly, 'though not as much as I'd have liked. You can expect to see a Volume Two precipitation here for approximately seventy minutes next Tuesday afternoon, starting at oh-two-hundred GMT. And that comes with the compliments of my law firm - Gravitz, Lee and Kraus, of San Francisco.'

The little man smiled, then turned to translate this news to others. Amid further smiles, a single hand waved an acknowledgement of thanks. The visitor wondered what their religious leaders must make of a world where rain could only be guaranteed to fall in any quantity after prior payment had been made to some invisible extraterrestrial controlling force.

'And we also need that diesel fuel,' said Chanda quietly in Michael's ear. 'For our main generators.'

The lawyer nodded. He had been given a list of his clients' requests over one of their old-fashioned voice-only satellite phones before he came here, but it had proved difficult to find a tanker company willing to deliver fuel to the 'hulk people' of the Southern Ocean.

'It's on schedule, Mr Zia,' he told his client. 'Arriving Friday, as agreed.'

Chanda smiled, then pressed his hands together in thanks and bowed.

Although Michael's tour took over four hours, he estimated that he had visited only twelve or fifteen vessels. But he knew that there were over 900 hulks of varying sizes lashed together in this one floating community alone. And he also knew there were four other similar hulk nations of the environmentally dispossessed scattered across – but tightly corralled within – the angry seas of the unpopulated southern latitudes.

'How many people do you reckon live here altogether?' he asked Chanda Zia.

'We can't be sure, Mr Fairfax,' said his guide, after a short silence. 'We tried to do a proper count last year, but with over sixty languages, a dozen religions, and ships arriving every month...' He tailed off, then hazarded, 'At least three-quarters of a million.'