

ISLAND IN THE SEA OF TIME

A Novel of the Change

S. M. Stirling



A ROC BOOK

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To Jan, as always, forever. And to Harry—for setting a good example.

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CHAPTER ONE

March, 1998 A.D.

Ian Arnstein stepped off the ferry gangway and hefted his bags. Nantucket on a foggy March evening was chilly enough to make him thankful he'd worn the heavier overcoat; Southern Californian habits could betray you, here on the coast of New England. Thirty-odd miles *off* the coast. The summer houses built out over the water were still shuttered, and most of the shops were closed—tourist season wouldn't really start until Daffodil Weekend in late April, when the population began to climb from seven thousand to sixty. He was a tourist of sorts himself, even though he came here regularly; to the locals he was still a "coof," of course, or "from away," to use a less old-fashioned term. *Everybody* whose ancestors hadn't arrived in the seventeenth century was a coof, to the core of old-time inhabitants, a "wash-ashore" even if he'd lived here for years. This was the sort of place where they talked about "going to America" when they took the ferry to the mainland.

He trudged past Easy Street, which wasn't, and turned onto Broad, which wasn't either, up to the whaling magnate's mansion that he stayed in every year. It had been converted to an inn back in the 1850s, when the magnate's wife insisted on moving to Boston for the social life. Few buildings downtown were much more recent than that. The collapse of the whaling industry during the Civil War era had frozen Nantucket in time, down to the huge American elms along Main Street and the cobblestone alleys. The British travel writer Jan Morris had called it the most beautiful small town in the world, mellow brick and shingle in Federal or neoclassical style. A ferociously restrictive building code kept it that way, a place where Longfellow and Whittier would have felt at home and Melville would have taken a few minutes to notice the differences.

Mind you, it probably smells a lot better these days. Must have reeked something fierce when the harborfront was lined with whale-oil renderies. It had its own memories for him, now. Still painful, but life was like that. People died, marriages too, and you went on.

He hurried up Broad Street and hefted his bags up the brick stairs to the white neoclassical doors with their overhead fanlights flanked by white wooden pillars. The desk was just within, but the tantalizing smells came from downstairs. The whalers were long gone, but they still served a mean seafood dinner in the basement restaurant at the John Cofflin House.

Doreen Rosenthal pecked at her computer and sneezed; there was a dry tickle in her throat she was dolorously certain was another spring cold. Behind her the motors whined, turning the telescope toward the sky. It wasn't a very big reflector, just above the amateur level, but it was an instrument of sorts, and you could massage information out of the results. *Sort of like 0.01 percent of Mount Palomar*. Astronomy posts weren't that easy to find for student interns, and the Margaret Milson Association had given her this one. It meant living on Nantucket, but that wasn't so bad; she was the quiet sort even at U. Mass. She'd finally managed to lose some weight, having nothing better to do with her spare time than exercise. *Well, a little weight, and it's going to be more.* Even in winter, the island was a good place to bike, or you could find somewhere private to do *kata*. When it wasn't storming, of course; and there was a wild excitement to that, when the waves came crashing into the

docks, spray flying higher than the roofs of the houses.

~~And always, there were the stars. The rooms below the observatory held decades of observation, all stored in digital form now. Endless fascination.~~

She took a bite out of a shrimp salad sandwich and frowned as the computer screen flickered. Not another glitch! She leaned forward, fingers unconsciously twisting a lock of her long black hair. No, the digital CCD camera was running continuous exposures. . . .

Stargazers didn't actually look at the stars through an eyepiece anymore. It was ten minutes before she realized what was happening in the sky.

Jared Cofflin sighed and leaned back in his office chair. There really wasn't much for a police chief to do on Nantucket in the winter. An occasional drunk-and-disorderly, maybe some kids going on a joyride, now and then a domestic dispute; they'd gone seven straight years without a homicide. But April came 'round again, and pretty soon the summer people would be flooding in. Summer was busy. Coofs were a rowdy lot. Not that the island could do without them, although sometimes he very much wished it could. Once it had been Nantucketers who traveled, from Greenland to Tahiti.

With a wry grin, he thought of a slogan someone had suggested to the Chamber of Commerce once as a joke: *We used to kill a lot of whales. Come to Nantucket!*

The little police station was in a building that had once housed the fire department, and across a narrow road from a restaurant-cum-nightspot. The buildings on both sides were two stories of gray shingle with white trim, like virtually everything on the island that wasn't red brick with white trim. *About time for supper*, he thought. No point in going home; he hadn't gotten any better at serious cooking since Betty passed on five years ago. Better to step over and get a burger.

He sighed, stood, hitched at his gunbelt, and reached for his hat, looking around at the white-painted concrete blocks, the boxes of documents piled in corners and bursting out of their cardboard prisons. *Hell of a life*. And he'd had to let the belt out another notch recently; it seemed unfair, when the rest of him was the same lanky beanpole it'd been when he graduated from high school back around LBJ's inauguration.

The lights flickered. Nantucket was just about to switch over to mainland power, via an underwater cable. For the next few months they had to soldier along on the old diesel generators, though.

"Christ," he said. "Not *another* power-out."

He walked out into the street and stopped, jarred as if he'd walked into a wall. Stock-still, he stood for a full four minutes staring upward. It was the screams from people around him that brought him back to himself.

* * *

Nor'easter at twenty knots. Just what we needed, Captain Marian Alston thought with satisfaction. She kept a critical eye and ear on the mast captains' work as the royals and topgallants were doused and struck.

"Clew up! Rise tacks and sheets!"

"Ease the royal sheets!"

The pinrail supervisor bellowed into the wind: "Haul around on the clewlines, buntlines, and bunt-leechlines!"

The upper sails fluttered and cracked as the clewlines hauled them up to the yards, spilling wind and letting the ship come a little more upright, although the deck still sloped like the roof of a house.

“Lay them to aloft,” Alston said to the sailing master. “Sea furl.”

The crew swarmed up the ratlines and out along the yards that bore the sails, hauling up armfuls of canvas as they bent over the yards; doll-tiny shapes a hundred feet and more above her head as they fought the mad flailing of the wet Dacron.

No sense in leaving that much sail up, on a night as dirty as this looks to be. Too easy for the ship to be knocked down or taken aback by a sudden shift of wind. The chill bit through the thick yellow waterproof fabric of her foulweather gear like cold damp fingers poking and prodding.

She stood with legs braced against the roll and hands locked behind her back by the ship’s triple wheel, a tall slim woman from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, ebonyblack, close-cropped wiry hair a little gray at the temples; her face was handsome in a high-cheeked fashion like a Benin bronze. Spray came over the quarterdeck railing like drops of salt rain, cold on her face and down her neck. The sun was setting westward over a heaving landscape of gray-black water streaked with foam, and the ship plunged across the wind with the yards sharp-braced. Her prow threw rooster tails every time the sharp cutwater plowed into a swell, twin spouts jetting up over the forecandle from the hawsehole where the anchor chains ran down through the deck. Then the ship would heave free as if shrugging her shoulders, water foaming across the forecandle deck and swirling out the scuppers.

Alston smiled behind the expressionless mask of her face. *Now this, this is real sailing*, she thought.

The Coast Guard training ship *Eagle* was a three-masted steel-hulled windjammer. It had been built in 1936, and the original incarnation was called the *Horst Wessel* before the United States took it as war reparations. There were still embarrassing swastikas buried under the layers of paint here and there, but it was sound engineering, solid work from Blohm & Voss, the firm that built the *Bismarck*. Three hundred feet from prow to stern, a hundred and fifty to the tops of the main and foremasts, eighteen hundred tons of splendid, lovely anachronism. Good for another fifty years hard sailing, if the Powers That Be didn’t decide to scrap her.

“Secure the forward lookout,” she said. It was getting a little dangerous for someone to perch up in the bows.

“Come about, ma’am?” the sailing master asked.

“In a minute or two, Mr. Hiller,” she said.

Nantucket was off to the northeast, fairly close, and it paid to be careful in the dark; the sea between the island and Hyannis on the mainland was shoal water, full of sandbars, and southeast was worse. She’d been tacking into the teeth of the wind for practice’s sake; fairly soon she’d turn and let the *Eagle* run southwestward. Cadets and crewpeople were swarming up the rigging; more stood by on deck, poised to haul on ropes. Archaic, but the best training for sea duty there was—the Coast Guard still taught stellar navigation, too, despite the fact that you could push a button on a GPS unit and get your exact location from the satellites. Lieutenant William Walker was taking a sight on Arcturus from the edge of the quarterdeck, and Victor Ortiz was running one of his pupils through the same procedure. Usually they did the first cruise of the season without cadets, but this year the Powers in their ineffable wisdom had changed the schedules a little. Completely rearranged them, in fact, causing everybody endless bother and inconvenience. It was a considerable relief to get out to sea, where a captain was her own master.

“The wind’s southing, ma’am,” Thomas Hiller, the sailing master, hinted.

“Brace them sharp, then.”

The centuries-old litany of repeated orders echoed across the deck; *Eagle* had been built to operate

the old-fashioned way, no high-gearred winches or powered haulage. It ended with a boatswain's mate bellowing: "Ease starboard, haul port, lively port!"

"Heave!" shouted the line leader in a trained scream that cut through the moan of the wind.

"Ho!" chorused the twenty young men and women on the line, surging back in unison.

"Heave!"

"Ho!"

"Ma'am." Alston looked up. Hiller looked a little lost, which was a first. He'd been on the *Eagle* for eight years. "Ma'am . . . there's something odd about the compass reading."

An old-fashioned magnetic card compass binnacle stood before the wheels. She took a step and looked down into it; the card was *whirling*, spinning in complete circles. Captain Alston blinked in surprise. What on earth could cause that? The sky was clear to the horizon, only a little high cloud boiling in on the wind—unusually good weather for this time of year and these latitudes, although there might be a storm riding in on the nor'easter. No lightning, certainly. Then she noticed that the gyro repeater compass was quivering too.

Marian Alston had been in the Coast Guard much of her thirty-eight years, commanded the *Eagle* for four, and served on search-and-rescue craft and armed cutters before that; she'd joined up the year sea duty was opened to women. You learned to trust your gut. And never, never to trust the sea.

"Finish up and get them down," she said.

Cadets and crew poured down the ratlines, the latter sometimes helping the former along; for the first few weeks out, there would always be the odd officer cadet who froze a hundred and fifty feet up on a swaying rope.

A fat blue spark jumped from her hand to the metal housing between the ship's three wheels. Alston bit back a startled obscenity—you had to set an example—and shook her hand. Something white-hot stretched for an instant from sky to sea off to her left. More sparks flew; people were leaping and cursing all across the deck. Not the four hands standing on the benchlike platforms either side of the wheels, she noted with satisfaction. They flinched, their eyes went wide, but they kept her steady on the heading they'd been given.

Light flickered from left to right behind her, curving ahead of the ship in a line only a few hundred yards away—curving from east to west, in a line her navigator's eye could see was the arc of a huge circle. St. Elmo's fire ran along the *Eagle's* rigging, blue witch-flame. The curses were turning to screams as the lightning reared up into a crawling dome of orange and white overhead. *Like being under the biggest, gaudiest salad bowl in the world*, ran through her mind as she stood paralyzed for a moment. Then the noise on deck penetrated.

Easily. The roaring wind had dropped away to nothing in the space of a few seconds, and the drumhead-taut sails slackened and thuttered limp. The motion of the ship lost its purposeful rolling plunge, changed to a shuddering as the waves turned into a formless chop, and then to a slow sway as they subsided. Shouts and screams echoed through an eerie silence as the rigging's moaning song of cloven air died.

"Silence there!" she snapped, quiet but carrying. "Mr. Roysins, let's get some order here. Whatever's happening, panic won't help."

But it would feel so good, part of her mind gibbered, looking up at the dome of lights that turned night into shadowless day.

"On with engines," she said. Max the diesel hammered into life and steerageway came on the ship. "Strike all sails. Give me a depth-finder reading."

She clenched her hands behind her back and rose slightly on her toes, ignoring the blasting arch of

fire. “We’ve got a ship to sail.”

“Got the stores covered?” Chief Cofflin asked, as he pushed through the crowd on Main Street.

“Right, liquor, grocery, and jewelry—just in case. We’re stretched pretty thin.”

His assistant hesitated; he was a short thin young man named George Swain, and a fourth cousin.

Everyone on the island was a cousin, except wash-ashores. It made for a certain lack of formality. So did the fact that there were only twenty-five officers on the force.

“Some of our own people are a mite shaky, Chief.”

“Ayup. Don’t blame ‘em, George. Still, we’ve got a job to do.” He stopped to think for a moment, running through a list of names in his head. “Get everyone who’s off-duty back on. And call Ed Gear, Dave Smith, Johnnie Scott, and Sean Mahoney. Tell them to each pick six friends they can trust and come down to the station. Deputize ‘em.”

George missed a step. “Chief, we can’t do that on our own say-so!”

“I can and I just did,” Cofflin said. “Ed’s a good man and he knows an emergency when he sees one and so are the rest. You call them and get them posted. Meanwhile, let’s see if I can talk some sense into these people here.” The selectmen or somebody should be doing it; he was a policeman, not a politician. But they were probably out there running around with the rest of the crowd.

He mounted the steps of the bank at the head of Main Street and looked down the cobbles toward the big planter at the foot of the street. The lights on the cast-iron lampposts shone on a sea of faces, on a street that should be mostly clear this time of night. Overhead the ghastly, garish lights still crawled and sparked, adding a weird touch to the upturned faces: all it needed was torches and pitchforks to be something out of a movie. He raised a battery-powered megaphone to his lips.

“Now, let’s have some sense here,” he said.

“What the fuck’s going on?” someone yelled, and the crowd roared with him.

“*QUIET, DAMMIT!*”

The bullhorn cut through the gathering madness, stopped it feeding on itself.

“If I knew what was going on, I’d tell you,” Cofflin said bluntly, in the silence that followed. “I can tell you going hog-wild won’t help any. That—” he pointed upward toward the shimmering dome of light—“hasn’t hurt anyone yet. But we’ve had a dozen accidents, a suicide, and two assaults-without-intent tonight. That *has* hurt people.”

It wasn’t real easy to have a riot in a town of four thousand people; particularly not when most of them were oldstock Yankees and phlegmatic by inclination and raising . . . but everyone was coming real close about now. He looked up. If he thought it’d do any *good*, he’d be inclined to start screaming himself. The dome of fire had been there all night, hanging over the town, over the whole island, like the face of an angry God. Every church on the island was jam-packed, but at least those people weren’t causing any harm and might be doing some good.

“The phone to the mainland’s out,” he went on. “Radio and TV are nothing but static; the airport can’t get through either. The last planes from Hyannis and Boston didn’t arrive. Now why don’t you all go home and get some sleep. If things aren’t back to normal in the morning, we’ll—”

A collective shout that was half gasp went up from the crowd. The stars were back. There was no transition this time; one minute the dome of lights was there, and the next it wasn’t. He suddenly realized that a sound had accompanied it, like very faint frying bacon, noticeable only when it was gone.

The crowd’s gasp turned to a long moan of relief. “—we’ll take further measures,” he went on.

“And we’ll all try not to do anything that will make us feel damned silly in the morning, won’t we?”

He could feel the tension in the crowd ease, like a wave easing back from the beach. People were laughing, talking to their neighbors, slapping each other on the back, even hugging—though he’d bet that those were coofs. A few were crying in sheer reaction. Cofflin himself breathed a silent prayer of thanks to a God he didn’t believe should be bothered with trivialities. *Everything’s all right*, he thought, looking up at the infinitely welcome stars. His gaze sharpened. *Mebbe so. Mebbe not.*

“So why don’t you all go home now?” he went on to the people. “It’s—” he looked at his wrist—“two-thirty and I’m plenty tired.”

The crowd began to break up. George came up, holding his cell phone. “Geary wants to know if we still need help,” he said.

“Ayup,” Cofflin said. The assistant blinked surprise. “Son,” Cofflin went on, “don’t say a word to anyone else, but take a gander up there.”

He nodded skyward. The younger man looked up. “Nothing but stars, Chief,” he said. “And I’m glad to see them, I’ll tell you that.”

“Ayup. But take a look at the *moon*, George.”

The other policeman’s face went slack, then white. The moon was a crescent a few days past new; and it ought to be right out there now, getting ready to set. Instead it was nearly full. . . .

“And the North Star should be just about there. T’ain’t. Just be glad nobody else’s noticed yet,” Cofflin said grimly. “Now let’s see if the phones to the mainland are working again.”

Doreen Rosenthal looked at the image on her screen and blinked again. One hand raised close-chewed nails toward her mouth, and she forced it down with an effort of will. The other twisted itself into her hair. She’d felt like weeping with relief when that weird . . . *phenomenon*. *Let’s not get emotional here* . . . had gone away. Now she was feeling sick again, with a griping pain below her breastbone.

“Let’s look for the polestar,” she said. One had to be systematic. She split the screen and called up an exposure from last night’s sequence beside the latest one for comparison. Her fingers flew over the keyboard. “This doesn’t make any sense at all,” she complained. Nothing was where it should be!

A thought struck her. *Now you’re going completely nuts*, she thought. Still, it couldn’t hurt. It wouldn’t take a minute to call up the program and get the data fed.

More keystrokes. Nothing. *Well, there’s one crazy idea junked*. Lucky nobody would ever know she’d tried. Then she paused. “Well, it can’t hurt to be absolutely sure.”

“Search . . . for . . . all . . . correlations,” she typed. Now the program would run a back-and-forth search until it found a stellar pattern corresponding to the one on the latest CCG exposure.

Dawn was turning the eastern horizon pale pink before she was sure.

Gevalt, she thought. It seemed appropriate. Tears trickled down her face to drop and blotch on the keyboard.

This can’t be happening to me! I’m an overweight Jewish grad student from Hoboken, New Jersey! Things like this didn’t happen to anyone, and if they did it was to some blonde in a movie, meeting Bruce Willis or something. Her arms hugged her middle, feeling a cramping like a bad period.

Mother, help! That calmed her a little. Mother would have panicked even worse, if she had been here. “You’re a scientist, act like one,” she chided herself, blowing her nose and wiping the keyboard. “Let’s firm this up and get a little precision here.”

“Ma’am, still nothing,” the radio operator said.

Captain Alston had been staring up at the infinitely welcome stars. A new unease was eating at the first relief as she checked and rechecked. Either her memory had deserted her, or . . .

She shook her head and stepped into the small rectangular deckhouse behind the wheels, rather grandly called the Combat Information Center. She preferred to think of it as the radio shack. “Still gettin’ static?” she asked.

“No, ma’am. It’s clear since those lights went away. There just isn’t anything to *receive*, not on any of the frequencies.”

She bit back *that’s impossible*. Obviously everything that had happened since sundown was impossible; nevertheless, it was happening. A thought occurred to her.

“Try a GPS reading,” she said.

That should read the ship’s location off to within a few feet. “Nothing, ma’am. Nothing. Maybe the storm scrambled all our electronics.”

Not unless it was EMP like a fusion bomb’s, Alston thought. Or maybe the elves had carried them off to fairyland and Br’er Fox would be by any minute, riding on Willy the Orca; right now one hypothesis looked about as good as another. The crewman’s voice was taking on a shrill note.

“Steady, sailor.” She paused. “Lieutenant, you have a pocket receiver, don’t you?”

The young man nodded. It was a camper’s model, accurate to within a few hundred yards, looking much like a hand calculator. William Walker pulled it out and punched at the keys.

“No reading, ma’am.” His Montana twang was as expressionless as if this was a training exercise. “As far as this unit’s concerned, the satellites just aren’t there t’all.”

“Ma’am! I’ve got someone on the radiophone.”

Alston carefully did *not* lunge for the receiver. “Who?”

“Nantucket, ma’am.” That made sense; they were only a few miles away. As much as anything made sense this night. “It’s the harbor. They’re sort of babbling, ma’am.”

“Ms. Rosenthal, I’m really rather busy.”

Cofflin’s long bony face was set in implacable politeness; he ran a hand through his thinning blond hair as he spoke, his blue eyes bloodshot with sleeplessness. Most of Nantucket had gone home and gone to sleep, but the ones still awake were slowly realizing that the island was still cut off from all communication with the outside world. Pretty soon the rest would wake up, and try to turn on the TV and find out what CNN had to say. *Then we will be well and truly fucked*. Normally he wasn’t much of a swearing man, hadn’t been since the Navy, but now . . .

“Chief Cofflin, *I know what happened*.”

That brought him up. Doreen Rosenthal was a coof, but she wasn’t one of the flake-and-nut brigade, the artists and artisans and neo-hippies who were much of the island’s permanent population. She was a student of astronomy, good enough to get an internship at the MM, and Cofflin had a solid Yankee respect for learning.

“What?” he said sharply.

“I ways . . . I was taking observations. When it happened. I kept the, well, I kept the video going. I got a good shot when the . . . whatever it was stopped.”

Cofflin looked at her.

“I got a good shot of the *stars*, Chief Cofflin,” she went on, pushing her thick-lensed glasses back up her nose.

Cofflin took her elbow. “Look, we’ve all had a rough night—” he began.

She pulled away. “The stars are *wrong*.”

Her voice was shrill but not hysterical. Not by tonight’s standards, at least.

“How are the stars wrong?” he prompted.

“They’re in the wrong places.” She fumbled in the big canvas carrying bag beside her chair, one with *University of Mass. Amherst* on it, and pulled out a printout. Spreading it on the desk, she pointed out circles and lines drawn around the white dots of stars. “See, the polar orientations—”

Cofflin swallowed. “Give me the gist, please, Ms. Rosenthal.”

She looked up at him, white around the lips. “I ran a comparison—I’ve got a stellar progressions program on my computer. This is not the sky of March 1998.”

“Why haven’t the morning planes arrived?” someone said plaintively. “We *still* can’t raise the mainland. We’ve had to ground everything because we can’t file flight plans, and there are people waiting for their planes!”

Cofflin held on to the tightly controlled fear that made him want to snap at the hapless airport employee, or at Rosenthal for blowing her nose behind him. The airport was a little stretch of double pavement off in the middle of the island’s moor and scrubland not far from the south coast. Twin-engine prop puddle jumpers flew in from the mainland, and private planes. Right now it looked a little forlorn in the light of earliest dawn, the sky blue but bleak and cold with mare’s tails of high cloud. The buildings were shingle-covered, like most stuff on the island; a bunch of mainlanders were waiting, with their children and carry-on luggage. Waiting to go to an America he suspected they’d never see again.

“Sorry, Mary,” he said. “That’s what I’m trying to find out. Andy Toffler here yet?”

“You called?” a voice said. “Jared. Mornin’, ma’am.”

Cofflin turned; there was Andy, in a battered old leather flying jacket, holding a paper cup of coffee and one of the *Emergency Town Meeting—1:00 P.M. Today* flyers the police chief had ordered spread around.

“Andy. I need an emergency flight to the mainland.”

“I hate to take her up so soon,” the pilot said. “God alone knows what all that whatever-it-was did to the electronics. I still can’t get my radio to pick up anything but stations here on Nantucket.”

“It’s the only seaplane on the island,” Chief Cofflin said.

Andy looked at him. “Something wrong, Jared?” he said. “I mean, beyond what we know’s wrong. Why do you need a floatplane to hop over to Boston?” His eyes narrowed as he looked at Rosenthal and saw the carrying case over Cofflin’s shoulder. “Why the scattergun?”

“Andy, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Look, I don’t often ask for favors, but—”

“Okay, okay,” the pilot said, spreading his hands in a placating gesture. He’d been a fighter jock once, but the bravado had mellowed with the years that left him bald on top. Not all the Kentucky was out of his voice, though. “No problem. We’re tanked up. Y’all come on aboard.”

Cofflin handed the astronomer in through the door and followed himself, folding his lanky frame into the copilot’s seat. The little floatplane shuddered as the prop spun and then settled down to a steady vibrating roar behind the silver circle. He reached for the headphones.

“Mind if I make a call?”

“Go right ahead,” Toffler said, running through his flight check. “Hope you have better luck than I did.”

As the airplane taxied out on the little wheels built into the floats, Cofflin turned to the frequency the Coast Guard ship used. “*Eagle, Eagle*, this is Cofflin, over,” he said. “Do you read?”

“Cofflin, this is *Eagle*. Captain Alston heah.” The Coast Guard officer’s voice was accented like gumbo, but it carried a sense of crisp confidence that the policeman was glad to hear. “Anythin’ new since we spoke?”

Alston had taken Rosenthal’s news with a long silence, then calmly said that her own observations of the night sky were “compatible.” It was nice to have someone else who wasn’t inclined to gibber.

“I’m taking a floatplane and doing some reconnaissance on the mainland,” Cofflin replied. “We need . . . ah, confirmation of Rosenthal’s theory.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Then: “Could you stop off here and pick someone up? I’d like to have one of my people go along, if you don’t mind.”

“Captain, I’d appreciate it. There’s room for one more—just me, the pilot, and Ms. Rosenthal at present.”

And the astronomer was there because he’d been afraid she’d crack up if he left her behind; crack up, and/or start babbling her findings all over town. Behind him her face was crumpled and blotched, and she was going through Kleenex at a ferocious rate. He really didn’t blame her much. It must be even worse for a scientist, used to an orderly and predictable world.

“That’s fine, Chief Cofflin,” Alston said. “You have our location?”

“Roger that.”

“We’ll heave to, and anchor after you pick up my officer.”

“Roger. Cofflin out.” He looked at the pilot. “You got that?”

“Hop, skip, and a jump.”

The Coast Guard officer turned out to be a fresh-faced young lieutenant with an M-16 over his shoulder, plus webbing with ammunition. He hopped nimbly from the ship’s boat to the right float of the seaplane, and offered a hand all around as he slid into the other rear seat, putting the assault rifle between his knees. He had a camera, too, something better than the Polaroid Cofflin had brought.

“Lieutenant William Walker,” he said; there was a Western twang to his voice, and he looked like younger version of the Marlboro Man, square-jawed and handsome in a boyish way.

No, Cofflin thought. *He looks like . . . what’s that guy’s name . . . Redford, yeah.*

“Happy to meet you.”

“Can’t say as I’m too happy about anything, at the moment,” Cofflin said with a dry smile, shaking his hand. It was hard and felt extremely strong. “But welcome aboard.” He nodded at the assault rifle. “See you came prepared.”

Walker chuckled. “The sum total of the *Eagle*’s armament, if you don’t count the flare pistol,” he said. “I notice . . .” He nodded at the shotgun in turn.

Conversation died away as they accelerated, throwing up spray from the floats. “Water looks odd,” Toffler commented as they lifted and circled the windjammer, then headed for the mainland. “And what the hell’s that?” He indicated a silvery patch below.

“Take a look,” Cofflin said.

The plane banked and slid down, swooping; not all Toffler’s fighter-pilot reflexes had gone the way of his hair. They leveled out and made a pass with the floats nearly touching the water, the heavy salt smell filling the cabin. And not only salt.

“It’s fish,” Cofflin said, wrinkling his nose. “Dead fish. Damn, but there’s a lot of ’em.” Seagulls

swarmed around the massive shoal, diving and pecking.

“Cod,” Lieutenant Walker said, peering out through binoculars. “Thousands and thousands of cod, big cod.”

Cofflin grunted skeptically. There hadn’t been concentrations of codfish like that around New England waters for . . . then he remembered what Rosenthal had told him, and shivered.

“What killed them?” he said, trying to lose awe in practicality.

“There’s a curving mark in the water,” the astronomer behind him said suddenly. He started a little she hadn’t spoken much since the airport. “See, you can follow it.” Different shades of blue, and a crosshatching of waves.

The Coast Guard lieutenant used his binoculars. “The lady’s right. It’s the edge of a circle, a very big circle, or at least some geometric figure. Like the effect you get with a river estuary emptying into the sea, or two very distinct currents . . . I’ve never seen anything quite like it, though. Like two different bodies of water just starting to merge.”

“Never seen anything like it. That’s something we’re all getting used to saying,” Cofflin said dryly. He clicked on the radiophone and relayed the information to the *Eagle*.

“Could you fly along the edge of the phenomenon for a few miles?” Alston said. “I’d like to get a radius.”

“Good idea.” He handed the radiophone to Walker, who called the data to his commander.

A few minutes later she answered: “Got that. Just a second. . . . Not a circle. It’s pretty well a precise ellipse, centered somewhere on the island. Not an exact distance in miles or kilometers, though—something like twenty-three point four miles across and five in height. We were just inside the edge of it, then.”

Cofflin grinned humorlessly at the tinge of bitterness and took the radiophone. “Bad luck for you, Captain—but good for the rest of us, I think. We’re heading in to the coast now.”

“You folks know something that I don’t?” Toffler said. Sweat shone on his forehead and the high dome of his head, and the Kentucky accent was stronger.

“Fill him in, Ms. Rosenthal,” Cofflin said wearily.

The fact of what had happened was beginning to sink in now, and it left silence in the wake of the astronomer’s hesitant voice.

“The . . . the *transition event* must have included a body of water around the island,” she finished. “That’s what we’re seeing here. There would be differences in temperature, salinity, and so forth. Perhaps the fish were caught at the, um, interface. It looked electrical and it affected our electronic apparatus. Where it met the water, I think it electrocuted some of the sea life.”

The floatplane flew low, a few hundred feet up, over intensely blue ocean just rough enough to show whitecaps; the sky was clear but a little hazy with high cloud. After a few minutes, Toffler tipped one wing and spoke:

“Thar she blows.”

Cofflin shaped a silent whistle. Thar she did, in twintailed spouts. He’d never in his life seen that many whales; the spouts and glistening backs stretched for miles. “Big pod,” he said expressionlessly. “Right whales. Blackfish.”

Which had been virtually extinct in these waters since the eighteenth century.

By the time they overflew a Cape Cod empty of roads and houses and reached Boston, he was almost unsurprised at what they found. There was still a bay and islands, but only roughly like the maps. Dense forest grew almost to the water’s edge, huge broadleaf trees towering hundreds of feet into the air, and birds rose in their tens of thousands from salt marsh and creekmouth, enough to make

the pilot swerve. Toffler circled for a few minutes, aimlessly. What clear spots there were on dry land looked to be the result of old forest fires. Under his numbness Cofflin thought how beautiful it was, with an unhuman comeliness that made Yosemite look like a cultivated garden.

“Well,” he said, “I think you were right, miss.” Rosenthal nodded and sneezed into her Kleenex. Walker pointed. “There.”

A stretch of shingle beach edged a seaside clearing where a creek ran into the sea. In it were a score or so of shelters made by bending saplings into U-shapes, and then covering the sides with bark and brush, like Stone Age versions of Quonset huts. Fires trickled smoke, and human figures pointed upward. When the plane came lower overhead they scattered like drops of mercury on dry ice; a few pushed big log canoes into the water and paddled frantically away along the shore. Lower, and they could see a woman turn back, scoop up a crying infant, and scuttle for the edge of the woods with the child in her arms.

“Can you take us down there, Andy?”

“Sure,” the pilot said. “Water’s calm, and that looks like a sloping surface—I should be able to ground the floats.”

The seaplane turned into the wind and sank. There was a skip . . . skip . . . skip sensation as the floats touched; the airplane surged forward, then sank back to a slightly noseup position as Toffler turned it toward the shore. Cofflin cracked the door and looked down.

“Sand and gravel . . . getting shallow, any minute now . . .”

Toffler killed the engine and the plane coasted forward. The aluminum of the floats touched bottom; they slewed about slightly and stopped. Cofflin picked up his shotgun and stepped down, onto the float and then into knee-deep water. He wiped his brow.

“Hot for March,” he said, looking inland.

Walker followed him, using his binoculars again. “Can’t see any of the . . . Indians, I suppose. Looks like they’ve cleared out.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Toffler asked. “Let’s get the plane secured. We need to stake down some lines.”

The men occupied themselves. Rosenthal took some items from her backpack and fiddled with them. “You’re right, Chief Cofflin. It’s eighty Fahrenheit.” That was unusual for Massachusetts in early spring. “And look at the trees, the other vegetation.”

Cofflin straightened up and did. “Season’s pretty far along,” he said. “But how do we know it’s March?”

“I worked on my calculations,” she said. “It’s March, all right. Early spring, at least, but I’m morally certain it’s the same day, down to the hour, that it, ah, would have been. Sunrise was at exactly the right time.” She paused. “The climate may well be in a warmer phase.”

Cofflin nodded, feeling his stomach twist with a sensation that was becoming unpleasantly familiar: sheer whirling disorientation, as if the ground kept vanishing from beneath his feet. He clicked off half a dozen pictures of the shore, then handed the camera to the astronomer.

“Let’s take a look. Andy, you take the left; Lieutenant Walker, you’re right; I’m point; and Ms. Rosenthal, you keep behind me, and get plenty of pictures.”

“Why?” she said, with a flicker of spirit, and a sneeze.

“Because you’re not armed,” he replied, glad to see the stunned depression leaving her face.

The air was not only warm, it was fresh like nothing he’d ever smelled. Closer to the huts it wasn’t as pleasant; evidently whoever lived there had never heard of latrines. From the look of it they kept dogs, too. The primitive wickiups were even cruder than they’d looked at a distance; inside were hides and furs, bedding made of spruce branches and grass. All around was a scattering of tools made of

bone, stone, horn, and wood, and shallow lughandled soapstone dishes. Hide stretchers, fire-carved bowls, wooden racks lashed together with thongs that held drying fish . . . He picked up a flint scrape somebody had abandoned beside a raw deerhide. Not a museum piece, he realized suddenly. It was still warm from the hand of whoever had left it.

“*Incoming!*”

Cofflin hit the deck with old reflex, and something went *shunk* into the ground ahead of him. A spear, he thought. It seemed pretty slender for that, though, more like a huge arrow. His hands racked the slide of the shotgun automatically. *Five rounds, mixed rifled slugs and deershot*, he thought.

Then he saw the men. Six, maybe ten of them running forward in dashes from cover to cover, short brown men with queues of shoulder-length black hair, naked except for hide breechclouts looped through belts around their waists. One of them fitted another of the slender javelins into a wooden holder with a curved end piece to hold a shaft in position and a butterfly-shaped stone weight on its end. He ran a few steps, half-skipping sideways, and swept his arm forward. The spear came forward, pivoting out on the end of the flexing stick.

Spear-thrower, Cofflin realized. *Atlatl*. He’d read about it in a *National Geographic* article. The stick extended the length of the thrower’s arm, giving enormous leverage. The spear blurred through the air and someone shouted with pain—Andy, he realized with a sudden stab of panic. Their *pilot*. The surge of adrenaline cut through the glassy barrier insulating him from the world. Suddenly everything became real again, and he knew that he could die here.

“Over their heads!” he shouted, and let a round off. Walker followed suit, the M-16 giving its light spiteful crack over the dull thump of his shotgun.

One of the Indians screamed and threw away his spears, pelting back toward the woods. The others dropped to the ground. Cofflin twisted to look over his shoulder; Rosenthal was next to Andy, working on his leg. A spear was through the pilot’s calf, but from the way he was swearing it wasn’t immediately fatal.

“How’s he look?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” the astronomer said. “There isn’t much bleeding.”

“Hurts like hell, but it’s through the muscle,” the pilot said, his voice tight with control. “Miss, get my knife out and cut it off here—that’s right. Now let’s pull . . . *Christ, woman* . . . sorry. Okay, okay now pack it with the handkerchief.” He looked up at Cofflin. “I’ve got a first-aid kit in the plane. Should be all right, but I’m not going to be runnin’ any marathons soon.”

“I doubt they hold ’em here,” Cofflin said, voice tight with relief.

“Heads up,” the young Coast Guard officer said.

The Indians were getting up . . . and moving forward, fitting more javelins to their spear-throwers. Their voices sounded, a shrill yipping broken with howls like wolves. Deliberately like wolves, he realized.

“Damn, but they’ve got guts,” Cofflin said. *Thinking straight, too. Saw that the noise didn’t hurt anyone, and now they’re coming to clear the strangers out of their homes. Probably their families’re waiting back in the woods.*

Maybe in their stories the hero always beat the evil magician in the end. It still took guts to attack outlandish men who climbed out of a great metal bird.

“I hate to hurt them,” Toffler said, echoing his thought. “It’s their home.”

“Them or us. That Mighty Mattel is more accurate than my scattergun, lieutenant. Try to wound.”

Walker set himself, exhaled, and squeezed his trigger. This time one of the Indians fell, screaming and clutching at his leg. The others wavered. Walker fired again, and dirt spurted up at another’s feet.

That was enough for most of them; they followed the first and ran yelling into the woods. The last man threw down his javelins and spear-thrower and charged, a longer stabbing spear in one hand and flint hatchet in the other, dodging and jinking like a brokenfield runner. His face was a contorted mask of glaring eyes and bared teeth.

“Damn, he’s not stopping for shit,” Cofflin said, Navy reflexes taking over from peacetime habit. “Take him down, lieutenant.” *Poor brave bastard.*

Crack. The Indian fell.

The islanders waited tensely, but there was no sound save the birds and insects. Nothing moved. At last Cofflin stood. “Let’s take a look at them,” he said. “Ms. Rosenthal, could you get the aid kit from the plane, please?”

The wounded Indians were short men, neither over five-six; they wore a long roach of hair on top of their heads, braided at the back, but the sides of their heads were shaved and painted vermilion. Their skin was a light copper brown, their features sharper than Cofflin would have expected. The first one to fall had a gouge over the big muscle of his thigh; he stopped trying to squeeze it shut with his hands and started crawling when they approached, naked terror on his face. He pulled a stone knife from a birch-bark sheath at his waist and swiped at them; he was chanting, something high-pitched and rhythmic.

Death song, Cofflin guessed, dredging at bits of old knowledge. *Okay, let’s see if we can communicate.*

He put down his shotgun and spread his open hands. The Indian waited, tense and wary. His eyes widened as Rosenthal came up beside the other man. Cofflin glanced aside at her. *Oh,* he thought. The astronomer was wearing a T-shirt under an open jean jacket, and her gender was entirely obvious.

“I think the fact that you’re a woman makes him less frightened, Ms. Rosenthal,” he said. “Wait a minute. Get out one of the rolls of bandage.”

Slowly, Cofflin mimed a wound on his leg, and binding it up, then pointed to his companion. After a moment, the Indian made an odd circular motion of his head that seemed to correspond to a nod. His bloody hand began to return the flint knife to its sheath. Cofflin shook his head, then made a waving motion with his hands. He took the scraper from his own belt, tossed it aside, and pointed to the Indian as he recovered it.

Reluctantly, the Indian did the same with his own weapon. “All right, doctor,” Cofflin said. “Move slowly, and be careful. I’ve got you covered. Put some of the antiseptic powder on it, then bandage it up.”

He held the shotgun ready. Rosenthal licked her lips and moved in, motions slow and careful. The narrow black eyes of the wounded man went wide for an instant as the astringent powder struck the wound, but he moved the leg to let the woman finish bandaging it. She sat back, sneezed, and looked helplessly at her blood-covered hands.

“All right, back off again,” Cofflin said. Maybe the gesture of goodwill would help. “Lieutenant, what about the other one?”

“He’s bad,” the Coast Guardsman said. “Sorry. Thighbone’s broken, compound fracture. I’ve stopped the bleeding and put him out, but without a good doctor and antibiotics, he’s a dead man.”

Cofflin watched the other wounded Indian drag himself backward toward the woods. *If we leave him, he’ll die. On the other hand, if we take him away, they’ll think God knows what. On the third hand, we can patch him up, maybe teach him a little English, and he can interpret. Give him some presents, knives, pots and pans, costume jewelry. Squanto R Us.*

“All right, then,” he said. “Let’s get out of this screwup.”

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