

EYE OF THE CHINOOK

SERIALIZED

A NOVEL

By Homer Kizer

Chapter Two

Gulls cry as if in pain, suspended between heaven and earth. An eagle chases a raven, both sailing and flapping between the riggings of seiners and trawlers. The harbor smells of kelp and diesel fuel. Steam hisses and a small surge splashes at the pilings of the dock to which the *M/V Freedom* is tethered.

The air feels heavy— and Itzak wonders what would it be like living at double atmospheric pressure. Breathing would be easy. Sound would carry like nothing humanity has ever experienced. Boom-boxes would be weapons of war, and one artillery round would have a shock wave... he will have to work out the calculations, but the shock wave would, itself, be lethal, meaning that sound could be used to do work. Musicians might then have been useful contributors to society. And he wonders why, here, so far from home, does he think about sheer speculation. A smaller globe. One covered with dense vegetation. The largest members of each animal species— the giants cats, dinosaurs, auroch— all gone now would then have lived well. Is that why they died out? They couldn't breathe the thinner air. Did they survive the Flood only to perish during the days of Peleg? Or did they not get on the Ark because they were too big?

Two of the common kind, seven pairs of the holy, eight people— not many to restart a world. But then, maybe it doesn't take many. And he sees an inbound vessel push its bow wake down the channel, the wave washing ashore, then falling back on itself and slinking away as double agents do.

What has he become? A man old before his time. And he feels anger well up inside him, anger that cannot be released, anger that makes him shiver in the chill breeze that holds the gulls suspended over hell as if they were sinners, unable to enter heaven.

One of the cannery's crew flips the crabber's heavy lines off dock cleats, then casts the lines aboard the vessel's fore and aft decks as the vessel backs away, its prop pushing troubled water along both sides. The diesel engine rumbles softly, the muffled sound absorbed by the harbor as if it were spilled water blotted by a paper towel.

The *M/V Freedom* jockeys back and forth as it turns around in the channel running northeast to southwest. The vessel seems unsure of where it wants to go as the breeze pushes and the retreating tide pulls and the prop chews through the thick waters of the Pacific, the ocean stretching beyond the horizon beyond the channel beyond the docks and gulls, forklifts and curious seals, their dog faces questioning the back and forth jockeying that produces motion but doesn't cause the *Freedom* to move far from the dock where it had been tethered.

Finally, they are underway. Although Itzak has been to sea before, he hasn't felt anything quite like the power that flows through the swells overrunning each other as the *Freedom* turns the corner at Buoy Four. The sky is gray, ominous, the clouds almost too heavy to lift

off the water. Wind grabs the spray and slings it against wheelhouse windows. The bow pounds. And he senses the outflowing of energy, seemingly limitless energy unrestricted by horizons, more energy than many bombs could produce. He senses rather than feels the inequality that should produce faith, but hasn't, doesn't.

The *Freedom* passes through Ouzinkie Narrows, crosses Inner Marmot Bay, and starts through Whale Pass as darkness settles like fog over this gap between islands. Jones names the landmarks as the *Freedom* bucks into Kupreanof Strait where the tides meet, forming a standing wave that walks as a man pacing back and forth. Itzak concentrates on the horizon, his stomach now arguing for calmer water and less wind, less weather, less worry. In the darkness, they buck through that standing wall of water formed where Shelikof tides meet Kodiak tides. Then they are into Shelikof Strait, a thirty-mile wide rift formed when the crust of the earth stretched. Again, Itzak wonders about the possibility that the paper he had been reading was correct, that the earth is much younger than observation has determined, meaning that the scientific method cannot be trusted. Age is measure by light mass particle decay. Quantum physics has taught scientists that photons take all possible paths between two points. They truly cannot be relied upon to reveal age. What is needed is a heavy mass particle that can be measured. One exists. One has to, or the background temperature of deep space would not remain constant as the universe expands. That temperature comes from the decay of this heavy mass particle. It can come from nothing else. And he stifles another sour belch as the *Freedom* plows into a particularly steep swell.

Jones' face is drawn as tension broods in the wheelhouse like a hen over her clutch, the hen's breast feverish, her eggs nurturing life, that life being unspoken thoughts about it being all right to admire Israel from a distance, all right to seek Israel's aid in developing a bomb for the *Cause*, but not all right to look like a Jew. After their initial meeting, Itzak has sensed a hostility developing in Les Jones, a hostility that prohibits any self-identity that suggests Judaism. In the wheelhouse are several pictures of the effeminate Christ. Without doubt, Jones is a born-again Christian, probably a zealot, the word used properly.

A wall of water slams into the *Freedom*, causing the crabber to lose headway and shoving it off-course. The vessel shivers and shakes as if chilled. Ports are washed with water, and Itzak suddenly hears the wind roar as he feels the barometric pressure fall, a feeling he at first can't explain and doesn't understand until the first mate mentions the falling pressure to Jones, who stares at the wind gauge, its needle a centimetre past eighty knots. They have sailed into a storm that isn't supposed to be here. And Itzak remembers the woman throwing the money out onto the street where he picked it up. Why did she do that? Why did the dog musher happen to give him a lift? He doesn't like coincidences, doesn't believe in them. And he feels his nerves tense as they do when he has gone into a battle.

The crabber's picking lights, unable to pierce the black fury, encircle themselves and shudder as yet another wall of water slams into the *Freedom*. The bow dips, dips, dips, and water smashes against wheelhouse windows, the wave broken by the whaleback design, as the crabber now flounders. Again the bow dips, then rises slightly as tons of frigid water break across it, flowing hard against windows. Again the dipping bow, then the ever so heavy rise as another sea breaks against the windows, the water burying the aft deck, gushing through companionways, flooding scuppers.

The deck crane's boom swings wildly as the picking deck is awash with each sea, the bow now very slow to rise. Seawater surges into the fo'c'sle, ebbs into the galley and down stairs to the engine room. Pumps run. But unable to keep up, the pumps return only a portion of each surge as seven hundred pound crab pots, having broken free, ricochet off bulkheads as they're thrown between gunwales.

Something is happening, and happening too fast for Itzak to fully comprehend. The sea has become their enemy, an enemy they cannot see until it against hits them with crippling blows.

Scuppers remain under as the bow again dips and yet another sea breaks against wheelhouse windows. Lights flicker. Inside and out. The radarscope darkens, then glows weakly again. Except for the engineer, the gathered crew huddles in the wheelhouse as the crabber shudders, each crew member alone with his or her thoughts, each strong or weak in his or her mind, each pale face reflecting the eerie green of the radar scope.

The cook, her feet spread wide, braces against the *Freedom's* rolls and pitches. To her, this stranger, the skipper's double, is a sign of the evil to come. She's frightened by him, fearful of him, of his eyes, as unblinking as those of a stuffed snake. He, not the skipper, seems to be in charge: the skipper would have laid up behind Harvester Island unless he was forced—forced by those eyes— to venture out on a night like this one.

One deckhand, this his first season fishing, crosses himself as he mutters prayers beneath his breath. The other deckhand sits on a pile of survival suits, his suit already removed from its sack. He's been in tight spots before with the skipper, but none tighter that tonight, right now, in a squall that suddenly appeared from nowhere. So it is with anger that he watches the Jew who's to show them how to build a bomb, the Jew who's the skipper's twin, the skipper in a frozen poise, staring at the radar scope with its miniature outline of Wide Bay.

They're running for protection. They shouldn't have left Karluk; but how were they to know this blow was coming? Now the rocks in front of Wide Bay glow as green teeth in an open mouth, the earth prepared to devour them. They're alone on Shelikof Strait, alone and without help, alone with God.

Again the crabber shudders, lights flicker, a wall of water slamming against the wheelhouse. Again they lose headway as the main sputters, coughs, sputters, then catches and regains RPMs. The engineer tries to start a portable pump, but its fuel is contaminated. No auxiliary pump will stay running despite fuel filters being cracked open to drain the seemingly endless stream of water.

Freedom's bow rises heavily as another wall of water hammers the wheelhouse. The crabber shudders harder as the sea holds the bow under longer with each wave.

As a nervous habit, Itzak drums his fingertips across the back of his other hand. He isn't particularly worried. He just doesn't like coincidences, and this storm is too coincidental for his comfort. But this is war, the elements of nature his enemy tonight. His life has been a series of wars. Germany. Haifa. Then the Sinai. Undercover in Syria. The mathematician, military tactician, Israeli, the product of an end-time generation— he tries to calculate odds as he watches the sweeping hand and glowing screen of the radarscope. But his thoughts keep returning to a smaller world, divided in the days of Peleg. What did those who saw the world divide think as half a continent broke away and appeared to sink in the western sea? Is this the Atlantis of legends? Has there been cultural amnesia? Surely more stories should exist than just the one about Atlantis.

Because he was born in Ostpreussen, not even Danmark as he has always claimed, Israel has not allowed him to work on his nation's domestic weapons program. He has ideas twenty years in development for how to simplify the production of fusion devices. His ideas have been examined by the brilliant minds of the young lions. He is properly thanked, then his ideas are shelved. Israel already has fission devices, and until a split proton device can be constructed, the young lions consider Israel to be adequately protected.

Freedom's bow again dips as a wave breaks against the wheelhouse. Lights again flicker and the main sputters and the rocks on the radar scope dim and fad, only to be renewed by the sweeping hand, as war continues to rage.

Why can't he seek peace? Why does he continue to fight enemies as old as humanity? Democracy originated on the Plains of Shinar; Communism, within Babel's walls. All forms of government date back to that Mighty Hunter who raised the sky, effectively separating man from God by introducing the concept of equality into the human psyche. Humanity has become many equals unequally yoked to myth and tradition. But humanity doesn't control its mental landscape. Its thoughts grow from the red clay and stony hillsides of the world outside of Eden. And that's what he wants: equality with God. He wants an equal claim to his mental landscape. Co-ownership of the garden where his thoughts sprout, take root, grow and mature. That co-ownership is denied him— and has been for as long as he can remember. His thoughts grow from soil owned by the prince of Persia, who he once briefly met in Damascus, the experience frightening. How can he believe in a God who would allow such evil to reign over humanity? What is the purpose? Surely there must be one.

Again lights flicker.

The sea is ruthless in a way he respects, not like the prince. It remains always before him. It delivers body blows and head shots, then dances away, before sending another combination of punches hard in the *Freedom*. But it doesn't war with faceless computers operated by equally faceless men, mirror reflections of the System they represent, that System controlled by the prince, whose lifeless shadow was once defeated by Mordecai. And if the shadow could nearly cause Israel to be wiped out, what greater mischief can the prince cause directly? He has all the nations of the world aligned against Israel. He even has Judah aligned against herself.

The sea doesn't war as he has, a spy in a foreign land with deceit forming his character into a salt pillar. Yes, he wants equality before he turns to salt, poisoning the ground where his body will lie.

The bow dips as another wave breaks against the wheelhouse.

A port POPS!

Water gushes through the opening as electrical sparks fly. The jog-stick breaks; autopilot's thrown off course. And Jones, who's just taken over the helm, is washed across the wheelhouse. The main engine coughs, then dies—

Lights fail as the sea smashes scopes and screens. Blackness engulfs the wheelhouse. The cook screams, but the wind screams louder. The first mate stumbles to the helm, but without power, nothing can be done as the bow slips and begins to swing portside.

Seeming to resent the sea's intrusion, the *Freedom* rolls violently. Everyone in the wheelhouse knows the crabber will lay beam-to in seconds— and time seems to slow down until it has nearly stopped.

Once the *Freedom* lays beam-to the seas, the vessel will then no longer be able to right itself. The sea will have won.

The deckhand who had been praying stands confused as rushing water slowly rises past his knees. Seconds seem endless as Itzak marvels at the relativity of time, a new dimension of thought he hasn't previously explored. If death awaits him, it will take an exceedingly long period of time to get here, for his perception of passing time remains constant but events that should occur in micro-seconds seem to take forever to happen. It is as if everything but his thoughts are suspended in molasses, as if the viscosity of space has suddenly increased to where events are unable to occur at their normal speed.

The other deckhand, in his survival suit, ever so slowly gropes for the port side door. The distance between the deckhand's outstretch thumb and mittened hand and the port side hatch slowly, ever so slowly, even slower closes— and Itzak wonders if death so slowly

approaches that it will be welcomed, that it will seem like it is time to leave this conscious world behind.

Bleeding from nose and mouth, Jones flounders in the now waist-deep water. And the cook, trying to catch one of the floating survival suits, still sacked, lunges here, falls, screams, scrambles to her knees, lunges there, splashing water as she thrashes in the near blackness, never quite able to grasp her only hope. Salt stings her eyes. The frigid brine chills her, causing her to shake violently, and still she can't grasp her salvation.

The crabber rolls to its port side, nearly rolling over, as a sea breaks against it. The vessel rocks back only to roll even farther to port when, again, the next wave slams into it.

Recalling the many times when his destiny hasn't been in his hands, the many times when hope has been dim, Itzak slowly extends his hand to grab a sacked survival suit as the last light goes out. He sees the retreating light, which now moves more slowly than his thoughts do, and he wonders if time is relative, or if thought is. This phenomenon he is experiencing might be the extreme escalation of the speed of thought rather than a reduction in the speed of physical events. If that is the case, then thoughts will exceed the speed of light, suggesting that thoughts originate outside of the natural world, with its laws of physics. Otherwise, he couldn't see the disappearance of light. But not all thoughts. Only the ones he presently experiences. And now able to see nothing, not even the speed with which he extends his hand, he calmly wedges himself between the helm and the compass. He dons the survival suit; he is no hurry. There seems to be plenty of time. And he calmly slaps the flap over his mouth.

Going with the motion of the vessel, he rolls to his side, his movement seemingly proportional to the length of time it takes to occur. He is, though, slowly bounced around like a soiled garment in a washing machine that barely agitates. Washed onto the deck, he feels himself being slowly swept away when he bumps into the cook, still in slow motion trying to catch a sacked suit.

His urge is to scream at the cook to hurry, but sound forms so slowly in his mouth that his words are lost before they can be retrieved.

The cook clutches his right arm as they're washed over the stern and into foaming fury. Wind sucks sound from their ears; the sea tosses them around as if they're specks of foam. And he feels them being sucked into the vortex of the hole caused when the *Freedom* rolled over, dived and disappeared. They're sucked down, around and down, farther and farther down and around, the cook clutching his arm, he reaching for hers.

He can't hold his breath any longer; it seems like he hasn't breathed for an hour. But the cook continues to pull him down, around and down, farther down, down, down, down. He tries to swim, but he moves too slow— and the cook hangs on. His lungs refuse to obey him, and he feels the slow release of air. He feels water slowly enter his lungs, and he feels her hands let go...

For a beat, his heart stops as he again feels her hands grasping his arm and him jerking free. It's as if her hands grasp his heart, not his arm. Wincing inside, he shivers as his stomach knots, twists, rejects seawater and bile, the pain that of a leg cramp a thousand times over.

When he finally opens his eyes, he's floating on his back, peacefully bobbing on the surface, shivering. Time has passed. The storm has passed, seas have calmed. He's exhausted, dehydrated, content to let the surge lift him, then gently roll on past, leaving him to be lifted by the next swell as wind and tides push him where they will.

When he tries to move, he feels her hands on his arm, but he can recall little other than the fury of the storm. He tries not to think, but the effort does little good for he still feels

her hands. He forces himself to think of something else, but there is nothing else but her hands clutching, begging, pleading.

In the distance to either side of him, he sees dark rocky headlands. From the blue-gray cloudiness of the water, he imagines he's in a bay. But he doesn't care where he is. All he wants is sleep, sound sleep, the kind from which a person doesn't awaken.

He feels free, a spirit soaring above the earth, beyond the earth, faster, faster and farther, the earth a shiny blue marble far below him. Then suddenly a man stands before him. Immensely tall, this man of war appears to be on fire though flames touch neither his white robe or snowy hair. And with his sword held ready to strike, he says in a voice like the roar of breakers on a beach, *Come no farther. It's not for men to enter Heaven.*

He suddenly becomes heavy and begins to fall, tumbling and spinning, around and around, banging and bouncing as he rolls over and over and over. Frantically waving his arms, he opens his eyes and sees that he's in the surf being cast ashore as if the sea were vomiting him back to life.

Clutching the coarse black sand with his mittened hands, he remains still long enough to draw himself onto his knees. He crawls as far as he can, collapses onto the wet mixed sand and gravel, and the surge laps against his legs, then retreats, abandoning him.

An arm's reach, a second one, then collapsing onto the coarse sand, the grit clinging to the side of his face, to his lips. Thoughts are jumbled, incomplete. His tongue is swollen, eyes burn. He shakes from the wet cold.

Finally, pushing himself back onto his knees, he falls forward, falls half his length farther up the beach.

His face feels encrusted in salt.

His arms lay to his sides; yet he feels her hands pulling him down, back into the sea. He's weak. Her hands are strong. He feels himself being sucked under— and with supreme effort, he struggles to his feet and staggers up the inclined beach only to collapse among scattered pieces of bleached-white driftwood that form a blurry line separating land from sea.

There he lies in his bright red survival suit. To one side of him is a partially flattened and sun-faded crab buoy, once florescent pink. To the other side of him is a yellow plastic JOY dish detergent bottle, half-buried in sand. Farther away lie a brown Saki bottle and a green Seven-Up can. Beyond his reach are a length of orange seine lead and a tangle of stiff, yellow-poly crab line entwined in a beached raft of bull kelp. He doesn't have the strength or will to move; so he remains lying with the flotsam of the world.

His mind clears, but he only vaguely remembers the wheelhouse and being aboard the boat. He's cold, really cold, and he rolls onto his back to see where the sun is... it's a lowly orb of no strength barely above mountains that lie beyond his head. Its rays tinge low-hanging clouds pink.

The cramp in his gut will not ease. He grits his teeth, but his swollen tongue is in the way. He feels his teeth pierce the side of his tongue, tastes the warm blood that seeps from the bite; tries to swallow the blood, but can't. His throat rejects the warmth. Instead, blood fills his mouth and trickles down his chin and alongside his neck.

The blood annoys him. He wants to spit, can't. Instinctively, he knows he must conserve his strength, that he can't waste a single drop of his blood, and he gags down a little of what fills his mouth.

He needs water. Lying on his back, he sees an inverted ice flow hanging from black rocks below where the sun sets. He suspects a stream trickles under the ice. But getting there will require standing, walking, neither of which he has tried since tumbling ashore.

Rolling onto his side, he draws himself into a fetal position, then unwraps onto hands and knees, pushes himself to his feet and stands wobbly, a little afraid to take a step. He shivers, his clothes wet beneath his survival suit. The longer he stands there mostly motionless, the harder he shivers; so he forces bruised muscles to take one step, then another, and a third, his steps like those of a toddling child. He stumbles, falls, rises to his feet again, and takes a fifth step as the knot in his gut clenches.

Where the black rocks rise above the coarse sand, a tiny stream flows under and over the ice. He flops down and drinks, sucking the water in, its coldness painful and numbing.

Shadows lengthen and the wind kicks-up. Whitecaps cover the bay, but only the caps near the far shoreline still catch the last rays of the setting sun.

The swift water of the stream washes blood from his mouth: the base of the ice flow turns crimson. His blood creeps up the flow, discoloring more and more of the plume as panic twists his already clenched gut. His thoughts are confused, eyesight fuzzy. Colors blend as they begin to spin, and he rolls and rolls and rolls until he's unable to move. There he lies, his eyes shut as night settles within his mind. A blood-red moon rises, but no stars shine. The man on fire again appears to him— the man is angry, and with his flaming sword strikes his eyes.

Pain! fiery pain that jolts him upright. He opens his eyes. His cheek bleeds, and a raven squawks as it tries to escape. The bird had pecked at his eye and had barely missed.

Clambering to his feet, he sees that the sun pushes up beyond the bay in which a red log floats just behind the surf. It's morning, or at least he thinks it is. He rubs his eyes, and when he removes his hands, the red survival-suit-clad body tumbles in the little breakers.

Without understanding why, he hurries along the beach to where the fellow is rolled up and down the inclined gravel by each advancing and retreating surge.

A dense bank of dark gray clouds stretches above the sun, and as the sun pushes upward into these clouds, he suddenly feels cold. He is wet, hungry, bruised, and confused about why he's here on this beach. He remembers something about a boat, but those recollections aren't making any sense to him. They seem distant, faint, jumbled like the spinning horizon. Some things he knows without understanding why he knows them. Other things don't make any sense. Just confuse him. Nothing seems like it should be, but he can't quite grasp how things should be.

A pair of ravens circle overhead, one of them the raven that tried to remove his eye. They have zeroed-in on the red suit, and seem to believe a meal awaits them.

He would kill the ravens if he could—

Something inside him tells him that he will have to keep the ravens from the body, protect the body, bury it. And he bends down to pick up a rock to throw at the birds.

The bending over almost causes him to pass out as blood rushes into his head. His thoughts become more difficult to connect, but then, he can't remember when they weren't difficult. But something's not right, a fact he senses more than computes. It's as if a war is going on inside his mind, a war he's determined to lose. And his awareness of this war passes as the bottom of the sun lifts into the clouds, obscuring it, the clouds absorbing its energy, leaving the beach cold and without shadows.

Gulls have already pecked out both eyes of the body— the fellow's face is purplish black and gruesome, unrecognizable. Grabbing the body by his arms, he drags the fellow above the tide line, stops, and hurls his rock at the raven tugging on the fellow's tongue even as he had a hold the fellow's arms. The ravens seem unafraid of him, or of the rock he threw. And he hurls another that lands closer to the birds this time.

He hurls rocks at the birds until he collapses beside the body, his arm too weak to even wave the ravens away as they squabble over which of them will get the fellow's tongue.

By the time he has a recovered enough to drive the birds off the body, the ravens have stripped away cheeks and lips, leaving even the base of the tongue exposed. He knows he will have to find somewhere to protect the body from the birds, and he sees a narrow fissure in the black rocks above the beach. If he can drop the body in the crack, maybe he can cover it up enough that the ravens can't get at it. But he now hasn't the strength to move the body, let alone drag it so far. Maybe if he strips the body he can lighten it enough he can drag it

When he unzips the fellow's survival suit he finds candy bars and sealed, foil packages of dried fruit. Plus, the fellow's shirt and pants are dry. His clothes are wet though now warm. And he thinks about putting on the fellow's shirt as he breaks off a section of a chocolate bar.

His swollen tongue struggles to get out of the way so he can swallow the softened chocolate, its effect dramatic even before it reaches his stomach. Muscles strength and the edges of things become sharper as his thoughts clear. And his aim becomes better: he hits a raven with a rock, knocks it down, and is on it before it can recover. He wrings its neck until its head separates, then as if instinct requires it of him, he holds it upright over his mouth and catches the stream of blood its heart continues to pump, its head in his right hand, its body in his left, its blood warm and thick like his own.

Under the shade of that gray cloudbank, he strips off his wet clothes and puts on the dry pants, shirt, underwear of the fellow whose suit didn't assure his survival. But the fellow's suit is actually in better shape than his own, wet and now cold inside, so he dons it.

The raven's mate *caws* as if trying to provoke him. He slings a rock at it, but misses badly.

Turning his attention to the body, he finds he can now drag it to the crevice in the outcropping of black lava. He slides it over the edge, then finds enough broken chunks of lava to cover it. All the while he works, the raven *caws*, with each *caw* making him a little more angry. And he doesn't realize how much time passes until the sun breaks out from the cloudbank— the sun is just above the mountains where it set last night. The bottom edge of the cloudbank turns orange and seems on fire; and he remembers something about a man on fire, but the image is blurry, its edges like those of the cloudbank.

The raven remains just beyond how far he can throw a rock as the sun dips lower and lower until blackness settles into the shadows, turning the snow-capped peaks into a jagged line that seems to levitate as he scrambles after the raven, clawing his way forward until his fingers become bloody hooks. He stumbles after the raven, sometimes running, sometimes falling, but always a little behind it, never quite able to get close enough he can kill it. And he wants to kill it, to wring its mocking neck, to tear it apart, devour it as he did its mate.

His head swirls and the ground spins yet he remains on his feet as his eyes burn from the brightness of snow. Streaks of white-hot fire probe his mind while he shivers in a cold wind, the raven always in front of him, neither close nor far.

He seems to float as if suspended above the land, free from the restraints of time and gravity. The raven seems to play tricks on him, and he can't be sure of what is real and what isn't.

A child runs up to him, hollering, "Santa, Santa," and his mind echoes, *Santa, Santa*, the sound having no meaning to him as he tries to run from the child. But he sees no child. He sees nothing but the raven, its beak long and black and sword sharp.

He remembers willow bushes and snow, deep snow, deep drifts and the mocking of the raven, and drifting...

The child grabs his arm and shouts, "Daddy, Daddy, it's Santa."

He feels the hands and they terrify him. He jerks his arms free, but the effort causes him to fall, spin and fall. He feels himself sinking into swirling blackness, going down, down, under farther and farther, spinning and sinking—

Lights, Lights! LIGHTS! **LIGHTS!**

Voices, noise. He opens his eyes, but sees only blurry shadows and can't comprehend what's happening.

A narrow beam of light probes his left eye—

He swings his arm in an attempt to knock the light away, but hands grab his arm. Panic sweeps through him like a tsunami. He jerks his arm, but the hands hang on. He jerks harder as he feels himself being pulled under. Jerks and flails about. More hands grab him. They seem to reach inside him, squeeze his heart. He can't breathe...

"Easy, Mr. Jones. Easy does it. Just relax... you're safe. We're here to help you."

He hears the softly spoken words, understands they're talking to him, senses their calmness, but where is he? And who are they? What has happened?

His mind seems blank. There seems to be a door he can't open where he senses his thoughts ought to be.

"Mr. Jones, we want to put the IV back in, but you can't swing your arm around like that. Understand? You need fluids. We want to leave the IV in. Okay?"

Why does he need fluids? What has happened?

Again he opens his eyes. Again he sees blurred fingers. He tries to pull away from them, but can't. Something holds him down, holds his legs still.

"Relax, Mr. Jones. And welcome back to the land of the living. You've had quite a trip."

Where has he been? What trip has he been on?

"Dad, don't fight the doctor. You're safe now."

DAD: the word has meaning, but he doesn't know why. And he begins to shake as he feels his chest tighten—

Hands tear at his heart, hands that pull him farther and farther under, farther into a white world, white ceiling, white lights, white walls, white sheets, white uniforms, the whiteness reflecting all light until darkness engulfs him as he shakes uncontrollably.

An electrical shock jolts him. Suddenly, muscles weaken. He no longer quivers, but lies as if dead.

He hears someone say, "He has a bad heart, be careful."

Who has a bad heart? Him? That doesn't seem right, but he has no way of even arguing as his muscles are too weak to shape his partial thoughts into words.

His face feels like he wears a cardboard mask. He wants to pull off the mask, but he can't seem to lift his arm as his mind battles waves of drowsiness...

When he awakens, he smells the antiseptic sterility of a hospital. He also smells the faint perfume of the woman sitting asleep in the chair near the head of his bed. He hears her snoring, the reason he knows she sleeps. He can't see her, but he imagines she is the one who called him *dad*.

With great effort, he turns his head until he can almost see her. His sight's still blurry, but she appears without color. Her forehead is light as is her hair, while her lips and fingernails appear dark. She seems tall, but her height is hard to determine as she sits slumped in the chair.

She stirs, jerks her head up as if she hadn't intended to fall asleep, then sees him looking at her. Immediately, she stands, and checks his pulse, her fingers expertly locating the arteries

and veins in his wrist. He tries to hold still, but can't. He has to jerk his arm away as he hoarsely whispers, "I'm all right."

"Dad," she hesitates several seconds before placing a thought behind the name, "you're so lucky to be alive."

How am I lucky? I don't know you, don't even know who I am, or how I got here, or what happened. This all seems like a bad dream.

He tries to recall a dream, but can't. His mind seems more restrained than his legs.

His daughter continues, "Chuck's body's been found, but none of the others." Her voice breaks, but breaks unnaturally. She tries to speak again, pauses, and pauses a second time before adding, "Nobody was searching for you— or for any of the crew until a trapper found you wandering around the edge of Becharof Lake. Actually, his son found you... Dad, you're awfully lucky."

Something horrible has happened, and he was part of whatever it is. Why can't he remember?

He doesn't want to talk to her, or to anyone. He stares at the ceiling, its whiteness offering no clue as to who he is.

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