

For Us...

By LEW ANDERSON

THE LORIAN STONES TRILOGY

Book One: *Tombs of Dross*

Book Two: *Battles Grim*

Book Three: *Pillars and Power*

THE LORIAN CHRONICLES

Horse Boy

Misty Grey

Yodin the Rescuer

For Us

LEW ANDERSON

A FARM BOY, A PERSIAN PRINCESS, AN ISLAND

For Us...



TREESTONE BOOKS



SHIPWRECK

1

THE WHOLE SHIP SHUDDERED, walls and panels trembling as when death comes unannounced. A screaming shrill of metal, torn and twisted, screeched through the cabin walls. Objects rattled, crashing to the floor.

Jake tumbled from his bunk, listening in the darkness as an eerie silence followed. Then a thunderous roar shook the tiny cabin. Like some cornered creature, the room shivered, quaking and quivering, then it groaned—a forlorn cry for mercy.

Pulling on cargo shorts and a t-shirt, Jake paused to listen once more. A growing tumult of screams and

shouts filled the hall outside his door. Their cries and running footsteps told of the chaotic clamoring, a hundred terrified passengers fighting through the crowded hall.

The floor began to slant, not much, but enough to send its foreboding message. Emergency lights flickered as if struggling to shed their light onto the rising chaos.

The lean young man poked his head warily out the cabin door. A passing arm whacked his ear. The narrow hall had already become a packed mass of confusion—screaming women and bossy men, pushing and shoving, some going one way, some the other, all calling for answers.

With a loud, agonizing groan the ship listed further, the floor now sloping at a frightening angle.

How can it be sinking? Jake thought with heart racing.

A small cruise ship, just under 400 passengers, it was a marvel of modern engineering, a floating cruiser of plush luxury and exquisite delight. *These ships don't sink, do they?*

A heavy-set man stumbled into his doorway, knocking Jake back into his room. The panic in the jammed hall had risen to a crescendo of shrieks and pleading cries.

These were economy cabins, the furthest from the top. The screams increased as the pack pushed for the stairs. Jake took a few deep breaths, grabbed his passport and wallet, then wedged his way into the hall.

An inch of water sloshed beneath the shuffling bare feet. A shadow of acrid smoke gently swirled above.

The yelling and screaming filled the hall like a fog, clouding all function of rational thought.

For a moment Jake just stood, banged and bumped as middle-aged overweight tourists fought each other for the stairs. The ship groaned again, leaning even more. This time the mass stumbled backward, arms flailing as bodies hit the floor.

A young blond, probably a college girl, went down in the rising water, her arms and legs pinned by frantic feet, feet driven by thoughts void of anything but survival. Jake pushed his way through and pulled her up.

“You okay?”

“What’s happening?” she muttered, eyes roving wildly. Dressed only in a soft-pink top and shorts, she, like most, had jumped from her bed and into the hall.

“Not sure,” Jake said, “but we’ve got to get out. Follow me.”

He tried to push his way through, pulling the girl behind, but the ship kept listing. When they finally reached the steps, a steady flow of water cascaded over feet that did not move. The stairway had become a tangled mass of piled bodies pulling at each other, clamoring and clinging, slipping on the skin of those that lined the steps, skin fresh from cozy beds and bunks, now cast onto a sea-soaked floor of doom.

Fear struck hard as death loomed, its dark shadow whispering through the terrified crowd, its rapacious eye on those struggling to climb the crowded steps.

The floor moved again, sloping the hallway further,

sending screams to a mind-numbing siren of tortured souls on the brink of death.

“Back to my cabin!” Jake shouted, leading the girl away from the stairs. But now the surge had become a solid wall, multiple parts merged into one, a blockade of entrapment.

Jake smashed through a door, forcing his way into an empty cabin. He peered out the porthole, seeing only the blackness of the South Pacific sea. He eyed the girl standing beside him, her young frame trembling. A bleach-blond with nice eyes and lovely features.

Wish we'd met before all this.

A scraping sound came from far down the ship's stern. Jake tensed as it grew near. A horrid shrill of metal tearing metal, great objects of force and mass warring till the weaker surrenders, till the inferior yields.

Bolting backward, Jake pulled the girl away from the porthole just as metal tore through the cabin wall, shredding the side of the ship with deafening screeches. The two stumbled backward, both falling.

When Jake sat up, waves splashed below, droplets blowing inside the once warm cabin. The girl shrieked as the floor tilted toward the waves. The structure had buckled, opening the belly of the vessel. Jake knew all would be over in minutes.

“We have to jump!” he said, peering through the gap. “Swim clear before it rolls.” He tugged for the girl to follow. She stood locked stiff, eyes wild. “Come on!” he shouted, tugging her arm. But nothing could break the

stare of dread, the blanched look of death seizing her soul.

The jagged tear in the ship was just enough to crawl through, but the metal and wall panels had ripped like rows of teeth awaiting their victims. He flung a blanket over the metal and pulled once more at the girl. She jerked away, eyes wide.

“We can’t stay!” he called. “We have to swim!” She slunk back, clinging to the door, her head shaking as her pale lips muttered. The ship jolted, then moaned like when death takes a weary body.

Jake pulled, but she fought, polished nails clawing and scratching. He looked for another blanket, thinking to roll her tight and toss her out, but then she was gone, squeezing back into the hallway of doom. The ship lunged to port side, sending Jake toppling toward the metal jaws, their ragged teeth gleaming. He shook his head, cursing as he carefully squeezed through the jagged gap.

“She’ll never make it,” he said, then dropped twenty feet into the black waters below.



THE WINE CASK

2

HE SWAM A FRENZIED STROKE, kicking hard, convinced the ship would list completely, roll and pull him down. He thrashed through the slow rolling waves as screams washed over the black waters, waters that reflected the lights of a hundred cabins, the glory and splendor of the luxury vessel whose innards now fanned out as the torn belly spewed the contents of a thousand objects, items of safety and comfort, of pleasure and leisure, all floating and bobbing on the waves that rolled casually on, unconcerned for the plight of those once aboard.

Jake rammed into something large, giving a hollow thud of heavy plastic bumping human head. A very large, yellow barrel rose with the swell. He looked back, surprised at how far he'd swum. The ship leaned so far now, three-fourths of the stern lay submerged, its lights flickering beneath the waves. Bodies hit the water from multiple angles, their final screams drifting out over the dark waters.

He tried to grasp the barrel, to find a handhold, a rope, or clasp. Completely round with a belly wider than the ends, it rocked and spun as he worked his way around. The top or end of the cask had a large cap set off center, at least two feet wide with indents for spinning it on and off.

"What the heck is this?" He fought to hold the cap, digging his fingers into the underside. The oversized barrel had to be empty for it sat high above the surge, bobbing easily as he hung, panting to catch his breath.

The cap turned, spinning just a bit, enough to plant a thought.

The ship, that now lay ever closer to its watery grave, had left Funafuti, Tuvalu, three days ago on its way to Vanuatu. But they were midway, meaning any rescue was at least a day or two out.

"Unless a ship is nearby." *But all these people in the water.*

A sharp fear rose. These waters had sharks, the likes of which, when coming upon such a feast, somehow spread the word with rapid effectiveness.

Jake had read of ships going down during wars, ships that lost hundreds to the sharks before rescue arrived.

A frightening chill shook him as he looked back toward the small cruise ship. He looked for lifeboats, seeing only jumpers, plunging as flames now poured from the sinking vessel.

He trembled as he worked the cover, gripping with both hands, pulling himself up out of the waves as he turned. Finally, it spun free, opening a portal into a huge empty barrel. A sweet fragrance of fruity wine billowed from the cask.

He felt the inside of the lid, finding small indents, enough to grip and hold.

If I could climb in... screw this lid back on... but not too tight...

“Feet first,” he told himself but struggled for some time trying to enter without letting water rush in. Screams and cries continued to roll over the waves, growing fainter and fewer as he tread water, clinging to the open portal.

Flotsam fanned out beneath the dimming lights of the ship, rising like a blanket of trash upon the dark sea. A plastic mug floated by, white with red lettering.

Jake stretched, reluctant to release the giant barrel. “I need that mug!” He pushed away from the barrel and swam, the lid in one hand, grabbing for the cup with the other. Just as he turned to swim back to the wine cask, a cry drifted over the darkness, a soft cry for help, the cry of a young woman.

Using the cover he pushed upward to look out over the waves. Nothing. He paused to listen. Only the drifting cries now carried by the wind.

With cup in one hand, the large lid in the other, he swam hard back to the bobbing barrel, spurred by the dreadful thought of losing it, of losing his only hope. Just as he tossed the plastic mug inside, the soft cry came once more.

He spun to face the sound, straining to see with salted eyes, searching for a head above the waves. Then it came again, a muffled cry, a desperate plea.

A black silhouette of an outstretched arm suddenly rose, caught by the firelight of the sinking ship. Just out of its reach, a life jacket bobbed in the waves.

“Can you swim?” Jake called to the hand but saw it drop with a splash, the gargled reply giving answer. Groaning he tugged at the barrel, kicking toward the cry. Without any way of knowing distance, he tried to focus on the spot, but waves rose and fell, jerking at his precious barrel, pushing him this way and that.

He brushed a limb, smooth skin against his arm, hair wrapping about his wrist. A young woman rose as he pulled. He called for her to answer, struggling to lift her head.

Sputtering and gasping, her face broke the surface, hair swirling over eyes and mouth.

“Grab this!” Jake pulled her arm to the cask hole, handing her the large lid. Her whole frame trembled as he held her up.

Lightening flashed from a dark band rising over the sinking ship. Drops came in heavy thumps, drumming the large barrel as if searching for some savage rhythm.

“Climb in,” Jake said, struggling to hold the barrel

steady. "Feet first. Careful, the sides are rough." But the young woman hesitated, sputtering a host of unknown words.

"Sharks," Jake said. "We need to get inside. I'll help you."

What followed was short of disastrous comedy. As Jake tried to lift her legs, the young woman's head went under. As her head went under, legs came out. The rain fell heavier, pounding the drum with rhythmic beats of warlike tempo, calling for the blackness, awakening the night.

After too many minutes of vain attempts, Jake explained he would crawl in first and pull her in.

With no less frustration, he squeezed his shoulders through, leaving some skin at the opening's rim. The challenge was to keep from rolling inside the barrel as waves grew with the building storm. The distant rumblings drowned out the last of the piteous cries, cooler air now rolling over the waves, blown in by the rising wind.

"Take my hand," he said, reaching out the portal. "It's going to hurt a bit."

With painful cries of protest, of banged shins and scraped thighs, the slender arms and legs of a frightened young woman finally tangled with those of a tawny young man inside a large plastic barrel drifting somewhere along the South Pacific Rim.

It took some time to undo themselves, to balance the stout barrel, to limit the banging heads and craned limbs, realizing in the process that they had lost the lid. With

their weight together at the bottom, the cask bobbed upright, but the driving rain had no trouble finding the two-foot opening overhead.

It was black inside, so Jake had no idea with whose limbs he sat entangled, other than her accent sounded Middle Eastern.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, bracing himself against the sides, the waves now playing hard with this new toy.

Only panting breaths and sniffing whimpers came in reply.

Hope she doesn't get seasick, Jake thought, as a wave lifted them high, then let them plummet. His stomach lurched with sudden nausea. *Oh, boy. Hope I don't get sick.*

When a lull came, Jake sighed, trying to take in the last hour. What had taken out the ship? He could still see the blond with wild eyes staring, the screech of metal ripping through the ship, the explosion, the jammed bodies in the hall of doom. And now crammed in a three-by-four-foot wine cask with a young woman who may not even speak English.

In their awkward fumbling to crawl inside, he knew she wore little for clothing, had incredibly soft skin, was slender yet shapely, and her long, thick hair seemed bent on catching and tangling everywhere.

He sighed again. “A dream,” he muttered. “Those kind you're so relieved when you finally wake up.”

The girl gave a stuttering sob, whole body shivering.



FISH IN A BARREL

3

SOMEHOW THEY ENDURED with agonizing cramps, cries of mercy, and bumps from sharks or whatever swims about banging large casks floating an endless ocean with rain-filled skies.

Jake tried to speak words of encouragement, of rescue, that it wouldn't be long, and search parties were already picking people up, but his soul didn't believe a word of it.

Something's off, he mused. *How had it sunk so fast?*

The girl coughed, suppressing a heave.

"Hang in there," he said, as the foot of water inside

sloshed about. "I'll bail this water when the waves let up."

He longed to stand and check things out, but the waves now rocked them hard. After an hour of hearing only rain and their own limbs banging the sides, a host of fears began to stir.

Where is the rescue? he wondered in frustration, fully expecting to hear helicopters or foghorns, anything that told of rescue.

Could take hours, he reproached himself. *Days even.* "No, there must be a ship nearby," he muttered.

But nothing came, only the rain's steady beat against the cask as the waves lifted and tossed the barrel side to side.

He glanced up. "If we had the lid," he said, "could tip this thing on its side... give us more room, be more stable... maybe."

The girl sniffled like a scolded child.

"No," he said quickly, "not blaming, just thinking. We can't sit crunched like this much more."

Having swum so hard in the waves, to now sit with legs crammed tight, was already pushing him toward madness. With no way to stretch, he could only rub his muscles, finding little relief.

The girl sat with legs drawn tight to her chest, trying desperately to sit sideways as she shivered, hunched in a tight ball.

His legs were to each side, his knees at her shoulders, bare feet wrapped around behind her back. Beyond awkward, and seriously uncomfortable, he wondered if he'd

made the right choice.

Would work for one, he argued. But then recalled her weak arm reaching for help, her sputtering cry. *Should've put her in the life jacket. Waited with her.* He shook his head. *Waited till the sharks came?*

Struggling to brace himself, he had one arm extended above her head, the other clutching the rim above. But the storm had come to play and it tossed them every which way.

He'd apologize each time he bumped her hard, or fought to work out a cramp. Her tense groans clearly conveyed she found this whole affair worse than death, even if by shark.

Then her leg cramped. Crying out, she kicked Jake in the groin as she tried to work it out. Clutching her knotted calf, she uttered unknown words. Pleas or curses, he couldn't tell.

He offered a hand but got a firm slap. So, he sat silent, his groin aching in the plastic darkness as she muttered, rubbing her calf.

After an eternal night of nausea, pain, and crippling stiffness, the sea had calmed, the cask now rocking gently. In the hint of a yellowish glow, Jake sat pondering, careful not to move.

Though sore in every joint, he studied the sleeping maiden entrapped with him. She slept with cheek upon her shoulder, arms limp at her sides. Her desperate struggle to keep from touching him had long since

failed, for her legs, like his, filled every space the cask offered.

As the glow brightened, he studied the weary face before him. Long hair hung loose, veiling most of her features. She moaned and twitched now and then, followed by a shiver.

Once again he questioned his judgment. *Should've put her in the life jacket. Found a boat or something, anything other than this... this plastic tomb of aching misery.*

She jerked, knocking him hard, but didn't wake. When her head flopped to the other shoulder, Jake gasped.

Oh, my God! No way!

Mouth hanging, Jake stared wide-eyed, his head shaking in disbelief. "Can't be. No way."

The first day into their cruise, he had been taking photos from a balcony when an entourage of dark suits and flowing head-wraps had come onto a private deck. Amid the suits walked a slender woman, early twenties if that, her long dark hair, thick and wavy, lifting freely in the sea breeze. She toyed with the wind, her hair and silks flowing gently about.

For a time, she stood at the rail, staring out over the waves. She turned, expecting to see no one outside her entourage, and to be seen by no outsider, for her customary veil lay loose about her long, bejeweled neck.

And that's when their eyes met—three seconds, maybe, but it was enough. She looked quickly away and he knew he'd better do the same. Three big suits with

dark glasses turned his way.

With a nod, he was gone. But those three seconds... He had been instantly convinced she was the most beautiful and stunningly gorgeous woman he had ever seen in his entire life.

She carried such poise and grace with her features and form, and even with all the silk trappings, he could see her figure was no trifling of the gods. From head to toe, this girl personified mind-numbing beauty reserved only for those of legends and lore.

Later that day, he'd learned she was the daughter of Fariborz Rahbar, a sheik or something, a guy with more money and wives than any man should have. For the next three days he tried to reach that balcony again but always found the door firmly bolted with a warning.

He now stared at the young woman entangled so close, her neck craned. *No, can't be*, he argued. *She'd have been whisked away by chopper, or set in a lifeboat. Probably on a beach in Tuvalu by now.* He shook his head, straining to see more in the dim yellowish glow. "No, Jake," he whispered, "you're still sleeping... dreaming stupid dreams."

But then she twitched, her large dark eyes opening wide with alarm. Like a trapped animal, she stared at the young man just inches away, then quickly glanced about the glowing barrel.

Dark fear filled her face as she peered down, immediately covering herself. Her skimpy silk top and matching peach-colored shorts did little for modesty. She scowled, her eyes burning with bitter rage.

But Jake remained stuck in his bewildered stare.

She huffed, giving the sternest glare a woman can muster. Snapping out of his stupor, Jake gave a respectful nod and looked away, even though there was simply no other place to look.

Breathing fast through her nose, she glanced about, as if searching for some escape. For a moment, Jake thought she would bolt up and try climbing out, but she kept her arms wrapped tight about her long legs which were pulled snug to her chest.

With awkward bumps and elbows in her face, Jake took off his *Big Sky Montana* t-shirt and looking away, held it out. She exhaled in disgust, the idea utterly inconceivable. He then looked her in the eyes, offering the shirt one last time.

For a tense moment, she held his gaze, finally taking the worn damp t-shirt using only thumb and finger.

Jake ceremonially closed his eyes and waited.

He had to fight back a smirk as she didn't move, still breathing hard through her nose. Then some strange, but nasty-sounding words got muttered as she struggled to don the rugged t-shirt.

When she finished, Jake nodded approvingly and introduced himself.

"Jake... from Montana... Bozeman."

She gave no reply other than more hot breath through flared nostrils.

"Tell me you're not the sheik's daughter," he said plainly. "That it wasn't you that day... on the deck?"

As if bitten, she gasped, then quickly looked away.

“Oh, God,” Jake groaned, shaking his head. “This is bad.” Seeing she understood English, he asked, “How’d you end up in the water? Is your father... okay? Does he know what happened to you? And those guys... your bodyguards?”

Her face tensed, pondering these same things, but still offered no exchange, her full lips pressed tight.

Over a foot of water sloshed with the swaying of the barrel, soaking their butts and feet. Jake yearned to start bailing, but it would be awkward.

“Any idea what happened?” he asked. “Was some kind of explosion.”

She continued to look away, a shadow of angst darkening her face.

“I need to bail this water,” he said, trying to speak gently, as if to a frightened child. “It’s going to be awkward. But if we can dry things out...”

She turned to study him for a bit, then gave a slight nod—a first in communication.

Minor awkwardness followed, trying to bring the cup up without bonking or spilling as it went up and down. Then his leg cramped and he had to stand.

Forcing his shoulders through the porthole into the morning’s light, he breathed deep, drawing his toes upward to stretch his calf.

Stern mutterings came from below. *Probably cursing me to the deepest hell about now*, he mused with a chuckle. But being just over six feet, he had to stretch his limbs. He glanced down to see her pressed back, hands covering her face.

He scanned the horizon, careful not to tip the barrel. The cask rode halfway in the waves, bobbling like a buoy. He turned about, fully expecting to see the ship where it had been last night.

But the sea lay bare, yielding only the sun's reddish reflection, its shimmering glow announcing the new day. All evidence of the ship had vanished, nothing but waves and endless sky. He squinted, looking long into the empty horizon.

"There's got to be something... come on! A ship would have passed by, got the message, called it in."

A swell of weary despair washed over him. Again he turned about, scanning the vast horizon of nothing.

When he wriggled back into the cask, bumping her more than once, she gave only minimal protest. Her eyes followed him as he slunk back down, his face revealing their plight.

At first, he couldn't face her, chiding himself harshly. *What was I thinking? Drag the sheik's daughter into an oversized barrel where no one can see us... hidden from rescue. Good lord, that was brilliant.*

He felt her eyes on him and looked up. She had an innate intelligence as she studied his face. Then she spoke, her voice dry and rasping, her accent clearly Middle Eastern.

"Nothing?"

Jake sat silent, just staring at her lips.

"You see nothing?" she asked again.

He sighed. "I'm sorry."

In silence they sat, swaying with the waves, drifting

aimless in the open sea, a thousand miles from anywhere, crammed together in a cask of yellow plastic, one dressed only in scanty silks, the other in worn-out cargo shorts. A guy from Montana and a princess of somewhere, drifting without water, without direction, without food, and without space to move.

“At least...” the girl said, forcing a dry swallow, “we are safe from shark.”

Only inches away, Jake searched her eyes, still mystified by her presence. Then he gave a consenting nod. “Yeah... we are safe from the sharks.”



ISLE OF SUNSET

4

AS A RED SUN ROSE, Jake worked at bailing water. The sea had calmed, but the cask grew warm, so, with no little calamity, Jake wriggled out and into the sea.

Alone inside, the girl was at first hesitant to stand and stretch, but Jake balanced the cask, and she stood with hands clutching the rim.

Holding the barrel as he tread water, he searched the sea in desperate earnest. *You fool*, he chided once again. *What have you done?*

The girl too searched as she stood, the rim just below her shoulders. Arms outside, she balanced herself, long

hair drifting in the gentle wind like that day on the upper deck.

“See anything?” Jake asked, hoping her eyes were keener, but she only shook her head in slow disbelief.

When Jake crawled back inside, he had to again bail water, but this time his guest seemed less annoyed.

After a time, when the cask and their clothes were mostly dry, the girl cleared her throat, and lifting her chin, proudly declared.

“I am Misha Kamineh Parim Mehrak, daughter of the great Fariborz Rahbar, ruler of the lands of Lahar.”

A bit startled, Jake nodded. She was indeed the girl with the entourage. “Jake Connor, ruler of my car and whatever else the bank doesn’t own.”

Though she fought it, a subtle smile tweaked her lips.

As the day grew warm, the girl slowly revealed more, granting glimpses into her life of luxury, but not of ease, as she readily made known.

Being only nineteen, she could never be allowed to speak to a young infidel like Jake, let alone be seen by him, especially in such a state. So to be alone with him, so close and dressed in things that would bring great shame even in her own bedroom, was unspeakable.

“So not even as pajamas?” Jake asked, careful not to sound judgmental.

“This...” She gestured toward the glowing barrel, then to the ragged t-shirt and silk top beneath, her gaze returning to Jake as if to say, ‘and you.’ “This...” she continued, wagging her head in bewilderment, “...is detestable sin beyond... beyond my English words.”

“Well, if it helps, the t-shirt looks good on you.” *Anything would look good on you*, he almost said.

She closed her eyes with a heavy sigh, sorrow again darkening her face.

“We’ll get out of this,” Jake said, struggling to believe his own words. “And... you’re safe with me. I’m not that kind of... *infidel*.” He spoke sincerely. “Just really sorry I dragged you into this.” He huffed a wry chuckle as he glanced about their yellow cell, recalling the comedic efforts to get her inside the rolling cask.

She studied him, looking long into his eyes, which they both knew was also ‘forbidden.’

By noon, the sun had grown hot, but then the sky clouded. By late afternoon, the sea had settled, so Jake suggested they lean the barrel over, keeping the offset opening on the upward side, clear of any waves.

“I assure you, Misha of Lahar, my intentions are purely to get you back to your father as safe and as soon as possible. Nothing more.”

Using the t-shirt to cover herself as much as possible, she consented. He offered his cargo shorts, but she quickly refused, to which he was silently thankful.

Lying side by side, Jake took care to keep his limbs as contained as possible, though contact was unavoidable, their bodies sliding together no matter what positions they tried.

Misha struggled to compose herself in such a compromising predicament, but appreciated the freedom to

move, and most of all, straighten her legs.

For Jake, having already been struck by the beauty of this mystery girl, to now be in such close quarters, was more than a bit bewildering.

Just Fate and the cosmos toying with lives again, he pondered in jest. *A cosmic convergence that will only create a mess for both of us. Or maybe the stars and planets have drifted completely out of celestial alignment... or Fate and Love are contending... with no one left to monitor the feeble stumblings of mankind.* He softly chuckled, then sighed. *Or I'm having a most fantastical dream.*

Stay focused! he rebuked himself, as an image of them drifting for days without water, their bodies shrinking, faces gaunt, came in a disturbing flash.

May very well die in this stupid barrel! An urgency to do something filled his veins. *But what? Should have captured that rainwater at least. But how?*

That night they shivered, Jake once more blaming himself for their predicament, wishing he had some way to relieve her discomfort. Yet somehow they managed to snatch bouts of restless sleep.

The following day grew hot as the sun beat upon the bobbing cask. Though hungry, it was the heat and thirst that became unbearable, especially for the young woman accustomed to luxury.

Only by necessity did Misha climb out and spend some time in the water. Being a poor swimmer and still fearing sharks, she at first held tight to the rim.

But the sea was calm, so together they drifted in the gentle swell, clinging to the cask as they tread water, eyes always searching the vast, empty horizon.

“I’ll stay out if you want to get some sleep,” Jake offered, noticing the dark shadows beneath her light-brown eyes.

She shook her head. “So warm inside. The water feel nice.”

Nothing had bumped their cask in a long time, and so they drifted with little fear. Misha rested her head on her hands as she clung to the barrel, her black hair swirling with the flow.

“Do you have any brothers,” Jake asked, “that would come looking for you?” He feared her father had gone down with the ship.

Misha shook her head. “No. No brothers or sisters. Just me.”

“Really?” Jake figured there would be a dozen or more. He almost asked the number of wives her father had but caught himself in time.

“The Rockies are beautiful,” he said, changing the subject to Montana and his life in America. For this, she had many questions, which at times he found amusing, her perceptions stemming from Hollywood.

“You have woman?” Misha asked.

“A girlfriend? No.”

“Why not?”

Before he’d realized, he told her about his fiancé running off with his best friend, and how he’d left the small town to work odd jobs on the islands, wandering from

place to place, trying to forget his past and find purpose.

With fresh remorse, he told how the two had died just last month in an avalanche while backcountry skiing, almost a year to the day she had left him.

What had begun as a plan to simply distract the young princess from their desperate plight, had grown into a full-out session on the therapist's couch.

"I should have done more," Jake said ruefully. "Should have protected her from him."

Misha watched him, her brow knit. "Today is... all sovereign over yesterday," she said, struggling to express her thought. "Does not the road ahead... reign over that which is behind?" She paused, brow still knit. "Did I say this right?"

Jake slowly nodded in surprise. "Yes, all too right."

She smiled, but then looked pensive. "We must keep trust that Allah watches," she said, this time struggling to believe her own words.

"Yeah, not seeing any God up there right now," Jake replied sullenly. "If he is, he sure ain't watching."

Misha fell silent, her own heart pondering the hand of Allah, of fate and life, and now... a very possible agonizing death.

That evening of their second day adrift, Misha lay with her head and hands outside the barrel, staring into the sunset. Jake lay on his back, eyes drowsy, stomach sunken.

Tears moistened the girl's eyes as she gently used her hands to keep the opening toward the sunset. She

seemed to be praying, her soft lips murmuring.

Then, lifting her head, she muttered something, paused a moment, and then... screamed.

Jake bolted, quickly pulling her inside. "What happened? Something bite you?"

"Look!" she said, pointing through the hatch. "Land! I see land!"

A faint rise on the horizon cast a long dull shadow as the sun edged near the sea. It was indeed land. But it was hours away and the sun was near set. Jake strained, searching for lights, hoping with all hope that it was occupied and not some remote little island without habitation.

He tried to observe their drift, hoping the current would take them near.

"Island?" he wondered aloud, "or a coast?"

"But no lights," Misha said softly.

Jake cursed the growing darkness, trying to find some way to set a course. Keeping his eye on the spot, he called for a star, for a moon, for anything to mark the sky.

"The moon will show us," Misha said rather calmly. "It will rise soon, we then see."

The moon did rise within the hour. Its glow on the open sea gave an enchanting display of wonder. As it climbed, its glow filling the night sky, they drifted closer to the 'Isle of Sunset,' as Misha called it.

When the moon was high, they passed near the land. It seemed to be an island maybe two miles from their bright yellow barrel. That they would pass completely by

was also clear, so Jake climbed out and swam.

Misha watched. "I very much not like the water at night," she softly confessed. She had told him early on that she was not a good swimmer and really did not enjoy being in the sea.

Kicking hard, Jake pulled and pushed the barrel, watching the isle drift further and further to the left. After an hour or more, he clung exhausted to the open hatch.

"I'm sorry," he panted, "but we'll have... to swim it. I can't get us there... in time."

So out she crawled, and with one hand on his shoulder, she kicked, trailing as he swam in the desperation that only those who have tasted such hopeless despair, seeing life itself drifting by, can understand.

Cursing, yet crying out for God to prove himself, Jake pushed against the current, aiming for the moonlit mass of hope that sat so distant, so passive, too indolent to aid their dying souls.

Time fussed with the darkness as muscles cramped, eyes blurred, hope fading with every endless stroke. Misha more and more lost her grip, her strength gone from days without food and water.

Something happens in those times of forsaken souls. Fragile walls of life give way to the core of being, to the spirit that often lies hidden, reserved deep inside. That which matters most, which matters only, comes to the forefront. Life, that delicate, precious gift so easily taken, yet easily preserved when conditions are right, dangles in the balance. It floats just a breaststroke away, just a

few more yards, calling your name, beckoning you to keep trying, to keep moving, to do anything other than give in.

Crying out, Misha jerked away, grabbing at her ankle. Then Jake jolted, as several sharp stings burned into his bare chest. Like an early alarm, it shook him from the endless swim. He looked up, seeing a mass of darkness high above them—the Isle of Sunset.

Again, Misha cried out, trying not to scream, but the pain came so quick, like bee stings that burned.

Jake paused, a sting to his thigh. He cursed, but his dry throat made no sound. Then the stings came from everywhere. They both cried out, Misha now screaming and kicking.

Seeing the island so close, Jake pulled her up onto his back.

“Hang on,” he tried to say, kicking and swimming with the little that remained, the burning pain fueling his strength.

They rose and fell in the waves, his feet touching just a moment before rising high with the swell.

The moon leaned toward the west by the time they crawled up the beach, collapsing on the warm sand. Misha cried with agony, frantically rubbing her skin as the gentle surf rolled in behind them, crabs scurrying about in the wash of the moon’s light.