

# Prologue

First there was pain and darkness.

Then there was pain and light.

Redeye could feel the cold scalpel blade slipping into his eye socket, probing deeper. He wanted to struggle but he was pinned to the table; anaesthetised, frozen. He couldn't even grit his teeth.

'Stay calm,' the clone surgeon whispered soothingly. 'Almost got it... There.'

Redeye felt a tug, something stretching like elastic. He knew it was his optic nerve, the cord that connected his eye to his brain. But this cord wasn't made of tissue and fibre, it was made of wires and cables. An artificial connection for an artificial eye.

It had been implanted when Redeye was just a boy - in another life, when he had another name, one he could barely remember. The scientists who designed the eye said that it would make him special, superhuman. He'd be able to track the heat signatures from living bodies and focus in on objects over a mile away.

But it hadn't worked. In fact, all the eye had done was cause him lifelong pain, make him bitter, make him hate everything and everyone.

He wondered if that was why he'd done the things he did. Why he'd become a follower of the Mariner terrorist John Cortez, why he'd joined Cortez's mission to seize the walled city of London. Redeye had planted a bomb that had killed thousands. Was it all because he wanted revenge on the world for treating him this way?

If so, the world had paid him back. During the battle, an explosion had torn out his good eye, leaving him blind. For a year now he'd stumbled in the dark, determined to do whatever he could, anything at all, to get his sight back. He'd tracked down the lab where those scientists had worked. There he'd located the blueprints for the artificial eye, and the records of his original operation. Then he'd set about finding someone who could carry out the necessary surgery. The surgeon had demanded a high price, but Redeye was willing to pay it.

In fact, the surgeon was a product of that same lab. The man they called Dash was a clone, one of five identical brothers grown artificially in an attempt to create the perfect soldier. But the Five had rebelled against their creators, escaping from the lab and leading a crusade to reunite the divided states of America. They'd declared war on the Mariners, attacking their home city of Frisco. Redeye had almost died in the battle, and Dash too. It was Kara who had saved them.

Kara. Just the thought of her made Redeye feel furious, and amazed, and sort of proud all at the same time. The girl had stood up to Cortez at the battle of London. She'd stood up to the Five during the attack on Frisco. She'd stand up to anyone she saw as a bully and tell them exactly what she thought of them. Redeye had to admit it – he admired her. She'd been a thorn in his side, but she'd also saved his life.

‘Lynx, pass me a fine-bore needle. No, finer. That’s the one.’

Redeye could hear tension in Dash’s voice. *Had something gone wrong?*

He felt a piercing sense of fear. He couldn’t keep living like this, in pain and darkness. He couldn’t.

‘I still don’t get why we’re doing this,’ another voice cut in; a dry, desert drawl. ‘This dude’s our *enemy*, Dash. He tried to kill you, and Kara, and he actually *did* kill a whole bunch of other people. He’s Cortez’s puppy, and I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could kick him.’

It was that smuggler talking, Lynx. They were a mystery to Redeye – neither boy or girl, rebel or servant, hero or villain, but a blend of them all. Once pledged to the Five, Lynx had now taken on the role of Dash’s bodyguard. The smuggler was a tough customer, Redeye knew, a road warrior with a wild past. But Lynx also happened to have

pretty decent medical knowledge – learned the hard way, Redeye suspected – so the clone had asked them to assist in the operation.

‘I don’t trust him either,’ Dash admitted, and Redeye felt warm breath as the clone leaned closer. ‘Neither does Kara. But we need what he’s selling, and this was the deal we made. Now if I just...’

Redeye felt pressure within the socket; something digging right inside.

‘Hand me the nerve stimulator,’ Dash said. ‘Now here goes. Three, two-’

If Redeye hadn’t been paralysed, he would’ve screamed his lungs out.

Light filled his skull as pain ripped through him like a firebolt, stopping his heart for a moment, leaving him breathless and inwardly shaking. His mind reeled, his consciousness hitting the verge of shutdown but somehow clinging on.

But when the pain passed, the light remained.

It was only a blur at first, a rippling sheen, indistinct but still beautiful. Then he blinked and saw a wash of silver, and above it a circle made of different shades – white and blue and gold and grey, all running into one another.

A shadow moved across his vision, slowly melting into focus. Dash crouched, peering with concern. ‘It’s too

bright,' he said. 'Lynx, lower the blind.'

But Redeye shook his head, or at least he tried to, jerking feebly, a few inches at most. Dash held up a hand. 'Wait,' he said. 'I think it worked.'

He took a step back, and Redeye felt his senses spin.

That silver blur was the polished steel wall of the ship's surgery, the coloured circle a large, foam-flecked porthole. Through the glass, he could see the world.

Sunlight scintillated on a rolling ocean, sending out darting patterns of dizzying light. An old wooden schooner was tacking past, sails raised and filling. Beyond it was a wall of grey rock, rising sheer from the sea.

Redeye focused on the cliff face, and suddenly his view *shifted*.

The rocks raced towards him, their outlines growing sharper, clearer. He could see patches of green: moss and lichen and scrubby bushes growing in cracks in the cliff. At its base he could see a seal pack, sunning themselves on a tumble of boulders. Gulls soared and dived, making their nests in the cliff. And around each of them was a red outline, shimmering like moisture-haze. *A heat signature.*

He felt a needle in his arm, ice-cold liquid in his veins. After a moment he felt his muscles loosening, his joints growing slack as the anaesthetic was flushed from his bloodstream.

‘How do you feel?’ Dash asked. ‘What can you see?’

Redeye told him, and the clone beamed. ‘By studying my parents’ blueprints I was able to figure out exactly where they went wrong. The eye may take some getting used to, but the pain shouldn’t return.’

Redeye felt a sudden, raw emotion, one he recalled from a long time back but almost couldn’t place. Then he knew. It was gratitude.

He felt tears leaking from his artificial eye and wiped them away with one shaking hand, gazing through the porthole to the land beyond.

‘That is the coast of Nunavut,’ Dash told him. ‘The fleet has sailed through the Northwest Passage and is turning south into the Atlantic.’

‘Which means that it’s time you told us exactly what’s going on.’

Redeye forced his elbows beneath him, raising himself up on the surgical table. The door to the surgery had swung open and a familiar figure was stepping in, looking at him with undisguised contempt.

‘It’s time to fulfil your end of the bargain,’ Kara continued, and he saw the red haze shimmering around her. ‘You have to tell us exactly what Cortez is planning. What’s this transition zone Joe heard him and Rex talking about? What’s their Plan B?’

Joe entered behind her, giving a little wave. Redeye tried to keep a straight face, but he couldn't help smiling. He'd always liked Joe, it was impossible not to. The kid just wanted what was best for everyone; there wasn't an ounce of harm in him. Perhaps he reminded Redeye of the boy he used to be, before the scientists took him.

Kara frowned. 'What's the matter with him?' she asked Dash. 'Don't tell me you've fixed his eye but now his tongue's broken.'

'I can shpeak,' Redeye said, his words slurring as the numbness retreated. 'Jush gimme shecond. Everyfing's... everyfing's jush a *lot*, you know?'

Dash frowned. 'He has had major surgery, Kara. Maybe it'd be a good idea to let him rest before you-'

'No,' Kara said. 'We've waited long enough. Whatever Cortez is up to, it's going to happen soon. We need to know.'

Redeye held up a shaking hand. 'I'll tell you,' he said. 'Don't worry, I'll tell you what he'sh planning. But I don't fink you're goin' to like it.'





# PART ONE

## In the Dead Land



## The Mutineers

‘So now you know what we’re up against,’ Kara told them, her fists clenched at her sides. ‘Now you know what Cortez is planning, and why we can’t afford to lose.’

She mopped her brow, her face jagged under the artificial lights. Joe felt the ship’s hangar fall silent, every man and woman struck dumb by what they’d just heard. Looking around he saw an old sailor weeping, and a girl in a chef’s smock holding her head in her hands. A boy caught Joe’s eye then turned away in disbelief.

Then the shock started turning to outrage. Joe felt it happen, he felt the tide of disbelief recede and a flood of anger rush in to replace it.

‘He’s insane,’ someone spat.

‘He can’t do this!’ another moaned.

‘It’s... it’s not... It’s not *human*,’ a third muttered.

‘Which is why we need to stop him,’ Kara said. ‘It’s why we’ve got to take back the *Neptune*. Seize control of the fleet. Stop him in his tracks. Listen, *listen*.’

She held up a hand and the voices ceased. Joe was still amazed that she could do that; it was like a special power, the ability to speak and make people listen. She’d had a lot of practice, though, these past months. Since the Mariner fleet had fled Frisco, with John Cortez back in charge.

Right away, Kara had started planning for mutiny. She’d begun with the people she knew she could trust – Lynx and Dash, who stood now at Kara’s side, and the fleet’s chief medic Doctor Chandra, who was serving on the *Neptune*. Then gradually they’d widened the circle, talking to everyone from captains to pot-scrubbers, from engineers to teachers, sounding them out, getting them on their side. There were forty-two people in the room tonight, and all of them had pledged their allegiance.

‘I know it’s a lot to take,’ Kara went on. ‘But believe me, it’s real. We’ve found enough historical records to back up Redeye’s story, and besides, I just don’t think he’d lie. I know he’s done some terrible things, but on this, I trust him.’

Joe saw a surprised look on Redeye’s pale face, but he looked pleased as well.

‘Do you think there are enough of us?’ a woman piped up. ‘You said we wouldn’t move against the Captain until we had at least fifty, and we’re not there yet.’

A flicker of annoyance crossed Kara’s face, but Joe was the only one who knew her well enough to spot it. ‘I wouldn’t do this if I wasn’t sure we could win,’ she insisted. ‘Obviously there aren’t as many of us as we’d like. Too many are still reeling from the

defeat at Frisco. They're not ready to risk more violence. But once we're successful, they'll support us. All we have to do is take the Ark.'

There wasn't a hint of uncertainty in her voice. It was as if she knew, absolutely and completely, that they'd be victorious. Joe remembered how Kara used to be, fearless on the outside but full of inner doubts. Now she was a leader, a figurehead; anyone in this room would walk into a pit of snakes if she commanded them to.

But it was more than that, he knew. They loved her. They really did. She was the bravest person any of them had ever known.

'So let's focus,' Kara said, looking up at the tall figures surrounding her. 'Let's put it all out of our minds. Cortez's plan, the future, and any thought of failure. Because as my friend Joe always says, if you think positive, good things happen.'

She grinned at him and Joe smiled back, putting as much encouragement into it as he could muster. Then he dropped his eyes to the riveted steel floor.

All around he could hear the rustle of wetsuits, the click of pistols being loaded. He tried to tell himself that Kara was right, that this would work. But deep inside lay a little seed of doubt. It had been there for a while now, and it wasn't going away.

It was an unusual feeling. All his life Joe had been an optimist, he'd expected good things to happen and a lot of the time they had. They'd won the battle of London and saved the Shanties. Then they'd gone to America and met the Five, and Joe had flown all the way across the continent to warn the Mariners, and got there just in time.

But were those really victories? The Wall around London had still been breached. The Five had still stormed Frisco and the Mariners had been driven into the ocean, their ragtag fleet limping north. And ever since then, Joe had been finding it harder and harder to look on the bright side.

He kept thinking about all the people in those cities, dying by flood or fire. He thought about what had come before, how the stupidity of people in ages past had left a broken, waterlogged world. He wondered if things would ever get better, or if people would just keep making the same awful mistakes over and over.

And now Redeye's story was the final nail. Cortez's plan was so horrifying, so dreadful, that hours later Joe was still having trouble keeping his mind on the present. He kept remembering what he'd heard and feeling panic break out again.

*No, he thought firmly. I will not think about it. I will not let it distract me. I'll follow Kara and we'll stop Cortez and everything will be okay again.*

Then a second voice spoke up, colder and more sly than the first.

*Sure it will, this voice said. Sure thing, Joe.*

They assembled on the deck of the ship, a rusty old tub called the *California Spring* that had been Joe and Kara's home since they'd sailed out of Frisco. They weren't about to remain on the *Neptune* with Cortez in charge, and her captain was a friend of

Doctor Chandra's. They'd had to share a bunk, but they were used to that.

The mutineers lined up at the railing and a length of stretchy rope was passed back, to which each of them clipped on. Lynx handed the rope to Joe, tipping him a sly wink. 'Stay close to me,' the smuggler whispered, jerking a thumb at Dash who was next in line. 'I'm already guarding this guy, one more won't be any bother.'

Dash turned, raising an eyebrow. 'How about we all just agree to keep an eye on each other?'

Joe nodded. 'Okay. Thanks.'

He saw Kara at the head of the line, raising her fist for silence. She hit a switch and a set of metal steps unfolded from the hull of the ship, clunking into place. Kara started down, and the others followed.

At the base of the steps was a rusty platform and one by one they dropped over the side, black wetsuits vanishing into the black ocean. Dash crouched, sliding in, and Lynx followed. Joe stood on the bottom step for a moment, frozen in sudden fear. What if this was a dreadful mistake? What if they were all swimming to their deaths?

Then he shook himself. *You were the best Beef in London. When have you ever in your life been afraid of the ocean?*

So he gritted his teeth, and jumped.

The cold was a shock. The water temperature wasn't below freezing, not like it would've been a couple of centuries ago. But it was colder than the sea in the Shanties, and even with the wetsuit Joe could feel it numbing his limbs.

He forced himself to keep moving, kicking after Lynx. The mutineers bobbed ahead and behind him, the rope growing taut as they drifted apart. Then the last of them took the plunge and they were floating free.

The plan was simple. Over the course of that afternoon the *California Spring* had pulled towards the head of the fleet, passing the great Ark *Poseidon* and her sister ship *Neptune*. It wasn't unusual; the fleet changed formation all the time, as ships dropped back to conserve power or surged ahead to give their engines a workout. So now all the mutineers had to do was drift, and wait for the bigger craft to catch up.

The moon hung low like a luminous sequin, threaded onto the ribbon of the Milky Way. The Mariner fleet lay spread out around them, each ship a beacon on the black sea. To Joe's right a wooden schooner slid by; her name was the *Mayan* and her captain was a friendly old duffer with a walrus moustache who'd offered to take Joe fishing. Beyond her was a squat, rusty tug; this one had no name, just a number, and her crew were all fiercely loyal to Cortez.

Joe couldn't blame them for supporting him. Cortez had stood up to the Five, and led the fleet safely out of Frisco. He'd been a legend long before that, too – the captain who challenged the mudfoots, who always put his own tribe first. Since Frisco, the Mariners had become a refugee people; this fleet was all they had. It was no surprise

that they'd turn to the toughest talker, the man with a plan. He wondered how many of them knew how monstrous that plan really was.

Seeing a red glow, Joe squinted. Right on the perimeter of the fleet he could make out a tall shape, low in the water. It was a submarine, the *Black Seal*, called from manoeuvres in the Pacific to guard the fleet. She wasn't as big or as heavily armed as the *Kraken*, the sub that Cortez had used to attack London. But she wasn't far off; her conning tower bristled with energy cannons and her flanks were studded with torpedo tubes. And of course, she too was crewed with Cortez loyalists.

But would they stay that way, once their leader was in chains? That was the gamble they were taking.

Feeling a tug on the rope, Joe looked up. Lynx pointed with one black-gloved hand. The *Neptune* was in sight now, her running lights flickering green above the water line. The Ark's sheer size always amazed Joe; how people could've built something so huge was beyond him. The craft consisted of two main parts – the Disc, a great raft that floated on the water and was home to several hundred Mariners; and the Hub, a tanker ship rising tall in the centre. Cortez would be on that ship, and they already knew where. All they had to do was take him unawares.

On the near side of the Disc was an inlet, a harbour hosting a number of smaller craft. Joe could see Mariners moving back and forth in the low light, some busy at their work, others keeping watch. Luckily, two of the lookouts were on their side.

He saw Kara slipping into the shadow between two boats, drawing the rope with her. A man on the dock leaned down, helping her from the water and onto the rubber lip of the Disc. Kara turned back to assist the man behind her, then he did the same for the next woman in line. A stack of crates and barrels kept them hidden, and as each mutineer unhooked from the rope they ducked deeper into the shadows.

Joe let the rope lead him between the boats, water slapping against fibreglass hulls. Lynx climbed out, extending a hand to help Joe up. He got one knee on the Disc then the other, feeling the stiffness in his muscles as he struggled to his feet. The wind was sharp and thin, and he felt a cold shiver in his belly.

But he stayed to help the next woman climb out, giving her an extra tug as she lifted a heavy wet-bag onto the dock. She unzipped it, and Joe saw that it was full of guns. With Lynx's help she handed them out; everyone took one except Joe and Kara.

'I'm a talker, not a shooter,' Kara said, and there was a ripple of laughter.

'You're certainly a talker,' Lynx mumbled, and Dash nudged them.

The mutineers peeled off their wetsuit tops, replacing them with Mariner-made jackets. Then they crept towards the Hub, staying low.

The surface of the Disc was springy but Joe was used to that now, he no longer felt like he was about to fall flat on his face every time he took a step. A hatch was open in the Hub's steel side, pale white light streaming out. Kara ducked towards it, and Joe

had a sudden, sharp memory of that night when they'd rescued her from the cage, just him and Nate. She'd been shaking when they pulled her out, shivering with fear and exhaustion, clutching at Joe like she was drowning. Now her face was rigid with determination, her whole self focused on the task ahead.

The lights pulsed as they slipped inside the Hub's great hangar. Kara headed for a bulkhead door, beckoning the others forward. She tapped in a code and the door unlocked with a clunk; Kara ducked inside and her fellow mutineers followed.

A long metal stairway rose above them, winding into the heart of the ship. They ascended in near-silence, just the creak of their rubber shoes on the steel steps. Flight after flight they climbed, and Joe gripped the railing to haul himself up.

Suddenly a figure appeared from a doorway and Kara jumped back in surprise. Weapons were drawn, safety catches clicked off. The figure threw up her hands as twenty rifles swung in her direction. 'It's me!' she hissed. 'It's Doctor Chandra!'

The guns dropped and the Doctor shook her head ruefully. 'Well, I see you came prepared.'

Kara grinned. 'Sorry. We're all a bit tense. Is Cortez where he's meant to be?'

Doctor Chandra nodded. 'Through here,' she said, pushing at the door behind her. 'Every night he visits the arboretum. So unless something's changed, that's where we'll find him.'

She led them into a long, silent corridor. One wall was all glass and through it Joe could see a science lab, with stacks of test tubes and a bank of computer terminals. But the screens were blank, the petri dishes gathering dust. The *Neptune* wasn't a research vessel anymore, it wasn't full of oceanographers and biologists. Like every other vessel in the Mariner fleet, it was now a warship.

At the end of the corridor was another steel door, with a small plaque fixed to it: ARBORETUM. Kara halted and the mutineers gathered around her.

'According to the Doctor this is the only door in or out,' she said, and Chandra nodded. 'But the last thing we want to do is make Cortez feel cornered and risk him lashing out. So I'm going to ask most of you to stay here and guard the corridor, while I go in and speak to him.'

Lynx frowned. 'Is that the best idea? At least let Dash and me-'

'I need you here,' Kara interrupted. 'If Cortez radios for help they'll have to come this way, and I'll need you to hold them off. Anyway, Redeye can protect me.'

Redeye spluttered. 'But I... But he...'

'Cortez needs to know how many of us are against him,' Kara said. 'Even the ones who used to be loyal.'

'I should come too,' Joe said. 'Cortez likes me, remember? He said so.'

He was expecting Kara to tell him it was too dangerous, but instead she just nodded thoughtfully. 'You can be pretty persuasive when you want to be. Come on, then. Give

him one of your sweet little smiles.'

Joe scowled. 'What smiles? I don't do smiles.'

He heard laughter and felt himself start to blush. He turned his back, and as he did so he thought he saw something through the glass wall, just the briefest movement inside the science lab.

He scanned the room but there was nothing. For a moment he considered mentioning it, but he didn't want Kara to tell him he was being jumpy and make everyone laugh at him again. So he joined her at the door as she tapped in a code and pushed it open. The air seal broke and Joe smelled sweetness – a fragrant, *green* scent.

He'd visited the arboretum before; on their long Atlantic voyage it had been one of his favourite places to relax, to read a comic on Nate's tablet or just sit and breathe the air. It had never ceased to amaze him: in the Shanties the only plants were different kinds of seaweed. Here there were hundreds of different species – flowering shrubs, tumbling vines, great hardy trees with branches reaching right up to the glass-pane ceiling.

The room was bathed in moonlight. Pale beams painted leafy stripes across Kara's face as she tiptoed forward, following a stone path through the greenery. Light-globes marked the way to a circle of grass, neatly cropped and bordered with earthy beds. Then she gestured and on the far side of the clearing Joe saw a lone figure, kneeling with his back to them. Even in the dim light he recognised that slim, sharp frame, that dark, hairless head. It was John Cortez.

The Mariner captain knelt in the grass, his head bowed. There was something buried in the earth in front of him, and it took Joe a few moments to realise that it was a gravestone. As they crept closer he strained to read the name on it, though he knew already what it would say. CANE CORTEZ, the stone read. CHILD OF THE OCEAN, TO THE OCEAN RETURNED.

Cortez's daughter had died right in front of Joe, during the Five's attack on Frisco. At the time her father had barely seemed to notice her passing, let alone mourn it – he had left her body where it had fallen, stepping over it as he fled to the *Neptune*. It was Joe and his friend Nate who had given Cane's body to the sea, and there hadn't been a day since that Joe hadn't thought about it.

'I know she hated me.'

Cortez spoke without turning. Kara froze, and Redeye looked startled.

'Cane lost her faith,' Cortez went on. 'But I never stopped loving her.'

'She loved you, too,' Joe told him. 'Even at the end, she still loved you. But maybe she wouldn't have if she knew what you were planning.'

Cortez turned slowly, getting to his feet. 'Cane was a true Mariner. Salt water ran in her veins. On some level, I think she'd have understood.'

Kara faced him defiantly. 'We're taking command of the fleet,' she said. 'And

we're placing you under arrest. We're going to tell everyone what you're up to. And if your people try to stop us, we'll kill you.'

A cold smile spread across Cortez's face. 'You know, I actually believe you. You've come a long way since the Shanties, child. You learned a lot from me.'

Kara's lip curled. 'I learned nothing from you except how awful people can be.'

Cortez laughed sharply. 'Maybe you're right. You should at least have learned not to walk into such an obvious trap.'

Kara's face froze. Redeye started to turn, his hand dropping to his belt. From behind them Joe heard a muffled sound – the pop of gunfire, and the shattering of glass. Kara started back but Cortez reached out and seized her arm.

'It's already too late,' he said through gritted teeth. 'Your little mutiny is over.'

Redeye tugged out his pistol, clutching it in one trembling hand.

'Shoot him,' Kara said. 'Do it!'

But Redeye didn't even raise the gun; he just held it, his face a mask of uncertainty. The gunfire in the corridor stopped and a horrible silence fell.

'How did you know?' Kara asked. 'Who betrayed us?'

Cortez gestured towards Redeye. 'He did.'

Redeye was so surprised he dropped his pistol. 'No, wait, I never...'

'You traitor,' she sneered. 'You miserable *traitor*.'

'Oh, he didn't betray you in words,' Cortez said with a smirk. 'But why else would he start avoiding me? Why else would he spend so much time with that clone? It was easy to access the search records on the *Neptune*'s database, find out what they'd been looking up – nanotechnology, optical diagrams. The question was, why would Dash agree to help his sworn enemy? There was only one thing Redeye had that you needed, and that was information. And once you had that, there was only one way for you to respond. Mutiny.'

Joe heard the door to the arboretum hiss open, and the sound of footsteps on the stone path. Between the walls of greenery marched Cortez's brother Rex, a broad-shouldered man with a bulldog face. He was pulling Doctor Chandra by the arm, and behind them came a phalanx of armed Mariners. Each had a mutineer in custody; Joe saw Lynx and Dash among them.

'There's no way to stop what's coming,' Cortez told Kara. 'If you kill me, my brother will take over. If he dies, one of our lieutenants will step up. Plan B is in motion, and there's nothing you can do.'

'But why?' Kara pleaded. 'Why are you doing this? You know it's wrong, you know Cane would never, ever forgive you, not for-'

'But she's dead!' Cortez roared, and for a moment Joe thought he was going to strike Kara. 'She's dead, and so's Elroy. Both my children have been taken from me.'

'That doesn't give you the right to murder other people's children,' Kara spat back,



unflinching. 'Just because you lost the people you loved, it doesn't make it okay for you to drown the whole world.'

Cortez tipped his head on one side. He was calm now, his anger passing like a storm. 'But I have to, Kara,' he said, almost regretfully. 'It's the only way to save it.'