

When the aircraft was about five miles out, Jesse caught his first glimpse of the long, narrow island. He knew the penal colony's statistics. Twenty-five miles long, San Clemente Island sprawled over fifty square miles ... sixty, cold, wet miles off the California Republic coast. A naval base abandoned by the Americans after the Water War occupied one end of the island. Otherwise there were no cities, only a few roads, and the bleak terrain was thinly covered with patches of sparse vegetation.

Not much there at all. Unless one counted the thousand untended, desperate criminals who'd been exiled there for life in the year since the colony opened.

The helicopter circled over the landing zone ... a flat spot, carved out on a denuded hilltop near the geographical center of the island. As the craft dropped lower, he saw several dozen men, all wearing orange jumpsuits, waiting at the edge of brush about fifty yards below the rough helipad.

The pilot settled the craft onto the gray soil, but kept the engine running, ready to abort if any threat developed. Travis opened the egress door, picked up an automatic weapon and stepped outside. The inmates waiting below must know the drill, Jesse thought. None made a move up the hill.

The co-pilot came out of the cockpit and approached the prisoners. One at a time, he unlocked their restraints and pushed them out the door. Travis waited until they had all exited, then herded them away from the helicopter. They stood in an uncertain group, alternately staring at Travis, the aircraft, and the island welcoming committee waiting below.

After Travis gave a thumbs up to the pilot, a pair of clamshell doors yawned open underneath and a large pallet of supplies descended on cables to the ground. Travis leaned underneath and disconnected the cables. "Coming back on," he shouted, waving his arm in a circle. He scrambled aboard and the pilot lifted off as the egress door and cargo doors thumped to a close. The chopper had been on the ground for less than a minute.

Jesse watched the aircraft climb and turn away. Down the hill voices rang out and the men who'd been waiting at the brush line started dragging wagons up the hill to collect the rations. And to greet the new prisoners.

He drew a deep breath, staring at the men approaching, some with wicked grins on their bearded faces as they eyed Jesse and the other arrivals. He didn't know what to expect, but knew this day was about to get much worse.

His descent into this hell had started only two short months ago.