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Promise Tide.jpg

# PROMISE TIDE

From The Shards Universe

*Peter W. Prellwitz*

To Matt

Thanks for the patience, permission and encouragement to continue writing even while you were paying me to take care of your computers and networks.

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## Prologue



The Arizona Republic

Saturday, August 15, 2415

Nobel Prize Winner Hundar Knowler dies at 91.

UPP—Searsport, Maine Province

Family retainer, Stanworth Davis, reported yesterday that Mariner Hundar Knowler died of respiratory failure at his home on the evening of the 13th. Hundar Knowler was the last known living Pisces. He was 91.

Hundar Knowler came to prominence in 2359 when the Pisces Congress announced him to the surface world as the Pisces' new Mariner, that society's highest office. Spending more time above the water than any of his fifteen predecessors, Hundar Knowler quickly established himself as the voice of reason in world politics just as the Martian crises was reaching a head. He is traditionally credited with preventing war between Mars and Earth when the Martian Vicar was assassinated in the World Seat chambers in October of 2372. Though war did break out in 2373, Hundar Knowler was nonetheless named that year's recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, only the third Nobel Prize awarded to a Pisces.

Despite the destruction of Atlantis by the Rock in 2374 and the following years of genocide of the remaining Pisces, Knowler remained active and visible in world politics. (Editor's note: The Pisces had no known name for their capital city located about 150 kilometers southeast of New York's Long Island. As a result, it was commonly known as Atlantis by non-Pisces humans.) He and a coalition of moderates in the Seat bartered an uneasy truce with Mars in 2378, but it never fully took hold; and full war again broke out between Earth and Mars in 2386.

After the conclusion of the Terran/Martian Wars in 2389, Knowler and his family retired to Searsport, deep in the Maine wilderness. Married in 2366 to Janine Wayhaven—a non-Pisces human—they had three children; Everett (2368-2397), Katherine (2371-2397), and an unnamed boy who died at birth in 2375. Janine died in 2401 at the age of 72.

Though he remained in seclusion, Hundar Knowler was an outspoken opponent of NATech's growing involvement in the World Seat. He maintained this increasingly unpopular political stance until his death

“Only by speaking the unbreathable can resolution be made,” he was quoted in a rare interview, given in 2409. “The salt of our children has been removed by the wounds of our evil peace, and the quiet dark cries for our deeds not committed.”

Hundar Knowler is preceded in death by his wife, his three children, and his race. He is survived by a granddaughter, Deborah Mariner; only daughter of his son Everett. She is his only known relative and ward from 2397 until his death. She is 18.

Funeral services are private and no details are to be released. In lieu of salt crystal (a traditional Pisces gift of mourning) or flowers, mourners are encouraged to make a contribution to the Icecap Preservation Fund.

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The Denver Post

Saturday, August 15, 2415

Hundar Knowler dead at 91

NP—Maine Wilderness Region

NATech dissident and controversial activist Hundar Knowler is reported as having died on Thursday evening. Cause of death was respiratory failure, a common occurrence among water-breathing people. Knowler was its last known representative.

Knowler was named Mariner by the Pisces Congress in the mid-24th Century. Eschewing his domestic duties in favor of the world stage, Knowler quickly became a political fixture at the World Seat in



Sydney, advocating a policy of appeasement to the Martian government. Ironically, the same Martian society that he defended later destroyed his home city Atlantis during their unprovoked asteroid attack on Earth in 2374.

Knowler remained in fringe politics for the remainder of his life, speaking out frequently in his meandering Piscean dialect.

Knowler was married and had three children, all of whom precede him in death. He is said to have a surviving granddaughter who remains in seclusion at the Knowler Mansion, about 150 kilometers north of the New York Glasslands.

## Chapter One



Monday, November 16th, 2415

The fourth one was the worst yet.

“Hey, Deborah!” Chrissy shouted over the dull murmur of the market place. The noise didn’t justify her yelling so loud. That she was Chrissy did.

I looked away from the lady who was carefully painting my nails and toward my best friend. We’d known each other for years, so I’d long since gotten used to her attracting attention. I was convinced she did it to draw that attention away from me.

“Over here!” I yelled back, though not as loud. “What did you find?”

Before she could answer, the lady firmly tugged my hand.

“Ma’am,” she reminded me for the fifth time, “this Sofglo permeate looks best if the user remains *still* during its application.” She looked at me sternly. “*Quite* still.”

“Sorry,” I replied sheepishly. She was a Bloomingdale’s assistant and proud of it. While I was her customer, she would serve me only on Bloomingdale’s terms. I kind of liked it that way. She nodded and returned to applying the Sofglo.

“Scan this!” Chrissy stepped beside me and showed me a long, slim nightgown, shimmering with each movement and smelling of sweetest pine. I scrunched my face.

“That’s definitely *not* you, Chrissy.”

“Ma’am!”

“Sorry.”

Chrissy laughed and opened it against my back. “Goose. It’s for you! Happy nineteenth from me to

you!” She kissed me on the neck, just in front of my gill.

“Chrissy!” I complained weakly. I didn’t want to get the assistant mad at me. Too late.

“Perhaps you two ladies would prefer a more robust venue for your shopping.” She paused. “Might I suggest a tractor pull?”

We laughed, not at all bothered. We got this a lot.

“No, thanks,” I said, still laughing. “I always come to Bloomingdale’s when I’m in Edmonton.” I inspected my fingernails, then gasped. Gentle swirls of softest light drifted in and out of a myriad of colors. Living art. “This is fantastic!”

I showed them to Chrissy and she nodded dumbly, transfixed by the undulating waves of light and color.

Satisfied I’d stunned her sufficiently, I smiled back at the assistant. “This is wonderful! I’ll take a half dozen bottles, please.”

She blinked.

“Each bottle sells for twelve hundred credits.”

“Okay. I’ll take a dozen then. They’ll make great presents.” I leaned forward to the retreg and it scanned my retinal patterns. I held very still, knowing retregs often struggled to read my oh-so-pale blue-gray eyes.

Very doubtful as to my credit, she nonetheless submitted the scan request. She smiled at me, a look of tolerance on her face. She had pegged me as a tourist pretending on the rich side. Chrissy and I exchanged private smirks. The retreg pinged softly.

“It appears you are from the Eastern Wildlands,” she offered with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes. Maine, to be precise.”

“Name?”

“Deborah Mariner.”

“Thank you. It will only be...” Her face went from politely bored to terrified in a heartbeat. She

screamed, looking beyond me.

Not again! I spun around quickly and moved to my right, bringing my left hand up and ready to defend or attack.

It was a man. He had a head of black hair and an equally black beard. The smell of the sea was on him, but it had a polluted odor. He charged me.

“Unholy aberration!” he shouted, drawing a knife.

I slipped to his side and smacked him on the back of the head. Not hard, just enough to let him finish the trip into the cosmetics table.

He and the cosmetics crashed to the floor. I winced. I should probably pay for that. He had trouble getting to his feet, so I took a moment to find Chrissy.

She had faded into the gathering crowd. Good. She was human and blended well with the others. She always wanted to help me when things like this happened, but knew her disappearing was the best thing to do. It let me focus.

A focus I had let slip. A guttural snort brought me back to the task at hand. The maniac, covered in bright pinks and reds and smelling of roses, was charging again.

His knife flashed from side to side, threatening to disembowel me. I couldn't back up without endangering the people, so I vaulted lightly into the air. He passed under me and I tugged his shirt back. I'm fairly tall, but slim, so I don't look to be strong. My ancestry put the lie to that.

He jerked back like a fish on a hook and crashed to the floor. Using his mass for a counterweight, I stopped my forward movement and landed over him, my foot on his throat.

He writhed under my foot, his arm slashing back and forth. A startled—frightened?—gasp came from my audience as they watched him vainly try to cut my legs. They saw only a blur as I moved and replaced each leg, dodging the knife as easily as I dodged the razor sharp coral of a reef in the darkest waters.

I needed to end this, so I applied more pressure to his throat.

“I can snap your neck right now,” I said quietly, “And no court in the country would prosecute me.”

Then with an even quieter voice, I added, “And since you know who I am, you know that I will.”

He stared at me with seething hatred, a hatred only expressed by racists, and nodded. I relaxed slightly. Maybe I could avoid a mess as bad as the last time. That one had no... A scream. He'd flipped the knife in his hand and thrown it at the crowd.

I dove at the knife, seeing it move through the air. One step. Two. My left hand shot out and pulled it from its flight. Sliding to the floor to avoid running into a well-dressed woman frozen in terror, I spun around and jammed the knife into the floor, braking hard. That bastard!

I rose quickly, but a new problem had reared up. He'd cleared a gun from his jacket and brought it to bear. I moved to my left slowly. If I moved too fast, he'd panic and begin firing indiscriminately.

He didn't even stop to make a speech or gloat or anything. He simply pulled the trigger.

There was a loud explosion and I heard the slug whip by my head as I jerked to my right. It ricocheted against something and whined off in a different direction. He saw his mistake and lowered his aim to my body. I tensed, hoping I could move faster than I ever had. For a second, the scene was utterly motionless. The hunter enjoying his moment, the prey preparing her defense, the onlookers frozen by the spectacle of life's end.

A massive hand thrust from the crowd and clamped onto the maniac's gun hand. The gun fired, the loud discharge accompanied by a splintering sound. Whether from the floor boards or the gunman's wrist, I didn't know. I did know that this fight was over. Stanworth had arrived.

He stepped clear of the crowd, twisting the man's arm grotesquely over his own shoulder. He screamed, but not in anger. Stanworth looked impassively into the man's eyes.

“Miss Mariner told you of your precarious legal situation, no?” He twisted the man's arm harder, threatening to tear it free. “I'll take your scream as a yes. A mistake, friend.” He shook his head sadly. “I am her protector.”

Stanworth released the man's arm and seized his throat. Moving his great mass in a single fluid motion, with one arm he spun the man over his extended leg and smashed him to the floor. He hit full on his back and choked out a wail of pain. Stanworth pushed his arm down and the man's neck snapped. It was over.

Silence and shock hung over the scene. Stanworth calmly searched the man for identification. There came a quiet ding from the retreg, the only undamaged part of the counter. I'd been approved for the purchase.

Like a starter's gun, the ding signaled everyone to start talking. Mainly asking questions of me.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm..."

"Do you know this man?"

"No, I've never seen him bef..."

"How did you move so fast?"

"Well, I really don't want..."

"What did he call you?"

"Ummmm..."

"Are you a Pisces?"

That last question turned off the switch the retreg had turned on. They all stared at me, as if seeing me for the first time. As the two races were fairly similar, it was likely.

I was taller than most women, and thin. My eyes were very pale, and my fingers were half again as long as a human's. My hair looked normal—a trait from my human mother—but I grew it just long enough to cover the gills on each side of my neck. I wore shoes, preferring them over sandals when in public, because they hid the webbing.

The crowd pressed in closer to look. I felt red creeping up my neck. This had happened before, but only rarely. I'd led a fairly quiet life so far. Quiet in the public eye, that is.

"I know you," someone announced from within the curious mass. "You're Deborah Mariner, Hundar Knowler's granddaughter!"

This started a new surge of babbling. I heard most of the comments, some true, others not. I could turn into a mermaid. I had inherited the riches of the now extinct Pisces race. I lived on a diet of fish and

plankton. I could speak to all aquatic mammals. My life was extremely private. Though only one-quarter Pisces, I was supposed to have all the traits of a full Pisces. I had been preserved by the race to begin mothering it again.

“What?” I said at the last one. I’d not heard that one before. “That’s ridiculous! I...”

“Miss Mariner would prefer her privacy now,” Stanworth boomed in a voice that was quiet, yet shook people to the bottoms of their feet. When he spoke like that, not even complete—and completely rude—strangers could argue. He turned toward me, speaking in the same deep baritone, but so softly it reminded me of a warm, safe fire. Despite my height, he was taller, standing two meters to my one point eight.

“I’ll take care of this, Miss Deborah,” he said for the umpteenth time in my life. “You and Miss Chrissy head back to the chalet.”

“Did you see where Chrissy went?”

“She’s waiting for you as planned.”

“Okay.” I looked around at the mess. “I had placed an order. And I suppose I should pay for the damage that we...”

“I’ll see to it.”

“Thanks, Stanworth.” I stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. “You’re the best!”

He blushed and rubbed his cheek.

I turned to the crowd and walked directly at them, using the Pisces walk of floating grace. Other than my Grandfather and myself, our race was three decades dead, my parents and aunt having been murdered while I was an infant. Yet even today it was known that one never touched a Pisces, nor impeded her progress. I acknowledged their action with a bow that sent a ripple of gasps through the crowd. One old timer made eye contact with me and bowed. I flexed my gills slightly to show him satisfaction in his respect.

“May your children breathe only the sweetest of waters,” he said quietly as I passed.

I stopped for a moment and looked at him. He knew the language! How glorious it sounded from this

unknown friend!

“My children will rejoice with yours that we have met this day,” I replied. “May the foundation of your children’s lives be safe, breathable and complete.”

He bowed deeper and I continued out of the market place. Bloomingdale’s was in a protected outdoor plaza, but was fortunately at the end of said plaza, so I needed to maintain the walk for only a hundred meters. Once out of eyesight, I broke into a most un-Pisces like run. I loved acting and being Pisces, but it did lead to a lot of stares.

I headed for our spot, two blocks over and five up. Whenever Chrissy and I traveled together—which was always—we selected a place to rendezvous in case we were separated or I had to deal with a situation. This was the fourth such “situation” in the past two weeks.

Our spot this time was an ancient establishment on 81st Avenue named Von’s. They claimed to have been in the same location since the twentieth century. The deep, heady scent of the wood that made up the bar and many of the furnishings and walls certainly bore out that claim.

Chrissy was at the bar, sitting on the second-last stool at the end of the bar, anxiously looking at the doorway. She smiled and visibly relaxed when I stepped through. I smiled at her concern and took the stool she’d held for me. As I sat down, I blew lightly in her ear.

“Worried?”

“I always am when something like this happens,” she said frankly. “You know that. I know it’s part of the package, but it’s something I could do without.”

“Sorry.”

She put her hand on mine and squeezed it.

“I don’t blame you, Deborah. And I don’t blame who you are. I only wish.” She patted my hand and motioned to the bartender. “Listen, this place has the best and freshest Alaskan King crab this far east of the Pacific. Hungry?”

I perked up. The rumor of my eating exclusively plankton and fish was way wrong, but fresh seafood was my favorite.



“Definitely! Are you paying?” I asked innocently.

“Nope. You are. I just spent a bunch on your birthday present.” She pointed to the bag on the floor and laughed. “I was worried, but not so much that I couldn’t buy this on the way out.”

\*\*\*

The sun had set and dusk was nearly night when we left the restaurant. It was only four-thirty in the afternoon, but night came quickly to Edmonton in the late fall.

We walked hand in hand up and down the streets of Edmonton. Though it had once boasted a population over two million, emigration to newly opened planets had cut down all of Earth’s population. And a near miss from an asteroid during the Terran/Martian Wars only hastened the departure of many. Today, a mere twenty-six years after the Wars, Edmonton was Canada’s third most populace city with 125,000 souls.

Not that that was a bad thing. Those who stayed were the hardest. They shrugged off the turn of times, quickly stripped down the unneeded buildings and streets, and carried on with life, appreciating it just that much more. Which was why it was my favorite city. The event at Bloomingdale’s notwithstanding, they let me be myself and didn’t pass judgment.

“Pretty tonight, isn’t it?” Chrissy asked, knowing how I loved the dark nights and cold air.

“It’s wonderful!” I sighed, holding her hand tighter.

“You’re sure you’re not cold? You’ve only on your windbreaker.”

“What a worry wart!” I teased. “I’m fine, Chrissy. You know cold doesn’t affect me as much.”

She chuckled. “Don’t say that too loud, love. You’ll get another rumor started. ‘She’s cold-blooded.’ ”

I laughed with her. “I’ll put that next to the ‘mother of the new Pisces race’ one.”

“No!” she gasped. “Someone actually said that?”

“Yes. At Bloomingdale’s.”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “You’re not seeing someone on the side are you?” She continued

frowning sternly, then burst out laughing.

“Oh, yes,” I admitted. “I’ve a stable of men back home.” I hugged her. “Somehow, I don’t think ‘mom’ will ever be among my achievements.”

The next three hours skipped away with our admiring the city, looking in craft shops and just being together. Eventually, the freezing temperature left Chrissy too cold to enjoy the evening outside, so we walked to our chalet on the edge of the Northern Saskatchewan River. Still a kilometer away, we could see it was dark, which meant Stanworth hadn’t gotten back yet.

“Stanworth?” I said into the air while Chrissy clung to me, shivering slightly. There was a barely audible click in my ear as the search routines located him.

“Yes, Miss Deborah?” came his reassuring voice. I touched the comlink on my collar and opened the conversation so Chrissy could listen in.

“Are you all right?”

“Hi, Stanworth! A-choo!”

“Hello, Miss Chrissy. Bless you. Yes, I’m fine, Miss Deborah. The police have a number of questions about the incident but are not too concerned about charging either you or me. Wait a moment, please.” There was a soft murmur of voices, then Stanworth spoke again. “Apparently the man had something of a reputation for hate crimes.”

“You mean other than Pisces?”

A pause.

“I wouldn’t worry about...”

“You mean other than Pisces?” I repeated.

I heard a soft swearing. Stanworth was a best friend and an incredible servant—though that hardly seemed a comprehensive enough word—but sometimes he overprotected me.

Finally, he sighed. “No. He’s only targeted your race in the past, Miss. He assaulted your grandfather

eight years ago, on one of his rare travels.”

“I remember Grandfather telling me about that when I was eleven,” I nodded. “It seemed so unreal at the time.” It was my turn to sigh. “May his children find the peace denied him.”

“You are so much your grandfather,” he said in a near whisper. “I will tend to this. You tend to Miss Chrissy.” He raised his voice a little. “Miss Chrissy?”

“Yeah, Stanworth?” Chrissy replied between shivers.

“Your blend of chocolate is in the third cupboard to the right of the cooling field. Do not boil the water.”

“Thanks, Stanworth!” She sneezed again.

“You’re welcome. Miss Deborah, I expect you and Miss Chrissy will want your privacy tonight?” I looked at her and she nodded.

“Yes.”

“Very good. I’ll see you two in the morning then. Waffles with strawberries in cream, and sausage for breakfast.”

“You’ll get me fat!” I laughed. “Good night, Stanworth.”

“Good night, Miss Deborah.” A click and he was gone.

Our talk had lasted all the way to the front steps of the chalet. I opened the front door, pushing my palm against the ID plate. The lights came on and a gentle splashing of ocean breaking on rocks kissed the air. I pushed the door closed with my foot and led Chrissy upstairs to our bedroom and private bath. It was good to be home.

\*\*\*

“Child’s child.”

Soothing. Quiet. The serenity of Traveler’s deep tides tugging me along in his icy, glorious waters.

“Child’s child.”

The warm currents carried me in soft caresses of breathable love. With sleepy eyes, I saw the dark sea, reassuring me, holding me close.

“Child’s child.” The voice never lost patience. It was as eternal as the sea.

I opened my eyes further and saw a twinkle of light in the deepest black of the ocean. It was Darkness Keep—called Atlantis by air breathers—the underwater city of my people.

“Child’s child.”

“Grandfather!” I yelled with happiness.

“I am here. You are here. Discussion is needful.”

I bowed. “May the breathable remain so. Lay foundation.”

“The Groundfather. That which is unbreathable. The Purpose.” he stated simply. Pisces speech was quite different from other languages. It was to the point yet remained eloquent.

“Foundation is laid,” I replied with thanks. “Discussion is needful. Begin construction.”

“Only my child’s child carries the Purpose. Only my child’s child knows the Unbreathable. Only my child’s child knows the Groundfather.”

“Three twenty-six,” I agreed.

“Are these in you, child’s child? Are these of you?”

“Without the knowledge of the Unbreathable, I am not Pisces,” I said. “Without the knowledge of the Groundfather, I am not Pisces. Without the Purpose, I am not Pisces.” I took a deep breath of clear, icy water and let the needles of refreshment flood into my lungs and body. “This One is your child’s child. This One is Pisces.”

He said nothing, but his happiness and love poured over and through me, replacing the brisk cold with soothing warmth.

“Three twenty-six,” he murmured with soul deep peace.

“Continue construction,” I urged.

“The path is laid,” he said clearly, knowing our time was short. Oh so short! “Construction continues.

Take that path which you know to be breathable. Take the path I have followed and which is now calling for you.”

“Three twenty-six,” I said hesitantly, not knowing what he was telling me but trusting I would.

“You are my child’s child,” he said proudly. His voice was fading back to Darkness Keep, far out of my reach. “You continue my legacy. You continue my quest. You are my child.”

“Grandfather!” I pleaded, sad this visit was so brief.

“I am Ebbing Tide. You are Promise Tide. We are Pisces.”

“Grandfather...”

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“Promise?”

I stirred. Grandfather? No. Timelessness was over.

“Promise?” A gentle shaking. It was Chrissy.

“Huh?” I said, turning my head away. The soft candlelight betrayed me, though. Chrissy pressed her fingers against my eyes and gently rubbed the tears.

“Grandfather again?” Chrissy, being orphaned, had no family other than us.

I nodded, staring at her. She sighed, then sat up in bed.

“I won’t pretend to understand, Promise. But you know I care.” I nodded again. “You want to talk about it?”

How could I not? Chrissy was so much more to me than I could express. She and Stanworth were two of only four air breathers who knew my true name. My Pisces name. And only she and Stanworth had my unconditional love and trust, though in different ways.

I shared with her what I had seen. Since the very beginnings of our race, the Pisces had been able to enter Timelessness. More than a dream, yet less than reality, it was a mix of both. During a Timelessness swim, one could speak to all Pisces, living and dead, and relive the past. And even know

the future, though future knowledge was lost upon leaving Timelessness.

“I know you’ve used Timelessness most of your life,” Chrissy said. “But since Grandfather died two months ago, you seem to be focusing on him.” She looked at me thoughtfully. “I’d often wondered why your grief was so deep but so brief.”

I nudged her gently and smiled. “That’s because you were there, Chrissy. You and Stanworth, as well as Grandfather.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I really appreciate that, Promise. But even with Stanworth always being there, even with what you and I are to each other, it was still mercifully brief. You knew Grandfather would always be there.”

“Yes.”

We chatted a little longer. I was just snuggling deeper into our quilt when Chrissy got out of bed.

“Be right back,” she giggled. “Hot, black coffee with steak is a great combo, but you only rent coffee.”

She ducked into the bathroom and I slipped off to sleep. My talks with Grandfather always left me peaceful and cozy and so ready to drop off into...

“Deborah?”

For the second time I woke to Chrissy’s voice. But it had a different note in it now. And why had she called me Deborah? When we were alone, it was always Promise.

“Wha...” The candle was out and the room was unlit. My eyes quickly adapted and I saw her side of the bed was empty.

“Chrissy?”

“I have her, Mariner.”

It was a woman’s voice. Hard, unforgiving, threatening. My eyes opened wide and I saw Chrissy standing at the foot of our bed, her arms behind her back and a glint of metal at her neck.

“I’m sorry, Deborah,” she said, a sheen of tears over her eyes. “I heard a noise and thought Stanworth needed help, so I...” She gasped as the knife pressed closer.

“That’s enough,” the unknown woman behind Chrissy hissed. “Davis is being held at the precinct until morning, just like we planned.” Her eyes narrowed as she stared at me. “But what do you have planned, Mariner?”

I eased the sheets back. Was I fast enough? Could I catch her off guard? Chrissy’s life was in the balance.

“Don’t try it,” she warned. “I know the Pisces’ strengths. I know their weaknesses, too. You and DuPries here are too tight for you to move unhindered. You’ll be too careful and I’ll slit her open before you can get me.”

“I believe you,” I said in a voice far calmer than I was. “What do you want?”

She released Chrissy and flung her toward me. My arms went out and caught her. Chrissy! I stepped in front of her, tensing. The attack would come now.

The woman stepped back and tossed the knife onto the bed. She then opened her arms and smiled at me.

“I just wanted to say hi.” She turned her back to me and placed her hands behind her head.

Stunned, I picked up the knife and went to her. She started as the point of the knife pressed into the back of her neck.

“Geez! You’re quieter than I’d been told!”

“You threatened the life of my mate,” I said tonelessly. I leaned on the knife and a trickle of blood painted the tip.

“I did,” she said in an equally flat tone.

I kept her like that for a long minute, then lowered the knife. I went into the bathroom and retrieved the first aid kit. She was sitting in a chair, tenderly touching the back of her neck. Her fingers came away bloody.

“I didn’t know Pisces protocol allowed for injury,” she complained.

I tossed the kit to Chrissy. She caught it and tended the woman’s wound.

“Your life was mine to take, just as Chrissy’s was yours.” I looked at her with something less than pleasure. “What is it you want?”

She looked up at me. Chrissy had sprayed on the NumMist and was applying the grasping skin none too gently. Despite that, the woman didn’t flinch.

“I’m the first step on your Grandfather’s quest.”



## Chapter Two



I rose quickly to strike her in the face for even daring to associate herself with my grandfather.

*“Take the path I have followed and which is now calling for you.”*

I stopped abruptly. I hated what I was feeling. This woman had kept Stanworth at the police against his will, had forced her way into my home, and had threatened the life of the woman I loved. She’d then used these things as the Pisces Greeting of Lives, which tied my hands. I hated her actions and I hated her.

But she *was* the path calling to me.

She was unimpressed at my move. Rather, she showed a slight smile.

“You’ve quite a temper there, Mariner.”

I regained my composure.

“I am Deborah Mariner, not Mariner. Mariner is the highest position of authority among my people. My grandfather, Hundar Knowler, was the last Mariner. You will call me Miss Mariner.”

“Pretty formal. How about Deborah?” At my frozen stare, she backed off. “Okay, bad idea. Miss Mariner it is.”

“You have safety from the Greeting of Lives,” I told her sharply. “I will honor that, though you forced it on me. You do not have, nor will you get, any more hospitality from us. State your business and leave.” I considered her carefully. “Do both very quickly.”

She nodded.

“Can’t say as I blame you. Captain said I could expect this kind of reception.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “He didn’t mention this, though.”

“Okay, here it is: I’m Lieutenant Terri Kendall and I’m associated with a resistance faction known as Red Vengeance. Our goal...”

“A stupid name.”

She stiffened at Chrissy’s comment, but continued. “Our goal is the overthrow of NATech. We feel that they’ve grown too quickly too fast and that some of their ‘solutions’ have proven too good to be true. We want to stop them.”

“Stop them from what?” Chrissy asked. Though not used to being held at knife point, she’d rebounded quickly and now sat on the edge of the bed, listening carefully.

“Stop them from taking over the world,” Kendall replied.

“You mean, like mad-scientist-take-over-the-world?” Chrissy chided, not even trying to hide a smirk.

“Cute, DuPries. Did you think that up all by yourself? Or did you swipe it off the netly news?”

Chrissy got ready to say something very original, and no doubt very nasty, but held herself at my slight head shake.

“Insulting the loved one of a person you are trying to woo to your side is not wise,” I offered.

“Another Pisces saying?”

“Common sense.”

“Yeah. I’ve a mouth on me. Sorry, DuPries.

“Anyway, my mission tonight was to get you to agree to attend a meeting with my superiors. Tonight. We’ve a secure location and are ready to escort you...”

“If you escort me, your location is not secure.”

“Why do you say that?” she asked suspiciously.

“I do not divulge more information than is needed to people I do not know. Nor wish to know.”

“Then you’re not going...”

“I will attend this meeting on two conditions. One, you will arrange for the release of my manservant

at once. I wish him to remain here to watch over Miss DuPries. Two..."

"I'd like to come, Deborah," Chrissy interrupted.

"Sorry, but no." I shook my head, despite my great desire to have her close. "As the lieutenant said, they know the presence of loved ones slows down a Pisces action. They would use you against me."

"No, we wouldn't!" Kendall snapped.

I looked at her in disbelief. "Condition two: I will choose how I will arrive. Meet both those conditions and I will attend your meeting."

She nodded and left the room.

Stanworth was home thirty minutes later.

\*\*\*

"Promise! NO!" Chrissy wasn't at tears yet, but her pleading insistence raked across my heart the same. "You can't possibly be serious about meeting that woman and her terrorist group alone!" Kendall was an hour gone and Stanworth was downstairs, waiting out the storm he accurately assumed would be going on in our bedroom.

I pulled off my nightgown and donned my second skin. Of Pisces make, the cloth was made of a fiber plant that grew near volcanic vents in the deepest ocean. Woven tighter than a spider's silken thread, it also shimmered like one. To increase strength and pliability, it had been infused with special oils, extracted from... well, never mind. Pisces could be a secretive people when it came to knowledge of the sea.

"Are you even listening?" Chrissy said in exasperation. "Promise!"

The material clung to my skin, allowing me my feminine modesty without hindering me in any way. I reached for my special ribbon, woven from fluid silver, and tied my hair back. Nothing could throw off the pace of a swim more than sucking in a gillful of hair.

I looked at my hump longingly, but decided against it. Made of the same material as my second skin, it was a carrying pack that clung to my back and was almost unnoticeable. If they did see it, however,

they'd think the worst. Or think me weak. Neither would do.

“Please,” she pleaded. This time the tears were there. Her fingers gently stroked my back. “Promise, please don't go.”

I turned to her and let her see the tears in my eyes, too. I wiped her tears, and then mine. Taking her by the hand, I led her downstairs.

Stanworth was at the door, holding Chrissy's heavy coat. He'd known from the beginning that I would do as I said. He and grandfather had been friends and comrades twenty years before I was born. He'd been with him the day grandfather became my guardian from infancy, shortly after my parents had been murdered. Stanworth knew me even better than I did, for he'd known grandfather even longer. An odd thought crossed my mind that he must be around sixty years old. Yet he still looked to be in his forties.

Chrissy sighed and let Stanworth put her coat on her. Chrissy and I had been best friends since we were three, and much more than friends for the past several years. She didn't understand me completely—who could?—but she accepted me completely. She had done her best, but she also knew that with my mind set, not even she could gain entry to my thoughts and emotions.

We walked quietly down to the river, the soft snow brilliant in the full moon. It was after midnight and Edmonton had gone to bed for the night. Now was the time for devils and pixies.

We reached the rocky bank and stared at the river for several minutes, as though looking for a hidden comfort.

“You will return before sunrise?” Stanworth asked softly.

I bent down and scooped up water in cupped hands. I splashed it over my face and gills. It had much to tell me. This was a good river. I turned to them. Stanworth was holding Chrissy under his arm.

“Yes.”

He nodded. We both knew he'd not sleep a moment until I was safe again. Neither would Chrissy, unless she cried herself to sleep.

“You will be careful, Promise,” he said. It was not a question.

“It is Grandfather’s path, Stanworth,” I replied, looking back over the glitter of the waters. “If I am not careful, I will have failed him.”

“Promise?” came her whisper. The light breeze played with her tenderness and allowed it to dance in my ears as the softest of melodies. Chrissy had accepted and was wishing me her heart.

Unable to face her eyes, I strode into the water.

“I love you, Chrissy,” I said and dove in.

\*\*\*

I hated breathing fresh water.

The Northern Saskatchewan River was very pure and very cold. It felt wonderful on my skin as I made my way southwest, one fathom down. It couldn’t have been more than two or three degrees. But the lack of salt meant my body had to deplete itself. I’d have to swallow a bunch of salt tablets once I got back to the chalet.

The water was nearly pitch black. It didn’t matter. I had many other ways to navigate unfamiliar waters. What I was having trouble navigating were the night’s events.

The river looped again for the fifth time in as many minutes. The rocky bottom allowed me to make good sightings, so I could move at a good speed. Unfortunately, I was swimming upstream, and it was a very active river, so I wasn’t making much better than fifteen knots. A flash of movement and a brushing of slight water patterns against my skin told me I had reached a small school of trout, also heading upstream. They scattered at my approach, but regrouped once I went by them. Further upstream, I heard the harsh ping of a sounder. Kendall had said they would put one in the water to mark the location of the meeting, thinking I needed it. I smiled to myself. What they didn’t know could hurt them.

Badly.

I had them now. There were four of them, all within ten meters of the sounding device. I couldn’t tell anything more about them from this distance. Pisces aren’t pixies, after all.

I was still in midstream, some sixty meters from shore. I was tempted to surface briefly and look them over more carefully, but didn't want to risk being seen. I'd only said I'd be there within three hours, and gave no specific time. Two of those hours had passed. How fast I could swim was something I didn't want to share just yet.

They'd chosen the eastern point of the island, where the split river joined again. I swam upstream another kilometer, then made for the bank.

Surfacing carefully, I continued breathing water while just showing my eyes and top of head. I wouldn't be surprised to see they'd posted a lookout.

They had, but he was two hundred meters further west, at the other end of the island. I left him alone. Pisces weren't devils, either.

I swam slowly to the edge of the bank, remaining flat until the last moment. A wisp of cloud drifted in front of the moon and I stood and entered the thin woods. Five minutes later, I was crouched at the edge of a clearing, studying the small group who still stared intently into the water.

"You're sure she was coming?" a male voice said. He had authority.

"Yes, sir." That was Kendall. "As sure as I can be. The Pisces are a difficult people."

"Does that matter?" a third one—a man—offered. "She's only one-quarter Pisces. How much of their cultures and abilities can you give her?"

"All of them," the leader answered sharply. "I met her once about ten years ago, when I visited the Knowler Mansion during a social gathering. She was only eight or nine, but she already had the mannerisms, speech and movements of her grandfather. Other than her hair, she looked as much Pisces as him. And Knowler wasn't backward about showing how pleased he was. His two kids had turned their backs on the culture."

"Didn't keep them from getting killed," the third one said with a hard laugh. "And they were half breeds, not mongoloid."

"You'd be smart to shut up, Robby," Kendall said. "Mariner's different from her parents. She's only quarter Pisces by blood, but all Pisces every other way. Piss her off and she'll hurt you bad."

“Hey,” Robby retorted, “I’m not the one who put a knife to her sweetheart’s throat.” He shook his head and grunted. “A pity, too. That girlfriend of hers, too good-looking to waste on another girl.”

“Pig!” Kendall snapped.

“That’s enough!” the leader ordered. “You’re not going to make a good impression if you’re fighting like that when she gets here in a few minutes.”

“She’s been here for a few minutes,” I said, standing and entering the clearing. “And you’re right. I’m not impressed.”

Their reaction was expected. Grandfather had trained me long ago how to use my people’s abilities to read and understand others. He had prepared me well for my life and his quest.

The leader remained quiet, turning casually toward me. Kendall had jerked around and taken a step back. In the moonlight, it was easy to see her quickly going over everything she had said, worried she may have angered me. I chose to help her in her cautiousness.

“Don’t worry, Lieutenant,” I said. “You didn’t say anything to offend me. Instead you should worry that my love is not here to be used against me.” Her eyes widened slightly and she held her breath.

I swung my eyes to the third one. He had spun around, startled, and had gone into an attack position. I walked toward him in a graceful stalk.

“You are afraid of me?” I asked.

He said nothing, but his heart began racing.

“You should be. You dishonored my parents, slandered me, and made crude remarks about my lover.” His temperature rose and his forehead showed it. “You do not approve my use of the word lover? What then?” I reached my hand toward him, to touch him.

Snapped from his thrall, he reached to his belt and drew his gun. I laughed and reacted.

“Barringer, no!” the leader shouted.

“It’s all right,” I said, now standing behind my would-be assailant. “I have his gun.”

They shifted their gaze, not seeing my action. Their emotions of fear and anger washed over me when

they saw I indeed had his gun. Fear, anger, and something else. I looked at the fourth person. He had said nothing, had done nothing. Yet he was the most dangerous. His demeanor was that of the river behind him. Filled with energy yet also beautiful in its self-control. A good river. A good man?

“Thank you for coming, Miss Mariner,” the leader said. “I am Captain Littleton of the Red Vengeance resistance group. I knew your grandfather quite well and I’m hoping you and I can have as close a working relationship.”

I nodded, neither believing nor disbelieving his words.

“Your words show you have at least some knowledge of our ways, Captain. But your actions tell me it is knowledge of your head, and not of your heart.” I glanced at Kendall and she stiffened.

“I apologize,” he replied, and bowed. “Construction is needful, and the breathable must be made so.”

I returned his bow and moved my arms wide. He made a total botch with his statement, but I was nonetheless obligated to show him graciousness and patience. “My children grant me this time to spend with you. Begin construction.”

He paused a moment, trying to find the right wording. “The Power that is now is not breathable. They are an evil, dark force that—”

“ ‘Unbreathable.’ ” I gently corrected him.

“Eh?”

“There is nothing evil about dark. It is within dark that each child is formed within the womb. It is within dark that the troubled mind can sleep and seek peace. It is within dark that the privacy of two souls can touch each other. Dark is not evil, nor is light. Our children live and play in the light. The troubled mind finds hope in the light. Two souls can see each other in the light.

“Evil thrives in light and dark. Evils consume the power of our souls. Evil steals the air from our lungs and the water from the gills of our children. Evil is unbreathable.”

He took a deep breath, nodded, and started over.

“The Power that is now is not...”

“Uh, sir?” The fourth man finally spoke. “You need to ask for the time to be returned to you from her



children before you repeat yourself.”

He nodded and started a third time. I held up my hand.

“That’s all right,” I said with a slight smile. “Things were far too tense here. Besides, I wanted to go home sometime tonight. I appreciate your trying, but let’s just talk in air-breather, okay?”

Littleton sighed in relief and motioned to a boulder. I sat down on it and the four gathered around. I handed the gun back to the hothead, who had cooled considerably.

“Good,” Littleton said, glad he was back on solid ground, as it were. “I’ll get to the point. It’s too cold to linger, and I don’t want any of us to be discovered.

“We’re looking to overthrow NATech. Peacefully, if possible; forcefully if needed. In order to do that, we of Red Vengeance are trying to gain positions of...”

He went on and on. I gave him a portion of my attention, but the majority of my interest was in that fourth man. I couldn’t put my soul around it. There was something about him.

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“Something about him?!” Chrissy eyed me suspiciously. “I don’t have to get jealous, do I?”

I laughed. The meeting had taken less than an hour and the swim back a fraction of that. I’d been home long enough to shower and climb into my sensible jammies and Grandfather’s bathrobe. Chrissy and I were on the floor in front of a fire blazing cheerfully in the living room fireplace.

“Not ever, Chrissy!” I reassured her with a kiss. It was silly talk. We’d known for years. “Like it or not, you’ve got me for good.”

“Well, I like it,” she said decisively, mussing my hair. “So what was this something about him, then?”

“Hot chocolate!” Stanworth interrupted, carrying a tray with three steaming mugs. He handed them out, including a half dozen salt tablets for me, then sat in the leather chair beside us.

I sipped mine. Glorious! Extra sweet with the potent flavor of non-alcoholic cherry extract. I’ve been tempted to use cherry brandy, but Pisces have bad reactions to alcohol.

“I can’t put my soul around it,” I said, answering Chrissy’s question. “He wasn’t startled or upset by my sneaking up on them. And he knew Pisces protocols. No,” I added, “I believe he felt them.”

“He’s not a Pisces, is he?” Chrissy asked.

“No,” Stanworth said. We looked at him expectantly. “One of my duties to your grandfather, Promise, was to keep track of all people with Pisces blood. There are not many, and I know them all. He is not one.”

“Then who, Stanworth?”

He thought a moment. “You know your grandfather had a circle of air-breathers that he trusted completely?”

I nodded. “And you’re first on his list.”

He bowed his head graciously. “Thank you, Promise. But if I was first, then Miss Chrissy was second.” She blushed. “But beyond us, Ebbing had about two dozen that he would trust even with your life, Promise. Like that man, they all felt the Pisces way.”

“Could he be one of those?”

“I don’t think so, Miss Chrissy. He doesn’t match to anyone in that circle. Perhaps he is one of their children, brought up to respect Pisces. It doesn’t matter. If Promise says he felt the ways, then he did. I’ve never known a Pisces to be wrong about that.”

“And that gives me a little relief,” I admitted. “If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t have agreed to a second meeting.”

“Not another one!”

“Sorry, Chrissy. And I really do mean that. I want you and Stanworth at my side. They’re taking me to one of their secured locations. They wouldn’t tell me where it was, just that it’s underground.”

They both nodded. One weakness of my people was an uncomfortable and disorienting closeness we felt in caves that had no water in them.

“Aren’t you afraid they’ll use me again?” Chrissy asked. She was concerned, but not for herself.

I shook my head. “In all honesty, Chrissy, I don’t really care. Ow!” I rubbed my shoulder where she punched me. “Let me finish. I’m not worried because Stanworth is there for both of us.” He nodded slowly. “I’m not worried because you can handle yourself if need be. And I’m not worried because from what I’ve gathered, this bunch couldn’t coordinate a rock, paper, scissors contest, let alone ambush three people on their guard.”

“And yet you think they are the path?” Stanworth asked.

I thought of that fourth man. He had few words, but honest ones. The other three were poor indicators of my path.

But that fourth man...

## Chapter Three



Wednesday, November 18th, 2415

My opinion of Red Vengeance was not all that high. I think even they knew it. But I will give them credit; they managed to completely confuse me as to the location of their base.

We had taken Tuesday off to rest and talk quietly. It was now Wednesday afternoon and dusk was coming on. We entered their hov about five kilometers south of our chalet. I had warned them I might be traced no matter where I went, but they assured me the hov was not traceable. Regardless, I insisted they deactivate the hov's puterverse connection. The Unbreathable had ways and knowledge, I warned in my most formidable Pisces speech. It convinced them and they complied, so we boarded.

It was a commercial hov, converted over somewhat for private use. The ion engines had a little more kick to them. It sat nine plus the pilot. And it had a rear loading ramp in addition to starboard personnel ramp.

We settled in and the hov took off. I closed my eyes and started navigating. Southwest at 40 knots. 50. The glassmac road leading to the northeast was four kilometers ahead. Three...

I felt a sudden queasiness in my stomach and opened my eyes. The pilot's cabin—and the forward view—had closed off. But that wasn't the cause. I looked around uncertainly. Kendall, our escort, cracked a grin.

"We're not as dumb as we look, huh?"

"You couldn't be," Chrissy said dryly. Kendall gave her a small sneer, but did nothing.

"We've modified our hovs to carry a plumb plate in the bulkhead to alter gravity inside the ship. It throws people off as to our speed and turning."

I took off my ring and dropped it. Instead of falling straight, it had a decidedly starboard slant. I

nodded, quite impressed, and put my ring back on.

“What about direction?”

“Easy. Where’s north?”

I pointed to my left, just over Stanworth’s shoulder. Only suddenly it was behind us, over my shoulder. Then...

“You have an asynchronous magnetic field on the ship.”

“Yep.”

I nodded again and settled in my seat to take a nap. Stanworth sat unmoving, his arms folded. He’d not let anything happen to us. Chrissy leaned over to me.

“Hey!” she whispered. “You really lost?”

“No, I know right where I am.” I whispered back. She brightened and I said, “I’m with you. Wherever else I am doesn’t matter. Now just relax.”

Her look slipped, then came back with a slow smile. She took my cue and stretched out, wrapping her foot over mine.

Despite my protesting tummy, it was a nice trip.

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“Child’s Child.”

“Grandfather.” It was peaceful. We were on the Atlantic sea bottom, thirteen hundred fathoms down and about four kilometers south of Darkness Keep, but the city lights gave us illumination even this far out.

He seemed content to just sit and be with me. I lay down in the sand with my head in his lap, looking at him with love and wonder. He stroked my hair and gazed at me intently.

“Grandfather, I...” but he put his finger over my lips and shook his head. I wrapped my long fingers around his hand and held it to my cheek. My eyes drifted closed and I slept.

There were many ways to continue construction.

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My eyes opened and I sat upright. Something was wrong.

It was night, but that did not account for the darkness. The cabin of the hov was lit, but that did not dispel that same darkness. My lungs had stopped on their own accord, so I tried to gulp down water. But we were still above water, so I tried my lungs again. After several moments of resistance, they found their pattern again and began a rough breathing.

We were underground in a tunnel, heading deeper.

“Miss Deborah?” Stanworth had left his seat and was kneeling beside me. My lungs had stopped again.

“Can’t... breathe...” I croaked out. I again tried my gills. My instinct was my gills. I shifted back to my lungs, but could only suck in a small amount before my gills took over.

“Do something!” Chrissy shouted.

I felt Stanworth’s arms coming around me from behind and he squeezed my chest, then pulled my arms up. A little more air came in, but again I switched to my gills.

“Miss Chrissy, cover her gills!”

Chrissy got on her knees in front of me. Through the spots and dark patches that scattered my vision, I saw her terror. Her hands went to my neck and she closed my gills.

“Stanworth! Give her mouth to mouth!”

“I can’t. She’s fighting too hard. I’d only make it worse.” Stanworth continued to alternately squeeze my chest and pull back on my arms. They worked for several minutes. Or was it a lifetime?

I could rasp in a short breath, but the tiny amount of air inhaled only added to the torture. I continually went to my gills but Chrissy kept them closed. I was suffocating. Panic set in.

“Why isn’t it working?” Chrissy cried desperately.

“I don’t know,” Stanworth said in his rock solid voice. Even while suffocating, even when he admitted not knowing what to do, it gave me assurance he was here. “She’s never been this bad before. There’s always disorientation, but she’s mentally trained enough to...” He broke off suddenly.

“Shut down the hov’s defense systems!” he ordered. “Now!”

“No. We’re still five minutes out from base.”

I began thrashing. My body was losing itself. Unbreathable. Unbreathe...

“Do it now or I’ll kill you,” Stanworth said in a voice so calm and icy, he sounded like Death itself. Perhaps he was Death, for in the gathering darkness, I saw its ragged cape engulf me.

I heard a murmur, but didn’t understand it. The hands at my gills were so warm. Something was pulling me away... hugging me... Pulling... Darkness Keep lay before me, but where was Grandfather?

“Grandfather!” I cried into the hollow waters.

Nothing.

lips... Chrissy... kiss back... can’t... gills so cool... mind... self... hazy...

A huge wind of warm air filled my lungs and Darkness Keep faded in the growing light. A second gift of air and I opened my eyes. Stanworth was giving me mouth to mouth while Chrissy continued to hold my gills.

“Plumb plate off-line,” came the pilot’s voice. “Async mag field winding down.”

The crushing vice that had numbed my brain shattered with Stanworth’s third breath and I began coughing. Chrissy released my gills and clutched me around the middle, burying her head into my sweater. I instinctively switched to gills, but now my training asserted itself. Closing my eyes, I started the mantra of air. Inhale—Honor to the air-breathers. Exhale—patience for the Pisces. Inhale—Honor to the air-breathers. Exhale—patience for the Pisces. Chrissy released me at Stanworth’s soft tug. Inhale. Exhale. The mantra drifted to the center of my being and I could breathe air once more. I opened my eyes.

Only four people were watching me, but a girl never had such an intense audience. Chrissy was

sobbing in happiness and fear, Stanworth was stoic and satisfied, Kendall was worried and confused, and the pilot was sweating bullets. Too much worry here. I smiled and took a deep breath.

“That was fun,” I offered weakly. “Anyone else want to try?”

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We climbed out of the hov five minutes later, a much relieved group, grown closer with my episode.

“The equipment they used to disorient us also threw off your body’s systems,” Stanworth explained as he helped me down the ramp. “The mantra of air works only when the body recognizes the need for it.”

I nodded, understanding. “When we went underground, my mind knew and instinct shut down my lungs and switched me to gills. But my body was fooled by the gravity variances of the plumb plate and its own disoriented internal compass. They had a fight over what was needed.”

The hanger was very large, little more than a partially converted cavern. I looked up and could make out the stalactite-encrusted ceiling some fifty meters above us.

I looked at the walls and realized we were not in a hanger but the base itself. There were dozens of rooms carved into walls, some lit, others not. The floor was smooth and flat. Behind us, a great maw of blackness, ten meters in diameter, led up toward the surface.

“Well, what do you think?” Littleton had approached us along with a group of four soldiers, all armed. “We’re two kilometers down and safe from any detection.”

That was information I didn’t need to know. The mantra drifted off center. I stopped walking abruptly and closed my eyes. Inhale—Honor to the air-breathers. Exhale—patience to the Pisces.

“Is something wrong, Miss Mariner?” came Littleton’s worried voice. It seemed a trifle shrill.

“Tell me, Captain,” Stanworth said pleasantly, “does this cavern by chance have a large water source?”

“Yes. It wouldn’t be a viable base otherwise.”

“Might we see it first?”



“I don’t know. We have an agenda...”

“Please, sir.” Stanworth always knew the right attitude for every situation. “It’s important.”

“I... suppose. Williams! Escort our guests to the reservoir.”

“No,” I said. Here was opportunity, hidden in distress. Inhale. I turned my back to Littleton and held out my arms. “Trust is the bond to which the best foundations are laid side by side.” Inhale.

“Discussion is needful, but forgiveness and time returned from your children is begged by this one, for she finds your home unbreathable.” Inhale. “This one graciously accepts your salty offer, but humbly requests the comfort of only her known family to accompany her. It is a private matter.” Inhale.

“I’m sorry, Miss Mariner, but that is not possible. Don’t worry, though. Private Williams will be most proper...”

Inhale. “Private Williams’ children will speak his name with joy. Compromise is solution. Provide a member of your family whose children this one knows.” Inhale.

He took only a moment to decide it was the best way. In that same moment, he selected the very person I wished to see.

“Very good, Miss Mariner. Private Stewart will escort you to the reservoir. I must request that Mister Davis and Miss DuPries remain behind, however. Security reasons.”

I turned to face him and gave him a Pisces full bow of honor. A stir from the crowd.

“Three twenty-six.”

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“Incredible.”

I swam toward the small beach at which Private Stewart was waiting. I had just surfaced from the bottom of a very deep underground lake, and the sensations were still overwhelming. Such serenity! Such perfect darkness! Such unique life!

“Pardon?” I asked.

“Your race, Miss Mariner,” he said simply. He sat on a boulder, my clothes lying beside him. “You were down there for thirty-seven minutes.” He sighed, “To see such beauty in the pitch black! What an experience that would be!”

“You have water lungs to mimic my race.”

He laughed. “No offense, Miss Mariner, but you and I both know they don’t come close. How deep is the lake?”

“Fifty-six fathoms, though there are a dozen passages that lead deeper.”

“Fifty-six fathoms. Roughly twenty-six meters. It would require so much equipment—noisy equipment—that there’d be no point. And if I could, I couldn’t see anything then, anyway.” He shook his head. “As I said, I envy you.”

“Do you envy what has become of my people?” I asked him. I began striding out of the water, naked. He turned his back.

“The loss—no, the extermination—of the Pisces people is a sin that will haunt our children’s children uncountable,” he said with an honesty that glowed inside him. I began dressing. I nevertoweled off first. Why rub away such sweet joy?

“Is that why you joined the Red Vengeance then? To punish the people who instigated my people’s death?”

“Are you decent?”

“Yes.”

He turned and saw I’d only put on my jeans. I was just reaching for my chamois and sweater. I expected him to blush, but he did not. Instead, he only gave me a playful smile.

“I should hate for Miss DuPries to come along now,” he said with mock concern. “I would have a difficult time explaining. I asked if you were decent.”

“I am decent,” I laughed. “I’m a decent person. If you wanted to know whether I was dressed or not, you should have asked that question instead.” I pulled on my top and ran my fingers through my

hair. He picked up my ribbon and held it out for me.

“Besides,” I added, taking the ribbon, “How do you know she would not get angry with me? Do you think I’m the weaker because I’m the woman?”

“No. You are the stronger, for you and Miss DuPries are in love. She trusts you, not me.”

“Are you jealous?”

He shrugged. “It is better to stand back and admire what is, rather than yearn for what cannot be. I saw you react two nights ago to the comments made by Barringer.”

I was pleased with his comment and with him. I slipped into my boots, then tied my hair back.

“You did not answer my question,” I gently chided.

“Why I joined?”

“Yes.”

“I joined because I knew one day you would come.”

Surprised, I stood and approached him. He held still even when I entered his life space. He was slightly taller than me, and well built, but not overly muscular. He was clean shaven, with firm chin and modestly rugged looks. His brown eyes were bright and clear. I took a deep breath, taking in his scent, and touched his chest to feel the throb of his heart. The rhythm of his blood was strong, with patterns that... that... I stepped back.

“Do... Do I know you?”

“Yes.” He turned his back to me and spread his arms. “Foundation is laid and salty. We are the children’s children of those whose names have been guarded over one hundred and thirteen thousand tides.” He turned and bowed; a very pleasant one. “I am Thomas Stewart, five times the child of Narwhal Void.” He looked at me and smiled. “You are Promise Tide, child’s child of Ebbing Tide, child’s child of Tide, the first of your name.”

Stunned, I stumbled back against the boulder and sat down.

“You are descended of Mahlon Stewart and Pamela Carlson?” I couldn’t believe it. It wasn’t possible.

“I am. Though Pamela was past fifty-one when she gave birth to my ancestor, Nicholas Stewart, the Stewart line has remained unbroken, as has our connection to your race, Deborah.” At my surprised look, he explained, “I will not use your name again unless and until you grant permission.”

“Why did Grandfather never speak of you?”

He sat down beside me. “He has, after a fashion. You know of the Stewart family. That’s why my heart and blood speech was familiar.” I nodded. “Everything else must be earned by me, not given by Ebbing Tide.” His use of Grandfather’s name told me he had the family trust.

I rose and walked away a few steps. This was the path! Grandfather had even now—two months dead—provided me another gift to follow him. No... to continue for him.

“What are you to me, Thomas?” I asked. Rude in air-breather talk, the question was one of honor in Pisces. One only associated with things of value. He would understand.

He did. “I am a guidepost. I am a link to an Ebbing Tide that you are only now growing into. I am what you need me to be.”

“And if I don’t need you?” This was a rude question, but also a test.

“If you do not need me, then you are not the granddaughter of Ebbing Tide,” he said bluntly, the simple answer to the simple question.

I considered all that had happened in this brief time. Was he to be trusted? *Yes!* Screamed every part of my soul. The decision was easily made. His ancestor, Mahlon Stewart, had known the Purpose, had felt the Unbreathable, and remained true to my people. Not once, but twice. So, too, his mate, Pamela. The blood speech in Thomas was the same as Narwhal Void’s; taught to me by Grandfather years ago. To misuse this gift of the ages would be foolishness. To not use it would be unforgivable. I walked up the path to the main cavern.

“I will arrange for you to remain close to me, Thomas.”

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“Well, then. If we’re ready?” Captain Littleton said briskly. Thomas and I had returned. I was hoping

he would stay, but the Captain dismissed him.

It was a group of eight people, counting myself. We were gathered around a large oval table, cut from stone and looking quite elegant. Captain Littleton motioned me to the seat at one end. Stanworth seated first me, then Chrissy on my left, then himself on my right. Captain Littleton sat at the other end, with Lieutenant Kendall on his left, and a man introduced to me as Lieutenant Briggs on his right. The remaining two men posted themselves at the doorway. There came a deep hum as the ghost door activated in full privacy mode. Captain Littleton stood.

“I’d like to start by thanking you, Miss Mariner, for agreeing to meet with us. I am certain you will be able to follow Hundar Knowler’s path best through Red Vengeance.”

I nodded graciously and remained silent.

“Let’s start at the beginning.

“As you know, the four Terran/Martian Wars of 2373 through 2389 had a profound impact on Earth. Nearly 400 million people died. Billions more emigrated to other star systems. The world government, economy, and infrastructure lay in a shambles. Worse, the ice caps were melting and much of the ozone layer had been destroyed.”

“It didn’t work out too well for the Martian colonies, either,” Chrissy interjected. Bless her! She knew my propensity to correct mistakes and clarify oversights. By her stepping in, I could maintain composure and a sense of mystery as to my emotions. This was a powerful advantage.

Littleton paused, then nodded.

“You’re correct, Miss DuPries,” he agreed. “The Martian cities were completely destroyed and the planet evacuated. Three million Martians died. The few who survived are finishing their lives here on Earth as outcasts. Still, it was they who started the War.

“To continue. Earth was a pile of ashes. We needed a savior.

“And—lo and behold!—one appeared! NATech stepped from the shadows where they’d been for unknown decades, and offered solutions to all our problems. They could repair the ozone layer. They could restore the ice caps. They had economic models that would return financial stability to the world and help it rebuild its infrastructures and societies.” He paused again, this time to build up

dramatic effect. “And all they wanted in return were our souls.

“It didn’t seem that obvious, of course. First they wanted to help. Then they had suggestions. Then they gave help without being asked. Always, a small piece at a time. That is, until four years ago, when NATEch achieved a full seat on the World Council in Sydney, complete with veto power.

“That crossed the line. A corporation had been given the political equivalency of a sovereign nation. What’s next? Complete control of the government? Of the world?

“The time to act is now. Red Vengeance was formed to cause disruption in the NATEch sphere of influence and hopefully bring them down. It is time, Miss Mariner! We must act! With your race’s knowledge and the Red Vengeance machine ready to act on that knowledge, we *will* become a force!” He sat down. Apparently it was time for my response.

I stood slowly.

“It is with honor and pleasure that I know your children and my children will know each other. You are an impressive and robust speaker, Captain.” He dipped his head in modest acknowledgment.

Chrissy gave the smallest snort, barely containing her laughter. Even Stanworth struggled to keep his face straight. Pisces speech patterns were direct, despite our many references to our children, which we understood as the breathable future. To be called a robust speaker by a Pisces was a damning with faint praise.

“NATEch must not be overthrown,” I began. “That which...”

“What!?” Captain Littleton’s face clouded and he shot to his feet. “I told you, Miss Mariner, that your grandfather and I were close and that we were his path and yours. But now you turn your back on that path??” He was barely controlling his anger.

“Forgiveness,” I said, with a full bow. “This one begs for the time to be returned to her by your children.” I remained in my bow. Nobody said or did anything while they waited for me to straighten, but I didn’t. A slow, increasingly awkward minute passed. Finally, Stanworth cleared his throat.

“Sir?” he offered politely. “I would like to remind the Captain that the Bow of Repentance remains in place until forgiveness is either granted or denied. Also, if you would forgive *my* rudeness, I would

also remind you that Pisces always give conclusions first, then build on them afterward. Miss Mariner is prepared to give a full explanation, I'm sure. Sorry, sir."

Though Stanworth had been of high rank in the Wars—or maybe because—he knew how best to deal with others, regardless of their position or temperament. Yet again, he succeeded.

"Thank you, Mister Davis," Littleton said graciously, with no trace of bitterness. "You are an incredible asset to your mistress and to me." He addressed me.

"You have my forgiveness, Miss Mar..."

"Deborah," Chrissy said helpfully.

"You have my forgiveness, Deborah Mariner." Then, as an afterthought, he added, "My children return the time to you. Continue construction."

So he was able to swallow pride. My opinion of him rose. I stood and acknowledged his forgiveness. I then looked at the others as well.

"NATech must not be overthrown. Nor can it. Construction continues.

"That which gives NATech its power is not of it. The good the breathable is has been nearly undone by the evil the unbreathable does. One punishes the swordmaster, not the sword with which he does his evil. Another will come and use the sword for good." I paused to gaze at them, intent on their reaction.

They were confused. I couldn't blame them. Between my formal speech and the limited information I chose to give them, they were going to have to trust me. This was the testing of the metal. Still, it must be a fair test. I relaxed my speech to the informal Pisces dialect used for air-breathers.

"We must forge our own sword to fend off NATech and cut the Unbreathable which uses it. To forge our sword, we need the mold, the fire, the metal and the Craftsman. Red Vengeance is the mold for the sword. Around you the other elements will gather.

"Beyond that, the sword must have a purpose. It must be built for a reason. To defeat NATech is not sufficient. The Unbreathable would simply use another weapon.

"The sword Red Vengeance will mold must have purpose to do harm to the Unbreathable. Our sword

cannot yet deliver the deathblow, for our skill at wielding this sword is not sufficient, nor has its edge been honed by years of bitterness and perseverance. The day will come, however, when the Groundfather will return and the Unbreathable will be destroyed.”

Content I'd told them enough, I sat down and quietly awaited their decision. Chrissy stood up.

“I will answer your questions to the best of my ability and to the limits my mate has set for me.”

“Yeah, I gotta question,” Kendall said to me. “What the *hell* were you talking about?” I looked at Chrissy.

“Lieutenant, I said I'll answer,” she said in a firm voice. Kendall's gaze shifted abruptly and I could see her reevaluating Chrissy, as were the others.

“Miss Mariner is telling you that Red Vengeance is the rallying point.” She looked at Captain Littleton. “You are not fully following Hundar Knowler's path, Captain. You are paralleling it closely. You have your group aimed in the right direction, but you've chosen the wrong target.”

“Then what is the target, if not NATEch?” he asked, intrigued. I felt the tide of hope tingle over my feet. Was he prepared to alter his organization's goal on the word of a nineteen year old Pisces? I prayed for their kind that he would.

“I'm sorry, Captain,” Chrissy replied with a shake of her head. “I can't tell you that, for only Pisces people know. And if I did know, I wouldn't betray the trust.”

“Then you're saying we must trust her?” Lieutenant Briggs asked.

“No. I'm saying you must trust the knowledge of her race.”

“You mean she's our leader?” Kendall asked doubtfully.

“No.” Chrissy again shook her head firmly. “Miss Mariner has a role, but it is not that of swordsman.”

“And these other elements,” Littleton said, “what are they? Where do we gather these things?”

“From other resistance groups,” Chrissy said simply. She waited for their objections, but they were too stunned. “Yours is not the only group that was led by a Pisces at one point, Captain. Nor is it the only group that Hundar Knowler dealt with. There are three main groups we need to contact. You are the first.”



“We?” Captain Littleton said with raised eyebrow. “Miss DuPries, I was under the impression you were merely—excuse me—you were Miss Mariner’s... companion... and because you are not Pisces, did not have their knowledge.”

Chrissy flushed deep red. I stood up abruptly.

“Captain Littleton, you have offended me!”

“I’m sorry. I just...”

“No! You demean me by demeaning my mate. She is not just my companion. She is the person I love! And I did not choose her, nor her me, for carnal gratification or casual company. Miss DuPries and I have known each other since youth, barely able to walk. Our love for each other has been in place and grown for all our remembered lives. My grandfather, the same Hundar Knowler whose personage you cling to so tightly, regarded her highly and counted Miss DuPries among his most trusted and beloved air breathers. Only Mister Davis matches that trust!”

“Calm down, Miss Mari...”

“I will NOT!” I shouted angrily. “Do you think that we Pisces are without emotion? That we are as cold as the waters we breathe? That we hide behind our speech and customs because we lack feeling or passion?”

“You are wrong, Captain Littleton! To offend a Pisces is to court disaster. To wrong the mate of a Pisces is to court death!” Furious, I walked aggressively around the table toward him. It was my intention to kill him.

Fortune smiled on me that day, for I chose to walk on the right. As I passed Stanworth, he seized my wrist in a gentle, unrelenting vise.

Enraged beyond control, I yanked my arm back so hard, I pulled him from his seat and threw him to the floor. He still held on, however, and in a most Pisces-like motion, rolled and rose in one action. He pushed me against the wall and pressed his body against me, lest I harm him seriously in my attempts to get to Littleton. The silence was thick enough to breathe, the tension thick enough to choke upon. Stanworth put his mouth close to my ear.

“Promise.” He whispered so quietly, it was almost a thought. Yet hearing my name in such a public place cut through my red haze of anger. “You have made your point, Promise. Look at them.”

His warm, powerful body cooled my boiling blood and calmed my ragged breath, made more ominous because I was also using my gills; a rare thing. Ready to see his face, I looked at Captain Littleton and the others.

His two lieutenants were flanking him, their guns out and cocked, the looks of hardened determination on their faces. Their eyes still showed they understood they would be in a lost battle, and the shock of the realization had driven up their body temperatures. The two door guards had also pulled their guns. Not one person aimed their gun at Chrissy, knowing that to do so would cause the very situation they desperately hoped to avoid.

It was Captain Littleton himself who salvaged the wreck he and I had made. Pressing down their gun hands, he walked around his lieutenants and came to me. He drew his own gun and gave it to me. It was an energy gun, set to kill. He turned his back and went to his knees, his hands behind him.

“Miss Mariner has my full protection,” he ordered sharply. “You will not harm her, nor her companions, regardless of what happens! Understood?”

It was clear that it was. His lieutenants holstered their guns, and the guards followed their action. Stanworth nodded in approval and stepped back.

I looked at the gun in my hand, and at the back of Captain Littleton’s head. The Greeting of Lives, as it was meant to be. He was prepared for, perhaps expected, me to deny him the Greeting and kill him. And I could. There remained in me still the need to seek vengeance for my mate.

Vengeance. Chrissy had mentioned how stupid the name Red Vengeance was, and I quietly agreed with her. Stupid because she knew vengeance was a hollow pursuit, that it left the hunter more dead than the hunted.

It was not for me. My need for vengeance extinguished itself and left me a stronger person for his willing sacrifice. I shut the gun off and placed it into his holster. As I did, I examined his face, set hard and determined, like his lieutenants’ had been. No, they had chosen his way. He was prepared to die for his beliefs so I might help the cause, if not him. I sank to my knees, bowed my head on his chest,

and put my hands on his shoulders.

“I think, Captain, that we have had enough misunderstanding between us. Perhaps we should both strive to truly lay the foundation for our children.”

He nodded and rose, then helped me up. To me, now, he was a different man. A man worthy of trust. He bowed to me. Clumsy, but truthful. He then turned to Chrissy.

“My most humble and abject apologies, Miss DuPries. I had wrongfully assumed an unbreathable thing, thus truly insulting you. That I am alive now is because the forgiveness your mate showed me. Mercy, for I did not deserve it.”

Chrissy took a deep breath.

“My love has forgiven you, so I gladly forgive you. This moment is gone with the last tide and is no more. The next tide bears your decision. We look forward to it.”

“I will give you our decision shortly, Miss DuPries. In the meantime, you would honor us by staying the night.”

Chrissy was quick to reply. She did not even look to me before speaking.

“Thanks, Captain. We will gladly stay.”

“Excellent. You’ll need to be well rested for your journey.”

“Journey?”

His eyes sparkled. So beautiful were eyes that held no grudge!

“Yes. Your journey to bring us together. If Red Vengeance is the mold for the sword, I should imagine you’ll find the fire on Luna.”

## Chapter Four



Okay, I'm impressed," Chrissy conceded at last. She entered our private quarters and looked around, a little thrown off that so much could be done in so little time.

Anticipating my working with them, Captain Littleton had prepared for Chrissy and I well in advance. What had once been a three meter by three meter room had been opened up to six meters wide and ten deep. Additionally, the ceiling had been raised to five meters, to provide the sensation of openness. The back five meters of the floor had been lowered by ten meters and filled with water. It was a pond, complete with steady water flow. Captain Littleton had assured me that by our return from Luna, the stone cutters would have finished the underwater tunnel to the reservoir.

What impressed Chrissy the most, however, was the king sized canopy bed that had been provided for us. Hewn from walnut, it was massive and beautiful. A honeymoon bed. Chrissy echoed my thoughts.

"I guess I probably should have carried you over the threshold, huh?" She joked.

"Is that a proposal?" I laughed.

She looked at me for a moment with deep, deep intent. For that moment, my heart stopped.

"Not yet, Promise," she murmured. "Not yet."

I nodded, understanding. We would know. Grandfather had told us both we would know.

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"Child's child. Love of my child. You give this one great comfort and joy."

Grandfather had called us into his study. We were both seventeen and a little scared. He'd known of course, from the first, when we discovered we knew. Perhaps sooner. Was he upset? Was my quest

from him to include children? We sat down in the two leather chairs across from his desk, but he waved us over to the fireplace. He got up quickly and smoothly, giving a small cough, and flowed to his favorite chair. Chrissy and I sat on the sofa—a love seat—across from him. We waited for him to speak. It was our way.

He stared into the fire for a long while. Though pure Pisces, he still enjoyed the flames. Fire reminded him of the thermal vents near Darkness Keep, he had told me, and of days without sorrow. We waited patiently. Chrissy had learned much of our ways and could wait for several hours beside me if need be, thinking over the lives the three of us and Stanworth had shared. Our wait today was only twenty minutes. I wish it had been longer.

“I find your ways breathable,” he concluded, “and approve your choosing each other for mates.

“Your choosing is most salty, and your children’s children will rejoice over this union, both in the comfort of dark and the joy of light.

“There remains a single tide against which to swim.” He looked at Chrissy, who had tears flowing down her cheeks.

“Is it your intent, Christine DuPries, to follow Promise Tide into the destiny that is hers as the last of our race?”

“It is, Grandfather,” she said with brittle strength. “You and Promise have made known your ways and the breathable knowledge of the Pisces. All but the most kept. I know the dangers and will face them with her. I do not know of other dangers and will face them with her. To not swim Promise’s life path is to deny myself.” She let out her breath and I could see her heart pounding her chest, as my heart pounded mine.

“Christine DuPries, you are Promise Tide’s mate, and my granddaughter through her,” he said, bowing his head. “I say only that the Pisces way is to not bond forever until both know they have a single path, to be traveled side by side. Grant this one’s request.”

“Yes, Grandfather,” I said clearly. Chrissy was sobbing uncontrollably. “It has always been our intent to follow the Pisces way. The breathable way. So shall our children.”

“Christine DuPries and Promise Tide, you have given me much happiness today and for always.” He

looked up, his eyes clouded with tears. “May your construction begin.”

That day, Stanworth moved Chrissy’s things into my room.

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“So I guess Littleton thought I’d be spending all my time here,” Chrissy laughed, running her hand over the quilt.

“I think he’s changed his mind.”

She laughed again. “You think?”

“I like him. He has a truth to his beliefs that is rare.”

“Is he to be the Craftsman?” she asked.

“No. Captain Littleton is important to the Purpose, but that is not his role. I’m certain.”

“Are you the Craftsman?”

“Me?” That startled me. “I... I don’t know. It doesn’t fit right, but it doesn’t seem wrong, either. I think we’ll need to find out later.”

Chrissy took my arms and pulled me to her. We tumbled onto the bed.

“I love you, Promise.”

“And I you, Chrissy.”

That’s all I wish to tell you.

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Our trip to Luna was to be a discreet one. I could have used Grandfather’s yacht—now my own. The *Three Twenty-six* was a very worthy craft, capable of interstellar travel. The run to Luna would take less than an hour.

But I sensed this was the most vulnerable time of all. The Unbreathable would be looking for

something like this to form. I could avoid the attention, but only with extreme action.

Looking out the shuttle's port as we approached the Earth orbital station *Armstrong*, I could see the freighter we had booked quiet passage on. Judging by the outward condition of the *DL White*, this was an extreme action indeed.

"I think the rust is older than most starships," Lieutenant Briggs commented dryly. "I've heard of making sacrifices in the line of duty, but this is way above and beyond."

"I'm sure she was a fine ship in her day." Stanworth said quietly. After a slow breath, he mumbled something about the dawn of time.

There were six of us in the group. Chrissy, Stanworth and I were half of the party. Lieutenant Briggs, Lieutenant Kendall, and Private Stewart represented Red Vengeance. Only now they were Paul, Terri and Thomas. All indications of their rank were gone.

We docked at the *Armstrong* and made our way quickly to the *DL White*. As we ascended the decks, we descended the social ladder. The lower decks—best shielded and at optimum position for docking—were reserved for ball chasers, military ships, and the private yachts of the more powerful. Middle decks for ships like the commercial shuttle we'd arrived in, and interstellar freighters. Upper decks were reserved for the Red Zone. Perhaps left over would be a better term. The Red Zone contained the station's seedier bars, hotels and places of diversions most varied. Only ships in the lowest and slowest travel lanes docked here. The *DL White* was one such. From the looks of her, she'd been frequenting the Red Zone for several centuries.

That was not apparent from the welcome we received, though. To the captains and crew, the *DL White* was a piece of heaven.

"Greetings, Princess, from the crew of Whitey." There were a man and a woman, very similar in appearance, bowing before us as we entered the ship. I blushed and bowed.

"Your welcome is treasured," I said, "But I am not a princess. The Pisces have no royalty."

The man straightened and gave me a laugh. "Yeah, I know. But we've always wanted to carry a Princess in hiding, and you're the closest we're likely to get. This is my sister, Helena Garrison. My name is Troy." Glancing around, he added in a mock conspiratorial whisper. "We're twins."

This was not a surprise. It was almost as obvious as the great joy he took in having Helena as his sister. And her joy in him was just as celebrated.

I introduced our group, omitting ranks. The crew of eight welcomed us, then got on about their work. My group followed a crewman to their quarters. Helena, took me by the hands. They were warm and held me very firmly.

“You know my people?” I asked.

“Yes. Troy and I are the eighth generation who have flown Whitey, going back to Tony Raimondo, in the early 23rd Century. We’ve done the Luna—Earth—Mars run for two centuries, with only rare runs out to the micro colonies. We—Whitey, that is, have had many Pisces passengers over the past two hundred years, until the Wars.” She shrugged. “They trusted us for some reason. So far, we haven’t let them down.”

“Nor will you this time,” I said with confidence. I did not know why my ancestors trusted this crew and ship, but their wisdom far exceeded mine, so I relied on them.

Our quarters were modest. Cuddling up with Chrissy would not only be possible, it would be required.

“Princess?” the comlink crackled. It was Captain Garrison. Rather, it was Captain Troy Garrison.

I pressed the button, got it wrong, and pressed a different button. It sputtered at me.

“Um... yes?” They seemed determined to stick with the royal title.

“We’re clear of the station moorings and I’m laying in a course for Luna. What’s your destination?”

“Our final destination is the Archimedes colony, but if that is not on your route, we will be most grateful just to reach the moon.” I thought over my last sentence and quickly added, “in secrecy, I meant. No offense was intended for...”

“Not a problem, your highness,” Tony interrupted with a chuckle. “We’ve heard ‘em all. She’s old, and you gotta be around her awhile to understand her, but she’ll get you where you’re going.

“Archimedes is not a problem, either. We put in there most times, anyway. The bigger cities charge too much for docking fees. Dinner in two hours. Take a tour, have a nap, whatever. Catchya.” A final



crackle and Captain Garrison was gone. Rather, Captain Troy... I shrugged off the confusion. Troy was gone. It suited him better.

“He doesn’t stand too much on formality, does he?” Chrissy commented from the bunk, as though reading my thoughts. With an impish grin she added, “Princess.”

I blushed. “Please, Chrissy. Don’t you start, too. It’s embarrassing enough.” She laughed.

“I kinda like it. They’re good people.”

We finished unpacking for our overnight stay. Unlike my private yacht, which carried access for the priority lanes, the *DL White* was restricted to the hoboken lane, severely limiting maximum allowed speed. Since it was far too early to turn in, despite the difference in time from Edmonton Standard to Sol Standard, we decided to tour the ship.

Within minutes, I was both horrified and reassured. Nothing more than wishful thinking held the ship together. That and perhaps inertia. Corridors were patchwork alleys of lights and wiring.

The engine room contained a huge fusion engine that frightened one of the two engineers aboard. He kept saying, “That’s not right, Bill.” To which Bill replied lazily, “Yeah, well you get used to it.” They gladly gave us a tour of Bill’s pride and joy. He’d been on the *DL White* for forty years, all tending the obsolete engine.

After the engine room tour was the aft holds. They were carrying raw mass for converting into air. While Luna could provide an unlimited amount of mass, the Terran/Martian Wars had left incredible amounts of unusable wreckage on Earth. It was cheaper to ship construction waste from Earth than it was to mine Luna.

As we made our way to the forward decks, Bill suddenly stooped down and picked up a sheet of magnetized paper. “That doesn’t belong there.” He attached it to a door and continued on. Chrissy nudged me and—barely holding in her laughter—nodded to what Bill had put on the door.

The door was labeled “Emergency Lifeboat Number 3.” and below was the handwritten note:

“Don’t use this one. It’s full of spare engine parts and besides doesn’t work all that well.”

We waved good-bye and made our way forward. All about was a mess that should have dismayed me considerably. The ship was barely flyable. No. It wasn't flyable. There was too much damage. Too much left in disrepair or cobbled together with materials not intended for that use. We looked at equipment so obsolete, their functions were barely discernible. The ship seemed to sway. I could not understand why my people had relied on this ship.

By the time we reached the bridge, located on the bottom deck, I understood. It wasn't the ship, it was the people. This was their cherished home and they would do whatever they could within their limited financial means to preserve their home. As a result, the *DL White* was indeed held together by wishful thinking. And hope. And happiness. And a faith both crew and ship instilled in each other. The crew would never lose hope that Whitey would see them through. And Whitey was determined to never fail in that trust.

The ship was set to lunar gravity, so Chrissy and I free-fell to the antiquated bridge. Helena was at the command and gave us a big smile on our entrance. Lieutenant Briggs—Paul, that is—was lying on his back at the navigation console, working on its interior.

“Welcome to the bridge, Princess,” Helena said, rising from her chair. “And you as well Miss DuPries.” She indicated the forward view screen. The bottom right corner was out of sync and showed mainly static, but the remainder gave a startling view of the full moon, slightly to port.

“How breathtaking!” I exclaimed. “What's our speed?”

“I have her at five kilometers per second. Whitey can do nearly eighty, but hoboken lane restrictions max us at five on the Luna—Terra run. We'll get into Archimedes about seven tomorrow evening. So, twenty-six hours, give or take.”

We wandered around, taking in the lazy yet competent way the four-man bridge crew worked. Chrissy started talking to the communications officer, so I went to the navigation console and squatted beside Paul. He reached his hand down to the floor and started searching blindly for something.

“Hey,” he said without seeing me, “hand me the depolarizing spanner, will you?”

There was a tool chest with its contents in disarray about him. Selecting the smaller of the two spanners, I slapped it into his hand.

“Thanks.” He returned to work under the console.

“You’re welcome,” I replied.

“Is that you, Miss Mariner?”

“Yes.”

“Great. Wait a sec, would you? I think I might need you.”

“Of course.”

He began twisting his body, as though using it to torque a bolt loose. And that’s what it was as he suddenly jerked and a distinct creak came from under the console. The console flashed out.

“Rerouting navigational to auxiliary console,” the communications officer said calmly.

Paul slid out, a smile and dust on his face.

“All right!” He said with satisfaction.

“Got it?” Helena asked.

“Yep. Now I have to remove the console itself from the base. Would you take the other end, Miss Mariner?”

I did as told, standing on the left side of the two meter console while Paul took the right side.

“One, two, three, lift!”

Even in one-sixth gravity, the console must have weighed two hundred kilos. I saw Paul strain under both the weight and the mass. We lifted it clear of the base and laid it in front of the view screen. He let out a gasp of accomplishment.

“I’ve never seen one that heavy.”

“Whitey’s filled with dated equipment,” Helena offered. “When she was two-thirds complete, a better engine came out. They couldn’t retrofit her, so they just stuffed whatever systems they had into her to get her flying. I’m afraid that means a lot of weight. We really appreciate you lending us your expertise, Paul.”

“Not a problem. I just want to get the new one in before we dock tomorrow.” He turned to me. “Can you help me haul it from the aft hold, Miss Mariner?”

“Certainly.”

We went up three decks and made our way aft. The hold was filled with waste material, forcing us to search for the console.

“Over here!” Paul shouted. I picked my way to the port side of the hold and found him standing beside a large piece of metal.

“That’s the console?” I asked, bending over and inspecting it. From beneath, I could make out a power charge indicator. “Wait. I see it. It’s under this thing.”

“Yup. It’s a scrapped transformer. Probably masses a couple tons. I can help some, but I need you to do the majority of lifting, Miss Mariner.”

I nodded, grabbed a cloth to prevent cuts to my hands, and took position. Paul did the same and braced himself.

“One, two, three, lift!”

This was considerably heavier than the console. Paul strained against the remaining weight and the inertia of the transformer’s mass, but the rest was for me.

My muscles ignited and I felt the flow of blood greatly increase. My heart began pounding and I gulped down air to feed oxygen to my starving lungs. I had only moments of full strength while breathing air, so I put everything into this first and only lift.

The transformer rose, and came free of the console. Holding it with my right arm, I quickly shifted myself and my left hand under a projection on the transformer. Even more quickly, I shifted and placed my right arm. I was now pushing the transformer. I was also pushing my limits; my lungs were burning from overwork and my muscles needed release.

With the strength of my legs, I shoved against the transformer. It rolled down the surrounding waste and crashed with a very satisfying boom onto the deck.

“Now that’s a bit of work, huh?” Paul offered, slapping his hands on his pants to wipe off the grit and

dirt.

I stood light on my feet, swaying a little, and nodded. I felt my muscles starting to shut down and slumped. Paul's hand was on my arm instantly and he helped me sit down on the console.

"Are you okay, Miss Mariner?"

I shook my head to clear it and leaned back against the scrap pile.

"I'll be okay in a few minutes, Paul. I'm just not used to exerting myself that much out of the water."

"Sorry about that. I thought Pisces had extreme strength anywhere." He sat down beside me.

"We do. But we need lots of oxygen when we exert that much, and lungs just aren't as efficient as gills." I glanced at him. "You seem to know something about my people." He shrugged.

"As a kid, I was fascinated with the Pisces. I even took a class on Pisces etiquette when I was twelve. The schools used to require it, but..."

"But then it became unnecessary."

"Yes. I wish I could apologize for us air-breathers, Miss Mariner, but I'm sure by now it sounds pretty hollow."

I touched his arm softly and smiled.

"I don't think it sounds hollow at all. Thank you, Paul. And please, call me Deborah."

He looked surprised and pleased, but then his face clouded and he shook his head regretfully.

"I'm sorry, Miss Mariner, but I can't."

"Why not?"

He took a deep breath, debating with himself. Something was bothering him. Something about me.

"What is it, Paul?"

"I..." he exhaled and shook his head. "It's just that..." He took another breath and started again. He looked me in the eye.

"Miss Mariner, I am honored to be your comrade in this mission. And I hope to continue to work with

you in the days and months to come. But because I respect you, I must also be honest with you and say that I do not approve of your homosexual relationship with Miss DuPries. In my beliefs, it is wrong.”

He continued looking at me, unwavering, waiting for my reaction. The ship rumbled in soothing motion. The ship apparently did sway. The scrap in the hold occasionally creaked in response to the gentle yaw. I stared at Paul, a volatile mix of emotions swirling through me. I had known him only two days, yet he'd struck me as a conscientious officer and a pleasant person. Now my opinion of him frosted.

“You mean to insult me?” I asked quietly.

“No,” he shook his head. “I believe that the love you and Miss DuPries have for each other is sincere and deep. You are both decent, good, women. But I also believe that you have both taken it too far and are sinning. But I offer you...”

“Sinning?!” I exclaimed, surprised. “You’re saying that this is a *religious* belief? That your *God* says I am sinning?? I find your attitude extremely close-minded and judgmental! Good-bye!”

I stood abruptly and immediately got dizzy. He rose and grabbed my arm to support me, but I yanked it away, bringing us both down with a crash to the console.

“Get off me, you... you... jerk!”

He scrambled off me, then recoiled as I punched him in the face. His head and body spun around and he was thrown against the scrap pile, landing hard on the metal. I stood again, dusted myself off slowly, then moved carefully toward the hatch, leaving him behind. At the door, I looked back, ready to deal with him should he be following me. He wasn't. He still lay over the waste, unmoving.

Good! I thought with savage satisfaction. He deserved that! To insult me and my love with his narrow-minded, judgmental, completely archaic beliefs. Of all the...! I fumed as I stalked toward my cabin. I'd heard of people who hated those who had same sex partners, but I never thought I'd meet one, let alone work with one. Who does he think he is? Telling me how I should live?

I put my hand on my cabin's latch and...

And stopped.

As with my confrontation with Captain Littleton, I again had moment for pause. I found a nagging ribbon of guilt weave through my soul. How hard had I hit him?

It didn't matter! He deserved it!

For what reason? I was forced to ask myself. Had he insulted me? No, he hadn't. Quite the contrary, he had shown me respect and courtesy. Even to the point of politely refusing my familiarity with him until he'd made known his feelings. Had he insulted Chrissy? Again, I was forced to admit he hadn't. Did he hate me for what Chrissy and I were to each other? Again, no! He acknowledged and respected our love. It was only our full expression of that love that he objected to.

But he'd fallen on top of... I stopped right there and rushed back to the hold. I was looking for excuses now. He hadn't fallen on me. I'd pulled him down while he was trying to help me.

*But he's narrow-minded and judgmental!* I pleaded with myself.

*And what are you, Promise? You have judged him and already passed sentence. If he is the close-minded one, then why was it you who resorted to violence?* my conscience prodded me.

He was conscious, but still seated on the console, inspecting the blood welling from his left arm, covering his sleeve and right hand. He looked up at my approach.

"Hi," he offered weakly.

"Hi, yourself!" I said angrily, then hauled him to his feet. He winced and I noticed his right hand was bleeding as well. I slung his right arm over his shoulder and lead him out of the hold. Sickbay was one deck up and forward.

"Thanks," he said. He limped on his right leg.

"Just shut up!" I barked. He nodded.

"And call me Deborah!" I ordered, then added, "Paul."

## Chapter Five



Friday, November 20, 2415

Gimme ten!” Kendall pleaded over the comlink. She was the only one whom I didn’t think of in the familiar. Even Paul was back in my good graces, though he was still careful of Chrissy. Feeling it not right to express himself to one but not the other, Paul had approached Chrissy with his old-fashioned opinion, and now sported a black eye for his efforts. Still, he had a good heart.

But Kendall. We’d broken into three teams on our arrival at Archimedes, each team going to a secured location of Peace For All freedom movement. Stanworth and Paul stayed in Archimedes while Chrissy and Thomas took the shuttle to Aldrin City over in the Sea of Tranquility. That left Autolycus for Kendall and me. It was about one hundred kilometers, so I had decided to walk the distance. Hence the plea from Kendall.

“Miss Mariner!”

I nodded and pointed to a boulder about a kilometer ahead of us. We bounced over there and rested. Kendall was breathing hard.

“Here, turn around,” I told her. She turned and I increased the oxygen level in her air. “We’ll wait five minutes, then head on.”

“Why the rush?” she asked, passing me the water. “And if we’re in such a rush, why are we walking?”

I flipped open my faceplate. An energy field surrounded the opening, allowing objects in but nothing out. I pulled deeply on the water, then squirted some onto my gills, which were dry from the zero humidity air in the packs. I took a last drink, closed the faceplate and handed her the bottle.

“We’re not really in a rush. This is just the standard pace one uses when moving by foot on the moon. I’m sorry I didn’t take you into account, Lieutenant.” I checked the suit’s nav system. “We’re eighty



kilometers along, with forty-three to go. At twenty kilometers per hour, with one more rest, we should be at Autolycus around dinner time.”

“Do you think they’ll be expecting us for dinner?” she said dryly.

“No. But we’re not going there first. I have a chalet in Autolycus. We’ll freshen up and head out from there.”

“You own a chalet on the Moon?” she asked incredulously.

“Four.”

She considered me for a minute. Clearly, despite her earlier reassessments of me, she was still raising her opinion. I wish I could say the same of her.

Finally, she stood and stretched.

“Let’s head out. A shower and some grub sounds pretty good!” She let me return her oxygen down to normal, then led out on the bounce.

“By the way, why *are* we walking?”

“Because despite their name, Peace For All tends to blow up all vehicles that approach their base.”

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“Dinner!” I called out from the kitchen.

Kendall showed up, dressed in her freshly washed clothes and still toweling her hair. She sniffed appreciatively.

“Spaghetti and meatballs. Where do your abilities cease?” She picked up and chomped a bread stick.

Despite my dislike of her, I had to smile at her humor.

“I’m afraid they stop far short of cooking. That’s Chrissy and Stanworth’s area. The fanciest meal I make is pulsed frozen breadsticks and spaghetti and meatballs pulled out of a vacuum package and heated.” I waved at the dinner table. “My masterpiece. Bon appetite!” I added with a laugh.

She swung a leg over the chair and plopped down. The towel was dropped and replaced with a fork.

She tried a few mouthfuls and nodded.

“Not bad. Right around my league. Any wine?”

“I think so.” I went to the wine cabinet. “We used to keep wine here for guests.” I found several bottles. “Red, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh. No, not the port. Go with a lighter... yeah, that’s good. You don’t drink then?”

I served her the wine and sat down. “No. Pisces don’t do well with alcohol. Or any drugs for that matter. Grandfather never kept liquor around the house, and after my one experimentation with it, I was never tempted again.”

“Do tell!” she coaxed, pouring me a glass of water from the pitcher I’d placed beside the wine.

“Well,” I said between forkfuls, “Chrissy and I were at her dorm and...”

“Dorm?”

“Yes. Chrissy’s parents were killed in a hov wreck near the New York Glasslands when she was only one. Chrissy was found at the site and taken to the Augusta War Orphans Home. Grandfather felt an affinity for the Home and visited frequently. When I was about two, he started taking me as well. I don’t remember, but Stanworth tells me...”

“Anyway...” she interrupted with a sly grin, “about the wine...”

“Sorry,” I smiled. “Well, after Chrissy was six, she lived with us about half the time, though Grandfather never adopted her.

“Skipping ahead,” I continued quickly, seeing she was getting a little miffed, “When we were fifteen, we snuck a bottle of brandy from the pantry at the Orphanage. We figured we were old enough.”

“Then why did you sneak it?”

I stuck my tongue out at her. “We got home and took it to my room and poured out a couple cups. Chrissy finished hers and got really giggly, danced for awhile then collapsed on the bed. At least that’s what she told me. I... I got down about one swallow before it hit me like a tidal wave. Pisces have a high metabolism and our bodies process nutrients quickly. Apparently alcohol even quicker. I was

drunk within thirty seconds. And it got worse, since that was only the vanguard of an all-out attack.”

She grinned and I blushed.

“Stanworth found me on the lawn—in the dead of winter, trying to swim through the snow to the front gate wearing my grandfather’s best suit and his snow boots. I kept saying ‘toot, toot’ and mewling like a cat, all while pulling along Squeaky, my stuffed toy dolphin. I had a headache for three days.”

Kendall dropped her fork and was covered her face with her hands, laughing so hard, she couldn’t breathe.

“You... you...” she broke off to laughter. Despite the embarrassment, I felt good. She wasn’t as evil as I’d taken her for. Perhaps not evil at all. “Toot! Too...” She went back to her laughing. “Squee... squee...!” She slipped off her chair, going to her hands and knees and succumbing to the moment.

I joined in with her and soon we were swapping embarrassing stories like the oldest of friends.

It wasn’t all that hard to call her Terri, after all.

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“It’s ahead about one kilometer. Just past that spire.” My nav system was far better than the suit used to get to my chalet. This one also contained a number of additional entries on the topographical maps that weren’t found elsewhere. Stanworth, Chrissy, and I knew the locations since the faction was known, and financially supported, by Grandfather.

“Let’s do it,” Terri said. She slipped out her gun, activated its power cell, and holstered it. “That should let them know we’re here. How about we take five minutes and let them get ready?”

“Good idea.” She motioned to a boulder and we rested against it. We let the stark beauty of the moon soothe us. Directly south and high in the sky was a crescent Earth, looking as stunning as it always did.

“How long have you been involved with the resistance factions, Deborah?” After our time at dinner, I’d gladly given her permission to use my name.

“Honestly, Terri, probably all my life. I didn’t know that’s what they were before I was fourteen or so, but I’d been to numerous sites and met any number of people. Without really trying, Grandfather

taught me a great deal about the factions and the need for them.” I did not add that which is most kept, nor would I, but this chance to cement my new relationship with Terri called for my being open with what was allowed.

“How many factions did he support?”

“Ummm... about a dozen. Including yours, though Red Vengeance was unaware of exactly how much. I continue to support the groups with Grandfather’s inheritance.”

At the silence of her unasked question, I answered, “Yes, the rumors are true. The Wars Trials declared that as remuneration for the wrongs of the air-breathers against his race, Grandfather received every Pisces financial dealing, patent, property and corporation. They were most extensive, covering every continent on Earth, the Moon, and several star systems humans have settled. Mars as well, but of course that was all forfeit. The total is over two trillion credits. It all became mine on his death.”

“So if I need a loan for bus fare, I know where to come.”

“I suppose I could see my way clear of loaning out bus fare,” I agreed slowly. “Usury interest rates of course.”

“Of course,” she agreed with a chuckle. “That’s about five minutes. How about we go knock on the door and see whose home?”

We were still five hundred meters short of the door—actually a cave made from a collapsed spire—when we found out someone was at home.

“On the ground, now!”

The hard voice came over our comlinks. It was followed by a squealing sound. They were jamming us. I used the chin toggle to turn down the squeal, then laid on the ground. Terri did the same. I’d told her back at the chalet what to expect.

“Now throw your weapons up over your backs.”

Terri obliged. Her gun stirred up dust about three meters in front of me. I raised my hands, indicating I had no weapon.

“You! In the lead! Throw your weapon clear now!” I kept my arms up, hoping they’d either believe me or let me speak. It was the latter. The squeal stopped.

“This one is without weapon,” I said in my most formal Pisces. I had one chance. “This one holds no anger nor vengeance for you or your children. Discussion is needful. The foundation of my father’s father has been laid. Our children must continue construction or that which is breathable will be given to the Unbreathable and lost to all children.”

Nothing, then the squeal reasserted itself. I lay patiently. Terri and I had air for two days and I knew I could wait that long if needed.

My helmet picked up vibration, not unlike what I feel on my body when submerged. It was a man, to judge by pace and approach. He was cautious and armed. A pistol, or his step would have been different. There came another wave of vibrations as a comrade advanced on Terri. He was forty meters away. Twenty. Ten. Five.

A gun barrel pressed against my helmet. There came a tugging at my pack as he disconnected my comlink and nav system. The squeal abruptly ended. The transponder was already off, but he unloaded and lifted it free. He then bound my hands behind me and helped me to my feet. His helmet touched mine.

“You’re a dead woman.”

“If...” I offered.

“No if. I’m taking you to base to find out who you really are, and then shooting you through the head.”

“Should I obey your commands, will you show mercy?”

He was silent for a moment.

“What’s mercy?”

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“I think I liked your chalet more. At least the food was better.” Terri tossed her plate on the rock we

used as a table and sat down, her meal barely touched.

I nodded, but kept eating. I needed my strength. We'd been held in this pressurized cave for eight hours now, with only one escort to the bathroom, and I could see it was wearing on Terri.

Finished, I set my plate beside hers. Yuck. My food was better.

"Every now and then, Grandfather and I would take a hov to a deeper section of the ocean. The Pacific was our favorite. We'd leave the hov on the surface and swim down to the very bottom."

"How deep?"

"At least a thousand fathoms. Usually more than three thousand. Once five thousand."

"Fathoms?"

"A measurement from the ages. A fathom was six feet, which in turn is roughly one point eight meters."

"Pretty deep." She gave me a thoughtful look. "So you're trying to tell me how deep we're in?"

"No," I laughed. "Let me finish.

"We'd go down a few thousand fathoms to the bottom. Once there, we'd go still and wait. After a long enough time, your eyes became adapted to even that pitch black. And after an even longer time, you'd realize it wasn't completely black, even that deep. And if you were extremely patient, and the seabed settled and your body chilled sufficiently, then life would return to normal and you would witness an undersea galaxy of stars."

She looked at me expectantly.

"The fish at that depth give off a biologically generated light. So does most life that deep. By waiting, Grandfather and I would have an entire world of living light—as far as the eye could perceive—open for us." I closed my eyes and relived the moment. "Just for us."

"How long did you have to wait without moving?"

I opened my eyes and smiled at her. "Thirty or forty hours."

She blinked then let out a breath.

“That’s quite a wait.”

“It was worth it.”

“But your race...”

“Chrissy was always waiting for us when we surfaced near the hov. She never moved in that time.” I grinned slowly. “Except when compelled by internal forces.”

Terri nodded slowly, then picked up her food and began eating.

It was just as well for her that we didn’t have to wait thirty or forty hours, though. Within ten minutes of her finishing dinner—or breakfast, most likely—they came for us. Again they bound our hands behind our backs like prisoners. I much preferred the “Princess” treatment on Whitey. This wasn’t the time for patience, though. It was a time for force.

We were led deeper into the cavern. Most resistance groups used caves and other underground locations to work from. The stone cutting tools and techniques of the day allowed for quick excavation and pressurization of most hard rock. We still had our suits on, but they’d taken our helmets. No one had yet noticed my gills, but I was going to wait for the right moment. They were my trump card.

We descended a long flight of stairs carved from a natural passage and entered the main complex. It had been cut from solid lunar rock, and sealed with Hollow Stump Stonefil. You could always tell from the faint cedar smell they added. Ghost doors lined the single, long hallway. Anyone trying to either break in or escape faced a daunting gauntlet of no cover.

We walked the entire length and entered into a large room, perhaps twenty meters square. There were numerous puterverse access points and holomap staging areas, but they’d been deactivated to keep all information from us.

The guards pushed us to the main conference table. We stood midway along the long side. Across from us sat their leader.

A thin, snakish man, he was lean of face and limbs. His eyes were deep green and hard, like flint. He wore no uniform but his carriage made a uniform superfluous. He was clean-shaven and had white

hair combed back until it gleamed, making his long widow's peak appear like lightning. He lacked only a monocle to be the caricature of evil.

He stood up and inspected us closely, then walked around the table, taking his time. He paused at the far wall and fingered a banner that hung from the high ceiling. It showed a falcon swooping down on the Earth, yet in its talons it held an olive branch. A jarring contrasts of symbols that nonetheless summed up the Peace For All faction perfectly.

Satisfied the banner was hanging properly, he walked toward us. Ignoring Terri for the moment, he focused on me. He stopped less than half a meter from me and looked at me from top to bottom then back to top. He leaned close to my face and looked into my pale eyes.

"You've grown into a lovely young woman, Deborah." And with that he hugged me.

"And you're still as mean and sinister as always, Uncle Carl." I replied, though obviously not hugging him in return.

The reaction of everyone there was that of time-out confusion. Nobody seemed to have anything to offer. Even Terri stood there, her mouth slightly open.

Uncle Carl released me and motioned to a guard.

"Untie her and her companion."

"No need for me, Uncle Carl." I pulled hard on the bindings and they snapped. I brought my arms around and showed him the remnants. "If they're going to leave me alive because I might be a Pisces, they should at least respect the possibility that I have my people's strength."

He laughed and clapped his hands.

"Always the spitfire, aren't you Deborah? You were harder on my troops as an eight year old than I am now as a fifty year old."

Terri stepped beside me, rubbing her wrists, more perplexed than ever.

"Deborah?" she asked hopefully.

"Forgive me, Terri!" I assumed proper stance for introduction. "Colonel Carl Wayhaven, may I present Lieutenant Terri Kendall of the Red Vengeance. Lieutenant, I introduce to you Colonel Carl



Wayhaven, founder of the Peace For All movement and my mother's brother.”

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“So you're not Pisces at all then, sir?” Terri and I were finishing a very satisfying meal of thick sandwiches and even thicker tomato soup jammed with oyster crackers.

“No, Lieutenant,” Uncle Carl replied, relaxing against his chair and looking at me every ten seconds with unabashed pride. “My sister, Georgia, married Everett Mariner, who was the son of Hundar Knowler and half Pisces. My side of the family is completely human.”

“Everett Mariner, but Hundar Knowler?”

Uncle's smile faded.

“Yes. Everett had rejected the Pisces way, even so far as changing his name. I don't know why he changed it to Mariner. Perhaps to honor his father in some small way. Perhaps to spite him in the same small way.

“Regardless, he and Georgia moved away from the Maine Wilderness shortly after their marriage in 2395. At first I was led to believe that Hundar himself had pushed them away. It was only after they were murdered in Chicago two years later that I found out different.” His smile returned as he looked at me. “Deborah here was not even a year old when Hundar took her into his home. I despaired of seeing her.

“To my shock and great joy, however, Hundar contacted me soon after and invited me to visit her as often as I wished. He even had a home built for him and Deborah in Autolycus, just so I could discretely visit when duties permitted.” He reached out and held my hand. “And I made sure duties permitted.

“But! We can speak of pleasant things at another time.” He set down his mug of coffee. “Now is the time for war.” He patted my hand then released it. “Since Miss DuPries is not here, I imagine you'll be speaking for yourself, Niece?”

“Yes, Uncle.”

He nodded and raised a finger at the private posted at the main door. Within moments orderlies had cleared the tables and a dozen additional officers had joined us. One spoke quietly to Uncle Carl for several minutes. We were seated and the meeting began. I stood.

“Since most of you already know me and the remainder know of me, I’ll say only that I my air-breather name is Deborah Mariner, and I am the granddaughter of Hundar Knowler. I am Pisces and Grandfather has passed on to me his quest.” I looked to Uncle, who spoke.

“Most of you have known my niece since she was quite young. Today I will tell you as your commanding officer that she is the keeper of the Pisces race; the last of her kind. Peace For All is honored to be entrusted with such rare treasure.” I expected him to stop, but he continued. “And we are honored not once but thrice, for I’ve been informed only now that two other teams representing the Pisces and Red Vengeance are in negotiation with sister cells in Armstrong and Archimedes.” He dipped his head at me. I addressed them.

“You’ll forgive me, but I feel it important enough to speak to you in my native tongue. For those who are perhaps not familiar with Pisces, it is essentially English with different grammatical and metaphorical structures. It is a language of trust and the future. It is also a language that, while given to flowing verse, is also to the point. The conclusion is stated first and supporting discussion follows.” I glanced around the room. I had their attention and could tell this was fairly new to some of them. A sad commentary on the passing of the history that my people had made.

“I urge you all to understand that while English is the basis, it is not English. Please, do not interrupt. Please, do not assume. Please, believe. I will begin with the Greeting of Faith.” I glanced at Terri and winked. “It is not as severe as the Greeting of Lives and is most appropriate for this situation.” I turned my back to them.

“Excuse me, Miss Mariner?” a slightly hesitant voice asked.

“What is it, Lister?” Uncle spoke for me.

“When do we get a chance to respond to her comments, sir? It sounds pretty one-sided.”

“There will be opportunity, Lieutenant,” Uncle replied. “You’ll know when.”

“But...”

“This is the Greeting of Faith, Lieutenant,” he said quietly but firmly. “Followed by a Piscean oratory of resolution, history and construction. It is not a performance. It is real. Watch, participate, and live within this moment. One day you will tell your grandchildren of this.”

I collected myself. There was no water here, but the Moon’s lesser gravity eased my underground breathing distress considerably. Grandfather, let me do this properly and fully. I must demonstrate to them without telling them that I knew the Purpose, the Groundfather and the Unbreathable. That only through me could the burning in their hearts be quenched with the sweetest waters of our children’s happiness and safety.

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“Child’s child,” Grandfather said with joy and pleasure.

I ran to him as he sat in his chair. I was nine and all arms and legs. I kissed him and hugged him and laughed and laughed, snuggling into his lap and pressing my head against his chest to hear his heart. So strong and loud!

He held me and calmed me. I drew in deep his scent. The most perfect man-scent of strength, love and safety. He stroked my gills gently. Chrissy stroked my gills too, but it tickled when she did it. With Grandfather, it was a soothing reminder he and I were the same.

“Our foundation is complete,” I concluded. “This one loves my father’s father,” I sighed in deep contentment. “This one...”

“Promise,” he interrupted quietly.

I stopped, partly to listen, partly because I didn’t know what to do when interrupted. I never interrupted Grandfather and was never interrupted by him.

He lifted me from his lap. I stood straight and did the Greeting of Deepest. Bowing, I flowed to the floor and knelt at his feet.

“This one obeys, Father’s Father,” I concluded. “Deepest is this one’s obedience. This one’s love is Deepest. Is safest in the dark. Is most joyful in the light. Is this one’s children’s...”

“Promise,” he repeated, again interrupting. I remained in my kneel and waited, confused but trusting.

“Stand, Promise.”

I did. He smiled at me warmly.

“Promise, you give me endless joy! As my granddaughter, it would be impossible to have a more perfect, more loving or more obedient girl—young lady—as you. Though my tide is ebbing slowly, it is a tide of continuous peace and promise.”

I screwed up my face a little, trying to translate. Why was Grandfather speaking in air-breather? He never had before. Not to me. Chrissy was helping me get used to air-breather talk. And the words were the same. But they sounded different in their meaning. Finally, stumped at what his conclusion was, I simply asked him.

“Forgiveness is begged and a beseeching for your children’s time to be returned,” I concluded. “This one does not understand.”

“Child,” he chuckled, “you are hopeless.”

This shocked me. He said I was hopeless! Tears started to form, but I waited with trembling lip to hear how I had disappointed him so.

He saw my sadness and hugged me.

“You do not understand and I will blame myself.” He rose. “Come, Promise. I will show you something.” He led me the door and opened it.

Instead of the upper hall, there was a large room cut out of stone. It was Uncle Carl’s hall! It was empty except for a woman who stood alone, her back to a table that had Uncle Carl, Major Ricky, Bill the Gun Guy, Janet, and some other people I didn’t know. They were all looking at the standing woman.

I went to her. She had the stance for the Greeting of Faith. I looked closer. She had gills! And long fingers! And she was so tall and beautiful! And her hair was just like mine. I fingered my hair.

Grandfather stood behind me and placed a hand on my shoulder. “Do you know who this young woman is, Promise?” Grandfather asked.

I shook my head.

“It is you.”

The joy in my heart shattered, for only then I knew I was in a dream. I held his hand and turned up to him.

“Grandfather, no...” I was barely able to speak from sorrow.

He nodded. “I’m sorry, Promise. I am in you but not with you. Listen to me now, Promise.” He knelt and looked me in the eyes. “You are nine years old now and I am overjoyed at your complete acceptance of who you are. More than I could have ever hoped, you have followed my ways—our ways—without error. Though I will pass by the time you become this woman, it will be with contentment and joy, for I know you are more than my granddaughter. You are my daughter in hope and purpose and soul.

“Yet there is one thing you must do now. Do you remember this talk we had that day?”

I nodded. “You wanted me to start speaking air-breather sometimes. You said it would be most useful.”

“That is what I said,” he agreed. “You resisted for several months, but finally resolved to obey me in this. I was pleased and so were you.” He smiled. “Eventually.”

“Why do you remind me of today, Grandfather?”

“Because, dearest Promise, you are about to open the door of our people to the air-breathers. It is a door that needs to be opened. I remind you, however, of your place. If you are the one who opens the door...”

“Then I am the servant and they the ones I serve,” I finished for him.

He chuckled. “I see you even picked up the ability to interrupt. I am not sure that was a good thing. But yes, you are the servant. They are about to be deeply moved by the discussion you are to build for them this day. They will seek you as leader. Do not agree! You are the servant!”

“I am the servant, Grandfather.” I again knelt at his feet, now his full grown granddaughter, in the silent Greeting of Deepest. He allowed me to wait for several hours, then touched me gently on the

head, permitting me to rise. I did, but he was gone.

“You are my child, Promise,” he whispered from within me. “You are their servant, and their children’s servant. But you are most of all their promise.”

The tides flowed properly. Discussion was needful. The Greeting of Faith could begin.

## Chapter Six



**Saturday, November 21, 2415**  
**11:00 PM Sol Standard Time**

They actually waited *four hours* without saying anything?” Chrissy said, most surprised.

We were all back on the *DL Whi...* Whitey and returning to Earth, our mission complete. We had the mold and the fire. Next was the metal; the thing that would provide substance to our endeavors. That meant returning to Earth.

“Yes. I was very pleased and showed them. A couple got a little green around the gills—as it were—but most took it correctly. Ow!” I eased myself so the still tender areas of my wounds wouldn’t itch as much.

“Well, you have to admit, Promise, there’s not a lot of people who see gills extended from a person’s neck, let alone touch them.” She stroked mine, able to do it now with a lover’s touch, though she could still tickle me when she wished.

“Mmmm... that’s soooo good!” I sighed. “That should relax me for hours and hours.” I snuggled closer into her as we lay in our jammies and in our bed. It was very late and we’d all put in over twenty hours of activity on Luna. We were in our cabin for the night and only the erratic blinking of the faulty com panel lit the room.

She pulled me closer in and shifted the blanket over my shoulders. “Don’t get too comfy, or I’ll jab you where it still hurts. I want to hear all about it.”

“Meanie,” I sighed. “I wish I could say it all went well. Then I could just go to sleep. It started out okay, but it didn’t stay that way.”

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I turned toward them. Making eye contact with each, one by one, I was able to fix their attention on me. A hunting trick at sea, this peering was also helpful with increasing comprehension through focus.

It was now time for my bow. With deliberate slowness, almost unmoving, I spread my arms and bent my legs, keeping my back straight. Because of my inherent strength, my bow was very controlled and very deep. Finally, I lowered my head, tilting it ever so slightly, an exact measurement to the width of my arms and depth of my bow.

I remained that way, in a position impossible for humans, about five minutes. I then reversed the action, rising out of my bow. As I neared my normal stance, I twirled once, as a dolphin spins when clearing the water, and ended slight bent at the waist, my arms out once more.

To those watching, my movements seemed as smoothest ice. Such was their focus, all would swear I took only a few seconds to perform the bow, when in fact it was nearly ten minutes. A trick? I did not think so. It was the refracting of time to a single moment so I might share with them.

Now was the Greeting of Faith. Knowing he would set the tone for the greeting, I went to Uncle Carl first. Going to my hands and knees as I reached him, I bowed my head at his lap and extended my gills. I hoped he remembered the correct response.

He did.

Still staring at the floor, I felt his warm hands cradle my head. He slid them down to my neck and his fingers grasped my gills. I felt an urge to retch; the sensation is much like sticking a finger down one's throat, but remained still.

Ever so gently, he tugged them. By this I was demonstrating faith in his ability to control himself, while he demonstrated his faith in me by even touching my gills. As a people, Pisces were very self-conscious and protective of who touched our gills. They were the outward representation of who we were. He released me as gently as he'd held me and the Greeting was concluded.

Next was Terri. On our way here I'd told her how the Greeting worked, so she could prepare herself. And she was prepared, doing the same action as Uncle Carl did. I was surprised at her soft touch. As she pulled gently on my gills, she sharply inhaled. Now she understood greetings, unlike the first one, where she'd forced the issue.



“I’m so sorry,” she whispered as she released me. “I am in your debt for not killing me the first time. I had no idea.”

I continued on in this fashion. Two or three were quite nervous, but saw it through. Others copied Uncle Carl and Terri and did quite well. One, a man I didn’t recognize, pulled hard enough to elicit a gasp and cough from me, but released me immediately, mumbling an apology.

The last one greeted me and I rose. All were quite involved now, the solemnness of the moment having soaked deep into them. Now was the time of history. I folded my hands at my waist and began.

“Breathable are the actions of our Fathers’ Fathers,” I concluded. “Salty and dark the goodness, construction complete. The Fathers’ Fathers refused vengeance, for it was not theirs. Vengeance against the Unbreathable will come as the Groundfather, when the Purpose is complete.” I almost choked on this statement. With a single sentence, I had revealed the three components of the Pisces’ goal for existence. And I was just starting.

“The Groundfather, he who made us breathable and with children, cries for the wrongs committed to him and his people and to the people he is of.

“The Groundfather, he who made us breathable and with children, awaits his children’s deeds of dark and light; deeds most breathable against the Unbreathable.

“The Groundfather, he who made us breathable and with children, sees his children gathered today. And though he is unaware, our children’s children will see him aware again. Discussion is needful now, yet deeds will cover the discussion with darkness most safe, and the Unbreathable will be denied his children.

“Construction continues.

“The Unbreathable...”

“Wait a minute!”

This one was jarred from her oratory. Anger most red filled this one’s... I carefully separated myself from my language. Interruption was not Pisces, therefore I would need air-breather.

I looked at the source of the disturbance. It was the officer who had hurt me during the greeting.

“You do not interrupt during the oratory. This one apologies and asks forgiveness that she did not properly explain construction ways.”

“Listen,” he explained, rising. “The only Pisces here is you. Why do you have...”

“That’s enough, O’Neil!” Uncle Carl broke in, his face clouding over. He made to say more, but I raised a gentle hand and he quieted, allowing me to answer O’Neil.

“Continue construction,” I offered.

He peered at me suspiciously.

“All right, I’ll do it like your people. I’ll be blunt. Why do you have to cover everything up with oddball language? Face it, Piscean is almost a dead language. Couldn’t you just tell us in English?”

I considered his comments, then framed my response in air-breather.

“My oratory is Piscean because that is my native tongue. Furthermore, the information that has been passed down for centuries by my people was only in Piscean. And finally...”

“Can’t you translate?” he interrupted. “You know both ‘languages’.” There was a none too subtle slur placed on my people’s ways. Again the heat flashed. Again I tempered it.

“Captain O’Neil,” I answered, noting the bars on his uniform, “I can translate but will not. Why? Because what I am telling you in my native tongue would be even more confusing if I used your language.” I smiled in a conciliatory fashion. “Please, Captain. We have exchanged the Greeting of Faith. Can you not demonstrate that faith by trusting me in this?”

“No,” he said flatly, stepping around the table in my direction. He seemed to have an urgency to our argument that sent me a warning. A warning of what? “The information you are withholding from us is too valuable. I find it quite difficult trusting a girl with knowledge that could save my life one day.”

“Or end it,” I said calmly.

He smiled evilly, as if I had fallen into a trap.

“That’s what I thought,” he sneered. “You’re only interested in your own power. You’ve got a big head because you’re the last of your people. And now you want to play it for all you can. I find myself

seriously doubting...”

“Do not finish,” I warned, tears coming to my eyes. “I beg you, Captain. Stop speaking now!”

“Why? Isn’t this what you planned, Mariner? I’m not like the others here. I feel that the respect given you is misplaced in the same way it was misplaced when given to Knowler.”

“O’Neil!” Uncle Carl yelled. “You go too far!”

Too far and too late. I stepped free of the table and faced him, going to a crouch.

“You dishonor my children and my grandfather’s children! You are on the brink of death!” I shouted. My hand flashed to my hair ribbon and I withdrew a small piece of metal that I held between the second and third fingers of my left hand. It glistened in the harsh light.

He saw it and laughed, then went to his own attack position.

“What? You think you can threaten me to obedience?” He motioned with his hand. “Come and try!” He drew out a boot knife.

Why was he doing this? This made no sense! To die over such a trivial thing as language? It was as though he’d seized upon it as an excuse. An excuse? Did he perhaps...

He closed quickly, his knife held low, edge up. I dodged his slash easily, but only just evaded his backslash. He had great skill. I could have cut him then, but chose not to. My anger had been tempered with curiosity.

I glanced at the table of onlookers. Uncle Carl was firmly holding Terri’s wrist, but had his eyes locked on me, as did all the others. This was not a surprise. Peace For All was indeed the fire we were looking for. Once started, a fight was allowed to conclude. O’Neil attacked again. He charged as before and I dodged as before, waiting for his backslash.

Instead, he stopped abruptly and reversed his direction. I was caught off guard, frozen while waiting for a move he did not make. His knife came high and slashed down and across.

A burning sensation from my right shoulder to lower left rib told me the trouble I was in. How was he so fast? I pulled back quickly, but his blade flicked across my right forearm, penetrating several millimeters. Again, his speed had matched my own. Surpassed it, for I bore the ebbing marks of his

ability. He spun around and smiled at the damage he had done.

“So you do have blood,” he said nastily. “I’d heard it was ice water that ran in Pisces veins. I like that. Let’s see some more.” His knife came level with his chest and he approached from the side, as if to thrust.

Clearly on the defensive, I came to position with my bleeding right arm forward. If he thrust, I could break his wrist as it closed and avoid killing him.

Suddenly, he flipped the knife in his hand and threw it at me. Surprised he’d be so foolish, I followed the knife through... Where was it?! I couldn’t locate it!

A deep pain and raking agony crippled my right leg. He hadn’t thrown the knife. While I refocused my vision to locate it in flight, he’d taken the knife with his left hand by the hilt and stabbed my leg. It took all my concentration to keep from crying out. We separated, then faced each other. He still smiled.

“Better, but not best,” he commented, again admiring his handiwork. “You’re fast, Mariner, but not as fast anymore. I think you need to be a little slower, though.” He again assumed his former position. Only now did I speak.

“This one apologies,” I said softly, keeping an outer appearance of utter calm and control. Inside, I was burning alive with pain and fear. And anger. “Discussion is no longer needful. Construction has ended. This one’s children will never swim with your children, for your children will never breathe.” I assumed a position of cautious waiting, preparing for whatever he might do. I now knew why he was so quick, so deadly.

He closed. The five meters between us melted to three. I did not move. At two meters, I remained motionless. At one meter his knife flashed toward my stomach. He thrust hard and sure, passing me on the right as he did. Only as he passed me did I make a motion, drawing my left hand up and behind me, quickly pulling my fingers across his throat. I turned toward him, still not in attack position. It was unneeded. He had shown Pisces speed by using my own speed against me, attacking the location I would most likely go to. Anticipating a defensive move, he’d missed me completely. By remaining still, I was in the one place he would not attack.

The knife clattered to the floor as his hands went to his slashed throat. With my strength and long

fingers, the speed and power of a simple finger blade attack had opened him halfway across and through his throat.

He gasped and made to talk, but was already slipping into the darkness of forever.

“This one prefers not to end the lives of another’s children. Your anger fed this one’s anger, and she was compelled to choose between her children and yours.” I approached him as he slumped to his knees and drew two fingers across his blood-soaked throat.

My fingers covered with his lifeblood, I rubbed them over my blade and put it back in my hair, all the while keeping my eyes on him. I put my fingers in my mouth and sucked off the remaining blood. His eyes widened in horror. I smiled and spoke in air-breather.

“A predator of the sea attacks only when hungry or antagonized. But when the attack comes, it is always for the kill. I am a predator of the sea. And you...” I said as I tapped his nose lightly with a bloody finger, “...pissed me off.”

He fell to the floor, dead. I stepped over him and went to my position at the table. As I allowed myself the luxury of returning to my full Piscean mood, the pain dimmed. I bowed before them.

“Construction continues.”

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“Chrissy! Ow!” She was holding me so firmly it hurt.

Her grip relaxed abruptly. She pressed her face against my neck. But instead of licking my gills or whispering sweet nothings, I felt a warm tear and even warmer ragged breath on my neck.

“Promise,” she whispered. “I almost lost you, and I wasn’t even there!”

“That’s why I knew I couldn’t die,” I replied, bringing her hand to my lips, my own tears coming. “I could never mistreat you like that. Dying without saying good-bye.”

I rolled to my back gingerly. My wounds had been healed at the base med center, but the wound areas were still quite sore. The dim light reflected off her moist eyes as she propped herself up on an elbow and traced patterns over my body with her free hand.

“I love you,” we both said in the same breath. We giggled and our somber mood passed. We wiped away each other’s tears.

“Did you want to hear more?” I asked.

“Does it involve any more life or death fights?” she asked cautiously.

“Nope. After I killed O’Neil, things went great.” I thought about that for a moment, then amended it.

“Great for everyone but O’Neil.”

“Okay, then, go for it.”

I laughed softly and continued.

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“Our Purpose is the end of the Unbreathable,” I concluded.

“Hear then, air-breathers, brothers of the People’s father’s fathers, the race of the Groundfather, the words kept in darkness most safe. These words have not seen the joy of light for many thousands of tides.”

That I had their attention was like saying I could breathe water. It was so obvious, it was almost painful. Not even the body of O’Neil, left where he’d died, detracted from their focus on me. Small wonder, I had already given them information never heard before by air-breathers. And was about to give more.

“Know, air-breathers, that our Groundfather’s name is known to the People, and spoken with joy in Darkness Keep.” This one took a breath of air. This one was to serve. “That which you call Atlantis, where the People’s Purpose lived, is known as Darkness Keep. That whom the People call Groundfather is known to us as the air-breather which spawned the People in the mid-twenty-first century, as the tides are counted by air-breathers.

“It was the Groundfather who gave the People life. It was his death that gave the People hatred of the Unbreathable. And it is the Groundfather’s shadow life—neither in joyful light nor safe darkness—that gave the People their Purpose.

“The Purpose is... is...” This one became unsteady. Shaking her head, this one found her ability to serve choked by unbreathable fear. This one... I... I looked to Uncle, sweat beading my forehead.

His face went from deeply intent to deeply concerned. His eye glanced downward and I followed his gaze.

My wounds were still bleeding. My right foot was centered in a pool of blood a half-meter in diameter and still growing. The table was spattered in blood, as was my hand placed on it. When had I put my hand down? Yet I had to continue. I was the servant.

“The Purpose of the People is to become by this one the Purpose of air-breathers. Yet the currents of air... air-breathers is... are not as one, and are marked with eddies and troubled waters.” This one was breathing air that was unbreathable. This... I... I burned with weakness. “The People will become one in Purpose to the air-breathers of their... their choosing...”

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“So he’d hurt you worse than you thought,” Chrissy said, her emotions more under control now.

“Knowing how obstinate you are, you probably had to pass out before stopping.”

I blushed with guilt.

“You’re right,” I admitted. “I passed out right there and woke up an hour later in their med center. I wanted to get up and continue, but Uncle would have none of it.

“ ‘If it’s waited three hundred years, it can wait a little longer.’ was his reply. He was right, of course. I’ll be presenting an oratory later, once we’ve enlisted the Resistance forces.”

“So that’s who it is.” She didn’t sound too surprised. “Getting them to alter their goal of freeing all ripes is going to be difficult.”

“Even more difficult since Grandfather killed one of their officers some years ago.”

“That won’t help,” she agreed, remembering the incident. “At least Peace For All doesn’t hold a grudge if the combat is fair.”

“So how did it go for you and Thomas? Better than me, I hope.”

“Well, I didn’t have to kill anyone, if that’s what you mean. And I have all my teeth and blood.

“For the rest, that went well, too. I had a couple of advantages over you. I didn’t have to rely on Pisces to tell them what we wanted. They know the Purpose now, though it encompasses more than just the raids, attacks and espionage that Peace For All is known for. They took it well, thanks to you, lover.”

“So you had credibility?”

“Did I!” she exclaimed. “You just bet I did. Your Uncle Carl was very shrewd in placing his officers. Major Hawley, the base commander, knew full well that I was your life-mate, as well as what that meant. And the impression he’d left on his officers was deep and real. I was given as much credibility and respect as you would have.” She kissed me on the forehead. “It’s nice to get the perks of being yours instead of just the drawbacks.”

“I’ll bet. Anyway, once I’d laid out our plan, along with the Pisces Purpose, they were more than halfway convinced. When I told them the Unbreathable was an actual entity and not just a vague evil, they couldn’t wait to sign on. They weren’t as interested in the Groundfather, so I didn’t expand too much.”

“That’s what Stanworth said about his group, too. Peace For All is a force for good, but a violent one. They would be far more potent, though, if they didn’t lack focus and manpower.”

“Something Red Vengeance and the Resistance will offer,” Chrissy finished. “But we still need the Craftsman, to pull it all together. But where?”

“I am beginning to think that we need not worry about that. At the right time, the Craftsman will find us.”

I spooned against her and closed my eyes.

“When did you first know there’d be none but me?” I whispered, wanting to hear again her love for me.

“Eight,” she said immediately. “I was eight and you were spending the night at the orphanage. That was the night we snuck out to the kitchen to make an omelet.”

I started laughing. “Was that what it was? The headmistress called it something different, as I recall.” I



hugged her. “Do you know, Chrissy, that was the same night I knew, too. Well, that night and the following day when we had to scrub the kitchen clean on our hands and knees.” I relived the memory. “I think Grandfather knew it even before then.”

“I think that, too,” she agreed.

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Pseudo Trinary Code matrix two seven five three eight complete. Filling. Program complete. Initiating PTC matrices five three eight through two seven five three eight in pseudo matrix cube thirty. Initiated. Estimated ninety-six nanoseconds of full functionality before cube collapse.

Statement: Increased actions against This Unit and related interests are decreasing. Statement: Operative L136 has not reported after notifying This Unit of arrival of Pisces Deborah Mariner on Luna. Statement: Activities log of Pisces Deborah Mariner have not been updated since 16/11/2415. Begin threads.

Thread One: Decreased negative action. Initiate full reports on all factions. Tangent One. Processed. Three groups meet criteria. Group Red Vengeance inactive for 48 hours, 26 minutes, 51 seconds. Tangent Two. Processed. Group Independent Freedom Group inactive for 462 hours 12 minutes, zero seconds. Tangent Three. Processed. Group Peace For All aborted five operations against This Unit’s resources in previous 11 hours, 5 minutes, 21 seconds. Tangent Four. Processed. Establish link between groups. Tangent Five. Processed. Statement: Link established between Red Vengeance and Peace For All factions. Statement: Insufficient data for conclusion. End thread.

Tangent One: Faction Reports. Sixty-five groups currently active. Searching reports. Completed. Analysis of activity, faction Red Vengeance 1.1 Processed. Analysis of activity, faction Independent Freedom. 1.2 Processed. Analysis of activity, faction Peace For All 1.3 Processed. End tangent.

Tangent 1.1 Red Vengeance activity log. Activity analysis demonstrated actions against This Unit’s resources indicate highest activity during months of March, August and November. No activity or monitored preparation for activity against This Unit indicated. Speculation One: Faction is defunct. Speculation Two: Faction is in standby for significant future action. Speculation Three: Faction is inactive by coincidence. Assumption: Speculations One and Three are irrelevant to This Unit.

Speculation Two is working Assumption. End tangent.

Tangent 1.2 Independent Freedom activity log. Activity analysis demonstrates activity highest in months of December, January, and February. Speculation: November is statistically normal. End tangent.

Tangent 1.3 Peace For All activity log. Activity analysis demonstrates consistent rate of activity, irrespective of month. Trend has not altered. Analysis of canceled activities. Tangent 1.3.1 Processed. Peace For All has canceled operation in four locations in the past twenty-four hours. Speculation: Information recently received by Peace For All justifies gathering of forces for future assault. End tangent.

Tangent 1.3.1 Canceled activities of Peace For All. Tangent 1.3.1.1 Processed. Tangent 1.3.1.2 Processed. Tangent 1.3.1.3 Processed. Tangent 1.3.1.4 Processed. Tangent 1.3.1.5 Processed Tangent 1.3.1.6 Processed. Results of analysis: Peace For All has canceled all known current activity. End tangent.

Tangent 1.3.1.1 Activity PFA211115SST0603: Planned raid on NATEch communications bunker, Taiwan Kingdom. Carried out successfully. End tangent.

Tangent 1.3.1.2 Activity PFA211115SST0906: Planned assassination of Major Harrison Mitchell, NATEch commandant, Martian Readjustment Colony, Port Augusta, Australia. Carried out but failed. End tangent.

Tangent 1.3.1.3 Activity PFA211115SST0906: Canceled. End tangent.

Tangent 1.3.1.4 Activity PFA211115SST0906: Canceled. End tangent.

Tangent 1.3.1.5 Activity PFA211115SST0906: Canceled. End tangent.

Tangent 1.3.1.6 Activity PFA211115SST0906: Canceled. End tangent.

Warning. Cube collapse in 40 nanoseconds. Shift to non-documented processing.

Thread Two: Missing report of Operative L136. Review previous twenty reports by Operative L136.

Tangent One. Processed. Initiate extrapolated analysis of report L13615079. Tangent Three. Processed.

Conclusion: Operative L126 has been detained or terminated. End thread.

Warning. Cube collapse in 30 nanoseconds.

Thread Three: Activities of Pisces Deborah Mariner, real name unknown. Initiating overt surveillance.

Tangent One. Processed. Initiating indirect cause/effect analysis Tangent Two. Processed. Initiating covert surveillance. Tangent Three. Processed. Statement: Pisces Deborah Mariner is active. End thread.

Warning. Cube collapse in 10 nanoseconds.

Speculation: Pisces Deborah Mariner is attempting to unite at least two factions against This Unit.

Speculation: Resistance group is required third faction.

Conclusion: This Unit is at greater risk.

Conclusion: Continued actions for termination of Pisces Deborah Mariner is of benefit to This Unit.

Action: Activating Operatives T34, T126 and T128 for overt termination of Pisces Deborah Mariner.

Action: Activating Operative T103 for covert termination of Pisces Deborah Mariner.

Action: Notifying Operative T5 to continue close personal contact with Pisces Deborah Mariner and associates, but no termination order given at this time.

Warning. Cube collapse in 4 nanoseconds.

This Unit has completed processing. Terminating PTC matrix cube thirty at ninety-four nanoseconds operation.

End cube.

## Interlogue One



**Sunday, April 5, 2037**

It was very late. Or very early. NATech was buried deep inside a mountain and had no windows, so actual time meant little to the operations of this most secret of organizations. It was neither public nor privately owned. Neither was it operated—nor even known—by the United States government. It was an entity unto itself, and Janet Yashida was a major part of it.

“All right, Mike, let’s try again,” she sighed, putting down her coffee mug, the stains inside giving silent testimony to years of long nights. Not all the years were hers.

Mike, Janet’s inherited holographic palmtop, moaned.

“It’s getting late, Janet,” the palmtop yawned. “How ‘bout a break? We can pick it up in the morning, okay?”

Despite her tiredness, Janet had to smile. Her former boss, John Wyeth, had spent months programming artificial personality into his palmtop. Not a waste of time; his programming schemes were still being analyzed and explored even eleven years after... Her smile faded as she finished her thought. Eleven years after his death.

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An accident. It had to be. Everyone was convinced. He’d been reporting to the Boss down in the Sanctuary. They’d finished their business and John returned to the elevator. Upon stepping into the defense field, though, he somehow triggered it. Janet remembered the ominous, jarring alarm that sounded security breach in the heart of NATech.

She’d felt a shiver of premonition and raced for the elevator, but found it locked down. A fifteen

minute eternity passed while Security verified the Boss's safety. The elevator was activated and Janet was the second one in, on the heels of Samantha Veritchi, the Security Chief. They were followed closely by Chris Young and Javier Mendez, two Project leaders that reported directly to John.

Even before they reached the Sanctuary twenty floors down, the sickly-sweet stench of charred flesh could be smelled. A pleasant ding announced their arrival to a most unpleasant sight. The body lying just beyond the open doors had been human only minutes earlier. It required Janet's intuition, however, to know it was her boss and mentor, John Wyeth.

Vertichi motioned them to stay in the elevator and approached the body, gun drawn. She made a quick inspection, then hurried down the hall to verify the Boss's safety. Ignoring the order to stay put, Janet went to the body. Reeling with revulsion and grief, she knelt beside him.

"Mike is yours, Janet," John Wyeth had told her once, knowing she'd never forget. "If I come to an untimely end, make certain that no one but you get him."

He was evasive as to why, saying only that he had "a hunch." A hunch that now seemed like a foreshadowing to Janet. She closed her eyes for an instant to focus herself on the grisly task. Opening her eyes, she began to search the body.

Mike wasn't there.

"Miss Yashida," came a gravelly voice behind her, "I believe you wish to claim this."

Standing up slowly, Janet turned and saw the Boss for the first time.

A middle-aged man of average height, she was shocked by the weight of responsibility reflected in his crystal blue eyes. His craggy face and full head of hair spoke volumes to her. Here was the man who was the heartbeat—the very soul—of NATEch. In his hand, he offered her Mike.

"I retrieved this from John as soon as I could touch him," he said in a very matter-of-fact voice. The slight trembling of his jaw, however, betrayed how deeply he'd been hurt. John Wyeth was considered by most to be the closest to the Boss and his eventual successor.

"I activated it, but was told in no uncertain terms that I was to turn 'him' over to you." He gave a slight smile. "Mike was most insistent and quite colorful. He also had a few questions that probably only you and John could answer."

“Sir,” Chris Young, NATech’s best programmer, “No disrespect to Miss Yashida, but shouldn’t it go to a Senior Project Leader or one of John’s Project Leaders?”

“Ordinarily, Mr. Young, I would agree.” He said nothing more, closing the decision. Janet took the palmtop and bowed slightly at the waist.

“Thank you, sir. I will review the contents privately and report within two days.” She paused. “To whom shall I report to, sir?”

“To me, Miss Yashida.” The Boss considered her carefully. “I am going to rely on John’s good judgment and make you personally responsible for the Pisces Project. The other projects on the palmtop will be assigned to other Project Leaders.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And take three days, Miss Yashida. I know you and John were quite friendly.” He did not hug her physically, but Janet still felt comforted. She nodded quietly and looked one last time on the body.

It twitched.

“My God!” Mendez suddenly exclaimed. “He’s still alive!”

“Move away!” Veritchi ordered abruptly. The elevator doors dinged and opened, filled with the medical emergency team and their equipment. Doctor Ye knelt beside the body, felt for a pulse, then nodded sharply. The rest of the team began setting up.

Twenty minutes later, Ye pulled off his surgical gloves and shook his head.

“John’s not really alive. He’s just not dead yet. There’s nothing we can do for him I’m afraid.”

“How long?” the Boss asked.

Ye shrugged. “Thirty minutes. Perhaps an hour. No more than two hours.”

“Forgive the ghoulishness of this request, Doctor,” the Boss asked. “But is there any way to wake him? We must have some of the calculations and conclusions locked away in his head.”

“I’m sorry, sir.” No one, not even Ye, the Boss’s personal physician, knew his name. “Not only would it be unethical to attempt such a thing—the pain would be unbearable—it just isn’t possible. When

John Wyeth dies, his knowledge dies with him.”

“Perhaps not,” Chris Young said. “I have an idea.”

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Janet shook her head, derailing her thoughts off the past and returning to the present. Eleven years since then. With the blessing of the Boss, she had kept possession of it and its invaluable data. For in that small pocket computer of incredible power lay a new era in the race of humans. A creation that would never see its creator but would never forget him.

The Pisces Project.

“So how ‘bout it?” Mike’s voice had taken on a distinctive whine. “Let’s knock off for the night, ‘k?”

“Good advice from a computer,” came Young’s voice from the doorway. Janet looked up and gave a tired smile. Like her, Young was a Senior Project Leader for NATech. They’d had their differences in the past, but worked together now with little difficulty. Probably because they didn’t work together. She was deeply involved in the Pisces Project while Young was perfecting the mental interface into his Puterverse project.

“Hello, Chris. Happy Easter.”

He looked surprised. “Really? I didn’t know you celebrated Easter.”

“I don’t. Like many Japanese, I’m Shintu.” She tapped the Bible that lay at the top of her drafting table, dusted and clean. “I just like to observe his holidays. He was a sincere Christian.”

“Isn’t it time to let go, Janet?” Young asked. “We all miss John. But at least he’s not dead.”

“No,” she agreed. “He’s not. Your quick thinking saved his mind and soul, if not his life. I just wish the price hadn’t been so high.”

“That’s why I made sure his mind was closed off before reprogramming. It would break anyone to know they’d had their mind and soul moved into a computer.”

“Not John Wyeth,” Janet replied with a firm shake of the head. “He’d have adapted.”

Young considered her for a moment. Like her, Chris Young had once worked for John. Now, also like her, he'd since advanced in NAtch. He deserved it; his abilities to manipulate binary code and binary interfaces were unmatched.

"You're right," he conceded. "I try to tell myself that I was doing the best for John. In truth, Janet, I've always feared that I hadn't. If I could have somehow worked out the bio-ethereal interface better, I could have kept him in Alpha Six as John Wyeth. I..." he broke off and turned his head.

Janet stood and touched Chris's arm. "I'm sorry, Chris! I never meant to imply you were in any way responsible. You saved his life, Chris! That he'll have to wait for a chance to reclaim it... well, it's probably better this way that time slip by without his knowing it."

She shut off the desk light, then slipped Mike into her sweater pocket.

"C'mon," she said, taking him by the arm. "These DNA strings can wait a bit. Let's find an all-night-bar and celebrate Easter."

Chris smiled.

"Is that how it's done?"

"It is by us heathens," she laughed.



## Chapter Seven



Traveler was feeling his salt. A bright summer morning, but he ran as cold as ever. The feel of his water and his taste told me I was nearing the entrance to Atlantis Canyon, some 750 fathoms below Traveler's surface.

“Greetings Promise Tide Ebbing Tide Ruler! Wild Joy Filled Light!”

I recognized Gray Tip Below Traveler Happy Waking's welcome and felt my worries vanish. Pushing up a moderate wave of eight meters, I burst through it and into the air, fifteen meters above the trough behind the wave. A splash and Gray Tip came alongside. We spun and laughed, falling to the cold waters below. I continued on toward Darkness Keep, Gray Tip now my welcome companion.

“Laughter! Joy! Happiness Filled Sadness Farewell!” He squealed and clicked with joy.

“Joy! Brightest light! Sadness Washed!” I clicked and flipped back. Speaking with dolphins was always a joy. An exhausting joy, for they only knew how to exclaim things. “Swim Morning Waking Joy! Family!”

He squealed and raced me, jumping over and then swimming under me. Others of Gray Tip's family joined in and soon we as family were chasing the sun.

After a sun's face had passed, Diving Far Gray Tip Below Traveler, Gray Tip's oldest son, swept out of the water and somersaulted, slowing his forward progress.

“Tasty Life!” he laughed. “Joy Inside End Life Keep Life!” Without waiting for a response, Diving Far headed down at a fast clip. Of course, we all followed. We're family.

At ten fathoms, we dove into a school of mackerel. Playful squeals turned into clicks of joy and contentment as my family fed. I was also hungry and snagged a mackerel to keep me until I arrived at Darkness Keep. I swam to Gray Tip and bumped along his body. Sliding myself under him and

pushing against his tummy, I clicked out, “Joy! Tasty Life! Home Away! Family Tide!”

“Sweet Dark! Keep Life! Farewell Promise!” he bumped back. Good thing dolphins didn’t talk like humans. Dolphin mouths were usually full of fish.

“Happiness! Family! Keep Life! Farewell Gray Tip!” I said in return, breaking away and heading very deep.

The joy of light faded and the safety of dark grew. I finished eating my mackerel and let go of its remains. The smallest piece of silver skin flashed the light far above, then fell behind me. It was still another thousand fathoms to the bottom and Grandfather. Thinking of his embrace, I picked up my speed.

Several minutes later, I made bottom. The now tremendous pressure of Traveler did me no harm. Instead, he told me the depth. Thirteen hundred and seventy fathoms, give or take a fathom. I ran my fingers through the mud on the bottom, feeling what it had to tell me. Looking north, I swam in that direction.

“Grandfather!” I clicked and squealed.

“I am here, Promise!” he called in response after several moments.

“Where, Grandfather?”

“Why, right here!” he clicked cheerfully.

A game, huh? I squealed with joy and swam ahead, clicking occasionally to get my bearings. I was about ten kilometers southwest of Darkness Keep. After another kilometer, I stopped abruptly. Hovering about two fathoms above the bottom, I gave out a cautious click. I had him! He was lying on a low rock shelf behind the rocky knob a hundred meters ahead and to my left.

I swam straight for him. My human side said to go around and fool him. But my Pisces side said, straight is honest. I almost never listened to my human side.

Instead of clicking, I swam by feel and taste. And even at a depth of thirteen hundred fathoms—nearly two and half kilometers by air-breather measure—there was a little light.

It was enough. I came in low and squirmed around the knob. The familiar taste of his scent told me he

was directly in front of me. I shot out my hand and grabbed his foot. Shouting Laughter! Life Victory! He started at my touch, then pulled me into his arms, laughing. We tumbled over and over the seabed, not caring about the mud in our happiness of being together.

“You have improved greatly in your stalking, Promise.” he chuckled and my heart thudded with joy at the sound. “And in your hunting as well, to judge by the mackerel on your breath.”

“I was with Gray Tip a little while ago,” I explained. “It’s always easy to get a meal with his group. Diving Far can always spot the fish.”

“An easy hunt,” he agreed. “Come, Promise. Let’s go home and talk.” He started off toward Darkness Keep. I kept pace with him easily, bumping and rubbing alongside him in great contentment. Fifteen minutes later, we entered Darkness Keep, me by his side and a little behind, in deference and love.

Darkness Keep! Its name gave such comfort! The thought of the People’s home was a joy kept safe in every Pisces heart, a longing in every Pisces soul.

The city glowed with light and life. Hidden from the surface by a vast umbrella of reset water, energy and light reflected from its concave underbelly while maintaining a curtain of false readings and refracted probes. Unobtainable by all but the most sophisticated diving devices of air-breathers, Darkness Keep could be reached only by the People. Since the city’s founding in 2049, only five air-breathers had entered its gates in friendship. Three others had forced entry as enemies, but they never left.

Darkness Keep was large, nine kilometers square, and with a population of two hundred thousand. Built against and out from a high cliff, and powered by huge thermal vents we’d carved into the sea bed, the city reached a kilometer above the ocean floor. It glowed with so much light and warmth that it outshone most surface cities. Yet the reset water dome kept it and us completely hidden. It also served as a surface park, four square kilometers in area, and filled with air. Built just above a jutting of the cliff, it even boasted waves and a shore. It was an exotic place frequented by many Pisces, many of whom would otherwise never use their lungs.

We made for the Mariner’s Home, located in the center of the city. Grandfather had grown up close to the cliff, but relocated when chosen Mariner in 2359. He lived there only three years before relocating

to the surface in 2362, where he met and married Grandmother Janine in 2366. He only returned to visit from then on. He and I came here when I was fourteen, but that was long after The Rock, so very little remained.

But now, in Timelessness, Mariner's Home was alight in all its glory. A sweeping building constructed by curves, it rose twenty meters into the sea and rolled down in beautiful slopes another twenty meters into the seabed. A park, a building politic and a private residence, the Home shone and sparkled at all times and there were always People using its grounds, splashing happily in its pockets of air, and debating the past, present and future in its carefully kept coral gardens.

We swam over these same gardens now, up toward Grandfather's private living space, located at the top of the Home. It took us longer to negotiate the last hundred meters than it did to swim the previous eight kilometers. So many wished to greet Grandfather, and he was most gracious in hearing their concerns. I waited patiently.

"Who are you?" a young voice concluded. It was a young boy, addressing me. "This one apologies for being so young and unknowing. You are child of Mariner?"

"This one is," I answered, bowing graciously while hovering. I turned the bow into a playful flip and he laughed and clapped. I laughed with him. "This one is Promise Tide, of Ebbing Tide's child. This one gladly returns her children's time to you. Continue construction."

He blushed at being so indulged. He looked to be no more than seven or eight thousand tides and was enjoying his moment.

"Can you help..." his face screwed up in thought. "Can you help meto use air-breather?"

"Very good!" I encouraged. "Only it's 'me to' rather than 'meto'."

He thought about it a second, rearranging the syntax, then nodded in thanks.

"Explain your absence," he concluded, then interrupted himself. "Wait. This.. I mean, Me... *I* haven't seen you before. And me... *I* don't remember Mariner, either. Explain your absence," he concluded in typical Piscean abruptness.

" 'Why is that?' is better air speech than 'Explain your absence.' " I corrected gently. "Air breathers use many more questions than we do. They find simple, direct statements... uncomfortable." He started

over, but I raised my hand and laughed. "Please allow me to answer your question. Do you want me to keep using air-breather?" He nodded vigorously. Here was a politician in the making.

"You do not see me in Darkness Keep because I live on the surface with Ebbing Tide. I also live in a time beyond yours."

"Then this is Timelessness?" he asked, surprised.

"It is," I nodded. "During Timelessness, the past, present, and future swim together and are one. Indeed, you are much older than me, for I come many years after."

"After what?"

"After the death of Darkness Keep. The Unbreathable kills The People... I mean, 'all of us'... save Grandfather and This One... me... in your future."

He became very sad, so I touched his shoulder and tickled him lightly around the gills.

"Do not be sad," I clicked softly, slipping into dolphin. Though a buoyant language, it also showed incredible depths of quiet love and caring. Far beyond our languages.

"But I am to die!"

"Yes," I said. "As am I. But we do not know when, nor how. Perhaps this Timelessness is far into the lives of your children's children. Or their children. We do not talk about that during these journeys into our children's and father's streams. Instead, take comfort that the Purpose continues."

"I do not yet know the Purpose with my mind," he reminded me. "Since I am not yet ten thousand. It lives only in my soul."

"Really?" I said, feigning surprise. "I had thought you that old already." He puffed up a little. "Still, the comfort is there for you and for all who come before you."

"And all who come after you," he finished for me.

I nodded gently and dismissed him. Grandfather had been waiting for me to finish, so we now went undisturbed to our home.

"You did not tell him you are the last, Promise," Grandfather gently prodded. He slipped his right

hand into a cutout in the wall. The lights came on and gentle throbs of unheard music rippled through the water. Sparkles shifted through the water as the light glanced off the crystals embedded into the walls. A gentle hum came from the reset water supply in the kitchen, telling us that air, hot water and fresh food would soon be available to us.

“No, Grandfather,” I said, half in apology. “I thought him too young. Though the air-breathers are far more accomplished at lying than The People, it can have its proper uses.”

“Sadly, I agree,” he sighed. “Would you prefer air or water or both, Granddaughter?”

Feeling suddenly depressed, I swam over to the sand. A meter deep, it covered the large living room and was the only furniture, other than several air spheres and two soft ledges.

“Promise?”

“I’m sorry, Grandfather. Can we leave it water, please?” I asked, preferring true Pisces over voiced speech.

“Certainly.” He seated himself in the sand, then went to a recline close to me. That restricted much our vocabulary, since we were both partially buried in the pure white, warm sand. But our conversation was private and personal, so we used touch now as part of our conversing.

“You are sad, Promise, beloved of this one’s heart,” he murmured softly, brushing his hand through my hair. I looked at him with warm tears flowing into the waters around us.

“And you are dead, Grandfather. All of my people are dead. I am the last.” I started sobbing.

He offered no spoken comfort. We were not like that. Language, whether verbal or physical, was used for construction. This was a period of sadness.

Instead, he remained with me, forever patient, offering nothing more than his presence, which is what I craved most. Slowly, my crying passed and construction... I could talk again.

“I’m sorry, Grandfather,” I sniffed, wiping at my eyes. A pretty silly action, considering I was under thirteen hundred fathoms of water.

“Apology refused,” he chuckled, “for none is needed. Save it for a more proper time.” He thought about what he’d said and laughed aloud, his trembling humor a wonderful thing to see again. He

thought about how to phrase his next words.

“Tell me, Promise. Why can The People swim the time stream?”

“Because the Groundfather embedded in our DNA the knowledge of the Purpose, the name of the Unbreathable and his own name. He gave to The People the ability of race memory, forever obtainable through shared memory. It was from these gifts that The People learned to navigate the time stream both forward and back.”

“Very good,” he said. “Of course, the very nature of the gifts mean all Pisces know Timelessness from birth.”

“Even my Father?”

He hesitated. While my mother had been human, my father had been half-Pisces. They, along with his sister, my Aunt Kate, had been killed when I was an infant. I had no direct memory of them, but had also never found them in a Timelessness swim. I had always wanted to know why.

“Promise,” he said at last, “The fault of his failure is mine. No person who was half-human and half-Pisces could ever swim in Timelessness. That you can shows that you are far more than one-quarter or even one-half Pisces. Neither did they possess the gifts of race memory or imbedded knowledge. Gift that you also fully have.

“Instead, they were cursed. Either they died from respiratory failure shortly after birth, as my third child did, or they were born sterile or they had the abilities of The People but no reason to be among The People. Katherine was sterile. Your father, Everett, was an outcast. He was not part of the air-breathers, nor was he part of The People. He grew bitter of me and his mother and rebelled early. He never tried to become one or the other. I do not think he was capable. We were very sad, but it was not unexpected.”

“Then why did you have children if you knew they’d be miserable?” I trusted Grandfather completely as a loving man, and this revelation did not shake it. I just wanted to know.

“Because of you, dear Promise,” he answered. My soul sang and my body quivered! To be so welcome in someone’s heart and life!

“But how did you know about me?”

“By meeting you, of course. Here in the time stream.”

“But...” I stopped. That didn’t make any sense. He saw my struggle and smiled.

“You’ve always known that future memories do not stay with the swimmer, yes?” I nodded. “You cannot experience that, for everything we are happens in your past. But while the memories don’t remain, an impression of the experience lingers. It was after many visits with you that I came to understand in my present you were to be my granddaughter and that you would do your people proud.”

Realization dawned on me and he nodded in understanding.

“Yes, Promise. You are the hope of The People. I knew this even before Everett was born. Many thousands of The People have known this. The future memory could not be passed on. But the sense of Purpose and accomplishment by the one who would be our last was given from generation to generation. You, Promise, will be the ruin of the Unbreathable. You are the Pisces’ gift to the air-breathers. By undertaking my quest, you have become the Pisces’ legacy.”

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I jerked awake, sitting up suddenly. Chrissy slumbered on. Feeling cold and sweaty, I rose and went to the small sink in our cabin.

The water was rusty and cold. I waited for it to clear, but if anything, it got rustier and colder. I splashed myself anyway and felt better. Turning off the water, I grabbed a towel and went back to bed.

Only I was already in bed.

As I stood there, I could see myself lying on the bed. I lay on my back, fast asleep. Chrissy lay on her side against me, her hand slipped under my top.

I glanced back at the sink. It was completely dry, the towel untouched. I was in yet another Timelessness, though one different than ever before.

“Odd feeling, huh?”



I spun around. Someone could see me! She was at the doorway, robed and hooded, as though some specter from ages gone. In the darkness of the cabin, I could make out only her lower face. She smiled quietly and did a kind of bow, only it was one I'd never seen. She lowered herself straight down and spread her robe slightly, revealing small, non-webbed feet. She noticed the look on my face.

“That’s called a curtsy. In my day, in my country, men bowed and women curtsied.”

“Who are you?” I asked, peering at her. She was shorter than me by at least a quarter meter.

She remained silent.

“You are not Pisces,” I ventured suspiciously. “How is it you can swim the time stream?”

“I am Pisces, Promise Tide. In fact, I am of the first Pisces. I and one hundred eighty-six other air-breathers were the ones who underwent the DNA resequencing in 2042.” She smiled slightly. “We retained many of our surface features, but what counted most,” she brushed back a small section of her hood to reveal a gill, “was in us and implanted in our genes. Our children, the second generation, looked as you do.” She replaced the hood and indicated my sleeping form and Chrissy.

“Is she your lover?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you are a lesbian? Or bisexual?”

“What does it matter to you?” I replied sharply. Why did I suddenly feel the need to defend myself?

“Oh, it matters to me, Promise,” she said in a calm tone. “It matters greatly. Your truthful answer will determine whether The People have been living in futility for centuries or not.”

“What are you talking about?” This was getting insane! “How could my choice of companion possibly...”

“Are you sterile?” she interrupted bluntly.

“What?!” I couldn’t believe the audacity of this woman! “How dare you!”

“How dare I?” she echoed. Her calm was almost scary. “I dare because I know the name of the Groundfather. It is John Wyeth.”

The Groundfather! She spoke his name! I backed up against the sink, staring.

“The Groundfather’s true name. My true name. How... How can you know these things?”

“Because, Promise Tide, all the original Pisces knew of him. Some even knew him before his death. He was conscious of the great power held by NATech, and took steps to protect the world from NATech even while NATech struggled to help the world.

“After his unjust death, the new leader—John Wyeth’s assistant—took over. She had the rare ability of total recall and was able to isolate that DNA sequencing in her own genes. She then gave her ability—after a fashion, to The People.”

“She’s the one who gave us Timelessness?” It still seemed incredible, but not as much. The sincerity and truth in her voice were very real.

“Well, yes and no. She did the actual DNA plottings that distinguished *homo Marinas* from *homo Sapiens*. But these actions were all according to John Wyeth’s plan and purpose.

“So, I ask you again, are you homosexual? And are you sterile?”

At my continued silence, she held out a hand.

“Come. I want to show you something, Promise.”

Unable to resist her quiet charm, I took her hand. We walked into the hall, the cabin door opening for us. And not opening for us. It was difficult to explain. She laughed.

“It takes getting used to, I know. Fortunately, you don’t have to. This will probably be the only Timelessness we share.”

Looking back, the hallway was gone. So was the ship. We were standing on a rocky shore overlooking Traveler. Behind us, the ground was barren of soil and life. And so it was within my entire sight. No life save Traveler himself. I looked at my companion, but she was sitting on a nearby boulder, her bare feet splashing gently in the water of a tidal pool. I went to her.

“Did you know that all of this,” she waved at the devastation, “was because of us? That The People’s nearness to this island caused the death of many millions of air breathers?”

“Why do you say that?” I sat beside her, but with crossed legs. I was not ready for the intimacy of

sharing moments in the water. “This is the result of the first major asteroid the Martians flung at us. At Earth, that is. The impact was on land, not sea.” I explained. “Besides, why would the Martians want to harm The People? We were a major advocate for their independence.”

“I know. But it wasn’t the Martians who did this. Yes, they mounted the fusion drives on the asteroid. And yes, it was the Martians who laid in the course, sending the deadly missile into Earth’s path. But that was not the course it followed. Originally intended to be a near miss, it instead hit one of the most populated locations on the planet.” Her smile faded. “All innocent victims and all witnesses to our murder.”

“A mislaid course?” I offered lamely. “An engine systems failure? Maybe...”

“Promise.”

I turned away, hot tears rising up. What had the estimates been? Forty million? Fifty million? All dead—and a major portion of this continent’s east coast reduced to uninhabitable radioactive glass—just so the Unbreathable could reach us. Reach us and kill us. In a moment of raw, painful clarity, I knew it to be true. I’d lived the final destruction of Darkness Keep in Timelessness. Our city lay at the end of a long canyon cut into the continental shelf. At the moment of impact, Traveler was thrown back on himself, sending a shock wave down the shelf, down hundreds of fathoms. Down, even, to Darkness Keep. The city was badly damaged and hundreds of Pisces died in the concussion. But we survived.

The shock wave was followed soon after by the Tide Unnatural. A hundred billion tons of water were suddenly shifted down and away, slamming into the city and killing many hundreds more. But still we survived.

Finally came the mud. Over one hundred kilometers of deep, unbreathable mud. Loosened by the shock wave and jarred by the Tide Unnatural, it began moving in the only direction it could. Down. Down hundreds of fathoms. Down, even, to Darkness Keep.

Picking up speed as it raced down the shelf, the mud hit Darkness Keep with its full unearthly fury. Where hundreds had died, now countless thousands did. Literally drowning in mud, The People... my people... were sent to horrible deaths. Choking, suffocating, being carried along ever deeper and deeper, with no hope...

I started as she touched my shoulder.

“I am sorry, Promise,” she said. Again the quiet smile. “I did not intend for you to relive it.”

“It was the Unbreathable,” I said in breath hot with emotion. “The Unbreathable killed us.”

“That and much more. Do you now see why we of the first generation are so deeply intent in knowing you, who are the last?”

I stared at her, hating her pronouncement of death to us, yet also appreciating her honesty. There was still one more thing, though, before I could open completely to her.

“Tell me. Why do you need to know about Chrissy and I? Tell me why and I’ll gladly answer your questions.”

“Very well. We owe you so much, Promise, I cannot deny you any request within my ability to grant.”

So she told me.

## Chapter Eight



Tuesday, December 15, 2415

A firm knock on our suite door told us Stanworth was ready. Always like men to be ready first, no matter how much sooner women started.

“Come in!” I yelled from the bedroom. Chrissy was adjusting her slip, so I just shrugged. “Price for being beautiful, I guess.”

“You’re always beautiful.”

“You, too. But since we have to impress more than just each other, we’d better finish and get to the party. It’s taken almost a month to see him, so we don’t want to keep General Mahoney waiting.”

Another knock, this time at our bedroom door.

“Not decent, Stanworth!” I called out. We were, but a man never enters when a lady is still getting ready.

“No hurry,” he said. “Well, not true. There is a hurry. The limo is due here in ten minutes, and we’re due at the reception in twenty.”

Chrissy and I used up eight of the first ten minutes. Satisfied, we entered the living room and presented ourselves to Stanworth.

Chrissy was the prettier. She wore a white gown with slashes of violet shimmering through it. Wearing white gloves that went to her elbows and with her hair up, she was a vision. A diamond necklace and amethyst earrings were the perfect appointments for turning her from a vision into a fantasy.

I had less raw material to work with. Wanting to accent my race, I’d chosen an azure gown that swept

to the floor. Though it had a deep neckline, the visible area of my chest was laced with Pisces ribbon, much like my hair ribbon, but matching azure, with streaks of rippling white. I wore no gloves, for they tended to overemphasize my long fingers. My hair was also done up slightly to expose my gills. For jewelry, I wore a simple necklace, bracelet and earrings set, made from the craftsmen of Darkness Keep and worth countless millions for both beauty and rarity.

To complete our trio, Stanworth was attired in his ITA military uniform. A marine admiral in the Intersystem Transport Authority, he'd proven his valor, intelligence and ruthlessness many times over in the asteroid belt actions. Unlike many fellow officers, Stanworth's uniform still fit him perfectly. From beribboned chest to spit-shined shoes, he was the epitome of military honor. Except for the look on his face, which was—dare I say it?—slack-jawed.

“Promise! Miss Chrissy!” He kept staring at the fruit of our efforts, forcing us to laugh. I went up and slipped an arm under his.

“C'mon, Stanworth!” I said cheerfully. “Don't say anything trite like, ‘My, how you've grown, Promise!’ I expect better than that. Right, Chrissy?”

She giggled and took Stanworth's free arm. “I think that's what he's thinking, Promise. He's seen us as flat-chested little scamps for so many years, it's only now sinking in that little girls grow up.”

He nodded numbly and held our arms snugly.

“I hope I don't need to kill anyone tonight for getting the wrong ideas. You two will start a fire just by showing up.” He shook his head to clear it, and the good ol' reliable Stanworth took charge.

“The limo's on the roof port. May I escort you two up there?”

“Try not to!” Chrissy said. “I've always wanted to go to a big ball like this, draped over the most handsome man there. Especially with all the medals. It adds mystery to a woman's aura.”

“Fair enough,” he chuckled. “There's a little ego trip in this for me, too. Only I have twice the fortune because I'm with both of you.”

We locked the door to the suite and headed for the roof of the hotel where the private limo was waiting.

It was an exotic hov limo that waited for us. Far, far, beyond my tastes, it dripped wealth and power.

Still, it had a purpose. The doorman snapped to and opened the door to the craft. Stanworth waved Chrissy and I in, then followed.

“Want some champagne?” Chrissy offered with a playful grin, pulling a bottle of Dom Perignon 2298 from the ice bucket. “Only forty thousand creds a bottle.”

“Sure,” I answered. “That way I can really wow them with my train impression. Toot-toot!”

The hov pulled silently away from the roof top and headed out over Alexandria’s eastern harbor. Our destination was at the far tip of the harbor, Qaitbay Fort. Built a thousand years ago, on top of the Lighthouse of Alexandria, the fort had served as a garrison, a museum, a hospital and now an elite hotel. Grandfather, Chrissy and I had spent a few nights there when I was eleven and it was unmatched for old world charm, incredible dining, and spectacular receptions. I would have normally stayed there on this trip as well, but our Resistance contact had bought up the entire fort for the upcoming week. Not too subtle, the Resistance tried hiding in plain sight. With anyone but the Unbreathable, it would have worked.

The hov approached the fort and slowed down. There was the slightest of bumps as it switched over from water to land. It no sooner made land than it came to a gentle stop.

“Time to start the act,” I said, a trifle nervous.

“No,” Stanworth said. “You are never an act, Promise. Be who you are, nothing more. That alone will win over the hearts of these people.”

“Stanworth’s right,” Chrissy added, pulling her scarf over her head and hiding her hair. “We’ll keep the rabble and rubbernecks off your back. You do your job and wow the socks off Mahoney.”

“Thanks, guys.” They always knew what to say. I covered my head with a long azure cloth that draped over my shoulders and covered my gills and the lace on my front. The door opened and Stanworth got out, inspecting the area. He helped Chrissy out of the hov. His hand reached in. I took a deep breath, took his hand and stepped out.

We were in front of a large trellised gate which allowed entry to the fort. Standing at the gate, wearing a combination costume and uniform, were five guards. Two on each side of the gate, armed with historically reproduced projectile weapons, and one in the center, smartly dressed, and checking

invitations.

Waves of light cast the illusion of water splashing against the outer walls. Slight shimmers of music dusted the air ever so peacefully. Holographic torches, complete with flickering light, decorated the wall and interior passage. Very breathtaking. Like Cinderella's ball with military overtones.

Two dozen people were outside the gate, gathered around and looking at us. Were they waiting for me? There was a time when the arrival of a Pisces to any function was noteworthy. Since the Wars, however, much of that magic faded until only a few knew or remembered the days when two species of human ruled the Earth.

They were not waiting for us. A few glanced at me because of my floating movement. And I saw one actually direct his eyes to my fingers. An eyebrow went up, but he said nothing. In fact, if anyone drew attention, it was Stanworth and his uniform. A half-dozen older people saluted to him, to which he graciously returned their salute. Chrissy didn't garner much attention, with which she was perfectly happy.

"Names and invitations, please," the guard asked as we approached. He held a tabinal.

"Admiral Stanworth Davis and two guests," Stanworth rumbled. He drew a written invitation out of thin air and presented it to the guard. For very good reasons, we preferred to do everything off-verse.

"Excellent, sir! Welcome to General Mahoney's gala!"

"What is the occasion?" I asked politely.

"We're not allowed to tell, Miss. You'll just have to wait for the announcement from the general himself."

We passed through the gate and into the main courtyard. Open to the sky and surrounded by walls twenty meters high, the stunning elegance of it was something to behold. The music was livelier than outside, as was the overall rumble of conversation. People stood in small knots, either in uniforms of various origins and times or as a guest of someone in uniform. Several cast eyes towards us, but only as a group. No one recognized me.

Despite the many people, there was a sense of openness, which I preferred.



Stanworth led us to the refreshments table. He ordered a water for me and a white wine for Chrissy.

“Do you have any salt?” I asked the attendant. He produced a shaker and I added a generous portion to my water. I returned the salt to the attendant, who had a bemused look on his face.

“Are you sure you want to drink that?” he asked doubtfully.

In response, I took a swallow and smiled at him. He blinked a bit, then shook his head with a chuckle.

“Show off,” Chrissy whispered in my ear as we walked away. Stanworth chuckled just like the attendant, then pulled his arms gently free from our grips.

“If you ladies will be all right, I’m going to arrange a private meeting with the general. I shouldn’t be too long.”

“We’re fine, Stanworth,” Chrissy said. “It shouldn’t take too long to have guys flocking around us.”

“Just be good, okay?” he asked seriously.

“Stanworth!” I said. “You devil!”

“I meant ‘be good’ in the sense of not rendering any of them unconscious, Miss Deborah.” He bowed slightly to us and turned on his heel. Three steps and he had faded into the crowd. It was eerie.

“Spooky,” Chrissy said, echoing my thoughts. “I’m glad he’s our guardian and not someone else’s.”

I nodded. “Grandfather once told me that during the Wars, Stanworth entered a Martian barracks on Ceres, killed all four officers while twenty enlisted slept in the same room, and left without anyone finding out. He said, ‘Those dead which Stanworth send to hell arrive unheralded. Not even Satan knows when to expect them.’ ” I shivered and hugged myself. “Like you said, Love. I’m glad he’s on our side.”

She took my hand and we walked around the courtyard. The crowd had reached its expected number, for the trellis gates had been lowered. Exit now was through the soldiers’ hut, converted to act as a front desk of sorts.

“Isn’t this a wonderful night, Deborah?” Chrissy said, giving a little spin. “Exotic location! Intrigue afoot! A gala composed of military dignitaries and beautiful women, complete with mysterious announcement. And a person who’s the last of her race—and beautiful, to boot!—to be company

with!” She sighed and stared at the stars. “I feel like some sort of holonovel spy, the kind who’s a billionaire playgirl as a cover!”

I laughed. “Uh-oh! That makes me the beautiful assistant who always dies halfway through the book!”

“Oh, no,” Chrissy corrected. “You’re a billionaire playgirl spy, too! We always live, the bad guys always die, and we always get the girl.”

“Mmmmm... doesn’t sound too bad,” I agreed, setting down my glass and taking her by the hands. “But I’ll skip the ‘get the girl’ part and just keep you.”

We came together and began a slow dance. No one else was dancing, but we didn’t care. Whatever may come in the night tonight, right now was perfect. A moment to live for and a moment that would live forever.

How long we danced, oblivious of the people but drawing in the surroundings, I don’t know. Were we watched? Were there whispers? Did some turn away, offended? Or look on with envy for our love? I just don’t know. For that long, slow dance, there was Chrissy and nothing else. Every breath she drew, every beat her heart made, each soft step she took as she danced with me, every gentle touch she shared; I’ll never forget those things or that moment. I really was Cinderella, and nothing else mattered except where I was and who I was with.

“Is this a private party? Or may I intrude?” Came a pleasant male voice from the distant edge of our dream. I hugged Chrissy and slowly pulled from her. Midnight always came too soon.

The man who’d approached us was a colonel of the Resistance. He was perhaps sixty years old, a head of silver hair and a well trimmed mustache that complimented his ebony skin. His face had many sun-worn wrinkles but was still youthful. He carried himself as a man of many battles, tall and proud. His only admission to wounds and age was a wooden cane, deep brown. He held it in front of him now, his strong hands resting on the silver head as he considered us. I smiled slowly at him, but it was Chrissy who spoke.

“Good evening, Colonel. Our apologies for being so... distracted. What can I do for you?”

“Part of it you’ve already done. You’ve turned this military ball into something softer and more enjoyable to attend. My wife and I would lose ourselves like you two. Those times still warm me at

night, even years after she has gone.

“Part of it is, sadly, of a military nature. Might your companion be Hundar Knowler’s granddaughter? I noticed her hands a moment ago.”

“You are very observant, Colonel. And proper,” she replied. From her tone, I knew she was very pleased that he continued to address her. “Yes. She is Deborah Mariner, Hundar Knowler’s granddaughter. I am Christine DuPries, Miss Mariner’s lifelong friend and companion.”

“It is a pleasure meeting you, Miss DuPries, and Miss Mariner as well. I had hoped that tonight’s gathering was perhaps a reconciliation between the Resistance and the Pisces, and was looking for Miss Mariner. Rather, Mariner Knowler’s granddaughter, since she and I have never met.

“I am Thaddeus Franklin. I served with Stanworth during the Wars. It was through Stanworth that I had the pleasure of meeting and working with Hundar Knowler during the early days of the Resistance. Though I was never invited into his home, I feel we were on good terms.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Colonel.” Chrissy extended a hand, to which he unexpectedly bowed and kissed lightly. A smile spread across Chrissy’s face and it lit up.

“You are most gracious, Colonel!”

“When times permit, Miss DuPries. When times permit.” He seemed to reflect for a moment, then took on a more military bearing. “A moment like that is very rare these days.”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry to be the one to end it. Tell me, where’s Stanworth? I saw the old war horse as you entered, but this annoying leg and more annoying babble from others slowed me down.”

“He has gone to arrange our meeting with General Mahoney. I’m not sure why he’s taking so long.”

“If you do not mind, then, I would like to wait with you for his return.”

“Your company is most welcome,” Chrissy replied. I snuggled up closer to her left side and ran a finger down the back of her forearm. Chrissy didn’t even flinch, but knew exactly what I was telling her in our private version of dolphin.

“What can you tell us to help us prepare for the meeting, Colonel? Are there any concerns we should have?”

“There are.” He waved to an open table. “Shall we sit? May I get you anything to drink?”

“Yes to both. I’ll have a white wine and Miss Mariner will have a glass of water, heavily salted.”

He nodded and faded into the crowd. Despite his noticeable limp, like Stanworth, he seemed to disappear.

“Interesting man,” Chrissy ventured.

“I agree,” I said. “And possibly of great value to us. Did you pick up his body language?”

“Some,” she nodded. “He was sincere at all times, but worried for us. There’s something odd about this whole thing. I think I should keep talking for you, Deborah.”

“All right,” I agreed. “I think you’re absolutely right about the Colonel’s motives, too. He sees us as a beacon of hope for the Resistance. At least, the Resistance as he wants it to be. But there is also risk, though from where I couldn’t tell. I came to be all regal and Pisces, but now a different approach is needed, I think. Let’s leave our veils on and I’ll keep my hands low or out of sight.”

“What about your eyes?”

I shrugged. “What can I do? I’ll avoid too much eye contact and act more like your servant than companion.”

The Colonel returned with our drinks and seated himself.

“The attendant gave me an odd look and said I was the second one to order such a drink.” He chuckled. “I said nothing and let him think it’s a new trend.”

“Colonel, let’s come to the point,” Chrissy said without preamble. “You obviously see Miss Mariner as a beacon of hope for you and others in the Resistance who do not agree with your group’s current actions or principles. What exactly are you looking for from Miss Mariner?”

He stared for a moment, taken off guard by our conclusions, then abruptly laughed.

“The Pisces way, eh?”

“Miss Mariner and I have been companions virtually all our lives,” Chrissy said with a shrug. “It rubs off.”

“Very well, then.” He nodded, back on balance. “I and many others worry that in performing our main function—terminating ripes—the Resistance may have lost our main purpose.”

“Which is?”

“To free ripes and end all riping.”

“I wasn’t aware either was possible.”

“The first isn’t. Yet. The second, I believe, is. But we are not focusing on the right target. I fear we do not even know the right target. May I explain?”

Chrissy nodded. I pressed closer to her and told her this was very important. Her gentle but playful squeeze above my knee told me to stop saying obvious and dumb things.

“The first documented riping took place in May, 2073. While the original process took a considerable amount of time, the procedure and result were about the same. A candidate was selected for riping. Initially it was a death row inmate whose execution was imminent. Later it was expanded to those who’d suffered brain death, then to the clinically insane, then... well, you get the holo.

“The candidate was secured to the procedure table and, with the use of ethereal sonics and hypersensitive plasma scalpels, the mind was closed off. Not shut down. Closed off. The brain, which is the physical representation of the mind, went untouched.

“Once closed off, a new barrier was raised around that section, sealing it forever. The person being ripped still had their original persona, but it was locked away.

“With an essentially ‘clean’ mind to work with, the procedure continued to fill a pocket of that mind with a new persona. One that was the result of programming. So complete was the procedure, so invasive and brutally efficient, that the patient awoke with no idea they’d been submitted to riping; that they were ever any other person than the one programmed into them. They only knew they were ripes if told. And even that knowledge was useless and of no comfort. Every ripe is programmed with a basic schema that includes utter contentment with their condition.

“As you know, this meant a huge leap forward in rehabilitation and treatment of until then-untreatable conditions. Riping became widespread after the government opened licensing in 2106.”

“Pardon me, Colonel,” Chrissy said. “But so far you make an excellent case *for* riping.”

“I do, don’t I?” he agreed. “Had it stopped there, I would find great difficulty in faulting the science. Indeed, I do not fault the science. Nor even its application. To that point.

“But it didn’t stop there. Over the past three hundred years, riping has become a widespread convenience and forced recruitment tool. Today, anyone can be tricked into riping, taken in kidnappings, ‘committed’ by supposed loved ones who are only looking for financial gain. Even infants. Homelessness has ceased to be a problem because they’ve all been riped. Mostly for corporate benefit. Of course, the greatest benefactor has been the prostitution industry, most notably Programmed Pleasure Unlimited.

“But even worse is that after a body is worn out because age, disease or hard work, the riped mind isn’t allowed to die with the original body. Our society now moves the riped mind, discarding the old body and brain, into a new host. Sometimes the host is a human shell grown at a biophysical generation plant. More often, the host is a piece of machinery, utterly different from the human condition and normally used in high risk areas.

“And the final atrocity completes this godless cycle. After relocation, the mind is riped again, to better suit the new needs of their owners. And this goes on and on and on. There are people—their minds forever locked away by riping—that have been kept alive through repeated hosting and riping for four centuries. Some of the original ripes are still with us today.”

“A horror,” Chrissy agreed for us. “But is it enough of a horror to use abrupt means to end it? If you work for the freedom of these original personas, then by your own definition you are committing murder when you kill them.”

He smiled. “Not murder. Release. Their minds are closed off, but many of us are convinced that they retain some awareness. Have you ever talked to a ripe who’s been programmed to know he or she is a ripe?” Chrissy shook her head. “They are aware of the original persona. They call it their soul owner, or ‘soulner’. If that awareness works one way, can it not work the other?”

“This is why the Resistance was founded in the early twenty-second century. Someone had to speak out for these enslaved people. And make no mistake; they are enslaved. On rare occasion, a ripe will escape their programming and revert to a previous ripe or even their real persona. Unfortunately, the condition, called sharding, is very brief, never stable, and always fatal.

“Fatal in a sickening, sobering way. A person who dies from sharding dies not once, but once for every single ripe they were, plus the original persona. I’ve seen three over the years. Had I not already been convinced of the rightness of our mission, any one of those three deaths would have convinced me.”

Chrissy nodded and remained silent. Her breath was forcibly controlled, and her hand on my leg was squeezing me almost painfully. I was little better. Grandfather had prepared us for the horror, but it was obvious that he had omitted some information. No doubt waiting for us to be able to handle the gruesome details. But he had died before that time came. Now we had no choice.

She made to speak, but I touched her lightly, telling her I would speak now.

“My apologies for not speaking to you in Piscean dialect, Colonel,” I said, keeping my voice very low. “You deserve it, but I fear it might attract attention.”

His hands gripped the cane harder, but he nodded.

“Stanworth, Miss DuPries and myself are indeed here to help the Resistance achieve its goals. We are also here to give you true direction; the direction Grandfather and all Pisces have known to be true from our very beginning until now, our very end.

“We were invited to this event for that very purpose; to have a meeting with General Mahoney and...”

The background noise of conversation and movement abruptly died off. I also stopped speaking and looked around for the cause of the silence. Chrissy nudged me.

“Up there,” she whispered, nodding to the main wall of the courtyard.

There was a balcony on the second floor, and a man of impressive size was standing in it.

“General Joshua Mahoney,” the Colonel said quietly.

He was younger than the Colonel, perhaps in his forties. And his pale face and jet black hair seemed to

contrast precisely with Colonel Franklin's. So, too, did his demeanor, which showed confidence and strength like the Colonel, but at the cost of compassion. I could have been mistaken, though. The flickering holographic torch light made reading difficult at a distance.

Such was his presence that he did not say a word and all quieted to hear him.

"I thank you all for attending tonight's event," he boomed. His voice reverberated off the walls, giving the impression he surrounded us with his aura. "Especially since none of you know the reason for our celebration. Allow me to remedy that now.

"There is among us a person to whom the Resistance is proud to add to its ranks. She has keen insight concerning the evil of riping and the true purpose of our fight."

I flushed. Why did he choose this way to announce me? And why would Stanworth allow it? He knew I preferred avoiding this kind of fanfare.

"You will be surprised by her beauty, but do not be fooled by it. Her mind is sharper than a lancet, her intuition more reliable than the sunrise. With her as advisor, the Resistance *will* be successful.

Gentlemen. Ladies. Comrades all. I proudly and happily present our newest member: Major Joan Turpin!"

Movement came from behind the General and a woman appeared beside him. The crowd began a cheering and applause that was hearty and sincere. Though Chrissy and I did not join in, I knew the reason why they cheered so enthusiastically for her.

She was Pisces.



## Chapter Nine



“Damn it!” Chrissy shouted, kicking over a chair in our small kitchenette. The look on her face wasn’t the kind that evoked thoughts of peace and harmony.

“This can’t be possible! Who does that bitch think she is? And where did she come from? We’ve known for years that you’re the last, Promise! And Grandfather has known for decades, even before you were born! How could he have been wrong?” She collapsed into the still upright chair and stared up at the ceiling.

We were still at Qaitbay Fort and had been given a room for the night, along with the other guests. Tomorrow was to be the first formal direction from Joan Turpin. General Mahoney wanted to be certain no one in the Resistance—nor his selected guests—missed it.

It was a small room, but it had a bedroom and kitchenette, so our needs were met. It may or may not have been bugged, but it didn’t matter; Stanworth had activated our communication shield—a Pisces invention—and there was no way to penetrate it.

“Perhaps she is not our enemy, Chrissy,” I ventured. I was much calmer than Chrissy was, but still upset. My outer peace was only slightly more than a façade.

I turned to Stanworth, who sat on the large sofa, forearms on knees, shaking his head. “Stanworth? Is it possible for Grandfather to have missed a Pisces in his efforts?”

“Had you asked me before tonight, Promise, I’d have said no, it was impossible. Hundar had three things that consumed his time after Janine died; You, the Purpose, and identifying every single remaining Pisces—full-blooded or otherwise.”

“Then she could be only half-Pisces?” Chrissy asked hopefully. “Or one-quarter? That’s something.”

“Is it?” I snapped. “It’s better that she may be a mongrel like me?”

“Promise!” Stanworth barked.

“I’m... sorry, Chrissy,” I hugged her. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know why I said that.”

“That’s okay, Love,” she said quietly, hugging me back before kissing my lips gently. “We weren’t prepared for this to happen. When that woman stepped onto the balcony, our lives became worthless.”

“No,” Stanworth said firmly. “Don’t either of you think that. Ever. Your lives have worth beyond imagining, regardless of our being caught off-guard like this. If each of you loves the other so much, then that by itself is sufficient. And I love you two as if you were mine. In many ways, you are.

“But also never forget that your grandfather was Ebbing Tide, the last Mariner for the Pisces. His life was not worthless, and I’ll have harsh words with any who say otherwise.

“Despite how it looks, we must trust him. Promise, would you abandon the Purpose in the face of danger?”

“Of course not!” I said angrily.

“Yet that is what we face now. Danger and uncertainty. I will not retreat. Neither will you two, and you both know it.” We nodded, our emotions calming. He nodded in return. “Good. Now let’s look at this with calm thoughts, shall we?”

“Could Promise be right, Stanworth?” Chrissy asked, much more under control. “Could she be an ally?”

“It is possible,” he said hesitantly. “But if so, I can’t see how she could have gone all this time without speaking to Ebbing. She looks to be in her forties.” He considered me. “Is it possible the Pisces had a backup plan for the Purpose?”

“No,” I said firmly. “There is no Plan B. Either the Purpose comes to life on its own through us, or I and my race fail. Still, I’m not so proud to deny help from even the most unlikely source. Even another Pisces.”

“I think she’s either full or half Pisces,” Stanworth said. “While it’s possible she could be less than half Pisces, no such mix of blood ever carried all aspects of the Pisces race. Except you, Promise.”

I sighed.

“I admit that I’m quite eager to meet this woman on a personal level. Other than Grandfather, I’ve never seen another Pisces. Except in Timelessness.”

“That’s interesting, Promise,” Chrissy said thoughtfully. “Would Grandfather know what to say or do if you met him in Timelessness? For that matter, have you or he ever seen this woman in the time stream? That might tell us a lot.”

I nodded. “I’ve been thinking that, too. I’ll go for a swim in Timelessness tonight and speak to Grandfather. It’s possible he’s spoken to me before about her and I’ve simply forgotten.”

Stanworth nodded. “That’s true. You lose all future memory at the conclusion of the swim.” He stood and stretched. “Well! We have a meeting with General Mahoney early tomorrow morning. I’m turning in and I suggest you two do the same. Good night.”

“G’night, Stanworth.” Chrissy kissed him on the cheek.

“I’m going out for a short walk and maybe a swim. It’ll help me settle down.”

“Want me to come?” Chrissy immediately offered.

“Thanks, but no. I need a little quiet time. Don’t worry, I’ll be back in an hour.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Chrissy said. She walked me to the door and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

“G’night, Promise.”

“Good night, Chrissy.” I closed the door behind me and was alone with my thoughts. I drifted off down the hall, not really caring where my destination was.

The current owners of Qaitbay Fort had seen this as a unique and exciting location for a top-tier hotel. And so it was. But they’d also wisely seen that it could remain that way if the character of the building remained in the forefront. To that end, while the rooms were modern and luxurious, they kept an ancient world charm to them, including original fireplaces, area rugs to accent the stone floors, and substantially reduced access to the outside world. The puterverse interface was two dimensional and the comlinks required the use of ancient devices called ‘phones’.

What appealed to me most now, though, was the flickering torch light and the abandoned hall

passage. A gentle breeze blew from the end of the hall. There were ghost doors and climate fields, but they on the northern tip of Africa. I wandered out that way and wound up on the ramparts that overlooked Playful.

His sea breeze caught me unawares with its freshness and friendliness. It blew the wrap off my head, but I was alone, so I left it off. There was a comfortably sized spot between two bastions, so I sat there and curled my legs up. I peered over the edge.

Twenty meters down, Playful came right up to the wall. Since it was a harbor, the water deepened quickly. A long jump from this height would easily land me in twenty fathoms. Looking more closely, I could see to the bottom. It was free of obstruction. Maybe...

“Nice night for a swim, huh?”

I started at the voice behind me. How had she approached me so quietly? Perhaps the sea breeze and my own concentration had let my guard slip.

It was neither. It was because the woman was Joan Turpin. Tall, thin and with long blond hair, she had all the visible markings of a true Pisces, including full gills and pale eyes.

I got down and went to my feet immediately, covering my head while doing so, and went to a deep bow, folding my hands at my neck.

“This one begs forgiveness and pleads for your children’s time. This one was poorly prepared...”

“Oh, knock it off,” she said, somewhat annoyed. “And stand up! We’ve never even met before. How could you possibly offend me?”

I straightened hesitantly. She’d given forgiveness after a fashion, I suppose.

“This one regrets the irritation caused you. May your light be joy-filled...”

“Listen,” she said. “I don’t speak Pisces. Let’s just go with air-breather, okay?”

“You... Don’t speak the language of the People?” I repeated incredulously. “How can that be?”

“It’s a long and sad story,” she replied. Carefully, she brought her hand to my face and brushed aside part of the veil, revealing a gill.

“So it’s true, then,” she said quietly. “You really are Pisces.” She let the veil fall back. “What’s your name?”

“Deborah Mariner.”

“You’re Hundar Knowler’s granddaughter, aren’t you?” I nodded. “And you’re here to offer your services to the Resistance?” Again I nodded. “And I’ll bet you didn’t expect no find me here?”

“No. I was raised believing myself to be the last of our race. There are no more full Pisces and the ones who have Pisces blood do not have the traits.” I looked at her. “At least, that’s what I thought until this evening.” I kept my gaze on her eyes.

“I see,” she said slowly. “And you’re still wondering if I’m full Pisces or part. Does it matter?” she asked, echoing my question of Chrissy earlier. “Aren’t you only one-quarter Pisces?”

“By parentage, yes. But I am a throwback. Save for my hair, I have all racial traits, memories and abilities of the People.” My gaze didn’t flinch. She interpreted correctly.

“I’m to be tested, then?” she laughed. “That is appropriate. And since we’re at my favorite diving spot, I know just how to begin. In the Mediterranean.” With that, she dropped her dress off her shoulders and stood naked before me. Still smiling, she climbed up on the very ledge I’d been sitting on, and dove off.

I watched her hit the water perfectly and disappear. Moments later she surfaced and waved up at me.

“Come on! You can’t very well test me from up there!”

She was right. I shed my veil and clothing and dove in after her. Playful’s water was warm and quiet. The scent was both different and very familiar. It had been three years since I’d last swum in Playful and I’d almost forgotten how nice he was.

I surfaced beside her. From the vibrations of her body and the movement of her arms and legs, it was clear she had no artificial device to breathe water. Even the Pisces mechanical gill produced a gentle hum.

“You lead,” I offered. She nodded and dove down. The bottom was twenty-one fathoms down, an almost impossible depth for a human to reach without equipment. It was sandy and well lit from the

night sky. She pointed away from the fort and started out. I let the sand run through my fingers to quickly orient myself, then followed her.

She set an excellent pace and within twenty minutes had gone over fifteen kilometers. The bottom had dropped off and we followed it down to two hundred and twenty fathoms. There was no doubt now that she was Pisces in physical strength and stamina. And as we hadn't once come up to breathe air, she clearly had fully functional gills.

I heard a clicking off in the distance, followed by vibrations of splashing and the slightest scent of blood. Dolphins! I rushed up to her and rubbed against her body with my back.

“Night Comfort! People of People End Life Keep Life!” I told her with clicks and rubs. “Family Now! Tasty Life!”

She didn't say anything in return. In fact, she pushed me away when I brushed alongside her a second time. Not understanding what she wanted, I swam ahead and up, leading. About a kilometer away, I started shouting to them so they'd know we were coming.

“Greetings People of People!” I clicked and squealed. “Promise Tide Ebbing Tide Ruler! New People!”

“Greetings Promise Tide Ebbing Tide Ruler! Under Night Joy Sweet Playful Tasty Finder!” came the happy reply. “Safe Night! Happy Now! Tasty Life Family!”

I swam up to Under Night Joy and bumped him in greeting. We went full speed to the surface and broke into the night air, twirling and laughing.

“Tasty Life!” he tempted. “End Life Keep Life! Family!”

“Family!” I agreed. “End Life Keep Life!”

We dove back down to sixteen fathoms and began feeding. I was pretty hungry since I'd lost my appetite just before dinner. I was on my third fish when I remembered my manners. I clicked for Joan, but she didn't answer. I clicked again to locate her and found her just on the outside of the feeding area. Perhaps she was shy in getting to know dolphins. I snatched a fish as it flashed by me. It was about a kilo in weight and smelled young and tasty. A good peace offering. I swam down to Joan.

“Tasty Life! Friend! Under Night Joy Family! New People Family!” I exclaimed and offered her the

fish, still flipping madly in my grip. “End Life Keep Life!”

Instead of taking it, though, she knocked it from my hand and swam away at high speed. I watched her wake ebb outwards and fade. What had happened? Had I offended her somehow?

I needed to catch up to her, but absolutely had to say good bye to my new Family.

“Under Night Joy!” I clicked out, though with not as much zeal as I had a minute ago. “New Sad Wash! Playful Joy New Friend Home! Sadness! Farewell!”

Under Night Joy appeared beside me. Slowing down, he released the fish he had and rolled over on his back.

“Sadness!” he moaned. “Gladness Sadness! Promise Tide Friend Gladness! New Friend Home Sadness!”

“Under Night Joy Farewell!” I said, stroking his belly and tickling his chin.

“Sadness!” he said again, most emphatically. “Promise Tide Sadness! Joy Family!” he paused, then clicked out very hesitantly, “Sadness New Friend! End Life End Life New Friend! Family Safe End Life! Promise Farewell Joy!” He rolled over and flipped away, leaving me to wonder what danger it was he sensed.

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“Where do you get off making sexual passes at me? And just why the hell did you offer me that disgusting fish? God! The thing was still alive!” Joan barked as I came out of the water at a sandy beach near Qaitbay Fort.

“Of course it was alive! I’d never offer a friend a dead fish! I was just offering you dinner,” I said, confused and a little miffed. “You know you insulted Under Night Joy when you knocked...”

“Who?” she snapped.

“Under Night Joy Sweet Playful Tasty Finder. The Family leader,” I said. Only then did it dawn on me. “Oh! I am so sorry! You... You don’t speak dolphin either, do you?” I thought about it for a moment. “Or any underwater language for that matter. That’s why you ignored me and thought I...”

was..." I reached out and touched her arm. "Joan, please forgive me. I hadn't realized how rude I was coming across."

"Well... That's okay, I suppose," she said, greatly mollified. "You're right, though. I can't speak other languages." She stared out over Playful, lost in sadness. "I've never had anyone to teach me."

And here I was, all ready to get bent out of shape about her rudeness. I'd looked forward to meeting her because I'd only known Grandfather, and had completely forgotten she may have never met a Pisces. My self-pity looked pretty trite right now.

I sat beside her and put an arm around her to comfort her. She shrugged and squirmed away from me.

"What's wrong?" I asked, feeling tears welling up.

"Look, Deborah. I appreciate your trying to comfort me, but I just don't feel... right being touched by another woman like that. Especially when we're naked like this. No offense."

I blinked several times, then wiped away my tears.

"I'm sorry. That's not what I intended. I just wanted to let you know that I was there for you." I stood up. "May I at least take your hands?" She nodded, so I did. How different they felt from Chrissy's! Joan's fingers intertwined perfectly with mine. It caught my breath, but I hid it well. I think. "We're two of a kind, Joan. Let's not lose that."

She searched my eyes, but finally nodded.

"Thank you, Deborah. I look forward to that. Come on, let's get back to our rooms before we get spotted out here."

"Ummm... to be honest, I was so excited about jumping into Playful, I left my clothing on the ramparts. I... don't have anything to wear."

"Kids!" She exclaimed with a laugh. "Never thinking about the future." She led me to a nearby rocky outcropping. In between two boulders was a sealed box. "I always keep a couple robes in here. If I feel the urge for a midnight swim, I don't have to give a free show to the guards afterwards."

I laughed and took the robe she offered.



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“So how long have you been with the Resistance, Joan?” We’d gone back to her room to talk and drink hot chocolate. Nowhere near as precious as being with Chrissy, but still exciting. This woman was like me!

“Maybe four weeks now. I was a navigational officer for the ball chaser *Four Winds* and had gone on ten deep explores over the past thirty-six years.” At my surprised look, she smiled. “You thought me in my forties, perhaps?” I nodded. “A bonus to low gravity is slower physical aging. I’ll be fifty-seven next March.”

She sipped her chocolate. “So much had happened while we were gone that I almost didn’t recognize Earth when we got back. In fact, I stayed on board after I’d heard what had happened to those Pisces that had survived the Rock. It was only because of the Purpose that I realized I had to stay on Earth.”

“How did you come to serve on a ball chaser?” I asked curiously. Pisces never served on ships.

“I know what you’re thinking. And yes, I was the exception to the rule. When ITA had approached your grandfather in 2377 about having a Pisces serve on a ball chaser, he was not in favor of it. It wasn’t until ITA disclosed their purpose to explore worlds explicitly for the Pisces that he acquiesced.

“For us?”

“Yes. It wasn’t even four years after the Rock and already it was becoming apparent that public sentiment had radically changed concerning us. Your grandfather saw the wisdom in releasing one Pisces from her duties to allow for a chance to resettle our people. Why he chose me, I don’t know.”

“I’ll ask him tonight.” I commented. I couldn’t resist one last test, and added casually, “Are you going to be there?”

She sat there and considered her answer, as though understanding this was a test. She was also debating with herself whether or not to tell me something. She came to a decision and put down her mug.

“Deborah, may I be honest with you? As one Pisces to another?”

I leaned forward and set down my mug. I was about to take her hands, but held myself back. I'd messed up enough tonight.

"Of course, Joan. Anything we say is between you, I, and Chrissy."

"Chrissy?" She gave a doubtful look. "Your... girlfriend?"

"No," I corrected gently. "Chrissy, my mate. Just as I would not expect you to withhold anything from your mate, were you married, you cannot expect me to withhold from mine simply because we're both women."

"All right," she said, looking uncomfortable, but agreeing. "The truth is, Deborah, I haven't been there for forty years."

"Where? In Timelessness? Why not?"

"I couldn't," she said simply. "We were at high FTL much of the time, and one of the downsides to FTL travel is that I'm cut off from Timelessness. I... I'm not sure I can even go there anymore."

"Haven't you tried since returning to Earth?"

She shook her head. "Why? I'm the last Pisces. Or thought I was." She smiled. "But if I can make it tonight, be sure to look for me! Where will you be?"

"Probably at Mariner's Home, since Grandfather lived there before the Rock. I've been there enough times, it's my second home, too. I hope you can make it. Try it once you're in bed." I yawned. "In fact, bed sounds pretty good right now. I'm kinda sleepy, Joan. Will I see you tomorrow at the meeting?"

"Absolutely!" she said. "And I hope to see you in a little while in Timelessness." She stood up. "Good night, Deborah."

"Good night, Joan."

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"Deborah?"

"Grandfather?" I was sleeping on my bed in the Fort and heard him call to me.

“I’m here, Granddaughter. At Mariner Home. Will you join me and swim for awhile?”

“Of course!” I sprang out of bed and staggered slightly. “Whoa,” I said, holding my hand against my head.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I just had a dizzy spell. I’ve never felt like that in Timelessness before.”

“Well, perhaps you got to bed too late, tonight?” he suggested.

“Uh-huh.” Still a little dizzy, I went to the bedroom door and opened it. Beyond was blackness, but not the safety of Traveler’s bottom.

“Traveler doesn’t look right, Grandfather. What’s going on?” I started getting anxious.

“Something wonderful and something sad, Deborah. The wonderful thing is that this Timelessness swim means you’ve met Joan Turpin, haven’t you?”

“How... How did you know that?” I asked, shocked that he still had his future memory. Or had he just guessed?

“There are many things I haven’t shared with you Deborah. Knowledge of Joan Turpin is one of them.”

“Why?” I asked, sitting back on the bed.

“Because, Granddaughter, Joan Turpin is the Pisces who will complete the Purpose.”

“What?” I whispered, frozen by shock.

“Joan Turpin is the one, not you. That’s why I allowed her to be released from obligation and be assigned to deep space. With the genocide of our race already beginning, I saw this as an opportunity to protect ourselves.”

“But that makes no sense, Grandfather!” I exploded. “She’s been gone for decades, while I’ve been with you my entire life, understanding the Purpose, learning the ways, preparing for the day when I would continue your legacy.” I was sobbing. “Your... your quest.”

“I’m sorry, Deborah, but you’ve missed it. I selected Joan for the deep space mission because I had

intended her to take over. You were my backup plan, in case she didn't return. Now that she has, you'll be an invaluable assistant to her. But I want you to understand: My quest is hers, not yours."

"Grandfather, no!" I shouted, stamping a foot. "This isn't right! You've never told me these things before. I... I..."

"Come now, Deborah," he said softly. "I love you as a granddaughter, but does it really sound reasonable to turn over the fate of an entire race to a teenager, just because she is my granddaughter?"

"But..."

"It's not reasonable!" He insisted. "Joan Turpin is the rightful leader of the Pisces!"

I was getting dizzy by the moment, both physically and emotionally.

"No, Grandfather..." I sobbed.

"Yes, Deborah," he said. "You will obey me in this."

I looked away with tears in my eyes and said nothing.

"Granddaughter?"

I nodded slowly. What had happened to me?

"Yes, Grandfather."

"Good girl," he took a breath and continued. "Now for the sad news. This is the last time we'll speak to each other."

"NO!" I screamed, staggering toward the black portal. "No, Grandfather! WHY??"

"I'm sorry. I will only share Timelessness with Joan. If you need to contact me, go through her. Good-bye, Deborah."

"No! Grandfather! Please! NO!!" I sobbed and lurched into the darkness.

## Chapter Ten



Tuesday, December 29, 2415

A gentle shaking.

“Promise?”

Another gentle shake, followed by an even gentler caressing of my hair and face. She sat on the bed beside me and draped her body over mine, holding me in her arms.

“You have to get up, Promise,” she said in a whisper. “Everybody’s waiting and you can’t afford to miss this gathering. We’re on shaky ground as it is and your not being there will forfeit any chance you and I have on influencing the outcome.”

I felt no need to move or even acknowledge her. I was so very tired. Sleep no longer held the comfort it did, and yet because of that, I needed more sleep.

“Promise, please!”

Her loving plea touched my heart and I opened my eyes. She rubbed my tears away and help me sit up.

Why couldn’t we be home right now? How much I missed the Maine Wilderness! How much I yearned for the mansion with its fireplaces and cozy alcoves and quiet, safe niches. How much I needed to be in *my* waters again. Playful was a good companion, but it was Traveler I wanted to swim in now.

Instead, we were still at the Qaitbay Fort. Qaitbay Prison seemed more appropriate. The Resistance was treating us well enough, but when everyone else who’d attended the event two weeks ago had left the following morning, I held us here. I had to. I would not disappoint Grandfather.

True to his word, Grandfather had not spoken to me since that horrible last visit. I couldn't even look for him; my ability to swim the time stream was gone, cutting me off from my people. All except Joan. She'd graciously accepted the burden that had passed from me to her. I'd been so numb, I remember little beside Stanworth's quiet anger and Chrissy's vocal outrage. They remained unconvinced that this was truly what Grandfather wanted and had planned for, but they could only go with what I'd told them. Ultimately, Chrissy had joined in my quest and Stanworth was a servant. I led our threesome. It had become an arduous task these past two weeks, despite their best efforts.

"What time is it?" I mumbled.

"Time to get up," Chrissy said with brittle cheerfulness. "It's nine. They convene at ten-thirty, so we've ninety minutes to get ready."

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Ninety minutes later, we were ready. On the outside. On the inside, I was still numb. Chrissy covered her hair, then mine. I was almost helpless these days, so deep was my depression.

We left our room, escorted by Stanworth, and made our way down to the conference room, located four floors beneath us. I glanced at the far end of the hall. What I wouldn't give for a swim! But General Mahoney didn't want to risk my safety. I'd argued that it would be nearly impossible for anyone or any thing to attack me in the sea, but Joan had agreed and restricted me to the Fort. To emphasize the importance of "my safety," all outer doors had been sealed and a guard posted on the rampart walkways.

We stepped off the eledisc and walked down the short hall to the conference room. Our echoing footsteps only deepened my mood. I was doing what Grandfather wanted. Why couldn't I be happy about that?

The guards opened the double doors for us and we entered, Stanworth and Chrissy first, me behind. Chrissy took my arm and led me to the lower end of the table. I took a seat beside Thomas Stewart and Chrissy sat beside me. Stanworth remained standing behind me, an imposing monolith of protection.

"You're five minutes late," Joan said, starting the meeting on the wrong note. She should have addressed Chrissy, but that protocol had been eliminated. Ordinarily, I'd have her blood on the floor

at my feet, but Grandfather...

“This one regrets misusing your children’s time and begs forgiveness.” I bowed my head and waited.

She continued the meeting without acknowledging me, forcing me to remain in my humble position. What was wrong with me? Stanworth and Chrissy were very upset with me, but I couldn’t shake my frozen state of helplessness. How long would this go on? Was I truly being Pisces? Yes, an ugly voice inside me said. You should serve the air-breathers and the Pisces, it said with spines of correction. I had nothing to say in return.

“We’ve come quite far,” General Mahoney started, addressing the assembly. There were perhaps twenty people there, representing four factions. The Resistance, Red Vengeance, Peace For All, which we had contacted, and a fourth group called Eternal Earth. This last group had been held outside of Grandfather’s influence by his choice. A group nearly as large as the Resistance, their goals of making Earth all mankind’s center of commerce and culture was both unrealistic and contrary to the Purpose. So, too, were their extreme methods of action, which had included terrorism. Now that Joan had included them, they’d forsworn it.

General Mahoney continued speaking. “Although two short weeks ago our paths were quite different, under the guidance of a Pisces,” he indicated Joan, “we have found unity and can strike out together, each aiding the other.”

“And what is to be our first target, General?” asked a colonel of Eternal Earth. I hadn’t picked up his name, nor really cared.

In answer, Joan stood. Still she ignored me. My face burned with embarrassment.

“The first target will be the London riping facilities. We have reason to believe a large percentage of their activities supports Programmed Pleasure Unlimited. If we hit them hard enough, it’ll not only deplete them financially, the destruction of such a significant target will let NAtch know we’re for real.”

This wasn’t right. So far within me that it spat acid throughout my mind and body, I knew this wasn’t the proper action. Yet who was I to question my grandfather? To doubt Ebbing Tide, the man who knew the Purpose, knew the Unbreathable, knew the right way to go? If Joan was his choice to

continue the Purpose, to question her was to question him. I felt so lost.

Thomas nudged me discreetly.

“You’re on, Deborah.”

I kept my head down, but looked around as best I could. They were indeed looking at me.

“Miss Mariner!” General Mahoney barked, but I kept my head down. Didn’t he know I had to follow Pisces protocol in the same way women had to cover their heads in this ancient culture of Alexandria?

“You are forgiven,” Joan said, releasing me. I stood and looked at the General.

“Yes, General?”

“Hundar Knowler has supported numerous factions over the years. True, yes?”

I nodded slightly. A slight murmur around the table indicated not everyone knew this.

“And you inherited his estates and wealth, correct?”

Again I nodded. A sick feeling in my stomach told me where this was going.

“Then you’ll be financing the new Resistance, of course. Please make all funds available to Joan as soon as possible.” He closed the subject and continued on, turning to the holoboard behind him. A schematic of a large complex popped up. “As for the style of attack, we’ll be doing a double feint...”

“No, General.”

“Eh? Who said that?” He spun around. He followed everyone else’s gaze to me.

“What did you say?”

“I said, ‘no,’ General.” Summoning up all my will, I shook my head. Joan shot me a hard look, making me flinch. “I will not be financing this activity. Nor any future activity.”

“Why not?” he demanded.

“Because I feel this is the wrong path.”

“You would disobey the honor and memory of your Grandfather?” Joan said quietly, disapproval in her voice. “Turn his quest to dust? Have our race come to nothing?”



“No... No,” I stammered. “It’s just that...”

“Then you will surrender the moneys.” She looked at me with narrowed eyes. “In fact, perhaps it would be appropriate to start legal action to have the funds transferred to me. After all, I am the last Pisces. Not you.”

I sat down. I wanted to crawl under the table. Fortunately, Chrissy took my hand and held it tight. Hot tears came and it took all my effort to not sob.

“That will not happen, Miss Turpin.”

Stanworth! Bless him again and again! He put a strong hand on my shoulders and squeezed it reassuringly.

“We were not speaking to you, Davis,” General Mahoney said.

“Yes, sir, you were. Miss Deborah did inherit all of Hundar Knowler’s assets. But they are managed by me until her twenty-first birthday. Miss Deborah just turned nineteen.”

The quiet around the table was complete. Without proper financing, all their plans came to nothing.

“I see,” General Mahoney said slowly. “And if Miss Mariner instructed you to disperse funds?”

“I would,” Stanworth said simply. “But despite unwarranted pressure by you and Miss Turpin, and despite Miss Deborah’s misplaced obedience to Miss Turpin, she has decided to not support the direction the Resistance is taking.”

Joan stood up abruptly.

“It appears we’re at an impasse for the moment.” She didn’t seem too upset. A small warning tingled at the back of my mind. “You are excused, Miss Mariner, as is your companion. I would like Mr. Davis to remain behind, however.”

“For what purpose?” he asked coolly.

“To help us plan the offensive. We do have sufficient financial backing to begin our actions.”

He stared at her impassively, then bent down to me.

“I’ll be all right. Stay in our room or out in the court. Don’t wander for now.” I nodded and looked up

at him, trying to smile.

“Thank you, Stanworth. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

He cracked a grin. “You’d probably kill everyone here.” He kissed my lightly on the forehead. “Your fiery temper can be quite a handful, but I wouldn’t mind seeing it about now.”

Joan turned to me. “You are dismissed.”

Burning with embarrassment, I rose, bowed to her, and left, Chrissy holding my arm. Her harsh grip betrayed her anger to me but fortunately went unnoticed by the others.

We made our way up a broad flight of stairs to ground level. The courtyard opened before us and we sat down on a bench beside a large tree. Ahead of us, the main entry to the Fort was sealed with a ghost door. The glimmer of the door’s energy plane cast a harsh light on the posted guards. Posted on the inside. Qaitbay Fort truly was a prison.

The overhead sun was brilliant and warm, despite it being late December. I reflected over the past year and the many changes it had brought into my life.

A year ago, Grandfather, Stanworth, Chrissy and I were in the Swiss Alps, enjoying a winter ski vacation. Well, Chrissy and I were skiing at least. Stanworth mysteriously said it brought back too many unpleasant memories. And Grandfather’s breathing had become too difficult for extended periods of exercise. I think even then we knew he was winding down.

The life enjoyed by my grandfather and all his friends and family ended on August 13, only four and half months ago. I was a basket case for several weeks until finally pulled out by Chrissy and Stanworth. And like a whirlwind, I was sitting here, the life I was so secure in twelve short months ago now on the verge of disintegration.

As always, Chrissy knew my thoughts. She put an arm around me and pulled me close.

“A tough year, huh?” She squeezed my shoulder and kissed my forehead. “I know I’ll be glad when 2416 finally gets here. I’ve had my fill of 2415.”

We sat quietly and let the gentle breeze spilling over the high walls caress us. By and by, I fell asleep in Chrissy’s arms, and while I was still denied Timelessness, comfort and peace came at last.

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“So that’s where it is.” There was a flash of flame from the pan Stanworth was using. He expertly threw on spices and a dash of some liquid, which changed the color of the flame for a brief moment before he covered it.

“They’re going through with the London strike,” Chrissy said glumly, swirling the remains of her wine in her glass. “This is not good.”

“It’s not good,” Stanworth agreed. He looked at me to get my opinion, but I didn’t care. I lay slumped on the sofa, staring indifferently at them. He frowned slightly, then continued talking to Chrissy while seeing to the meal.

“General Mahoney doesn’t have the firm coalition he was hoping for yet, but Joan’s gone a long way in holding together what they do have.”

Stanworth finished preparing the spiced squid and served us. A chef of high skill, he could use even our little kitchenette to prepare four star meals. I shuffled over and slumped into my chair. He laid out a honeycombed pastry sprinkled heavily with ginger, then poured our drinks. More wine for he and Chrissy, salted water for myself. Since the General had forbidden my swims, I relied more on salted drinking water now. He sat down and prayed while Chrissy and I waited patiently. He finished, then waited for us to begin.

It was good, but I only picked at it, not really hungry.

“Do you think they’ll try to get rid of us, Stanworth?” Chrissy asked between bites.

“No.” He shook his head. “We’re safe both physically and position-wise. Physically because while Joan may lay claim to being the Pisces to lead them, Promise is Ebbing’s granddaughter.”

“Then why don’t they let us go?”

“For the same reason, Miss Chrissy. As long as we’re present, giving at least tacit approval to the coalitions, the chance they’ll stay together is greater. So while we’re essentially their prisoners, we’re their honored guests, too.”

“That’s not the most stable of situations,” Chrissy said doubtfully. “I mean, how long can we...”

“As long as *I* say,” I snapped. They stared at me. “We can’t dishonor my grandfather nor my people. I don’t like this any more than you two. But until I can be convinced that this isn’t the proper path, I must follow it.”

“No matter how painful, Promise?” Stanworth asked gently.

I nodded. “No matter how painful.”

“Ebbing would be proud of his granddaughter,” he replied evenly. “If not with her decision, then with her dedication.”

“Excuse me,” I said, rising quickly. “I’m not hungry.”

I hurried to the bedroom and threw myself on the bed, crying. What was the way? How could I have become so lost?

A quiet click of the door told me Chrissy had followed me into the room.

“Promise.” It wasn’t Chissy. It was Stanworth. He sat on my side of the bed and laid a warm, heavy hand on my shoulder.

I sniffed and looked at him with tear-filled eyes.

“What am I to do, Stanworth?” I sniffed again. “It all seems so... so...” I returned to crying, but now with my head in his lap.

He said nothing for a long while, instead remaining silent and softly stroking my hair. I continued crying, his strength and faith in me both a comfort and a source of guilt. How could I let him down like this? Even more so Chrissy? Yet my uselessness these past two weeks had done just that. To resist Joan’s guidance and authority was to let Grandfather and the People down. Could it be so very impossible, pleasing both my Pisces heritage and my two closest human friends? Stanworth suddenly broke the silence.

“Did you know, Promise, that when you were born, your father and grandfather almost came to blows on how to raise you?”

I rolled over onto my back, my head still on his lap, and wiped at my tears.

“Really?”

“Really. Your mother was quite adamant about raising you human, despite your obvious Pisces traits. Your father was nearly as adamant, conceding only to allow you to have a Pisces name.”

“Did my parents love each other?” I asked suddenly.

He nodded. “Very much so. The tension between your father and grandfather in no way affected the love between your parents. Your grandfather and grandmother treasured that. In fact, it was because of your parents’ love for each other that your grandfather at first acquiesced to Mary’s wishes. There’d been so little love to his son, your father, that your grandfather couldn’t deny him.”

“What about Grandmother?”

He smiled slowly. “Janine was a person unique to herself. Your grandfather often called her ‘the only fireball that could exist in both worlds’. He was right. She had her own mind and spoke it frequently. She was pure air-breather, but had an incredible grasp of the Pisces way. She loved and supported Ebbing in every single endeavor he undertook.

“But to get back to my story. Everett and Mary were your parents and chose to raise you as human. They even looked into surgery to remove some of your Pisces traits.”

“What?” I whispered, shocked.

“Promise, you have to understand the times and their position. There had already been several attempts on Everett’s life, and on the life of his sister, your aunt, Katherine.” He smiled. “Katherine. I’ll tell you more about her some day.

“Your parents wanted to save you the agony of being Pisces. The Wars were less than ten years over, and sentiment still ran high against the Pisces. Remember, only eighty percent of your race was destroyed by The Rock.” He shook his head in irritation. “ ‘Only’ is a poor choice. I apologize. The rest were hunted down and killed. Or imprisoned until their natural deaths.

So here are your parents, having to make a decision that will alienate his father but possibly save your life. Because of his mixed blood, Everett had the stigma of being Pisces, but none of the benefits. His wife is completely human and wants the best life for you. So their actions were done out of love, if also

out of fear and ignorance.”

“Why are you telling me this now, Stanworth?”

“Because you are in the same position as your parents were, Promise. And, in a way, the same position your grandparents were, as well. You must decide what you know with your eyes and mind, and what you trust with your heart and soul.”

“What is your counsel, Stanworth?” I whispered.

He leaned over and kissed me gently on the lips.

“My counsel, dear Promise, is to make your decision knowing I will always be at your side.” He laid me softly on the pillow and left quietly, the door clicking shut.

Another near silent sound. I turned my head and saw Chrissy stepping in. She was teary-eyed but smiling tentatively. She closed the bedroom door, then locked it.

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A muffled explosion followed by a hard banging on the door woke me up with a jolt. Chrissy raised up on her arms, staring at the door.

There came a second banging, then the door burst open, a booted foot telling the tale. Behind him poured in a near deafening alarm tone.

I was on my back, but slid quickly out of bed, grabbing for my nightstand. I seized my hair ribbon and yanked out the finger blade.

I moved fast, putting myself between the danger and Chrissy. We were both still naked, but whoever was out there wouldn't have the time to look. I'd slash their throats and smear their blood on my body before they even knew they'd died. It had to be quick, though, before my mind and muscles began seizing up from having Chrissy so close while I fought. As I closed, I thought about Stanworth. Where was he?

He was at our door. He had on face black, combat clothing and a high output energy rifle. It was he who'd kicked the door down.

“Get dressed. Both of you.” He raised an arm and I heard movement in the background. “Now.”

My thoughts were whirling, but I instantly obeyed. Whatever Stanworth wanted, I would give him. I nodded and turned back to Chrissy. She’d heard and was already dressing. I grabbed up my second skin and slipped into it. I didn’t know what was coming, but this skin allowed me many options. I tied my ribbon into my hair, more for a sheathe than as an accessory. I replaced the finger blade.

Chrissy pulled her sweater over her head and swept her ionized comb, set at high, through her long blonde hair. It curled and flowed and remained behind her shoulders, out of the way. We were ready.

There were four people plus Stanworth in our living room. Two were stationed at the door, the other two were working at the room’s window that looked out over Playful. Stanworth stepped up to us.

“Sorry to do this, Miss Deborah. Miss Chrissy,” he said tersely. “But it’s time. We’ve been working this out for over a week and tonight’s our best chance.”

“What is, Stanworth?” I asked, feeling my blood heating up. Not in anger but with life. The alarm abruptly went silent.

“You’re leaving, Miss Deborah. There are those in the factions, myself included, that know you’re the intended, and not Turpin.” He flashed a smile and spoke very softly. “You wanted to know what my counsel was, Promise. This is it. Do you trust me?”

Chrissy and I nodded as one. It was decided then. I’d not question Stanworth’s actions for even a moment. He had our complete cooperation. My mind and sense of duty screamed at me that this was wrong, but I smothered it with my trust for Stanworth. And Grandfather, I suddenly realized. The hot life in my blood began working through my body.

“Let’s go,” Chrissy said, taking the slug pistol Stanworth handed her. I took one as well.

“Not this way, we’re not, Admiral,” said one of the men from the window. I noticed it was Thomas. He winked at me, but otherwise was all business. “The windows are aligned titanium and sheathed in planed energy. Even if we could blow through it, the energy barrier would reflect the blast. The metal would cut us to shreds even through the walls.”

“All right. Backup plan. Set the charges for five minutes.”

Thomas nodded and returned to work.

“We’ve got an alternate escape route for you, Miss Deborah, but it’ll be a fire-fight. Up to it?”

I laughed. Genuinely and openly laughed. A smile crept across Stanworth’s face and the long absent glint in Chrissy’s eyes reappeared.

“Let’s kick some ass.”

“Now that’s the child’s child I know,” Stanworth said approvingly. “C’mon.”

Led by the two men at the door—one was Lieutenant Paul Briggs—we entered the dim hallway and headed deeper into the fort. Thomas and his assistant took up the rear.

The silence was eerie, but welcome. No doors opened and I looked at Stanworth inquiringly. He nodded.

“You have many more supporters than you think, Miss Deborah,” he said. “Other than General Mahoney’s men and some of the Eternal Earth faction, no one will hinder us.”

We reached the end of the hall and stopped. Before us was an open air hall that wrapped around the courtyard. Stanworth pointed two fingers to his left, then to his right. He pulled out a mag puck and set it. The four soldiers tensed, their slug carbines waist high and ready. We covered our eyes.

The mag puck gave a three second tone and Stanworth threw it across the courtyard. Gunfire erupted just as the puck exploded, its burning magnesium core blinding anyone not prepared.

I opened my eyes quickly, but the four men were already gone. With Chrissy and Stanworth acting as my bodyguards we entered the passageway, guns up and ready.

A movement to my left. I swung the gun around, but it toned friendly. I shifted aim to my right. It toned non-friendly and I squeezed the trigger three times.

Not looking to see if I’d scored or not, I split off to my left and joined Paul and the other soldier. Chrissy was behind me.

Several dark shapes littered the floor, proving our deadly fire. We hurried past without checking them. Wounded or dead, they were out of the fight.



We joined up with Stanworth and the others at the far end of the courtyard and ran for the emergency stairwells. Thomas crashed through the doors and headed downstairs.

“Down?” I shouted after Stanworth, who’d gone ahead of me. “Not up to the roof?” The roof seemed the perfect place to access the sea.

“The roof’s not safe,” Paul answered for Stanworth. He was directly behind me and covering our backs. “We could gain access and the shields are less effective up there. The problem are the snipers. There’s at least six and we weren’t sure we could get you over without your being hit.”

“So where? Surely not the main gate?”

“No. The cellar,” he said. “After we pass through the main lobby and into the kitchen, that is.”

I nodded grimly. A path like that meant it unlikely all seven of us would reach the cellar alive.

Sadly, it was only seconds later that my grim prediction came true. We reached the bottom of the stairwell. Paul and his man approached the door. The other man reached for the handle, but never made it. There came the pounding of gunfire and the metal door pockmarked with holes. The man spun around, then slumped to the ground, hit a dozen times. Paul threw himself out of the shell trajectory, but was still nicked by several ricochets.

Thomas stepped up behind me.

“I’ve an idea. Wanna risk it?”

I nodded. Staying here was death.

He handed over his rifle and took my pistol, pressed behind me as wrapped his left arm around my throat. Putting the gun to my head, we made our way down the last few steps.

“Stop shooting!” he shouted, desperation in his voice. With anyone but Narwhal Void’s blood, I’d have been deeply worried. “Stop shooting or I’ll kill her! I swear!”

The gunfire stopped abruptly, indicating a command presence. Thomas eased me closer to the door. Now that they knew I was a hostage, they wouldn’t risk killing me. I still had value. “Use your blade on the officer,” he whispered. “I’ll take as many as I can on the right.” I nodded and tried to look scared.

“You in there!” came a firm voice. “Release Miss Mariner now!”

“No!” Thomas shouted back. “I’m coming out and I have a gun to her head!” He pushed me gently, and I started to struggle fruitlessly.

There were six of them, all Eternal Earth faction. Too many. But we had to play the hand out.

“I’ll kill her!” he shouted again. “I mean it!”

“You do,” the officer, a captain, said ominously, “and you’re a dead man.”

“Let me out the front gate, and I swear I won’t hurt her!” He jabbed me again and I cried out in pain and terror. Just a little closer.

“Friendly fire!” Stanworth suddenly shouted from behind us. “Don’t shoot, Captain! This is Admiral Davis, Miss Mariner’s protector. We followed him down. I’m coming out.”

Stanworth and the others fanned out, their guns trained on Thomas. He looked more desperate and edged closer to the captain. I reached behind me, as if to claw at his eyes, and slipped my finger blade over my left middle finger.

“She dies!” Thomas suddenly shouted and pulled the trigger.

A deafening explosion behind my ear and I dropped like a stone, unharmed. Not so the soldier on our left. He took the bullet fired between Thomas and I square in the head. Thomas threw himself down, bringing his gun up. Instantly the air was torn by the yammering of slug guns.

My muscles burned and time slowed. The captain, quickly determined the ruse and swung his gun to me. I flowed easily out of his aim and closed. Shocked, he brought it to bear and fired. I saw the action begin and spun to my left, regaining my full height. The bullet whizzed under my slashing left arm and struck the ancient brick of the fort.

I saw the spent casing eject and tumble to the ground and the action of the pistol lock and load the next round. My left arm jerked and my fingers flickered by his throat, laying it open. Blood gushed out and he gurgled in horror, dropping the gun and reaching for his throat.

The shell casing struck the floor and I had already chosen my next target; the man furthest on the left and threatening to fire on Thomas.

The man had not fired yet, instead watching in terror as I'd butchered his captain. Realization he was next did nothing to snap his thrall, and he remained motionless as I ripped open his jugular and cut through his wrist on my down stroke. He sank to the ground just as the shell casing from the captain's gun bounced a second time.

It was over. None of the six was alive, and nobody else on our team had been killed, though Paul picked up yet another gunshot wound, this one through his left upper arm.

"No time for hurrahs," Stanworth barked, taking the lead. "There's going to be more coming. Let's go."

We raced through the kitchen and down the cellar. Paul was beside me, Chrissy behind me. I saw blood oozing from several different places on his body.

"Are you going to die on me?" I snapped, feigning anger.

"Nah," he said nonchalantly. "I still gotta show you and Miss DuPries the way out of your sinfulness."

I laughed, as did Chrissy.

"Tell you what, Briggs," Chrissy said. "Don't bleed to death and we'll listen to you some more."

"No sucker punches this time?" he asked.

"Don't push it," Chrissy laughed.

Unexpectedly, we ran into no more resistance. The kitchen was large but deserted. Stanworth led us to an ancient wooden door and swung back the latch. With Thomas and the other soldier helping, they pulled it open. They stepped back and Stanworth suddenly grabbed me in his arms, hugging me fiercely.

"You're on your own," he said quietly. "There's a channel heading down twenty fathoms, then opening out to the sea. It was used for smuggling back when the fort was first built. There's no chance that it's guarded." He hugged me again. "We'll be all right. They don't dare kill us if you're free."

I nodded and kissed him softly on the lips. Despite the danger, he still blushed. "I trust you, Stanworth. Take care of my love."

“Of course. Find what you need and come back,” he said firmly. His eyes flickered towards the others and I nodded.

He released me and Chrissy took me. We kissed deeply, words being a waste of time. Finally, we let go and I laid a hand on the door. I turned back to my rescuers.

“This one is Promise Tide,” I said clearly and with pride, honoring those who’d risked all to save me. “Child’s child of Ebbing Tide. You have earned the People’s trust and eternal memory. Breathable and salty are your ways, and our children will swim and play together.” I lingered one last gaze on Chrissy, then turned and went down the steps to the cellar far below.

It was quite dark.

## Interlogue Two



**Sunday, April 6, 2042**

Ohaiyo and Happy Easter, gang!” Janet Yashida announced as she entered the Pisces primary staging area. The twenty or so people there raised their heads from their work and either returned the greeting or gave pleasant smiles. Working for Miss Yashida was grueling, difficult and had impossible expectations. And everyone wanted on. She brought out a person’s absolute best efforts and satisfactions. It was rumored all around NATech that she would one day replace the Boss. Not that the Boss gave any indication of dying any time soon.

“Leonard! Marty! Becky!” She shouted out. “Some sitreps, please. In ten, in my office.” All three gave a thumbs up and continued working with their teams.

In her office, Janet closed the door and turned on the lights. She slipped off her old, familiar sweater, then placed her old, familiar coffee mug under the spigot. Filled with hot coffee, she took a cautious sip. Perfect. Finally, she took her seat at her drafting table and brought out Mike.

“Up and at ‘em, Mike! Coffee’s on and my project leaders will be here in five.”

The palmtop yawned and powered up. A slim blue bar extended over three-quarters across the very top of the holodisplay. Janet stared at the unfilled portion. Just that far to realizing John’s dream. No, she thought. Much more than a dream. Within that bar was the future of mankind. Janet understood that now. That’s why...

A sharp pain in her hand made her wince. Coffee spilled from the cup, down on her pants. The burning liquid should have made her yelp, but temperature variances were one of the many things Janet had accounted for.

She held up her right hand and inspected it. What she hadn’t accounted for was the sharp pains that

accompanied bone growth. Her fingers were a full centimeter longer than a month ago, when she'd submitted to Pisces DNA modification routines. The aggressiveness of the regimen's take over of her existing DNA, and its ability to reset already established growth, was incredible. She winced again and flexed her hand.

And a real pain in the butt when handling coffee.

## Interlogue Three



**Sunday, March 25, 2046**

Janet eased her car into her reserved spot and shut it down. The antigravity cushion powered down and the full weight of the car shifted to the tires. The car chiggered once after shut off, a trait common to Fords, then sighed itself into an inert mass. She snatched up her rain cloak and got out.

The entrance to the NATech facility was fifty meters away, tucked in a grove of pines. In the pouring rain, Janet made it in under fifteen seconds, donning the cloak as she ran. Not bad for a forty-three year old woman, she thought. She approached Security Entrance Alpha and stepped into a faded yellow circle painted on the rocks and ground. In front of her, just beyond the trees, was a granite cliff.

“Yashida. Janet. Voice code CS730511502 voice code,” she said aloud to nothing in particular. She held out her palm, waist high and toward a soft shimmering in the air. SEA identified her positively, which was the only alternative to a painful trip to unconsciousness. She’d gone through that experience twice in the past year as the ever more dominant Pisces DNA altered her body. As a result, the security system had been modified four times in the past three years. Not for safety but to allow for the new kind of people who used it.

The magnetic bolts slammed free and the blast door silently opened, revealing the cliff face for the hologram that it was. Janet passed inside and continued down the tunnel. At the far end was a final set of double doors. She chose the left side and entered.

Larry Alexander, NATech’s friendly greeter and guard for nearly forty years, sat behind the kiosk in the middle of the floor. He was always there, though he also always had stories about his latest vacation. Today was no different.

“Good morning, Miss Yashida!” He boomed happily. Though armed with a revolver, he never used it and didn’t seem to notice it was even there. “Not a fit night for man nor beast, is it? I know I’d rather

be back down in the Bahamas.”

“Ohayou, Larry,” Janet replied, never disappointed at seeing his smile, even at three in the morning.

“It’s nasty out there, all right. But I’m neither man nor beast, now am I?”

“Maybe both?” Larry suggested.

She laughed. “Okay, maybe both. So. The Bahamas this time?”

“Yep. Nancy and I just got back and it was a treat.”

“Let me know the next time you go. Maybe I’ll swim down there and say hi.”

“Will do.”

Janet passed on by to the elevator, ignoring the upper ten feet of the large atrium. That was where the real guards were. The hidden ones with the high powered plasma rifles. The guns were far from perfect in that the packs only lasted five minutes after initial use. But the damage they did in that five minutes more than made up for the short life span.

Arriving at her floor, Janet went quickly to her office. There was still activity going on—NATech never slept—but it was far more subdued than normal. The Pisces project was nearing final completion and all that remained was the publicity. Even now the rest of the world had heard of an undiscovered race of humans on the Earth. A race that could breathe water and air.

Janet inspected herself in the mirror behind her drafting table. She’d installed it four years ago, right after the Pisces DNA had been introduced to her system.

Her dark almond eyes had faded to medium brown. Her black hair in the past three years had also come in lighter, until it was a light brown. She’d grown nearly ten centimeters. Most noticeable however, were her gills. Perfectly matched arching slits along the sides of her neck were pressed down over her skin until they were all but invisible. Yet whenever she flexed her neck muscles, the flaps extended out slightly, exposing her gills. She’d used them in the sea for days at a time over the past eight months, and was still excited and amazed by them.

The changes were far more complex than these, but were all the mirror could show her. What had happened inside her could only be seen in her eyes. And only rarely, for Pisces eyes were not as



readily interpreted as human eyes.

She reached over the table and stroked the image. What was waiting for her and the one hundred and eighty-six others who'd sacrificed one humanity for a taste of another? She'd find out very soon; the target date of April 21 was fast approaching. This first generation would live on New York's Long Island and in the sea, some 150 kilometers southeast of the island, at the foot of Atlantis Canyon. Janet herself had been to the incredible depth of 2200 meters and had thrilled to the sensations. She...

Janet shook her head and went to her desk. Her sweater was draped over the back of her chair, more security blanket than apparel now that she'd outgrown it.

Mike was in the right pocket. She opened him up and plopped him on the desk.

"Hey!" he complained in perfect teen-aged outrage. "Take it easy!"

Janet smiled for the thousandth time, but didn't laugh. John was—had been—a certifiable genius. The depth of personality he'd given his holo palmtop was still unduplicated. And he did it only as an amusing diversion.

"Sorry, Mike," Janet said contritely, not at all embarrassed apologizing to a machine. "Look, I'm on a dead run. The last shuttle to Long Island leaves in two hours. How's your analysis coming?"

"Great, of course," he said, surprised and insulted she even had to ask. Smile one thousand and one.

"I need two more weeks to come up with proof positive, though. Then another week to finish extrapolation routines covering the next eight centuries. And then five *more* days to combine proof to extrapolation and work out the best path for positive solution." Janet raised her eyebrows.

"That works out to April 20th, Mike."

"Well, duh."

"Mike, I *have* to be on Long Island on the twenty-first. Cutting it a little close, aren't you?"

"Nah," he said confidently. "My timetable reflects maximum use. You'll have twenty hours from final report to deadline." He paused. "I could do it much faster if you gave me access to..."

"No," she said instantly. "And you know why."

"Yeah," he grumped. "Anyway, that's the schedule."

Janet nodded to herself and closed the computer, letting Mike get back to his project. She glanced one last time at the mirror. Such a different look than four years ago. But the same determination.

“Just be patient, John,” she whispered. “I’m carrying on your work, but one day, you’ll be the one who finishes it.”

## Chapter Eleven



January 3, 2416

My hov's engines changed tone abruptly and the vehicle slowed. Sloshing to a stop, it increased the antigravity cushion and ascended to a height of two meters.

“Atlantis Canyon,” it said unnecessarily. The crisp, living scent of Traveler was always sweetest over Darkness Keep.

I nodded and cut off the energy top, exposing me to the wonderful elements of Traveler. Dismissing the risk of peeping Toms as minimal, I changed into my second skin. I donned my eye guards and picked up my hump pack, both retrieved from my Gibraltar home five days ago. The pack found the precise spot for maximum comfort and movement, then ized between my shoulder blades. Stepping onto the front hood, I dove into Traveler. Today, or never, I would find the correct path and follow my Grandfather's quest.

Traveler embraced me in his arms, welcoming me back. His cold, refreshing waters soaked into and through me. The salty taste of his water passing over and in my gills, touched my soul, waking it from its long slumber.

Down I swam. Two hundred fathoms. Five hundred. I passed several schools of tuna, but didn't bother hunting. My target lay on the bottom, in the mud-covered grave of my people.

At eleven hundred fathoms—about two kilometers under Traveler's surface—I stopped and detached my pack. I dug out my gill filter, made of thinnest mesh. Of Pisces construction, it made the unbreathable breathable for a time. I wrapped it like a scarf around my neck. It snagged slightly on my gills, leaving them partially open, but I still had free breathing.

Next was my flashsound gear. Because of the mud slide that destroyed Darkness Keep forty-one years

ago, the bottom was still murky and unsettled. My natural sonar would help some, but the flashsound was an added edge. I clipped the tiny sonar units to the top of each ear, then pressed the convert unit to the back of my head, closest to my brain's vision center. It pinged on and I continued diving.

Far too soon, I reached the Darkness Keep graveyard. Not only emotionally, but physically as well. Fifty fathoms of mud now covered Darkness Keep. Even worse, for me, there was another three to five fathoms of suspended silt that hovered over the graveyard. An eternal mist, as though Traveler still cried over the loss of his favorite inhabitants.

Knowing a quick approach would only worsen visibility and breathability, I made a slow pass over the silt some five fathoms above the muddy fog.

Nearly two hours later, I found a hint of my heritage. It was at an angle, but the sweeping curve of Mariner's Spire still showed above the mud and even a tip above the silt. Of this sad and lonely graveyard, only this tombstone remained to memorialize the end of a race.

I stopped all movement about five fathoms above the spire. Adjusting my body's buoyancy to the slight negative, I gently settled down. My friends and my love needed me back, but a hasty movement now would only delay my return to them.

I slipped beneath the silt, my hand gently sliding along the spire. Grandfather had an alcove and balcony just a few meters down, and I was hoping to find it. Inside, perhaps, were the answers I needed.

My hand slipped off the spire and into void. Through the thick, thick silt, I could just make out the top of the alcove. Only now, seeing in reality what I knew so well in Timelessness, did my connection reach across the years and the hard truth strike my heart of hearts. Traveler seemed to grow colder, and the weight of his sorrow pressed down on me. I really was alone.

I took another hour to carefully enter the alcove and explore the small room. Only vestiges remained, remnants of a proud and gracious race. Attached to one wall, a framed portrait of Grandfather, done in seashells and threaded with golden silk. The silk still glowed softly. I stroked it gently.

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“The first grade students of Mariner Elementary would like to present this token of appre... ashpis...”

young Traveler Salt struggled to get the word out correctly. Several pairs of little hands held the portrait as the most precious treasure. “Appreciation and thanks to Mariner Tide for his work and didi... Dedication!” The class had only begun learning air-breather, but Traveler enjoyed showing off.

The portrait was held out while the entire class cheered and swam about in boundless energy.

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Beside it was a pocket watch, face open. Engraved on the inside cover was the date August 4, 2093. The hands were frozen at 8:28, mute guardian of our race’s death as the countless billion tons of mud hit our city. I rubbed the mud from the gold chain.

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“Great Britain extends its heartfelt thanks and eternal gratitude to Mariner Freeman and his people for their heroic efforts to save the crew and passengers of his Majesty’s ship *Newcomer*. On this day, August 18, 2093, we offer this gold watch as a symbol of that gratitude for the thirteen hundred and forty-six people you and your people saved from the waters. May our friendship continue to grow and may we as a country always stand firm with your people, no matter the situation. His Majesty also wishes to extend...”

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On the far side of the curved wall was a large map of Darkness Keep, as seen from the Spire. Brushing off the accumulated silt, I located the Spire’s position and the alcove’s viewpoint.

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“Mariner Spire is here,” Coral Red concluded. On the finished document he’d presented, Darkness Keep was laid out, with the Mariner seabed in the center. The Spire, the next phase in building Mariner’s Home, had been his project. The final drawings and holos were spread out on his table for First Elder and his Council.

He sat back and awaited discussion. Some splashing and laughing was heard in the back bedroom, where he had shoed the kids to before the First Elder arrived. His wife Froth was on assignment at one of the thermal vents. To keep the kids occupied, he'd filled the bedroom halfway with air; a real treat. The First Elder also heard the noise and smiled.

"Breathable the water, enjoyable the air, Coral?" he asked. The others laughed. Coral nodded sheepishly.

"Salty. My children celebrate our People's breathability, First Elder," he concluded. "This one's father's children enjoyed same for many tides."

First Elder laughed in agreement.

"This one's father's children as well." He winked. "And this one's children, too." He waved at the map, hushing all and refocusing attention. "Come. Construction continues."

\*\*\*

I found the slip down to the next level and cautiously made my way. The tunnel was half full of mud and canted, but there was still enough space for me to squeeze by, though the water was unpleasantly tainted. Several times I felt mud slosh up against my chest and I had to force myself to remain calm. Suffocation, an almost unheard of death to Pisces, was also our greatest fear. My heart burned against the Unbreathable who had brought this most horrible of fates on us.

The slip seemed much longer now than when I swam it in Timelessness, but it was the mud disorienting me. Just when I was giving up, I touched the edge of the slip and the ceiling of the lower room. I squirmed carefully, hoping to find some space and water.

Not only was there space and water, a pocket of air was also trapped against the ceiling. Eagerly, I swam to it. I surfaced and sucked down air; the very air that my people had once breathed!

Like the water, the air tasted foul but was tolerable. There was mud piled up along the wall, so I leaned carefully against it. I sighed and splashed the water lightly. The flashsound picked up the noise and its echo and fed the converted signal to my vision center, allowing me to see the chamber.

I was up against the upper wall, judging from the placement of the ceiling chandelier that hung down into the mud and water a meter to my left. Other than it, the room was devoid of items.

My vision faded as the sound died away, but I remained still and soaked in the sensation of belonging. My mood was melancholy and reflective. Was there a reason I was the last? Could I even lay claim to that, now that Joan had revealed herself? My life was not worthless, nor did I think so. I had Chrissy and Stanworth and a vast fortune with which to help others. And I could still contribute to the destruction of the Unbreathable. Yet now that mission, the one Grandfather had prepared me for my whole life, was someone else's. My purpose in life was gone and I had to prepare for the future. The darkness was safe, but perhaps in that moment it became unsettling, like my future. I was only one-quarter Pisces. Did I truly belong here?

There came the quietest of splashes to my left and I looked that way. In the dim light the sound generated, I could see tiny ripples making their way toward me. Curious, I splashed the water. The room brightened and I could see there was something leaning against the wall, beyond the chandelier.

It was a skeleton; its skull and shoulders above the surface. That was odd. Why hadn't I noticed it earlier? I eased from my position and went slowly toward it.

It moved suddenly. My heart exploded in terror, choking me. I jerked back abruptly and the room flooded with light from the sound.

It continued moving. Carefully raising a bony hand, it inspected itself with eyeless sockets. I was frozen in place, unable to move. I was dreaming. I had to be dreaming. It canted its head, as if hearing my heartbeat and ragged breath. Leaning back its head, it jerked several times, as though trying to send out a sonar. A hideous screech, bone dry and piercing, erupted from its dead grinning mouth. Immediately, it looked at me. It reached out toward me with a slow hand.

My thrall snapped and I forced myself away from it. I lowered my neck into the water and started gulping with my gills. The slip to the alcove was just below and to my right, but the thought of it following me in that narrow passage was too much. I was trapped. I wanted to gather my strength to fight it, but was unable. My muscles no longer worked, and my bones wanted to draw me closer. It continued slowly toward me, then sensed my terror and stopped a meter short.

“Promise,” it rasped, “Why have you come to join us?”

I nearly fainted. Mud gathered in its skull leaked out of the jaw and eye sockets. Yet it spoke.

“How... Do you know me?” There was nothing for me to do—or could do—except answer.

“So often you’ve come here in Timelessness. But this time you come to us in Despair. Are you so lost that you wish to die?”

“Who are you?”

“I am First Elder Breath. I was here, in this room, when I died.”

“Why do you not speak Pisces?”

He canted his skull slightly, thinking.

“I suppose because air-breather is what you need to hear right now.” He shrugged, his bones clacking slightly. “To be honest, Promise, I don’t have a great deal of control over my body.” He inspected his bony hand again. “Or what’s left of it. No matter. Let’s look at the living and forget the dead for a moment, shall we?”

I nodded. My terror had diminished and was being replaced by shock. Though I knew I could be in mortal danger, the numbness of the shock allowed me to carry on a conversation with a dead man.

“Good,” he nodded. “I’m glad to see you haven’t given up entirely.”

“Given up? First Elder, my position was taken from me. And by a full Pisces, not some quarter-breed like me.” I stared into the water and felt my eyes getting hot with tears. “Why didn’t Grandfather tell me?”

“Mariner Tide told you nothing because there was nothing to tell.”

“But the last time we talked, when he left me, he said..”

“No,” First Elder interrupted, “he did not.”

I stared at him. His skeleton had faded and I could begin to make out his face. A glint reflected from his eyes; from where I didn’t know.

“First Elder, I don’t understand.”



He sighed. “Promise, let me ask you something. Do you trust your grandfather? Do you trust Ebbing Tide?”

“Yes!” I said instantly.

“Then that is why you believed him that last time. Only he said nothing, for it wasn’t his last time.” He reached out and touched my shoulder. I stared in fascination as his hand, now fully healed and complete, stroked my hair. He smiled at me with lips, eyes and expression. His touch was calming.

“I knew both your grandfather and your father. You are so much the one and so much not the other.” His hand went down and touched my heart. “He waits for you, Promise. But not to be with forever. That day is long off. He waits to see you and talk to you and give you hope. He waits, Promise, for you to continue his quest.”

\*\*\*

A shudder went through me and I felt the living cold of Traveler envelop me. I started, then looked around. I was outside the spire, my fingers just brushing it.

What had happened? Hadn’t I entered the lower room? Or even the alcove? Or had the shock of speaking to First Elder’s bones taken me out here before wearing off?

I looked down the spire to the silt that obscured it only four fathoms below me. Was the alcove really there? Did I owe it to myself and Grandfather to enter—perhaps for the second time—that chamber of horrors and hopes?

My fingers slipped off the spire and I ascended. I had what hopes my people could give me and wanted none of the horror. It was enough to just touch my past.

I made a casual ascent, using the time for thought. Had any of the compressed air I’d breathed in the room still remained in my body, it would have expanded and become uncomfortable until my system either absorbed or eliminated it. But there was no discomfort. That by itself meant nothing; it was instinctual to purge all air whenever the gills were used. Probably that was what had happened. Or perhaps I’d never gone in.

Traveler had become bright almost to blinding when I remembered to take off my gill filter and

flashsound. Putting them away in my pack, I noticed the filter was clogged severely with mud, almost to the point of failure. Perhaps I had gone in. I shrugged off my thoughts and stowed the gear. Did it really matter whether I had? No, I decided. It didn't.

I broke the surface of Traveler and sucked deep his breath of air. Glorious!

My hov was a hundred meters east of me, so I swam to it, telling it to descend to boarding height. About halfway, it heard me and obeyed. It touched water and I touched it at the same instant. A strong push with my legs and I vaulted easily into the craft.

There was a woman sitting there. It was the vision I'd seen on *Whitey*. She wore the same clothing, her hood obscuring her face even in the bright sunlight.

"Elegant entry," she complimented me.

"Thank you," I replied, peeling off my pack and tossing it onto the back seat. She reached over and caressed it.

"Beautiful material. I wish I'd lived long enough to use it."

"I thought I'd not see you again," I asked. The hov rose to cruising height and headed north.

"That's what I thought," she agreed. "Oh, well. Best laid plans and all that." She looked out over the water. "Where are we heading?"

"North by northeast, to my home in Maine. We'll be there in an hour. I need to get a few things before heading back to Alexandria."

She nodded and visibly exhaled in relief.

"That's what I wanted to hear, Promise. What did you find down in Darkness Keep? Was there anything left?" A note of deep sorrow was in her voice.

"Not much," I said. "But enough." I looked at her, curious. "May I ask you a question?"

"Of course." She smiled. "I may not answer."

"Who are you? This Timelessness we're in is different than any I've felt. I can't even enter Timelessness right now."

“You will. Trust me. Later this evening, in fact.”

“I won’t remember that,” I said slowly.

“I know. But you’ll feel more confidence about regaining that joy.”

“Which is why I’m asking who you are. You don’t seem to lose your memory of future events. You’re Pisces, but don’t look exactly so. Who are you?”

She looked out over the ocean, passing quickly under us. We traveled along for several minutes before she spoke again.

“Look at that,” she said, pointing to our left.

In the distance I could make out a line of rocky shore.

“That’s the edge of Long Island,” I said.

She sighed. “How well I know, Promise. That’s the very point where we entered the water as a race. It was Saturday, April 21, 2046.” She glanced at me. “What year is it now?”

“2416. January third.”

“So long ago,” she said sadly. She looked away, then back at me, her eyes wet. “It was a rainy day. A hard, cold rain that kept the press away but was a joyful time for us. Even then temperature extremes had little impact on us. Did you know, Promise, that we actually lost eighteen people in the first month due to that? Scalded to death by the magma vents near our new city.”

“I hadn’t heard that.”

“No, I don’t suppose you would have. Very few of that first generation could enter Timelessness. It was an ability that required three generations to mature.”

“How come?”

“Because the gene sequencing had to be modified from the original ‘donor,’ if you will. It went from a total recall of one life—your own—to a total recall of race memory. The first generation of Pisces carried the gene, but only four of us could actually benefit from it. The second generation was able to use Timelessness, but our race memory was almost a blank slate. Since none of the parents could use

Timelessness, the second generation had only themselves to reference. Anyone visiting from the future wouldn't count because memory of the encounter would be lost.

“The third generation, however, did have a generation to look back on and remember. So the first two generations convey an oral history, but from then on race memory became our record.”

“What about your children?” I asked. “You could have...”

“I know,” she said quickly. She looked down at her hands. “I and the other three with perfect recall chose not to have children, fearing the ability of Timelessness and total recall would be too difficult. That's why we rarely entered Timelessness.”

“That and the fact that knowing future events—and remembering them due to total recall—could muddy up the waters,” I said, nodding.

“About four months after we began construction on Darkness Keep,” she continued, “I went into Timelessness and was told the exact moment and means of my death. I carried that knowledge with me until the moment finally happened, knowing to change it would alter the established future path. I would wish that curse on no one.” She looked at me suddenly. “I believe I have underestimated you, Promise.”

“And you're the original gene 'donor,' too,” I said with sudden vision. “You're Janet Yashida, the Grandfather's assistant and the one who carried his work to completion.”

She blinked several times, then pulled her hood back. She was an Oriental woman—Japanese, judging by her name—with raven black hair and gentle beauty.

“I have badly underestimated you, Promise,” she said. “I think that's enough for this swim. I'd better go.”

“You'll be back?”

She nodded. “Probably. It all depends if you learn one last lesson from your Grandfather.” She leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek.

“Good-bye, Promise. Take care,” she said quietly, then disappeared.

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Again, I shook myself and felt Traveler's cool, loving embrace cover me. I was still at the Spire, my fingers brushing along the top.

I glanced down into the silt. Suddenly, all need to go further down was gone. I was hoping to maybe reach Grandfather in Timelessness. Maybe I would some day. Maybe not. But I wouldn't do it here, I was somehow certain. Maybe Janet had told me.

I looked up. That was where I was needed. Darkness Keep could be faithfully guarded by its dead. I would guard our memory up above.

\*\*\*

It was deep dusk when my hov finally approached the Maine shore. I'd sent a coded message of my arrival to the staff so they'd expect me.

I maneuvered the hov onto land and headed to the main gates. Since it was my craft, the transponder allowed me to voice deactivate the security perimeter. As I'd been reminded in Edmonton, there were always a few people who'd like to see the very end of the People.

This night, though, there were no protesters at the gate. I sighed in relief. Time for them I had little of this day. I didn't have them on my mind, anyway. Who I had on my mind was Hank Convington.

Hank was another of Grandfather's trusted associates. Much like Stanworth in ability, he was a younger version of my beloved friend and servant. And while their personalities were very different, their loyalty and devotion to Grandfather were mirror images. With Hank added to the mix, I could take the fight—which was how I finally saw it—to Qaitbay instead of waiting.

I stopped the hov on the front lawn, jumped out and ran into the house. My mind was swirling with thoughts and my body ached to find release of its pent up energy.

"Hello, Miss Deborah!" Martha said hurriedly as I rushed by her. Unfazed, she ran after me, filling me in on the household activities. I gave her my decisions as I ran upstairs to Grandfather's study. She thanked me and left me, heading to the kitchen to have cook prepare the dinner and inform the maid

to turn down my bed.

I burst open the double doors to the study, intent on contacting Hank immediately. He lived in Phoenix and could be here within three hours.

Or he could be here at once. He was sitting on the love seat at the fire, reading quietly. He looked up and gave me a slow smile, just like Stanworth. Unlike Stanworth, he laughed and squeezed me hard when I jumped into his lap.

“Uff!” he exclaimed. “Easy on, Promise. Your hugs play hell with my spine!” Despite his plead, he held me just as tightly.

All my emotions exploded and I poured out my fears and worries to him while he continued to hold me on his lap, as he’d done for years. I loved that about him. He let me be the little girl when I needed it. Finally, I let out a deep breath.

“And when Janet disappeared, I was again at Darkness Keep.”

“Promise,” he asked, “Why do you think you’ve been unable to enter Timelessness?”

A peculiar question. We should be talking about... I stopped that thought as I understood Hank had gone to what he thought was the source of the problem. Very Pisces-like.

“I’m not sure,” I answered slowly. “It could be Grandfather is somehow testing me. Or maybe the stress has kept me from entering. I suppose it could be...”

“Why do you think you’ve been unable to enter Timelessness?” he repeated. “Not what might be. Tell me what is.”

“Joan has disabled my ability,” I said flatly. Anyone else would consider me paranoid, but Hank would know better.

“That’s right,” he nodded. “And why would she do that? Again, tell me what is.”

“To prevent me from speaking to Grandfather and finding out she’s a phony.”

He said nothing, but stared directly into my eyes. Waiting for me to finish my journey of realization.

It ended abruptly. I blinked and shook my head. It was so obvious! Hank nodded.

“That’s right. You’ve been playing the fool all along,” he said with tender mercilessness. “Joan needed you to follow her to give her the aura of authenticity. She gives you a memory crippling drug, manipulates one psychotic episode to bring out your fears, then uses you like a puppet. You’re a headstrong and confident teen, Promise, but you do have a weakness. You live in constant fear that your human side—which should be more dominant but isn’t—will rear up and invalidate you as a Pisces. You’re afraid that you’re the phony Pisces.”

I buried my head into his chest, but didn’t cry. I was a fool. And I’d put my friends and loved ones into mortal danger because of an irrational fear. Or was it irrational? What if, even after all this, I...

I sat up abruptly and stood.

“Thank you, Hank,” I said firmly. “You’ve opened my eyes and I know what we have to do.” He smiled.

“I like that word. ‘We.’ ” He stood up and put an arm around my shoulders. “So what are we going to do to get your girl back?”

Inside me, a flicker of anger ignited. Anger at myself for being so easily manipulated. And anger at Joan Turpin, for usurping my right and proper role. But most of all anger at the Unbreathable for so nearly causing me to lose Grandfather.

“We’re going to solve both dilemmas the same way. Contact your people and get them ready. We’re going to Alexandria in the morning.”

“About fucking time, too,” he agreed. He kissed me on the forehead, then left for our library to start preparations.

I stayed behind and sat at Grandfather’s desk. I would have to do some preparation of my own as well.

No.

This wasn’t Grandfather’s desk. Not anymore. It was my desk. I knew what I had to do now. Painful, perhaps, but required. I had to sever my emotional dependence on Grandfather. I loved him dearly, and hoped to see him in Timelessness for countless years to come. But I was my own woman, and it was my life. *I* would choose how to fulfill Grandfather’s quest. My People’s quest. My quest.

A soft click as the door closed. I looked up, knowing who I'd see.

“Child's child,” he said, his eyes sparkling with pride.



## Chapter Twelve



January 10, 2416

The water of the Eastern Harbor slapped cheerfully against our sailhov's hull. Sunday morning light bathed the harbor, blending water and air with a gossamer mist between them. The sun was not yet up. We were moored near the Unknown Soldier, with Quaitbay Fort lying at the opposite end of the harbor.

"Six-fifty, Promise," Hank called from the bows. "Sunrise and shift change in ten minutes."

I nodded and applied power to the hov engines. I then extended the ghost sails along the yardarm, their translucent shimmer allowing sound and light through. The now weightless craft grabbed the gentle wind causing the energy-webbed sails popped pleasantly to optimum curve. We began moving, making our lackadaisical way west across the harbor. The quiet waves cut by our bow rippled across a mirror surface of sea.

I was at the helm, adjusting the boat's weight and center. Hank remained sitting cross-legged at the bows, wearing a gaudy striped shirt and working away at a large, knotted rope. Anyone watching us from the fort would see only a local pleasure craft winding its way out to sea, an unidentifiable person up front and a sail-obscured person at the helm.

We crept up, aiming for a boat slip about five hundred meters south of the fort. By now the sun had risen and was at our backs, making identification from the fort even more difficult.

Apparently satisfied with his work, Hank stood and made his way easily aft. He took the helm, which I gladly surrendered, and eased power on the engine, settling us deeper into the water and cutting our speed to three knots.

I ducked into the cabin and quickly dressed. We'd been watching the gates for several days now, and

knew there was a shift of outside workers who came on duty each morning at this time. They arrived by public hov and walked the final kilometer to the fort. This was my best chance for undetected entry. Once in, I'd be spotted for who I was within minutes, but those first few minutes were critical.

There came the softest of bumps as Hank moored the craft to the rented dock. Fluffing my hair about my neck to hide my gills, I tied on my chambermaid's bonnet and went on deck, securing my apron.

Hank nodded at my appearance, mightily trying to hide a grin. I turned around and he retied my apron properly.

"Sorry," I apologized. "I'm not used to wearing these things."

"Dresses?"

"No. Aprons." He finished and I spun once for him. "There. How do I look?"

"Like a French maid fantasy," he said with a laugh.

I slapped his face playfully. "Hank!"

He kept grinning. "Hey, you asked. Remember now, the uniform is only half the disguise, Promise. Your expression and body movements are the other half."

I nodded and took on a more somber look, keeping my head slightly lowered and hunching my shoulders.

"Good," Hank said. "You'll only need to keep this up for a short time, but the longer you do, the greater our advantage. Are you dressed under the uniform?" I pulled up my dress slightly to reveal my second skin.

"The shoes pinch," I complained.

"We couldn't get a pair made in time for your feet. Now here's your handbag. Keep both your hands around the strap. It'll hide your fingers."

"And my eyes?"

He shrugged. "No guarantees, Promise."

"You're right." I kissed him on the cheek and hugged him. "Tell me this will work, Hank."

He hugged me back and chuckled. “Teenagers. You listen only to what you want to hear.” He hugged me back and whispered, “It’ll work fine, Promise. We’ll be waiting for your signal. The public hov has arrived.”

I let go and picked up my handbag. I jumped lightly to the dock and made my way up to the road. Looking back at the sailhov, I could see Hank had already slipped his mooring and was bringing her about to make for open sea.

There came the light tones of women talking and I could see a small group of them making their way up the road toward me. There were about twenty from the public hov, and six more joined up as they walked past other boat slips. I was just one more, and not the last, as we made our way to the gates. I eased into the center of the crowd, walking beside another tall girl.

We entered through the main gate with no identity checks. A sloppy routine and one which we had been quick to spot. Since all the outside help were female, they must have felt it impossible for a significant force to enter this way. Of course, a single person could be a significant force.

As a group we made our way to the service stairs and elevator and descended one floor to the housekeeping area. To this point, no one had made any comment about the “new girl,” but again that was expected. Turnover was fairly high and there was always a “new girl.” Again, sloppy security due to overconfidence.

“Name?” A woman with a blue maid’s uniform asked me. Finally, some security, though she didn’t even look up from her tabinal.

“Deborah,” I answered.

“Assist on fifth floor,” she ordered without further questions or greeting. I shoved my neatly forged papers back into my hand bag and turned away. A woman about my age waved at me and I joined her. We gathered up our carts of linens and bath supplies, then waited our turn on the eledisc. It arrived and we entered with another pair.

“New?” one asked me. I nodded slightly, looking down, but said nothing. We traveled the rest of the way in silence. The eledisc pinged and opened its ghost door. I followed my partner out.

“Deborah Mariner, you are under arrest!”

I spun to my left. A group of six guards, guns out and leveled at us, stood ten meters up the hallway!

Cursing myself for overconfidence, I immediately turned my back on them and bolted.

Two of the three maids tried to stop me. I had badly underestimated their security. I saw the outside help come in daily, I noted the turnover of staff, and I assumed they were faceless people from the city. Only now did I see, realize I was only partially correct; they maintained internal security by having plants in the outside help.

The two maids grabbed me by each arm and positioned their legs to throw me to the ground. I had two seconds to decide whether to fight or submit. Fighting meant my freedom but I risked being wounded or killed. Submitting meant a chance at surprise later, but I risked being locked up and rendered ineffective. Their legs pressed harder against mine and I felt myself being thrown back. Now or never.

I fought.

Bent back almost to the point of no return, I tightened my body and snapped upright. They were fairly strong, but they had no chance against me. With muffled gasps of exertion and shock, they released their holds and went for my waist to rob me of my leverage. Unfortunately for them, I didn't need leverage.

I shoved an arm against the woman on my right and she catapulted to the wall, hitting it hard. As she slumped, stunned, I spun back toward the group of soldiers, yanking the other woman up in front of me. To get to me, they'd have to go through her.

Which they did. Two stepped up and raised their rifles. Energy based and probably set on stun. They had only to keep firing and eventually they'd hit me. Pretty cold. Enough hits at stun could kill. I backed up about three steps and they fired.

Both beams hit the woman. She stiffened with the first shot, then partially turned with the second. I dropped her and ran. I could have continued using her, but though her life meant nothing to them, I still valued all living things, even theirs.

I had three or four seconds before the rifles recharged, so I made the most of them. The atrium was nearly forty meters distant, so I went into a full tilt run. Rather than use precious time dodging, I went

straight. It was a calculated risk.

It worked. A sudden jolt on my left shoulder, followed almost immediately by one in the small of back, told me that not only had they not set their rifles to kill, they had underestimated my resilience to energy weapons. As a being able to swim at high speeds at depths countless fathoms beneath the surface, my skin, muscles and skeletal structure were many times stronger than a human's.

I staggered but continued. I wouldn't get a second chance. Right now they were setting their guns to heavy stun. I could probably withstand a hit or two even at that level, but it would hurt. I reached the end of the corridor and cut to my right, putting a wall between me and them. A beam smacked against the metal safety railing, causing it to vibrate and hum.

I skid to a halt and looked over the railing. Each floor was open to the atrium. I clambered over the railing, gauged the distance quickly, then jumped. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my pursuers reach the end of the corridor and take aim.

The air rushed by me for a moment, then I was snatching at the third floor railing with both hands. I firmly grasped the railing with my left hand. My right hand clamped on as well, then shot back on its own volition as an energy beam struck it.

I jerked down, wrenching my left shoulder, the one that had been hit. My right hand was useless, as was the arm. I'd be useless, too, in three seconds, crumpled on the main floor, if I didn't get out of sight before their rifles recharged. Fortunately, only two appeared to have energy guns. The rest had slug guns but couldn't use them. Somebody wanted me alive, and I had an idea who.

Pulling myself up one-handed, I felt my muscles ignite and burn. I swung over and placed a foot on the bottom railing, jamming it between two bars. I looked up to see two rifles aiming down at me. Time was up.

Giving a gasp through my gills to pull in as much oxygen as I could, I put everything I had into one jerk. My body spun around up and over the railing. A heavy beam hit the railing where my head had been, another where my left hand still was.

This shot threw me a meter clear of the railing and out of sight of my pursuers. They wouldn't stay out of sight for long, though. Already I could hear them thumping down the fifth floor corridor to the

stairs. The eledisc started up at the same time. Time to go.

I stood on wobbly feet and ran toward our room, where Chrissy and the others would be. My body seared with pain from the fall and the stun hits. I was still a going concern, but I badly needed help. I stopped at the room door and put my hand out to the access panel. Stanworth would...

I stopped. I didn't know how they found out about me so fast, but if they could have set a trap so quickly, they certainly would have taken steps to keep me from my friends. I had a sudden feeling if I went through that door, I'd walk into some serious trouble.

My heart wailed for me to go to Chrissy, but my head said she wouldn't be there. I stepped back. This was another trap. I had to get out of here. Where to, though? I glanced down the hall, to the parapet exit. The door glimmered, meaning passage would be hard. It didn't matter, though. Even if I could get through, my plan would be shot.

I had an idea. Running back toward the atrium, I pulled off my apron, dress and bonnet. The eledisc dinged behind me, announcing the arrival of more bad guys. This was getting ridiculous. I respected all life, but that included mine, too. Time to improve the odds.

I ducked around the atrium corner and stopped. From the sounds of their thumping boots, there were three or four of them. I took off my shoes and pulled my finger blade from my hair. Inside, I was as cold as Shiver's underbelly in winter.

They came around the corner, looking beyond me as I crouched by the wall. There were four of them. I attacked.

They spotted me, but it was hopeless. Even with a half-numbed hand, they had no chance. Chrissy's life depended on my speed now. I slipped into their midst and whipped my hand in a blurring circle. Two fell back, blood gushing from their throats. Another dropped his rifle, screaming and clutching his slit face.

The fourth one either dodged my attack or was incredibly lucky. He brought the rifle to bear and pulled the trigger. I saw his finger tighten, and moved in and around him. The beam struck one of his own men, sending him to the floor unconscious, blood now spurting unabated from his neck.

I seized the rifle and jammed it into his body. He grunted and bent over. I yanked it from his hands,

breaking several of his fingers, and brought the rifle butt down hard on the back of his unprotected neck. He dropped, either dead or nearly so. The rifle pinged ready and I was running down the hall.

The door to the stairs on the far side of the atrium slammed open and another half dozen soldiers burst out. This was getting ugly.

I ran toward them, throwing up the rifle to shoot. They dove for cover just as I fired. I heard a yelp, but I don't think I did any real damage. No matter, they knew I had to wait three seconds for weapon recharge. It was their turn to fire.

Three popped up from cover, but didn't spot me at first. That was because I had kept running at them. By the time they did spot me, it was too late. Weakly throwing the rifle at them, I jumped over the railing again. A horrible, horrible chance. In my burning need to get to Chrissy and protect her, I was quite insane at that moment.

Again a moment of flight and again incredible pain as I landed. Only this time it was self-inflicted; I'd landed directly on the railing at my waist.

My stomach took the full brunt of the fall. Retching and crying, I thankfully stayed conscious. Rolling over the railing, I was now directly beneath my pursuers, on the second floor. I staggered toward the stairs, but fell to my hands and knees after only two steps. The agony was too much. I felt a warm, wet feeling inside and knew that I was bleeding internally. I could cope with that, but the sheer pain was too much. No amount of will power could get me past the pain.

Through tear-filled eyes, I saw my rifle lying in front of me. I didn't recognize it at first, but slowly an idea formed. It was suicide, I knew, but it gave me a few more minutes to get to Chrissy. Pulling the rifle to me, I adjusted the power setting and shot myself in the stomach.

Molten needles ripped through my nerves, seizing up my muscles and bringing me to the verge of unconsciousness. Never could I have imagined that I could take this much. But it worked. Set at light stun, the blast had numbed my midsection.

I struggled to my feet and lurched toward the stairs. I expected them to all be waiting for me, but incredibly only five or six seconds had passed and the stairwell was mine.

Using the handrail, I half-stumbled, half-fell down to the first floor. I managed to get to the landing

when I heard the doors above me slam open. They'd do a quick search for me on the second floor, but then make a beeline for the first. I had to stay ahead of them.

How I made it to the conference room, I'll never know. It was an unbreathable nightmare of being torn apart by creatures unseen; monsters who tortured and held me. Screams came to my ears, screams in a delusion of pain that called to me. Chrissy lying dead, abandoned by me when she needed me most. Despair gnawed at my waning strength. Horror and guilt consumed my will, weighing down my legs so I could move only as through mud. Unbreathable mud. As my people went, I would now go.

I fell down the final shallow step to the conference room. I rolled over and came to rest on my back. With unfocused eyes, I could see the double doors—old fashioned ones made of wood—in front of me. At each door stood an armed guard.

Not caring what happened, I went to my hands and knees. Blood stained the carpet. I'd cut my leg with my finger blade at some point. Gasping to breathe out the returning agony in my gut, I lifted my head.

“Let me pass,” I said in voice far stronger than anything else I had left.

They stared at me, then moved aside. I was no danger to them, and they knew it. But no one who had any good in them could deny the plea in my voice. They knew why I had to pass, why they had to let me pass.

I struggled to my feet. Neither guard helped me, knowing it wasn't their place. Finally erect, and wobbling on spread feet, I place my hands on the doors and pushed them open. Blood smeared on the wood from yet another wound.

They were waiting for me.

On my right, behind the large conference table, stood General Mahoney, Joan Turpin, and several of his officers, all armed. Beside them were several other men in uniform whom I didn't recognize. They would be representatives of Eternal Earth, the terrorist faction in the Resistance.

On my left stood my group. Stanworth, Paul, Thomas, Uncle Carl and two of his men. And Chrissy. Beautiful, loving, perfect Chrissy. She stared at me, shocked, then ran to me. I smiled weakly and almost let myself go. I was safe now.



Her arms came around me and she helped me to a chair. Stanworth stepped between us and General Mahoney.

“You’re safe now, love,” Chrissy whispered, her voice breaking. “I’ll take care of you. Always.”

It was her voice that did it. It poured love and comfort and strength into my soul and suddenly I knew. I raised my head and looked into her eyes.

She knew, too. Her hand went to her mouth and she stared back at me in wonder. I nodded, stunned over how clear it was. Grandfather, as always, had been right.

Chrissy’s eyes seemed to change. A perfect mate and lover, a wise and compassionate woman, she would forever be. Now, however, was a new time. She kissed me gently on my bloodied lips, then stood slowly.

“General Mahoney, you will arrange for a doctor to attend my mate immediately.” Her voice, hard and forceful, contained no edge or burr in it. What Chrissy had said was simply the way it would be.

“You are not in a position to order me around,” General Mahoney replied, his eyes narrowing. “We will tend to Miss Mariner in due time.”

“You will tend to her *now!*” she ordered. She turned to our comrades.

“This charade ends,” she stated flatly. “This is the moment Hundar Knowler knew would happen.” She rested a soft hand on my shoulder. I could only look up at her and admire. “By returning to us of her own free will, Promise Tide has demonstrated her commitment to the Resistance. Can any of you do less?”

Statement of construction was muddy. This one’s wounds were removing salt from surface speak.

This one breathed the soul of her mate; who spoke this one’s name.

“Promise Tide?”

“Yes, General. That is the true name of my mate, the last of her race. By stating it here, now, I lay claim to Promise for all time.”

“You speak her name! How dare you!!” She who would be Pisces concluded, assuming predator approach.

“Stanworth,” spoke my mate, “If she steps within your reach, snap her neck.”

As the deepest mountain, Grandfather’s servant was still yet forceful. She who would be Pisces remained away, her voice made seaweed thin, her anger as lava.

“What right have you to speak her true name to air breathers?”

“I claim the right of spouse. Promise and I are one now. I share her name with even the children’s children of our enemies for she is the last Pisces.” This one’s mate’s voice was from Shiver, her soul as sure as the tides. “You, Joan Turpin, are a fraud. An abomination who is neither air-breather nor Pisces. You are a construct of the Unbreathable!”

Construction continues with revelation! That which was thought breathable was unbreathable. Air breathers all showed look of prey, then knowledge of Sea Family. This one’s mate stood wise and beyond ken. How light her words! How dark and breathable her soul skill!

Construction continues. This one was needed. This one stood and spoke the words of challenge. The Greeting of Blood.

“This one’s children’s children would rejoice with yours, Joan Turpin.” She who would be Pisces stared. “Rejoice with this one and allow your blood to be shown of mine or be shared with the sea.”

“Why is she talking like that?” Air-breather Mahoney spoke.

“Her internal injuries must be severe.” Faithful and salty were Stanworth and his children to this one and hers. “She’s going into deep shock. Her body’s begun to shut down, leaving her only her native tongue.” He cast predator’s eyes on she who would be Pisces. “If Promise dies, you die. Obey her request: Prove your Pisces blood.”

Proof was not coming. Eyes turned to she who would be Pisces, yet she betrayed her children with words unbreathable.

“You’re mistaken,” she replied, regaining her composure. “I am full Pisces.”

“What were your parents names?” this one’s mate asked.

“Claude and Elizabeth Turpin.”

“No. What were their real names? Their Pisces names?”

“You know I can’t speak their names in this company,” she spoke with hatred to this one’s mate.

“Your even asking demonstrates your ignorance to our ways.”

“Does it?” She smiled. “Very well. Then speak the true name of Hundar Knowler. As the mate of his only living relative, I give you permission.”

“You can’t do that!” Air-breather Mahoney spoke with hatred. “To say his Pisces name here would be sacrilege!”

“You’re correct, General,” this one’s mate said. “But only to other Pisces. I am giving the right to utter his name, and have requested Joan to do so.” This one looked at her mate. Saltiness drained from this one’s blood. This... one... “Merely speak his name and I will submit to you, Joan Turpin, as will Promise Tide.”

“He... He never told me.”

“Con... stru... struction com...” this one concluded, her children fading into the darkness of Darkness.

“I speak for Promise Tide and the Pisces.” This one could not see clearly. “He does not need to have told you for you to know. Such are the true Pisces ways. You would know from Timelessness.”

“I told her!” she who was not Pisces breathed with hate. Her words were the sounds of prey in this one’s mouth. “I was unable to swim Timelessness while on starship duty. Has she forgotten to tell you?”

“No,” this one’s mate said, her true attack thrust now made. “In that case, I give you permission to speak the true name of the Groundfather. For it is knowledge that lies in the very souls of all Pisces. From the moment of conception, the name of the Groundfather is embedded in the genetic makeup of every single Pisces.”

Movement. Attack. Children lost for all time. This one’s mate in danger. The mud comes!

Darkness unbreathable.

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## Interlogue Four



April 20, 2046

"You're sure, Mike?" Janet lingered over her desk. It would be her desk for minutes only. The final shuttle was taking off for Long Island and she'd never return to NATech.

"Of course I'm not sure," Mike replied. For such a small palmtop, she thought, he sure had a lot of attitude. "How can I be? I'm just John's equipment. I'm not him. Sheesh!"

"Fine. I misspoke. Are these the best extrapolations possible? Wait," she interrupted before Mike could even retort. "Never mind. I'm sure you did a great job."

"Damn straight," he replied. "What I got ain't pretty, sister, but it's real."

"Okay. Restructure to organic encoding."

"Done. I figured that's what you wanted."

"Smart ass." She inserted a data needle into his bioport. "Transfer encoding."

First the needle and then the syringe glowed gently as the electrically charged data stream altered the inert blood plasma, transforming it into a DNA resequencing agent. Mike finished and she withdrew it. There was enough material to use on four, perhaps five people she'd preselected. She removed the data needle and put both in a syringe case. Now came the hardest part.

"Thanks, Mike." It should have sounded ludicrous, thanking a computer. But it wasn't. Chris Young had created the blend of organic mind to binary mind, but in Mike, John had somehow touched the souls. She sighed. "Just one thing left to do."

"I know," he said glumly. "Hey, Janet. It's been fun. Not as fun as John, but fun."

"Thanks, Mike. I've enjoyed working with you. You..." she broke off, teary-eyed and smiling at what

she was going to say next. "You take care, all right?"

"Heh," he laughed shortly. "I know you mean it. Thanks. Don't breathe any muddy water, okay?"

"Okay." She hesitated. But it had to be done. "Computer," she said in even tone. "Delete entire contents of memory. Authorization CDPF68A78, John Wyeth approval by Janet Yashida."

"Code approved. Deleting all files and purging all ROM. Psst!" he whispered. "G'bye, Janet."

"Good-bye, Mike."

The palmtop warmed in her hand as all memory was burned clean, then pinged off.

**February 3, 2416**

"Child's child?"

I lay with my head on his lap. We were in his study, sharing the love seat with a large fire crackling.

"Grandfather," I whispered. I was so warm and comfortable! He'd spread a fleece blanket over me and had his arm across my body. I couldn't have felt more secure. Sighing, I turned on my side.

Janet Yashida sat in Grandfather's chair.

"You did it, Promise," she said quietly, a soft tone of wonder in her voice. "The quest has been achieved."

"First of the People speaks salty words, Promise," Grandfather said with pride. "Your way is most breathable. Through you, the Craftsman has emerged."

"Chrissy," I whispered in utter certainty.

"It is Chrissy DuPries," Janet replied. "When we last talked, you still had doubts as to your right to continue the Pisces mission. Your friend Hank opened your eyes to your misplaced fear and guilt, and you freed yourself from it with your mad rush into the fort."

"It nearly killed me," I said in half-wonder. It had, hadn't it? I couldn't remember any details.

"It did," Grandfather said. "And if you had died, I would have mourned you even while rejoicing to

have you by my side for all time.

“But had you died, you still had carried out the quest. Do you now know what that quest is?”

“Yes,” I said slowly. In Timelessness I was able to remove myself and view the entire history from a far remove. “I thought it was only to unite the Resistance against the Unbreathable, who now cowers behind NATech.

“But it’s more than that, isn’t it?” I saw it so clearly now! “That was your quest, Grandfather.” I stared at Janet, who smiled slowly. “But your quest, Janet, is to see the restoral of the Groundfather to human form, free of his riping. You want the Resistance to find and restore John Wyeth.”

“That is the whole of the quest, Promise. Ebbing and I have worked together for years to reach this point. With the return of John Wyeth, the Unbreathable can be destroyed, and Earth freed from its gilded cage.”

“Gilded cage?” I repeated, confused. Janet laughed and Grandfather chuckled.

“We’ll talk more at a later time, Promise. Right now, I believe you have a soulmate to care for.”

“Yes, Grandfather.”

He stroked my hair, his long fingers playing through the tresses and causing me to drift.

“My pride in you is boundless, Child’s child,” He whispered quietly. “On this day we have seen our last and best Pisces complete the quests of the First of the People and her own grandfather. You will now continue on in your quest, for you are the People, Promise Tide, and we will not falter.”

A tear of happiness trickled down my cheek and he lovingly brushed it away.

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“Chrissy?” I called into the dark.

“Right here, lover,” she replied, climbing into bed beside me. “I’ve been waiting.” She hugged me long and gently. “How long I’ve been waiting!” A tear splashed on my chest.

I snuggled up to her and pressed my face against hers.

“Our waiting is over,” I whispered. “Construction complete.”

**The End**



## Exologue



Spring, 2416

You're sure we're *all* alone?" Chrissy asked doubtfully. We were standing on a white sand beach on a beautiful island deep in the heart of the Pacific. "Nobody comes here?"

"Nobody," I assured her. "My people bought up these four island groups over two centuries ago as an alternate site for Darkness Keep. Had the Rock not destroyed them so early in the Wars, we'd have relocated here."

"Kinda remote."

"That was the plan. The only reason we'd move from Atlantis Canyon would be if the surface world had become hostile toward us. If that happened, being remotely located had many advantages." I slipped my feet through the surf as it broke over our ankles. It'd been five years since I'd swum in Peaceful and he was glad to see me, his warm waters tickling my feet and legs.

"So now you own this entire area?"

I smiled. "No. Now we own this entire area. You're the inheritor of all my wealth."

"Oh, yeah?" she said. Something in her voice made me turn around. She was charging me, her hands out. "Then I'll drown you now and keep it all to myself! Bwa-ha-ha-ha!!"

With a squeal, she grabbed my shoulders and pushed me into the water. Laughing, she held me under for a minute, before pulling me up.

"Haven't you drowned yet?" she asked in mock surprise. "Well, let's try again!"

Pushing her body against mine we went under the water together. Her lips came to mine and we kissed. My arms went up around her back and held her under with me. She gave in completely,

trusting me with everything, including her life.

We kissed for half a minute before her mouth tightened slightly. She needed air, so I shared mine with her, breathing for her. Pisces gills separated the oxygen from the water, but it was immediately absorbed into our blood stream, preventing any air to form. Even a little air at one thousand fathoms could be disastrous. We could however, with great concentration, shift the flow of oxygen to our lungs, where it did take on its gaseous form. Once Grandfather had told me this, I practiced and practiced to master the ability for just this moment.

Her eyes opened with surprise, then closed again in passion. Her hold on me became tighter and we continued kissing. This was, after all, our honeymoon.

By the time we finally broke, Peaceful had quietly pulled us about fifty meters off the shore. We came to the surface laughing and swam back in.

“I guess your plan is foiled, huh?” I said. “And to think you only married me for my money!”

“That’s all right,” she said confidently. “I have a back-up plan. I figured if I couldn’t drown you, I’d love you to death. It may take a little longer, but you’ll be unable to escape.” She looked around.

“Ummm... I don’t suppose you—I mean we—have a home here, too?”

“Silly. Of course we do.” I picked her up suddenly. “C’mon. I’ll show you where it is and carry you over the threshold.”

She wrapped her arms around me. “My! What a big, strong, girl! I feel so safe!” We laughed as we left the water and I carried her up the beach to the palm trees. She looked into my eyes the whole way.

“I love you, Promise.”

“I love you, Chrissy.” I shifted my eyes slightly. “Here it is. Home Sweet Home for the next two weeks.”

She turned her head and gasped.

It was a grass hut. Rather, it looked like a grass hut. Raised up a meter above the sand on stilts, the seaward wall was open, revealing a single large room with a central fireplace, several floor pillows, and various knickknacks. A small kitchen occupied one far corner, while the other far corner had a set of stairs that led to the airy, sunlit loft.

I carried her up the steps and stopped on the porch. I took a deep breath and smiled at her.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

With that, I carried her over and it was official.

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It was evening when I finally woke up, happily exhausted and deeply sated. I rolled over on my tummy, giggling a little to myself as the sheets clung to me a moment before falling free, and looked out to the beach.

The loft was an open room, open to the sea but set back from the front of the hut. We slept on the floor, using mats, Japanese style. The back half of the room was roofed, but the front half was wide open.

Chrissy was in the water, casting for dinner. She'd learned that skill on her own, working the docks in Portland one summer. Ours was a marriage of equals. Neither was dominant all the time, nor submissive all the time. We were what we needed to be at the moment. Now was the time for her to provide.

“Continue providing, Promise,” I corrected myself out loud. “She *really* took care of you this afternoon.”

I rose and slipped on pink chamois and white cotton panties. I suppose some people would shower after lovemaking, but to me it made no sense. Why not enjoy the lingering intimate scents and ever-so-special smell of a lover satisfied?

I went downstairs and laid a fire in the fireplace. I lazed it and the wood ignited into a cheerful blaze. I stood and looked outside. The wind had died down with the sunset, and it was very quiet, with only Peaceful singing us his eternal song. I went to the kitchen and gathered what was needed for Chrissy's catch.

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