

A NOVEL BY
MARK CANEY



DOLPHIN WAY

RISE OF THE GUARDIANS

aquapress

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	12
CHAPTER 2	19
CHAPTER 3	25
CHAPTER 4	31
CHAPTER 5	38
CHAPTER 6	41
CHAPTER 7	47
CHAPTER 8	53
CHAPTER 9	58
CHAPTER 10	62
CHAPTER 11	67
CHAPTER 12	74
CHAPTER 13	80
CHAPTER 14	84
CHAPTER 15	90
CHAPTER 16	95
CHAPTER 17	102
CHAPTER 18	107
CHAPTER 19	112
CHAPTER 20	115
CHAPTER 21	120
CHAPTER 22	125
CHAPTER 23	130
CHAPTER 24	134
CHAPTER 25	139
CHAPTER 26	143
CHAPTER 27	146
CHAPTER 28	151

CHAPTER 29.....	157
CHAPTER 30.....	161
CHAPTER 31.....	165
CHAPTER 32.....	169
CHAPTER 33.....	173
CHAPTER 34.....	179
CHAPTER 35.....	183
CHAPTER 36.....	187
CHAPTER 37.....	190
CHAPTER 38.....	196
CHAPTER 39.....	200
CHAPTER 40.....	205
CHAPTER 41.....	209
CHAPTER 42.....	215
CHAPTER 43.....	218
CHAPTER 44.....	220
CHAPTER 45.....	226
CHAPTER 46.....	228
CHAPTER 47.....	233
CHAPTER 48.....	239
CHAPTER 49.....	244
CHAPTER 50.....	249
CHAPTER 51.....	253
CHAPTER 52.....	258

For Anouk

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The white gull snapped its curved beak deftly four times across a stone, as though to prepare it, to clean it, to sharpen it.

From a short distance away, Touches The Sky held his head above the water helplessly, watching the murderous bird. The inert form of a dolphin lay stranded on the sand of the little bay, well clear of the water, exposed to the intense heat of the tropical sun. Sky knew how that felt. He had nearly died that way once, many years before, and it would be a cruel and horrible death, your flesh drying and burning while the shocking weight of your own body crushed the air out of you.

The gull hopped nearer the battered dolphin, very close now to its nearest weary eye; sharply inclining its black capped head back and forth as it peered into it. Judging how helpless this creature was. If this should be its time. Sky leapt from the sea in frustration, letting out a rattling scream of anger as he crashed back into the clear water. The gull barely looked at him. It knew that the other dolphin was powerless to help its beached friend.

Sky surfaced again to watch the scene in nauseous horror. The battered body of Born Into Summer was completely inert apart from small movements of her eyes. The rake marks across her back and sides glistened with drying blood. Otherwise, her flesh was taut, dry. Her previously beautifully proportioned tail flukes had clear teeth marks and deep nicks in several places. Sky had never seen one of his kind so obviously abused by other dolphins before. He called her name once more, but she could not make a sound, would never reply. She did look towards him though, just for a moment, and there was the brief light of recognition there, perhaps of gratitude too. That at least a friend was close by at the end.

Sky recognised the moment when the gull made its decision. As it made the first strike, he dived. Dived deep and long, deep and long, shutting his own eyes tightly; trying to block out what he had just seen.

CHAPTER I

“Beware the tool makers. Once they have tasted the power to change, they will not cease until all is changed. There will be no balance, no harmony, no beauty, when the tools are at last laid aside.”

As agreed, they swam in silence so that they would not alert their intended prey. Their powerful tails drove up and down as they sliced through the lazy swells, their smooth backs breaking the surface briefly here and there. Fleeting, the rising sun gilded the fine spray from each expelled breath before it dissipated in the gentle tropical breeze. They kept in tight formation just below the undulating silver of the surface, their broken images racing above them. Below, they left no shadows. There was only the still depths of the open ocean, seemingly falling away forever in the frail light.

Touches The Sky held his position close alongside Deneb Rising. Like Sky, Deneb was a large and powerfully built young adult, and their leadership of the hunt had been unquestioned. From time to time Deneb made a low leap from the water to confirm the direction of the distant mass of excited seabirds. As he sliced back into the water, he ordered fine corrections to their course with small inclinations of his head. With a gesture, he urged the hunting party to greater speed as they closed with their quarry. Sky drove himself forward hard, trying to eradicate the memory of the scene on the beach the previous day. But he could not erase the image of that white bird with its cruel yellow beak — nor would he forget the final shudder that

passed through Born Into Summer's body before she passed beyond the reach of more pain. Sky was still stunned by what had happened, and had happened so suddenly. Sky had always admired Born. She was outwardly serious, yet always serene. Like one who knows some fine secret — some special, wonderful truth that allowed them to see the minor troubles and dramas of daily life as being as inconsequential as they actually were. She had taught Sky and the others a great deal; fragments of knowledge, elements of control, glimpses of the deeper meanings of the Way. Warnings of errors to avoid, of Ocean's many natural dangers, and of the less natural ones too. The perverse, twisted logic of the Guardians, the strange, apparently self-destructive workings of the Walkers. But mostly, Sky remembered her complete trust in the Way. Clarity of thought; perfectly attuned to Ocean. All the self-assuredness of one of the elders in one not much older than Sky himself. He remembered her full of life, skin smooth, eyes shining, ready to help anyone wishing to learn, and especially patient with Sky. Trying to make him take his responsibilities seriously, telling him that there must be more to his life than games from now on. He had never really understood. And then, unaccountably, she had been driven to that beach, to that waiting gull.

Sky was brought back to the moment by a sound. He glanced across at Deneb who looked back meaningfully at him without breaking the pace. He had heard it too: the faint buzz of another dolphin's sonar — they were not alone here. Sky listened carefully, and there it was again. Nearer still this time; and clearly just one lone dolphin — strange.

Sky tilted his body to one side as he swam so that he could look down. They had begun their sprint towards the birds barely able to see in the dim light, and without echolocation it had been almost like swimming blind. Now, the light was increasing and he could see the sun begin to penetrate the darkness of the deeper water. The wavering shafts of light picked out occasional tiny flecks of life in the clear water and hinted at the presence of the seabed far below him in the indigo depths. But apart from the rest of the hunting party there was no other dolphin in sight.

He broke the surface in a low leap, exploding from the water at the peak of the long swell so that he could look ahead. They were drawing close to the birds now and in the brief time he was airborne he could hear their screams. Some were bobbing agitatedly on the surface, some diving into the water, others squabbling noisily. Sky tried not to remember that lone gull on the beach. Tried not to feel anger at these other birds. They were just fulfilling their allotted role on Ocean. The sound of their screeching vanished abruptly as he fell back into the sea.

Suddenly, the dolphins' object appeared ahead of them through the blue of the water. A wall of living mercury: undulating, shimmering, an equivocal, giant beast. Deneb gave a pair of short jerks with his head and the party split into two; seven circling to one side of the silver cloud with him, six to the other led by Sky. As though in a well choreographed dance, they circled the shoal of sardines in opposite directions. They snapped at the fish to drive them closer. Three of the dolphins repeatedly dived to the bottom edge of the shoal where they sent up curtains of bubbles to panic the little fish into herding tighter together.

Before long the shoal was a densely packed shining ball, its members terrified and confused. While the other dolphins continued to force them together, two dived to the bottom of the shoal and with sharp, menacing movements began to force the sardines towards the impassable wall of the surface. Soon the shoal was as closely packed as it could ever be. The little fish were showing signs of fatigue as their multitude began to deoxygenate the water in which they swam.

Now, at last, Deneb broke the silence. 'Enough: let's eat,' he called in a strong voice. 'Who will dedicate this meal for us?'

No one replied.

'Come on then little brother, you do it!'

Sky smiled to himself. Although not really brothers, they were as close as if they were and it felt good when Deneb called him that. Like having a family again. He paused for a moment then called out clearly above the clamour: 'We thank Senx for these points of light that we may shine the brighter. We honour them for their gift to us this day.'

'Good!' Deneb Rising cried. 'Now let's eat, and quickly. We don't want the Cleaner to get too much from all our hard work.'

With that, two of the dolphins broke away from their circling and cannoned into the seething mass of fish, snapping up the sardines left and right. The tiny fish attempted to scatter, but they were too tightly packed and the dolphins proceeded to gorge themselves. Two by two, they broke away from their encircling patrol and feasted on the oily tasting fish, while their fellows kept the panicked shoal packed together at the surface. The seabirds wildly entered the hunt in earnest as the fish made the water surface boil.

Soon Deneb called out again above the clamour: 'How many have your lot taken Sky?'

'Sixty-three, no...sixty-five now,' Sky shouted back as he shot past, 'we're unstoppable!'

'Oh no you're not! We've had our shares of the quota already, and you need to take your last few morsels and we'll head home. The Council is

going to be happy to hear that there's still some prey at least out here.'

They soon moved away from the writhing ball of fish which still swarmed about mindlessly. As the dolphins left, Deneb Rising called to Sky again. 'That was the best hunting in many moons.'

Sky nodded. 'And we're not the only ones to appreciate it. Look: just as you expected, they're here already.' He gestured downwards. There, could be seen several large, slender shapes rising from the depths, moving silently towards the shoal. One of them diverted leisurely from its path to snap up a falling fish tail, the others were moving purposefully; drawn by the traces of blood in the water.

Deneb watched for a moment then turned to Sky again. 'Never mind them, did you see him — the lone zeta?'

Sky was confused for a moment, then remembered them having heard the sound of a dolphin's sonar as they had approached the shoal.

'No, I didn't. Did you recognise the voice?'

'No. But he was Ka-Tse. We should keep an eye out for him.'

Sky nodded. Even though the stranger was Ka-Tse — a bottlenose dolphin like them — it was best to be wary. Very few dolphins would choose to travel alone so the stranger may well be an exile. There was usually some good reason for them to be alone.

They swam away, leaving the sharks to their business. Sky moved alongside another young adult male who was singing happily to himself. His pale grey stocky bulk contrasted sharply with Sky's dark, toned body. Sky tried to lift himself from the dark thoughts that were coming back to him again now the excitement of the hunt was over, and brushed against the other dolphin's side companionably. 'So, Muddy, you seem in good spirits.'

Muddy River Mouth's eyes beamed back at him. 'Oh, yes I am. I haven't eaten so well for a long time. I am going to make the rest of the clan just hate me when I tell them about this.'

'You're so full of fish you'll likely sink out of sight before we get there!'

The larger dolphin snorted. 'I can promise you that I could've eaten a lot more. I know we need to have them, but these quotas make no allowance for those of us who simply *need* more food.'

'Well, the Gathering starts soon. I'll personally request that you be allowed to talk to the Elders on behalf of special cases like yourself.'

'I wouldn't dare speak to them! Do you really think that they'd even listen to me anyway?'

Sky looked gravely at Muddy. 'Oh yes. They'd realise the seriousness of your situation as soon as they saw your poor, emaciated, little body before

them.’ Sky forced his eyes to smile a little. It was not Muddy’s fault that Born was dead.

Muddy looked about to give Sky a nip on the tail when they both realised that Deneb and the others had halted just ahead of them. Sky stopped himself beside Deneb, keen to see what was happening; Muddy hung back cautiously. Sky immediately saw why they had paused. A single dolphin was approaching them hesitantly. He moved a little stiffly, awkwardly, like he still nursed some old wound. Although he had pale undersides and dark grey back like most of them, there was something unusual about the skin on his back; like an old mottled scarring just faintly visible.

He stopped, announcing himself formally.

‘It is I, Rain Ending!’

Deneb replied on behalf of the hunting party, ‘It is I, Deneb Rising of the Dune Coast Clan! My companions are also of that clan.’

The stranger dipped his head in acknowledgement.

‘Greetings to you all. I hope your hunt went well.’

‘It did, thank you. But you did not name your clan.’

‘No...I have none. Have not had for many years now.’

Deneb glanced at Sky, a question in his eye. The others would be wondering too. Sky thought it best to put the question that was in all of their minds. He moved forward a little.

‘It is I, Touches The Sky!’

‘Greetings...Touches The Sky.’ The stranger looked long and hard at Sky, staring almost rudely.

‘Are you here because you wish to join our clan, Rain Ending?’

‘No, that is not my intention. And I’m not an exile in case that might be a concern.’ He still stared at Sky, making him uncomfortable. Then his gaze fell on Sky’s right pectoral fin. The very tip of it was missing, the result of an injury he had suffered when he was very young. Nothing unusual: most dolphins had scars, so Sky thought it odd when the stranger commented on it.

‘Touches The Sky, that injury to your fin — is it old?’

‘Yes, from when I was small, I don’t even know how it happened really. Why do you ask?’

‘I just wondered...if it was something that bothers you...but obviously not. You must have a good Healer in your clan. And that is why I’ve approached you — I have an old injury — a very old injury — it’s always caused me some trouble but recently it’s become worse. If you have a Healer in the Dune Coast Clan I’d like to seek their advice. Just advice, that’s all; then I’ll be on my way.’

Sky and Deneb exchanged glances. There was nothing threatening about such a request. Deneb answered. ‘We have two Healers at present and they are both skilled. We’ll have to seek permission from the Council of course, but your request sounds very reasonable. Follow us back to our clan and we’ll see if we can help you.’

Deneb asked two of the party to accompany Rain Ending in case he might have trouble keeping up with the group. He was a little slower and soon he and his escorts were trailing at the back of the company. When he was well out of earshot Deneb spoke softly to Sky: ‘Do you know him, Sky?’

Sky had no memory of the stranger and shook his head.

‘Well he seemed very interested in you. Let’s keep an eye on him just in case. Any lone zeta is suspicious but the way he acted while he was speaking to you was strange. Very strange.’

‘Do you think he might be connected with what happened to Born?’

‘I doubt it. If it *was* other zetii that drove her on to that beach as you believe it would have to be more than one. And they’d have needed to swim much faster than he can. But that whole idea seems incredible to me! Zetii deliberately killing a fellow zeta? What about the Way?’

Sky screwed up his eyes then opened them again wearily. ‘I know, it seems fantastic, but there are stories, these Guardians — they are supposed to be turning all the old rules upside down — corrupting the Way. Maybe it’s something to do with them.’

‘But, why? Born was such a lovely zeta, would never hurt anyone.’

‘Look, Deneb, I *saw* her body! I saw the marks on her and I am sure they were made by zetii. Someone chased her, hurt her, and scared her so badly that they drove her up onto that beach. And then they left her there to die.’

Deneb looked at his friend compassionately. ‘And you saw her end, my friend. It must have been hard, especially for you.’

‘But why couldn’t I have arrived just a little earlier — when I might have saved her?’

‘Don’t think that way. You had no reason to know anything was going to happen.’

Sky inclined his head in agreement. ‘I suppose so. But now we know something *has* happened. Something that shouldn’t be possible according to everything we’ve learned. Deneb, what’s happening?’

Deneb looked at him sympathetically. ‘Soon it will be the Gathering. There have been so many stories recently of food shortages and bizarre rumours about what the Guardians are up to. Maybe the Gathering will come up with some interpretations of the Way that can help.’

DOLPHIN WAY

‘Maybe. Maybe the Way isn’t enough any more.’ Sky felt slightly shocked at hearing himself say it.

Deneb looked at him gravely. ‘Let’s hope you are wrong there, for the zetii and for Ocean’s sake.’

CHAPTER 2

“When the sons and daughters of T’ret returned to Ocean’s waters they had the gifts of warm blood in their veins, milk for their children and vision without sight. They thereby had the strength to thrive in the Great Waters, but their greatest gift was the Way.”

- The Creation Legend

The returning hunting party neared the headland of a wide, sweeping bay. The seabed rose to meet them as they approached the shore; the steep fall of the bottom mellowing into a gentle, sandy slope as they neared the land. Wave-filtered sunlight dappled the endless sand ripples that paralleled the shore; miniature reflections of the swells that had formed them. Lone hermit crabs toiled across the miniature dune fields, ducking sharply back into their borrowed shells and tumbling into the tiny valleys as the dolphins’ shadows approached.

Sky and Deneb were at the head of the group, swimming side by side. They had spoken no more of Born’s death or of the stranger who still trailed at the back with his escorts. Sky glanced at Deneb as they travelled. Typically, he looked quiet, concentrated. Deneb took his responsibilities seriously and seldom spoke spontaneously. Sky supposed that mainly came from the fact that his mother Silent Waters, was the clan leader, but he sometimes wished Deneb would relax a little more and have more fun. But then, he reflected, if Deneb said something, he had thought about it and he meant it. He was a

strong individual and a good friend to have. Once again, Sky counted himself lucky to have been taken into their family.

Deneb tilted his head, listening. ‘I think I hear familiar voices, Sky. Shall we announce ourselves?’

They made their signature calls:

‘It is I, Deneb Rising!’

‘It is I, Touches The Sky!’

Faintly came back:

‘And it is I, Fades Into Dusk!’

Sky’s spirits lifted as the owner of the call came into view: a young adult female, slim, but a powerful swimmer, with an intelligent face. Her graceful body was smooth and her skin shone. Just behind Fades Into Dusk, another female appeared; her companion from the perimeter patrol.

‘It is I, Wakes Softly!’

As the others returned her greeting warmly, Sky noticed how the pretty, petite Wakes seemed to glow in Deneb’s presence. She was a relative newcomer to the clan and had been painfully shy at first when she had joined them at the Academy, but now she was gaining in confidence and Sky had begun to notice her interest in Deneb. He wondered if Deneb was aware of it. She looked first at Deneb, then Sky as she softly said, ‘Everyone is talking about what happened to Born Into Summer. Poor Sky, you were the one who found her, weren’t you?’

‘What happened?’ Dusk asked. ‘Do we have any idea how she ended up on land?’

Deneb answered. ‘Sky thinks other zetii may have attacked her, chased her ashore, perhaps.’

Sky tossed his head in negation. ‘Not perhaps. They must have. I can’t see another explanation for it.’

Wakes recoiled visibly. ‘We never kill except to eat, not even the tiniest thing, – so zetii killing another zeta — no, it can’t be!’

‘Maybe it’s possible,’ Dusk said. ‘If it was another species — one with a grudge against us Ka-Tse, maybe the Xenthos, say.’

Deneb gave a small shake of his head, and looked doubtful, but said nothing.

They lapsed into silence for a while, then Dusk tried to lift the mood.

‘Tell us about the hunt,’ she said. ‘You were lucky— going hunting while we’re stuck here just swimming up and down.’

Sky gave a small smile with his eyes, aware of what she was trying to do, and grateful. ‘I’m sorry you two couldn’t have been with us today, Dusk — in fact you missed fine hunting; the best this year.’

‘I hope you’ve left us something,’ she replied, ‘We’ve been on patrol since midday and I’m famished. Some of the clan are talking about going back to look for your fish ball this evening but I can’t join them; I’ve got to be somewhere else.’

Sky was about to ask her where; Dusk had been going off alone a lot recently and he missed her company in the group, but Wakes Softly spoke first.

‘Was it a big shoal then?’

‘Oh yes, and we left plenty of fish,’ Deneb replied, ‘although the Cleaners were quick enough to move in after us. There should still be some left tomorrow, given that Muddy can’t join the second hunt.’

The females smiled and glanced across at the larger dolphin to see if he had heard, but he was describing the hunt and his part in it in graphic detail to some of the others.

As they looked that way, Rain Ending passed behind Muddy with his two escorts, on their way to seek out an elder from the Council.

Dusk watched with interest, inquisitive as usual. ‘Is that a new member for the clan?’

‘No,’ Deneb replied, ‘he says he just wants to see the Healers. Has some kind of injury.’

‘And then he’s off again? What’s he like?’

Sky answered. ‘He claims he doesn’t want to join the clan. Said he hasn’t got one of his own though. And he’s...a bit strange...but maybe that comes from being alone for a long time.’

‘Is he an exile?’

‘Says he isn’t, but you can’t be sure, I suppose. Maybe we’ll find out more later.’

Deneb leapt from the water to gauge the height of the sun, and reappeared in a moment amongst an explosion of silver bubbles. ‘Look you two, we’ve pretty much had our allowances for today — but why don’t we swim along the eastern drop-off and see if we can find you something to eat as well?’

They readily agreed, so Sky, Muddy, Deneb, and the two females set off across the shelving sea bed towards the headland. Small coral heads started to appear, becoming larger as they neared the rocky promontory at the eastern end of the bay. Delicate, branching, stony corals gave shelter to myriad small fish; bright orange, metallic blue, velvet black, flashing silver. All darted in concert into the protective crevices of their homes as the dolphins passed, only to cautiously re-emerge once they had moved on.

As they reached the headland the bottom fell away steeply, becoming almost a vertical face. They followed this wall, staying near the surface;

looking for the fast swimming silver fish that dwell in that zone.

Sky placed himself just behind Fades Into Dusk who was at the front of the group, swimming close enough to feel the pressure waves from her tail. He admired her elegant, natural grace as she powered along. He made up his mind to try to get her to spend some time with him later, perhaps to play a game of memoranii or just to play tag with some of the other young ones. He needed to do something to get his mind back to where it was just a few days ago, when Ocean had seemed such a gentle place.

Just then, Dusk called back to the others. 'What's that up ahead? Something big in the water — not moving.'

Sky moved closer to her. Nothing could be seen yet, but then she had detected it by sound. He sent out a short burst of clicks in the direction she was looking. Yes, he could "see" it too. The reflected sound that came back from his sonar signal showed it to be a large, firm bodied animal; not a squid, probably as big as a dolphin...and then he could actually see it. 'It's a Cleaner', he said, 'and it seems to be dead.'

They cautiously circled the shark. It was not long dead; its sleek, blue-grey body had not stiffened yet. Its perfect, hydrodynamic shape now pointed skyward as it hung suspended from the long, vicious hook that was embedded in its open mouth. The line from the hook led almost to the surface where it was attached to another, horizontal line that extended out of sight in either direction.

'What happened to it?' Wakes Softly asked.

'Walkers,' replied Deneb grimly. 'Let's follow this and see where it goes.'

'What a horrible way to die,' she murmured, unconsciously moving slightly behind Deneb as though to protect herself from shark and hook.

They followed the horizontal line which was suspended just below the sea surface. Soon they came to another line and hook; this one empty but for some shreds of the now missing bait. But the next had another victim: a young Blue Shark. It was still very much alive and it thrashed against the pull on its jaws. This just drove the hook further into its flesh. It stopped for a moment, exhausted, staring at them with wide eyes, its dark pupils dilated.

They followed the line further. There were five sharks in all on separate hooks; two dead, one nearly so, the remaining two very much alive.

Muddy turned to the others, his expression troubled. 'Do they just leave them here to die?'

Deneb shook his head. 'No, they'll come for them eventually. They return to these things. But I wonder how many they take like this; they seem

to be killing more and more fish every year.'

'They say that's why the hunting's getting so hard', Sky agreed.

Dusk rolled her eyes and snorted bubbles. 'Don't be so naïve, Sky! That's such a convenient explanation for everybody. The real truth is that it's not the Walkers, it's other zetii taking more than their share from the quotas!'

'No, I don't believe that we would...'

'Not *we* — not the Ka-Tse. I mean the deep water zetii; the Xenthos or Xa-Hana. They're not like us; they move around in those huge clans and eat everything they come across. Don't tell me they're following the quotas!'

Sky knew he should stay calm and back off, but this had become a familiar argument from her recently, and it frustrated him that Dusk believed this stuff. 'Come on, Dusk,' he said, gently, 'there's no proof — this is the kind of nonsense those so-called Guardians come out with.'

'Well it sounds like they actually realise there's a problem then!'

'Stop it,' Deneb interrupted. Talk about the issues if you want, but stop talking about the Guardians. There are good reasons why they're banished from the rest of us.'

Dusk was about to reply but stopped, her head tilted, listening. The water slowly filled with the distant, rhythmic thrashing of a propeller cleaving the water. The sound grew steadily louder, then slowed. Above them, they saw the shape of the boat silhouetted against the glare of the surface, its wake strung behind it. They could even make out the shapes of the men that reached down to haul in the longline.

One by one, the sharks were winched aboard the boat. Three, passively; two still fighting for life. But even as the last one was dragged out of the water, the sharks began returning to the sea, spiralling down from the surface towards the dolphins. But something was wrong. The sharks' bodies, already exquisitely streamlined by millions of years of evolution, were now even more so. Obscenely so.

Sky stared at the first descending form in confusion. It was hard to see against the light, and a darkening cloud spread behind the shark as it fell towards him. Behind it, the surface was broken again as the next shark entered the water, followed by its own expanding cloud.

The first shark fell between Sky and Dusk. Its body trembled and twisted weakly as it desperately tried to halt its fall into the depths. Its eyes looked uncomprehendingly into Sky's as it passed him. The next four sharks followed one by one, each like the first, with fins and tail hacked off. The dolphins watched in shocked silence as the bodies passed them, but as the last neared them, Sky spoke at last.

‘This one is still alive too. Let’s move it over to the wall at least.’

They gently pushed the shark over to the steeply sloping wall and found a sand covered ledge big enough to accommodate its body. It squirmed helplessly on the sand, blood still flowing freely from its wounds.

Wakes closed her eyes, then opened them slowly and looked at her friends, her expression pained.

‘Why?’

‘Who knows?’ replied Deneb. ‘Of course, the Walkers are wasteful, but this seems incredible. Why take just their fins? And why be so cruel?’

The shark was shaking slightly, its mouth opening and closing rapidly as it fought to breathe. Dusk turned to the others and spoke quietly, as if she was afraid it would understand her.

‘We should kill it — end its suffering.’

‘No Dusk!’ Sky said. ‘You know we can’t. We mustn’t kill except to eat.’

She turned to face him, her voice quietly angry. ‘Don’t quote the Way at me! Just look at it — we can’t leave it like this!’

‘And we can’t just ignore the Way whenever it suits us! It’s what makes us civilized — otherwise we’d be no different from those Walkers!’

‘I’m not saying we ignore it all — we just need to realise that it doesn’t answer all the questions any more — Ocean’s changing, and if we don’t change too we’ll all end up like this Cleaner!’

Deneb moved between them.

‘Both of you calm down. I think the argument’s irrelevant. Look, he’s almost gone now. I say we let Ocean take him back.’

The shark had stopped trying to swim and was still. There was a small flicker of life in its eyes, but it was a small, distant, failing thing. Like a stone dropped into the void and gently fading from sight. They lifted what was left of its body and carried it away from the wall, out over the darkening blue of the open sea. Without a word they let the shark fall. As they did so the flicker of light vanished and its eyes were left with only the peaceful, indifferent gaze of the dead.

They watched it tumble gently into the abyss.

CHAPTER 3

“Trust the words of a fool. Only the wise lie well.”

- Traditional.

‘There’s just sand. Endless sand. And sand doesn’t talk.’

‘Keep swimming.’ Sky pressed ahead faster, forcing Muddy River Mouth to keep the pace, hoping that the greater effort might discourage his complaining. But he knew that Muddy would never allow himself to make any unusual effort without at least a token show of resistance and reluctance. That was just Muddy and it did not mean a thing.

‘Why are we doing this, Sky? Alright, so Born was stranded on the beach near here, but that was days ago now. You think that someone is going to be still hanging around here? There’s nothing here!’

Sky said nothing. It was true that the area was barren. Just a flat, shelving seabed, a continuation of the white sands of the shore stretching far out under the sea, the small ripples in the sand the only blemishes on an otherwise bland space. That was why so few dolphins from the clan came this way; there was just no reason to. But Sky had dragged the reluctant Muddy along to try to find something, anything, to explain what had happened to Born; what had driven her onto that beach and why.

‘Sky, we need to stop and find some food. I am so hungry, I could eat...’

‘Quiet!’ Sky stopped swimming so suddenly Muddy almost careered

into him. ‘Listen!’ he hissed at Muddy.

Faintly, the sound of two female dolphins’ voices could be heard ahead. They were young, not yet adults, and bottlenose dolphins like Sky and Muddy. Sky flicked his head to Muddy in a signal commonly used in a hunt — *close in silence*. They approached the voices cautiously then Sky stopped them as a huge shape loomed into view at the edge of visibility. The wreck of a large metal ship lay partially on its side in the sand; decaying rusty plates, cables and containers beside it. Corals and sponges were growing on various parts of the hulk, gradually absorbing the intruder into the world in which it had fallen. The voices were coming from the other side of the wreck. Sky and Muddy surfaced to take a breath, then Sky led the way to the near side of the ship where they stayed motionless, listening. Sky could hear the young dolphins clearly at last. He glanced at Muddy, who tipped his head in silent acknowledgement. Sky knew these voices: one was Bellatrix Unseen, one of the younger students he and Muddy helped to teach at the Academy. The other was the same age and new to the clan, she was called Shining, but he could not remember her full name: something Shining, anyway.

Bellatrix was speaking now, quickly and full of enthusiasm as always, but in the loud conspiratorial whisper of a child trying to keep an exciting secret. ‘He’s late again! I hope he is going to turn up this time! Are you sure he meant today, Shining?’

‘Yes, that’s definitely what *we* said. But you never know with him. I don’t think he hears half of what we say.’

‘Let’s go up and see.’ Bellatrix led her friend to the surface where they both finned hard with their tails, lifting their heads high above the water to look out into the clear air. Sky took advantage of their temporary inability to hear to speak to Muddy. ‘They shouldn’t be here on their own! Who are they meeting so secretly?’ Before Muddy could answer the two young dolphins dived down again to the other side of the wreck, chattering excitedly. Sky and Muddy hung back in the shadow of the ship’s keel. They could clearly make out Bellatrix’s voice. ‘So he did remember! He’s just late as usual. I wonder if he’s going to try to scare us again today!’

Sky swam cautiously upwards until he could just see through the thin branches of a red gorgonia, which swayed gently back and forth on the upper rail of the ship in the lazy swell. The two young dolphins were looking expectantly out into the blue away from him. Sky heard the sound of the approaching dolphin’s ranging sonar, then saw him appear and approach the two females. He was not much older than them, and Sky was sure he had never seen him before. His head was slightly misshapen, flattened on the top and one side, as though it had been squashed somehow as a baby, and the

eye on that side was partly closed. He spoke slowly, his voice flat and dull. He seemed to need to concentrate hard to get the words out. ‘You still here. I said you must go.’

Shining shook her head vigorously. ‘We told you, we can’t just go! The Council decide where the clan goes, and they are not going to move it now with the Gathering coming up.’

The strange youth dipped his odd head for emphasis as he spoke again in the same stilted way. ‘Is Gathering that troubles start. You go before Gathering. Go now.’

Bellatrix interrupted. ‘But you still haven’t told us why! We can’t tell our mothers we just want to go without a reason!’

The youth spoke more forcefully still. ‘Don’t tell then! Just go before bad things happen. Go before Gathering’. Then, pleading, ‘Promise you go.’

Sky sank slowly back to Muddy’s side and indicated for him to take station behind the gorgonia, then swam quietly around the bottom of the wreck till he was on the opposite side of it, behind the three young dolphins who hung above the wreck, absorbed in their conversation. When he was directly behind the strange young male, Sky rose up into view, saying as gently as he could, ‘It is I, Touches The Sky. And I think you had better tell *me* about these bad things.’

The three young dolphins spun to look at him in shock, the male looked terrified and turned to bolt, but as he did, Muddy’s bulky body loomed up above the edge of the ship in front of him. He turned back to look again at Sky for a moment, then to Sky’s horror he shot into an opening in the wreck, disappearing into the darkness of the ship’s inside. Sky darted to the opening but did not dare to go in.

‘That young idiot! If he gets lost or trapped in there he’ll drown! Muddy, see if there’s another way out.’ His friend swam swiftly along the wreck, using sharp bursts of sonar to scan the surface as he went. Sky turned back to the two females. ‘You two are both from the Dune Coast Clan. You know you are not meant to be here! Who is he?’

They looked at each other, frightened and guilty. Bellatrix answered at last. We are really sorry, Jeii. We didn’t think it was so wrong. His name is Sand In Rain.’

‘So his clan call him Rain?’

Bellatrix looked embarrassed. ‘He says they call him “Sand In Brain”. It’s why we come here — we’re his only friends. We call him Sand though.’

Sky looked at them hard for a moment before going closer to the darkness

of the opening into the wreck. He called into the darkness: ‘Sand! Come out Sand! We’re not going to hurt you.’

Muddy reappeared. ‘There are no other openings big enough for a zeta to pass through that I can find. He needs to come back out this way or not at all.’

‘I don’t think he will answer you, Jeii,’ Bellatrix said, ‘he’s not allowed to speak to zetii from other clans.’

‘He needs to come out of there soon. He must need to breathe by now.’ Come on, let’s all go up, maybe that will encourage him.’ Sky led them all to the surface to take air, keeping his eye on the dark opening in the wreck. But there was no sign of the strange youth. ‘Muddy, I’m going to have to go in after him.’

‘No, Sky, you don’t know what you will find in there! There could be some kind of Walker trap or something. It’s not natural for a zetii to be in an enclosed place like that!’

Sky knew that full well and dreaded going into the hole. Getting trapped underwater was every dolphin’s worst nightmare, maybe even worse than getting trapped on the land. ‘I know, but I have to go. It’s our fault he went in there, we scared him. And I think he may know something important.’

They dived down again and Sky entered the hole cautiously, leaving the others at the entrance. He called the youth’s name again: no reply. Had he passed out already?

Sky went deeper into the wreck, relying more on his sonar as the light fell away. Shafts of light came in to dimly illuminate the space, coming through round apertures in the higher side, but they were too small for a dolphin to pass through. As he moved past the debris inside the ship, slowly billowing clouds of silt rose from the bottom, blinding him. The metal and other strange materials sent back confusing multiple echoes from his rasping sonar bursts, and he began to feel disorientated. He turned to look for the light from the entrance, but found to his dismay that a great wall of silt was following him. There were small patches of light here and there, but which one was the real opening? He began to feel panic rising in him. He was starting to feel the need to breathe. He should just go — Sand must have lost consciousness by now — must be dead by now. But no. He would go just a bit further, just to the end of this space. Then he heard a soft return to his sonar; and a moment later he could dimly see the shape of Sand, pressed against the side of the wreck, his eyes blank as though already dead.

‘Get out!’ Sky called urgently.

The youth stared at him blankly then moved his head sideways slightly in a negative gesture.

‘Get out now or you’ll die in here!’

Again the blank refusal.

Then Sky, remembered what Bellatrix had said to him about Sand. ‘You don’t have to speak to me. And I won’t tell anyone I’ve seen you. I promise!’

The screen of resignation lifted slightly from Sand’s eyes and he focused on Sky for a moment. He looked about to pass out.

‘I promise,’ Sky repeated firmly. Sand seemed to relax a little so Sky moved forward and pushed him into the silt cloud in the direction he hoped the exit lay. Sand swam with difficulty and seemed disorientated. Sky pushed him ahead of himself, hoping the opening was in fact this way. He knew there was no chance that Sand would make it if they were going the wrong way, and he was not sure he would either. He called out: ‘Muddy! Help me! We are lost!’

‘Here! You are not far now, I can hear you!’

With relief, Sky swam on, and Muddy kept calling encouragement, his voice getting louder, until at last, through the cloud of soft mud, Sky saw the light of the opening. He pushed Sand out ahead of him and then they both made the surface to take great gasps of beautiful air.

When they had recovered, they joined the others at the bottom again near the wreck. The young females circled nervously; Sand rested with his tail on the bottom, impassive but body full of tension.

Sky turned to Bellatrix. ‘I know he does not want to speak to me. So you ask him. What is going to happen at the Gathering? Who is behind this?’

Bellatrix looked very nervous but turned to the inert form. ‘Sand, what will happen at the Gathering?’

He looked at her sullenly. ‘Bad things. Zeta fight zeta. Maybe worse.’

‘How worse?’

‘Maybe kill.’

‘Kill!’ Muddy exclaimed. ‘We don’t kill other zetii. It’s against the Way to kill except to eat! That’s impossible!’

Sand looked at him angrily. ‘Not true! Sand heard it is already happening.’

Sky glanced at Muddy and motioned him to be quiet. He nodded to Bellatrix again.

‘Who wants to make this happen, Sand?’

‘Sand must go now.’

‘First say who, Sand.’

He looked around fearfully, then dropped his gaze to the seabed. ‘My clan. The Kark Du says it must happen. He will make zeta hate zeta. We

must do it or we die, he says.'

Sand was looking more and more upset and Sky was afraid that he might bolt at any moment, maybe back into the wreck. 'Kark Du?' he enquired gently.

'That is the name we give leader. Our father and our master.'

'Who are "we"?'

'Sand must go!'

Sky spoke gently to the young dolphin, trying to calm him, 'Alright, you can go if you promise to come back and speak to me. When can you come?'

Sand looked at him mutely.

'When would you normally meet him again, Bellatrix?' Sky asked.

'The next new moon, at sunset. But are you going to tell the Council about this Jeei?'

Sky glanced at Muddy for consent before replying. 'Well, not yet anyway. Not if Sand promises to come back. Alright Sand? Come back then and you and I will talk some more. Promise that and you can go, and I will not tell our Council about your friends.'

Sky held the frightened stare of the youth for a long moment. Sand looked deeply distressed but finally lowered his eyes in what seemed to be acknowledgement. Sky decided that was the best he was likely to get.

'Just one last question before you go: who are "we"? Who are your clan?'

Sand looked at him in panic. 'We...they are...Guardians! And they kill me too if they know I speak like this.' And suddenly he turned and was gone, swimming at speed out to sea.

CHAPTER 4

“For countless millennia, Ocean nurtured all the zetii; delighting in the strong, tolerating the weak. Now the times of plenty draw to an end. Only the true followers of the Way will prosper. The Ka-Tse are Ocean’s favoured sons and daughters. Others shall not eat until they are satiated.”

- The ‘Seer’ Stone Eyes (13,222 -13,264 post Great Alluvium).

He was being crushed by his own body. The unfamiliar weight of it driving his chest against the hot sand. Every breath a struggle. Sunlight burning his back, his skin stretched dry and tight. The tide had ebbed away leaving him and the rest of the clan in this alien world, their grey bodies scattered across the beach like giant, wave tossed pebbles. He was glad at least that his mother was beside him. It soothed him at first to look into her clear eye. There was some sand in the corner of that eye, and it looked wrong, unnatural. A drop of thick liquid carried some of it down her face. He wished he could help her get rid of that sand, it must be hurting her. At first he’d thought that she was trying to comfort him — was trying to speak to him. But he couldn’t hear her. Had heard nothing since the terrible noise had begun.

At first it had been exciting; they’d gone up to look at the strange machines. Odd, angular shapes protruded from the massive grey bodies that sped through the water driven by the noisy, swirling blades. He’d been frightened by those, but riding the huge pressure wave in front of the

machines with his father and older brother had been fun.

Then the sounds had begun. Shattering pulses of sound that shook his chest and seemed to split his brain. He'd been terrified and had looked to the adults for guidance, just wanting them to stop the pain, make everything right; like they always did.

Father and mother had led him and his brother in a fast swim towards the land with the rest of the clan. There were no words of comfort, or none that could be heard. They couldn't even navigate with their sonar; the awful sound pulses dominated everything; so they just fled through the turbid water.

They had blindly followed the rest of the clan up into the shallows and then through the surf of the beach. As they stranded among the waves they were at last free of the terrible, mind shattering pulses and they flopped about in confusion. The retreating sea left them there as Senx rose in the sky, pouring his burning heat onto their backs. Heat like he'd never experienced — the sea had always caressed it aside before.

He'd tried to talk to his mother in his childlike way but he never knew if she'd heard him. She'd tried to smile with her eyes but he saw hints of a strange, disturbing terror there. He remembered watching her blowhole open and close, taking reassurance in that even when the bright light of intelligence began to fade from her eye. As Senx reached his zenith and the heat grew beyond all endurance, the bodies around him fell still one by one. He'd still thought that everything would be alright, that father would come and help them back into the sea; make life go back to normal. Then he noticed that his mother had stopped breathing. Her sand coated eye stared blankly through him and for the first time in his short life he found that it was possible to be completely alone.

Then there was nothing for a long time; mind drifting, body crushed, the bright, merciless eye of Senx burning into his own. Then they came to him, or he thought they had. Maybe he just dreamed them. Moving upright with apparent ease, in spite of the oppressive weight of gravity. And making complex sounds to one another — almost as though they were talking. Strange others who caressed him reassuringly and looked into his eyes with compassion. The sand harsh against his belly as they pushed him back into the waves. He'd tried to swim onto the beach again to be with his mother. There was nowhere else for him to go in Ocean. But they must have pushed him back into the water with their gentle insistence. Back into a world of solitude that seemed more frightening to a young child than that beach of death...

'Wake up Sky!'

After a long moment's confusion he opened his eyes gratefully to see Muddy's concerned face peering at him in the half light of the pre dawn greyness. 'I was dreaming...'

'I gathered that. The same dream I suppose?'

'Yes — the beach...I wish I could get it out of my head.'

'You probably never will. For that kind of thing to happen to a little kid — losing your parents, your brother — it must have been a huge shock.'

'But I don't really remember much about it; how I got off the beach, how long I was alone, how I survived...'

Muddy tipped his head in a shrug. 'Well it's no secret how you were found. One of our hunting parties came across you half dead in the shallows, right? Silent Waters can tell you all about that.'

'Yes, she has of course, lots of times. I think I mean more *why* I survived. Why *I* survived, not the others.'

'Don't start getting all morbid this early in the day. Come on, let's find something to eat, that'll take your mind off it.'

Sky smiled to himself. Eating was Muddy's solution to a wide range of problems. He followed the broad form of his friend across the bay. Below them, the familiar expanse of rippled, shallow sand fell gently away. A slender garfish darted off in panic above them as they approached; its shining silver body blending perfectly with the underside of the surface. They ignored it, looking for a meal that would be easier to catch and more palatable. Occasional pale fan worms snapped their delicate circle of arms down into the sand as the dolphins passed above them, then slowly re-emerged once they were well past. The rising sun coloured the rolling dunes behind the shoreline a warm pink, in striking contrast to the deep blue of the sea. They surprised a small group of cuttlefish in the open and Muddy snatched two before the rest jetted off from sight.

Muddy muttered a belated thank you to Senx before turning to Sky again. 'What's the matter, not hungry? They're delicious — and no nasty sharp spikes or bones.'

'Yes, I know. And I will eat soon. I was just wondering about what that strange Sand character told us.'

'Yes, he was very strange. Mad would be a better word. All that stuff about zetii killing each other! That can't be true.'

'Are you so sure, Muddy? What about Born Into Summer? Something caused her death. And Sand said he had "heard it is already happening".'

'Oh, come on, you can't believe that the Guardians can somehow make the zetii break one of the most basic teachings of the Way after a million years or whatever it is?' Muddy looked troubled. 'But if they could...what

would it be like?’

‘Ocean is a very different place now, Muddy. Maybe they could change things with everything in such a mess. Maybe that’s *why* they are doing this now!’

‘I don’t want to believe it. All this stuff about Guardians must be exaggerated. Where’s the proof?’

Sky was about to reply when three dolphins shot out of the blue, emitting short blasts of navigational sonar as they came. Sky recognised them from the clan; all young males, not really friends of his but they had always been amiable enough. Now though, they careered past Muddy and deliberately bumped into Sky, one each side then one from below, striking him roughly.

‘Hey!’ Muddy called, ‘what are you doing? You hit him!’

‘Then he shouldn’t be where he doesn’t belong!’ came a reply, and they were gone, as fast as they had appeared.

Sky stared after them, very shaken.

Muddy looked at him in concern. ‘Did they hurt you?’

‘No — no not really. But what was that all about? They were so aggressive; what have I done to them?’

‘I’ve no idea, that was really weird.’ Muddy looked around nervously. ‘Well, I think they’ve gone for now at least. You sure you’re alright?’

Sky nodded.

‘Let’s get away from here then; let’s get back to the clan.’

After they had swum for a while, Muddy looked over at Sky again. ‘You look depressed. Still thinking about those idiots?’

‘Yes. But also about yesterday. The Cleaner — what Dusk and I were talking about.’

‘Arguing about you mean. You two always seem to argue these days. More than old lovers.’

‘Well, that’s *not* the reason as I’ve told you before.’ Sky kept pace with Muddy as they swam slowly inshore. ‘Don’t look at me like that — I know what you’re thinking. A year or so ago I thought that maybe there was going to be something between me and her. But it never happened, alright?’

‘That’s because you always just wait around hoping everything will work itself out. You have to take some initiative Sky! She’d have been perfect for you.’

‘I know that’s what everyone thinks, but she’s changed. Dusk has such strange ideas now. You heard her yesterday; she’s openly questioning parts of the Way — I don’t feel I have a connection with her any more.’

‘Look, I don’t get into all the deep thinking stuff like you do, but a lot of Ka-Tse are questioning the Way these days. In fact *all* kinds of zetii are

questioning it from what I hear. Ocean has changed and the Way is ancient. It doesn't seem to have all the answers like it used to.'

Sky leapt high from the water as they swam, trying to clear his head. He exploded back down through the surface again, a cascade of silver bubbles following him as he powered back alongside his friend.

'I'm not talking about questioning details of the Way; there's nothing wrong with that. After all we're meant to do it as Novices aren't we? Even more so if we qualify as Initiates of the Way. No, I mean that she really seems to be arguing against some of the basic principles. If she goes on like this she could get into a mess. That's how ordinary Ka-Tse like you or me end up getting seduced into the Guardians.'

Muddy's normally amiable features started showing signs of irritation now.

'Sky, just forget it. You're imagining things again. Listen, I know how important it is for you to finish this last year at the Academy well. Here's my advice: keep away from Dusk if you can't avoid talking about philosophical things — it always ends in a fight and I hate having to listen to it. Now, no more about this please; here's the clan.'

As they closed with the shallow water near the shoreline they found themselves in the happy confusion of the Dune Coast Clan. The water was full of sound as the dolphins moved about in sociable groups; playing, flirting, hunting. Sky realised that there was at least one more family present now that had returned to the clan after having been away for a couple of years. He tried to remember how many that made their number now; he guessed at about sixty-five: a big clan. He and Muddy threaded their way through the groups and among the small isolated coral heads that protruded from the sand. Then there was a signature call he knew at once, with an odd, urgent edge to it: 'It is I, Deneb Rising!'

They replied with their own calls and Deneb appeared, his pale eyes showing concern.

'Sky, my mother wants to see you immediately. Follow me.'

Sky took station alongside Deneb who led him in silence away from the crowds and along the coast where the sandy beach turned to a harsh rock face that fell almost sheer into the water. A narrow vertical fissure in the cliff face continued downwards into the water where it widened, its two inward facing walls dropping away out of sight. They approached this, and as they drew closer, Sky could see the slight form of Silent Waters suspended almost motionless between the towering stone walls, the wavering shafts of sunlight from the surface making her pale skin seem to glow against the dark shadow of the cliffs. Deneb signalled to Sky to continue alone and turned to leave.

Sky approached her, troubled. In spite of having been raised by her since he was only two, he still shared some of the awe that most of the clan had for their leader. He had never been summoned to see her in this way before, and he struggled to stay calm.

‘You wanted to see me Prime Mother?’

‘Yes, come closer, Sky.’ Her rich, melodious voice would have sounded as composed as ever to most listeners, but Sky detected something: a faint echo of alarm that made his stomach tighten in concern. He stopped in front of her, the two of them hanging almost upright in the rock recess; moving their tails gently to hold position.

‘Sky, you are doing well in your studies.’

‘Thank you Prime Mother, I try. I enjoy most of the lessons.’

‘Your teachers tell me you have great promise. This is your last year as a Novice; if all goes well you will soon qualify as an Initiate of the Way. But there are heavy responsibilities attached. We Ka-Tse have always expected the highest personal integrity of our Initiates: they should not merely be able to quote the Way. They should embody it.’

‘I understand that, Prime Mother, and I want to do exactly that. I do believe in the importance of the Way — it’s allowed us to live in harmony with nature for a million years after all. I *want* to try to embody its teachings.’

She nodded slowly, as though to herself. ‘I believe that you do. But I have learned something today that will make others question your right to become an Initiate — will make them want to argue against it in fact.’

Sky stared at her in confusion. She continued, picking her words carefully.

‘We have had a visitor. He came to seek help from the Healers, they did what they could and he has gone now.’

Sky nodded. It was Rain Ending of course, the lone dolphin that had approached their hunting party.

Silent Waters watched him intently as she continued. ‘Sky, you always told us that the rest of your clan died that day on the beach.’

Sky felt as though his heart had stopped.

‘Yes...they did...I was sure they had.’

‘This visitor told us he was from your old clan. And he was not the only one to escape. He said that a few others survived too.’

‘What happened to them?’

‘He said they went separate ways, too few to make a clan. But he knew that a couple of them had been angry at what happened — were in despair. He had heard that they turned to those abominations that we do not even

speak of. They joined the Guardians.'

Sky suddenly felt very cold. 'Why are you telling me this, Prime Mother?'

She looked up towards the surface for a moment and closed her eyes, then looked directly back at Sky, her eyes piercing. As if trying to read his thoughts; see inside his mind; find the truth.

'He said that one of them was your father, Sky.'

CHAPTER 5

*“I love you for what you are
Though your heart bears scars
From life’s harsh tempests
I would not wish it unblemished
Each wound carved your strength
Suffering gave you wisdom
These flaws make you perfect”*
- From the Arcturus Love Sonnets

Fades Into Dusk made her way through the bustle of the clan towards the eastern end of the bay. She kept to the edge of the groups of dolphins who were variously talking, telling stories to the young or preparing for a night hunt. As she reached the coral headland at the edge of the bay she waited, pretending to search among the sand patches for hidden fish as the perimeter patrol went by. Once she judged it was clear, she slipped around the headland and set off parallel to the coast, relaxing as she distanced herself from the clan. The sun was dropping below the low dunes on the land, a great red disc. The few strands of cirrus cloud were turning a deep purple and the sea was darkening. Once she was sure she had slipped away unseen she began to sing to herself as she swam and occasionally leapt from the water, sometimes spinning quickly in mid-flight as she loved to do.

She kept swimming for hours, while the water gradually turned first to

velvet black then slowly lightened again as the bright white moon rose; almost a complete disc. Soon she did not even need to use her echolocation to navigate and used only occasional bursts of sound to look ahead. Eventually, after several hours swimming she reached the steep sandy shelf with the familiar, distinctive rocky arch protruding from it. The moon was almost at its zenith so she was just on time. She could feel her pulse quickening. Because she was excited to be here? Or because it was wrong? She made her signature call: 'It is I, Fades Into Dusk!'

There was no answer.

Storm Before Darkness was not here yet. Or not coming? He had missed two of their meetings before and had always had excuses about emergencies that had come up that needed his attention. Rationally, she knew that it was likely that there would be such demands on his time given his responsibilities, but both times she had dreaded that it must mean he was tired of her and was bored with meeting her. He seemed so different from all the males in her clan. He was obviously admired by his followers, and he had such clarity of vision. There was no vagueness about him, he knew exactly what he wanted to achieve in the world. She found that very attractive. She also found *what* he wanted to achieve rather frightening, but that was exciting in a way too.

Everything she had learned at the clan told her that what Storm Before Darkness and these others said was wrong, and when she was listening to Cloud Passing or Silent Waters speaking she was almost convinced again that it *was* wrong. But when Storm spoke and became impassioned she was swept along by the precision and ruthlessness of his arguments. When she heard him she doubted the Way; doubted it could help them any more.

She called out again, 'It is I, Fades Into Dusk!'

Silence.

She remembered when she had first met him. She was with two other females from the clan on their way back from a hunting trip. They heard the voices of some other dolphins calling to one another. They were Ka-Tse like those of the clan, but they spoke with an odd dialect, it sounded harsher and more purposeful than the speech she was used to. Her friends were nervous and wanted to leave before the strangers became aware of them. But she was curious and in spite of their protestations she insisted on holding back when they left. She had then silently approached the sound of the strange voices and drew closer. At the edge of visibility she could see it was four dolphins; males from their voices, in a circle on the sand, their heads low.

She could make out some of their words and it was clear that one of them, an exceptionally large, dark skinned dolphin with a pale scar over his right eye, was their leader. He looked and sounded authoritative and he

spoke with the ease of a natural and unquestioned leader. She had encountered dolphins with an aura of power before, but they had all been elders of the clan, and it arose from the respect accorded the wise. This one spoke of action, and the power was also a physical one. She was strangely attracted and disturbed in equal measure.

She had been about to leave when he had become aware of her. She saw his eyes lock onto hers and it had felt like she had been struck a blow. She had started to swim off but he called to her to wait. It sounded like a command, and she had stopped dead without making a conscious choice to do so.

He had left his companions and swam over to her. Once he had established she was alone, he had wanted to know what she had heard. He must have soon realised that she had really heard nothing of consequence. Their conversation had been one sided, almost an interrogation, but he seemed to soften when she answered more of his questions about herself. He seemed interested in the movements of her clan and genuinely fascinated to learn that she was in training as a Starwriter. She was flattered by his attention and so, at his suggestion, accompanied him on a swim over the shallow sand; their course following the lines of the ripples. She was intensely curious, as it soon became clear to her that he was a leader of a clan, even though he could only be a few years older than she was. She had not heard of such a young male taking that role and was quietly impressed. She was also impressed by the way he spoke and his sure, precise movements. He radiated strength. When they separated and he suggested they meet again she agreed. At that point she knew little about him, but soon they were secretly meeting regularly. She was probably already more than half in love by the time she found out what his clan called themselves. That had been a shocking day for her and she had tried to stay away from him for a while, but the lure was too great, and in any case, she reassured herself, their relationship had never gone further than close companions. She had explained that such a thing was impossible now, and he seemed to understand that. But he knew her circumstances would be different soon and he had been quite clear that he had expectations for that day. She did not know what she would do then.

Where was he? She called again: 'It is I, Fades Into Dusk!'

A long pause.

Then, faintly, a voice from the night: 'And it is I, Storm Before Darkness!'

DOLPHIN CULTURE EVOLVED OVER MILLIONS OF YEARS SO THEY COULD REMAIN PERFECTLY ATTUNED WITH THEIR WORLD, OCEAN. UNLIKE MAN, THEY HAVE CREATED AN ALMOST UTOPIAN SOCIETY WITHOUT FEELING THE NEED TO MANIPULATE THEIR ENVIRONMENT, COLLECT POSSESSIONS OR WAGE WAR. BUT THE GROWING PRESSURE OF MAN'S ACTIVITIES BECOME INTOLERABLE AND IN FRUSTRATION ONE FACTION SEEKS AN AGGRESSIVE NEW PATH, MAKING A SHOCKING DEPARTURE FROM *THE WAY* — THE ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY THAT HAS GUIDED THEM SO WELL THROUGH THE MILLENNIA.

SKY, A MALE DOLPHIN CLOSE TO BECOMING AN INITIATE IN *THE WAY*, UNWILLINGLY FINDS HIMSELF CAUGHT UP IN THE VIOLENT CONSEQUENCES. TO SAVE THE LIVES OF HIS CLOSEST FRIENDS HE WILL HAVE TO RISK THE WORST PUNISHMENT HIS CLAN CAN INFLICT AND MUST DECIDE BETWEEN THE TWO FEMALES WHO CHALLENGE EVERYTHING HE BELIEVES IN.

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About the Author:-

Mark Caney has spent much of his life on or in the sea, sailing and diving. English by birth, he lived abroad for eighteen years and during that time travelled to many countries working on diving related projects. These varied from photo shoots of sharks, running private courses for Arab sheikhs, leading an award-winning, four month expedition to east Africa, and operating a dive school in Cyprus.

Since 1996, he has held the position of vice president with the well known diver training agency, PADI, and is based in their offices in Bristol, UK.

During his life he has had many encounters with dolphins and has had frequent opportunities to study them in detail. He is a marine mammal medic and is an active member of the board of the marine environmental charity, Project AWARE.

To learn more about the world of dolphins visit
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