

A NOVEL BY
MARK CANEY



DOLPHIN WAY

RISE OF THE GUARDIANS



Hi, this is Mark Caney, author of *Dolphin Way*. I hope you enjoy these chapters and I look forward to taking you into their extraordinary world. If later you decide you'd like to get the whole book for your e-Reader, as a paperback, or as an audiobook, just click below.

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Prologue

The white gull snapped its curved beak deftly 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 in frustration, 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; rapidly inclining its black-capped head back and forth as it peered at it. Judging how helpless this creature was. If this should be its time. Sky leapt from the sea, 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 abused 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. 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 1

“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.”

- From the teachings of Saturn Over Antares

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, shockingly, 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 Cleaners 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 on their own.

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 case 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 a 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’s 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 going on?’

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.’

‘Maybe. Maybe the Way isn’t enough anymore.’ 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 some 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 in 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 seabed 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 a 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 wide.

They followed the line further. There were five sharks in all on separate hooks; two dead, one nearly so, the remaining two still fighting against the merciless hooks that held them in place.

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 final one 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 anymore — 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 tiny, 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. That was just Muddy, and it didn’t 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, the white sands of the shore continuing 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, like Sky and Muddy were Bottlenose Dolphins. 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, with 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 hull. 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 gorgonian, 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 gorgonian, 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 around 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 insides. 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

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 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’re lost!’

‘Here! You’re 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 for the surface to take great gasps of cool, 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 his 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’s 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 Jeii?’

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 Alluvion).

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'd 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 tide 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 motionless 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’s 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’s 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 I have 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 anymore.’

‘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 actually 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 swam 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.

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 speak 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 anymore.

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'd 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 swum 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 shyly 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!'

Chapter 6

“The child will have long to think on the mistake that the parent made with so little thought.”

- Carried Westward (12,214 – 12,242 post Great Alluvion)

A large swell rolled towards the shore, born in the deep open sea, a vestige of a far distant storm. Above the deep waters the great liquid monsters lifted and fell benignly, sleep-swimming ponderously towards the land. After their long journey, the sudden resistance of the small coral reef woke them with a shock; they reared up in outrage and crashed down in white violence.

Lying on the sandy bottom on the inshore side of the reef, Sky watched the huge breakers crash down at the surface above him, driving great billows of white into the clear water. He had lain there a long time; watching, thinking.

‘It is I, Deneb Rising!’

‘And I, Wakes Softly!’

Deneb’s dark form appeared in front of Sky, his serious face showing concern. Wakes hung back at a short distance to give them a chance to speak privately.

‘We’ve been looking for you little brother,’ Deneb said gently. ‘You’ve been gone a long time.’

‘I needed some time to think. It’s been such a shock.’

‘Of course it has. Come on, swim with us, I can hardly hear you with all this noise. Let’s go down where it’s quieter.’

Sky slowly followed Deneb and Wakes into the calm of deeper water, reluctant to leave the clamour of the waves; the comforting caress of the swell.

‘Whatever everyone else thinks Sky, nothing has changed for me. I will still treat you like a brother and I’m sure my mother will still treat you like her son. You’re still the same zeta.’

‘Maybe I’m not though. I’ve gone through my life thinking my family were dead, now it seems my father may still be alive. And a Guardian! If half of what is said about them is true, they’re bad enough. They say that they condone killing other zetii sometimes and that they follow a perverse form of the Way; saying it was only really meant for us Ka-Tse or something like that — that the other kinds of zetii are inferior.’

Wakes shook her head. ‘Even if that’s all true, it doesn’t matter. *You’re* not a Guardian.’

‘The rest of the clan won’t be as reasonable as you though — after all my father might be! Deneb, I have to know, I want to ask him what would make him do such a thing!’

‘Well, you can’t! You know the penalty for any kind of contact with them. You’d be crazy to risk everything now when you are almost at the end of your studies.’

‘Alright, alright, I know that makes sense, but I really need to know more somehow...’

At that point Sky trailed off. Ahead of them were five adult males from the clan. Sky made his signature call:

‘It is I, Touches The Sky!’

Before Deneb or Wakes could add theirs, and without any proper reply to Sky’s call, the largest of the males said, ‘Don’t you mean “It is I, Son of a Guardian!”’

Sky recognised him as Last To Speak. One of his daughters was Bellatrix Unseen, who Sky had seen at the wreck and who sometimes attended the classes that Sky helped to teach at the Academy.

Deneb advanced towards the older, larger dolphin; deliberately placing himself between Sky and him. ‘How dare you speak like that! There’s no proof of this. And even if it’s true it’s not Sky’s fault.’

Last To Speak snorted. ‘Don’t come on high and mighty with me, boy. Just because you’re the Prime Mother’s son doesn’t give you any authority over us.’ His companions circled around them, watching the exchange without comment but clearly following it with interest. Sky was shocked by the animosity, but felt he had to defend himself. He moved closer.

‘Who told you this story?’

‘Everybody knows it now. And maybe you haven’t done anything wrong yet, but I think it’s just a matter of time. Like they say, “no stronger current than the father’s blood in the child’s veins”. I think the Council should get rid of you *now* before you do any harm.’

Deneb replied before Sky could, his voice cold but angry. ‘Fortunately, the Council are able to make their decisions based on facts, not emotions. That’s why zetii like you aren’t on it! Come on Sky, let’s go.’

They left the group of males behind them, Last To Speak's voice just reaching them as they moved swiftly towards the headland: 'We'll be watching you, Guardian's son! The first sign of you turning bad and we'll drive you out of this clan in a tailbeat!'

The three friends swam around the headland into the clan's bay. The western end of the bay was quite calm, but the breakers boomed against the other side of the protecting headland, sending fountains of fine spray to hang briefly in the bright, tropical sunlight.

Deneb slowed the pace at last and turned to Sky. 'Don't pay too much attention to them.'

'No, you mustn't Sky,' Wakes agreed, 'I'm sure most of the clan won't think that way. It was good that you two stood up to those idiots. Deneb, you really put him in his place.'

Deneb gave her a small smile but turned back to Sky, serious as usual. 'Sky there's something else too isn't there? I talked to Muddy today.'

Sky had been wondering what to do about Sand and his story, after all he had promised him not to let anyone know that he had spoken to him. But now he told Deneb and Wakes what had happened. 'Don't tell anyone else yet though, please,' he finished, 'I need to find out more first.'

Deneb inclined his head in agreement. 'Very well. Let's go and see mother though. Wakes, why don't we meet you again after we've seen her.'

They found Silent Water in the shallows, laying on the white sand; meditating.

They waited a short while nearby. She must have become aware of them as they could tell that she was slowly raising herself up through the levels of consciousness, making small movements, then slowly opening her eyes. Without apparent effort, she drifted to the surface, took a brief breath, then settled back to the seabed. 'You look troubled. Has it begun?'

Deneb glanced meaningfully at Sky, who spoke first. 'Has what begun, Prime Mother?'

'Prejudice and bullying from the foolish. It is inevitable I am afraid. No need to answer; I see that it has.'

Sky nodded, his eyes downcast. She continued. 'There are some in every clan that can think for themselves, make their own judgements, accept and embrace change. Then there are others whose horizons are close by, who find a false courage in unthinking conformity.'

'What should I do?'

'Probably best to do nothing. If they see that you are hurt, it makes their sport all the more rewarding. Remember that their opinions are of no real value. Seek out the company of those with open minds. In time you will see they are the ones that really matter, and that are truly respected by the wise and the good.'

'And my father — what about him being a Guardian? What will happen to me now?'

'I hope that there is no need for anything to change. I have spoken with the Council and we have agreed that whatever your father may have done, you have committed no fault. But Sky, do be careful. There will be many who are suspicious of you now, who will look for any hint of an error. I cannot protect you if they find one.'

'Prime Mother, I really need to know more about my father.'

She drifted up again to breathe; sank back again thoughtfully. ‘I can understand that. But if he is alive and *has* become a Guardian, you must not try to meet him. You know that any kind of deliberate contact with them will result in exile.’

‘Could I at least try to find the zeta who brought the news about my father? Perhaps he could tell me more about what happened that day on the beach — to explain why.’

She paused for a while, considering. ‘I do not like this at all, Sky. There will be many zetii who will be very suspicious of you now, looking for reasons to expel you from this clan. Do you understand?’

Sky nodded. ‘Yes, but I really have to know more — to find out where I’ve come from.’

She looked at him for a long time, her eyes full of compassion. ‘Very well, when your studies permit you can try and find him, but do not spend too long searching, he may be anywhere by now. And you are not to go alone. Now go and try to forget about this for the moment.’

They departed and made their way back to where they had left Wakes Softly. She was playing with a pufferfish, teasing it as it swam in irritated circles around a boulder. She looked up with shining eyes as Deneb approached.

‘Did she have anything to say about it?’

‘She’d anticipated something like this happening and warned Sky to be careful. But she’s given him permission to find out more about his father.’

The three of them began a gentle cruise along the shoreline, swimming close together as they talked. Wakes looked at Sky in concern. ‘Sky please do be careful! You know how impetuous you can be sometimes. I *hate* all this — why is everyone behaving so oddly lately?’

Sky glanced at Deneb questioningly who tilted his head as a shrug. ‘Who else is behaving oddly, Wakes?’

‘Well...those bullies attacking you, what happened to Born, the Walkers killing those Cleaners in that awful way, and then the night I saw...’ She trailed, off her eyes frowning.

‘Saw what?’

‘I’m not sure exactly, which is why I hadn’t meant to say anything until I had a chance to try and check things properly.’

‘Come on, Wakes,’ Deneb prompted her. ‘You’ve got us curious now; you’ll have to say more.’

She smiled at him. ‘Well, I’ll tell you *what* I think I saw, but I don’t think I should say *who* I thought I saw. A couple of days ago, I was looking for Dusk. It was getting dark when I saw her; she was with some of the other trainee Starwriters and they were practising or something. They were in the shallows in a kind of rocky depression, so that they could see the stars without being disturbed by the waves. When I got there, they had already dropped into that trance they go into and the Dreamweaver had started to chant the stuff they had to memorise; old historical stuff, I think. Of course, I didn’t want to disturb them, so I was about to leave, when I noticed an older zeta watching them from behind a rock.’

Sky interrupted her. ‘Do you mean this zeta was close enough to hear what they were saying?’

‘I am pretty sure he would have been. In fact, it looked like that was what he was trying to do.’

‘But they’re not allowed to do that,’ said Deneb ‘Who was it?’

She looked at him apologetically. ‘I’m not certain. It was too dark. But I think that it was a zeta from the Council.’

‘A Councillor! Who?’

‘I don’t think I should say, as I’m half guessing really.’

‘What happened then?’

‘I was curious, and so I watched for some time from the edge of visibility, but from where I couldn’t hear the Starwriters. Eventually, he left; very carefully and quietly, as though he didn’t want to be seen. I followed him. Maybe I shouldn’t have, but it seemed so strange. He swam east from the clan a long way and eventually he stopped by a rocky outcrop. Soon another zeta came. A big, younger male. They talked, but I couldn’t hear what they were saying — they kept their voices low.’

‘So, did you see where this other zeta went?’

‘No. At one point they stopped talking and looked around — looked in my direction! I was terrified that they may have seen me as the moon was coming up so I came back to the clan as fast as I could.’

Sky looked at her seriously. ‘Wakes, that *is* really strange. Tell us who you think it was.’

‘I don’t like to, as I’m not certain. And you know what the Way says: “*Let the accused hear the accusation first.*”’

Deneb moved closer to her. ‘It was brave of you to do what you did. And you’re right not to want to spread rumours if you’re not sure. But something is very wrong here. Promise me that you will tell Cloud Passing when we see him next for lessons.’

She smiled back at Deneb gratefully. ‘That’s a good idea. I’ll talk to him. He’ll know what I should do.’

Sky saw how closely the two of them were swimming. He noticed that Wakes had brushed her pectoral fin gently against Deneb's side at least twice now, as though by accident. Sky smiled to himself and decided he should leave them alone. 'I'm supposed to meet with Cloud Passing myself now. I'll see you two later. Hopefully we can find out what this little mystery is all about soon.' He left them to their swim and headed back towards the clan. He wondered if they had even notice him leave.

Chapter 7

“Fear not endings

Without beginning and end

Nothing can be whole.”

- Unseen Crystal (12,001 - 12,026 post Great Alluvion)

As Sky made his way across the shallows through the waking bustle of the clan, one of the new family groups passed him, swimming slowly together in synchronisation, often gliding between their short excursions to take breaths at the surface. One of the resident clan females swam with them. Sky overheard her discussion with the senior female of the visitors.

‘...and did you come across any others?’

‘Only once; a group of young males. We were afraid they might cause trouble, so we moved on quickly, and they didn’t bother us. We also passed a large clan of Xenthos who were heading east, far beyond our range.’

‘Did they tell you why?’

‘We tried to speak to them, but you know how odd their speech is. I think it was due to a lack of hunting, but that always seems to be the reason these days. Anyway, they’re a strange sort, so who knows?’

‘Strange indeed. And of course, they say that they’re stealing our share of the quotas.’

The visitor shook her head. ‘I don’t know about that. But we certainly saw the lack of hunting. It seems there are just no fish left in Ocean some days. I think the Walkers are to blame, not the Xenthos. You know how they are taking everything with their hunting machines.’

‘Well, no doubt the Grand Council will be talking about these things soon enough. And what brings you back to us now?’

‘It was mainly for the young ones. They need better education than we can give, so we’ll probably stay at least until the second equinox. My youngest wants to become a Starwriter! I’ve tried to tell her the amount of study that will mean but she’s too young to understand yet. At least she has an ambition! So, we’ll be here for some time, and we wanted to get here for the Gathering in any case.’

‘Oh yes, it would be a shame miss a Gathering. There are so many things planned for it! You must get your young ones involved in some of the recitals. Let me find you someone from the Academy who can help you...’

Hearing this, Sky veered off to one side abruptly, before the speaker might turn and see him. He swam as quickly as he could, without, he hoped, appearing to be escaping. He reassured himself that he really did have to go to his meeting and that he had no time to listen to what was likely to be a long explanation of the merits of the children and a listing of their many artistic talents. He made his way to the appointed end of the bay and looked for Cloud Passing.

He found him slowly gliding in the shallows with his misty eyes half closed, apparently deep in thought. Sky watched him from a respectful distance for a while, and marvelled at the way he spent so long submerged between breaths, easily exceeding the six or seven minutes that was the ordinary limit for most dolphins. His slight body was covered in small scars like many of the older dolphins, but Sky noticed that he seemed to be acting noticeably time-worn of late. When he did swim to the surface for air, it seemed as though the movements pained him, and his breathing seemed laboured. It hurt Sky greatly to see him like this. Cloud Passing had been his teacher and mentor for many years, and he had more respect for him than any other dolphin. He hoped that one day he might reach the level of oneness with Ocean that the old dolphin had clearly attained. Sky knew that Cloud Passing would have been deeply hurt by the death of Born Into Summer too. She had been a favourite student of his and had spent much of her free time acting as an assistant to him. Sky drew closer. ‘Greetings, Cloud Passing-Jeii.’

The elderly dolphin opened his eyes fully and turned slowly to peer at him.

‘Greetings, young Sky,’ he said affectionately. ‘I see you got my message.’

‘No, not at all.’ He looked thoughtfully at Sky, his misty eyes kindly. ‘Silent Water tells me that you have had some strange news.’

‘Yes, Jeii.’

‘How do you feel about it?’

‘I feel...confused. I hate the thought that my father might have been a Guardian, but if I even have a father still...’

Cloud Passing nodded. ‘Of course. Most zetii of your age take parents for granted. But if you have never known a parent, it is inevitable that you must wonder what they were like.’

‘Exactly. If he is alive, I would like to know more about him, even if it’s only to find out I don’t even like him; I just want to know.’

‘Have you spoken to Silent Water about this?’

‘Yes, today. She said I can try to find the zeta that told our hunting party about him, when my studies allow it.’

‘Alone?’

‘No, she said I should not go alone.’

‘Very wise of her — as always. Sky, you must be careful. I sense there are some events on your near horizon that will be hard for you to cope with. You will need to rely on your training and instincts to deal with them. Let me see...yes, you can take a few days for this, but you must return by first dawn after the new moon. And you can take one of the other novices with you.’

‘Thank you Jeii, I’ll take Muddy River Mouth if he’ll come.’

‘I am quite sure he will, you are all such a close group. Which reminds me, I have been meaning to tell you: I have enjoyed teaching you and your four friends immensely. I think you have been the brightest group of Novices I have had the pleasure to work with for a long time. I shall miss our lessons.’

‘You must know that we look forward to your lessons the most, Jeii. Anyway, we have a few more moons of lessons still to go, and then you’ll have a new group of Novices to test your endless patience next year.’

The old dolphin looked wistfully at Sky, a faint smile in his cloudy eyes. ‘No, I am afraid that I won’t be leading any classes next year.’

‘But why not, Jeii? Are you sick?’

‘I am not at my best. But you know that; I am sure you all must have been aware for some time that I have been unwell, it is an unfortunate side effect of getting old.’ He slowed as he came alongside a large isolated boulder and paused to peer at a small, red, hermit crab that was laboriously picking its way through the low algae towards the top. He seemed deep in thought for a while, then seemed to come to a decision. He turned to Sky and said gently, ‘Sky, you were always one of my best and most favourite pupils. Let me share something with you. You will be one of only a few I have mentioned this to. It is not a secret; I am just not in a hurry to tell everyone just yet.’

Sky nodded without a word, wondering what he was about to hear. He had not seen his teacher quite like this before, and he felt a cold shiver of anticipation that something bad was coming.

Cloud Passing looked once more at the small crab which had almost reached the summit of its boulder. The crab became aware that it was being watched and stopped its climb. Its unwinking black eyes stared expressionlessly at the old dolphin for a moment. It seemed to sense he was no threat and began its climb again, only to stop, as it discovered a discarded shell. The shell was somewhat larger than the one it currently inhabited and the crab examined it carefully, reaching inside with its claws.

‘It looks like he is growing out of his current home’, observed Cloud Passing. ‘Time to move on to something better.’

‘Jeei, you were going to tell me something.’

‘So I was. Sky, I have been thinking a lot lately. It has been a long time since I made a deep dive down to the dark waters. I think I should like to make one more.’

‘Jeei, you don’t mean...’

‘Hush a moment Sky. I had thought of arranging this in a moon or so when this whole Gathering business is over with. But I discussed it with Silent Waters, and she seems to think it would be appropriate to incorporate it into the celebrations. I am very flattered of course, and do not wish to appear pretentious...’

Sky could not stay quiet any longer. ‘Jeii, no!’

‘Touches The Sky! I am surprised at you’, Cloud Passing said in mock reproof. ‘As a scholar of the Way you know that it is every zeta’s right...’

‘Yes, of course I know Jeii, but...’

‘There cannot be any buts. However, I do have a problem.’ He looked hard at Sky for a long time, as though he was searching for the right way to put something. ‘I had thought that I had all my duties properly discharged in preparation for this. But, now things have changed.’

Sky waited; confused.

Cloud Passing continued, apparently still choosing his words carefully. ‘You have learned a great deal about the Way, and are a good student.’

‘Thank you, but I still have so much to learn, Jeii.’

‘Hmm. So, tell me, how would you like to change the Way?’

‘Change it? But...that’s an impossible question, Jeii. It can’t be changed...it’s the immutable teachings of the ancients.’

‘Did I ever tell you it was “immutable”?’

‘Well, no, I don’t think so, but everybody knows...’

‘Everybody likes to think that, of course. But Ocean changes over time, and the Way needs to adapt to those changes sometimes.’

Sky was confused by this idea. He had always believed that Way was a perfect set of truths; an unwavering code for behaviour. If the zetii followed it, all would be well. And now Cloud Passing, of all zetii, seemed to be implying it could be changed! ‘But, Jeii, who decides if it should be changed? The Council?’

‘No. They deal with more pragmatic matters. There are others who have been entrusted with this task, entrusted since our histories began, since the Way was first codified.’

‘How are these zetii chosen?’

‘They are not only zetii, Sky. Some are of the Great Wanderers, for example.’

Sky was really confused. He knew that there was some level of communication between some of the dolphin species and whales, but he had thought it was at best very basic. Now, Cloud Passing was saying that the Great Wanderers were involved in changing the Way! ‘Why are you telling me this, Jeii?’

‘The ones given this task are known as the Aligners of the Way, or more often just the Aligners. There is normally at most one member in each of the larger clans of zetii. It so happens that I am an Aligner.’

Sky looked at his teacher with a new respect. ‘I have never heard of them, Jeii.’

‘No, you would not. Very few know of their existence, even less of their identities. In this clan, just a few of the Council members know that I hold this honour. But I have a problem. It is the duty of each Aligner to arrange for an apprentice who may take over their duties when they are gone. I had someone that I was very confident of, and spent much time preparing her for the role. But now she is dead.’

‘Born Into Summer?’

‘Yes, exactly. I had high hopes for her. And it is a tragedy that she should have died. Because she was a wonderful zeta of course, but also because she was to take my work forward now that I must go. And it is a great blow to me that she died so suddenly and at such a vital time. But now I need to find someone else. And that someone must take on the obligation with little help from me as I do not have much time. I am quite unwell you see, Sky.’ The old dolphin waited expectantly.

Sky hardly knew what to say. ‘Jeei, are you asking me?’

‘Yes, Sky. I have chosen you. It is a heavy thing to bear at the best of times, but it will be far worse for you I am afraid. I am not going to be able to help you much, and I fear that Born’s death was no coincidence. She may have been killed because of what she was about to become. If that is true, then you are also at risk. Therefore, you must tell no one of this. And I will tell only those that absolutely must know. I know what you are thinking, Sky. You are not worthy, there must be others in the clan, and so on. It is what I would expect you to say. But you will have to trust my judgment more. And I believe you are the best one to take on this task. Please accept it.’

Feeling he was diving into a dark pool of unknown depth, Sky tried to keep his voice steady as he replied, ‘Very well, Jeii. Thank you for honouring me so.’

‘Good. Oh, and one other thing. When the day comes for my Darkening Dive, I was hoping that I might ask something of you.’

‘Anything Jeii, you don’t have to ask.’

‘Well, you have always had a fine singing voice Sky. I wondered if you might sing me a particular song that day.’

Sky smiled sadly at him. ‘Of course, Jeii. I shall sing it with all my heart.’

Chapter 8

*“Feed them hard truths as you would feed them a sour meal
— in small bites”*

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

She was alone again in the warm tropical night, gliding through a velvet sea to her forbidden lover. The swell lazily lifted and fell about her, casually tossing breakers onto the nearby shore. Dusk could hear each one drawing itself up — like, she imagined, some huge eel: dragging a mouthful of coral fragments, shells and sand into its jaws before idly lunging forward and spewing it back onto the steep shelf of the beach.

Although the full moon would come up later, for now it was very dark; yet the starlight alone was enough to allow her to clearly make out the white beach whenever she leapt from the water. She leapt often that night. She leapt for the sheer joy of it. She leapt to see the stream of bright phosphorescence she created as she fell back into the welcoming water. She leapt to admire the beauty of the night sky.

Dusk took a special pleasure in looking at the sky. Of course, like all dolphins she used the stars as her calendar, clock and compass; but she had studied them in much greater detail than most during her apprenticeship as a Starwriter. She enjoyed being able to name almost every point of light she saw. On this perfectly clear night, the most distant white cloudy belt of stars stretched in a band from one horizon to the other, marking the edge of the galaxy in which Ocean floated. Dusk even made out one of the “New Stars” — strange, tiny points of lights moving swiftly across the sky. They were not stars at all of course, but their origin was mysterious. The Starwriters’ meticulously kept records showed that they were a recent phenomenon: only in the last fifty years or so had they started to appear. There were various theories about them, including some that Dusk considered far-fetched, like that they contained visitors from the stars who orbited Ocean in great shining, water-filled orbs. She thought that the more likely explanation was that they were connected somehow to the Walkers, but what their purpose might be no one knew.

She arrived at the rock arch where they usually met. She was just on time, with the upper edge of the moon beginning to appear above the sea surface. Soon the whole disc was up, painted a dirty orange colour by the sand and dust blown from the land. She made her signature call: 'It is I, Fades Into Dusk!'

Silence. She hated it when she was here alone, calling into the night; not knowing what the silence meant. She always tortured herself with possibilities.

He was not coming.

He did not even remember — she was so unimportant to him.

He was with someone else.

He was dead.

He wanted to end it.

She tried to imagine how she would act to each scenario if it was true. She tried to work out which one was worse.

She watched the moon rise by the height of its own diameter nine times. As she counted each one, she called again. The oppressive silence of the replies was louder each time. At the tenth diameter she gave up and started swimming slowly towards the area where Storm Before Darkness's clan usually spent the night. That was how she named them to herself. Storm's clan. His clan. She shook her head. That was not what they called themselves. She was just trying to trick herself with words, not naming the thing of her fears, like she had done as a child. It was like the time she and her two best friends had resolved never to say the names of the great black and white pack hunters. The older children would try to frighten them with stories, but the three of them had agreed that if they never said the monsters' names out loud, they would be safe from them.

Now she was making the same pretence with Storm and his clan. And she wasn't a child anymore. So, she would just have to face facts and call them what they were: The Guardians. She was meeting and talking to Guardians, directly against the clear orders of the Grand Council. Punishment: exile.

But at least, she told herself, she was not *swimming* with the Guardians — not a member of their clan. Storm had tried to persuade her, but she had resisted. Claimed that she must finish her studies. He did not argue too fiercely against this — he seemed to be encouraging her to finish her Starwriter training in particular, and she appreciated his understanding. He was thoughtful that way.

Now, there were voices in the water ahead. She moved up into the shallows and could see clearly where the moonlight reflected from the white sandy patches. She disturbed a little foraging reef shark that moved quickly aside, concerned that it might become a meal itself.

She could make out a number of dolphins still on the bottom— one here and there occasionally rising slowly to breathe — all of them clearly asleep. She stopped using her sonar to avoid disturbing them. A little further was the source of the voices: seven young adult males had just returned from a night hunt and were talking in low tones about it. She was about to swim past when one broke away and approached her.

‘Hey, beautiful, where’s your manners? Aren’t you going to announce yourself?’

Her first reaction was to try to avoid this obviously flirtatious approach but then thought that if Storm could not be bothered to turn up to their meetings he could hardly complain if she spent time with other males.

‘It is I, Fades Into Dusk!’ She knew that protocol demanded she should have properly added “Of the Dune Coast Clan”, as she was greeting a member of another clan, but then she felt almost a member of this clan. Almost, but not quite.

‘And it is I, Catches In Air! And you can call me Catches. Why haven’t I met you before?’ He swam next to her, trying to gently direct her course away from his friends who trailed idly behind them.

‘I like to spend time alone sometimes. And I’m new here. And enjoying a swim by myself, thanks.’

‘Pretty name for a pretty girl. Did you change it when you arrived?’

Dusk shook her head. It was common for many of the Guardians to choose a new name when they joined — “everything changes when you become a Guardian” they said.

He carried on, ‘There seem to be lots of new clan members recently. At last all these zetii are coming to their senses.’

‘They hope to start a new life here I suppose.’

‘They realise there’s no other choice! They’re tired of the indecision of those ancients that ran their old clans. Not only that, they’re starting to realise that their precious Way is dead.’

She glanced at him sharply, unsure if he actually meant that or if he was just being provocative to show off.

‘Is it dead then?’

‘Well, the version that most zetii grew up with is. All that stuff about living in harmony with the environment, the Ka-Tse keeping their proper place, self-sacrifice for the good of Ocean — all that. Of course, the Guardians still have the Way, but it is the new Way, with the Ka-Tse in their *real* proper place; as the dominant species in Ocean. Now, why don’t I take you for a swim along the shore just over here?’ He started to press against her side to try and guide her away from the clan.

She snapped her jaws at him in exasperation. ‘I said no! Tell me more about these other zetii instead — those not Ka-Tse. What happens to them now then?’

Catches gave up trying to redirect her physically, but stayed close to her side as he continued sulkily. ‘The Seer told us the Way was never meant for them. They’re smaller than us, weaker than us — and stupid mostly. They need to keep in their own corners of Ocean and stay out of our ranges.’

‘I see. And what if they don’t want to?’

‘Drive them out of course. If we have to. We can do it.’

‘Just the Guardians? There are so many of the others.’

‘Of course! But when all the Ka-Tse join together against them we can. Can’t we stop talking about this stuff and just go for a little swim? I know this lovely little bay near here...’

Dusk shook her head. Inside she was shocked at this youth’s aggressive beliefs. Surely, he was just boasting and did not really believe this nonsense?

‘It’s hardly likely that the Ka-Tse are suddenly all going to join together against the other zetii though, is it?’

‘Oh yes, it is. And not far off. Kark Du has it all planned. He said that...’

He suddenly cut off as one of his friends bumped him hard from the side. Catches turned to him in anger, but the friend whispered something urgently to him. He turned back to face her, wide eyed, suddenly quiet. She prompted him: ‘You were about to tell me what Kark Du said?’

The friend answered instead. ‘Greetings, Fades Into Dusk. If you’re looking for Kark Du Storm Before Darkness, I know that he was called away urgently to meet a messenger. He may not be back till dawn.’

‘I see. Thank you, that’s helpful.’

He dipped his head slightly and led the still stupefied Catches In Air away.

Dusk paused for a moment, then decided she had better leave. She turned and made off away from the Guardians, towards her own clan. She thought about the strange conversation with the youth Catches. It had been different from any she had had with a Guardian before; they always seemed a little careful of what they said.

Catches had said disturbing things. She was sure he must have just been showing off. Storm had made some harsh statements about what needed to be done, but always justified them with the crisis that forced them. He was fond of quoting: “Hunger makes the bitter fish sweet”. He had never said anything to her about dominating the other zetii. Yes, that must be it. Catches was just a typical young male, showing off to impress her for the usual reason that young males showed off. All that stuff about driving out the other zetii — he must be exaggerating.

Chapter 9

“Anger sullies the pure heart.”

-Forgotten Thunder (8,111 - 8,159 post Great Alluvion)

A fresh south easterly had been building the sea swell, and large, rolling breakers crashed against the lonely beach. Sky and Muddy raced along the rearing edge of the breakers; enjoying the fleeting novelty of a vertical wall of water beside them. Just before each wave broke, they could clearly see out from the face of it and make out the tall palms on the shoreline that were being buffeted by the gusty wind. The dolphins darted through the mayhem of the surf zone; only their finely tuned reflexes and sheer power stopping them from being thrown bodily onto the beach.

Muddy was the first to tire. ‘Come on Sky, let’s go deeper now. That was great but exhausting. I need something to eat, we’ve been swimming since dawn.’

Sky followed Muddy reluctantly into the calmer depths and they searched for food as they continued their swim eastwards parallel to the shore. Sky begrudged any delay; he badly wanted to find Rain Ending, and was acutely aware that he had only a limited amount of time in which to do so. All they had to go on was that he had mentioned to one of the clan's Healers that he tended to stay around a large isolated coral reef near the coast in this direction. Sky knew that they might well not find him at all, and the delay while Muddy looked for food chafed at him.

Eventually they located enough small bottom-dwelling fish to meet Muddy's immediate needs, and Sky was able to persuade his grumbling companion to resume their fast pace eastwards.

It was almost dark when they reached a large area of coral rising from the sandy seabed a little off the shore.

'This fits the description,' Sky said. 'Now, will he be here?'

'Well, I hope you're not expecting to start looking for him now. I'm exhausted after that swim. Let's just see if there are any titbits to be had and then get some sleep. We'll search in the morning.'

‘Muddy, I’ve only got two days to find him in! You sleep if you have to, I’m going to start going around the reef. I’ll wake you at midnight and you can help me.’

Muddy complained bitterly at the thought of so little sleep but eventually agreed. Sky left him and followed the edge of the reef around until, within a couple of hours, he was back to where he had begun, having seen or heard no sign of other dolphins. Muddy lay resting on the sand, occasionally half drifting, half swimming upwards to breathe without waking. Sky surfaced to look at the night sky: it was still not midnight, so he snatched a little sleep himself.

A while later, Sky woke from a troubled dream. He had been confronting his father, a dimly seen, unclear figure, who had been angry with him for some reason. Sky had the feeling that his father had left because of him; something he had done wrong; and he had wanted to make amends somehow. But his father wouldn’t speak to him or answer his questions. At last his father said in a strange voice: “It’s out of alignment with the new Ocean. Out of alignment. That’s why they’re all dead. Out of alignment.” He was still repeating that as Sky rose from the strange dream.

Sky woke Muddy and they searched the surface of the submerged reef for the remainder of the night, easily navigating in the darkness with their sonar. In the morning, they searched the nearby coastline, but with no sign of the lone dolphin. That afternoon, Sky suggested they try the deeper water out to sea from the reef, and so they crisscrossed the upper regions of the deep water far from the shore. It was there that they finally heard the distant but distinctive rapid clicks of another dolphin's sonar. They followed the sound and to Sky's great relief it was Rain Ending.

‘It is I, Touches The Sky of the Dune Coast Clan!’

‘And I, Muddy River Mouth of the same!’

‘And I, Rain Ending!’

The older dolphin looked at the two friends suspiciously. ‘Have you come all this way to find me? I suppose your curiosity is aroused, young Sky?’

‘Yes, it is. I was hoping you could tell me more about my family, my old clan.’

‘A zeta does not choose this life because of his love of conversation. I am not a great one for explanations. In fact, talking of any kind. I’d rather be on my way.’ He nodded to them and then turned as if to go.

‘Wait! That’s hardly fair. You were ready enough to speak to other members of my clan about me! Do you know how much trouble you’ve caused me?’

The other paused, reflecting. ‘Well, yes, that’s probably true. It was not my intent, just the surprise at seeing another survivor...after so long.’

‘You recognised my name?’

‘Vaguely. But it was the missing tip of your fin that reminded me. I was nearby when you lost it.’

‘Really? I never knew how it happened — it was before I can remember and there has been no one to ask.’

‘Of course. It was a simple enough thing; as a little one you strayed too close to a big triggerfish nest. The owner gave you a good bite and a scare. Your mother was mortified I remember.’

‘My mother? You knew her?’

‘Yes, and your father. Come on then, you two. Swim with me and I’ll tell you what I remember.’ He turned and started to swim again then suddenly jerked to a stop, his back arched and eyes full of pain. He twisted in torment and began to sink into the depths. Quickly, Sky put his head beneath him and, with Muddy’s help, lifted him to the surface to breathe.

Rain Ending lay there panting for a short while then the spasm seemed to pass and he slowly relaxed. Soon he could move again. ‘Excuse me. A problem I have with my spine. It comes more often these days, but usually passes quickly.’

‘Is that why you wanted to see our Healers?’ Muddy asked.

‘Yes. They have suggested some changes to my diet and exercises that will alleviate the pain and help to reduce the severity of the attacks. No cure, unfortunately.’

When he was recovered enough, they swam on together and Rain Ending seemed to try to answer Sky's questions as well as he could. He had known Sky's parents; not well, but thought them to be well-liked zetii who fitted in with clan life. He had been amongst the clan the day they had heard the terrible sounds, and had found himself stranded on the beach like the others but close to Sky's father. They had been on a different part of the beach to most of the clan and although he had expected to die there, the waves there had eventually lifted him off, along with two other dolphins. One of them was Sky's father.

'Was my older brother one of them too?'

'Your brother? What is his name?'

'Still Bay. He was a couple of years older than me I think.'

'Then no. I didn't know who the other one was at the time; you have to understand we were very confused and couldn't hear properly for weeks, so we didn't talk then. But I heard the other's name later...when I heard where they had gone...I don't remember what it was, but it wasn't Still Bay, I'm sure of that. I'm afraid your brother must have stayed on that beach with your mother.'

'And what did you hear about my father?'

‘That he was heartbroken at losing all his family. Heartbroken and angry — very angry. He wanted to blame someone, anyone. He came across the Guardians. Their strange philosophy must have appealed to him somehow while he was in that state — gave him a way of rationalising things while he was desperate to find a reason for it all. Maybe it gave him a focus for his anger.’

‘So, it’s true,’ Sky murmured, half to himself, ‘my father is a Guardian. I was dreading hearing you say that.’

‘Well, it gets worse,’ Rain Ending replied grimly. ‘Last I heard, he wasn’t just a member of the Guardians. He was the leader.’

Chapter 10

“When no dawn is looked for

Comes the full weight of night

Ocean spares not a favour

To him who’ll not fight”

- Last Pebble (5,155 - 5,189 post Great Alluvion)

Sky and Muddy followed at a distance behind Rain Ending as he swam out over the deep water of the open sea, looking for shoals of small fish to eat. Muddy shook his head vehemently. ‘Knowing what you do now, don’t even think about trying to find your father! You know what would happen. Any deliberate contact with the Guardians means exile. And don’t think it wouldn’t happen to you — there are zetii in the clan just looking for an excuse to blame you now.’

‘But I need to know, Muddy! I’ve got to try and see him somehow!’

‘No! You can’t do that! Look, why don’t you ask Rain to help you? He’s had some kind of contact with the Guardians in the past, maybe he still knows how to reach them and can ask for you?’

‘Alright, that’s worth a try. But if he can’t do it I will, and I don’t care about what might happen.’

They caught up with the lone dolphin and put the idea to him. ‘Yes, I do know where they used to be, but I’m not prepared to approach them again. They’ve got some strange, dangerous ideas. They have their own codes about not speaking to outsiders, and the penalties for doing so are harsh.’

‘But I just want to know if my father is still there.’

‘I don’t care. I’m afraid, and I don’t mind admitting it. I wouldn’t put it past those Guardians to kill me if they thought I was a threat.’

Sky wondered if he was exaggerating. ‘You can’t be serious.’

‘I am. They don’t follow the Way as you and I know it. They’ve twisted it according to the teachings of Stone Eyes — he’s long dead, but they call him “the Seer”. He said that the Way was only meant for Ka-Tse that follow his teachings. According to him, all the other zetii are inferior and pretty much expendable if need be. Forget all the traditional stuff about zetii living in harmony with Ocean. *They* say that Ocean has changed, and the Way has changed too. They’re ruthless, and I have heard that sometimes they will kill other zetii.’

Sky remembered Born Into Summer, laying helpless on a burning beach; that deadly gull poised beside her.

Muddy broke into the conversation. ‘Can’t you just try and find out if Sky’s father is still with them, though? If you don’t, I know that Sky is going to want to do it himself, and he’s going to end up exiled or worse.’

‘No, I’ve told you, there’s...wait...something’s coming.’

The other two listened, and soon they could all hear it: a number of big creatures coming closer at speed. Sky sent short bursts of sonar in the direction of the sound. They all listened to the reflected echoes.

Sky articulated their thoughts. 'Fish. Big ones, at least forty. Moving fast. Coming this way.'

A few seconds later a shoal of yellowfin tuna appeared out of the blue. The powerful silvery fish were all large adults, the biggest almost as large as the dolphins themselves. They took station under the dolphins and followed their progress, the darker upper surfaces of their bodies making them harder to see from above, only the occasional flash of silver showing them clearly whenever one fleetingly turned to inspect some passing fragment in the water column.

Rain Ending looked relieved. 'Well, they can follow us if they want, but we don't know where the food is either.'

Sky and Muddy stayed with Rain Ending as he continued his swim over the depths, trying to persuade him to change his mind and help, but he was adamant. The tuna kept their silent station below them, hoping the keen senses of the dolphins might lead them to food.

The two friends were about to give up and leave when a new sound began and grew in volume. The distinct thrumming sound of a big boat's engine, and then the sound of a second, smaller, but faster boat.

The dolphins leapt from the water to look. The larger boat had protruding structures at the back of it and something was trailing in the water behind it. As they watched, it stopped heading directly for them and turned as though to commence a curve around them. The smaller boat veered away to the opposite side of them, moving fast and bouncing from wave to wave, the roar of its engine like a gigantic, angry insect. It raced loudly occasionally as the boat bounced from the waves and its propeller cleared the water.

‘What are they doing?’ Rain Ending asked.

Sky was worried at first; the sound of engines always reminded him of the awful time his clan had been driven onto the shore by the terrible pulses of sound. But these were different machines, smaller than the giant monsters they had seen that day, and brightly coloured, not all grey as they had been. ‘Maybe they saw us and have turned like that to avoid hitting us?’

Muddy shook his head. ‘I don’t like it. Why would they go with one on each side of us like this? And what’s that stuff coming out of the back of the big one?’

‘You’re right, it’s strange. Well we don’t have to stay here and watch them, let’s just go and leave them to it.’

The dolphins started to swim off in the direction the boats had come from. The larger one continued to circle around behind them. The smaller one abruptly turned around and shot ahead of the dolphins, its engine roaring. They could see the vivid white wake above them as it blasted in front of them. They instinctively turned away from it and swam faster, making frequent leaps to check where the boats were. The speed boat kept cutting across their path, confusing them. Below them, the tuna still followed them, but they were sharing the dolphins' growing agitation and darting about nervously.

The dolphins were turned back by the fast boat three more times while the large boat completed its great circle around them, then suddenly the smaller boat slowed to a halt.

‘Come on,’ Muddy called nervously, ‘they seem to have given up — let’s get out of here!’

They set off away from the boats, the tuna following them, but then Sky saw a line of small floating objects ahead of them in the water. ‘Look out! There’s something up in front of us!’ The net appeared in front of them suddenly, a great mesh wall dropping out of sight to either side and below them.

‘Go back the way we came!’

They turned and sped back towards where the boats were, veering off to one side of the larger one. It was busy lifting something back aboard. Moments later they were faced with another vast net wall. They turned, and there it was again. Sky realised with horror that it was all around them: a continuous circle.

‘It’s shrinking!’ Muddy cried. ‘They’re making it smaller!’

‘Go down,’ Rain Ending panted out, ‘let’s go under it!’

They dived down through a confused mass of tuna that were darting in terror in all directions. Twice, Sky was violently bumped by one as he swam downwards. Then he could see the net below him as well. He almost gave up, but then realised that it was moving, closing. ‘This way! Maybe it’s not closed yet!’

He led the other two in the direction that part of the net was moving. The sound of working machinery came clearly through the water as the heavy cable drew the base of the net shut. Then Sky could see clear water through the shrinking opening at the bottom of the net. ‘Come on! We can still get out!’ He darted through, Muddy close behind him. They turned to look at the enormous net above them, the tuna swirling within it in confusion.

‘Where’s Rain Ending?’ Sky asked.

‘He was just behind me — he must still be in that thing...’

‘I’m going to get him.’

‘Sky you can’t — the Walkers will get you!’ But Sky had shot back into the opening of the net calling Rain Ending’s name. Inside, he was immediately confused. The visibility had dropped with the water full of bubbles, scales, and other debris. The mesh walls were getting closer, forcing the fish together and he had to fight his way past several panicked tuna as they shot out of the turbid water at him. Then his sonar picked out the subtly different reflection of the body of a dolphin amongst those of the giant tuna. There was Rain Ending, his body racked in a spasm. Sky rushed to the dolphin and began pushing him downwards to where he thought the opening should be. The other dolphin resisted weakly. ‘No, leave me, save yourself; I can’t move now.’

‘Come on, you have to! This way!’

Sky pushed him ahead through the silver madness of the tuna. Soon the floor of the net was in front of them. He kept swimming but it seemed to go in all directions. The net was closed!

He was ready to give up, and desperate to breath, when he faintly heard Muddy's voice.

'Sky, where are you? Sky, quickly, it's about to close!'

With a final effort he pushed the other dolphin in the direction he thought Muddy's voice had come from, and then he could make out the bulk of his friend at the rapidly shrinking opening of the net. He pushed the weakly moving Rain Ending through the opening then forced himself through as the cable constricted the base around his body. For a moment his tail was caught in the net, then with a violent jerk he was free.

They watched from a distance at the surface as the tuna were dragged struggling onto the boat and flopped about in their death throes on the deck. Rain Ending's spasms had almost passed, and he could support himself again at the surface unaided. 'You saved my life. And you nearly got yourself killed for me. Why?'

'I didn't have time to think about it. It just seemed the right thing to do.'

'I don't know how to thank you, Touches The Sky.'

Sky paused, then faced him. 'If you want to thank me, find out what has happened to my father. That's what I want to know more than anything.'

Rain Ending nodded slowly. 'I'll do my best, but it will take a while. Look for me at the Gathering. I'll find you there and tell you what I've learnt.'

'Thank you. This means a lot to me. But please be careful. Now we must go quickly, tomorrow is the new moon and I have to be back with my clan by dawn!'

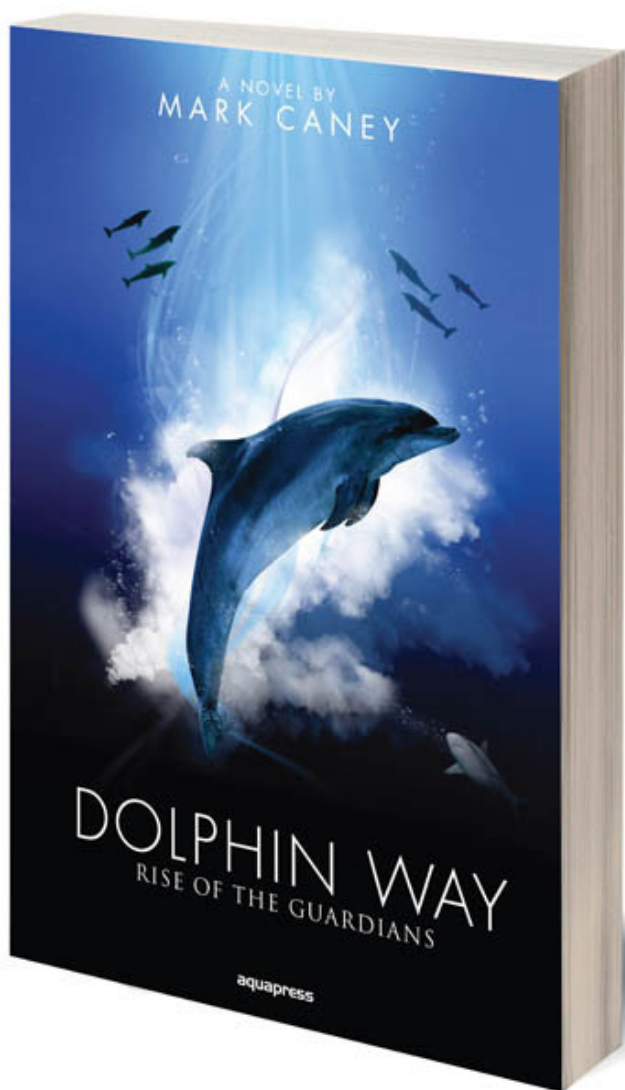
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About the author

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.



He moved back to the UK in 1996, when he started working for the well-known diver training agency, PADI. 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 has served for many years as chairman of the board of the marine environmental charity, Project AWARE.