

Prologue

Harry Rellant pulled off an armored glove to stroke his son's soft cheek one last time. The baby slept in his foam cradle, sedated and blissfully unaware. How many of his men would die for this child without realizing it? *Ought to be me.* Harry dismissed the attempt at self-pity. A little late for that now.

"Get you fixed up soon, Scotty," he promised, his words rasping through his black breathing mask. Bio-weapons from the previous job hadn't just ravaged his respiratory system, they'd poisoned the DNA he'd passed on to his son. Scotty's lungs weren't mature enough to handle the nanobots. Medics said only a miracle would save him. Harry gently closed the ammo case lid. A quick check of the other gear in the assault ship's tiny equipment bay ensured that nothing would rattle itself free during the harsh descent.

One miracle coming up, son.

Turbulence threatened to jerk the deck from beneath his feet. At thirty-five, he was getting too old for this kind of work. Gripping the shelf on which the case rested, he afforded himself a few more precious moments lingering over the disguised life pod. The Valkyrie's pilot was too busy and the strike team too airsick to bother him. What had Boss Mackenzie said about Scotty? Oh, yeah. *Tough luck.* This from the man whose ass he'd saved. Well, what did he expect? Compassion wasn't part of a mercenary's kit. Harry wiped a momentary blur from his gray eyes before affixing his glove. Opening the troop bay's hatch, he turned to give the men a final briefing.

Twenty soldiers greeted him with indifference from benches lining the cramped compartment's green bulkhead. Several of the other "security consultants" had the sense to wear helmets. The rest would learn soon enough to protect their tattooed skulls. Those who still gave a damn. Encased in olive drab combat gear, the troops looked more machine than human. Killing without question did that to a man. Harry didn't linger on the thought too long. He absently rubbed at his own shaven skull. Bad enough his mask made him look like some comic-book villain.

The ship lurched. He seized the overhead weapons rack for support. Engines rumbled in protest, adding to the squeak and clatter of loose strapping. They were deep into atmosphere, trading weightlessness for a rough ride. Time for the speech. Harry prayed this bunch would pay attention for once, considering what he had in store for the poor bastards.

"Listen up!" His boot kicked the car-sized mechanical beetle hogging most of the bay. "We've got one job. Get the drone into the water. Get it back inside. Get paid. Anything moving gets itself shot."

He flashed the fingers on his right hand three times. "Fifteen minutes. Understand? Not a damn minute longer, or I start deducting paychecks. We'll be backing our ass up against an old temple—Plan B if you can't make the ship. That's where the evac bird will pick you up. Questions?"

Of course there were no questions. Just the descending ship's rattle and shake. *Where are we going? What are we picking up? Who's the client?* Like any of them gave a shit. When you worked for Brothers, you didn't waste breath on such trivia. Brothers built its reputation on not asking, and business was good. Most of these guys would figure things out once they saw the sky. Then they damn well better keep their traps shut. He knew who the client was. There would be precious little mercy given for what he was about to do to their benefactor. Harry managed a grim smile behind his breather's grill. Mackenzie said he'd wanted someone he could trust for the job. The man should've seen this coming.

A few more pitch and rolls told Harry they needed him up front. Passing back through the equipment area, he gave the special ammo case a quick pat before returning to the flight deck. The bat-winged Valkyrie was a pain to fly even at the best of times, but the assault ship was reliable and tough. Harry looked through the windscreen at a panorama of boiling cloud tops highlighted by lightning. The weather wasn't the worst of his worries, but you didn't underestimate a dying world, either. Especially this one.

A rail-thin face glanced up at him with wide eyes and a skull's grin. "Lovely weather, mate." The pilot aimed dark spittle at the deck between the chairs, adding to the cockpit's sour tobacco smell.

"Jesus, Mad Jack, get your helmet on." Harry strapped himself into the copilot's seat and grabbed his own protection off a side hook. His helmet fit snugly over what was left of his shaved brown hair. The

screens in front of him flashed a collage of warnings. Not just thunderstorms, either. Red triangles pointed out enough tornadoes to make even the most steadfast storm chaser run screaming. He glanced beyond the planet's curve at the bright bar lancing across the cosmos. A plasma jet squeezed from a black hole millions of light years distant, and this system was about to get a close encounter with it. Petal. A disarming name for a doomed world, given for the pattern of circular lakes across the planet's tortured surface. "What's the radiation like?"

"Nominal, but we've super cells above the lakes. Atmosphere's getting baked."

"Believe me, storms aren't our biggest problem."

"Damn straight they aren't, mate. Trust me, you see a siren, don't stop and stare."

He nodded. Mad Jack had been on a previous Petal run. One of the few who made it back after trying to hit the same site again due to a previously aborted raid. There was no fifteen-minute delay before a siren spawn. The same creatures still waited out there for them. This time Brothers was smart enough to find a new target. One far enough north to escape the worst of what pounded the lake clusters below. Harry had seen enough combat footage to take those crystalline bitches seriously. The creatures looked like glass angels when they spread out their dorsal fins. Right up to the point where they screamed and melted you into your armor. Well, Hell had angels, too.

I told them about the temple. I gave them a chance.

Harry tried to feel guilty, but the emotion was hard to come by. Brothers built its reputation on that too, and he was a model employee. He worked the screen between him and the pilot, plotting a descent path to weave around the nastier storms ahead. Most of the cloud piles pierced the stratosphere, a by-product of lakes being heated by the approaching plasma jet. If getting killed by a black hole wasn't enough, Petal was due to be pummeled by ice as well. A mix of oxygen and hydrogen clouds through which the jet passed would hit the planet both coming and going. Fire and water. God was being a real bastard here. Irony barely described this mission.

His client? The Church of Life.

The drop was tantamount to a drunken elevator, the soldiers' comments coming over his headsets with every colorful adjective they could think of. Mad Jack ignored it all, the pilot bucking his way through downdrafts and wind shears with his usual silly grin.

An electronic tone alerted their arrival over Petal's northern hemisphere where the weather thankfully approached some degree of sanity. Harry peered through more interspersed thunderheads and finally spied the landing zone—a series of orange baked-clay towers. Like all Shreen cities, the population center sat on the edge of a lake cluster whose pattern suggested the doomed race had a thing for terrain sculpting. Always four lakes, each body of water forming a near-perfect circle. Their target sat on the western shore of the northernmost lake.

"There." Harry pointed out a long, white, cement pier extending from the middle of the city into the lake. "That extends out from the avenue leading to the temple. We'll put down on the street next to those low buildings where we're less likely to be flanked."

"Place should be empty," Mad Jack stated, though it sounded more like wishful thinking.

Harry nodded. "Project Exodus gassed the place almost a year ago. Probably a few didn't get scooped up, so keep your eyes peeled for movement."

The pilot dipped a wing into a gradual turn over the lake. "Think we'll find any beer?"

"Not in fifteen minutes." Harry hit the troop compartment's warning buzzer.

They skimmed crystal-blue waters any resort would be proud of, each ripple diamond-bright beneath the plasma jet's hellish glare. Mad Jack lined them up over the pier. Various sheds along the wharf looked deserted. No signs of life along the cobblestone avenue beyond, either. Harry counted five squat towers surrounded by various low buildings, the structures forming an ideal barrier on either side of the landing zone. He eyed the big domed temple at the end of the street with its iron double doors. The team could hole up there. Keep the sirens at bay.

Just don't stand your ground, Harry prayed in silence.

Mad Jack raised the Valkyrie's nose and brought them to a dust-blasting hover above the avenue just behind the pier. They bounced to a landing, the engines winding down to a fluttering thrum. Harry

dropped the rear ramp and locked the engines at idle. He pulled his Hanza-88 from behind the seat. “Let’s get this done.”

A rush of hot air greeted his arrival in the troop bay as if someone just opened a clothes drier. It smelled about the same, too. He lowered his visor to offset the harsh light flooding the compartment. “Squad out. Mad Jack, give me some anti-personnel. ASAP.”

His pilot pulled a launcher from its wall mount and rushed outside behind the hastily formed perimeter. The grenades popped and rolled across the cobblestones.

At least this part of the mission was moving along smoothly. Harry released the drone’s clamps and thumbed the console buttons, commanding it to go fetch. Rotors extended and whirred to life. The machine lumbered for the exit, causing a miniature hurricane within the bay. “Heads up everyone. Drone is out and on the way.”

The beetle shot over the pier, took a hard left, and disappeared in a splashing dive.

Harry stepped outside, wincing up at the white bar arcing across the sky. He could hardly make out Petal’s sun for the invader’s brilliance. It was painful looking out over the lake even with the visor. Hell of a way for any civilization to die. The buildings around him were cooked to a crisp—remnants of faded banners clinging to poles around the towers and only suggestions of peeling paint on clay walls. An opaque layer of dust coated glass windows. If anyone recognized either the architecture or the monstrosity overhead, they kept it to themselves. Smart.

“Squad One, extend your perimeter to the pier. Squad Two, give me flanking positions behind the ship and along the boardwalk. Fourteen minutes.”

He wasn’t sure who bawled out, “Movement, left!”

A shed along the pier puckered with rifle fire. Something hit the water behind it.

“Cease fire!” He ran to where Squad one fanned out along the pier’s concrete decking. “Hit my drone, and I’ll leave the lot of you here to dry. Get a man up at the pier. Ten minutes, team.”

One of the mercs saluted and ran forward. Most likely the nervous trigger finger. The trooper didn’t get too far before he reeled back from a single crack of sound. The soldier returned a staccato burst with his rifle. He was still standing. Good.

Harry ran up and inspected the glistening remains of something shattered against the man’s breastplate. He remembered this kid. Fresh from Navy Ops, courtesy of one bar fight too many. “Marcus, you good?”

“Sir!” Marcus pointed toward the shed. “Shiny with a shard rifle.”

Shiny, eh? Yeah, the kid knew where he was. “Just a hostile,” he grated, pushing his helmet against the other’s visor. “Got that, professor? You don’t get paid to know shit.”

“Yes, sir. Make it a dead hostile.”

A *dead Shreen*, Harry corrected inwardly, using the species’ actual name. He knelt for a closer inspection. The male sprawled out a hand’s breath away from a back ladder inside the shed. The native wore a simple gray loincloth over his glittering brown skin. Near him lay a gas-fed long rifle with a full magazine of crystal needles. Blood ran thin and watery as if from a butchered fish. Hair looking like fiber optic strands ran down the Singer’s back. Silicon biology, Harry reminded himself.

He glanced at the Shreen’s feet. They were webbed, unlike most of the land dwellers here. Sure enough, those were gills along the neck, too. Great. The kid bagged himself a Quan Singer. The going theory said these amphibious bastards called in the sirens. Well, wasn’t this the plan all along?

Harry straightened and turned to Marcus. “Get your ass out to the end of the pier. We’re about to have company.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry glanced at his wrist display. Shit. He opened the comm channel. “Five minutes.”

Mad Jack’s voice provided blessed reassurance. “Paycheck’s on the way in.”

Harry looked north. The drone bobbed to the surface, sending miniature vortexes of water into the air while struggling to get airborne with its load. “Team, collapse your perimeter.”

He sucked a shot of hot air through his mask's grill and switched frequencies. Time to see if all the hacking paid off. "Drone. Turn west thirty degrees and proceed sixty yards." His breath became a sigh of relief. The beetle was turning. Heading toward the shore well north of the avenue.

He returned to a squad channel, listening to the kind of curses only the military could engender.

Harry overrode them. "Cut the chatter. Squad One, get after the damn thing. Two minutes."

"I'll shoot the son-of-a-bitch!"

"You do, Mad Jack, and I'll blow that chaw out your goddamned ears. Everyone move your asses and keep sharp. Squad Two, set up a firing line along the boardwalk and pier. Everyone, remember Plan B. Get to the temple if things go to shit." He ran for the Valkyrie, flipping back to the machine's channel. "Drone, ascend fifty feet and hover at Waypoint One."

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Ancient memories raced along the Quan, broadcasting themselves into one of the blue-green reception nodules lacing the creature's great ovoid body. So was she conceived. A name occurred to her when she uncurled and split open her humming womb, allowing in a black torrent of cool liquid. *Water*. Something appropriate to couch her dawning self-awareness. She was, after all, only moments old.

She paused above her beloved Quan's rock-like surface, waiting for her memories to settle. She was a Song Guard. Her tribe and lake was Inis Drum. Yes, things were beginning to make sense now. She was here because something was wrong. Why was something wrong?

Water sang a high-pitched questing song through the pressing darkness. Nothing echoed back save for the reflection of her seven sisters emerging around her. Each newborn glowed with life, but the melody Water instinctually searched for was gone. The Song of Inis Drum no longer in the cradle? Her life purpose refined itself. Angry orange ripples shot up her two dorsal fins. She would bring the Song back and kill whoever stole it.

Water straightened her crystalline body, swimming fins spreading from pelvis to ankle. She launched herself toward the surface, arms tight against her side. The questing songs of her sisters painted the depths, finally giving her the distant silhouette of her first potential victim. Water narrowed her own song for a more detailed image. Her racial memories supplied an identity for her. A Quan Singer. One of the other two races her memories told her about.

She chirped.

The return taste told her this one was of Inis Drum. Not killable. Someone she was supposed to trust. Perhaps one who could tell her who her enemies were. She flicked her swimming fins and shot toward him, feeling the water's weight ease as she ascended. The water gleamed a deep azure now, darkness giving way to light.

"Song Guard. Come to me."

She froze, surprised at how the command in his voice gripped her in the penetrating song of Earth, the language one spoke when beneath the waves. Who did he think he was, ordering her like this?

Cutting fins running the length of her forearms vibrated with her irritation. Water swam toward him. Bright beams of light flickered down from the surface above, playing across the Singer's elder face. She searched her Quan's memories for a meaning behind his expression upon catching sight of her. Awe? Fear? Remorse? No matter. The Song needed her.

She sang out in demanding tones. "Release me."

Undaunted, the Singer waited until all of her sisters ringed him as well, their fins glowing in agitated ripples.

"They will kill you if you do not listen to me," he sang. "Your enemy are not Shreen. They wear metal, and have weapons to kill you at a distance. Close upon them silently, Song Guard. Spread yourselves out so as not to be taken at once."

"Not Shreen?" Water asked, her alarm growing. She could feel the Song, but it was moving away.

"Not Shreen?" her sisters echoed, whirling around him in sharp turns, their translucent hair whipping about in exasperation.

The Quan Singer's song was an ode to bitterness. "The Quan should have sent you while we were still a people to save. They have taken all of Inis Drum, and now they steal our future. Go, Song Guard. Save our Song, and give your Drum vengeance."

Water had heard enough, surging past him in a burst of fear.

"Do we believe him?" the nearest sister inquired, keeping pace beside her during the ascent. She hesitated, then added, "I call myself Ping."

"I am Water, and yes, we should. He is older than all of us."

"Everything is older than us," Ping asserted. "Even our memories."

Another Song Guard spoke up, declaring herself in a voice filled with self-discovery. "I am Twitch."

"I am Blue," another sister joined in.

"I...I will call myself Question."

Three more introductions. Memory, Tapping, and Wonder.

Water basked in the music of this newly formed camaraderie, sending green ripples up the crystalline spines of her fins. Moments away from battle, and here was a celebration of sudden life. There was poetry in this. A prayer worthy to be cast in the face of the hated gods. Yes, the waters were warming quickly. She could feel the change, and see the blaze of Kee's Sword flickering through the water above just as legends foretold, all but vanquishing the sun with its brightness. She was legend, too. Of course they would bring the Song back. How could they not?

Water turned westward, following the Song's beckoning toward the shoreline. Along with her sisters, she spread her dorsal fins flat across her back to catch the penetrating shafts from Kee's Sword, letting its cursed light nourish her for the fight to come. Pools of brilliance swept across the rising lake bottom. Her memories supplied her with a name to go along with the cement pilings ahead. Inis Pier. This is where the Song called from, and she and her sisters would answer.

Mindful of the Quan Singer's warning, Water folded her dorsal fins tight against her back and traded the powerful strokes of her swimming fins for a predatory glide among the pillars. Her first sight of enemy came in the moment of Tapping's death. Something, Water couldn't find a memory to place on it, sliced through the water and halved the Song Guard.

"Spread yourselves!" Water sang out. "The Song travels ashore and so must we."

More bubbling trails entered the water. Bullets, she realized. An impossible stream of them clawing up the bottom. Question vaulted upward in a swish of fins next to an algae-stained piling, breaching the surface. When she plunged back in, a bodiless head followed, still encased in a helmet. Thick blood billowed from the severed neck.

The lake reverberated with resonating splashes, announcing the arrival of a new menace. Skimming the sandy bottom, Water spied a cone-shaped metal fish speeding towards her, its tail bright and hissing. She flattened her dorsal fins and chirped. A metallic taste rebounded back, telling her the proper pitch she needed. Shaping her throat and lips accordingly, Water screamed her death song. A narrow cone of vapor replaced the water in front of her, shattering her adversary upon contact.

Gulping water to cool her vocal chords, Water let her spread fins dissipate the remaining heat. Her throat still burned, but it was manageable. And she had other weapons. She looked back and found Blue coming up behind her. And then her sister was gone in a roiling blast of sound, the explosion driving Water into the sand. Gathering her wits, she shot upward to take her chances on the pier.

She landed hard on the pavement, her swimming fins swirling around her like a crystalline dress. Water squinted, the horrid streak of light across the sky all but blinding her. Screeching a curse at the god Kee and his wretched sword, she lunged for the nearest enemy she could find. A metal man, just like the Singer said. He swung on her with a wide-bored rifle. She slashed out with a forearm, her cutting fins sinking into the soft-looking collar beneath her foe's helmet. Thick blood splattered her crystal plates.

Twisting around, Water ran across the pier toward the Song's vibrations, trying to comprehend what she was seeing. A huge machine bird squatted in the middle of Temple Way, its door open wide to admit an equally befuddling insect thing lumbering toward it. She couldn't see her Song, but she knew where it was. The insect had it. She charged forward. These thieves were not going to fly off with her Song!

The armored warriors fought among Temple Way's shops, firing and dying to both death song and fin. Water saw Memory fall beneath a hail of bullets as she and Wonder closed on a beleaguered group of fighters backed up against a tower wall. Wonder screamed her death song. Air wavered between the siren and her victims. Those before her burst and died, the last of their number taking Wonder with them.

The tableau of violence played out on both sides of Water as she ran, giving her an opening among the enemy's ranks. Aiming a chirp at the huge bird, she rushed in, intent on cutting apart the odd insect whose insides sang with the Song's call. The thing was almost inside the bird's waiting maw.

Bright blasts hurled her forward in a tumble, pain shooting through her legs. She slid across the cobblestones, slamming into a storefront. Dazed, Water looked down and found most of her legs gone. Even her own heart's song couldn't stem the life flowing from her.

The machine bird was escaping. Howling like Anasa's wind, the flyer rose, its prize secured in the thing's bowels. Leaving the warriors behind.

Wrenching up on a ruined knee, Water exchanged waves of agony for the dread of seeing her Song taken. The sheer horror inspired her final death song, blistering the air in front of her. The flying machine rocked, a glowing pod flashing into ruin. Bits of metal rebounded across the street, but the flyer rose just the same.

Water tried to scream again, but the heat and weakness overwhelmed her. Her throat cracked, her eyesight leaving her with one last terrible sight of Inis Drum's Song ascending into the harsh glare of Kee's Sword. She collapsed, listening to a dwindling roar mocking her failure. In time, even that faded. Her heart song was stubborn, however. It refused to let her go. Finally, to end the pain and anguish, Water did the task herself. Her ruined throat managed to carry her final keen skyward, broadcasting her toward the Song's dimming presence.

For a brief moment she joined with her people in a dream of welcoming. And then she was...elsewhere.

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I'm screwed. Harry's gloved hand hesitated above the red fire handle for the starboard engine. Pull it and this ride was over. He could manage a landing, but not an orbit. No way he'd set down on this dying rock with a bunch of sirens on his tail. Better to let the engine blow its guts out. Alarms bleated like stuck pigs, but the thing still provided thrust. Enough, at least, for a low orbit. The Valkyrie clawed through the deepening blue for the dark sanctuary of space. *Why in hell hadn't they run for the temple? Idiots.* He'd given them their chance. He'd done everything he could.

Harry pulled the encoder from his pocket and jammed it into the comm port. "Maiko, you there?"

The synthesized and heavily encrypted answer didn't hide his wife's anxiety. "Did you get it?"

"Yeah, but won't make it to you. Your orbit's too high. Lost an engine and will be lucky to manage a low pass. I'm exposing Scotty now, and will eject his pod. Head to Petal Gate the moment you've got him aboard."

"They'll see you."

"Yeah, and they'll think I'm sending you the Reliquary. Gonna have to get them to come after me instead." He hung his head, hating himself for the heartbreak in her voice. "Hon, I'm sorry. This was the plan all along. I've got what Boss Mackenzie wants, and he's not above making deals with this big a payday. Not a lot of time so gotta go. Love you...take care of our son. Will join you later."

He pulled out the encoder and crushed it under his heel. Fat chance on that last bit. He'd be lucky if Mackenzie didn't track her down regardless of any agreement they made. Well, the bastard did owe him.

Satisfied the ship wouldn't drop out of the sky, Harry swiveled the seat and headed back to the ammo crate. Perhaps it was better the sedative kept Scott asleep. God only knew what exposure to the Reliquary would feel like. Harry pulled off his helmet. Warm, moist air added to the perspiration along his bare scalp. Taking in a deep breath, he unclipped the releases and removed the black breather as well. He kissed his son's smooth forehead, taking solace in the peace behind those little closed eyes.

"Let's get your miracle." Clipping the mask back on, Harry lifted his son from the pod, pulling away the blue blanket Maiko had wrapped him in. He carried Scott to the rear troop compartment and the empty benches on either side of the drone. "Open."

Still dripping from its immersion in the lake, the beetle obediently unfolded its wings to reveal the wonder inside. The Reliquary looked like... Hell, he couldn't come up with a good description. An opal stuffed with rainbows, maybe. Iridescent nodules lined the large crystal, and damn if he couldn't feel...something. People paid millions for a chance at this. He didn't have millions. Mindful of the short time left, Harry knelt and gently pressed his son against the glowing stone. A halo formed around the baby's forehead where the two touched.

One

Scott sent his oboe's mellow notes floating across the narrow ravine, letting the echoes accompany his afternoon improvisation. He smiled, half closing his eyes in satisfaction. Something worthy of a new opus if he hadn't already started work on his current suite's fourth movement. A crisp March breeze reminded him he'd chosen to wear only a light brown leather jacket and jeans. He didn't have enough meat on his bones for such bravado. But people liked the slender look these days, and he wasn't one to disappoint his fans. Yeah, he should've grabbed the parka.

The sun perched low on the peaks behind him. How long had he been out here? Scott looked over the stretch of pine descending toward Lake Tahoe. Evergreen scents filled the clear air. Easy to forget time up here in the Sierra Nevada. Easy to forget himself, too. That was the whole point to living in the cabin behind him.

He swept back a shock of way too long hair. Better get a stylist up here soon or his manager would have a fit. The Sacramento concert was coming up, and his hermit look wasn't exactly the rogue virtuoso being sold by the media blitz. At least his manager had quit badgering him to switch to black hair. He preferred keeping it brown. One of the few things about himself he did like.

Scott pulled the oboe's electronic reed from his lips. Waning light played across gold keys and a polished veneer of red cocobolo wood. The instrument of his considerable fortune. Fine, so some critics considered the oboe a synthesizer because of what lay beneath the classic exterior, but he wasn't about to explain why he needed ranges well beyond human hearing. He'd spent four years climbing the professional ladder until he could afford having the renowned Wolf company come up with this custom job. All part of a greater plan nearing fruition. He carefully set the oboe within the cushions of its silver carrying case and snapped the biometric locks shut. Grabbing the handle, he headed back up the rutted gravel to his cabin.

His chosen getaway from the human race didn't look like much from the outside where it perched on an overlook. Just another ramshackle afterthought, albeit a rather large one. Nothing to attract attention. Right now he looked forward to what lay under the faux corrugated steel roof. A fat steak, perhaps. Maybe a good movie to—

Scott paused just shy of the front door. Something moved around the old green garbage bin. He let out a slow, frosty breath.

A tawny feline head glared back at him from the shadows between the trash container and the cabin's northeast corner.

Crap. What in hell was that doing here?

The cougar stepped out onto the old road, its belly low to the ground. An adult by the look of it, the cat's gaunt frame telling him the reason for the visit. He gently set down the case so as not to jar its precious contents, and backed away.

The mountain lion snarled, baring yellowed fangs. It should be running for the high country, not swishing its tail at him.

Swallowing back his growing dread, Scott eased two big knives from their holsters on his pant legs. "Get out while you can, kitty. I seriously don't want to do this."

Kitty didn't understand the message. The animal's shoulders bunched.

Fear rose in Scott's throat. He edged closer to a red fir next to the cabin, knowing how nature intended these issues to resolve. Nature, however, didn't figure on his particular madness. The source of his twisting guts had nothing to do with the cougar. It was already dead. He reached into a part of himself a legion of psychologists had failed to lock down. The imaginary fishbowl in his head. Scott shoved the lid back with a shudder. He saw her clearly, coiled up in a crystalline ball. He always saw her, thanks to those damn crystals stuck in his skull.

Water.

His personal demon stirred much like a snake rising from a lethargic torpor. Snakes didn't sing, though. Nor did they look like a murderous sea angel rendered in crystal, fins rippling with bioluminescent menace.

Why do you wake me, thief? Her reply was a melodic vibration through his skull, serrated with venomous undertones.

“Something for you to kill,” he sang aloud in her audible language of Air, hoping it might startle the cat into fleeing. No such luck. The animal remained bunched up, as if trying to bolster its own courage. Those bony front legs quivered...then stilled.

A high keen rang in his head like someone running their finger around the lip of a crystal goblet. Water, vibrating her cutting fins right before striking. He braced himself.

Scott jerked forward as if electrocuted. Instead of fighting the involuntary spasm, he threw the fishbowl’s lid wide open. He leapt, a throat-burning shriek erupting from his mouth.

To the animal’s credit, it tried to scramble out of his way. Maybe it saw the monster behind his eyes, but the revelation came too late. The horror inside him went to work with a vengeance. The first slash opened the cougar’s scalp, sending the big animal tumbling against the trash bin. It twisted around and leapt to its hind feet in a vain attempt to claw him. Pivoting in a spray of loose rock, Scott drove the predator’s paws against its chest with one arm and cut through its throat with the other. Hot blood splashed across his face. Then Water went for the exposed belly.

Both combatants staggered back. Scott sank against the cabin door, heaving ragged gasps, feeling like his legs and arms had been wrenched from their sockets. His victim’s death throws banged against the green container before the cougar dropped into its grisly mess of entrails. Death mercifully stilled the beast.

The pain of strained muscles helped him drive Water back into the fishbowl, but not before she pushed a bloodied blade against his throat. Her crystalline face pressed against the imaginary glass.

Shall we play the cutting game?

“One scratch, bitch, and we don’t visit the Tabernacle. No Song for you to climb into.”

You are not much fun, today, she trilled back, twisting around to bat at the fishbowl with her swimming fins.

Scott regained control of his arm, wiped both knives against his pants, and holstered them. Her light reply told him Water was in a good mood. And why not? No doubt she’d been thinking of him while eviscerating the hapless feline. Or she was looking forward to their upcoming Visitation at the Tabernacle as much as he was. The goal he’d spent most of his brief professional life preparing for. She would be reunited with her Song, and he would truly be free.

The thought of freedom had him glancing around to make sure the violent encounter hadn’t been noticed by a stray hiker. God, if the doctors even suspected he’d been lying to them all this time...

Even Water had pulled off her end of the ruse to perfection. Fourteen years of white walls and humoring smiles. No way was he going back. Just, no way. He was twenty-four, rich as hell, and famous. And technically still crazy, unfortunately.

But this last bit was about to change. Soon.

The ache in his limbs intensified with each step. The human body wasn’t supposed to move like that. He inspected the torn lines across his coat and jeans. The cougar had gotten a few licks in after all, but nothing too serious. He healed quickly. Scott winced, feeling the onset of shakes. He glanced at the body, his stomach souring at the sight. He could drag it down to the ravine in the morning and let the turkey vultures have a field day. Right now he needed to go inside.

One day I will have your father lying there. And then you.

She was in a good mood, all right. “I don’t have a father. Go back to sleep.”

Water floated on her back in her bowl. Her singing turned petulant. *Play me something.*

“Jacuzzi, first.” Scott lurched to his feet with a groan, taking a moment to steady himself. The cougar could wait, but not his oboe. Biting his lip, he shuffled across the road for the Wolf’s instrument case. It was the last thing he wanted to forget when he arrived for his Visitation.

His cabin basement wasn’t big. In fact, it was little more than a rustic hollow hewn out of the granite. Aquamarine lighting rippled across the rocks, extending the submarine grotto effect encouraged by the bubbling marble bowl at the center. He pulled off ruined clothes and eased into the hot massaging waters. The majesty of Holst’s *The Planets* rolled out of hidden speakers. Seven movements.

Scott sighed. He'd barely finished *Anasa's Dance*, his third movement in *Song*. He'd reserved tonight for laying the foundation to the fourth movement involving the Shreen sun god Kee, but that was before Miss Mayhem dislocated every bone in his body. The pain would subside, but not the memory of what she had done to the cougar. One last ugly image to throw on the stack before leaving.

Let me swim.

He caught himself moments away from falling asleep. "What? Like at our first and last Caribbean vacation? Nothing like having two guys pushing water out of my lungs."

"The ocean reminded me of my Drum," she defended.

"Drum? You talking about your lake back home, or your tribe? Your language doesn't seem to know the difference."

"There is no difference," she sniffed. "Both are home."

He chuckled. "But only one of them can drown me like you damn near did."

Water lifted her chin. *Song Guards do not need air.*

"Cute. And no." Scott wished he could soak in the bubbling comfort all night, but didn't want to encourage Water into any mischief while he slept. Sighing, he pulled himself out of the Jacuzzi and grabbed a white terry-cloth robe from the adjacent hook. He regarded his lanky and uninspiring nakedness in the wall mirror. Gray eyes where they should've been brown, no doubt part of the overall mess in his forehead. A swath of glistening pale blotches marked the start of powdery crystals embedded into his skull. The contact points where he'd been exposed to Water's Song by his father, according to her best guess. The source of his lifelong nightmare about to end.

The cougar's marks were but pink lines across pale skin in need of some tanning. Perhaps some weight training too, so those girls had something worth squealing at. He smiled. Soon he'd be able to take a woman for a drink without worrying about the whole Jekyll and Hyde thing. Oh, yeah. A whole new world of freedom coming up.

He climbed up the basement stairs, his overly stretched muscles complaining. A nod to the automated kitchen, and he was on his way to burying the afternoon's horrid encounter beneath a good steak. He closed his eyes for a moment. This wasn't how the day was supposed to have turned out.

"Sorry, kitty," he whispered.

Once satiated, he lounged in a brown overstuffed chair before the rustic fireplace, and set about playing Water her song. Music was the garden spot in their battlefield where commonality soothed both their troubled spirits. An entire cultural heritage lay behind Water's baleful glare. He'd learned early to tap into those old Shreen memories during her mental and physical tortures, if for no other reason than to maintain his sanity. Much later, well after their desperate truce, he retained a gold mine of ballads and melodies to draw on. Tonight they both needed serenity.

Last Descent told the story of a Shreen merging with their Song. The aliens believed they gained immortality upon returning to their race's collective memories. The Song was essentially a waiting room until it was taken back to some queen-like creature called the Quan. Mythology aside, the journey to the Song's cradle was meant to honor the passing of life, and *Last Descent* did a great job of capturing the grandeur.

Scott pulled his Wolf from its case and put the instrument through a warm-up cycle. He blew softly into the reeds, his fingers plunging the oboe into a sonorous range too deep for anything but a whale to appreciate. Water heard as well, and the vibrations coursed through his mind with equal beauty. Those minute crystals in his head allowed him to enjoy the full range of what his Wolf could do. Doctors dismissed the pale blotch across his forehead as abnormal calcification. He, of course, knew better.

And so he played, giving himself to the music's flow and forgetting why. *Last Descent* climbed into audible frequencies, then ascended with the grace of a freed soul. Soon, even Water quieted herself to listen, and that was the best part of all.

He woke in the same chair the next morning, still cradling the Wolf. Trading the robe for another pair of jeans and a blue plaid shirt, he dealt first with the mess outside. People were coming over. The grisly task inspired a lackluster breakfast, but his spirits picked up after the arriving stylist brought him back to civilization. Clean-shaven, with a Scott Rellant signature sweep of carefully unruly locks masking a

discolored forehead. Black slacks, black shirt, and black sneakers. His wake-up call to a new life without the demon in his head.

His manager's limo appeared in the afternoon sky like a streamlined angel, the pearl-gray flyer settling on the gravel driveway with barely a whisper. Benny stepped out, wearing a lavender satin shirt and the usual red tie stuffed into a pinstripe suit. Benny being Benny, living up to the expectations of being a rock star's handler. Scott didn't even know the squat balding man's real name, not that it mattered. It was all about the performance, and none knew the act better than Benny.

Arms wide, his manager embraced him on the doorstep with an enthusiastic bear hug. Yep. Lavender perfume, too. Fortunately, Water was sleeping.

"Scotty! Sweetheart! Pumped and ready to go." Benny ran an imaginary feather brush over the shoulders of Scott's pressed shirt. "Nice. Gucci makes the man, I say."

Scott went straight to the important question. "You talk with the Church?"

Benny rubbed his hands. "You're in. Baby, the Prophet himself is going to meet you. Jeremiah Jones in the flesh."

Scott let out a caught breath. "When?"

"You said early, so tomorrow. Church limo will pick you up outside the hotel."

Scott savored his long expulsion of breath. How many years had he waited to hear this?

Benny continued to rattle on while trying to keep his custom alligator shoes from being scuffed on the gravel. "You have any idea what kind of publicity we're talking about, here?" he gushed. "Simulcast to all eighteen world temples and audit centers. And then released to the media. You can't buy that kind of exposure, my boy." Benny's delight faded as his words caught up with him. "Okay, so maybe you did."

Clearing his throat, his manager glanced around. His brown eyes crinkled upon spying the garbage bin.

"Minor accident." Damn, he should've taken a hose to the thing. "Everything's fine. Not my blood."

Benny stepped back, folding his arms. "Then whose?"

"Half-starved cougar. Didn't hurt me. I'm fine."

Benny rolled his eyes. "No, not fine. Mountain lion? You're really okay?"

"I'll go get my oboe," Scott offered to avoid more hand waving on Benny's part.

"Lined up a nice lakeside Tahoe chalet, but no. You get a shack out in the middle of cold-as-hell nowhere where things eat you." Benny followed him in. "One o'clock, and I'm already needing another drink. You're killing me, Scotty."

Scott scooped up his case, relieved the morning's maid service had already been through the place. Otherwise Benny would bitch about that, too. He tacked toward calmer waters. "So, what's Sacramento look like?"

Benny rubbed his hands. "Sold out two weeks ago. Got Angie Carter doing your warm-up with her violin. Quebec Holography brought in the new equipment yesterday. Twice the resolution. How's your fourth movement coming along?"

"Peachy," he lied. Getting started on his newest piece would be a post-Water affair. Getting rid of her was all he could think about. "Let's head out."

Scott pretended to be engrossed in the passing mountain scenery on the flight to Sacramento. He envied Benny's clinking glass of scotch, but knew better than to encourage Water. She remained curled up in the fishbowl, blue-green ripples slowly rising up her twin dorsal fins. No doubt she dreamed of her cherished reunion with her people's memories. Staying away from booze helped keep her that way. People thought him a religious man. No drinking. No parties. Not even a young lady or three to dangle off his arm. If they only knew. He closed his eyes for a moment. If the wrong people knew, he'd be back in a mental hospital. If there were a God, and He wasn't laughing His ass off at Scotty, then this would all end tomorrow. So what if Jeremiah and his "church" were as genuine as a circus sideshow. Maybe it took one big joke to end another.

Scott raised an imaginary glass to Benny, knowing the manager considered him somewhat of a tamed psychotic. Typical for most of his high-end clients, no doubt. The only guy who could repack

fourteen years in a mental institution into an “edgy” persona the people loved. Maybe, with Water finally gone, there would be a chance to actually live the life of a rock star right down to the sex and booze.

Benny raised a manicured eyebrow upon being saluted. “I could still cancel the church visit.” His voice had lost its usual Hollywood dressing. “You’re not exactly my idea of a religious man, and you’re spending a lot of cash. Thirty million just to stare at the thing? What are you looking for, Scott? Redemption, or bankruptcy?”

“A miracle,” he returned with a sarcastic laugh. So much truth in Benny’s question. He just had to get within range of the Song and let Water do the rest. She claimed to have broadcast herself into him like some glorified radio signal. With the oboe’s assistance, she could transmit herself back out.

Redemption, indeed.

“We ain’t got the cash for a miracle. This is a Visitation, not a full Intercession. Last guy I know of paid a couple billion to get his miserable life extended, and you’re just kissing the Prophet’s glass. We’re not in that sort of league. It’ll take London, Sydney, and probably Frankfurt to cover the rest of your loan.” Benny paused for a sip from his glass. “And for what?”

“Publicity, remember? Besides, Beijing sold out, and they want me back. We’ve got the money.”

“You’re killing me.”

“You said that already.”

~*~

Backstage green rooms were rarely green, and the Civic Auditorium’s waiting area proved no different with bland, tan, panel walls and stuffy smells. He’d already run up and down the Wolf’s extensive range of notes twice, ensuring even the low frequencies would catch his every whim. Never mind if the audience heard nothing. They would swear otherwise, however, thanks to both the induced vibrations and what the upgraded holo-sphere displayed.

He set the Wolf aside, its latticework of gold keys and guards glinting in the room’s indirect lighting. Scott sank onto a couch, exhaling his tension. The afternoon rehearsals were behind him. The crowd loved *Anasa’s Dance* in Beijing. And of course, there was *Prelude*, the first movement catapulting him into fame. Then came *Water*, a flirtation between modern beat and classical divergence. *Water* faced no competition on either side of the fence. He’d be fine. People were starved for something other than computer-composed crap. *Song*’s three movements delivered originality in large doses, the suite giving no excuses in the sophistication department, either. Nobody had heard anything similar. Ever.

And now came his newest movement. *Anasa’s Dance* drew from the Shreen myth of a wind goddess enticing her sun god suitor, the rhythms all about seduction. The tough part was mixing in aspects of the gift she demanded as her bride’s price. A crystal necklace made from no less than all of the Shreen Songs. Blending in music containing what Water explained as inexpressible beauty was a challenge and a half. One he’d pulled off, if Beijing were any indication. That was China, though. This was the United States.

Water stirred, lazily circling the fishbowl’s confines, her long swimming fins flowing around her. *We will sing well*, Water assured. *Let me begin. Let me curse these thieves one final time.*

He was inclined to be generous since she would be broadcasting herself voluntarily at the Tabernacle tomorrow. It was time to be expansive but not stupid. The Shreen sang in two languages—Air, audible to all and used above water, and Earth, a low frequency reserved for underwater. The latter fell well below human perception. Not a problem for Scott, given his brain passenger.

“Only if you sing in Earth where they can’t hear you,” he agreed. “I’ll give you the first four lines from *Prelude* to play with.”

Done.

“Scott, you singing something?”

He opened his eyes to Benny and his hand wringing. Damn, he’d been talking out loud to Water again. In Air, no less. “Sorry. I do that in my sleep sometimes. Crowd up for it?”

“Angie’s got them doing the Texas Two-step out there. It’s time to wow ‘em, baby.”

Scott retrieved the Wolf from its stand. “It’s what I do, Benny.”

He eyed the burly types waiting at the door, discovering the reason for their presence when they helped him plow through a flurry of journalists crowding the hallway outside. They babbled about tomorrow's meeting with the Prophet. How did he feel about it? Was he begging for an Intercession?

Scott kept walking.

Angie Carter, all flashy in cowgirl sequins and wild brunette hair, raised her electric violin as they passed back stage. "Go get 'em, tiger. All yours."

"Next year I'll probably be your warm-up," he joked, earning a quick smile from the sprite of a girl. Not even seventeen, and Benny had her at near superstar status.

"Damn right," she laughed.

He would've given anything for such confidence a few years back. Everything had been a leap of faith since the hospital. *Prelude* had been written there, and most of *Water*, too. Not out of love for the art as much as a way to escape the hell *Water* had put him through.

Benny left him at the side curtains. Scott released a quick breath and walked out onto a darkened stage. A dimly lit guideline navigated him safely around the huge holo-globe. His simple stool was a study in contrast to the wizardry around him. He grinned. Benny had left nothing to chance. Behind the props emulating swaying fronds sat a second stool with a fishbowl on top. The man was all about the particulars, even if he didn't understand them.

He took his place on his stool, listening to the restless rumble of an audience just beyond the dark silkscreen. The orchestra pit was already going through the motions, warming themselves to the task at hand. Black-clad technicians flitted about like wraiths. One plugged a broadcaster into his Wolf. Another unrolled his music screen. A row of green dots told him the Quebec Holography bunch were happy with what their displays told them. A single blue mark acknowledged the conductor synching in. The data vanished, swept aside by *Prelude's* sheet music. The conductor glanced back and raised his baton. Scott let *Water* slide out of the fishbowl, fulfilling his promise.

Her lips closed around the Wolf's reeds.

The silkscreen raised, the floor washing in blue and violet hues. Sea nymphs rose within the holo-globe in dreamy swirls, heralding a sonorous vibration from the oboe only he could feel through the tiny crystals in his head. *Water* spoke in Earth against the orchestral backdrop of *Prelude's* introduction. His audience quieted. They couldn't hear her, of course, but the infrasound broadcasters throbbed enough to make them think they had.

Surprisingly, *Water* didn't deliver the scathing tirade he expected. She was almost entreating them. Asking why they stole her people's future. Didn't they understand? Didn't they care? Venom injected itself into her settling on the latter assumption, her appeals darkening into some of the worst death wishes he'd ever heard. This was the *Water* he knew. Hateful. Desiring to kill everything around her in an impotent fit of rage. All managed in four opening lines. Spent, the Song Guard returned the Wolf to him.

Scott cooled her mood with remembrances of better days plucked from *Water's* racial memories. Recollections neither of them had experienced. He left the inaudible tones of Earth behind, rising into the salutation of a new sunrise over Inis Drum long before Kee's Sword slashed across the sky. He heard lingering sighs from the audience as they recognized *Prelude's* true opening. The tone, upbeat and full of promise, teetered between classical form and pop in a mad balance he'd perfected and made his own.

The audience clapped their way into *Water*, the second movement.

The orchestra joined in, raising the tempo in a grand salute to the legendary deeds of the Song Guard who defended each Drum when called upon by their Quan. No question as to who this was about. Inside his head, *Water* sang, lifting her voice in memory of fallen sisters. Wonder. Question. Memory, and others. Not simple words to her, but glittering comrades she'd known only for an instant.

A martial tempo introduced the reason behind the Song Guard's existence.

The stage transformed again, becoming the rainbow cradle to a wondrous orb couched in a bed of jagged crystal. Sure, the people thought he paid homage to both the Church of Life and the Tabernacle's Reliquary. Let them.

He played for *Water's* Song, and what it would shortly give them both.

Anasa's Song came next. Not only did his latest movement delight, he literally had women out of their seats and improvising the sinuous rhythms for themselves. A thrilled audience refused to let him off stage without an impromptu solo and a few more bows. He felt like a wet rag with all the water twisted out by the time he headed backstage.

Benny met him with a slap on the shoulder. "Did you *see* that? You had them dancing, Scotty. Dancing! I mean, we should think about having a few girls on stage next time. Not just the holograms. Speaking of which, how about ducking into the after-party for once? Just to say hi?"

Scott shook his head. Not with the way Water thrashed about in the fishbowl. The second movement always put her into an agitated state remembering her sisters. The third? Well, she absolutely loathed *Anasa* and every other Shreen god in existence. Scott knew he was better off alone.

"Just get me to the hotel." He waved to the raucous cries of held-back fans down the hallway.

Next time, he'd take Benny up on his offer. He'd be in much better shape after the Visitation. Maybe even human.

