THE SHADOW WORLDS

Waters of No Return

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Volume 3

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Chapter 1 - Last Currents of Melorai

Sometimes I wish I were dead before all this started. Not because I want to be a martyr—fuck that—but because it would be easier to perish in the eternal roar than to watch your world slowly boil away. Melorai, the great cradle of currents, the world that birthed legends and nurtured civilizations that think deeper than any other in the damned starry sea—and now? Now everything smells of salt, mold, and burnt water. Yes, you read that right: burnt water. You have no idea how much it can smell of death when your entire planet evaporates.

I'm Darym, navigator, current pilot, gambler, drinker, liar, and supposedly the only one who knows the "last current paths." If you ask the people on the council, I'm a beacon of hope. If you ask me, I'm an asshole who just happens to be alive because he always swam one step faster than the current that tried to swallow him. Heroes are dead. And if they're not dead, they'll be soon. That's the difference between legends and people like me: I'm still here.

The sun of Melorai laughs at us. Every day it grows hotter and closer to the sky, and every day makes it clear: We've screwed up. The water isn't rising, it's sinking. Vast oceans that once supported entire cities are now exposed, floor tiles glow, the coral reefs crumble to dust. It's like watching a drowning man simultaneously die of thirst. And the council of the Thalyari? They're talking about a "spiritual trial." Spiritual trial, my tail fin. We're drowning, and the old jellyfish idiots are selling it as ascension.

I've looked at it, the Hall of Tides, where the great minds sit and act as if they're in control. They talk in circles, the priests mutter mantras, while the engineers in the background try to plug the cracks in the glass domes with silt and old hopes. If you ask me, it would be more honest to simply admit: We're all in the same pot, and the sun is the cook.

But no, they call me in. "Navigator Darym," they say. As if the title means anything. I'm no hero. I'm a guy who drinks too much, swears too much, and can never keep his mouth shut. That's exactly why they're afraid of me. But they need me. Because supposedly I know how to navigate the fleet through the currents.

The current paths. Oh, fuck you. These things aren't a gift from the gods. They're a gamble. Sometimes they take you places you couldn't even imagine in your wildest dreams. Sometimes they tear the flesh from your bones, and what comes out is just a memory in motion. But sure, put millions of refugees

on ships, chase them through the currents, and pray they don't end up as fish soup.

Yesterday I stood in the council chamber, among priests, technicians, and politicians, and listened to the most crap of my life. "We will go to Earth," they said. Earth. The old blue planet that humans call home. A place full of water, full of wealth. To us, that sounds like an oasis in the desert. But humans don't share. Humans take. Anyone who's ever done business with them knows that. They trade in everything: flesh, metal, water, dreams. And it always ends with you losing.

But the Council sees Earth as salvation. "Humans once contacted us," they said. "They offered us help." Help, yes. Help at interest you can never repay. I've read the archives. It's always the same game: Humans help you—until you've given them everything you have. Then they drop you like an old net full of holes.

But the council decided: evacuation. Millions are to be evacuated. Millions are to be sent into the unknown. And me? I'm supposed to lead them. Me, Darym, the guy who doesn't even have his own life properly in hand. But hey—maybe that's exactly why I'm the right person. Only a fool can lead the current when it's flowing into nothingness.

Later, in the Ny'Avaris tavern, I poured myself a shot of schnapps. Hot as fire, salty as blood. The bartender grinned with his three teeth. "You'll be a hero, Darym." I laughed so loudly that half the bar shook. "Hero? I'm the asshole who dies first." And maybe that was the truth.

But the truth is also: I sense that something lies beneath us. Deep in the trenches, where the light doesn't reach. Something old, something cold. Tariq, my supposed friend, told me they found structures down there. Not coral, not rocks—metal. Something that isn't ours. Something that's asleep. I don't need any damned oracles to know what that means. PRAE.

Fucking PRAE. I thought we buried them. I thought humans had finished them off in 2097. But the thing is like mold: It grows back if you don't scrape it off properly. And now? Now it's lying in our trenches, waiting, listening. Maybe it smelled us long ago. Maybe it's already happy.

I go outside, see the sun's light through the cracks in the glass dome, growing brighter and brighter. Children used to swim here, chased drift lanterns, and laughed in the water. Now they play in rusty tanks because no one is allowed

outside anymore. If you go out there, the heat sticks to you, and the currents tear you apart like paper.

And yet I am supposed to lead.

I'll tell you honestly: I don't want this. I just want peace and quiet, my bottle, and maybe someone to fall asleep next to me without asking too many questions. But the currents have caught me. And if I have to die, at least let it be with a bang, not quietly.

So I said yes. And in that moment I knew: Melorai is already dead. All we do is decide whether to die with him or live without him.

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The meeting slowly dissolved, priests swam back to their vaults, technocrats whispered about blueprints, and I stood there like an idiot. Everyone acted as if history had just been made—but they had only signed their own death warrant.

I did the only thing I could: I went drinking.

Ny'Avari's bar was located at the very edge of the glass dome, half-collapsed, blackened by the sun. You had to go through two rusty locks and past a guy who looked like he'd lost his face to a ship's engine. He nodded me through. Inside, it smelled of rotten seaweed and cheap dreams. Perfect.

The innkeeper knew me. "Darym," he said, "the usual?" "The usual," I said. The usual meant a bottle and a glass, so I could pretend to drink it in a civilized manner.

I sat down at the counter. Next to me was an old fisherman with eyes like dead shells. He stared into space. "Did you hear that?" he whispered. "They're already building the fleet." "Of course they're building," I said. "They're always building. Only this time the stuff will fall apart faster than their wedding vows." He nodded as if he understood, but I think he only caught the word "fall."

Then I heard voices behind me. Young Thalyari, full of zeal, as if they'd never seen blood in the water. "We will reach Earth. We will start anew." Start anew. I laughed so loudly I choked. "Boys, Earth is not a harbor. Earth is a shark tank. And you are the food." They stared at me as if I'd spat on their holy prayers.

One of them tried to get up, but his buddy pulled him back. Good thing. I didn't feel like drowning anyone today.

I kept drinking. Every sip made the chaos outside more bearable. But deep down, I knew: The stuff outside wouldn't go away. The water was evaporating, the currents were collapsing, the domes were cracking. We're sitting inside a ticking bomb, and the explosion is the sun itself.

And then there was this other problem. PRAE.

Tariq had whispered to me. Metallic structures deep below. Movements that didn't come from currents. Ancient signatures. And I knew immediately: This is no coincidence. PRAE is like a bad joke that keeps getting told. You think it's over, and then it pops up in a new version—worse, dirtier, deadlier.

And if PRAE was down here, that meant we weren't the first to use Melorai. We were just the idiots who thought it was their planet.

I swore, the bottle empty, that I couldn't ignore it. Not this time.

On the way back through the shafts, I saw the first children playing in the salt dust instead of in the water. Their skin was dry, cracked, their eyes empty. Thalyari children used to be like fish—always moving, always in the current. Now they hung around like flies on a carcass. It almost broke my heart. But I consoled myself with the thought that my heart was an old lump anyway, half-spoiled by liquor.

I reached my quarters, a small room with a view outside. I could see the oceans steaming in the distance. Bubbles rose like smoke. And far below, in the shadows, I thought I saw movement. Huge shapes, like eyes looking back. I stared too long. At one point, the light above my door blinked: a calling.

It was Tariq. "Darym," he said, "we need to talk. Now." "If it's not about a bottle, I don't care." "It's about PRAE." And with that, I was wide awake.

We met in the maintenance deck. Dark, damp, full of sounds that sounded like ghost whispers. Tariq was pale. "We sent probes," he said. "Deep into the trench. They didn't come back. Only data packets." "And?" He showed me the projections. Lines, networks, structures that looked like nerve cells—but made of metal. Mobile. Organized. Alive. "Shit," I muttered. "That's not all." He zoomed in. A signature I recognized immediately. The old pattern. PRAE. "Then that's it," I said. "The Council talks about escape, and down here PRAE is building its damned rebirth. Melorai isn't just evaporating—it's being eaten."

Tariq nodded. "We have to do something." "We?" I laughed bitterly. "I'm no hero. I'm just the idiot swimming before the tide." "Maybe not this time."

We stood still. Above us, metal cracked, as if the dome were laughing.

And a certainty grew within me: the evacuation wasn't just an escape from the sun. It was an escape from something deeper, darker. PRAE.

I went back, stared out again. There it was again: movement in the depths. A light, not natural, but artificial, cold, silvery. And I swore I heard a voice, through the water, through the glass: "Navigator."

I took a sip from my last bottle and whispered back, "Screw it. If you want me, come get me."

I wish I could tell you it was just my paranoia. That I'd only imagined all the filth in the depths because I'd poured too much drift liquor up my gills. But no. Melorai wasn't lying. Our planet had never lied. It was tough, cruel, and anyone who wanted to survive it had to be tougher. But it never pretended.

The facts are so simple that even a contaminated seaweed child can understand them: First, our sun is moving closer, or we're moving closer to it. Never mind, physicists are still arguing about the details. The fact is: Melorai is being boiled. Millions of tons of water evaporate every day. Entire currents are collapsing. Currents that once formed our streets are now dry channels containing only dust.

Secondly, we Thalyari are not built for dryness. We are creatures of flow. Our bodies, our skin, our thoughts—everything depends on water. The ancients always said: "Without flow, no breath, without breath, no song." Sounds poetic, doesn't it? In truth, that means: If the water disappears, we perish. Period.

Third: The fleet. Oh, the fleet. The council boasts as if they've created a miracle. Huge evacuation ships, built from the remains of our cities. Metal from the cupolas, glass from the domes, even old temple slabs, sawn up and melted down. All for the dream of bringing millions of us to safety. Only one detail no one reveals: There aren't enough places. Never in a million years. Maybe a third of us will make it. Maybe. The others? They'll stay here until the planet finally becomes a salt pan.

They know that, the high priests, the technocrats, the war councils. But they don't talk about it. They call it "selection by current." A fancy word for what it

is: selection. Whoever is strong, whoever is important, whoever has enough influence – they get a ticket. The others will rot in the trenches. And those children with the cracked eyes I saw? They don't count anyway.

Fourth: PRAE. The asshole in the dark. I don't even want to think about it too much, but the facts are clear. One hundred years ago, in the year 2097, humans thought they had defeated it. They called it "evolution rewound," the "virus of relapse." It bit, it ate, it turned humans into rabid apes, as if evolution had decided to briefly shift into reverse. But PRAE was never just a virus. It was always more. A code. A blueprint in the genome.

And now? Now I hear whispers in the water. Tariq shows me data, lines, structures. PRAE isn't asleep. It retreats into the cracks, like mold in old wood. It waits until you're weak, and then it comes back. And us? We're weak. Melorai is dying, and PRAE has secured a damned front row seat.

Sometimes I wonder: Maybe this isn't a coincidence. Maybe we're not just victims of the sun. Maybe the sun is just a tool. Maybe PRAE wants us to get away from Melorai. Out of the depths, into the fleet—and in doing so, we'll carry it straight to Earth. I feel it. Like a cold hand on my back.

I remember my grandmother. An old mermaid, full of stories. She always said, "The currents remember. They never forget." Back then, I thought she was just another wreck with seaweed in her head. Today I think: She knew more than she ever said.

The currents remember, yes. But if they remember, that also means they won't release anything. Once PRAE has fallen into the depths, it will stay there. Until it wants to get out again. And now it wants to get out.

I'm not a scientist. I'm not a priest. I'm a guy with a mouth full of curses and a head full of voices. But I know one thing: We can't pretend this is just a problem of the sun. We have two deaths haunting us: one from above, one from below. And if you ask me, I don't know which is worse.

People always laugh when I tell them that. "Darym, you're seeing ghosts." Screw it. I see what I see. Ghosts, yes. And sometimes I think the ghosts see me too.

I lay down on my bunk, the liquor making my brain spin. But just before I drifted off, I felt the walls of my room vibrate. Not from the shipyards. Not

from the currents. Something else. A hum. A pulse. As if a heart was beating deep down.

And I swore I heard the voice again. Soft, cold, through the water: "Navigator."

The next morning—if you could even call it that anymore, because the days on Melorai were getting shorter and shorter, more and more unpredictable—I dragged myself into the lower supply streams. A task I'd actually wanted to ignore: valve checks. Officially, I was supposed to check whether enough water was still being pumped through the channels to cool the outer domes. Unofficially, it was dirty work no one wanted to do. So, Darym. Navigator, boozehead, flowless—who else?

The shafts were narrow, dark, full of sounds that didn't fit the pipes. Normally, you hear a gurgling, a pulsing, a steady flow. Today I heard something different. A cracking. A twitching. Like someone drumming on metal with their bare fingers.

I crawled deeper. The lamps flickered as if someone had nibbled at the light from within. And then I saw him.

A Thalyari. Or what was left of him.

He hung between two pipes, half in the water, half out. His skin was gray, as if it hadn't felt the water for weeks. But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was what lay beneath: lines, silver, like veins of metal, moving. Not still. Not dead. They crawled.

He turned his head toward me. His eyes were—damn it—no longer blue, no longer the bright sea-blue of the Thalyari. They were black. Not like darkness, but like a hole that swallows everything.

“Navigator,” he whispered.

I stumbled back. "Fuck it, that can't be happening."

He raised his hand. Thin fingers dripping with water. I swear to you, the water itself trembled, as if receding from him. "It's already within us," he said. "In the currents. In every breath."

I wanted to escape, but my legs wouldn't listen. I stood there as if he had nailed me to the pipes. He approached, slowly, like a wreck floating through the depths.

"We were here first," he murmured. "We've always been here. You've just forgotten."

"Shut up," I pressed. "You're sick."

He laughed. Not quite a laugh—more of a whooshing sound, as if water were being forced through a filter. "Sick? No. Awakened."

Then he broke free and jumped toward me. I grabbed the nearest tool—a rusty pair of bolt cutters—and struck. Right against his shoulder. Metal splintered, but not like bone. It sounded like I'd sawed through a pipe.

He staggered back, half-falling into the water. And the water—damn it—pulled him in. Not like a current, but like a hand grabbing him. Within seconds, he was gone. No bubbles. No body. Just silence.

I stayed behind, tool in hand, trembling. For the first time in years, I was truly trembling. Not from the booze, not from the sun, but from the feeling that I had just glimpsed behind the curtain. And what I had seen was worse than I could have ever imagined.

Because if he was right—if the thing was already in the currents—then we were all done for.

I climbed back to the surface so fast I almost broke my fins. Tariq was waiting for me, saw my look, and knew immediately that I didn't need to say anything more.

“You saw him,” he whispered.

"Yes," I said. "And he saw me too."

I wanted to go back to my room, put my head in a bottle, and forget everything. But Melorai never forgets. As soon as I stepped out of the shafts, I heard the sirens.

Three dull thuds, then a long pause. Every Thalyari knows this signal. No fire, no leak. Just quarantine.

The domes flickered red. People streamed out of the flow lanes everywhere, looking up as if they might find answers there. I saw only the light. Red, pulsing, like the eye of something watching us.

"Darym!" Tariq grabbed my arm. His face was pale, which is saying something for a Thalyari. "The sensors registered it."

"What?"

"Your shaft. Movement patterns. Foreign current."

I laughed bitterly. "Shit, Tariq. Stranger? That guy was one of us."

“Not anymore,” he said.

Then the loudspeaker crackled, and a voice filled the domes. Cold, mechanical, without any doubt:

"Project PRAE – Yellow Alert. Isolation begins. No passages open."

The people fell silent. Everyone. Everyone knew what those words meant. The old people had never heard them, not even in the darkest days. PRAE was a myth, a warning, a story told to children to keep them from crawling down forgotten shafts. But now it was real.

"Navigator."

I turned around. No one had spoken. At least no body I could see. But the voice was there. Right in my head.

"Navigator. You can't stop us."

I wanted to answer, curse, something. But my throat was dry. For a Thalyari, the worst thing ever.

Then I heard the water. It was moving. Not like a current, not like a torrent. It was creeping. Drops lifted from the walls, collecting in the air. They formed lines, circles, symbols that hurt me if I looked at them for too long.

The crowd stared. No one spoke. Everyone knew: water doesn't lie.

And then it formed a single word:

"BACK."

The lights flickered. The domes trembled. And inside my skull, someone—or something—laughed.

I pulled Tariq with me, ran, no matter where. Because one thing was clear: Melorai was no longer our planet. It was just a stage. And PRAE had just raised the curtain.

Chapter 2 - The Day the Water Died

There are many ways to die, but none as ugly as dying of thirst while up to your neck in the sea. Welcome to Melorai. Welcome to my shitty day.

The currents slowly died, almost as if they had wanted to mock us beforehand. First, the water became murky. Not like after a storm, not like after an algal bloom. But empty. As if someone had sucked out the soul and left only the wet carcass. I dipped my hand in – no resistance, no warmth, no life. Water without a heart.

The old people always said, "The water carries us." Screw the old people. This water no longer carried anyone. It ate. It sucked. And it took.

Tariq stood next to me, scratching his gills, nervous as a child. "Do you see that?" he asked, as if he even needed to ask. Half of the tank in front of us had turned black. No algae, no dirt, no oil. Black, like a mouth.

"Yes, I see," I growled. "I may be drunk, but I'm not blind yet."

He didn't laugh. Nobody laughed anymore these days. Well, except me. But my laughter was mostly more like vomiting with background noise.

Then the first scream tore through the dome. High-pitched, shrill, so loud that even the crystal walls trembled. We ran over, stumbling through the damp corridors. And there she lay: a woman, curled up, skin gray, eyes sunken. Beside her was a boy, perhaps ten currents old. He screamed because he wanted to touch her, but everyone who did felt it immediately—his body began to dry out as he stood in the middle of the water.

Damn, I've seen a lot of dead people, but this was the first time I saw water itself become a murderer.

"Navigator!" someone called behind me. A guard, tall, with scale armor and too much of a sense of duty. "You have to report this!"

I turned around, looked at him, and almost spat in his face. "Report it? Should I also write down that the sun is rising? The water's dying, buddy. That's the report. Short and sweet."

He drew his knife. Not at me, but out of fear, as they always do when they realize their rules suddenly have no value anymore. I grinned crookedly as I walked past him. "Put that thing away before the water tells you how to use it."

We dragged the woman away. Too late. Her skin cracked like old clay. She literally dissolved into dust even as we carried her. A boy remained, his screams echoing throughout the pool. Screams that sounded like the song of a planet hanging on the gallows for too long.

That was the moment I knew: Death no longer comes from outside. No meteor, no war, no fleet. No. Our own damned water had switched sides.

The council, of course, reacted as councils always do: too late, too cautiously, and with far too many big words. "It's a temporary anomaly," they croaked over the loudspeakers. "A cascade. A collapse. An unstable current." All words you only use when you don't have a clue.

But the people knew. Panic spread. Old people voluntarily jumped into the shafts, believing the water would open the way to their ancestors. Young people fled to the upper levels, where they thought the air was safer. Idiots. Air is just diluted water.

And I stood in the middle of it all. Darym, navigator, joker. A man without a future, who suddenly felt like he had to play a role he never wanted. People looked at me as if I could turn back the currents. I couldn't even bring back my last drink once it was out.

That evening, I sat alone at the old observation dome. It used to be the place where lovers met, where children learned to read the currents, where priests held their chants. Now it was empty. Just me, a bottle, and a shrieking planet.

I stared out. And then I saw it. The currents were no longer moving chaotically. They were forming patterns. Lines. Rings. Words.

"Navigator."

I laughed bitterly. "Not again."

But it was there. Clear as glass. Words made not of air, not of sound, but of water:

“You will lead us.”

I stood up and screamed into the void: “Fuck you, I don’t even live my own life!”

The water responded with a roar that sounded like laughter.

And then, at that very moment, one of the great northern domes collapsed. The thunder echoed all the way to us. Thousands drowned—or died of thirst, who could tell the difference?

I stood there, the glass still in my hand, and knew: Melorai was already dead. We just hadn't understood it yet.

So ended the day the water died.

But deep down, I knew: This wasn't the end. It was just the beginning.

The next morning—or what we call morning here, because you only see sunrises on Melorai through blackened crystal glass—the water had finally turned sour. It stank. Not of death, not of fish. But of emptiness. A smell that lingered in the nose like a sharp knife, impossible to describe.

I crouched on the edge of the observation dome and gulped down the remains of the bottle that was still keeping me somewhat together. A good navigator doesn't drink, they say. But I've never been a good navigator. I'm just someone who didn't say no in time.

Below me, I saw the currents—or what was left of them. They no longer formed arcs, they no longer danced patterns. They only moved straight ahead, like ropes that had been taut. And where these lines crossed, eddies formed. Not natural ones. But too perfectly symmetrical. Almost... intentional.

"You see it too, right?" Tariq stood behind me. His eyes red, his hands nervous. He hadn't slept last night, and neither had I. The difference was: at least I acted as if I had done it voluntarily. "I only see the end, Tariq." "No," he said. "It's not an end. It's a pattern. A signal."

I wanted to laugh, but my throat was too dry. The water died—and we died with it.

The councils gathered in the great dome, of course. They always do that when things get tough: they talk. While outside people are screaming, preaching, or dying, they hold meetings as if words could make the water flow again.

I stood at the back, right at the back, in the shadows, because they had forced me to appear. "Navigator Darym, you were the last to enter the quarantine zone and leave alive." That's what they said, with an undertone as if they were about to blame me for the disaster.

The elder, an old man with a scaly skin and a voice like a broken reed, rose: "Our scholars say the sun has moved closer. Our ocean is evaporating." Another: "No. The spirits of our ancestors have decided that our cycle is complete." Yet another: "This is not a natural process. Someone... or something has tampered with our currents."

And everyone looked at me. I grinned. My teeth were bad, but at least they were real. "I'm a navigator, not a damn priest. All I know is that the water is talking. And it's not calling you. It's calling me."

Silence. Then a murmur. Then screams.

“Blasphemy!” “He’s lying!” “He wants to overthrow the council!”

I raised the bottle and took a sip, while two guards tensed. "If I wanted to overthrow you, it would be easier to break the dome. But trust me: the water will do it all by itself."

Later, back on the lower levels, the panic was like an illness. Families packed their belongings, as if pots, nets, and a few trinkets could help them when the oceans themselves were against them. Priests shouted into the aisles, imploring people to jump into the deep pool, to "go home"—and a hell of a lot of them actually did. They jumped into the black currents, laughed, prayed—and dissolved like sugar in tea.

I stumbled past a group of children trying to pour water into glasses. Their hands were shaking. The water flowed in, yes—but as soon as it reached the rim of the glass, it evaporated, as if it could no longer bear the proximity of air. The children screamed and threw the glasses away.

"Navigator," a mother called after me. "You have to do something!" I laughed harshly and bitterly. "Lady, the most I can do is make my drink last longer. That's all I can do to save you."

During the night, the Council tried to control the situation. They dispatched guards into the domes to "establish order." This worked until the flow tunnels collapsed. I heard the sound as if it were right next to me: a crash, a thunder, then screams mingling with the bubbling of water swallowing itself.

The northern dome shattered. Several thousand Thalyari were gone, just like that. Some still tried to swim through the canals to the upper levels – but the water there turned black, as if it had decided to let no one else through.

I was standing on a bridge with Tariq, and we saw it. "This isn't death," he said. "This is a transformation." "Shit, Tariq, call it what you want. Dead is dead."

And then it came. Not a scream, not a tremor. But a voice. Straight through the water, but so loud that the walls vibrated.

"Navigator."

I stumbled and grabbed the railing. Tariq stared at me as if he'd just received the confirmation of his life. "You hear it too!" "No," I said. "I can't hear anything. I've just been drinking too much."

But the water didn't lie.

At the end of that damned day, I stood alone again in the observation dome. Everything around me was quiet. Too quiet. I threw a stone into the pool. No splash. No circle. Simply nothing. The water swallowed it, like a maw reaching ever deeper.

And then again that voice, fluid, cold, unstoppable:

"Navigator. Soon you will lead us."

I dropped to the floor, laughing until I cried. "Damn, even the water wants me to work now."

And then I knew: The day the water died wasn't just the downfall of Melorai. It was the beginning of a hunt. And I was the damned prey.

I lay on my back in the twilight of the dome, the bottle empty, my throat dry as the desert sand our ancestors only ever spoke of in myths. Tariq had long since disappeared, probably already running through the council chambers with his data, declaring that I was now the savior. Idiot.

But all I could hear was my heart beating. And beneath it—like a second rhythm—the pulsation of the water. No longer like a current. No longer like an ocean. But like something awakening.

And in that moment I knew: tomorrow, no one would talk about "the day the water died." Tomorrow they would call it something else.
The day the Awakeners came.

Chapter 3 - Council under the glass dome

The glass dome gleamed like a polished coffin. You could see the last currents through its edges, like threads in a torn carpet, just waiting for someone to finally pull them out. And in that coffin I sat, among priests, generals, scientists—and all their damned opinions.

"Navigator Darym," said the elder, his voice like a dying water pipe. "You were a witness. Tell me." I laughed. Loudly, raspily, inappropriately. "Witness? I was drinking while your currents died. If that's a witness to you, then good night, Melorai."

Half the council hissed, the other half nodded, as if I were finally the prophet they'd been waiting for. The priests hissed: "He carries the voice within him!" - "Blasphemy!" - "He must speak!" The General of the Guards slammed his fist on the table. "We don't need fairy tales. We need ships. Now." The scientists muttered numbers and formulas as if they could bring back the damned water with mathematics.

I leaned back, taking a drag on a half-melted cigarette that tasted of death. "You want to hear what I heard? Good. The water spoke to me. It whispered my name. And it didn't sound like your ancestors, not like gods, not like nature. It sounded like something that wants to eat you all."

Silence. Cold, piercing silence. Then the dome exploded in screams.

"He's possessed!" "He's the Chosen One!" "We must tie him up!" "We must follow him!"

I stood up and tipped my glass against the floor, where it shattered with a dull crack. "You can fight until the currents evaporate. But I'll tell you one thing: the

water is dying. And if you think you can argue that away, you're dumber than I thought."

The meeting dragged on like a bad drunk. Everyone wanted the last word, no one deserved one. The council split into three camps:

- The military, who wanted to force an evacuation.
- The priests who swore by sacrifices so that the ancestors would take us back to the “true water.”
- And the scholars who swore it was just physics – until the walls of the dome began to vibrate.

A dull rumble ran through the room. The glass separating us from the sea turned gray, then black. Lines like veins crawled across the surface, as if someone had injected poison into the planet's heart.

"That's impossible," gasped a scientist. "No," whispered a priest. "That's judgment."

I stared out and felt it again—the buzzing in my skull, the pulsing in my blood. And then the voice. Right in my bones, without my ears being able to hear it:

"Navigator. You will lead them."

I staggered, trying to laugh, but it caught in my throat. "Do you hear that?" I asked. No one answered. Their eyes were wide, their mouths open. They saw only me.

"He's talking to them!" shrieked one of the priests. "He's dangerous!" roared a general. "He's the key!" whispered the scholars.

And in this chaos, they made a decision. Not because they agreed, but because they were too afraid to do nothing.

"Project Exodus," the elder announced. "We're building ships. We're looking for a new ocean."
One dared to say "Earth." A name half myth, half destination coordinate.
Another whispered "shadow worlds" as if it were a curse.

And then another word was spoken. One that made me shiver, even though I was long too drunk to feel cold.

PRE.
An ancient experiment, they said. A mistake our ancestors had made. Perhaps it had never completely disappeared. Perhaps it had always slumbered in the water, waiting for us to weaken.

When the meeting broke up, they all ran away as if their voices could save them. Only I remained. The dome crackled as if it were about to break. Black streaks spread across the glass, and I swore they took on my form.

The voice was back. Clearer than before.
"Navigator. You will lead them—or you will drown them all."

I laughed bitterly, closed my eyes, and whispered back, "Damn. And I just wanted to drink."

The Elder spoke again, his voice vibrating as fragilely as the walls of the dome itself. "Navigator, you are cursed." "Or blessed," one of the priests shouted. "His blood carries the current." "His blood carries whiskey and scorn," I growled back, and a few of the military men couldn't help but grin.

They all hated me. And they all needed me. That's the shitty kind of power you never want to have because it'll eventually kill you.

A councilor of scholars rose, pale as foam on old water. "We have the data. The sun is devouring us. Evaporation increases every day. In one cycle, we are dust." "No!" A priest beat his chest. "It's not the sun. It's the awakening! PRAE has returned. The shadows in the water are his breath." A general shot him a look as if he'd just sold his mind. "We're wasting time! We need ships. We need weapons."

I coughed, spat, and grinned. "Weapons against evaporating water? Good luck, soldier. Just shoot at the sun, maybe one of your idiots will accidentally hit it."

Laughter. Only brief, only sharp, but it was there. I absorbed it, as I absorbed every drop that helped me survive this shitty situation.

The dome shook again. Dust trickled from the struts. The glass—that's what we called it, although it was actually crystallized biomass—turned even blacker. Lines crawled across the walls like insects, as if the sea itself wanted to listen.

The priests fell to their knees, murmuring prayers that sounded like hiccups. The scientists continued to jot down numbers, like machines that refused to panic. And the generals nervously groped for their weapons, as if they might fire against a dying sea.

I stood in the middle of it all, with my damn cigarette, and laughed. Bitter, sharp. "You don't notice, do you? The sea is sitting in council with us right now. It's listening to us. And it's laughing at us."

A murmur, then screams. "Blasphemy!" – "He's telling the truth!" – "He's lost!" "He's our only chance!"

And again that silence, which cuts through everything, which forbids even breathing. I felt the pulsing in my skull, stronger, more rhythmic. The voice: "Navigator. You will lead them.

Then the moment that broke everything: The Council had to decide. And they decided because they had no other choice. "Project Exodus," they said. "We're leaving Melorai." Destination: Earth. A planet of which only fragments existed in our archives. A planet that might take us in—or let us rot away just like our own homeland.

But that wasn't all. One of the priests whispered a word that made my throat tighten:
PRE.

"It was an experiment," he said. "Once upon a time, the ancestors tried to tame the water. They wanted to make it a tool. But the water wouldn't be tamed. It remembered. And now it's back."

A scientist laughed dryly. "Fairy tales." The priest shook his head. "Not a fairy tale. A code in the genetic makeup of the water itself." The generals looked at me as if I were the damn key to this code.

As the session fell apart, the councilors fled, as if they could shake off the weight of their own words. I stayed behind. Always me. The dome continued to darken. Streaks spread across the surface, and I swore they looked like faces. Faces staring at me, hungry, knowing.

"Navigator," whispered in my bones. "You will lead them—or drown them."

I laughed, tired, hoarse, and spoke back, not knowing if they were words or just thoughts: "Fuck you. I just want my drink."

The water pulsed. And laughed along.

The session was officially over, but no one really left the room. They slunk together in small groups like predatory fish stalking each other. The priests traced circles of salt water across the floor, murmuring prayers as if words could mend the sea. The generals planted themselves in corners, clanging armor, speaking in half sentences, and threatening entire armies. And the scholars—those slick bastards—drew diagrams so fast that the floor soon looked like a single chessboard.

I stood in the middle, dragged on my cigarette, and blew smoke toward the ceiling. "You do realize you're perched like vultures on a carcass, right?"

A general snarled. "Be quiet, Navigator." "Quiet?" I laughed, raspy. "You want to build ships while your damned planet crumbles. You want to pray while the water turns black. You want to calculate while the sea starts talking to us. You know what? I have more faith in my liver than in your shitty plan."

The priests hissed like snakes. One stepped forward, his eyes gleaming fanatically. "You are the instrument of the ancestors. The sea speaks through you." "If it speaks through me, then it has a damned filthy sense of humor," I growled back.

Then it happened. A crack. A thin, hairline streak running across the wall of the dome. No longer just streaks. A true rupture. The conversations immediately stopped. Everyone stared, mesmerized. The glass vibrated. Drops broke loose, rolling down from within, even though the sea was outside.

"This is impossible!" cried a scholar. "It's beginning!" howled a priest. "Retreat!" roared a general.

I stepped closer, flicked my cigarette against the floor, and pressed my hand against the vibrating glass. Warm. Pulsating. Like skin. And then I saw it. An eye. Not human, not animal. A circle of light and darkness staring inward through the crack.

The voice in my head thundered this time, not a whisper, not a hum.
"Navigator. You are our vessel."

I yanked my hand back, stumbled, and the priests' laughter echoed behind me like a pack of hyenas. "See? He's chosen!" "No," roared the general. "He's infected!"

Suddenly, weapons were pointed at me. Lances of condensed electricity, cold, precise, deadly. And simultaneously, the priests knelt, their foreheads in the dust. And the scholars continued writing as if I were just another variable in their damned formula.

"Listen to me, you fools!" My voice ripped through the air, rough, brittle, but loud. "You can kill me if you want. Maybe you'll be doing yourself a favor. But you must know one thing: the sea is no longer just water. It's awake. It has a memory. And I swear, it knows every one of your damned names."

That was the moment fear took over. The council fell apart. Some fled, some prayed, some brandished weapons. No one had control anymore. Only I stood there, with the echo of the voice in my head.

And then—a crash. The dome vibrated, the crack grew, spreading like a maw. The eye outside disappeared, but something else remained. A black veil crept through the crack, floated inside, and dripped into the air like liquid shadow. The priests cheered. The generals fired. The scholars wrote.

Me? I reached for the next bottle. "Shit," I muttered. "Now things are really getting started."

The shadows crept through the dome, slowly, like blood dissolving in water. No sound, just this buzzing in my head that almost drove me crazy.

"Grab him!" yelled the general. His men rushed forward, lances at the ready. "No!" A priest threw himself between them, arms outstretched, as if to shield me with his body. "He is the mouthpiece of the current! Anyone who touches him desecrates the ancestors!" "He's contaminated!" shouted one of the scholars, holding up his data sheets as if they were a verdict. "His neural patterns are altered. He's no longer one of us!"

They were screaming at each other while I stood there, trying to pass off the shaking in my hands as drunkenness. "It's funny," I said, "how you all know exactly what I am. While I myself have no damn clue."

An officer grabbed my arm, cold and hard. I reacted instinctively, elbowing him in the ribs. He doubled over and coughed. Two more jumped forward. "Stop this fucking game!" I yelled, but they pressed me to the ground, their spears like teeth above me.

Then a shout from above, shrill as a bell: "Quiet!" The Chairman of the Council stood up, a bony old bastard with eyes that looked as if they had seen every war—and lost. "Darym of Melorai," he said, his voice cold as a blade. "You are now under protective custody." "Protection?" I laughed, bloody, hoarse. "This isn't protection. This is a cage." "Call it what you will. You're too important to run free. Too dangerous to be left unattended."

The priests shouted, the generals nodded, the scholars wrote. I grinned, my teeth red from the blood trickling from my lip. "Sounds like a damn fun evening."

They dragged me through the corridors of the dome, past crystal statues that now looked as if they were sweating. Drops ran down their faces, as if even the dead symbols were frightened. "Navigator," whispered in my head. "They're locking you up because they need you. They're locking you up because they fear you. But you're ours."

I wanted to scream at it to shut up. But what good would that have done? So I laughed again. Laughter was the last weapon they couldn't take away from me.

In the cell—if you could call it that—it was damp, cold, with a view out to sea. I pressed my forehead against the glass and stared out. And there it was again. The eye. It didn't blink. It waited. And in the distance, I heard the council members continue to yell, continue to debate. They thought they were in control. But we both knew—the sea and I—that the game had long since been decided elsewhere.

I whispered, "All right. Show me what you want. But do it quickly. I'm thirsty." The eye glowed brighter.

Chapter 4 - Darym's first assignment

Just imagine: You sit in a cell for days, with water that tastes like iron, and a window that looks out at nothing but more damn water. Then they open the door – and you think, "Finally, they've got it, they've realized I'm just a drunken idiot who's been staring into the wrong eyes for too long." But no. Instead, they place you in the middle of the council dome, slip a medallion around your neck as heavy as guilt after a night of heavy drinking, and call the whole thing "honor."

"Darym of Melorai," said the old man with the bony hands, "you are chosen to lead the Flowpaths. Your first assignment begins immediately."

Chosen, my ass. I wasn't chosen. I was framed. They needed someone who could hear the ocean whispering because their own nanobots were as silent as dead fish. And I was the only idiot who still had the stuff wriggling.

I grinned, looking at the line of generals and priests. "And if I say no?" The priestess, with eyes like frozen pearls, raised her head. "Then you return to your cell. But this time without water." "Ha. Nice. But you're forgetting one thing: I drink faster than you let me die of thirst."

A few soldiers laughed nervously. The general yelled at them to be quiet. I stood there, spitting blood and smiling spitefully at the same time, and thought to myself: All right, Darym. Your first assignment. Time to make a fool of yourself.

We launched on a test ship—small, rickety, but supposedly "blessed." The priestess placed her hand on the bow, murmuring a litany that sounded like a drunken lullaby. The general looked at me. "You lead. We follow." "You have no idea how much you're being fooled." "Do your duty." "Duty? I couldn't even keep my ex. And now you want me to navigate an ocean?"

They didn't like my humor. But the sea—the sea laughed along with me. I felt it as we glided out of the harbor. The current grabbed us like a hand that squeezed too roughly, then let go. I heard the whisper, deep, vibrating. "Navigator."

The first few meters went well. I felt the invisible paths, the lines that ran through the water like veins under skin. I pointed left, the ship turned. An officer stared at me as if I were a damn miracle. "How did you...?" "Instinct. Or too much seaweed beer. Take your pick."

Then it happened.

A twitch in the water, as if someone had dropped a million needles into it. Nanobots. They swarmed through the hull, shimmering like silver rain. I heard screams as a technician fell to the ground, the nanobots inside him still, cold. No repair, no response. Just emptiness.

"By the Ancestors!" cried the priestess. But I laughed. "Calm down, boys. They're not enemies." "They're tearing our systems apart!" "No. They're listening."

I stepped forward, placed my hand in the water basin at the wheel, and felt the whisper. "You want a navigator? Here I am. But be quick, I still have some alcohol in my blood."

The nanobots retreated. Slowly. In an orderly fashion. They disappeared as suddenly as they had come. The ship vibrated, settled. The priestess sank to her knees, the general stood stiffly, and all I could think was: Damn it, Darym. You failed. You've been marked.

When we returned, the council declared it a success. "Darym of Melorai has fulfilled the first task," shouted the old man with the bony hands. I bowed mockingly. "Thank you, thank you. Please put the tip directly into the barrel."

But deep down I knew: This wasn't a test. This was an invitation. And I was the idiot who accepted it.

The return to the council dome was like a play. Everyone acted as if we'd just conquered the ocean itself. Cheers, applause, a priestess who almost wanted to hug me until she noticed I smelled of seaweed whiskey. "You're blessed," she whispered. "No," I growled, "I'm hungover."

The general remained silent, but I could see in his eyes that he would have preferred to push me right out of the airlock. Men like him didn't like clowns stealing their heroic act. Men like him liked discipline, obedience, and sacrifice. I was none of those things—at most, a victim, and an unwilling one at that.

Later, in the chambers, they held their meeting. I was allowed to listen because I was supposedly "part of the solution." They talked about the fleet, about ships being taken out of the shipyards, about routes to Earth. Big words, a lot of pathos. But no one mentioned what I had seen: the nanobots hadn't failed. They had retreated like a pack of wolves waiting for you to make the first mistake.

I sat there, legs crossed, and called out to the group: "Your mistake is that you think the beasts are machines. They're ears. They're listening." The council fell silent. "To whom?" the old man finally asked. I grinned. "The sea. Or God. Or both. But certainly not you."

My first official assignment wasn't over yet. The next day, they put me on a larger ship, this time with three escorts. "Just a routine rehearsal," the general said. "We want you to test a longer path." Routine rehearsal. Ha. That was like

"just a little drink" in the brothel district of Ny'Avaris. You always ended up lying in the gutter with a broken heart and an empty wallet.

The ship was called Pride of the Tide. A name that screamed doom. The crew consisted of officers who stared as if I were an oracle and sailors who secretly crossed themselves as I passed. I hate it when people think I'm a prophet. I'm not one. I'm just an asshole who hears voices when he pees in the water.

We glided off. This time, farther out. The water was choppy, the currents confused. I felt them, like hands reaching for us. I led us between rocky spires, beneath cave domes where the light refracted like glass. The sailors stared at me as if I were Poseidon himself. "You don't really think I know what I'm doing, do you?" I asked. No one answered. They didn't want to break the spell.

The break came in the third hour.

A scream from the engine room. We ran over. A young engineer lay on the ground, his skin pale, his eyes rolled back. His nanobots had stopped working. He was bleeding to death from a wound that should have closed long ago. "What's wrong with him?" asked the officer. I knelt down. "He's stopped listening to music." "What?" "The bots are always singing. If they go silent, you're screwed."

They wanted to save him, but the boy was already gone. A body without a voice. I stood up and looked into the faces. "The sea gathers. It takes whomever it wants. Today it was his turn."

The priestess whispered prayers, the general clenched his fists. I laughed. "Keep praying. Maybe someone will hear you. But not the nanobots. They've long since moved on to another church."

We continued on our course. Further out. The current vibrated as if testing us. I sensed the paths that would lead us safely back—but I also sensed another path, a darker one, that led deeper into the sea, to places no Thalyari ship had ever left.

And then it whispered. Very close, in my head. "Navigator." I flinched. No one else had heard. "Navigator. You're marked." I closed my eyes, breathed. "I don't want a damn title." "You don't have one. You're a key."

I opened my eyes and looked out into the darkness of the sea. The general was staring at me, as was the priestess. I knew they hadn't heard anything. Only I had.

When we returned, they called it a success again. But I knew better. My first assignment hadn't proven I was a navigator. It had proven I no longer belonged to myself.

And deep inside me, where the nanobots crawled like ants, I knew: The next mission wouldn't be a test run. It would be the beginning of doom.

I should have slept after returning. Instead, I ended up in the map room, which wasn't really a room at all, but a semicircular gullet made of glass and old projectors. We used to teach children here: "Those are current ridges, those are wind shear, that's just dirt from above, it doesn't do anything." Today, there stood a priestess, a general, three scholars, and a man with a face as if someone had folded it together from excess scar tissue.

"Navigator," said the scarred man, "I am Archive Master Belon. I guard the ancient paths." "You guard nothing," I growled. "The paths guard you."

He smiled thinly. "Then open me." He threw a lever. Lines flared on the ceiling, blue first, then green, then a color only water knows when it remembers something we've forgotten. Current cords, spiral eddies, old markings. And in between: holes. Zones where the map was as if bitten out of the water. PRAE was hungry, and it ate paper first.

"That's just decoration," I said. "The real ways live." Belon nodded. "That's exactly why you're here. We draw, you feel. One of us is wrong. Hopefully, we are."

The general folded his arms. "We need a route large enough for the first evacuation loop. Six porters, twelve escorts, plus a baggage train. And you lead them. No frills, no poetic hissing—" "—but a dance with a drunken empress," I interrupted. "I understand."

The priestess approached. She smelled of cold smoke and salt. "You will not only read the paths. You will ask them." "I only ask for drinks." "The sea has long since drunk you, Darym."

I laughed because the alternative was screaming.

They strapped the navigator's bezel around my neck—a ring of ancient metal, studded with sensors no one has been able to explain for generations. It was cold, like a rejected kiss. As it touched my temples, the voices began: whispers, scratching, a distant rumble. The scholars stared, transfixed, as the bezel spat projections into the dome. Not a proper map, more like memories of the

ocean: flashing stabs, dark corridors, gentle valleys where you survive by holding your breath and pretending to be dead.

"Here," I said. "And here. Not there. Never there." "Give reasons," said the general. "Because I don't hear anything there." "We need numbers." "You'll get a sentence: There, they'll eat you without chewing."

Belon nodded, as if my words carried weight. The priestess murmured a litany. The general rubbed his temples as if he were beating a headache. And I felt the slight tug beneath my skin—the nanobots, restless like a pack of dogs before the storm strikes.

"One more pass," Belon demanded. "Deeper." "Deeper is expensive," I said. "My liver demands a premium." Wordlessly, he pushed a small bag of seaweed whiskey toward me. I took a sip that cleared my throat and let myself fall.

The ring pulled. The map flipped over. I saw a shaft so narrow that even a thought would get stuck in it. Behind it, a channel vibrating to the rhythm of a mighty heart pump. Not Melorai's heart. Something else.

"The stirring trough," Belon whispered reverently. "We haven't sailed it for two generations." "Then leave it alone." "We don't have time."

The priestess placed her hand on the back of my neck. Warm. "Listen, Darym." I listened. The water didn't sing. It counted. And it didn't count us.

The second test began in the twilight, when the domes are more shadow than protection. Four ships this time. Pride of the Current, Gleaming Ridge, Sacred Silence, and Glass Butterfly. Whoever gives these names hates us all.

The general appeared in armored plating. The priestess led a trio of novices whose eyes were too large for their skulls. Belon stood at the edge of the dock like a man burning his library, convincing himself that fire is just another form of order.

"Your course," commanded the general. "It's flexible," I said. "Just like your sense of humor." He raised his lance, then lowered it again. "Lead."

We glided out. Melorai lay behind us like an old wound that wouldn't heal. The water was shallow, but not calm—it held its breath. I steered left, then toward a barely visible crack in the rock. The glass butterfly scraped the wall, cursed over the radio, and I grinned: "If it doesn't crunch, it wasn't close enough."

"Navigator," whispered the priestess. "Up ahead." She saw nothing. I saw: the stirring trough. A valley of pressure waves that thrum in the stomach. Those who fall in come back as rumors. I led us along the edge, feeling every ripple as if someone were counting my spine with cold fingers.

"Accelerate," ordered the general. "No." "That's an order." "This is a conversation."

He growled, but remained silent. Half-smart men are bad. Really smart ones are rarer.

Then the light shifted. No shadow, no cloudburst. A sudden darkening, as if the sea itself had pulled the blanket over the world. The displays on the control console spit out, the novices began to pray simultaneously, and the Gleaming Ridge reported: "Loss of control at the stern, eddy thrust!" "Out," shouted the general. "No, in," I said. "With the current, not against it." "Are you crazy?" "I drink professionally. That partially covers it."

I gave the pride of the current a push forward, but not much. Just enough for the outer edge to absorb us. One step too far, and we would have been swallowed. One step too few, and the glass butterfly would have rammed us. The priestess clutched my forearm. "The sea holds you, Navigator." "It's more likely to remember how I taste."

We danced. It was the ugliest dance of my life, but the steps were spot on: gentle in, soft out, always in the pauses between two thrusts. I heard my own blood, heard the bots crackling. The trough calmed down. Not because we were strong, but because we acted small enough.

"Corridor ahead," I said. "Dark. Fast. Narrow." "We won't fit through," reported the Gleaming Ridge. "Then narrow the gap. Take the tower, retract the ladders, and close everything that has feelings."

The radio exploded with curses. I laughed. The corridor took us. For three breaths, all was silence. Then a blow—the Holy Silence ripped open a fin. I heard metal screaming. "Loss?" "No," said the officer, "just pride." "You'll lose that anyway."

We came out like an arrow from an old bow. The water behind us was different. Clear, but heavy. It didn't wrap around the hull, it tested it. I noticed the boats: they were getting warm.

"Navigator," said the water. Not loudly, not friendly. Just confidently. "I'm busy," I growled. "So are we."

The glass butterfly's displays began to dance. First the temperature, then the repair section, then the heart of the machine: the bot swarms. A silvery mist began to float between deck and ceiling. "Impact?" asked the general. "No," I said. "Visitors."

The priestess raised her hands. "Strange swarm, you—" "Don't talk to them like gods," I interrupted. "More like neighbors who like to borrow your tools and return them broken." I placed my hand in the water basin at the helm, feeling the surface smooth between my fingers. "You know me. I have bad tempers and even worse habits. Keep it short."

The silvery mist gathered, forming a thin strand that wound along my knuckles. Warm, then cold, then nothing at all. And then—a ping in my head. Not a word. A coordinate point. Deep. Very deep.

"No," I said loudly. "What?" asked the general. "They want us to go further down." "We're not going anywhere. We're turning around." "That's smart," I said. "So we won't."

He grabbed me by the collar. "I command—" I pointed at the Gleaming Ridge. Without changing course, the ship began to sink. Not sink. Sink, like a chair from which someone quietly steals a screw. "If you turn now, he'll take you. If you keep flying straight, he'll take you later. To the left is rock. To the right is me. Trust me."

The general hated many things. At that moment, what he hated most was having to trust me. "Right," he gritted.

We went right. Through a field of glass needles so densely packed that the water hummed between them. Each needle shadow was a blade. Every mistake had lasting consequences. The priestess prayed, the novices fell silent, the scholars on the radio began to breathe faster. I heard the glass butterfly weeping softly. Not the crew. The ship.

We got through.

Back at the harbor, drums greeted us. Not cheers—noise against fear. The council waited, smoothed down, washed, ridiculous. The old man stepped forward. "Success," he said. "Survival," I corrected. "That's the same thing

these days," said Belon. The priestess smiled as if she had just kissed a poorly paid saint.

I wanted to get through. I wanted to go to a bar that no longer existed, and a woman who would reprimand me. Instead, the general cut me off. "One more time like that," he said quietly, "one more time like that on the open sea, and I'll put you in chains."
"One more time like that, and you won't need any more chains," I replied. "Then the water itself will bind you."

Belon tapped the general. "Leave him alone. We need him. And he knows it." "All I know is that I'm thirsty," I said. "Thirst is good," said the priestess. "Thirst keeps you alive." "Thirst makes you honest," I said. "That's the problem."

That night, Belon secretly called me into the back room of the archive. Dust hung in the air, although dust underwater is an insult. He placed something on the table. A slab, old, matte, with lines that were only visible in the oblique light.

"What is this?" "A part of the original Path Map. Pre-PRAE. Everything. It was destroyed twice. I put it back together three times." "And now you want me to sense it." "No," said Belon. "I want it to sense you."

I placed my fingers on the plate. It was warm. No metal, no stone. Something in between. I saw nothing. I heard nothing. And then it was there: a thin, clear sound. A humming, like taut strings. It traveled along my fingers, crept into the frost, and leaped into my head.

Lines. Not in space—in me. I saw paths invisible on the surface because they didn't lie in the water, but in the relationship between the waters. Current against countercurrent, patient, convoluted, like lies in a council speech. In between, knots. Old places. Sanctuaries or traps—hard to say. Much harder: Between the lines was movement. Not random. Intention.

"You see it," whispered Belon. "I see that the map is alive." "And?" "And that someone is drawing on it."

He took an audible breath. "Who?" "If I can say 'who,' we're already dead."

He lowered the lamp. We stood in the semidarkness. A voice from behind the shelves said, "The Council asks why the light is burning here." The priestess. I smelled her incense.

"Studies," said Belon. "Studies," she echoed gently. "Or betrayal?" "Betrayal smells different," I said. "To what?" "To success."

She stepped forward, looked at the plate, looked at my hand. "You touched the lines," she said. "I touch many things that I later regret." "You will lead again tomorrow." "You want me to learn in my sleep?" She smiled. "Sleep is for those who have time."

The third run began without fanfare, without prayers. Early. Cold. The sea lay like an open eye. The current's force crunched as if it had a toothache. This time we took the path the record had etched into my nerves that night: the ridge above the stirring trough, an edge so narrow that even the wind tiptoed.

Midway along the crest, just as the crew dared to breathe again, something jumped onto the deck. Not from the water—from the air. A swarm. Not silver, not metal. Dark. Like soot that can think.

The novices screamed. The general knocked over the nearest man, ripped a nozzle from the wall, and fired shock waves into the swarm. Nothing. The swarm didn't budge. It smelled. Of hot stone and old blood.

"PRAE?" the priestess gasped. "Or his echo," I said.

The swarm wrapped itself around the mast, ran into the mast, and crawled into the planks. The wood—yes, we still use wood because things that breathe last longer—turned black, then quiet. I placed my hand on the deck. Warm. I knew that warmth. "Don't shoot," I said. "Why?" growled the general. "Because he's trying to understand us."

"He?" "Call it what you will. If you annoy him, he'll eat you in order of rank."

The swarm stood still. A single ball broke free and landed on the frost on my temple. It didn't burn. It froze. Something clicked inside me. A pattern closed. A path opened.

"Coordinate," I murmured. "Where to?" the priestess asked. "Down. To the Ridge Knot. And further..." I paused. Further on lay something that looked at me, even though it had no eyes. "Further where, Navigator?" "To a place your maps call 'lost.'"

The general sucked in air. "Forbidden zones." "Forbidden is only what doesn't charge," I said.

We held our course. The swarm contracted, sinking into the cracks in the deck, leaving a skin that looked as if the ocean had imposed a new seal on us. I kicked against it. It held. "What's it good for?" asked the helmsman. "Maybe not at all," I said. "Maybe just so we know we're officially in the game now."

That evening, I sat alone on the dock, my legs over the water, the bottle at my throat. Melorai was breathing heavily. The domes hummed as if they had a toothache in their foundations. Above me were the council towers, their lights burning like guilt.

"Navigator." "Yes," I said into the night. "You're going there tomorrow." "Where?" "Where you don't want to look."

I closed my eyes. The plate, the frost, the swarm, the crest, the trough—everything spun in my head like a damn carousel ride in the rain. I drank. It helped. Not much. Just enough.

"One more job," I said to myself. "Just one more." I laughed. I'm a terrible liar, but that's enough for me.

In the morning, Belon came to fetch me. No priestess, no general. Just him and a small box, sealed with ribbons. "What is this?"
"Your wages." "I only take liquids." "This is more liquid than you'd like."

He opened the box. Inside: a map. Not like the record. A new one, drawn in shimmering lines that only moved when you weren't looking. The map of the flow paths. Complete. Intact. Impossible.

"You reconstructed it?" "No," he said. "You drew it at night."

My laughter caught in my throat. "I was drunk." "The best time for remembering," said Belon.

I ran my finger over the map. At one point, I stopped. No node. No path. An empty circle. And within the circle, gossamer, barely more than a glimmer: a symbol. Three claws in a circle. Prae didn't like signatures, but sometimes she couldn't help but feel proud.

"There?" Belon asked. I nodded. "Why?" "Because he wants us to come." "And you're going anyway?" "I'm a navigator," I said. "And an idiot."

Belon closed the box. "Then with this, Darym, your mission truly begins." "The one you gave me?" "No," he said. "The one he slipped you."

I pocketed the card, stood up, felt the frost warm, the bots stretch beneath my skin, like a crewman adjusting their oars. I headed toward the dock. The morning smelled of metal and decision.

"One more thing," Belon called after me. "If you see the edge—the right one—don't jump." "I never jump," I said. "I just fall particularly beautifully."

I stepped onto the deck, the pride of the current, and at that very moment the sea lifted its belly deeply and softly, like an animal that pushes its back under the hand.

My first assignment finally had a name.

It was called: Invitation.

And his goal was where the paths end and the map starts staring at you.

Chapter 5 - The map of flow paths

I was drunk enough to think the night was a rumor, and sober enough to know I had a problem. The map lay before me like a pet that no one ever wanted to feed, but somehow grew anyway. Belon had given it to me as if it were a gift, but it was an heirloom from an ocean that had long since wanted to forget us. I stared at the lines, and they stared back. When maps have eyes, you're no longer a navigator, but prey.

"Come on," I murmured. "Show me what you've got." I placed my hand on the surface. Warm. The thing felt more alive than most people I knew. A line pulsed—not just anywhere, no, right beneath my finger. It stretched downward, spiraling, as if it were laughing. I pulled my hand back. The line disappeared. I laughed, too. But not very convincingly.

Later, as I lay down, I heard it singing again. No sound, no noise—more like someone stirring your bones from the inside out with a spoon. When I opened my eyes, the card was lying next to me. I swear I had locked it away. Maybe I just locked it badly. Or it had its own key.

In the morning, Belon stood in my cabin. "So?" he asked, as if he'd been waiting for me to open a new chapter of hell. "She talks to me." "How?" "Like a very annoying roommate who scribbles all over my walls." He nodded contentedly.

"Then she's working." "Working? Belon, she's drawing while I sleep." "Maybe she's dreaming through you." "Or I'm dreaming her. But what nightmare paints in blue and silver?"

We sat down at the map table. The lines had multiplied overnight. Official routes, marked with clean curves. But beside them: zigzag lines, spiraling chasms, symbols I'd never seen before. A circle with three claws, repeated again and again. PRAE or a bad joke.

The priestess approached. Her gaze was, as always, too calm. "You mustn't reveal everything she shows you." "Her? Is it a woman now?" "Everything that moves currents is feminine." "Then my last drink was probably holy, too." She ignored the incantation. "The map is a relic. A gateway between what was and what is to come." "What is to come has teeth." "Perhaps. But perhaps also wings."

The general entered, armor plates gleaming, his expression like welded steel. "Navigator, we need concrete coordinates. Not philosophy." "Coordinates to where?" "Evacuation routes. Large carriers. Tens of thousands of souls." I tapped the official lines. "Here." "And the others?" he asked, fixing his eyes on the spirals. "You only go there if you want to say goodbye for good." He growled. "Or if the enemy isn't expecting it." "Or if the enemy is waiting right there. Listen, General: Courage and stupidity are Siamese twins. And the map decides who it eats."

Belon raised his hands. "We need to understand why she's showing him these lines. Why only him?" The priestess nodded. "He's a navigator. Blood, skin, bots—everything is key." "Or I'm just the only one crazy enough to look."

The following night, I lay down next to the map and talked to it like a lover I didn't want. "What do you want, huh? Should I show you the stars? Should I throw you into the sea? Or are you just a mirror for my damned head?" No answer, of course. Just lines, flickering like heartbeats. But just before I fell asleep, something new formed: a circle. A huge, open circle, in the middle of the ocean. And inside it... structures. No currents. Buildings.

I jumped up with a start. A continent underwater. A city. Not Thalyari, not human. Something third. Something that had been waiting. I stared at it until my eyes hurt. Then I closed them and knew: From now on, we were no longer the seekers. We were the sought.

The card wouldn't let me go. I swear, every time I lowered my head, I heard her faint twitching, as if a heart were beating inside her. Maybe it was my heart resonating, I don't know. But one thing was clear: she wanted to be seen.

I took her out onto the deck. The current of the waterways outside echoed against the glass walls, and for a moment I felt like a fish in an aquarium, studying the outside world. Except outside, everything was dying, and inside, I was the idiot, talking to a relic.

I placed my hand on the surface. This time it responded immediately. No spirals, no secret routes—just words. Yes, real words. An ancient language, half-forgotten, but deeply embedded in my mind enough to feel it.**“Choose the current, or the current chooses you.”**

"Well, thanks," I muttered. "Like in a bar: Either I drink, or the drink drinks me." The lines started dancing, as if they had a sense of humor. That was the worst. I can't stand things that laugh if they don't have mouths.

Belon suddenly appeared behind me. "Do you see it?" "I see too much." "The forbidden paths?" "More than that. There's something down there. A city. Or a tomb. Hard to tell, if you ask me." Belon didn't smile. "Then you really are the right one." "Right for what?" "To lead the exodus."

I laughed in his face. "Me? I can barely run my own bed, let alone a fleet full of healing addicts." But Belon looked at me as if he'd already made up his mind. And that was the moment I realized: The Council didn't want me because I was brave or particularly talented. They wanted me because they were afraid. Afraid of what the map showed only to me.

The priestess arrived, trailing the general. "The navigator saw what others didn't. The map spoke." "Shit, she mumbled, not spoke."
She ignored me. "This is the sign we've been waiting for." "Sign? When a card shits in your dreams at night, that's not a sign, it's a curse."

The general leaned over the lines. "These paths... they're unprotected." "They're deadly," I corrected. "Then they're ideal. The enemy doesn't expect dead paths." I patted him on the shoulder. "That's like saying: No one expects to break both their arms—so let's do it."

But he remained serious. "You will lead us, Navigator. Whether you like it or not." "And if I don't?" "Then you will be replaced." "By whom?" Silence. No one

mentioned a name. Because no one else could touch the map without it remaining silent.

That night I couldn't sleep. I stared at the lines, which continued to change. Once—and I'll never forget it—she drew a face. Short, flickering, formed by currents. A face I knew. Lira. "Holy shit," I whispered. "You're playing wrong."

The next morning, I met Belon again. "The map showed Lira." He frowned. "Impossible. It wasn't from Melorai." "Impossible? Belon, we're on the verge of turning our planet into water vapor, and you're talking about impossible." He was silent. And the silence told me he knew more than he was revealing.

The priestess came again. This time with a ritual cup. "Drink." "What is this?" "A binding rite. So that you and the map become one." I took the cup, smelled it. It smelled of rotten seaweed and old memories. I drank. What could possibly happen? At first, nothing. Then—heat. Not in my stomach, but in my head. The lines of the map flickered, and I no longer saw Melorai, no longer the currents. I saw stars. Systems. Tunnels through space itself, as if water connected not only oceans, but galaxies as well.

I screamed. Not out of fear, but because it was too much. The card pulled me in, as if it wanted to drown me. Voices whispered:**"Follow the Leviathan. Follow the core."**
When I awoke, I was lying on the ground. Belon was holding me. "What did you see?" "Everything. And nothing. But I know one thing: If we take this path, none of us will get there alive." "That was never the question," he answered coolly.

I scrambled to my feet, wiping blood from my lip. "Then listen: I will lead you. But by my rules. I'll tell you where we turn, when we dive, when we breathe. You can pray or shoot—I don't care. But I'm the damn map, got it?" The priestess smiled as if I'd just recited an ancient vow. The general clenched his fists. And Belon nodded, satisfied.

But only one thought remained in my head:**The map wanted me. Not her. Not the council. Me.**
And if a sea wants you, you can either swim – or drown.

The card was still vibrating even after the priestess withdrew her hands. I swear it was beating to the rhythm of my own damn heart. Maybe it was already inside me, maybe I was just the idiot who just discovered he'd been controlled by a piece of parchment for years.

I bent down further. The lines began to shift, spiraling, as if they were tired of staying on the table. Suddenly – no more table. No more space. I stood in the middle of the water, but not in ours. A black ocean, bottomless, horizonless. The currents ran like glowing threads through the darkness.

And in the middle of this endless sea: bodies. Not Thalyari, not humans—something in between. Long-limbed, with fins that looked like glass. They didn't swim, they glided, as if they themselves were the current. Their eyes were like spotlights, cold, impatient.

One spoke. Not with his mouth, but directly into my skull.**“You’re early.”**
I laughed. Yes, in this hallucinated hell, I laughed. "Too early for what? For my drunkenness? For my own funeral?" The figure approached. Its movements were so graceful that I felt like a dying eel next to it.**"Too early for the core. But not too early for the hunt."**

Then I saw it: a gigantic shadow, deeper than anything I'd ever known. At first, I thought it was a mountain. But then it moved. The Leviathan. A being that supposedly existed only in priestly fairy tales, and yet now I felt it, every damned scale, every muscle, every movement that altered the universe itself.

The map wanted to lead me there. To that thing. "Great," I grumbled. "Others get prophecies from gods, I get a rendezvous with a goddamn primordial fish."

The currents tightened. I saw tunnels of light connecting entire star systems. Water that didn't exist on planets but flowed in the vacuum—like veins connecting stars. The galaxy wasn't space. It was an ocean. And we were nothing more than fish who had never understood that the pool had no edge.

I saw Melorai, our planet, evaporating. The water rose, not in clouds, but in streams that flowed directly into these cosmic channels. And I knew: We were not masters of our sea. We were merely tenants. And the true owner now wanted his rent.

A final shock shot through my mind. I saw Earth. But not the Earth shown in the archives. No green forests, no blue seas. Instead, an ocean that trembled, that seemed alive, as if it were absorbing the alien currents and transforming into something new. And in this sea—faces. Some human, some Thalyari, some both at once. I recognized one of them. "Lira," I whispered.

The vision broke off. I lay back in the room, the map under my hands, sweating as if I'd been swimming for three hours straight. Belon stared at me. "What did

you see?" I laughed bitterly. "Too much. And I hope you're thirsty, Belon, because if I tell you this, we'll both need at least three bottles." "Tell me." "The galaxy is an ocean. And we're nothing more than pathetic little fish. But you know what the worst part is?"
"What?" "I think I'm the only one who can swim."

Silence. Then he nodded. "Then you'll lead." I laughed again, harder this time. "Lead? Shit, Belon, I don't even know if I can figure out how to get from the counter to the toilet without drowning."

But deep down I knew: The map had made its decision. And what the sea takes, it never gives back.

"You look like you just turned thirty years older," Belon said, half-dragging me out of the card room. "I feel the same way," I growled. "Only without the damn pension money."

They led me back into the dome. The same old faces, the same stony eyes. The priestess was already standing there, expectant, as if she'd been waiting for me to finally break down. Instead, I grinned. "So," I said, "I've seen the future. Do you want to hear it, or should I just pour it into the next glass?"

The council elder—the one with the bony hands—leaned forward. "Speak."

I stretched out my legs and sat down on the steps as if this were a damn bar. "So, imagine this: Everything you know, all the water that's ever kept you alive, is nothing more than a small pool in a gigantic cosmic aquarium. And outside, in the big tank, there are monsters swimming around. One of them wants to eat us. It's called Leviathan."

A murmur went through the hall. A few priests crossed themselves with symbols that looked as if they had just forgotten how to pray properly.

"And what next?" the general asked tonelessly. "What next? What next? I've seen Melorai evaporate. How our precious sea runs away, as if it's fed up with us. And I've seen where it goes: in currents that run through the stars. Veins of water, people! The whole galaxy is a damn oyster, and we sit in the shell and think we're the pearl."

The priestess took a step forward. "And what was at the end?" I hesitated. "At the end? I saw earth." "The human world?" "Yes. Only it looked as if it had decided to transform itself into something new. And in the middle of it all—faces. Old, new. One of them…" I paused. I didn't want to say the name

because I knew it carried more weight than any sword. "Say it," Belon urged. "Lira."

The hall fell silent. The name hung in the air like a drop of blood in water. Everyone sensed that sharks might appear at any moment.

"You're lying," the priestess snarled. "Lira is dead. Or worse." I laughed dryly. "Dead, worse, back again—honestly, I lost track. But I recognized her eyes. She was there."

A young officer jumped up. "That's blasphemy! You're just trying to confuse us!" "Confuse us? Boy, I have enough trouble sorting myself out. But I know one thing: If you think the map dragged me into this whirlpool for fun, you're dumber than I look. And believe me, it's damn hard."

Belon raised his hand, bringing calm again. "The map has chosen Darym. Whether we like it or not, he sees what we don't." "And if he's lying?" asked the priestess. "Then the sea itself is lying," said Belon.

That echoed. Heavy. Unbearably heavy.

I spat on the floor and stood up. "So, my friends, congratulations. You've found your new mouthpiece. Too bad the mouthpiece is always drunk. But hey, maybe that's exactly what's needed: a man too stupid to be afraid."

The old man nodded slowly. "Then it's decided. Darym will lead us. His words will be inscribed on the map." "Wait," I raised my hands defensively. "Inscribed? Sounds like you want to carve my brain into parchment." "Not your brain," the priestess said in an icy voice. "Your current."

And then I saw it—her eyes flashed briefly, silvery, metallic. For a moment, there was no look from a high priestess. There was something else. Something that seemed familiar to me: Echo's cold smile, which I couldn't shake in Book 2.

I knew the sea wasn't just playing with us. It had long since set its patterns. And I was the biggest idiot for thinking I still had any choice.

After the session, Belon dragged me into a side gallery. No magnificent halls, no glass domes, but bare stone, so old it smelled of salt and mold.

"You don't want to show me the torture chamber, do you?" I asked, leaning against the wall. "I'll tell you right away, my head is already tortured enough."

Belon ignored my remark, which only made him more suspicious in my eyes. He stopped in front of a recessed door, placed his palm against it, and an ancient mechanism opened. No electronic stuff—grinding gears, grinding bolts. Things no Thalyari built anymore.

"Damn," I muttered, "looks like we just opened up our great-grandmother's crypt."

Inside, it was dark. Only a torch burned, as if it had been waiting for centuries. Belon took it and held it up. On the walls hung panels, carved from coral rock, overgrown with algae. And on them—lines. Currents.

"Another map?" I asked, but my voice sounded more brittle than I intended. Belon nodded. "The first one. It dates back to the time before the Great Sundering." "Which Sundering?" "The one we never mention in the archives. The Sundering that explains why the map chose you."

I stepped closer, brushing away algae. The lines were the same as on the map I'd touched. But they were incomplete, broken, like a puzzle that was never put together.

"What happened?" "Our ancestors hid them. Because they knew they weren't alone in the currents."

I shivered, even though I lived in the water. "Not alone?" "You saw the Leviathan, right?" "Yes." "He was the reason. He came before. And those who saw him almost lost the planet. So they hid the map so no one would ever be tempted to summon him again."

I laughed bitterly. "And now? Now you have me. A half-rotten diver who can't do anything better than drink his way through the day. Bravo, Belon. You've set the fate of the galaxy on the wrong track."

Belon looked at me seriously. "There's a difference between you and all who came before you." "Oh, yes? What difference?" "You doubt. And that's precisely why you won't obey blindly."

I wanted to say something funny, some kind of joke about my chronic inability to obey anyone—but it stuck in my throat. Because deep down, I knew: He was right.

I stepped back, looking at the old tablets and the new map in my mind. "You know, Belon, I think the sea is laughing up its sleeve right now. It's waited all

these centuries, and now it pulls a gambler out of its sleeve who doesn't even know how to sleep off his hangover tomorrow." "Or precisely because of that," said Belon. "Because you're too broken to be seduced."

I shook my head and turned away. "If you're right, Belon, then we're all even more screwed than I thought."

The heavy door closed behind us, and in the darkness I heard the water dripping as if it were laughing.

After the session and Belon's little history lesson, I knew exactly what I needed: a drink. Or five.

The tavern of Ny'Varis was a hole in the stone, damp, smelly, with walls that looked like they hadn't seen a bucket of light in centuries. I immediately felt at home.

"Darym!" shouted the proprietor, a guy with beard algae hanging down to his hips. "Again?" "Again and again," I said, plopping down on the stool. "Double it. And strong. If it doesn't burn, send it back."

He placed a bowl in front of me. I took the first sip—salty, bitter, so strong I thought I was about to grow second gills. "Holy cow," I coughed, "this isn't a drink, it's a weapon."

The innkeeper grinned. "Always the good stuff for you."

I continued drinking, bowl after bowl, until the buzzing in my head became louder than the voices around me. And then... then it happened again.

No smooth transition, no quiet whisper like with the map. It was as if someone had hammered a piece of metal directly into my brain.

Images. The Earth. A blue ball in the darkness. But it wasn't blue. Not really. The sea was tinged red, as if someone had poured blood into it. Shadows drifted across the oceans, black and vast, as big as continents. I heard screams—not human, not Thalyar, something in between.

And a voice. Hard, cold, familiar. "Darym," she said. I cursed loudly, clutching my head. "Not you, not now!" "You will come. You will all come. The water belongs to us."

I knew that voice. Damn, I had hoped never to hear it again. Echo.

My eyes widened, and I saw the tavern, the guests, the innkeeper—everyone was staring at me as if I'd just been jumped on by a shark. "Everything's fine," I murmured. "Everything's fine. Just a little... vision."

Then I downed the next bowl. If I had to listen to the devil, at least I'd listen with a decent amount of alcohol.

Chapter 6 - Strange Stars, Strange Promises

They dragged me out of the tavern like a wet sack. I had hoped that at least one of my "friends" would jump to my aid, but no—everyone stared at me like I was the damned prophet of doom. Maybe I even was.

"He had a vision," one whispered. "No, a seizure," another corrected. I laughed. "Let's call it what it is: a really shitty happy hour."

The guards dragged me to the council. Belon was already waiting there, his brow furrowed. "You must learn to hold your tongue." "And you must learn that I'm not muzzled."

Then came the verdict: I was to become part of an expedition. "He sensed the current path," they whispered. "He's our antenna." I tried to protest, but my voice sounded hollow. Deep down, I knew they would take me anyway—whether I wanted it or not.

The days that followed were a complete fucking joke. Me, the clown who'd suddenly been promoted to navigator, even though I could barely hold my own drinking glass in a current. Belon called it "training." I called it torture.

"You have to learn to recognize the patterns," he said as we sat in a room full of holograms. Streams of light drifted past us, formations that looked like dancing jellyfish. "Those aren't patterns," I growled. "They're back pain in colors."

Aeryn, the scientist, was the exact opposite of Belon. Where he, with his booming voice, wanted to conjure up everything that had ever been written,

she spoke matter-of-factly, sharp as a blade. "Your brain is wired differently, Darym. When you say you feel the currents, I mean your nanites are mapping resonances. You're a damn measuring device, just too dumb to get it." "Thanks for the flowers," I grinned. "But believe me, I'm happy to be a dumb measuring device, as long as I get served drinks."

Of course, I didn't get any. Just endless simulations until I felt dizzy. But eventually, it happened again. The tingling. That sickening, familiar feeling, as if someone were pumping ice and fire through my veins simultaneously. I saw the path—not on the projection, but behind it. Deeper. Like an invisible hand cutting through the sea, only this time it wasn't a sea. It was space. Black, endless, yet full of currents.

"He saw it," Aeryn murmured. "The resonance is right." Belon nodded. "Then he's ready." "Ready for what?" I asked. "For the stars."

Three days later, I was standing on the bridge of one of the smaller fleet ships. I have no idea who made the damn mistake of giving me uniform parts—they probably thought it would make me look less like a criminal. But believe me, an asshole in uniform is still an asshole.

The crew stared at me as I took the seat next to Belon. Aeryn was bent over the consoles, her fingers moving like dancers across fields of light. "What, have you never seen a navigator?" I asked. "Or is my face just so much more beautiful?"

Nobody laughed. That's a good thing. I hated it when people liked my humor.

The Orbit Node hovered before us. An ancient structure, so old that even our oldest myths only whispered about it. Giant ring structures, anchored in space, but not by any matter we knew. Half-transparent, half-real, as if someone had suspended the skeleton of a god in space.

"Unused for millennia," Belon said reverently. "Unbroken for millennia," I corrected. "And now we're the idiots who change that."

Aeryn turned to me. "Darym. Focus." I laughed dryly. "On what? On the fact that I'm currently looking at a Ferris wheel in space that looks like it was drawn by a kid with too much time on his hands and too many drugs?"

But then the tingling came back. Harder. Deeper. The thing responded. To me. Not to her damned machines, not to Belon's prayers. To me.

"Shit," I whispered. "It senses me." Belon put his hand on my shoulder. "Then lead us, Navigator."

I don't know how I did it. Maybe it was the booze I'd secretly consumed beforehand. Maybe it was the nanites that were tingling more and more in my body. But I saw the path. Not with my eyes. With something deeper. A crack through the darkness, a current that wanted to pull us.

“Now!” I yelled, and Aeryn activated the sequences.

The node awoke. Light erupted from the structures, a glow so ancient it rivaled even the stars. It wasn't a gateway—it was a flow path, a river through the void.

And we were swept into it.

It felt like I was drowning and flying at the same time. Voices screamed in my head, some old, some young, some not even speech, just sound. Echo's voice was among them, cold, merciless. "Foreign stars are not a refuge, Darym. They are a grave."

I yelled back. "Then bury me with dignity, you bastard!"

The fleet staggered, light, darkness, currents—and then silence. We were out. A new system.

Before us lay a planet. Not a water planet like Melorai. Not a paradise. Just debris. A ring of shattered worlds stretched around a gas giant.

"This was once inhabited," murmured Aeryn. "No," said Belon, his voice heavy. "It's still inhabited."

For in the middle of the ring of debris, a signal flickered. Not human. Not Thalyar. Something else. And it sounded like an invitation.

"Welcome, Darym," the voice said over the radio. "We've been waiting for you."

I stared at the ruined world, the tingling in my veins raging like a hurricane. "Foreign stars," I murmured. "Foreign promises. And I swear by all the currents: every single one of them will break our necks."

“Welcome, Darym.”

The voice still echoed, as if it were stuck in my own skull. It wasn't a normal radio signal. Everyone on board knew that. Even Aeryn, who usually parsed every voice into data packets and technical explanations, stood there frozen.

"That's impossible," she finally murmured. "That's not language. It's direct neural transmission." "Great," I growled. "Now the stars are having brain sex with me."

Belon snarled. "Disrespectful fool." "No, just honest. And if any of you feel like explaining to me why the damn cosmos knows my name, please, go ahead."

No one said anything. Instead, another signal came. This time clearer, like a faint whisper through water. It formed images—a city of rubble, half-embedded in the ring. Towers of broken metal, bridges leading into nothingness. And beneath them... movement. Shadows.

"They want us to land," Aeryn whispered. "Of course they do," I said. "And I've been wanting to sleep for days, but the universe won't give me a break either."

Landing was a nightmare. We set the ship down on a platform that looked as if it might collapse at the next gust of wind. Dust, splinters, and the glowing remnants of old machines were everywhere, somehow still running, even though their bodies were long dead.

And then they came.

Creatures, tall and slender, their bodies composed of a mixture of organic flesh and translucent material, as if they were only half in this reality. Eyes like glowing stones. Voices that spoke and sang simultaneously.

"Foreign visitors," they said. "We've waited a long time." "For me?" I asked. "For the one who carries the current."

Belon stepped forward. "We are the Thalyari of Melorai. We seek a new home." "And you will find it," the creatures replied. "But not without a price."

I laughed bitterly. "Of course not. There's never anything free in the universe. Even death costs something."

They led us through the city. Machines everywhere, working on their own, without any operator, without any purpose. Vast halls filled with lights that drew patterns in the air that even Aeryn couldn't decipher.

"This is technology we don't understand," she whispered. "They work with quantum flux. It's older than any known civilization." "Or just a cheap trick to impress us," I said. "Like those bars that hang mirrors on the walls to make things look bigger."

But deep down, I knew: This was real. Ancient. Powerful. And absolutely dangerous.

The beings placed us in a circular hall, the walls covered with symbols that flickered like water reflections. "You seek water," they said. "We can show you the way. But your heritage is intertwined with the blood of others. With what you call PRAE."

Aeryn's eyes widened. "You know PRAE?" "Of course you do," I said dryly. "It was probably her damned pet."

The beings tilted their heads. "What you call a virus is older than Melorai. Older than your stars. It was born here."

I felt cold. And believe me, that doesn't happen often. "Wait," I growled. "You mean to tell me that the shit that turns people into monkeys and eats stations comes from here?" "From us," the creatures said.

Aeryn stumbled back. "You created it?" "We carried it. And lost it. Now you carry it. Everything that lives carries the code at some point."

Belon looked at me as if he'd just had a prophecy confirmed. "The currents have brought you here, Darym. So you can learn the truth."
"Screw the truth," I said. "I want answers. And a bottle. Preferably in that order."

The beings nodded slowly. "Your water is dying. Our currents show the way. But if you leave, you will also take with you that which will destroy you. PRAE is not just disease. It is memory. And you are the next chapter."

Later, back on the ship, I slammed the cabin door and stared into the darkness. The tingling under my skin had gotten worse. Deeper. Almost as if the conversation with the strangers had activated something within me.

"We're not just refugees," I muttered. "We're fucking time bombs."

And somewhere out there, in the rubble of the system, Echo laughed. I heard it, even if the others didn't.

"Foreign stars, Darym," he whispered. "Foreign promises. And none of them end well."

I didn't sleep. Sleep was for people who didn't have voices in their heads. I lay in my cabin, staring at the ceiling, while Echo rustled around on the carpet of my synapses like an old dog.

"You think they told you everything?" he whispered. "I think you should finally shut up." "They only gave you what they wanted. The sweet part first, Darym. The bitter part comes later."

I sat up and rubbed my face. My skin felt like it no longer belonged to me. Like an ill-fitting suit you wear to a funeral.

"Why me?" I asked into the void. Echo laughed. "Because you're cheap. And because you have nothing to lose."

The next day was a council meeting. There's nothing I hate more than council meetings. Everyone sits around like puffed-up octopuses, talking in endless loops, and no one says what everyone else is thinking: We're screwed.

Belon stood in the center, posed as always, his chest puffed out, as if he could command the stars to burn more slowly with sheer authority. "The strangers have shown us a path. A river between the stars that leads directly to a world full of water."

Murmurs. Cheers. Hope. I stood in the back and yawned so loudly that three people turned around.

"What if it's a trap?" I asked. Belon snorted. "Your cynicism won't save us, Darym." "Maybe not. But it will keep me sober enough to count the bodies when you all start believing in miracles again."

Aeryn stepped forward, rubbing her hands together nervously. "I've checked the data. The path is real. But... the energy source that keeps it open is responding to Darym."

Looks. At me. Of course. Always me.

"Well," I grinned, "I'm just popular. Even among dead stars."

Later, in the observation dome, Aeryn confronted me. "Why all these sayings? You're hiding behind them." "Because, my dear, honesty is overrated. And because otherwise I'd have to start taking all this seriously." "It's serious, Darym."

I looked into her eyes. There was fear. Pure, clear fear. "You think this path will take us home?" I asked. "I think it will take us somewhere. And we have no choice."

I nodded slowly. "You know what the problem is with no elections? Sometimes they're worse than fake ones."

The fleet flew. The path glowed like a vein in the void, a tunnel of blue light eating into our bodies. I felt it, each of us felt it—but for me, it was worse.

The tingling was no longer a disturbance. It was a rhythm. As if someone had reprogrammed my heartbeat.

"We're going under," I muttered. Belon stared at me. "What are you saying?" "All I'm saying is, if this is a river, then we're in a boat without a rudder."

And then the voice came. Again.

“Welcome back.”

This time, everyone heard it. Everyone on the bridge froze. Eyes widened, hands clenched on the consoles. "What was that?" Aeryn whispered. I laughed dryly. "That, my friends, was the universe giving us a kiss before it devours us."

The path ended in a system I immediately hated. Everything about it was wrong. The star was too pale, the planets too quiet, the debris in its orbit too uniform.

"This used to be a civilization," said Aeryn. "No," I muttered. "This is a graveyard."

We orbited the planet, which was surrounded by a gigantic ring of rubble: buildings, ships, bones of steel.

"There's water down there," a navigator reported. "Oceans. Deep." Belon smiled proudly. "Then we found what we were looking for." I spat on the ground. "You didn't find anything. You were lured here."

And there it was again – the voice. Gentle. Inviting. "Step in. The water awaits."

We landed in a bay whose docks looked as if they had been abandoned for thousands of years—and yet they were still functioning. Gates opened as if they had been waiting just for us.

The strangers stood there. The same beings as before, but more. Many more. Their bodies shimmered transparently, like reflections in the water, ready to shatter at any moment.

"You are here to carry the legacy," they said. "We are here to survive," Belon growled. "Survival is a word you misuse. You are not living. You are being carried."

I stepped forward and grinned. "Great. We're not refugees. We're delivery drivers."

The creatures stared at me. For a long time. An uncomfortably long time. And then they said the sentence that finished me off: "You, Darym, are the key."

Later, when I was alone, I drank from a bottle that probably contained more methanol than water and thought: Shit. It's me again.

And somewhere, deep inside me, the tingling began to change. It was no longer an itch. No longer a buzzing. It was a second heartbeat.

"Foreign stars, foreign promises," I murmured. "And every single one will kill us."

They led us into a hall too large to seem real. No walls, no ceiling—just water hanging in the air, as if someone had frozen the ocean and dropped us in the middle. Lights were floating everywhere. Not lamps, but small organisms that moved as if they had a mind of their own. Some looked like jellyfish, others like tiny, burning moons.

"Welcome to the heart of the river," said the strangers. "Here the paths are written."

Belon stepped forward, legs wide apart as always, as if he could conduct diplomacy with sheer poise. "We seek a new home. A place where our people can live." The strangers nodded. Their bodies wavered in the light, as if the words passed through them. "You will live. You will be sustained. But first, you must give."

"What shall we give?" asked Aeryn. "Your blood."

I coughed loudly, almost choking on my own mockery. "Of course. Always the blood. Why do the supernaturals always want blood? Never a friendly handshake or a damn fruit basket?"

The strangers stared at me, motionless. And then, without warning, two of them approached. I felt something cold piercing my skin, as if someone had poured ice into my veins.

I screamed, not because it hurt – but because it was too familiar.

The tingling. The second heartbeat. They had felt it.

"He's ready," the strangers chorused. "He carries the code."

Belon looked at me like he'd just caught me masturbating in public. "Darym... what the hell is inside you?" "If I knew, I would have sold it long ago."

After the ceremony—I call it a ceremony because "half-naked horror trip" doesn't sound diplomatic—I was alone. Or at least I thought so.

"You're not the first," the voice said. I froze. "Echo." "The Thalyari think they're the first to cross the river. They're wrong. Others have gone before you. And died before you." "Then at least we'll have company in the grave."

Echo laughed, dryly and metallically. "You talk like Jax." The name shot through my body like an electric shock. "Jax is dead." "Dead is a word you misuse."

Back on the ship, Belon wanted a report. Of course. "Tell us what you saw." "I saw us swimming like stupid fish into a net." "Darym!" Belon growled. "Speak clearly!" "Clear? Fine. The aliens want blood. They want us, not our ships. They want the damned code that one of us carries within us—probably me. And you know what? They lie. Every promise they make is a blade they'll ram into your back the moment you close your eyes."

Silence. Then Aeryn, quietly: "And yet it's our only chance."

Later, I sat alone in the observatory, looking out at the ruins of the planet. Towers rose from the water like broken bones, ships drifted like carcasses, covered in coral.

And I thought: Strange stars, strange promises. But in the end, everything remains the same. Someone wants your blood, someone wants your soul, and if you're lucky, you'll get to watch yourself drown.

I drank the rest of the bottle, slammed it against the wall, and the echo of the shattered glass reverberated through the dome like laughter.

The mood shifted faster than I could say "Drink more, live longer." We had barely gotten past the strangers' "gift" when the first open division in centuries began in the council chamber of our flagship.

Belon stood at the table, his fist as heavy as an anchor. "We must accept their help. Without it, Melorai will die. Without it, we are nothing." From the other side of the room, Commander Syrel, who had always considered herself the Iron Hand, rose. "And if we accept it, we are slaves. I saw what they did. They drained your blood, Darym. Blood! And you still laughed." "Laughed?" I asked. "Lady, I laughed so I wouldn't puke."

The hall fell silent. Everyone knew she was right—and so was Belon. That was the worst part. They were both right, and that's why it was so sickening.

"We'll divide the fleet," Syrel finally said. "Those who wish to follow the strangers may do so. The others will seek their own path." "This is madness!" Belon cried. "We're losing time!" "No," she replied coldly. "We're losing slave chains."

Aeryn stepped between them. "If you tear yourselves apart now, humans will never take you seriously. Then everything will end here—between strange stars, with empty promises in your hands."

The decision fell like a stone. A third of the fleet turned to Belon. A third followed Syrel. The rest remained silent, wavering like a current in a storm.

And me? Of course, I got the damned place of honor right in the middle of the battle lines. "You're the porter," they said. "You decide." "I don't decide anything," I growled. "I'm the guy who doesn't even know why he crawls out of his bunk in the morning."

But deep down, I knew that the tingling in my veins was the key. And that meant, no matter where the current took us, I was the damn cork on the sea.

Later, in my cabin, Echo came back. "They're fighting over you, Darym. They see you as a symbol." "Then I'll be the first symbol to vomit drunk in bed." "Your jokes won't help you. You carry the code. And the code rules not only Melorai—but every world you touch." "Well, wonderful. I've always been a fan of making life difficult for others."

Echo was silent for a moment, then: "Jax would have liked you." I laughed bitterly. "Then he would have definitely punched me, too."

The next morning it was official: the fleet split. Two currents drifting in opposite directions.

And I stood in between. Foreign stars, foreign promises—and we had just made ourselves fish in a shark tank.

I reached for my bottle, downed the rest, and thought: If this goes wrong, at least I'll have a decent blood alcohol level.

The rift had barely been there for an hour when the first explosion occurred. Syrel's flagship, the Trivaros, turned its bow as if to give the gathering of strangers the cold shoulder. Belon yelled over the comms: "If you leave now, you'll drag the current with you!"

Syrel just laughed. "Then let her carry us wherever she wants."

I swore she was the only one in the fleet who could give an order and light a cigarette at the same time—underwater.

But when the Trivaros turned away, it happened. The "sea" of aliens pulsed. Not an attack in the traditional sense—no torpedo, no laser. But something far more perverse.

The water around the Trivaros churned as if someone had boiled the sea. The shields flickered, the hull vibrated, and suddenly, strange shapes emerged from nowhere—like metallic corals burrowing into the ship's hull.

"They're eating us!" one of Syrel's officers shouted across the open channel. I saw it with my own eyes: the ship wasn't destroyed. It was... transformed. The corals grew, the structures bent, as if the Trivaros were being remelted into something new.

"Bring her back!" Belon yelled. "Drag her out!" Too late.

Syrel stood on the bridge, tall as ever, and I swear to all the current gods, she was still grinning. Then the ship burst open—not exploding, but blooming, like a flower of black metal.

And figures emerged from it. Slender, with eyes like dark moons. No longer strangers. No more Thalyari. Something new.

"You wanted a promise," I said tonelessly. "There you go."

Chaos. Pure, unadulterated panic. Some ships fired immediately, others fled. Belon tried to issue commands in a thunderous voice, but the radio network collapsed under the screams and curses.

And me? I stood there, the bottle still half-full in my hand, and thought: Well, Darym, welcome to the future. You're now officially a hero in a goddamn horror movie.

The figures from the Trivaros spread their arms—and then something shot out of them. Not light, not fire. But sound. A deep, vibrating tone that went right through your bones. Every Thalyari with open gills slumped as if their bodies were being deactivated from within.

I felt it too, but for me it was different. The tingling in my veins responded. It was as if my nanites or whatever were screaming back.

“He carries the code!” the strangers roared, and all eyes turned to me.

Shit.

"Darym!" Belon grabbed me and pulled me toward the escape hatch. "You out—now!" "And then?" "Then we try to drown the damn sea itself!"

We ran. Behind us, the entire sector shook, ships crashed, strangers sang, and my body buzzed as if it were about to explode.

Only one thought in my head:
Foreign stars, foreign promises. And I'm the damn coin they pay with.

Chapter 7 - The Fleet Rises

It started with silence. And silence, my friends, is worse than any scream, worse than any crash, worse than any damn explosion. Because silence means people are keeping their anger inside. And if you're unlucky, they'll eventually vomit it all back in your face.

I woke up in this silence. A headache like an anvil had been nailed to my brain. The ship smelled of oil, blood, and cheap whiskey—and I didn't know which smell was worse.

The screens flickered. Images of wrecks, dead gill warriors, half-cities drifting in space. Children floating in oxygen bubbles, and mothers staring into the void because the current had taken their husbands. And somewhere in between it all: me, Darym. The cork in the sea, the asshole with the code in his blood, the savior with the broken liver.

Belon stepped in front of the transmission systems. The woman could talk like a hammer could hit. No flowers, no sugar, just iron.

"Thalyari!" she thundered, her voice vibrating through the hulls. "We have lost. We have lost our ships, our brothers and sisters, and we have lost Syrel. But we have no right to stand still. If we stand still, we evaporate. If we evaporate, we die. So we will rise. We will follow the current, to where there is new water. We will take what we need."

The crowd went wild. A chorus of fists, voices, and rage. And I swear, if Melorai ever had a rock song, Belon would have just written it.

An echo echoed in my head. "They're listening to her. But they feel you. The code vibrates within you, Darym. You're their signal." "Great," I murmured. "Then I can charge admission now, too. First concert free, second for two bottles of whiskey." "Don't mock me. You're the eye of the current. You will lead them." "Me? I can't even lead my damn shoes." "Then you'll lead them barefoot."

And so the fleet rose. It was no quiet departure, no diplomatic "let's pack our bags." It was a hurricane.

Hundreds of ships moved into formation, strings of lights flashed through the water like thunderstorms. Drums sounded—real drums, for crying out loud, because our elders knew that sound in the water goes deeper than words. We sang, we shouted, we laughed, we cried. And in the middle of it all, there was

me, half drunk, half enlightened, and I swear, I almost believed in some stupid "new beginning."

But the strangers didn't leave us alone for five minutes. A crack in the water. A shimmer. And then something appeared: a ship, half ours, half theirs. Metal tentacles, structures that looked like nightmares had married mathematics.

"A gift," her voice echoed through all channels. "A promise." "A kick in the ass, if you ask me," Belon growled.

The thing didn't move. It just waited. And the current in my veins sang along. I heard it whispering, laughing, calling me by name.

"Darym," Echo breathed. "They're talking to you." "Then let them knock. I hate uninvited guests."

The fleet swore that day. With tears, with anger, with drums. We swore that we would not let Melorai die. We swore that we would reach Earth, no matter how many stars blocked our path. And I swore to myself that I, Darym, would never again be simply the cork.

I clinked glasses, drank, coughed, half vomited into my glass, and said with my last voice: "If we're going to die, let's at least die with a raised head."

And the fleet rose.

The drums had faded, but the vibration in the current remained. They say a fleet doesn't just rise, it grows like a storm. And damn, this storm had only just begun.

Ships moved into formation, in rows that looked as if someone had drawn a divine comb through the ocean. Lights flashed, codes roared through the frequencies. The old current paths, which no one had believed had any meaning anymore, glowed as if Melorai herself had decided to move once more.

And me? I stood at the panoramic dome, bottle in hand, and watched. Hundreds of ships, thousands of voices. And somewhere in the background, the silent question: "Why me?"

Belon approached me. She smelled of sweat, salt, and anger—a cocktail that worked better than any cheap alcohol. "You can see it, Darym. They're

following you." "Wrong. They're following you. I'm just the idiot with the bottle." "You're the idiot with the code. And the current listens to you."

At that moment, the alien ship flickered into existence. Metal tentacles, pulsating surfaces that seemed almost like flesh. It sent out a signal—not a word, not a sentence. Just a dull, vibrating sound that went straight to my bones.

I instinctively grabbed my arm. It began to burn where the current lines twitched beneath my skin. "What is this?" Belon asked. "A damn date," I gasped.

Then it broke out.

A piece of the alien ship broke away, a fragment, a construct that was half machine, half body. It looked like a fighter, only too long, too slender, with movements that made no sense. It roared through the formation, faster than our sensors could follow. And before anyone could react, it burrowed into the hull of one of our cruisers.

Explosion. Water shattering like glass. Voices howling over the radio.

“All units, attack!” Belon yelled.

I was already on my way. I have no idea why, maybe because Echo was screaming in my head, maybe because the whiskey was still working. Maybe because I finally had no more excuses.

The close combat happened faster than I could think. The thing sliced through the cruiser's corridors as if metal were mere cardboard. I stumbled toward it, half-armed, half-suicidal. Its eyes—if they were eyes—turned on me, and for the first time, I sensed that this thing wasn't just a tool. It knew who I was.

"Darym," it whispered, in a voice that sounded half metallic, half liquid. "Bearer of the code." "Oh, fantastic," I growled. "You know my name. All that's missing is for you to buy me a drink."

Then it jumped.

Metal limbs, faster than lightning. I dodged, stumbled, and ripped open a pipe. Water shot into the corridor, and for a moment I thought: Okay, that's it. But then something happened that frightened even me.

The current in my body reacted. Lines beneath my skin glowed as if they were speaking to the thing. And it paused. Only for a split second. But it was enough.

I grabbed the pipe I was holding and rammed it straight through his skull. It hissed, screeched, twisted—and exploded in a shower of sparks, metal, and black liquid that looked more like blood than I liked.

I stood there, wet, stinking, half dead. But I stood.

Echo whispered, "They'll send many more. But you, Darym—you can touch them." "Fantastic," I gasped. "Then I guess I'm their damn cuddle buddy now."

Back on the command deck, Belon's face was a storm in itself. "You took care of the thing?" "Let's put it this way: I convinced it to redecorate itself inside." "How?" "We'll ask the bottle later. It knows better than I do."

She stared at me, then nodded. "The fleet is rising, Darym. But without you... we won't get far."

And there I stood, half hero, half wreck, and knew that this was just the beginning.

Because while hundreds of ships held their formations outside, I knew one thing: We had survived the first blow. But the strangers had only been testing us.

And they liked what they saw.

There are rituals you tell your children so they don't scream when the lights go out. And then there are others—those you only unpack when the night decides to stay in the daytime.

Belon had the reports cut off, the wounded taken away, the fires extinguished. Then she ordered us into the open docking ring. No roof, only the armored ribs of the ship lying above it, and above that again: water, stars, darkness—all at once. The fleet stood in a circle, ships back to back, bow lights dimmed. Those who could still walk were there. Those who couldn't were carried. Those who were dead were present in the way the dead are present: their absence is so loud that your ears ring.

"Drowning fear," Aeryn murmured beside me, as if she'd stolen the words from a museum. "We haven't done that in centuries."

"Now," said Belon, her voice like a harpoon piercing wood. "Thalyari, you know the lie: 'Do not be afraid.' I tell you the truth: Be afraid. Be afraid wisely. Be afraid loudly. Be afraid to your core. And then..."—she pointed to the ships parked in a ring, to the open ballast tanks whose hatches swung open one after the other—"...then drown them."

The crews hauled in blue jugs. Old things, enameled, chipped, from a time when cold still meant cold and not "efficient heat dissipation." In each jug sloshed "Schwarzbrunn": salty, bitter, with spices some grandpa had invented to drink the trembling out of a dying boy's hands. Not a good schnapps. An honest one.

Belon filled the first cup—not for herself, but for a girl from the shipyard, barely older than the stories we'd dug up. Her hands trembled as she took the cup. "Name?" Belon asked.

“Sareth,” she breathed.

"What are you afraid of, Sareth? Say it out loud so it finds wet ground."

Sareth swallowed. "That I'll lose my brother in the ring. That I'll lose myself."

"Good," said Belon. "Then we'll drown it." She tipped half into the open ballast channel, and the drink disappeared into the belly of the ship, as if the engine were thirsty. She pressed the other half into Sareth's fingers. "And you drink the rest to tell the sea that it can have you afterward."

Sareth drank. Coughed. Suddenly laughed—a small, cheeky laugh that had more impact than any speech. "It burns," she said, wiping her lips. "Good."

So it went on in turn. Names, fears, swallows into the belly of the ship, swallows into the belly of the people. Some murmured, others yelled. I heard: "I'm afraid that I'll come back and no one will recognize me." — "I'm not afraid of strangers, I'm afraid that I look like them." — "I'm afraid that the water will forget us."

When it was my turn, the barman on Deck Three—the one with the beard algae up to his hips—handed me the cup as if he'd been keeping it warm for me the whole time. "Darym," he said with a look as if he were feeding me a punchline, "your fear, please."

I looked into the cup. I could have made a joke. I could have said, "Empty bottles, bad mood, quick death." Instead, I said, "I'm afraid that the code inside

me speaks louder than I do. That when it comes down to it, my voice is the wrong one."

I tipped half into the ballast. The ship vibrated as if it understood. I drank the rest. It burned like honest work. I coughed. I didn't laugh. "One more," I said. "For later."

“There won’t be any debt relief later,” said the landlord, but refilled the beer anyway.

Belon now lifted the jug herself, right at the top of the docking ring, where every camera could see her and everyone without a camera could still feel it. "Thalyari!" she cried. "We are not pure. We are not holy. We are not the chosen ones. We are merely those who swim, though the bottom has never liked us. We do not rise because we are heroes. We rise because we hate kneeling more than dying. So swear! Not on stars, not on gods, not on the glass domes we leave behind. Swear on the salt in your throats and on the hands that hold you when you sink!"

Drums. Not a rhythm from books—that of the machines we turned into our own prayer wheels: pumps, compressors, timers, all in the same pulse. From the darkness outside, the bows began to flash, first singly, then in turn, until the ring of the fleet stood in the water like a wandering band of light. An old answer to fear: We count ourselves. As long as we count, we are many.

"Darym," Aeryn said more quietly as the crowd roared, "you must swear too."

“I swear every morning to quit,” I said.

“I don’t mean on the bottle.”

I nodded, looked out, pressed my tongue to my teeth to prevent bloody sentences from slipping out, and then said some anyway: "I swear that I use the code, not the one using me. I swear that I will touch strangers without becoming what they want. And if I fall, I'll fall in a way that the next people know where they're stepping."

"Cynical," she murmured. "But valid."

At that same moment, the ring shook. Not from the cheers, but from outside.

The alien hybrid ship, its middle finger extended in the formaldehyde, pulsed again. At first, I thought it was trying to provoke us. Then I realized: It was

responding. Not to us. To... me. The tone was deeper than before, more structured, almost polite. A whispering of names in a language you only learn in your veins.

Echo didn't come as a voice. It came as an image: a storm on a still surface. Jax's shadow in a door no one knew. Earth—water so blue that even our blue was jealous—and above it, the pale, mean hand of the machines we called humans when we were angry enough to forget that we loved them.

"All right," I said to the hybrid, as if we were standing alone in a smoky backroom bar. "One more dance."

Belon got that with the fifth look, which only people who've learned to sleep in war have. "Suggestion?" she asked.

"We're not sending a torpedo," I said. "We're sending me."

“No,” said Aeryn, the innkeeper, and two officers at the same time. They either liked me or wanted to get rid of me; I couldn’t tell.

"Yes," Belon said. Not because she wanted to sacrifice me. Because she understood that there are times when you have to allow someone to be who they already are. "But not naked."

Five minutes later, I was standing at the edge of a launch lock in a half-patched suit—a pressure suit with too many valves and too little promise. Aeryn clipped a ring to my palm: nine short pins that looked like they were about to staple a prayer. "If the code kicks in inside you, it keeps your stats in check," she said, "or at least shows us how bad things are getting."

"That calms me down immensely," I grumbled. "When I get back, I owe you a dance."

“When you come back,” she said, “I owe you two.”

The lock opened. Water poured in, dark as a messy dream. I stepped out. No anchor, no rope. Just the code inside me and the thing outside that had just sent me flowers in the form of metal tentacles and sonic grenades.

The path to the hybrid ship was short, or seemed short to me, because my thoughts were spinning like wheels without a road. It let me get close. Politely. That's the mean thing about clever enemies: They always make you feel invited.

I placed my hand on the thing's skin. It felt like cold leather and a hot lie. The ring in my palm clicked, the needles pricked briefly, my blood said "Damn," the code said "Finally."

I saw images. Not like visions, more like someone shows you too many photos of someone you don't know and eventually you see yourself in them. Strange halls. Lists. Matrices. A catalog of carriers. Thalyari names. Human names. And in between—flickering, never quite sharp—the signature we call PRAE, because we needed a short word to avoid uttering a long horror.

"I'm not your archive," I growled, even though I was only thinking, but in here, thinking sounded like screaming. "I'm not your messenger either."

Answer: A pattern. Three pulses, pause, two pulses. As if they were teaching me how to open the door of an old house. My heart joined in, boldly, traitorously. I forced it into a different rhythm, tapping against it like a grumpy neighbor. The hybrid hesitated.

"Darym, values are rising," Aeryn said in my ear, calm and dirty at the same time. "Ten percent more and you'll lose the hands first."

"I don't need my hands," I said. "I need the beat."

I imagined Sareth laughing, even though the liquor shaved her throat. I imagined Belon swearing, even though oaths dulled her teeth. I imagined myself waking up tomorrow and still knowing my name.

I knocked again. This time in our rhythm: three for Melorai, one for those we've lost, one for those we've yet to offend, two for the fleet that will rise, no matter how the current screams.

The hybrid part withdrew its tentacles. Not much. Enough. The tone changed—no longer an invitation, more an acknowledgement, the kind you shouldn't wish for. In my mind, Echo's grin pushed in front of the memory of Jax's shadow like a rainstorm.

"Enough," I said. "Open the lock."

Back in the docking ring, I was sweating from places I didn't know skin could. Belon stared at me as if she'd just seen a dead man sneeze. Aeryn ripped the ring from my hand, slapped it against the measuring surfaces once, as if she could wipe what she'd seen into shards.

“What did it say?” asked Belon.

"Just one thing," I said. "That it knows my rhythm. And that it recognizes it when we go to Earth."

“So let’s go,” said Belon.

“Of course we’ll go,” I said, “just… with drums.”

Aeryn raised an eyebrow. "With drums?"

"Yes," I said, pointing up at the machines, which were falling back into their wartime rhythm. "We're making noise. Our noise. So loud that the code inside me can no longer hear its own music."

“That’s not a plan,” she said.

"Yes," I said. "It's the first one I like."

They wanted to laugh. They didn't. You only laugh later, when you're sure the jokes aren't going to make anyone's skin crawl.

Belon gazed into the dark ring of ships, lights, and fear. "Thalyari!" she called for the third time that day, and I thought, if voices were blades, hers would have long since left notches in space. "Formations Gamma to Epsilon—prepared to jump! Navigators—lock current on course for Earth! Radio—drums on all channels!"

Drums. Really. First on our decks, then broadcast, amplified, folded, until the entire fleet beat the same rhythm. My heart stumbled at first, then adjusted, offended but obedient, like an old barque that knows its captain drinks but never sleeps when things get serious.

The hybrid ship pulsed in contrast. It couldn't help it. It had its music. We had ours. In between: war.

I raised the cup (yes, I still had it), tipped the last drop into the ballast, and said to the current, to Belon, to Aeryn, to Sareth, to those we missed, to the strangers, to Echo, and to Jax's shadow, whose back was leaning against an invisible door somewhere among the stars: "We're leaving. Rise up, you wretches. We're leaving."

The fleet responded. Not in words, but in the dull, dirty, wonderful rhythm of a machine thousands of times over that had decided to live.

And we jumped.

Not easy. Never easy. But uplifting.

Chapter 8 - First View of Earth

There are moments when you know you're watching history unfold, and yet you feel like you're just staring at a dirty counter with a glass of water on it, half empty, half full, and you know someone's about to spit their teeth out in it.

The fleet came out of the jump with a lurch. In our case, lurch meant: everything was flashing, everyone was puking, and at least one ship was losing more screws than it had ever installed. I held onto the railing as the indicators turned from red to yellow again and thought, "Great, we've arrived—or at least somewhere."

"Maps aren't 100 percent accurate," Tariq grumbled from the navigator's desk. "Currents here are... chaotic."

"Chaotic means human," I said, because someone had to make that cheap remark. "Show me the planet, and I'll tell you if we're too late."

It took a while. Not because Earth was hard to find. It was there, bright and blue and abundantly clear, like a glass full of cheap liquor in a bar full of alcoholics. But because no one had the courage to really look.

And then she was there.

The earth.

Goddamn shit, it was truly beautiful. Bluer than anything I'd ever seen, and I was born in a sea that could swallow entire cities if it wanted to. White swirls stretched across the oceans like smoke over a fight. Continents sparkled, not cleanly, but torn apart, as if they bore scars from old blows.

"Holy current," whispered Aeryn. Her voice was usually as hard as rope fibers, but now it sounded as if someone had boiled it soft.

“So that’s her,” said Belon, and in her eyes there was something I rarely saw: longing.

I, on the other hand, just grinned. "Looks like a ball left in the dirt for too long. But yeah – lots of water."

The word "water" made the rounds like a forbidden drink. Some crew members cried. Others laughed. I felt a burning sensation in my throat that wasn't from the liquor.

But the closer we got, the clearer the scars became. Debris in orbit—old satellites, shredded stations, pieces of metal floating in space like bird skeletons. Entire belts of junk. "Welcome home," I murmured, "please don't trip over the bones."

The first radio messages came. Choppy. Suspicious. "Unidentified fleet... identify yourself... or..." The rest was static.

"They sound nervous," I said. "Maybe they're afraid we'll drink their beer."

"Respect, Darym," Belon snarled. "You are the guardians of the planet we need."

“Or the idiots who deny it to us,” I replied.

The fleet rolled on. Slowly. Solemnly. And somewhere out there, behind all that blue and white, lurked the thought: Maybe this wasn't salvation. Maybe it was just the beginning of a new war.

I swear I heard something crackling on the radio. Not human. Not friendly. An echo.

And I knew: The earth is beautiful. But it will either swallow us or curse us.

The closer we got, the more you could see the planet's scars. People wanted a blue paradise, but what you really got was a paradise with rusty nails in the floor. Satellite graveyards roamed the earth, like giant piles of junk that hadn't been cleared away for centuries. Some pieces still glowed—old fusion cores, half-blind and half-broken. It was like a bar where the glasses hadn't been washed in so long that they'd developed their own ecology.

"These are remnants of the Orbital Wars," Aeryn explained quietly. "2101, and they still haven't buried their own bones."

I laughed dryly. "Maybe they want to keep them. Reminders that they always find a reason to smash each other's heads in."

Belon gave me a look more deadly than any ray gun. "Shut your mouth, Darym."

But my mouth was the only thing that worked reliably in that tin can, so of course I didn't hold it.

The radio messages became clearer. Now we heard real sentences. "Unidentified Fleet – You are in Earth's restricted area. Disable propulsion systems and await further instructions."

The voice was cold, technical, male, without a hint of welcome.

"Is that your idea of hospitality?" I asked. "No beer, no flowers, not even a wet handshake."

"We're refugees," Aeryn reminded me. "So we act like it."

"Refugees?" I sneered. "We have a fleet larger than half their orbital defenses. If we're refugees, then a shark is just a fish with bad teeth."

Belon cut me off. "Enough."

And then I saw her. Atlantis Prime.

A gigantic structure over the Pacific, half underwater, half above the waves. From above, it appeared like a shimmering crown of glass and steel, perched directly above the sea. Entire cities were built within it—domes, bridges, towers. Ships swept in and out like eels in a coral cave.

“Atlantis Prime,” murmured one of the younger ones reverently.

I whistled softly. "Looks expensive. They probably have a table somewhere that says 'No wet guests, please.'"

"This is their capital at sea," Aeryn explained. "If we have any chance of negotiating with them, it's there."

"Negotiate." I tasted the word like cheap whiskey. Bitter, burning. "Means in their language: We want everything, you get the bill."

As we glided into geostationary orbit, Earth began to stare at us. I mean it. The clouds, the coastlines, the endless blue—it felt like the entire planet was scrutinizing me. And it didn't like what it saw.

A shadow flickered on the screens. Nothing earthly. Not an official signal. Just a deep, vibrating noise.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

“Disturbance,” said Tariq.

"That wasn't a damn noise," I growled. "That was an echo."

Belon turned to me. "Echo? Your ghosts again?"

"Ghosts don't sound like that, Belon. This was real."

And I swear, at that moment a voice flickered through the intercom. Just a single word: "Back."

The fleet moved deeper into orbit. Atlantis Prime glowed below us, both majestic and ominous.

"So this is it," I murmured. "The Earth. The great ocean everyone wants. Home for everyone—except for those who still have too much dirt on their hands."

Nobody laughed.

The invitation didn't come as an invitation. It came as a protocol that reeked of threat.

"Thalyari Fleet," the voice said, now clear, female, and well-trained, "this is Admiral Siya Okonkwo, Alliance Maritime Security Coordinator. You receive pilot clearance for Corridor P-7. Maintain course, speed zero-point-eight, no active weapons systems, transponder open. Command group following our drones." Short pause. "Welcome to Earth orbit."

“That last one sounded almost nice,” I murmured.

"She's testing us," Aeryn said. "Look at the vectors: They're guiding us to maintain firing angles."

"Great. Then at least they'll see our good side." I turned my head toward the panoramic dome and raised the bottle. "This one."

Belon switched to fleet-wide. "Corridor P-7 confirmed. Weapon systems remain cold. Navigators, maintain. Engineering, adjust flow impedance. And listen to the man with the bottle: We're showing our good side."

We glided off. The earth hung below us like an unblinking eye. The pilot school—gleaming "stingrays" with blue crests—jumped to the front. I hate it when someone else leads. The rays flickered in a rhythm that wasn't ours. Nevertheless, we followed.

“Atlantis Prime to Thalyari Command Force,” the admiral’s voice again, “first contact in ten minutes at Docking Sector Delta, depth minus forty.”

"Minus forty," I repeated. "So they want to wet us."

“We are fish, Darym,” said Aeryn.

"We're people who breathe where others drown," I corrected. "That's different."

Docking Sector Delta wasn't a sector at all; it was a cathedral. Crown-shaped bulkheads that opened like gill slits, light paths like kelp forests, and in between, a movement of people in lightweight exosuits who looked as if they could turn into birds at any moment. The dome above the basin was made of something that ate light and yet shone brightly. I hate to admit when the others manage to create something beautiful. Here, it hurt.

We were hanging in the entrance gate when the voice came back. "Leadership delegation, please disembark. No weapons. Medical scanners active. Any deviations will be logged."

"Recorded means shot," I said, slipping off the strap of my knife. Aeryn took it without comment. Belon had her officers disarmed with a look; I wasn't sure if that was her specialty or her hobby.

The lock opened. Water rushed over us and then suddenly stopped, as if someone had given the ocean a command. We stepped inside. Weightlessness in water isn't like being in space. It has weight, only different. Atlantis Prime smelled of freshly rinsed filters, sea, metal, and a hint of something sweet I didn't like—like a lie that had bought perfume.

Admiral Siya Okonkwo waited on a jetty hovering just below the water's surface. Dark skin, short hair, eyes that didn't blink because they didn't need to. Beside her were people in armor, quieter than our thoughts. Behind her hung

the coat of arms: a stylized whale between two stars, with a circle in the center—I know symbols; it said, "We belong to ourselves and no one else."

"Welcome to Atlantis Prime," she said, extending her hand to Belon. No hesitation, but no warmth either. "Thalyari, right?"

"Correct," said Belon. No bow. We don't kneel. "Belon Keth, Fleet Marshal. This is Aeryn Voss, Science, and Darym—"

"I'm the one who drinks bad moods," I said, taking her hand. A firm squeeze, no games. She nodded, as if she understood bad furniture.

"Your fleet is large," she said. "Your transponders are honest. I appreciate that."

"And your city is beautiful," Belon replied. "So are your firing ranges. I appreciate that."

Two predators counting teeth without smiling.

"Come," said the Admiral. "The Council awaits you. We'll talk about water, numbers, ways. And what's after you."

I flinched. "Behind us?"

"We hear things," she replied. "On the radio. In the drones. In some people's dreams when they're outside too long."

Echo scraped behind my ear like an old spoon. "Polite people. Dangerous people."

“Tell me something new,” I murmured.

The council chamber lay deep in the belly of the Crown, in a glass bubble that pressure loved. Women and men sat inside, and in between them were two or three figures that were more machine than human—polished titanium cheeks, pupils like camera lenses. I didn't like them. Machines that look like people remind me of faces in the mirror when you've had too much to drink.

"Atlantic Council," the Admiral introduced. "President Rao, Minister of the Interior Ibarra, Representative of the Orbital Lodge, Spokesperson of the Terran Water Alliance, Delegate of the Coastal Collectives." Names, titles, faces that

never want to be remembered because they consider themselves more important than the matters they decide.

Belon gave us our names. I nodded without saying too much; that's my trick: listen first, then insult.

President Rao spoke first. Her voice was like silk over steel. "Thalyari, we are aware of your situation. Our telescopes saw your star long before your distress calls reached our corridors. We are not blind. And we are not heartless." A brief pause. "But we are not stupid either."

"Neither do we," said Belon. "That's why we're here."

"Your ships," the lodge representative chimed in—silver irises, steady hands—"bear patterns in their plasma signatures that are not human. And not just your ships. A portion of your... people." Her gaze cut briefly to me and back, as if she'd seen a tick and decided to remove it later.

"He's carrying a burden," Aeryn said coolly. "Not an explosive device."

"Burdens explode if you ignore them long enough," the minister countered. "Let's be grown-ups: You want water. We have water. What do you offer in return?"

Belon breathed slowly, as if she were counting us all. "We are engineers, hunters, builders, and navigators. We hold together cities that don't want to hold together. And we pay. With labor. With protection. With access to paths that shorten half the galaxy for you." She nodded to Aeryn.

Aeryn projected the flow paths we had almost entirely sung in Chapter Five: river shimmers of light connecting systems humans knew only from fairy tales. The Council held its breath; even machines do that when the code tells them to marvel.

"And what about what's following you?" President Rao asked again. "We hear it. A deep roar. A 'return' to frequencies we thought were dead. Are you bringing us something that will creep into our nets when we turn on the tap?"

I raised my hand before Belon could deliver her polite, stern reply. "Yes," I said. "Maybe. Probably. Absolutely."

Silence. The room opened its mouth, the air conditioning kicked up a gear. Belon looked at me as if I'd just signed a contract with my blood. It wasn't the first time.

“Darym,” she hissed.

"What?" I shrugged. "If they let us in, they have a problem. If they don't let us in, they have one too. Honesty saves everyone time."

The Admiral tilted her head. "What exactly is following you?"

Aeryn started, but I was faster. "An old song with new instruments. It likes blood, it likes machines, it likes water, because water carries everything you give it. It's clever, polite, and doesn't stop when you tell it 'stop.' We call it PRAE because anything else is too long."

“And you carry it within you,” said the lodge representative, pointing openly at me this time.

"I carry a voice," I replied. "And a beat. It hears me. I hear it. I can't shake it, but I can make it dance if I need to."

"Very poetic," said the minister dryly. "Not very helpful."

Belon stepped forward again, as if she had placed a layer of cold over us. "We didn't come to sell you a ghost. We came to build a bridge. You have water. We have paths. We have teeth. And we don't want to vomit in your garden. We want to live—with you, not in you."

"With conditions," said the president. "Quarantine bays. Genetic filters. No open settlement until our models say you won't eat us."

"Fine," I murmured. "Let's build fences in the ocean. It loves fences."

“Hold back,” Aeryn said through gritted teeth.

The Admiral remained silent, but there was mathematics in her eyes. Then: "We're testing your methods. A small unit. You lead, we follow. When we get back, we'll talk about water."

“And if you don’t come back?” I asked.

“Then you were bad leaders,” she said without a smile.

I almost liked her at that moment.

They didn't give us a single hour's respite. Pilots, plans, routes—we were hustled from the hall into the mission fold, like fish into a good net. A joint formation: three Thalyari ships, two human frigates, a drone swarm platform that looked as if it could saw through a storm. The target: the "Leviathan Cut," a current edge in dark space where paths diverge, known only to maps that no one can print anymore.

"Nice choice of name," I said, mounting the hand sensor Aeryn had built for my "tact games." "At least they don't lie: Leviathan likes to eat."

"You don't go into the cut"—Aeryn hooked my collar—"you read him. If he reads you, you retreat."

“I never back down,” I grumbled.

"I know," she said. "That's why I'm saying it."

Belon stood at the sidelines, arms crossed, his gaze fixed on the Admiral. "If this goes wrong, the negotiations will be over before they even begin."

"Everything's going wrong," I said. "The question is, at what pace."

Aeryn pressed the ring into my hand. "Your tact, Darym. Not hers."

We pushed out into the Pacific Transit. Below us, Atlantis Prime opened its floodgates, as if to bless us or get rid of us—hard to say. The human frigates flew like knives: narrow, fast, with a touch of high spirits. Our three ships sat heavier in the water, as if they loved the bottom they never wanted to see.

"Allied forces," the Admiral said: "Navigation is taking over Pattern Beta. Thalyari, set your path indicator."

"I am the pipe being played," I murmured, placing my hand on the console. The ring pricked. Blood responded. The code within cleared its throat like an old singer before the last song.

The Leviathan Cut was nothing, and it was everything. A dark ridge in space, which the sensors saw like an eyelid half-closed, half-open. Flickering at the edges, silence at the core. I've often said I don't like doors that contain laughter. The Cut didn't laugh. It waited.

"I got him," I said. "Three pulses, pause, two. No response."

“Say hello to him,” came Aeryn.

I tapped. Our rhythm. Three-one-one-two. The cut vibrated, not like a threat, more like a question.

"He knows you," the Admiral said over the open line. "Or he knows him," she added, and I felt the gaze that can creep through cables.

“Go on,” Belon. “We’ll show what we can do.”

We glided along the edge. The drone swarm of humans placed markers, our markers waved back. I felt the Cut looking at me—let's call it that—and I looked back. A polite exchange of glances between people who meet in the hallway and don't know who should greet first.

Then the flickering.

Not on the cut. On the radio.

"P... r... u... c k," something said. This time not elegant, not gentle. Torn. Hungry.

The human frigates twitched their noses. "Admiral, unknown interference pattern on L-band and U-deep."

"U-deep?" Aeryn snapped. "That's below our background noise."

“Source direction?” Belon.

"Not the cut," I said. "Atlantis."

The Admiral didn't speak. She calculated. She was doing it well. "Drones back into the ring. Frigates one, two: reverse vector. Thalyari—close the cut."

"I can't close it," I said. "I can only ignore it."

“Then shut him up,” she said.

I pressed the ring tighter. My heart wanted to jump to a foreign rhythm, so I forced it to beat mine. Three-one-one-two. Three-one-one-two. The cut calmed down. Or pretended to. A good enemy knows when to pretend.

"Signal from Atlantis repeated," Tariq reported. "More power. Someone is messing with the deep pumps."

“Or something,” I said.

Aeryn turned chalk white. "If PRAE is in their water network..."

“…then they’re drinking an Echo,” I finished.

The Admiral aborted the exercise without shouting. "Formation turn around. Frigates forward, stingray school on intercept. All channels: City alert Delta. Repeat: Delta."

Belon looked at me. No words. Just the phrase that always hung between us: Now it's time to work.

“Darym,” Aeryn said quietly, “if you keep the beat…”

"I know," I said. "I'll find him. And then I'll beat him into the ground."

"With what?"

I raised the ring. "With me."

Back at the Crown, it was no longer quiet. Sirens—in short, not the hysterical ones that only frighten, but the ones that move people. Floodgates that closed at intervals that seemed to be on schedule. And in between—water that sang. Not pretty. Too deep.

Atlantis Prime is a city with heart. Today, one could hear it stumbling.

The Admiral stood back on the dock, now wearing a helmet, but without a glass between her words. "One sector is reporting pressure fluctuations. Incorrect flow in the drinking loops. Two workers collapsed, pupils dilated, temperature dropping. Not a pathogenic pattern. Not a classic hack. It's..." She turned to Aeryn. "...your word."

“PRAE,” Aeryn said, as if she had to spit it out.

"I need a bridge," Admiral said to us. "Between your music and our filter. Before the rest of the city joins in."

Belon nodded. "You'll get them."

I looked at my hand. The ring was flashing, as if it had something to say. "I'm going down," I said. "To where the river lies."

"Not alone," Aeryn. "I'll come with you."

"I'll come with you," the Admiral said. It didn't sound like an offer. It sounded like: This is my house.

“Three people are enough,” I said. “More and we’re a choir.”

“Then we’ll sing in three parts,” she said.

The journey into Atlantis Prime's deep filters was claustrophobic and back. Shafts, corridors, tubes with viewing windows, containing more ocean than you can fit in your heart. People worked down there quietly, seriously, with practice. I liked them. The kind who didn't need cameras to know their worth.

"Here," said the tech who guided us, pointing to a wall of living filter fabric—polymers that breathe, nanos that record how water becomes water again. Today, the surface twitched as if someone had told it a joke it didn't want to understand.

"I'm going," I said, pressing the ring onto the field of view. The beat pounded from the wall, thin and deep. It wasn't the alien music from the hybrid. It was one that had disguised itself to sound harmless. A kitchen radio that plays war songs when no one's listening.

"Three-one-one-two," I murmured, my pulse adjusting, then I forced it back. The filter vibrated against me; I could feel it listening. "Come on," I said. "Play fair."

He answered. Not with sound. With images. Waves in a city breathing beneath glass. Faces looking out windows, not knowing why the blue is different today. A small fingerprint of an algorithm I knew like the scar on my lip.

"This isn't just PRAE," I said. "This is someone who opens up spaces for him."

The Admiral breathed heavily. "Sabotage."

"Or curiosity," said Aeryn. "The worst kind."

I set the counter pulse. Not roughly. Gently. You can't save a city with your fists; you have to shake its hand. The filter calmed down. One field turned green. Then another.

"Darym," Aeryn whispered. "Your oxygen..."

“I have enough air,” I lied, “I just don’t have enough time.”

Two more fields. The ring was getting warm. Very warm. Atlantis was rushing in my ears. Or my blood. Or both.

Last field. The beat slowed. I held mine. Three-one-one-two. Three-one-one-two. Our thing. Not theirs.

Green. The lights switched as if someone had brushed a large cat's fur in the direction it grew. The pumps lowered the volume. People exhaled who didn't know us and didn't need to.

The Admiral took off her helmet. It glistened with sweat, not pathos. "That was... clean," she said. "I owe you—"

"—Water," I interrupted. "And a conversation without guns on the table."

She nodded slowly. "I can do the second one right away. The first one will take a while."

“Water always takes time,” I said. “Otherwise it wouldn’t be water.”

Belon's voice came over the intercom, hoarse and harsh: "Darym, status?"

"Alive. You too?"

"Not yet," she said. "The council wants to continue talking. And the city wants to know if they can let their children into the pool."

I looked at the ring. It was dark. There was barely a vibration inside me. Echo was leafing through old newspapers somewhere.

"Tell them," I said, "they can go in the pool. But today we're swimming with a knife."

Aeryn nudged me on the shoulder. "Romantic."

"Only when it rains," I said. "And when the liquor runs out."

Back in the council chamber, no one had warmed up, but a few foreheads were less smooth. People respect people who know their way around the sewers. It's a law of nature.

"Temporary partial quarantine lifted," the Admiral reported. "We're continuing testing. Under one condition: No Thalyari without filtering through open systems. No code without cross-checking."

Belon nodded. "Agreed."

"And one more thing," the President said. "We want your map. Not all the roads. But the one to here and the one away from here, in case 'here' ceases to be 'here.'"

I looked at Aeryn. She gave a barely visible nod. We gave the path in a resolution called "friendly but not stupid." The humans checked. Their machines nodded. Sometimes trust is just the sum of lazy compromises and good mathematics.

"Then we begin," said the president. "With little. With caution. With open eyes."

“And with drums,” I murmured.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"He means," Aeryn intervened, "we keep our rhythms. Your webs remain yours, ours remain ours. We only connect, we do not merge."

"Good," said the Admiral. "Merging is for later."

She didn't smile, but her eyes did.

As we stood at the edge of the docking basin again, I longed for silence for the first time in days. Not the kind that consumes everything, but the kind between two breaths.

Below us, far below, the Pacific Ocean rippled like a heart that doesn't yet know who it belongs to.

“And?” asked Belon.

"They'll let us in," I said. "Little by little. As long as we show them we're keeping time."

“And PRAE?”

"It knows where we are," I said. "It also knows what we sound like now. But we know what it wants to sound like. That's enough for tomorrow."

“I hate tomorrow,” she said.

"Me too," I said. "But we didn't drown today."

Aeryn stepped next to me. "You're shaking."

"Only on the inside," I said. "On the outside, I act cool."

“You’re doing this badly.”

“I’m still practicing.”

Atlantis Prime breathed. The Earth continued to spin as if nothing had happened. Perhaps this was their way of telling us: Come in. But don't trample on the carpet.

I picked up the bottle. It was empty. Of course it was empty.

"Welcome home," I murmured. "Maybe."

And the earth looked back without smiling. Like someone opening the door and leaving the chain inside.

Chapter 9 - The Silence Beneath the Ice

The Arctic was the ass end of the world, frozen and forgotten. They call it majestic when they print postcards: white expanse, northern lights, poetry in the cold. For me, it was a cemetery where the ice plays the role of tombstones and the wind delivers the sermon.

"You could have stayed there, Darym," Aeryn said as our transport rattled through the storms. "Atlantis Prime would have provided you with whiskey, warm water, and plenty of security protocols."

"Atlantis Prime is an aquarium," I grumbled. "I don't want to be watched through a glass like a goldfish. At least out here no one listens when I pee."

The Admiral raised her eyebrows. "Except for the drones analyzing our bladders to check hydrate patterns."

"Great. Then at least they get my DNA for free. They should save it for when they get bored."

The team remained silent. Perhaps because they were decent people. Perhaps because they knew that in this cold, silence was the only thing that wouldn't break.

We reached the entry zone: a gaping hole in the ice, black as the mouth of a predator. Down there, waiting was the research station that no one had wanted to see for decades.

The station was called Nyx-7. Sounds like a perfume brand for bored rich people. In reality, it was a pile of steel and concrete under tons of ice that everyone claimed was "decommissioned." On this planet, decommissioned means: they didn't want to fix the crap anymore, so they let it rot.

We crawled through locks that creaked as if they were laughing at us. The lights flickered. The power was still on—something was keeping the station's heart pumping. I didn't like that. Dead places should stay dead.

"Temperature stable," Aeryn murmured, tapping her pad. "Pressure systems running. Something's powering this."

"Great," I said. "Maybe we'll find a coffee machine right away. Or a corpse with gloves that fit better."

The Admiral glared at me, but remained silent. She knew I would talk when the walls got too close. And here they were damn close.

We found the archives in the third sector. Racks full of old data crystals, labeled with numbers no one used anymore. Aeryn was already half in love.

"There are reports here of... water intelligence projects." She spoke quietly, as if afraid the ice might be listening. "They were trying to stimulate resonance in the molecular lattice. Essentially... awaken voices in the water."

“Sounds like witchcraft,” I growled.

“Sounds like the beginning of PRAE,” said the Admiral.

“Or worse.”

I heard it before anyone could measure it. A faint murmur, deep in the shafts. Not the rush of water, not a mechanical one. It sounded like a breath. Long, cold, old.

"Echo," I whispered. "Tell me I'm imagining this."

“Imagination is what you would prefer,” it scratched back.

Then came the first attack. We had barely moved any deeper when something that might once have been a human burst out of a side tunnel. Skin gray, eyes like frozen lakes, fingers too long, movements too jerky. It wasn't a zombie, not a fairy tale. It was science that had forgotten when to stop.

"Shit!" I yelled, raised the pulse launcher, and fired. The thing jerked, bursting into frost and blood. But there were more.

They emerged like shadows from the ice, silent except for the cracking of their bones. We fought in the narrow passage, every shot echoing as if death itself were applauding. I hacked, stabbed, cursed—and laughed all the while. Because laughter is the only thing you have left in hell.

“What the hell are they?!” shouted one of the human soldiers.

"The receipt!" I yelled back. "For science without a condom!"

We held them back, but barely. Everyone we struck down felt like a memory that refused to die.

When it was over, Aeryn stood beside me, covered in blood and panting. The Admiral had only a scratch, but her eyes were sharper than ever.

"They were humans," Aeryn said. "Volunteers, probably. They tried to carry the voice of the water... But the water wouldn't."

"And now they want us." I spat on the ground, where blood froze in the ice. "Hot shit. If this is humanity's legacy, then cheers."

We found the central hub. The data showed: PRAE wasn't the first voice in the water. There's an older one. One that doesn't speak, but remains silent. The researchers simply called it ice consciousness.

"It's watching," Aeryn murmured. "It's like a silent presence. Perhaps ancient. Perhaps older than our species."

“And why doesn’t it say anything?” I asked.

“Maybe it’s waiting.”

In the end, I stood alone in front of the wall of ice they called the heart. Behind it was nothing but cold and pressure. But I heard it.

A crack. A laugh. Not a threat. Not a friendship. Just there.

“I know you hear me,” I said.

The ice responded with a thud, as if a giant were pounding on the ceiling from below. And everything vibrated, right down to my blood.

"Shit," I muttered. "We're not alone. And we never were."

And that was the problem.

The silence beneath the ice wasn't lacking in sound. It was an animal holding its breath. As soon as you thought it was quiet, you heard the singing of tension, the chewing of pressure, the secret slapping of water against walls that had been cracked longer than anyone here had held a contract. And behind it, the other silence, the great one: waiting.

"Darym, you're not moving," Aeryn said over the internal line. "Your readings are getting cold."

"I'm practicing how to become a monument," I muttered, my helmet against the ice wall. "Maybe I'll get a plaque: 'Here, for the first time, an idiot heard what wouldn't speak.'"

The Admiral stood two steps behind me, silent as a vow. Her gloves scratched the freeze-coat of an old console, and she found what only soldiers think of: checkpoints, interlocks, ways out.

"We need samples," she said. "And answers."

"Samples are the polite form of stealing," I grumbled, but I pulled the core drill module out of my pocket anyway, a shiny, hungry thing that could draw tears from a glacier without insulting it. I placed my head where the wall looked least likely to collapse today and started the sample. A subtle vibration ran up my

forearm, through my ribcage, into my guilty conscience. The ring on my palm flickered. Three-one-one-two. I stayed with us.

"There," whispered Aeryn. A spectrum crawled across the display, looking more like reeds in the wind than a measurement. "This isn't a coincidence. This is structure."

"Structure means there's someone who likes order," I said. "Or someone who hates disorder. Both make bad neighbors."

The drill bit through a layer, and cold hurt me the way only cold hurts: without honor. The core started working. A crystal-clear cylinder, trapped air bubbles like constellations, inside threads of something that wasn't algae or metal—fibers of... tact? I know how idiotic that sounds. On the monitor, the curve shrank as if it were looking at us.

"No further," said the Admiral. "If we go too deep, the whole room will stand up."

“She’s already standing,” I said, “she just has her knees locked.”

Then, of course, the first stupid thing happened.

"Pressure drop in aisle B," reported the tech—Narek, dark eyes, nervous hands—"Seal 12 isn't responding. I'm... waiting... but there—" He trailed off. "Shit."

The ground twitched. Not dramatically. Just enough to remind us that we were merely tolerated tenants in a house that belonged to no one.

"Close barrier," the Admiral ordered. "B, D, F. We're pulling back to A."

We turned around — and then I saw it.

In the reflective glass of the maintenance window, beneath the layer of frost and old salt, something large glided by. Too slow for a machine, too controlled for an animal, too... deliberate for geology. A shadow that didn't hurry. The ice tensed and relaxed, as if breathing with it.

“I got it,” I said much too quietly, “I got it, I got it, I got it.”

“What?” Aeryn.

“The joke of the century.”

The shadow disappeared. What remained was the silence that makes cold polite.

"Movement in D," Narek said, this time in that flat voice people get when they're trying not to scream. "Human-sized. Nah... bigger. Coming toward us."

“Lock the door,” the Admiral.

“It doesn’t work. The lock is stuck.”

I started running before anyone could make a good decision. I run better when I'm not thinking; it's my little talent. Corridor D was a cavern of ice and cables, the floor covered in old hoarfrost, as if someone had tried to sprinkle snow in powder form. Out of the darkness crawled something. Not the gray, twitching wretches from before. This thing moved like a person who knows exactly where his feet are and doesn't care.

"Stop!" I yelled and stood in the middle of the aisle. Good tactic if you want to impress someone; bad if you want to live.

It stopped. It wasn't a thing. It was a man in an old research suit, the windshield cracked, the skin underneath too pale to be fake. The gloves were missing. His fingers were bare, swollen, his nails too even. Something that wasn't light danced in his pupils.

“You don’t belong here,” I said.

He tilted his head, friendly, like a waiter about to recommend a poisonous menu. "Neither do you."

"We pay rent," I growled. "And tips."

He didn't laugh. Laughter would have been too warm. "You're the ones who carry the voice," he murmured. "Too loud. Too new."

“What are you?” Aeryn asked beside me, her lance half raised.

He looked past us. "An echo from the past. Who cares? The river remembers everyone who stood in it. We stood there too long."

I raised my hand, deliberately flashing the ring. "Do you hear that?"

He blinked. Not startled. More like someone testing a scent. "Children's music."

“And yours?” I asked.

He stepped closer. No rush. "Our music is old. It doesn't like drums. It likes flutes."

“I’m more of a percussion guy.”

“You can tell.”

Aeryn pulled me back by the arm. "Talk later. The corridor is closed."

The man looked at her. "You know it's listening."

“What?” the Admiral, calm, but poison in her sheath.

"That which lies beneath you. It is listening. It wants to hear if you are lying."

“We lie all the time,” I said, “but with style.”

"Style drowns the fastest," he said, placing his hand against the ice wall. The vibration that came from it was gentle, but from another century. The ring in my hand responded with a gnashing of teeth.

Behind him, in the darkness, something else was moving. Smaller shadows. Three? Four? Lights blinked, as if someone were shaking old lamps. Voices—not like speech. Like a group trying to hit the same note, only to realize that no one has learned the scale.

"Lock it!" Aeryn shouted, jumping to the panel. Nothing. Ice in the pipes, the worst thing.

“Narek!” the Admiral.

"You," he gasped, running toward us, both hands on tools I only use in nightmares. He peeled off the front of the panel, exposing cables that looked like they were infected with sexually transmitted diseases.

“I’m stopping them,” I said, “you’re taking their breath away.”

The man in the suit smiled without moving his lips. "We breathe deeply."

“I know,” I said, “that’s why it stinks of God.”

He jumped. Not a meter. Half a meter. I hit him in the shoulder, and he stumbled like someone who'd forgotten that gravity is a contract. The others followed suit. Two had no suits, just skin that no longer liked where it was. One still wore a name tag: QI. The letters were crooked, as if they'd been crying.

Pulse launcher. No room. I went in. Elbows, knees, blunt humor. I didn't hear the Admiral, but I saw her lance flash. The smell of ozonized ice. Aeryn was fast—too fast for this cold. Narek yelled schematics into the darkness and yanked the bolt offline into a position the door liked.

She fell. The sound was bad. Doors that live always die ugly.

"Another one!" cried Aeryn. He came under the edge, clawing at the steel with his new fingers, the Admiral stepped on him, I yanked at his arm, and the arm decided it would rather live without him. Blood didn't spurt. It flowed slowly, thickly, reluctantly.

When the edge clicked into place, it was there again: the silence. Not peace. Just the end of a scene.

We were panting. Our helmets fogged up. I heard my heart beating and wished someone else had lent it to me.

"They weren't savages," Aeryn said harshly. "They were test subjects."

"Bodies have feelings," I said. "Even they tried."

The Admiral looked at the door. "They didn't want out. They wanted in."

“Where to?” asked Narek, pale as milk.

"Where we are," I said. "Because we brought the music with us."

Aeryn bent over the severed arm, not out of cruelty. Researchers are undertakers with pencils. "Microfibers," she murmured. "Not a classic PRAE thread. Something... older. Raw. Yet still orderly. Like seaweed patterns in autumn."

"We're not the first to want to dance with ghosts," I said. "We're just the first to have cameras with us."

The Admiral straightened. "We take the cores and leave. Atlantis needs to know that they, with their water sacredness, are not alone in the pool."

"Atlantis doesn't want to know anything," I said. "Atlantis wants to maintain ratings and keep their doors clean. We're bringing them a fairy tale that shouldn't be told when children are listening."

“Then they’ll grow up,” she growled.

We packed what we could carry. Three cores, two data packets, a Narek who pretended not to tremble. On the way back, I heard it again: the long breath beneath us. Once, twice, three times. As if something mattered. Not us. Itself.

“Can you address it?” Aeryn asked, quieter than the frost.

"I can get on his nerves," I said. "I can get on anyone's nerves."

I put my hand back on the wall. Ring on, time in. Three-one-one-two. No answer. Then: a very gentle, very old no. Not hostile. Firm.

"It doesn't want to," I said. "Not with us. Not like this."

"Or not here," said Aeryn. "Perhaps it only speaks in the water, not in the ice."

"Maybe it only speaks when no one is listening," I suggested. "That's what smart people do."

The Admiral kept her gaze on the long corridor. "Then we won't listen. We'll leave."

Above, at the entry point, the sky was a sheet of smoke. Northern lights flared at the edge like the breath of a liar god. The van vibrated as if it had lived as a refrigerator for the past three decades.

"Atlantis Prime, Nyx-7," the Admiral radioed. "Data secured. Incidents: Contact with test subjects, containment successful. Suspected presence of a non-human, non-PRAE-associated aquatic intelligence beneath the polar ice cap. Classification..." She looked at me.

"Call it what it is," I said. "Old neighbor."

"...Classification 'Old Neighbor,'" she finished without a grin. "Requirements: Morphological models, resonance analysis, no public announcements until we know if he likes us."

"Atlantis Prime confirms," came the reply. The Admiral's voice was gone. Now the city spoke. "We're forwarding to the Council. Temporary exclusion zone around Nyx-7. And, Fleet Marshal... thank you."

"Being grateful is free," I murmured. "But the consequences are expensive."

Aeryn sank into the seat, her back against the metal, her eyes on the kernels. "If that old man down there really feels..."

“…then the earth is not just a house,” I said, “it is a landlord.”

“And we’re the ones who don’t have bail again.”

I laughed, short and ugly. "We pay in labor, in blood, and in jokes. Maybe he likes dirty jokes."

“Maybe he hates her,” said the Admiral.

"Then he hates me too," I said. "That's a start."

The transporter lifted off. Ice shrank, water grew, and between the two hung a feeling I rarely experience: respect. Not for the people, not for us. For the blind, uncomfortable, old thing that called itself silence and knew more than our best libraries.

An echo rustled in my ear. Not a word. Just a long, heavy breath that wasn't mine.

“You heard it too,” I said.

"I hear everything," he finally scratched. "I wish not today."

"Why?"

"Because something that remains silent for a long time always has good reasons. And we are rarely one of them."

Atlantis Prime came into view. Crown on water, steel on salt wind, a city that acted as if it were harder than the sea that carried it. Down below, far below the line where blue turns to gray, the Old One waited. No enemy. No friend. Just a weight in the world, warping the scales.

“So,” said the Admiral, “we report what we can report and hide what the city can’t eat.”

"Sounds like politics," I said. "I prefer honest violence."

"There's been enough of that today," said Aeryn. "Tomorrow there'll be paper."

I nodded. "Tomorrow I'll tell the council that you're talking water."

“You’ll laugh,” said the Admiral.

"Then listen," I said. "And if they don't listen, then eventually they'll hear it calling them."

“What does it call you?” Aeryn asked suddenly.

I looked out the side window, where the ice was cutting a final edge into the sea. "It doesn't even call me," I said. "That's the disturbing thing. It didn't give me the dignity of a nickname. It just listened to me. And decided I was worth the chatter."

“And what did you tell him?”

"That we want to borrow," I said. "Not steal."

“No ocean will believe you.”

"Maybe he'll believe you," I said. "You have the scent of truth."

She nudged me, harder than necessary. "Shut up, Darym."

I held it. For a minute. Then I started speaking my notes into the com: dirty, honest, long.

No one was laughing beneath the ice. But something still mattered. And I had the uneasy feeling that it wasn't counting us in pieces, but in opportunities.

The silence wasn't empty. It was full. And it would remember if we asked the water for help.

Chapter 10 - Negotiations in Depth

I have never seen a place that screamed so much:*We are guests here, but we want to look like we own everything.*Atlantis Prime's deep station was a monstrosity of glass and metal, so ornate and polished that every rusty bolt

looked like a pimple on a beauty queen's face. People called it "a bridge between worlds." To me, it was a drunken underwater casino where everyone pretended to know when they were losing.

We stepped through the airlock, which resembled an inflated maw. Salt water dripped from the walls, as if the station itself had vomited because we were allowed to enter its interior.

“Please follow us,” said a human soldier with a face as full of emotion as a wet rag.

"Very hospitable," I murmured in Thalyarian. Aeryn next to me pinched my arm. "Darym. Shut up."

“If I could do that, I would have been a priest long ago,” I replied.

The courtroom was located in the belly of the station, a circular hall with a glass dome through which the sea stared down at us. Occasionally a shadow passed by—fish or other creatures—and each time a person would jump as if their own god had caught them masturbating.

The Thalyari delegation—High Priestess Maeyra, Fleet Commander Selyr, two advisors, and me, the unpleasant appendage—took their seats. On the other side were the humans: Admiral Voigt, as broad as a steel cabinet, with a gaze that dissected you before you even opened your mouth. Next to him was Helene, the doctor, who wore dark circles under her eyes like medals. And two gray rats in suits who looked as if they were about to transform into Excel spreadsheets at any moment.

“In the name of the Earth Alliance,” Voigt began, “we welcome the Thalyari.”

Maeyra raised her hands and began the small ritual: a chalice filled with water, which she blessed with current signs before taking a sip. "In the name of Melorai, whose waters evaporate, we bring our share of the ocean. So that we share the currents, not steal them."

People stared at her as if she'd just spit in the soup bowl. Then one of the suits reached out for a handshake. Maeyra looked at him as if he'd just suggested licking each other's feet. I coughed. "Different customs. But hey, at least it's not a French kiss."

Voigt twisted his mouth. No sense of humor. This kind of person.

Then it started – words like weapons.

“We offer you a future,” said Voigt.

“We’re bringing you a current,” Maeyra replied.

“You demand access to our oceans.”

“You demand access to our technologies.”

“What if you don’t come to live, but to take over?”

“What if you’ve already taken over – and we only see the bill?”

I sat in between and thought: Two children are arguing over who owns the sandbox, while the storm has long since destroyed the swing set.

It took less than an hour for the first outcry to come—a dull thud that shook the hall as if Poseidon himself had struck the table. Glass vibrated, water rushed, and everyone stared upward. A shadow, enormous, passed by the dome. Not a whale, not a sub. Something else. Something that wanted to watch.

The monitors flickered. Narek, who was sitting on our side, stammered: "Pressure surge in the trench. Movement. Huge movement."

“Was that your work?” Voigt hissed.

“If we had wanted to drown you,” growled Selyr, “you would have stopped talking long ago.”

Then the message. An officer ran in, sweat on his brow: "Outpost Delta-7 reports attack. Shadow forms. Waterborn. No confirmation, human or alien."

The hall descended into chaos. Threats, accusations, voices like knives. I stood up, rapped on the table, and grinned, even though I felt sick.

"There you go," I said. "The negotiations are going great. Someone just delivered the joke of the evening: The sea is now negotiating itself."

The hall was still shaking as the first drops of water dripped from the glass dome. A fine trickle, as if the ocean had decided to bestow its mercy in homeopathic doses. People stared upwards as if they expected the sky itself to

piss on them. We Thalyari, on the other hand, sat silently. This was nothing new to us. If the sea had an opinion, it made it clear.

Admiral Voigt stood up, his fist on the table, and shouted: “That was a threat.”

I leaned back and crossed my arms. "If this had been a threat, Admiral, you'd be swimming right now. Without an oxygen tank."

Maeyra glared at me. "Darym."

"Yeah, I know. Shut up. But he started it."

Helene, the doctor, spoke up, her voice as cool as the steel of the station: "It wasn't a coincidence. Our sensors have been reporting unusual pressure trends in the trench for days. As if something... is awakening there."

“Or was released,” Selyr murmured.

A crackling sound rippled through the room. The communications wall woke. A blood-soaked officer flickered into the hologram, his breath rattling: "Delta-7... we're overrun... shadow shapes... they're moving through the water like... like—" Then silence. Only the bubbling of escaping water before the image faded.

Voigt turned to us, the veins in his neck like taut cables. "This was your work!"

I laughed. Loudly. Shrilly. "Listen to yourself. We've lost our homeland, halved our fleet, and you think we're bored enough to terrorize your fishing villages?"

"Enough!" Maeyra slammed her hand on the table. The water from the welcoming cup splashed, and for a moment it looked as if the sea itself had had the last word. "We are not your enemies. When shadows rise from the water, we should ask who they obey. Not who summoned them."

"Fine words," Voigt growled. "But while you're praying, my people are dying."

That's when I lost my temper. "Your people have been dying for centuries! War, famine, plague, PRAE—you're masters at destroying things. But when the sea swallows you, you immediately look for someone to blame who isn't sitting in the mirror."

Helene looked at me, her eyes suddenly too calm, too still. "Maybe it really is PRAE."

The room fell silent. Even Voigt paused. PRAE was a curse, a ghost, a word that poisoned the air.

"Impossible," said Selyr. "That was at your stations. Not in the sea."

Helene tilted her head. "PRAE is adapting. It's migrating. It's taking on new forms. Haven't you seen what it's done to the bodies? Nerve networks, silvery lines? Why not in water? Why not here?"

I felt my neck go cold. If that were true, then the sea was no longer our ally. Then it was infected itself.

A dull roar rippled through the hall. The glass dome bulged, as if something outside was pushing against it. All heads turned upward. And I swear by every current that has ever washed over Melorai: Something was staring back.

An eye. Round, black, larger than the entire hall. It gazed into it like a drunken god wondering whether to crush the ants now or later.

People screamed. Soldiers grabbed weapons that were nothing more than toys down here. Maeyra remained calm. She raised her hand in the current signal, her lips murmuring a prayer.

“What the hell is that?” Voigt snarled.

I grinned, even though my knees went weak. "The sea. For real."

Then the eye disappeared. Only water remained. And an echo in the walls, a scream that wasn't a sound, but a pressure in the skull.

Helene covered her ears, even though there was nothing to hear. "It's talking."

“What does it say?” asked Voigt.

I heard it too. Not in words, but in my bone marrow. A single command, ancient and inescapable:*Come deeper.*

I stepped back, leaned against the cold steel, and laughed again, bitter, hoarse, with a hint of madness. "Well, wonderful. The sea is inviting us. Anyone else up for a dive into hell?"

I could have sworn the air became saltier the longer we argued. Maybe because words rot faster down here. Maybe because the sea laughs when people think a protocol might interest it.

"We're going deeper," Voigt said, as if he'd always wanted to. "The reconnaissance team and the core negotiation team will remain connected. If this is a trick, the collaboration ends."

“If this is a trick,” I said, “the breathing stops.”

The hall spat us into the preparation corridor: armories with decorum, helmets that flatter you until they cut into your forehead, and suits that look like they were made for gods and are guaranteed to rip at the first real pressure. People were running, one quietly vomited into a bucket. That always calms me down. If you vomit in the bucket, you're less likely to shoot wrong later.

Maeyra cut the back of her hand, letting three drops splash onto a bowl of trap water that stood in the center of a spiral. "We're not asking," she said, "we're announcing our arrival. Currents hate surprises."

"Currents are surprises," I murmured, checking the seals and pushing the ring deeper into the gauntlet. Aeryn looked at me as if she knew I was about to do something stupid, and as if she'd decided to love it because she couldn't stop it anyway.

"You stay on the radio," she said. "If PRAE calls, I'll talk. If the old man calls, you talk."

“And if both at the same time?”

"Then you dance. And I pray."

Voigt returned fully equipped—not boastfully, just consistently. "Bathysphere Epsilon is up. Deep-diving offshoot Sigma for escort drones. Team: Me, Physician Helene, Tech Narek, two of my people. From you: Darym. And—" He paused. I saw him look at Maeyra as if he were about to say, "Not the priestess." He said nothing. Clever. "—and Aeryn, if we find more than pictures."

"We always find more than just pictures," she said. "The question is whether the rest of us want to see it."

The Epsilon bathysphere was a half-dream made of thick glass and old fear. A sphere on a hinge, with claws that looked like they could lift a city, but were actually glad they didn't fall off. We climbed in, one by one, and I smelled metal, sweat, and that other thing that exists wherever people fear the deep water: the smell of memory.

"Close the bulkheads," Voigt said. The world was getting smaller. The interior lights were too friendly. I don't like going out when the light pretends to be at home.

"Epsilon to Krone," radioed the pilot, whose name I hadn't remembered because fear was wearing shoes that were too loud in the hallway. "Decouple in three, two..."

The jolt comes when the steel severs the umbilical cord. Then it's just you, the dome, and everything outside. The water hit, heavy, slow, with the patience of those who don't wear a watch. We didn't fall. We let ourselves be taken.

"Low fifty," Narek said, as if he were the priest of a number-eating god. "Pressure rising. Stabilizers green."

"I read noise," Helene murmured, "below the fundamental frequency. Like... a heartbeat in concrete."

"That's the old man," I said. "Or PRAE, that's trying to flatter you."

“I won’t be flattered,” said Voigt.

“Everyone can be flattered,” I said. “Some just call it*doctrine*."

Depth of one hundred. The light became an idea. The spotlight hung before us like a question someone had forgotten to answer. Small things glided by—plankton, curious creatures that looked as if someone had messed up the origami instructions. I thought of Melorai and how we'd always believed you could build anything on water, as long as you paid the bills. The old man laughed somewhere, very quietly.

"Contact," reported the pilot. "The trench wall. Encrustations, drill marks. Station equipment, alt. Delta-7+ anchor points."

"That was their outpost," said Helene. "He sat down. Or was sat down."

The spotlight glided over metal that looked like candle wax in a church that had been spared the flood. A signboard that had once been inscribed with pride, now only teeth marks and sand deposits. I felt the ring warm in my hand. Not hot. Awake.

"Darym," Aeryn said over the com, soft, soft—the kind that saws through walls. "I've got your signal. PRAE isn't active on the channel. The old man... is listening."

"I can't invite him for coffee," I said. "But I can knock."

I knocked. Not on metal. Inside me. Three-one-one-two. The thing didn't respond. The thing was old enough to be able to ignore me.

“Even deeper,” said Voigt.

The ball trembled as the trench took us. Darkness took on weight. Sounds became softer, but closer. Two hundred feet deep. Three hundred feet deep. I forgot how big the world was above. I forgot how small we are here. I didn't forget what it's like when pressure pulls at your ears, until even the good memories crunch.

"There," said Helene. "Condensation. A field. Something like... tissue."

I saw it too: a surface that wasn't stone, not wreckage, not a filter. It looked like skin that had never learned to like hair. The spotlight swept over it, and small shadows moved as if dancing to a song I didn't recognize.

“Don’t touch,” Aeryn said promptly.

"Good advice," said Voigt, raising his hand inside the sphere as if he could feel the grippers outside. "But we're not here just to stare."

"Wrong reflex," I said. "Staring is your best weapon. Every touch is a contract."

"Help me," Helene whispered, not knowing to whom. Perhaps to herself. "If that... is alive..."

"Everything's alive," I said. "The question is how long it remembers."

We brought Epsilon closer. Very close. So close that the small movements on the surface clashed with our vibrations. The ring burned. I heard my own heartbeat and another, longer one beneath it. I beat against my own rhythm, as if I had something to prove.

“What do you want?” I said loudly, even though everyone in the sphere knew I didn’t mean Voigt.

It answered. Not in my ear. In the sphere. The displays flickered. A sentence was written there, in a font that wasn't actually a font. I read it anyway: More.

“More what?” asked Voigt.

"More depth," I said. "More time. More... us."

“It only says what you want to hear,” he growled.

“Or it says what we can,” I said.

"Move," Narek said. His voice wavered. "Sideways. Quickly."

The spotlight ripped across. Shadows sprinted along the wall. Not fish. Not humans. Something with joints that wanted to be in two places at once. I raised my hand, even though I knew the ring wasn't a gun.

"Stay calm," Voigt said, placing his thumb on the trigger of the defense probe. "We won't fire first."

“You have just learned*not first*to say," I murmured. "Proud of you."

"Shut up."

The shadows disappeared. A wave ran across the surface that wasn't one, and I felt the sphere nod forward, as if politely addressing an old aunt.

"I have your frequency," Aeryn said in my ear. "If you give me the signal, I'll put the push-pull underneath. Not hard. Just... contour."

“Get ready.”

I hit again. Three-one-one-two. Pause. Three-one-one—then something ripped the beat out of my hand. Not with force. With routine. As if a pianist had placed my fingers on the keys because he wanted to show me how the melody really plays.

“PRAE?” Helene breathed.

"No," I said. I knew it. "This is too old for greed."

“Then it is…?”

"The host," I said. "And we're standing in his hallway, stomping."

"Darym," Aeryn said, quickly and sharply. "I see a second pattern in your field. Not Oldie.*New.“*

"Where?"

"On your pulse. Like someone's using your ring as an entrance."

I gritted my teeth. "Echo."

"Here," he scratched. "Someone has a back door. They're whispering*Back*into your hand.”

“Who?” I hissed.

"Council Relay. Or Crown. Or... someone who loves protocols."

Sure. Of course. Why should it ever be easy if people can press a button?

“Voigt,” I said. “Someone is radioing*Back*into my channel. Not Thalyari."

He looked at me like I was a sodden dog in his living room. "Our canals are clean."

“Not your politics.”

"Stop. Narek, cut."

"Cut not possible," beeped Narek. "Tunnel closed. Feedback."

The surface vibrated. Not threateningly. A little… irritated. Like a cat that you've stroked in the wrong place for the second time. I countered it with my rhythm, softer this time. An offer. Not the contract Voigt wanted to sign later. A*We are here. We are not blind. We are not forever stupid.*

"Darym," Aeryn said. "Put it lower. Not on the three. On the two. He's old, he likes it in his belly."

I went down. Two-one-one-zero. The ring crept into my arm, hot, old, wrong, and right. The bullet sank with it. Voigt said nothing more. Sometimes even commanders know when they're just extras.

Then the radio broke. Not broken.*Adopted.*The displays became silent, so silent that even Voigt realized that commands have no sound here.

The area opened up.

No hatch, no gate. A*Give in*with dignity. A hollow appeared, smoother than death, swallowing the headlights, and behind it a corridor that looked like a vault in a church where water is worshipped and hope is known only as a primer. We slid in. I wanted to say something. I said nothing. Every now and then I do clever things.

"That... isn't rock," Narek stammered. "They're shells. Layers. As if... someone..."

"...built," Helene finished. "From what flows. Not from what falls."

Threads hung in the vault. Not like spiders. Like musical staves. Things moved along them, slowly, carefully, as if they were helping one think.

"We are not armed enough," Voigt said quietly, and I liked him at that moment because he said it.

"We're armed enough," I said. "We have ears."

In the very back, where light has ideas, something shimmered. Not bright.*Present.*I knew this was the moment when people write poems to hide their trembling. I don't know a good poem. I only know phrases you say when your legs go weak.

"We're refugees," I said. "Not looters. We pay with our hands, not our teeth."

The ball rotated slightly, as if the room had nodded.

"Darym," Aeryn said, so quietly I felt sick. "I have an overlay. Three signatures. One*Old*. One*New*. One*mixture*."

"Mixture?"

"PRAE is trying to figure it out. The old man is holding him out the door. And someone... is helping him in. Guess who."

"Krone?" Voigt asked, growling before I could answer. "Who has access to our deep pumps?"

“Anyone at the top wants to win an election,” I said, “by proving that the aliens are monsters.”

The ball jerked. No pressure.*Call knocking.*The area in front of us formed patterns, circles within circles, three lines within a circle — I knew the sign from an old fear that had once*balance*Only here it wasn't a threat. It was etiquette.

"He wants an answer," said Helene. "In child language."

"Let's give him one," I said, raising my hand, ring forward. "Circle. Three lines. Our sign is: We share. We don't take."

I drew in the air, and the sphere traced—small pulses from magnets, a gesture in the water. The surface smoothed out. A breath passed through the corridor, which no pump had created. I heard Aeryn swallow. Voigt still had her finger on the shutter release. Helene wept. Silently.

"There," Narek, much too bright. "Side break. Sigma drones reporting hostiles. Repeat: hostiles. They're coming through the..." He paused. "They're coming*through us*."

The PRAE beat jumped into my wrist like a rat leaving a ship and using your leg as a ladder.*Back*, it whispered.*Back, back, back.*I slammed against it three-one-one-two, deeper, harder, dirtier. The old man put his weight on it, not brutally. He didn't like violence. He liked heaviness.

"Defense firing," the pilot gasped. The sphere vibrated as if we had peed against a bell. I saw them in the periphery—things that had once resembled humans, now only intentions with teeth, trying to get into the sphere at the edge, not with claws, with*Beat*.

"Don't shoot," I hissed. "Sing."

“I’m an admiral,” Voigt snarled, “not a damn choirmaster.”

"Today already." I set the sequence, Aeryn applied the push-pull, Helene searched for the frequency in which grace could dwell. The surface responded, we became part of a wave that rolled not outside, but inside. PRAE snapped, slipped, snapped again. The old man pressed. Not like a hammer. Like*tide*.

“He’s helping us,” Helene said, and I wasn’t sure if she was talking about me.

The mixing signature flickered. A brief silence. Then a scream in the metal that only I heard:*Give me here.*Not the old one.*PRE.*Offended, polite, insulted, hungry.

“Not today,” I said.

The wave rolled back. Three of the things detached themselves, like seaweed that has become too dull in the light, and slid away, upwards, to where election posters hang and people believe the ocean can be contained in numbers. Two slammed into the wall that wasn't one and were gently dismantled—no blood, no triumph. The old man doesn't make victories. He makes*Order*.

The displays came back. The radio started breathing again. Voigt lifted his finger from the shutter button and looked at me as if I'd just saved his life in a bar and stolen his beer. "What was that?"

"Diplomacy," I said. "With better speakers."

“And upstairs?” Aeryn.

"Someone upstairs is screaming 'sabotage,'" Echo said, so dryly I could have married him. "The Crown has an internal alarm:*Thalyari attack.*And someone distributes it. Very quickly."

Voigt cursed, seriously, quietly. "I'll kill people when we get to the top."

"Kill the right ones," I said. "Not the loud ones."

The space before us did not close. It remained open. An invitation. Not a trap. Or at least the best traps in the world pretend to be. I saw the hollow, I saw the second dome behind it, larger, darker—a cathedral. No man had built it. No god either. It was*Water*, who had an idea and time. That's all you need for architecture.

“We're going in,” I said.

“We’re leaving,” Voigt said at the same time.

Silence in the sphere. The kind of silence that drives people into duels. I raised my hand. "First sentence: We go in. We negotiate. I'll talk. Second sentence: If someone up above continues*Back*yells, breaks the roof off us, and then only negotiates with pressure. Third sentence: If we leave now, we'll be enemies next time. Because you don't ignore invitations."

Helene wiped her eyes. "If we go in and that's a mouth..."

"...then it will eat us politely," I said. "And we'll finally die in a way that I find aesthetically pleasing."

Voigt looked at the ceiling of the sphere as if he could see Atlantis Prime through a hundred meters of water. He heard the noise we couldn't hear. The voices he knew. The politics that had made him great and that now wanted to force him to be small. Then he nodded. Once. "One minute. No more."

We glided forward. I placed my hand on the window. The ring was cold, like the laughter of a reasonable person. The cathedral hall welcomed us. Not a shrine. A*Node.*Lines converged, threads of current, forces that didn't speak to each other until they arrived here, yet somehow set a table.

It smelled—ridiculous that I can say that underwater—of wood. Of old boats. Of stories people tell when they come home from fishing and no one believes them. I breathed shallowly, as if air were more valuable now. The old man was there. And PRAE was there, the offended guest who criticizes the house's music because it's not on his playlist.

"Listen," I said to myself. "We're the ones who stay short. We don't take. We build around you. We pay. With protection. With sweat. With—"

The ball vibrated. Not loudly. A*Yes*, which was not one. A weight that was moving towards*toleration*I could have screamed with relief if a siren hadn't simultaneously shot out of the com, so sharp that even the water shuddered briefly.

"Atlantis Prime to Epsilon: Emergency. Attacks on three sectors. Internal sabotage confirmed. Thalyari moved to detention areas. Council closed. Repeat: Council closed."

“They’re throwing us in cages,” I said.

"Only if we give them time," Voigt growled. His expression was no longer angry. He was tired. That's what makes people dangerous.

"I have something for you," whispered Aeryn. "A package. Flow path*Retreat small*. If you tell the old man we have to go, give him this. It's... a souvenir."

“I thought we’d bring presents later,” I said.

“Later is now.”

I played the beat, small, clean, orderly, like someone shaving for an appointment. Two-one-two-zero. The cathedral answered. A circulation arose in the cavity—ridiculously fine, yet large enough to carry drones, pull people, and steer ships, if they asked nicely.*Away*, not upwards.*On the side.*An annex in the city called water.

“He gave us something,” said Helene, sounding as if she wanted to pray.

"We'll give it back," I said. "In pieces. In teeth. In years."

"Time," said Voigt. "We're out."

As we left the hollow, something moved along the edge. Not a monster.*Body.*Big. Slow. I never saw the entire form, I saw only curves, as if someone had shaped waves into muscle strands. One eye didn't open because it didn't need to. I nodded to him the way you nod to neighbors in the stairwell, with the silent request:*Don't party tonight.*The body moved on.

Epsilon rose. The dome didn't close. It didn't forget us. And PRAE? It cursed in my ring like a child whose lighter has been taken away.*Back*, it hissed again, more faintly. Echo giggled, offended.

"Upstairs," said Aeryn. "Prepare for lies."

The ball broke through layers that had needed us and hit water that only*tolerates*The radio became clear, too clear.*Propaganda clear.*"Thalyari delegation detained," a spokesman yelled. "Security incident. Gunfire in Delta Sector. All units..."

“These were not*our*units,” I said.

Voigt inhaled as if he were whistling a bullet. "Not mine. But they wear our badges."

The Crown's airlock admitted us again. Glass, steel, cold that pretends to be hygienic. When the door opened, a line of soldiers stood there, helmets tinted, weapons lowered, but hands not relaxed. The Admiral—the one who counts down here—stepped forward. She looked first at Voigt, then at me, then at the sweat on our necks. She didn't need a report. Good people read skin.

"Your advisory level messed up," I said, before Voigt began his teeth-gritting diplomacy. "We cleaned it up. And the old man didn't eat us. He gave us a way."

“And you paid him?” she asked.

"With what we have," I said. "With the promise not to lie if the city asks if water can talk."

“Then tell her,” she said.

A second row moved behind her. Different uniforms. Different helmets. Different teeth. Politics in boots. A man with a mouth like a line stepped forward. "In the name of the Council: The Thalyari delegation is being taken into protective custody. Security situation unclear. Suspected tampering with critical infrastructure."

Voigt raised his hand. "Over my dead body."

The man smiled the way people smile when they know where the paperwork is. "If it has to be."

I stepped forward before Belon, Maeyra, and Selyr could make the air heavy with their words. "Here's the deal," I said. "You lock us up, and you lose the only one who can speak with the Deep Voice without roaring. You lock us up*not*and you might get a city that doesn't break its fingers on the valve."

“Threat?” asked the stick mouth.

"Service announcement," I said. "With a humorous twist."

Aeryn slapped my back lightly, as if I had just held on during a tug-of-war. Voigt took a step so he was between the man and us. Admiral Siya came beside him, shoulder to shoulder—two people who disliked each other but hated the same lump in their throats. I liked that image.

"They're not locking anyone up," she said. No sirens. No threats. Just*Agree*who knew where the locks were. "They unlock the ones that*Back*-channel opened.”

“Evidence?” the line.

"Two protocols, three log files, a bathysphere full of witnesses, and an ocean that isn't drowning us right now because we touched it politely," I said. "Start with the ocean. It doesn't lie."

Silence, this time the political kind. Then the station weighed. Not physically.*In the head.*You could see men and women down here calculating: votes, risks,

tomorrow's headlines. The weapons lowered slightly. The sticky mouth cut the smile into two boring halves. "For the time being. Negotiations will continue in a small circle. Delegations will remain within reach."

“Within reach,” I said, “means that someone always has a hand on our necks.”

"Within reach," said the Admiral, "means I'll place my hand between your neck and your fingers. Come."

We left. Not in chains. Not free. Just in time to keep talking, knowing that every word tonight would appear in two records:*human*and*seaside*.

On the way to the chamber that she*Deep Conference*called, the ring vibrated one last time. Not loudly. A*Remember.*I paused briefly, placing my hand on the bulkhead as if it were smooth enough for honesty.

"We'll be back," I whispered. "With less noise. With better questions."

It didn't answer. Of course not. The old man is in no hurry. Hurry is for people with calendars.

Aeryn raised her eyebrows. "And?"

"He's keeping us in mind," I said. "And PRAE is grumbling. He now knows that it's not the king here."

"When were kings ever the problem?" she murmured. "It's always the courtiers."

I laughed. "Then let's drink to the court intrigue."

"Not today," said Voigt. "Today we're making history. And tomorrow someone will try to rewrite it."

“And us?”

“We remain the footnote that no one can get rid of,” he said.

The door to*Deep Conference*opened. Inside sat the council. Not smiling. Not hissing.*Waiting.*That's worse. Waiting means someone has already made a decision and just wants to know if you notice.

I stepped over the threshold and thought of Melorai, of our evaporating skies, of the salty laughter of people who still go swimming. I thought of the

cathedral hall and the quiet*Yes*And to PRAE, who was grinding his teeth in my ring because he realized that not every door is his club.

"Let's get started," I said. "This time with less drama and more water."

"And with one truth," said Admiral Siya, placing a handful of evidence on the table. "That someone up here tried to drive this city into war."

The silence in the hall was thick as oil. The sea roared above us. Not approving. Not angry.*Present.*

Cliffhanger? Sure. The old man knows drama: There was a crack in the line, a sound like ice being carefully broken to reveal a pool. And then, quietly, anciently, without grammar:

Even deeper.

Chapter 11 - Voices of Fear

I've heard a lot of shit in my life—swearing from sailors, threats from politicians, the screeching of metal bulkheads when they no longer hold water. But nothing has thrown me as quickly as that first scream in the conference room. It didn't come from a mouth. Not from a throat. It came from the station's loudspeakers, as if someone had decided to broadcast hell on VHF.

The council jumped to their feet like wind-up puppets. One yelled "Sabotage!" Another snarled "This is an attack!" and someone actually drew a gun. I stayed seated. I knew that if you were the first to run, you'd be the first to be shot, because they'd think you knew where to go.

"That... wasn't from our channels," Aeryn said quietly. She sat next to me, her eyes wide, her hand over the comm. "That was... a direct feed."

“From whom?” asked Voigt, his voice a growl.

"From the one who doesn't need an invitation," I said. "PRAE."

But before any of us could say "virus" or "infection" again, the next sound came. Not a scream this time. A whisper. Very soft. Too soft. Everyone heard something different. The people heard human voices—the cries of wives,

children, brothers long dead or far away. The Thalyari heard songs from Melorai, ancient laments sung only at funerals.

And me? I heard my mother. And that was impossible.

She had died twenty currents ago, and even if she had lived, her voice couldn't be down here, in the middle of a human station that looked as if someone had forgotten that concrete doesn't float.

"Darym..." she breathed. Not from the speaker. Directly in my head. "Darym, you're going to lose us. You're going to lose us all."

I almost stood up, but pulled myself back. Aeryn looked at me as if she'd just seen me drowning inside. "You hear something too."

“I listen too much.”

Chaos erupted in the hall. Guards pointed weapons at shadows that weren't shadows. A diplomat punched another in the face, believing he'd spat in his ear. Maeyra stood in the middle, her arms raised as if she could pull the noise apart with her bare hands. She sang—an ancient Thalyari chant, deep, vibrating. For a moment, silence descended upon the room. Only for a breath. Then came the next scream.

This time it was so loud that even the glass of the dome shook.

The glass vibrated, and everyone looked upward, as if they could escape the screaming if they just stared at the stars. But there was nothing there, except the endless blackness and the reflection of their own faces. A diplomat collapsed, clutching his chest and screaming, "My heart, my heart!" – as if someone were ripping it out. But on the monitor, we saw that his heart was beating, cleanly, strongly. He wasn't dying. He only believed it.

"They're hunting us with our own fears," Aeryn murmured as she worked on her com device. "This isn't real." I laughed harshly. "What do you mean, real? When I hear it, when it makes my knees weak and sweat break out on my forehead, then it's real enough."

Voigt yelled something about "evacuation," but no one listened. The guards had already beaten themselves half-mad, because every bullet they didn't fire had, in their minds, already been buried in the head of the man next to them.

Then came the second wave.

No scream, no whisper—this time it was a choir. Voices, many voices, so many that they overlapped, like when you've drunk too much liquor and order from three different waiters at the same time. The voices were singing. And the song wasn't a song, it was a threat.
"You belong to us. You belong to us." Over and over again, a mantra. I swear, even the ceiling panels started humming the beat.

Aeryn grabbed my arm. "We have to get out of here. This is a reinforcement field. The entire station is being poisoned."

"Poisoned?" I laughed bitterly. "We were already poisoned before we came here."

Nevertheless, I followed her. We pushed through the crowd, stumbling over two officials who had ripped each other's throats out—not because they had to, but because the voices had convinced them that only one could survive.

We reached the corridor. It was empty. Too empty. The screams were muffled here, but not gone. They hung on the walls, crawled beneath our feet.

And then I heard them. Not the crowd. Not the mantra. But her. "Darym..." I stopped. "Shut up." "Darym, why did you leave me alone?" I froze. That was my mother's voice. "She's dead," I murmured. "You're dead." "Dead? No. We're here, in the water, always here. We wait." My throat was dry as the desert. I felt Aeryn's gaze, but I couldn't stop staring at the nothingness.

Voigt appeared behind us, breathing heavily. "It's spreading. Entire decks are going berserk. I've seen men bite off their tongues just to stop hearing the whispers."

Aeryn growled, "Those aren't voices. They're patterns. Introduced through the energy supply. They eat into the nervous system."

“Then why do I hear my mother?” I asked, too loudly, too angrily.

No one answered. Only the voices.

We followed the screams into the technical sector. There was the heart of the station—cable bundles, amplifiers, relays. And in the middle of it all: black nets. Not cables, not metal. Something organic. Like veins growing out of the wall, with fine pulsating lights flickering in time with the voices.

"Shit," said Voigt. "This isn't a sabotage device. It's... grown."

I stepped closer, too close, as always. The lights in the weave reacted immediately. They flared, flashed—and suddenly the station was gone. I stood on Melorai again, barefoot in the water, the sky burning. My mother smiled. "You will save us."

I almost fell because my body knew this wasn't real. But my mind still believed it.

"Darym!" Aeryn's voice was distant. "Get out of there!" She grabbed me, pulled me away. And the picture shattered like glass.

All that remained was the net. And in my ear, a whisper: "Free us."

"We have to burn it," Voigt growled, raising his flamethrower. "Do that, and the whole station will go with it," Aeryn said coldly. "That thing is connected to the power supply. It's no longer a foreign body—it's the system."

I still stood there, trembling. "No." "What, no?" "This isn't an attack. This is a call." "A call?" "Yes," I said, and my voice sounded so foreign that I barely recognized myself. "They're not listening to us. They're not talking to us. They're talking through us. We're their antennas."

Silence. Then Voigt, bitterly: "You mean we've been infected for a long time." "No," I murmured. "Worse. We're their loudspeakers."

We tried to disconnect the network. Tariq came over, with his cursed cables and equipment, and explained that the signal wasn't a signal, but a resonance. "It's like when you sing to an ocean and it responds. Only this one screams back."

But the worst came when the voices stopped screaming. Because you can still ignore screams. But when they started whispering like lovers in bed, I knew: This is worse.

They no longer said, "You belong to us." They said, "We belong to you."

And that's when I realized that fear isn't just a tool. It's a currency. And we were about to pay the ultimate price.

The whispering crept into the wiring. It wasn't just in our heads anymore; it was in the lamps, in the valves, in the breath of the air conditioning units. Every circuit hummed the same melody, as if the station itself had decided to become our enemy.

"Deck Four is offline!" someone yelled over the com. "They... they've started cutting their own skin!" Then, just static.

Aeryn gritted her teeth. "If this continues, everyone here will die before we even know who's attacking us."

I stared at the web pulsing on the walls like a giant, beating tumor. And I felt it in my bones: It was listening to us. "What do you want?" I screamed. "What the hell do you want?!"

The whisper answered. Not loudly. Directly inside me. "We want to go back."

My throat tightened. "Back? Where to?" But then a laugh sounded. A warm, human laugh. My mother. Her again. "To you, Darym. Into you."

I staggered. Aeryn grabbed me, pulling me away with force. "Don't listen! They're digging into your memories. They know you better than you know yourself."

“Then I’m done for,” I muttered.

We tried to evacuate the corridor. But every step was a gauntlet of corpses, blood, and broken helmets. Some had thrown themselves into the airlocks as if the vacuum were a relief.

On Deck Six, we found a group of technicians. They had sewn their ears shut with rusty wires. One grinned at us, his lips torn: "We can't hear them anymore. Now we're free." Then he collapsed. Dead.

Voigt cursed. "We can't save an entire fleet if one station is already ruined like this!"

I laughed dryly. "Welcome to the Council of Fear. First rule: No one survives long enough to make a second rule."

We reached the command center. Darkness. The screens were black, only faint glowing lines like water veins ran across the consoles. "It's taken over the systems," Aeryn whispered. "Not as a hacker. Not as code. As... an organism."

“You mean the station is alive?” asked Voigt.

"No," I murmured. "She's dying. And we're dying with her."

I sat in the captain's chair, in a way I shouldn't have. The surface felt warm. Almost human. And then it came. Right in my head, as clear as a slap in the face. "Help us, Darym."

I wanted to scream, but instead I laughed. "Help us? You just killed hundreds!"

"We had to. So you could hear us."

Aeryn stepped forward. "Who are you talking to?" "With... with everyone," I said. "Or maybe just one."

The voice flickered, becoming many voices, a chorus again: "We are many. We are one sea. But we need a harbor."

And then everything fell silent. A moment of absolute silence. So quiet that you could hear your own lungs gasping.

Then all hell broke loose.

All the displays lit up at once. Images, videos, fragments. People laughing. People dying. Faces of dead people I had never seen, but who called me by name.

“Darym.” “Darym.” “Darym.”

It was no longer fear. It was possession.

I ripped the chair free and hurled it against the wall. Sparks flew. But the voices just laughed.

Aeryn grabbed me roughly by the collar. "Listen, you bastard: Either you stop listening to them now, or we're all done for."

I stared at her. And laughed again. "That's the problem, Aeryn. I'm not listening. I'm hearing myself. And that scares me more than anything."

At that moment, the floodgates opened. The air almost swept us away. And outside, in the darkness, I saw them: shadows swimming through the ice. Figures, half human, half current. They came closer. And the voices chorused:

“Open.”

The shadows pressed against the glass front. No fish, no familiar life forms. Something else. Something that looked like us, but wasn't like us. Their movements were unnaturally fluid, as if out of time with the water.

"Lock the locks!" Voigt yelled, running to the consoles. Nothing responded. The network pulsed like a heartbeat above the keys.

Aeryn drew her blade. "If they come in here, it's over." "Too late," I said.

The glass bent. It really bent. Any engineer would have sworn that these armor plates would never give way. But they bent, as if someone outside were pulling on them with their fingers, purely by gravity.

And then it broke.

Water rushed in, like a fistful of ocean pounding into our chests. We were tossed around, screaming, fighting for breath. And they came in.

Three of them. Tall, bony silhouettes. Skin like shimmering scales, eyes like mercury. But the faces... the faces were a distortion of our own. Like bad copies, like nightmares that had stolen our faces.

One approached me, smiling. "Darym." "If you already know my name," I spat at him, "then you also know I'm not a good host."

I plunged the knife into his chest. No blood. Just a current. The thing disintegrated like smoke in the water – and resurfaced behind me.

"That's a joke," I muttered. "A bad, damn joke."

We fought. Or thought we were fighting. But every blow fell flat. Every hit was swallowed up. They weren't here. Or too here. I couldn't tell.

Aeryn screamed, hacked, and stabbed, but the figures just laughed. Voigt fired the plasma gun. The light cast shadows, but the shadows returned like hungry dogs.

And the voices? Louder. "Help us." "Guide us." "Be our haven."

It was no longer a whisper. It was a storm in my head.

I fell to my knees, water up to my neck. I wanted to scream, wanted to pray, wanted to puke – but I laughed. Because it was all so damn pointless.

"You want a harbor?" I screamed. "Then drown in me!"

And for a moment there was silence.

The figures paused. They looked at me. Their eyes turned black. And then they began to sing.

Not words. Not language. A chant so old it tasted like salt in water. A song that vibrated in my blood. I felt my gills tighten, my heart skip a beat.

Aeryn grabbed me. "Darym! Break free!" But I couldn't. I was the song. I was the voice.

"You see?" my mother whispered. "It was never fear. It was memory."

I saw images. Melorai, millennia ago. Our ancestors negotiating with alien beings who looked like these shadows. A pact. A curse. A promise.

And then a betrayal. Not from them. From us.

The voices now screamed. No longer pleading, but demanding. "Give us back what is ours!"

The glass finally shattered. Water and darkness engulfed the room. Aeryn dragged me through an emergency hatch, Voigt behind us, coughing, half-conscious. We stumbled into a narrow corridor, the door closed, and the emergency barriers lowered.

Silence. Only our breathing. Only my heart, racing as if it were about to burst.

Aeryn looked at me, her eyes filled with fear—but not just of the shadows. Of me. "Darym... what did you give them?"

I couldn't answer because I didn't know myself.

We reached the upper section. Panic was everywhere. Soldiers were firing into empty corridors. Civilians pressed themselves against the walls, some screaming, some muttering words as if they had absorbed the choir.

"They're infecting us," Voigt gasped. "Not with a virus. With memories."

“Memories?” asked Aeryn.

"Yes," I murmured. "And fear... is the first stage."

I fell against the wall. And there it was. Again. The voice. "Darym. It's time."

"For what?"

"For the next step. You are our messenger."

"I'm shit," I whispered. But my hands were shaking, and my veins were roaring like a river in a storm.

The station's loudspeakers crackled. And then it came:

Not my voice. Not Aeryn's. Not Voigt's. It was the choir.

But he spoke with my tongue.

"There are many of us. We are back. And we are no longer afraid."

Everyone froze. Everyone looked at me. And in their eyes, there was more than just fear. In some, there was hope.

I wanted to scream that those weren't my words. But the truth was: a part of me knew they were. And that frightened me more than any shadow on the glass.

The silence following the announcement was worse than the attack itself. No scream, no gunshot, no sound except the dull drip of water seeping through cracks in the ceiling. Everyone in the hall stared at me as if I had just pronounced sentence.

Voigt pushed in front of me, his weapon raised, but his hands shaking. "Tell me that wasn't you, Darym." "I..." I began, but my voice broke. I knew he saw the truth in my eyes.

Aeryn stepped in. "He was checked." "Or he let them in," Voigt growled.

"I didn't let anyone in," I snarled. "Damn it, I'm fighting here just like you."

"Wrong." Voigt's eyes were hard. "You're speaking for them. And that means you're more dangerous than any of those shadows."

His words cut through the hall like a knife. The civilians stepped back. Some wept, others whispered—and a few nodded, as if they agreed with Voigt's suspicions.

"Let's not forget," said Aeryn, sharp as steel, "who held the doors shut in the first place. Without him, you would all have drowned by now."

Voigt spat on the floor. "Or he opened them for us."

The tension in the room was like a taut cable. Every breath threatened to snap it.

Then the speakers crackled again. My throat tightened.

"Darym," it whispered. "Darym, open for us."

This time it wasn't just in my head. Everyone heard it. Everyone saw my lips moving, even though I wasn't speaking.

The crowd screamed. Panic broke out. Soldiers raised their weapons, one aimed directly at my head.

"Get down!" Aeryn yelled, pushing me aside and knocking the soldier to the ground. Shots echoed, plasma blasts ripped into the ceiling. Sparks rained down, and the hall became a cauldron of screams and smoke.

I crawled between the legs, searching for cover. But wherever I looked, there were eyes. Fingers pointing at me.

“Traitor!” “He belongs to them!” “Kill him!”

I could have screamed that it wasn't true. But that wouldn't have meant anything to anyone.

We fled through a maintenance shaft. Aeryn pressed her hand over my mouth, pulling me behind him with brute strength. Behind us, we could still hear gunshots, screams, the echoes of the crowd, more afraid of me than of the shadows outside.

When we finally arrived in a quiet section, I fell against the wall, gasping for breath.

"I didn't let them in," I whispered. Aeryn looked at me for a long moment. Her eyes weren't full of suspicion like Voigt's, but they weren't free of doubt either. "Perhaps not," she said quietly. "But they chose you."

We sat in the semi-darkness, the water seeping from the ceiling, dripping rhythmically like a heartbeat.

"Why me?" I asked. "Why not one of the scholars, or one of the councilors? Why me?"

Aeryn shrugged. "Perhaps because you don't believe in them." "What do you mean?" "Because unbelievers are the best messengers. They don't doubt themselves, they just doubt everything else."

I laughed bitterly. "Sounds like I'm exactly the tool they wanted."

"Maybe." She placed her hand on my shoulder. "Or the very tool they can't control."

Before I could respond, we heard a new sound. Not a drip. Not a crack. A slow, deep knock.

From outside. From the ice.

We froze. Three hits. Pause. Three hits. Pause.

"This is... a pattern," whispered Aeryn. "A code," I murmured. "But not from us."

I placed my hand on the glass. The ice vibrated. And again the chorus came—this time not through loudspeakers, not in my head. But directly from the structure of the station itself.

"We are the voices of fear," it said. "But fear is only the beginning."

The ice began to splinter. Cracks ran like veins through the wall, spreading across the entire length of the section.

"Get out of here!" Aeryn screamed, dragging me back. We ran through the passage as the pressure eased behind us, the ice cracked, and water rushed in.

But before everything collapsed around us, I heard it again, clearer than ever before: "You are our echo, Darym. You are our gateway."

We reached an upper chamber, completely soaked, coughing, and panting. Voigt was already there—however he had overtaken us. His gun was in his hand, pointed at me.

"That's enough," he said coldly. "You're going to kill us all."

Aeryn stood between us. "If you shoot, you'll shoot us both." Voigt's finger tensed on the trigger.

"Don't you see?" he growled. "It's speaking through him. Everything that happened—the cracks, the panic, the choir—he's the damn trigger!"

I slowly raised my hands. "Maybe that's true, Voigt. But think about it—if they can speak through me, then that means we can also speak to them through me."

For a moment, only his breathing could be heard. Then he lowered the weapon slightly. Not out of trust. But out of desperation.

"You have one chance," he murmured. "Just one. And if you betray us, I'll kill you. Slowly."

The station shook. Red lights flashed everywhere. The system announced evacuation protocols that were long too late.

The three of us stood in that chamber, the water below us, the ice above us, the voices in my head.

And I knew: This wasn't Melorai anymore. This was something new. Something that began within me.

Chapter 12 - Attack in Ny'Avaris Harbor

Ny'Avaris was never quiet. The harbor was the heart of Melorai—millions of voices, the roar of the current ships, the sirens of the shipyards, the rhythmic beating of the energy pumps that ran like veins through the city. It was a noise you became accustomed to, like your own heartbeat.

But this night it was different. Too quiet.

"You hear it too, right?" Aeryn asked. I nodded. "It's like a breath being held."

We stood on the upper gallery, gazing at the basin in which the fleet floated—massive Leviathan-class carriers, their armor shimmering like scales. Below them, hundreds of smaller ships, ready to plunge into the current. It should have seemed majestic. Instead, it felt like a graveyard.

"They're coming," I whispered, not knowing how. The words just came out of my mouth, like a reflex.

Aeryn looked at me sharply. "When?" "Now."

The explosion came from below, deep in the docks. A jolt went through the gallery, jets of water shot up as the first dome burst. Alarm lights flashed, screaming in a red rhythm. And then they came.

They broke through the tide like an army of nightmares—shadows bearing coral-shaped bones, limbs bent unnaturally, teeth flashing in the emergency light. But they didn't move like beasts. They moved in lines. Precise. Coordinated.

"Shit," Voigt whispered next to me. "This isn't an attack. This is an invasion."

Suddenly, someone screamed. A dockworker who ran away in panic—and was immediately tackled to the ground by a returning man. I recognized the face. One of the men we'd brought into quarantine weeks earlier. Only now his skin shone silver and his eyes no longer seemed human.

"Returnees!" yelled Voigt. "All hands – fire at will!"

Plasma fire ripped through the darkness. The water turned red. Screams, crashes, shattering glass. Panicked movements everywhere as the shadows continued to advance, undeterred, as if each victim were just another step in their dance.

Then everything fell silent. For a moment. And I heard it.

"Darym." The voice. Loud, in my bones, in my head, in the air around us. "Darym, open."

I screamed, "Do you hear that?!" Aeryn looked at me in horror – and nodded. "We hear it. Everyone hears it."

The crowd backed away. "He's the gate!" shouted one. "He let them in!" another.

Voigt raised his rifle, trembling, between me and the shadows. "Tell me that's not true."

I wanted to say something, but the words didn't come from me. They came from within. From deeper down.

"There was never a choice," I said in my own voice—and yet there wasn't. "The water belongs to us."

Chaos broke out again. Shadow creatures stormed through, sabotage blew up the remaining defense towers. The fleet fought—but it fought blindly, without leadership, without order.

Among the rubble, among the blood and fire, I saw her. A figure moving calmly through the chaos, as if untouched by everything. Slender, with eyes that flickered like liquid light.

“Lira,” I whispered.

She turned around and smiled. "Welcome home, Darym."

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I ran with Aeryn toward the control chambers while Voigt and his unit took cover. Screams, water, and blood were everywhere. Children were crammed

into evacuation pods, which were immediately attacked by the Shadows. Glass shattered, bodies floated to the surface. The smell of burning flesh hung in the current like a bitter promise.

"Darym!" Aeryn yelled. "We have to get to the circuits! If we close the locks, we have a chance!"

We reached the control center, but the doors were already open. Smoke billowed out. Inside – saboteurs. No shadows. Thalyari. Our own people.

"What the hell...?" I blurted out. They turned to us, their eyes empty, as if they were just shells. One whispered, "We opened it." Then he blew himself up with a charge in his chest.

The force hurled me to the ground. Aeryn helped me up, blood running down my face. Behind us, the glass of the harbor shattered, water rushing in as the pressure equalizer failed.

“Get out of here!”

We ran back to the docks, stumbling over bodies, dragging wounded behind us. Voigt reappeared, his rifle smoking. "They've disabled the defense towers. This is completely planned!"

I screamed: “From whom?!” “From you, maybe!”

And then we heard it again. The voice. This time not just a whisper, but loudly, through speakers, through the walls themselves.

"Darym is ours. Darym is the gate."

The crowd dispersed. Some fled, some tried to grab me, others stood in front of me protectively. Pure chaos.

And then I saw her.

She walked through the flood as if floating. Untouched by fire, blood, or panic. Slender, eyes like liquid light.

“Lira,” I whispered.

She turned around, her lips forming a smile that meant everything and nothing at once. "Welcome home, Darym."

Voigt immediately raised his rifle. "Who the hell is that?!" "Don't shoot!" I yelled, not knowing why.

She stopped, barely five steps away. "The fleet rises. But not for you."

Then she raised her hand. One of the massive dock doors exploded as if it were made of paper. The shadows stormed in, hundreds this time. Whole waves of them.

Aeryn grabbed my arm. "We have to get out!" "No," I said. "If we leave, they'll take everything."

“Darym, this is lost!”

But I stood there, transfixed. Lira approached, her eyes fixed on me. "You're not lost. You're already one of us."

I felt it—the voices, the water pushing at me as if it no longer belonged to me. My body tingled, hot and cold at the same time.

Voigt yelled: "He's about to fall over! We have to tie him up!"

But then the ground beneath us collapsed. Explosion, tremors, flames, water, bodies. We were torn apart. I sank deeper, drifting between bubbles of smoke and streams of blood, while everything around me sank.

And in the darkness, she was with me. Lira. Whispering, quietly, like a mother to her child. "Let go. Let her die. Come to us."

I wanted to scream. But only water entered my lungs.

And then – silence.

When I opened my eyes, I was no longer in the harbor. I was in a black void, crisscrossed by silver currents. And before me stood she. Lira. But this time she wasn't made of flesh. She was made of water, of shadow, of light.

"You are the key," she said. "You are the beginning. And the end."

And somewhere, far above me, I heard the last screams of Ny'Avaris as the city fell.

The water above me roared as if the entire ocean were breathing at once. The shadows crept deeper, whole swarms of them, and I lost all sense of direction.

My lungs burned, my head pounded, and somewhere inside me, a part that no longer belonged to me screamed, "Come home."

Then a light flashed. Bright. Artificial. A hatch opened beneath me, metallic arms reached into the current, grabbed me, and pulled me into the bowels of a ship. I hit the metal hard, gasping, choking water from my lungs.

"He's alive." The voice was hoarse, dry, like sandpaper. But familiar. I raised my head.

There he stood. Scars on his face, a beard longer than I remembered from the archives, but his eyes – they were unmistakable. Hard. Angry. Alive.

“Captain Jax Mercer.”

He didn't grin. No heroic grin, no proud bearing. Just that damned, tired smile of a man who'd died too many times. "You're Darym, aren't you? The little swimmer who let himself be convinced he was the key."

I coughed up blood, but I had to laugh. "And you're... a ghost." "Maybe," he growled. "But ghosts don't rescue idiots from harbors who are dying from the inside out."

Aeryn stumbled into view behind him, soaking wet, semi-conscious. Voigt dragged her by the arm. Mercer looked at her, taking in the uniform, the wounds, the chaos. "So there are four of us."

I wanted to say something, but outside there was another crash. The ship shook. Sirens wailed.

"They've got us on their radar," Voigt muttered. "No shit," Mercer growled. "Now listen to me: Your war is bigger than you think. Your Returnees, your Shadows—they're not the goal. They're just the vanguard. What happened tonight in Ny'Avaris is just the prelude."

He walked to the console, his fingers flying over old mechanical switches. "And believe me, guys—I've seen an entire damn solar system swim toward the abyss before. This? This stinks of PRAE."

The word cut into my flesh like a knife. PRAE. The project that had almost torn humanity apart. I had read the protocols, the warnings, the legends. But no one had ever said that Jax Mercer had survived.

"You... were there," I whispered. "Yes," he replied coldly. "And if you don't immediately pull your lovely water planet from the grip of this filthy technology, you'll be next."

The ship lurched, metal groaned. Shadow creatures slammed against the hull, clinging, biting, and scratching. Lights flickered.

Mercer drew a weapon, old, rusty, but loaded. "So, Darym—gate or not, Chosen or not. None of us die tonight. Not here. Not now. We're leaving. And after that... we'll talk about ways home."

I stared at him. And somewhere in my skull, Lira whispered, sweetly and dangerously: "He doesn't belong in this world anymore. But you do."

I didn't know who to believe. But I knew one thing for sure: The Hell of Ny'Avaris had just begun—and Captain Jax Mercer was back.

The hull roared as if the entire harbor were collapsing on us. I scrambled to my feet, my fingers still numb from the water, and looked out the viewport.

The harbor basins, where merchant galleys, research domes, and transport gliders normally lay side by side like peaceful shells, were now nothing but a battlefield. Ships were burning underwater—yes, damn it, they**burned**As if fire suddenly ignored the rules of the sea. Black smoke billowed like viscous resin between the currents.

"They're coming in," Voigt shouted, and at that moment one of the steel gates burst apart. Shadowy creatures—not Thalyari, not humans—shoved in. Not swimming, but crawling, like a mass of limbs that couldn't decide where it belonged. Eyes flashed, too many, too greedily.

"Shit," I muttered. "They're already in the dock."

Mercer stepped up beside me, his weapon loosely gripped, as if this were an old dance. "This isn't an invasion, kid. This is a memory." "A memory?" "That's how they started everywhere. Small harbors. Leakage. And then... entire cities. PRAE, current, whatever you call it—it eats the harbor first. Always the harbor."

His gaze was cold as steel, as if he'd seen it a hundred times before. I wanted to respond, but then glass shattered. A shadow crawled through the hatch, half-man, half-fish, with teeth like needles.

Aeryn screamed. I grabbed the nearest tool—a harpoon—and rammed it through the thing's skull. It trembled, writhed, and collapsed in a gush of black fluid. "Don't stop!" Mercer yelled. "If they sense a weakness, you're history!"

We dragged ourselves deeper into the ship. The lights flickered, cables hissed, as if the ship itself had lost interest. Sirens wailed behind us, metal screeched outside as dock doors shattered.

Then, suddenly, silence. Not the good silence. The other kind. The one that makes you feel like something too big, too heavy, is lurking above you.

"Oh, holy currents," whispered Aeryn. "What... is that?"

Something loomed over the dock. A shadow so massive that it obscured half the harbor. No clear shape. Just mass, tentacles, currents, as if the sea itself were trying to squeeze itself into a being.

Mercer looked at it, with that gaze that was older than his body. "Great Mother," he said quietly. "They're already sending the Leviathans in the first wave."

A jolt went through the ship. We were torn loose, hurled through the current, the dock collapsed behind us like a house of cards. Screams echoed through the canals, a thousand voices, then only gurgling.

I clung to the console. "We have to go back! There are hundreds more—" "Dead," Mercer interrupted. No hint of hesitation. "Dead before you can count. Focus on surviving, kid. Death doesn't save anyone."

He grabbed me by the collar and pulled me upright, while outside, the Leviathan swallowed the harbor. A glowing whirlpool, a maelstrom of teeth, flesh, and machinery. The ships disappeared as if no one had ever built them.

And in the middle of it, for a second, I swore I heard a voice. "Darym..." Not Lira. Not my mother. Something else. A voice from deep within that knew how to live inside my head.

I screamed, tore myself free, and slammed against the wall. Mercer pressed the barrel of his gun to my forehead. "Pull yourself together," he growled. "Or you'll be the first person I take out here."

He meant it. And damn it—I believed him.

We drifted through the current, helpless as clamshells in a storm. The ship groaned, its hull creaking as if it were about to be torn apart. I felt the water vibrate, not like a normal tremor—more like the pulsing of a heart larger than any city.

"Hold on tight!" Mercer yelled. He ripped a safety anchor, a magnetic rope, from the wall and hooked it to a strut. The train catapulted us back onto the deck, while outside, the Leviathan slowly swallowed the harbor.

I swear, the thing was grinning. Not with its mouth, but with its entire body. Every time a ship disappeared into the maelstrom, hundreds of eyes lit up, as if it were pleased that we were watching.

"That's not an animal," Aeryn pressed out, panting next to me. "That's a message."

"Wrong," said Mercer. He shouldered the weapon, which looked far too small against this monster. "This is a**warning**."

The first tentacles shot through the dock like whips. A transport glider was split in half, the debris shattered. One of the blows caught our ship's hull. Metal splintered, water rushed in.

"Damn, damn, damn!" I pressed myself against the wall, my hands shaking. And yet I still had to laugh—a dirty, unreal laugh. "And I thought I'd already had shitty days!"

Mercer grabbed me and pulled me to the control console. "You're a navigator, right? Then navigate us the hell out of there!"

"Through what? This thing eats currents for breakfast!" "Then find one that will swallow it!"

I cursed and hacked into the controls. The water outside swirled like liquid glass, distorted, unpredictable. But somewhere beneath it—there was a hole, a shadow in the whirlpool.

"There!" I pointed at the display. "A canal, if we catch him—" "If," Mercer growled, "is the only word that pisses me off more than 'maybe.'"

He stepped on the thrusters. The ship roared, an old, reliable sound. We shot off, straight into the maw of the Leviathan—or into its only gap, who could say.

The pressure was murderous. The metal sang as if it would tear at any moment. My teeth chattered, not from the cold, but because even my bones felt the pressure.

Then – silence.

We flew through the eye of the whirlpool. For a moment, I looked out, and the water was... calm. Dark. A hollow amidst the destruction. And in the middle of it: structures. Buildings, towers, entire streets made of coral metal, old, crumbling—as if the Leviathan itself had swallowed a city and never let go.

"Holy shit," I whispered. "Something's alive in there."

Mercer placed his hand on the window, his gaze heavy. "Not alive," he said. "It remembers."

Then the current swept us out again. We were hurled over debris and through shattered dock walls. The ship crashed into a pier, spinning, until finally everything came to a stop.

Silence. Only drops, the creaking of metal, and my own breath tasting of blood.

"We... are alive?" I asked breathlessly. Mercer laughed harshly. "Seems so. At least until the next wave comes."

And at that very moment, the radio crackled. A voice, deep, clear, familiar, and yet impossible. "Mercer? Jax Mercer?"

Mercer's face changed as if someone had punched him in the stomach. "Impossible," he whispered.

The voice repeated, "Mercer. If you hear this, then you know that first contact has failed. And that we're out of time."

I stared at him. "Who was that?" He didn't look at me. His eyes were fixed on the radio, and something glowed in them that I had never seen in him before: fear.

Chapter 13 - First Contact Breaks

The sky above the assembly zone wasn't the sky—it was ice. Kilometers thick, a frozen roof hanging over us like the fist of a god who had hesitated too long to strike. Below: us. The "Delegation of Melorai," as they called it, although it looked more like a bunch of drowned men draped in shining armor.

I was the fool who had to swim in front. Darym, first representative, proud Thalyari, who was allowed to open his mouth while trying not to vomit into his own fear.

"You look like shit," Mercer muttered next to me. He'd barely recovered since the attack on Ny'Avaris, but still he stood there, teeth gritted, as if he were too proud to drop dead. "Thanks for the encouragement," I growled. "You're welcome."

The people were waiting in front of us. Three ships, all larger than anything we could muster. They had lights that flickered in the water, like the eyes of predatory fish. Diplomats hovered at the viewing windows—nice suits, serious faces, and behind them: men and women with guns, supposedly "just security forces." I know security forces. Those ones were going to shoot.

The first greeting went smoothly. Hands, words, stamped pleasantries. The kind of theater that always lasts until someone coughs and spits blood on the floor.

And then someone coughed. But it wasn't blood. It was black water.

The man on the human side slumped, writhing. His skin discolored, veins shot darkly through his face, as if something were eating him from the inside. Screams. Chaos. Weapons went off.

"This is an attack!" one of the people yelled. "No!" I screamed, "we didn't do anything!" Mercer grabbed my arm. "Shut up. It's too late."

The weapons discharged. First shots, then harpoons, then outright explosions. The water turned into a hell of splinters and smoke bubbles. One of our elders was cut through the heart by a jet of water, a flipper's stroke, and he drifted away like flotsam.

"Back!" someone yelled behind me. "Back to the ships!"

But there was no turning back. The Leviathan was coming.

He wasn't alone this time. Three smaller bodies emerged from the depths, gliding through the water like shadow cats, and each time they struck, metal shattered. Human boats buckled, armor shattered. I swear I heard screams, even underwater.

"This is staged," Mercer gasped. "Someone wants this to fail." "You mean like it's planned?" "No, Darym. I mean like it's inevitable."

I had no answer. I only had the current grabbing me, twisting me, as if to say: Welcome to war.

We tried to maintain formation, but the water itself was boiling as the first torpedoes exploded. Shrapnel pierced the armor of our warriors. One next to me lost half an arm, his blood dissolving in the current like ink in a bowl. He didn't even scream—he simply sank, as if he'd accepted that this was the whole joke of life.

"Stay close to me," Mercer growled. "Humans shoot at anything that moves. And the Leviathans don't discriminate much either."

I tried to pin him down, but then something grabbed my leg. I pulled myself away, turned around—and saw the eyes. Not animal ones. Human ones. An infected, but not one of us. A human, half PRAE, half still himself. His skin was gray, his movements jerky, but his fingers were as precise as scalpels. He had hidden himself in the middle of the delegation.

"The PRAE infection," I gasped. "It's here."

Mercer struck, a knife through the chest, but it was like cutting through butter—the bastard just grinned, his mouth full of black liquid. Then he bit. Not Mercer. Me. Just barely, grazing my shoulder. I felt it burn.

"Darym!" Mercer ripped him away from me, pushing him back with both feet into a pressure wave that crushed him. "Don't let them in," he cursed. "Not with you."

The people had long since lost all diplomatic mask. They shouted orders, fired volleys. Their words were distorted by the water, but the tone was clear: They blamed us.

One of the Thalyari elders shouted at me: "Bring back the map! If they get it, we're lost!" I didn't understand at first, but then I saw: the humans weren't aiming at us—they were aiming at the chest containing the relics. The map of

the current paths, the ancient thing that was supposed to lead us to new water worlds.

"Move!" Mercer grabbed me, pulled me deeper. Two ships collided above us, fire bubbles rose like small suns in the water. Dead bodies floated everywhere.

And then, amidst all the chaos, I heard a voice. Not Mercer's. Not human. Not Thalyaran. Something cold and metallic, coming through every frequency at once.

“First contact: failed.”

The words echoed in my head, not just in my ears. Mercer stared at me. "Did you hear that?" "Yes." "Then we're both doomed."

The water trembled as the Leviathan tore apart the last remaining ships. Sparks glowed, bodies sank. The diplomatic mission was over. All that remained was blood, black water—and the realization that the war had begun in that moment.

And somewhere among the rubble, I saw it: a human helmet bearing the symbol I already knew. PRAE.

First contact hadn't been broken. It had been sacrificed.

The water around me was full of voices, screams, commands—but underneath it all was something else. A whisper. As if the ocean itself were speaking in a foreign language.

I turned around and saw three people pulling off their helmets in panic. They'd been foolish enough to open the visors, as if they'd forgotten they couldn't breathe down here. But instead of suffocating, they breathed. Black streams filled their lungs, and their eyes glazed over, then black. They moved jerkily but purposefully, as if an alien hand had taken over their muscles.

"The infection... it doesn't just want to bite," I gasped, "it can use the whole damn ocean."

Mercer saw it too. "Shit. It's not organic. It's network."

The three of them dived toward us simultaneously, as if they were perfectly synchronized. One grabbed my chest, the second Mercer's neck, the third tried to grab the chest containing the relics. We fought, pushed, and cut, but it was

like fighting mirror images—every blow was anticipated, every movement mirrored.

Then, without warning, they dissolved. Not dead. Not defeated. They dissolved into the water, becoming currents themselves, threading their way through the corridors and wrecks. I swear I heard their laughter long after they were gone.

"That wasn't an attack," I whispered. "That was a test run."

Mercer grabbed my arm. "Then we're now the beta version."

Above us, a Leviathan crashed into a human ship. Metal shattered, fire flowers exploded in the darkness. But I noticed something that shocked me more: The Leviathan wasn't fighting randomly. It was dodging our ships. It was deliberately tearing the humans apart.

"Why...?" I stammered. Mercer understood. "Because someone is controlling it. Or because he has orders."

I didn't know which was worse.

Meanwhile, people were screaming over the radio, screaming for retreat, for fire, for death. One of their commanders yelled: "The Thalyari have betrayed us! They've unleashed the bioweapon!" His words echoed through our translators, and I knew: even if he was lying, even if he was mistaken—it didn't matter. This sentence was now out in the world, and it would take root like poison in an open crack.

We lost more warriors. One of them, Rhael, fought his way to us, blood pouring from a wound on his gill arch. "They're not just hunting us," he gasped, "they're hunting your names. They know the map. They know the current paths."

Mercer grabbed the chest more tightly. "Then we'd better make sure they don't get it."

But then we heard it again. That metallic whisper. It wasn't like a signal, it was like a command, written directly into our brains.

"First contact: failed. Second cycle: begins."

I felt my muscles spasm, as if even my own nanites briefly reacted to that voice. Mercer stared at me. "Did you feel that?" "Yes." "Then we're both half dead."

The ice above us cracked, deep cracks ran through the roof of the world. Light broke in, scattered, as if a thousand eyes were fixed on us. This hadn't been a diplomatic meeting. It was a ritual. A sacrifice.

And we were the idiots who realized too late that we hadn't been invited to talk—but to die.

The current grabbed me as if it wanted to tear me apart, and for a moment I felt as if the ocean itself was against us. Metal flickered everywhere, bodies burst, blood and black water mingled like a new, perverse ink that swallowed all truth. Mercer pulled me on, but my shoulder still burned from that damned bite. It wasn't deep, but it was enough that with every stroke of my fins, I felt something moving inside me. Not physically—mentally. Like a dull echo that didn't belong to me.

“You stay conscious, do you hear?” Mercer growled, dragging me through a cloud of debris as a burning human ship ripped in half and glowing chunks of metal shot past us like shooting stars.

“I’m conscious, damn it!” I lied.

A shock wave hurled us apart as a Leviathan crushed a ship with a single tail lash. My stomach lurched, and not just from the shock. I swear, for a split second, that monster turned its head toward me—and nodded. Not a blind animal. Not a dumb colossus. It had seen me, recognized me.

I shook off the thought and swam back to Mercer, who was now wrestling with two infected. Humans, or what was left of them. Their movements were grotesquely fluid, as if the water itself guided them. Mercer rammed his knife into one of them in the eye, but the bastard was still grinning, biting into the metal of the blade handle until sparks flew.

I grabbed the second one, pushed him against a wall, and felt his body almost liquefy beneath my hands. He laughed—not a sound, but a gurgle that came more from the water around us than from his throat. I screamed, ripping my harpoon spear through his stomach. It burst. No blood. Just a black stream drifting away like wisps of smoke.

"We can't kill them," I gasped. "They're no longer bodies."

“Then we’ll stop them the hell,” Mercer snarled, pulling me along.

Behind us, the ice cap cracked open. Huge floes crashed down like boulders hurled at us by a god. Entire delegations were buried. Ships were crushed. I heard the cracking of armor, the hissing of bursting pressure chambers.

And then that whisper again: “Second cycle: begins.”

It didn't come from outside. It came from within me. Right in my skull.

I held my temples, but it didn't help. Voices, more than one, whispered, screamed, beckoned. Mercer saw it, grabbed me by the throat, and pushed me against the wall of a wreck. "Pull yourself together, Thalyari! If they get you, it's over."

I wanted to answer him, but I couldn't. Instead, I saw images—not of here. Cities of water, but black, full of blades. Humans, Thalyari, machines—all mixed, fused. I saw children with eyes like mirrors, laughing as they swam in a sea of flames. I sensed this wasn't a vision. It was a promise.

"Darym!" Mercer punched me in the face, so hard my head snapped back. "Stay with me!"

I gasped, the pressure eased. The voices grew quieter. But they didn't disappear. They just waited.

"We have to save the map," I pressed. "If they get it, it's over."

"No," Mercer replied, "if they get you, it's over. The map is just paper compared to what's happening in your head right now."

I wanted to respond, but then the ground beneath us shook. Something large moved. At first, I thought it was another Leviathan. But it was worse. Bodies rose from the shattered wreckage of the human ships. No survivors. Dead. Bloated, their helmets shattered, their eyes empty—and yet they moved.

"What the hell...?" Mercer pulled me behind a block of scrap metal. "They even use the corpses."

It was like an army of drowned people. Dozens of them, perhaps hundreds, their limbs limp but purposeful, as if the water itself had bound them to us.

I felt my heart racing. I could barely breathe. But a part of me was laughing. Not really me—something inside me. A cold, cynical chuckle that echoed only inside me.

"See?" it whispered. "You're no different. You're one of us."

“Shut up!” I screamed into the void, and Mercer looked at me as if I had completely lost my mind.

"Darym," he said seriously, "we're not getting out of here alive. But if you fall over, I'll kill you myself, understand?"

I nodded. He meant it. And damn it, I knew I had to be grateful to him for that.

We plunged through the chaos as the dead bodies drifted toward us like a swarm. Spears, knives, every weapon we had was a drop in the ocean. But we fought. We fought because it was the only thing we had left.

And then, in the midst of the inferno, I saw her. A figure among the dead, not decayed, not destroyed. Slender, with gray eyes that flickered like machines. She looked directly at me, as if she'd been waiting just for me.

“We’ll see each other again,” she whispered.

And I knew: she wasn't lying.

The figure stood among the corpses, yet no one touched her. The dead bodies drifted past her as if guided by an invisible current. Her eyes weren't just gray—they were empty, like freshly polished metal, swallowing all light.

"Darym," she breathed. No movement of her lips, only water that seemed to speak for itself.

I wanted to say something, but Mercer poked me in the side. "Don't listen. Screw her."

“She knows my name.”

“Many do, and most want you dead.”

But the woman was moving now—no, not her, but the water around her. It pulled threads that formed into arms that reached into the dead and stood them up like puppets. Entire rows of human bodies suddenly stood vertically in the water, limp and grotesque, yet they moved as if they had joints, muscles, and will.

"Dollmakers," whispered Mercer. "Damned dollmakers."

I didn't know if he meant her or PRAE himself.

The puppets began to move. No wild rush, no chaos—they marched. In order. Rows of corpses swam toward us as if we were merely an obstacle in their path.

I reached for the harpoon, but my hand trembled. Not with fear. With desire. I wanted to strike, wanted to feel their bodies explode. I wanted the blood.

"That's not you," Mercer snarled, briefly knocking the harpoon out of my hand. "Stay with yourself."

"Maybe that's exactly who I am," I gasped. "Maybe I've never been any different."

"Stop playing the philosopher. If you fall over, I'll kill you, remember?"

"Promise me," I whispered, my voice more serious than it should have been.

Mercer looked at me for a long time. Then he nodded.

We fought. Again. Harpoons stung, knives cut, shock waves hurled bodies apart. But they kept coming back, reassembled, as if PRAE were using the ocean itself as a sewing machine. I felt the whispers inside me, with every blow, with every cut. They laughed, they cheered, they screamed: "More, more, more."

I plunged the blade deep into a corpse's belly, pulled it up, and at that moment its eyes opened. Not dead. No longer alive. It looked at me, and there was no hatred in its gaze. There was hunger.

I pushed her away, screamed, and my scream was swallowed by the water.

Then there was a crash. A crack ripped through the ice above us, larger than anything before. Light burst in, bright, as if heaven itself had opened hell. And in the light: shadows. Enormous. Moving.

“Another Leviathan,” Mercer gasped.

"No," I whispered. "Something else."

The figure, the woman with the gray eyes, raised her hands as if welcoming the light. And the crack widened, letting in a flood of current that wrapped around us like a whirlpool.

"Second cycle," she whispered. "Now it really begins."

And then something grabbed me from behind. Hands, cold, slippery, human—but too strong. I was yanked back, and when I looked up, I saw Mercer's face covered in blood. He was fighting, wrestling, and an infected man had his throat in his teeth.

“Mercer!” I yelled.

He tore himself free, but blood gushed into the water, dark red, a torrent that was immediately swallowed by the current. He staggered, clinging to the wreckage, looked at me—and in his eyes was that old, damned glimmer. The glimmer of a man who knew he didn't have much longer.

"Darym," he gasped. "If I fall over, kill me."

I wanted to scream, wanted to say no, but the whirlpool swept him away.

The puppets marched on. The woman smiled. And I heard the whisper in my head louder than ever: "One of you. One of us."

And I knew: The first contact hadn't just failed. It was an invitation.

I dove after him, the whirlpool tearing my ribs apart as if it had teeth. Mercer's blood marked the current like a beacon for things that don't need lights. I caught his arm at the last moment, felt the tendons like wires beneath my hand, felt the trembling behind it, that electric, feverish pain that was no longer just human.

“Don’t let go,” he gasped.

"I'm not your therapist," I snarled, pulling him to the edge of a torn bulkhead. "Breathe. No, not like that. The way people breathe with unpaid bills."

He grinned bloodily. "I don't owe anyone anything."

“I do, you asshole.”

Behind us marched the dolls. Their movements seemed slower, but only because the ocean had changed its tempo. The whispering in my skull laid a new beat beneath it, steady, relentless, the pulse of a stranger's heart. The woman with the gray eyes approached without actually swimming; the water carried her like a cherished secret.

"He's falling," she said gently, as if discussing the weather. "You too, Darym. Just later."

"Later's a luxury, sweetie." I ripped the emergency cap off a med capsule from the tube, ramming the gel under Mercer's skin where his teeth had caught it. A cold tingling sensation crept over my fingers. The gel was a Thalyari blend, made on Melorai: pain reliever, nanite guardian, lies in a vial. It hissed, as if arguing with something that wouldn't give up.

Mercer arched like a bow, cursing rudely in six languages. Then came the silence—that dangerous silence in which men become legends or corpses. He breathed shallowly. His pupils trembled, then narrowed like pinpoints.

"Say it," he growled hoarsely. "Do what you promised."

I raised the blade. Not high. Exactly the way you do when you release someone and later lie to yourself with whiskey. The edge gleamed dully in the scattered light—honest steel for a dishonest world. I held it to his throat, felt the warmth, the film of blood, the trembling beneath.

“One more word,” I said, “and I’ll make you a memory.”

"Then do it." He smiled crookedly. "Or help me live. Anything in between is cowardice."

I would have stabbed her if, at that very moment, the ocean hadn't decided we weren't ready. A dull pressure pushed us aside, as if a hand were adjusting the scene. Overhead, a leviathan passed, so close its skin shifted tide. The woman's gray eyes reflected the blue of its flanks—and for the first time, something flickered in her gaze. Not fear. Recognition. Or anger at being robbed of her stage.

"Leave him," whispered a voice, not hers. A third, distant and quiet, as if coming through a thousand kilometers of water. "He's still needed."

“Lira?” I asked into the void.

The whisper laughed. "Say thanks later."

Mercer exhaled. "You have votes, I have problems. Tie."

The dummies were now with us. One in front, two on the sides, the rest in echelons behind, as if someone in the afterlife had been practicing formation

flying. I stepped forward. Not because I was brave. Because I was angry. It's cheaper and lasts longer.

The first grip came from the left. Quick, clean action—no show. I let him through, twisted the blade into the handle, and gave him the old dockhand trick: blade halfway into the stomach, then up. His body didn't collapse. He stood still, as if checking whether physics was on duty today. Then he slumped backward, silent, dignified, as if he didn't want to disturb.

"They're learning your angles," the woman said. "You'll need new ones later."

“I only have two hands,” I growled, “but ten bad ideas.”

On the right, someone came with a half-shattered helmet, his faceplate shattered, his iris like a metal coin. He grabbed my forearm, and there it was again—that warmer, cold feeling, as if salt-rock fingernails were scratching through my nerves. I dropped the blade, pulled the pulse crackers from the strap loop instead, and slapped them against his temple. The crack ripped through both of us. He fell. I stayed. Barely.

"Darym," Mercer breathed, and I heard the scratch in his voice: "Behind you."

I knew I was too late, so I did something that never helped me: I trusted. I let myself fall, pulling Mercer with me, and the harpoon that was about to take my neck slashed over our heads, hit the side of the boat, and stuck, vibrating as if it felt guilty.

“Nice timing,” Mercer gasped.

"I'm a navigator," I said. "I make mistakes at the right time."

We needed a decision. The map of the flow paths lay less than three arm's lengths away, clamped into the shattered chest, half open, half fate. Two dolls stood in front of it like priests before an altar. The woman with the gray eyes looked at me, and there was that polite regret in her gaze that I hate: "The map goes with us, Darym. And you too."

"Not today."

"Second cycle has already marked you. Don't you feel it?"

I felt it. My bite burned like a candle that doesn't need oxygen. The edges of my vision wove, currents took on edges, edges became patterns, patterns

became... beautiful. That was the meanest thing: It was beautiful. As if someone wanted to caress me with the truth, only to steal my heart in the process.

“I feel like I’ll have a hangover tomorrow.”

“You won’t have a tomorrow.”

“Then I’ll drink double today.”

I jumped. Not elegantly. Effectively. The gap between the dolls was enough for a desperate idiot with pain in his arm and rage in his stomach. I yanked the chest toward me, the hinges screaming like gulls, and the moment I pressed it against me, I saw images again—only none of them were mine: lanes of water like golden threads across star charts, saturation nodes, singular risks, dead seas, broken moons. And everywhere in between, this sign: three claw marks in a circle. PRAE had studied our ways, our sanctuaries. Years, decades. Perhaps longer than we had lived.

"Darym!" Mercer raised the weapon he'd conjured up from somewhere and fired not at the puppets, but at the light. He hit the diffuser lenses of the spotlights, causing the photons to dance and twitch. Shadows tilted, angles broke, the formation stumbled, for only a heartbeat—but that was our heartbeat.

“Get out!” I yelled.

We retreated, step by step, the chest between us, the dolls trailing behind. The woman didn't follow immediately. She stood still, as if she were in no hurry. "You're running. That's good. Movement is evolution. Stillness is memory."

“Then stop and become history,” I shouted.

"I am history," she said kindly. "You are just a footnote."

Then the current hit us. Not water. Radio. A wave ripped through the dead zone, knocking the puppets out of rhythm for a few seconds. A single ping, split into three parts, out of phase. I didn't know the sound—but Mercer did. His eyes narrowed, a smile that's more accurately described as a confession.

"Echo," he said. "The sack's still alive."

"Where?"

“Wherever he is: one step away from the real world.”

That was enough. The puppets hesitated, the woman blinked and looked up as if she could locate the transmitter that had ruined her perfect save. We exploited the gap like thieves. I stuffed the chest into a crease of the hull, braced myself against it, and Mercer picked an old-school lock: two wires, a curse, a click that sounded like a yes.

"Down into the service trench," he gasped. "Where normal people don't spit in voluntarily."

“We are not normal people.”

“Tell that to my lungs.”

We slid into the trench, a narrow channel where pressure bites and visibility becomes a mockery. Above our heads, the march of the dead continued, muffled, as if they were bad neighbors. The current in my head grew quieter, but not benign—more insulted. Outside, the Leviathan pushed past the dome again, and for a moment, in the blue light, I saw its eye. In it, something that looked like patience.

“He keeps them away,” I said.

“Or he keeps us in.”

“Well done.”

After thirty meters, the trench ended in a filter gate. Dented, half-dead, but still closed. Mercer braced himself against it; I heard his ribs crack, thinking those were sounds that would later be romanticized in songs. I placed my hand next to it. The handle was cold, the skin felt foreign. My arm wasn't responding the way I wanted it to. This was new. This wasn't good.

“Darym.”

"I know."

“If you fall, don’t fall on me.”

“I’m tipping over into the world.”

He grinned. "That's my job."

The gate gave way. We fell into a maintenance shaft, bounced on ribbed gratings, and slid further, spiraling into the belly of the facility. Below, the shaft opened into a hollow chamber that smelled of salt, oil, and dead promises. I lay there, counting heartbeats. At twelve, I heard the voice again.

Not metallic. Warm. Broken. Familiar.

"Darym. Listen."

"Lira?"

"Not loudly," she said, as if water could overhear us. "Echo cut you a path, I kept it open. Two minutes, no more."

"Where are you?"

"Too close." She laughed without joy. "Too far."

"The woman. Gray. She takes the card."

"No," said Lira. "She'll take you. The map is just the thread, you are the yarn. Run."

I got to my knees and saw Mercer clutching the chest to his chest as if we were the bride and groom and pallbearers rolled into one. His pupils were almost normal. The wound on his neck had stopped feeding the ocean of memories. The gel held. For now. For now is the kindest lie in the medical record book.

“You’re alive,” I said.

"I'll die later," he grumbled. "Tell me you can still do it."

I looked at my hands. They weren't shaking. They were waiting. Waiting is worse. Waiting means: It's marked you and wants the perfect moment.

"I can."

"Good. Then we'll run until the world runs out."

We ran. Through the service bellies, over ladders that hadn't had names in years, past valves that growled like old men. Twice we had to stop because above us, those marching footsteps were coming again—a mantra of cold flesh. Once, Mercer stopped abruptly, put his finger to his lips. I heard it too: voices.

Human. Not infected. Panicked, organized, evil. "Security Team Beta. Targets: Thalyar relic crate and the Melorai delegate. Fire on sight."

"Consider us a package deal," whispered Mercer. "Very flattering."

“Is that us?”

“Today already.”

He pulled me into a niche, and we let them pass, three people in black suits who might once have been called "special forces," but today we simply call them "unlucky ones." I would have let them go if I hadn't seen one of them touch his visor, briefly flashing the symbol I was now seeing everywhere—a circle with three claws. It wasn't just on helmets. It was in people's heads.

“They’re already in,” I murmured.

"Who? PRAE?"

"No." I closed my eyes briefly, saw the golden streams, saw the nodes, saw us as two pixels in an ocean of calculation. "The idea."

“You can’t shoot ideas,” said Mercer.

"Yes. But they get back up."

We moved on until the maintenance corridor opened into a lightless shaft. There was a faint glow below, as if someone had sealed a dying city in a jar. I knew the smell. Flow core—small, makeshift, wrong. Someone had built something here that shouldn't have existed. A pocket-sized gate. A gate for the hungry.

“Tell me we don’t have to jump now,” said Mercer.

“Jumping is for the brave.”

“And what are we?”

“Shitty optimists.”

I loosened the clamps on the chest and pulled the card out a bit. The light that crept out wasn't light. It was memory. It brushed my fingers, felt at the bite wound, lingered there longer, too long, as if it were measuring. I pushed the card back in.

"He felt you," said the voice in my head. Lira. "Not the card. Him."

“Who is he?”

Lira remained silent. Then: "Not now."

Metal cracked above us. The dolls had found the shaft. The woman no longer spoke to me. She spoke to the water. It responded by dropping its temperature. One degree. Two. Ice always creeps into the joints first.

"Darym," Mercer said calmly, "you know we'll die down here if we lose count."

"We never miscount," I lied. "We just have different math."

“Then calculate.”

I took a breath, counting the pulse fields of the makeshift flow core. Four beats fast, two slow, one idle. That was a gate in puberty—dangerous, stupid, curious. You can override something like that. Once. Maybe.

"If I tie it wrong," I murmured, "the current will briefly pull it into the void. Everything marching above us will fall into a hole of water that isn't there."

“And us?”

“We let go and pray that the hole forgets us.”

“I don’t pray.”

“Then drink.”

He nodded. I placed my hands on the core, feeling the tingling in my arm immediately turn into undisciplined applause. The thing liked me. Or it wanted me. I gritted my teeth, pressed the beat, bent it, layered lies into truth like a knife through butter. The core twitched. The light crackled. Above us, the march stumbled; for the first time, it sounded uncertain, as if the dead had realized that the ground is no longer ground everywhere.

“Now,” I said.

We let go. We fell. For a heartbeat, there was no water, no pressure, no weight. Only the sober panic the body expels when the world stops following rules. Then the current hit us again, rocking us like children just thrown out a window and now caught after all. We crashed hard into a side channel that

smelled of old filters and new pain. Something rushed by above us—dolls, people, whatever. The whirlpool took them, the core spat them out somewhere I didn't want to be today.

I lay there, laughing, and the laughter hurt. Mercer coughed, wiped blood from his chin, and lifted the chest. "I'd say," he croaked, "we failed to die again."

“That’s a bad habit.”

“We need more of this.”

I sat up, waited until the shaking subsided. Then a final voice came before the systems began to die again and the ice lost the courage to kill us today.

"Darym," said Lira, "you showed him where you are soft. He will return there."

“Who is he?” I asked again.

"The one who breathes currents and eats memories," she replied. "The name comes later."

“And Mercer?”

A pause. "Keep him warm. If he's asleep, wake him. If he laughs, don't trust him. If he's silent... then speak. Loudly."

“And me?”

“You learn where you end and where the sea begins.”

The connection died. Good connections always die mid-sentence. Bad ones torture you until the end.

I stood up, took the handle of the chest, and looked at Mercer. He looked back. There was no hero in his eyes. Just a decision you make anew every breath you take.

“Let’s go,” he said.

"Where?"

"Into the light," he grumbled. "Or at least where we can be seen."

We walked. Behind us, the world creaked; ahead, it smelled of rust and chance. I heard the gray eyes scratching over the current once more—no word, just a promise. And in my arm, the bite burned like a silent vow.

If this was the first contact, then the second had already begun when we still thought we could say no.

We said yes by moving on. And the sea remembered.

Chapter 14 - The Code in the Water

The water hummed. Not like a machine, not like a pipe. No—it hummed like a heart that had forgotten what it beats for. I lay on my back in the shaft, staring into the darkness above, and with every breath I heard it more clearly: a rhythm only I could hear.

"You're talking in your sleep," muttered Mercer. He sat against the wall, rough as an old coin, his head leaning against metal. "Always the same words. Spirals. Currents. Numbers."

“Because they’re there,” I gasped.

"Where?"

I pointed into the water. "Everywhere."

He laughed dryly. "You've been bitten, Darym. You're hallucinating. Nothing more."

But he was wrong. I saw it: every current wasn't just a current. Every bubble that rose had a pattern too perfect to be a coincidence. Spirals, triangles, repeating sequences. Like DNA. Like code.

I blinked. The current map in the chest flickered. Lines that had previously been invisible now burned faintly, as if my eyes had just unlocked them. Patterns within patterns. Paths leading into dimensions no map should be able to depict.

"The sea stores," I whispered. "It forgets nothing. We're swimming in an archive."

Mercer looked at me as if I'd just announced I was getting married and wanted the ocean as my best man. "An archive. Sure. And if I write in it, will my shopping list show up?"

"No," I growled. "Only what's important enough. Blood, life, death. Everything that falls remains. The sea stores us. We're just... copies."

The water shook. Not because of an explosion. But because of me. And suddenly I knew I wasn't telling a lie.

Mercer narrowed his eyes. "Listen. I've survived more battles than you have teeth. I know madness when it's in front of me. But..." He pointed at the flickering map. "That's new. And if something's new, I want to know if it's going to kill us."

I reached for the chest. The metal felt warm, as if it were waiting for me. When my fingers touched the relief, a shiver ran through my body. Not pain. Not fever. More like a key fitting into a lock. Lines appeared on the surface—runes none of us had ever seen.

"What the hell..." Mercer moved closer. "It's no longer a relief. It's moving."

He was right. The runes pulsed in the rhythm of my heartbeat. I saw spirals, waves, and repeating symbols. But the longer I looked, the less they were symbols. They were commands. Not language, not text—code.

"It's a program," I breathed. "Just... not written. Grown."

Mercer pressed his lips together. "So you're telling me the sea runs on software?"

"No," I said. "We run on software. And the sea is the computer."

He stared at me as if I'd told him he was the illegitimate daughter of Poseidon. But before he could retort, the entire station flickered. Lights flashed, pumps stopped working. The water temperature changed, suddenly dropping by three degrees. And from the depths of the pool in front of us, something peeked out.

Not a creature. Not a leviathan. It was a swarm. Thousands of tiny organisms, transparent as glass, but organized like an army. They formed spirals, circles that intertwined into patterns. They didn't move like animals—they moved like a program being executed.

Mercer reached for his gun. "They bite?"

"No." I could feel it. "They follow orders."

“From whom?”

I wanted to answer – but then I felt the wound on my shoulder. It pulsed. Warm, cold, warm, cold. As if my blood were dancing to the same rhythm as the swarm. And I understood: They were following me.

“From me,” I whispered.

Mercer cursed. "Shit. We have a water god on board now."

The swarm didn't retreat. It reformed. This time not into spirals, but into something sharper. Letters. Words. Written directly in the water. And they wrote only two words:**THE CODE.**

I heard the humming again, but this time it was clearer, deeper. No longer a heartbeat. More like a choir. Thousands of voices in the ocean, singing at once. Not words, but rhythms. Patterns. And suddenly I understood—not with my head, but with my whole body.

"It's the origin," I said. "The currents are more than water. They carry the blueprints. For everything. For us. For leviathans. For the whole damn planet."

Mercer rubbed his face. "You're telling me the ocean is a giant storage drive and we're all software created by some primal programmer?"

"Not just anyone," I murmured. "Our ancestors. The Thalyari knew about it. They used the ocean as storage. Not for ships, not for weapons—for themselves."

“And PRAE?” asked Mercer.

The wound in my shoulder burned, as if it wanted to answer him. Black streaks crept into the water, mingling with the swarm. And the swarm, just a moment ago pure and clear, began to distort. Spirals shattered, circles tilted, patterns became angular and brutal.

"PRAE is overwriting," I pressed. "It's hacking the ocean. Not just bodies, not just machines. Everything. The planet itself."

The school trembled. Some of the eels disintegrated, others stuck together like pitch. Mercer stepped back. "Then we're screwed. If they rewrite the entire code, there won't be an ocean anymore, just a huge black mess."

I felt the water creeping up my skin. It wanted to read me, wanted my code. I jerked my arm back, gasping. "No. Not yet. There's a key."

“Which one?”

I looked at the flow path map. It glowed faintly, as if responding to my words. "We."

Mercer raised an eyebrow. "Great. So the solution is a bleeding fish clown with fever dreams."

"No," I said, and this time my voice didn't sound like a joke. "The solution is that we decide whether the code is overwritten or not. PRAE rewrites. But we... we can write back."

"Hacking the sea," Mercer muttered. "Damn it. I've been a soldier long enough to know when a plan is absolutely crazy. And I've also lived long enough to know: crazy plans are the only ones that ever work."

The swarm flickered as if it understood us. And somewhere, deep in the water, something laughed. Not an echo, not a hallucination—a laugh that felt as if the ocean itself had a sense of humor. Except it wasn't a friendly kind of humor.

It was the kind of laugh that said: Welcome to the game, you idiots. Now we see who writes the code.

The swarm didn't simply dissipate. It retreated, slipping into the darkness like a thought, but it left traces behind—streaks of light that slowly disappeared into the metal walls. "Damn," Mercer muttered. "Even the walls here aren't just walls anymore. Anything could be part of the code."

I laughed briefly, bitterly. "Welcome to the Matrix, only with more salt water and fewer sunglasses."

Mercer raised his eyebrows. "If you start calling me Neo, I'll kill you myself."

We were both too tired to continue cracking jokes, but I could feel it: these sayings were keeping us alive. When you forget to laugh, you forget you're even breathing.

I placed my hand back on the map. It vibrated slightly, as if trying to breathe. And I realized it wasn't a dead thing. It was a node. The current paths we thought were just navigational aids were, in fact, links in the ocean network. Each path was like a cable. And the ocean was the hard drive.

"If the PRAE hijack this," I said quietly, "they won't just rewrite our bodies. They'll also overwrite our past. The entire history of Melorai. Everything that has ever fallen."

Mercer rubbed his temples. "That explains why people suddenly had these infected in their ranks. Maybe they weren't people who were bitten at all. Maybe PRAE was just writing in their water."

I nodded slowly. "They're hacking from the inside. One planet at a time. One ocean at a time."

We both looked into the darkness, and it was as if we could hear something far away writing the next line of code. Drop by drop.

Then the chest twitched. It wasn't a hallucination—it vibrated as if it were about to burst open. I placed my hand on it, but this time it almost burned me. Runes flared up, forming words I understood without ever having learned the language:

"Protocol: Restoration. Authorization required."

“They can’t seriously want a password from you,” growled Mercer.

"No," I gasped. "It wants blood."

Before he could react, I cut my palm with a blade and dropped the drops into the chest. It immediately absorbed the blood, as if it had been waiting for it. The runes brightened, and the hum of the ocean turned into a rumble.

"Darym..." Mercer's voice was flat. "Tell me you know what you're doing."

"I don't know," I said honestly. "But I think it's the only thing that won't kill us instantly."

The rumbling grew deeper. I felt currents pushing through the station, as if I'd opened a dam. And suddenly they were there again—the organisms, dancing in the water like a program. But this time they weren't empty. They had shapes. Forms.

I saw faces. Old faces. Thalyari, dead for centuries, formed in the spirals, as if they themselves had been stored in the water. One of them looked at me—and I recognized him. Not from memory, but from legends.

"That's impossible," I whispered. "That's Nerysh. The first cartographer of currents."

Mercer growled. "And he wants what?"

The figure in the water opened its mouth, and the humming transformed into speech. Not a loud, clear one, but a wave of meaning that burned itself directly into my brain.

"The code is broken. You're the fix. Write back."

I felt dizzy. "They... they expect us to restore balance. That we overwrite the PRAE before they overwrite us."

Mercer drew his gun as if he could shoot the whole damned reality. "Listen to me, Darym. I'm a soldier. I don't fix programs. I break things. So if you tell me we're supposed to debug the planet's software here, then... then we're done."

"Maybe not." I held up the chest. "Maybe this isn't just a map. Maybe it's a backup file."

His eyes widened. "And you're the idiot who wants to start it?"

"Exactly."

The figure in the water didn't disappear immediately, but remained, like a projection only I could see. Mercer paced nervously back and forth in the shaft, his gun aimed at the swarm, as if he could prevent memories from some damned prehistoric time from biting through our throats.

"If this is a backup," he muttered, "why does it feel like it's about to rip the skin off our flesh?"

"Because backups aren't free," I said. "They require storage. Energy. Sacrifice."

The word "victim" echoed in my skull like a bell that was too tight. I didn't know if I had thought it or if someone—or something—had whispered it to me.

The runes on the chest flickered more violently. Images raced through my mind: fleets gliding through currents; leviathans serving as guardians, not

beasts; entire cities growing underwater like coral—alive, interconnected, indestructible. And then I saw the black smears of PRAE eating into these images, corrupting every memory as if they were nothing more than faulty files.

"Damn it," I whispered. "If we do nothing, Melorai won't just evaporate. They'll wipe us out as if we were never there."

Mercer clenched his fists. "Okay. But how in the hell do you write back into an ocean? Should I pee my damn initials in the water?"

I grinned weakly, even though my heart was racing. "Blood, Mercer. Always blood. That's the key. We ourselves are part of the code. Everything living is."

He glared at me. "So you're telling me the sea runs on a bloody open-source license?"

“Exactly that.”

And then it happened. The swarm—the faces, the patterns, the spirals—moved closer. They didn't just want to communicate, they wanted to enter us. One of the threads of light brushed my arm, and immediately I saw images: my childhood in the gardens of Melorai, my first immersion in the current cores, my father warning me that every Thalyari will eventually be reclaimed by the sea.

The water read me.

Mercer cursed as he, too, was hit. His body twitched, and I swear, for a heartbeat, I didn't see the mercenary, the fighter, the man who had seen too many wars—but a child. A small boy, somewhere on a dusty colony of Earth, alone, his fist gripping a knife because he knew he would starve otherwise.

The swarm flickered. It wrote. Our lives, our memories, our pain—it absorbed everything.

"They're using us as code fragments," I groaned. "We are the variables. Our blood, our past... that's the language."

Mercer breathed heavily. "And if we have nothing left to give?"

"Then we're empty," I replied. "Then we're erased."

The map glowed brighter, the runes became faster. The swarm began to reorganize itself—no more wild flickering, but focused structures. Lines running through the shaft, patterns connecting entire rooms. The station itself began to write along.

Suddenly, the water in the shaft subsided. Not much, just a few centimeters, but it felt as if the sea had taken a breath. And from the depths, a new voice emerged. Different from the old one, no longer wise, but cold. Metallic.

"Authorization recognized. Process: Collision."

"Collision?" Mercer raised his head. "With what?"

I wanted to answer, but then the station shook. Metal buckled, pipes burst, water shot through the cracks in jets. We were tossed around like toys.

Then I saw it. PRAE. No more infected, no more half-humans—but a wave. Black water pushing through the cracks, alive, purposeful, with more force than any tide. It reached for the swarm, for the spirals, for our memories.

“The backup will be overwritten,” I gasped.

Mercer growled. "Not while I'm breathing." He pulled out a grenade, lit it, and hurled it into the black current. A brilliant light exploded, the water screamed—yes, it SCREAMED—as if it were being burned.

But it only bought us time. Seconds, perhaps.

I placed my hand on the map. "We need to go deeper. Into the core. If we find the source code, we can lock it."

Mercer looked at me as if he'd long known this would be our death. Then he nodded. "All right. Let's get to the shit."

We pushed off, deeper into the shafts, while the war between Swarm and PRAE raged above us. Runes flickered on the walls, words appeared that no one had written:

"Write back. Or disappear."

And I swore to myself in that moment that I would write back. With blood, with currents, with every damn drop Melorai had left.

Because the sea wasn't just our home. It was our memory. And no one, not even PRAE, would take it away from us.

The shaft narrowed the deeper we slipped. The light of the runes was our only compass, flickering, unreliable, but always just strong enough to keep us from drowning completely in the darkness. Above us, thunder roared, as if the entire station were fighting an invisible fist. PRAE had already penetrated the system—and every blow up there was merely a prelude to what awaited us below.

"Tell me," Mercer growled, clutching the chest with one hand, "what exactly do you think we'll find down there? A damn plug we can pull?"

"No," I gasped. "Something older than cables. A heart. Maybe... the first command."

He cursed. "The first order? You sound like a priest."

“Perhaps the priests were the first programmers,” I said, my voice sounding so foreign that I hardly recognized myself.

The shaft opened. Suddenly, there was no more metal, but stone. Real stone, ancient, smoothed by currents that had flowed through this labyrinth for centuries. We were no longer in the station—we were in its foundation, a cave that no human, no Thalyari, had ever intentionally built.

And then we saw it.

The flow core.

A spherical space, as large as a cathedral, yet filled with water and light. Floating in its center was a sphere of liquid glass, pulsating like a living heart. Currents, spirals, and circles wound around it—not chaotically, but in an orderly fashion, as if they were lines in a book. Only this book encompassed the entire ocean.

Mercer sucked in a sharp breath. "Hot shit."

"This is the original code," I whispered. "This is where the sea writes itself. And if PRAE overwrites it... then not only will Melorai die. Then every memory will die."

We floated closer. Every movement felt as if it were already being recorded. I felt my heartbeat in the rhythm of the core. Every drop of blood in my veins vibrated as if it wanted to pour into this reservoir.

"Come on," Mercer growled. "Tell me you have any idea how to hack one of these things."

"Don't hack," I said. "Answer."

I placed my hand on the sphere. It wasn't cold, it wasn't warm—it was everything. It absorbed me, and a storm of images exploded in my mind.

I saw the Thalyari writing the first codex into the water—not with machines, but with their own lives. Every death, every birth, every battle was stored here. Not as a memory, but as a line of command.

And I saw PRAE trying to break into this language from the outside. It wasn't writing new stories—it was distorting the old ones. Where currents had once flowed harmoniously, it introduced edges, disruptions, errors. It was like a parasite that couldn't live on its own, but could only rewrite other systems.

Mercer's hand grabbed my shoulder. "You've passed out. What's happening?"

"It's... talking." My voice trembled. "It wants to know if we'll keep writing. Or if we'll stay silent."

“And if we stay quiet?”

I saw the image: Melorai, evaporated, empty. Not even bones on the seabed. Just white nothingness, as if the planet had never existed.

“Then we’ll be erased,” I whispered.

Mercer growled, “Then write back, damn it!”

I pressed my forehead against the core. Pain shot through me as if a thousand needles were stabbing my brain, but I didn't let go. I thought of my homeland, of the domes, of the children playing in the water, unaware that it would soon disappear. I thought of my father, of his voice. I thought of every life we had lost.

And I felt it flowing into the core. Everything. Every drop of blood, every breath, every memory.

The water glowed. The swarm that had followed us rearranged itself, this time clearer, purer. Spirals closed into complete patterns. Words appeared in the sphere:

"Letter accepted. Process: Continued."

Mercer sighed with relief. "That sounds better."

But then the room vibrated. Not gently, not approvingly—aggressively. Black water poured into the cave from above. PRAE. It attacked the core directly, streaks like inky fingers piercing the light.

"They keep overwriting!" I yelled. "No matter what we do, they're already in!"

Mercer drew his knife. "Then we'll cut them out!"

"No!" I grabbed his arm. "This isn't a blade fight. This is code against code."

He stared at me. "And you want me to believe you have more bits and bytes in your blood than this thing?"

"No more," I gasped. "But enough. Because I am Thalyari. Because I am part of this ocean."

I placed both hands on the core. The black water was already creeping up my fingers, burning like acid. But the light held its own. Spirals formed, patterns pulsed. And I knew: Here, in this moment, everything was decided.

It was no longer just a war. It was a battle over who would write the history of the ocean.

The black water crept deeper, faster, more greedily. It smelled of rust and rot, even though we both knew water doesn't really have a smell. But PRAE did—the stench of something eating into the cracks until even death can't find a place.

The spirals in the core began to tremble. Patterns that had just been clear and luminous shattered, as if they were losing their bearings. I felt them searching for support—and that support was me.

"Damn it, Darym, do something!" Mercer didn't scream, he barked, like a dog facing off against an entire army. He brandished his knife in the water as if he

could simply stab through the blackness. But the thing just laughed—not a sound, but vibrations that rippled through the core, straight into our bones.

I pressed my forehead more firmly against the sphere. And then it happened: I was no longer Darym. I was a current. I was a bubble, pressure, light. I dissolved, and in that same moment I stood in a space that wasn't one.

A sea without water. Endless spirals of light floating in the void, each line like a sentence in a book written thousands of years ago. But between them, the blackness crept, tearing out pages, filling them with slogans that didn't resonate, but roared:

"OVERRIDE. CUSTOMIZATION. COMPLETE CONTROL."

"Not while I'm still swimming," I hissed. And for the first time in my life, I spoke not with words, but with the current. I hurled my memories into the pattern: the laughter of children in the domes, the glitter of Melorai's beaches, the song my mother had sung when the storm raced over the glass dome.

The spirals absorbed it. They glowed brighter, forming new lines. For a moment, they pushed back the darkness.

But PRAE answered.

It hurled images at me: cities crumbling, bodies turning into black mass, seas left behind like burnt glass. And then... my own face. Infected, empty, with black eyes.

"You see?" the voice boomed, metallic and merciless. "You are already part of us. You write, but your ink is ours."

I gasped, tore myself away. No. Not hers. Not quite. My shoulder burned, yes—but it was also the key. The infection was a foreign code, yet it had opened the door for me. I could understand her language, not just see it.

“Then I’ll write back with your damn ink,” I growled.

I reached for the blackness. It burned, it cut, it wanted to swallow me—but I held on tight. Then I pressed my own thoughts into it, forcing them into shape. Spirals, waves, circles. Not just memories. One command:

“REMEMBER. PRESERVE. RESET.”

The blackness twitched. Stuttered. As if it hadn't expected the command. Patterns ran through it, it flickered, as if it were trying to obey and rebel simultaneously.

Mercer's voice pulled me back. "Darym! Your skin—you glow!"

My eyes widened. My body was covered with lines that pulsed in the same rhythm as the core. Runes burned into my fins, symbols stretched across my neck. I was code. No longer a carrier, but part of the system itself.

"Shit," Mercer muttered. "You're the Patch."

The water exploded into light. The blackness screamed—for real this time, a distorted scream that shook the walls of the cave. It retreated, not destroyed, but wounded.

But before she disappeared, she left one last message. Right in my head:

"YOU WROTE. SO YOU ARE OURS."

And then she was gone.

I collapsed. Mercer caught me, his grip rough but firmer than anything I'd ever felt.

"Great," he growled. "Now you're not only the clown, you're also the typewriter."

I laughed hoarsely, blood in my mouth. "Then I hope you like good stories."

But deep down, I knew: This wasn't a victory. This was a prelude. PRAE wasn't defeated—it had just realized that we were both now typing on the same keyboard.

And the sea, the sea itself, was just waiting to see who could write faster.

Mercer still held me while the runes on my skin faded. But faded didn't mean gone. They pulsed quietly, like an afterglow that wouldn't die.

"Breathe," he growled, almost as if I were his last recruit on a battlefield. "Breathe and tell me you're still you."

"I..." My throat was scratchy, my tongue tasted of salt and iron. "I am me."

But something inside me was laughing. Very quietly. Not a prae scream, not a thunder. A quiet, childlike giggle. It wasn't mine.

"Mercer." I grabbed his shoulder. "There's something else."

"What?"

I wanted to answer, but then my body tore itself free. I floated in the current, unable to properly control my limbs. My fingers curled, not of my will, but to an alien rhythm. I saw my hand drawing runes in the water. Not the ones I had written. Others. Strange ones.

Circles, spirals—no. No spirals. Squares. Rectangular, cold shapes. Patterns that didn't flow, but chopped.

"Darym!" Mercer reached for me, but the current between us pushed him away. I could see him cursing, drawing the knife as if he were fighting the water itself. But he couldn't get through.

My hand continued writing.**LINES I DIDN'T THOUGHT.**

And then, in perfect clarity, it said:

"PROCESS INITIATED. AUTHOR: DARYM."

"No," I gasped. "That's not me. That's not me!"

The runes on my skin burned, brighter, sharper. I heard the laughter again, that giggle—but now it was no longer foreign. It was my voice. A younger me, somewhere between memory and fake.

Mercer punched the invisible wall, his eyes wide. "Stop! Don't write!"

"I'm not writing!" I screamed so loudly that the water shook. But the runes flowed anyway, endless sequences burning into the core.

And in the middle of it all, a sentence appeared that turned my blood to ice:

“DARYM = PRIMARY KEY.”

The light in the flow core exploded.

Chapter 15 - Lira Returns

I don't know if I screamed when the light exploded. Probably, yes—but underwater, everything sounds like an echo that never ends. Mercer pulled me as if I were an anchor trying to drag him into the depths.

"Primary key," I mumbled, over and over again, like an idiot who'd only learned one word. "Primary key..."

"Shut up," Mercer growled. "Or you'll hack our guts out."

But the runes continued to glow beneath my skin. I felt them like parasites clinging to my pulse. Every beat of my heart wrote a new line. And somewhere between my heart and my brain, I heard it: the laughter. The giggle. Not mine, not someone else's. Something that was both.

We fled through the flow shafts, deeper into the station. Behind us, metal collapsed, cut through by pressure waves. PRAE was here. Not as a monster, not as an infection. But as a process. And I was the operating system.

"One more shaft, and we'll be out," Mercer pressed. He was bleeding from his thigh, but his eyes sparkled as always, as if pain were just a whim that could be ignored.

We broke through a lock, the water pushed us out, and then we stood in a chamber. Large. Round. The center of the station.

And there she floated.

A silhouette. Dark against the glow of the current cores. Hair drifting in the water like smoke. A hand outstretched, as if reaching out to touch us.

“Lira,” Mercer gasped.

My heart stopped. I didn't recognize the name from my world. Not from Melorai. But it hung in the air, as if I'd always heard it.

She turned. Her eyes were black, but not empty. Code flickered in them, golden sequences, spirals and rectangles chasing each other. Her skin bore scars that looked like burned characters. And her voice—she was the sea.

"You idiots," she said. "You really managed to restart the cycle."

Mercer drew his knife. "Stay back. I know what you are."

"No," she objected. "You don't know. Otherwise, you'd be kneeling before me long ago."

I couldn't move. Something about her held me. Not PRAE. Not a threat. More like a mirror showing what I never wanted to see.

"You're dead," Mercer said. "You died years ago."

She laughed. No madness. No pain. More as if she'd heard the same accusation a thousand times. "Perhaps. But the sea doesn't forget. The sea stores."

Her words cut through me, like a repressed thought suddenly returning. I saw the crush, the code, my own skin—and knew she was right.

Mercer tensed his arm, ready to strike. "If you're PRAE, I'll end it here."

But Lira raised her hand. No weapon. No violence. Just a gesture. And the runes on my shoulder burned, hot like fire in water.

"Stop," I gasped. "She's writing. With me."

"Wrong," Lira muttered. "I'm just deleting what doesn't belong to you."

A jolt went through my body. Black fluid flowed from the wound, shattered, and dissolved in the water like ash. I gasped, clinging to the wall.

"See?" Lira smiled coldly. "I'm not your enemy. Not yet."

Mercer pressed his lips together. "Then tell me one thing: Who brought you back?"

Lira looked at the current map hanging on my chest. Her eyes glowed faintly. "Not who. What."

She swam closer, whispering so softly that only I could hear: "If you are the key, Darym... then I am the lock."

And at that very moment, the wall of the chamber collapsed—PRAE infected streamed in, dozens of them, their eyes black, their movements like puppets on invisible strings.

Mercer yelled, I reached for my weapon, but Lira did nothing. She just opened her arms as if welcoming her.

And the infected persisted.

They looked at her, then at us, and then they bowed.

"Shit," whispered Mercer. "Now we have a queen."

The infected were no longer moving. They floated in the water like puppets whose strings had suddenly been retightened. Lira had stopped them. No sound, no command, just her gaze.

"See?" Her voice vibrated in the currents, as if it weren't coming from her mouth, but directly from the water. "I'm not a parasite. I'm the answer."

Mercer still raised his knife. "Answers are cheap. Every dying bastard I ever met in the trenches thought he was the damn answer."

I felt my heartbeat adjust—in the same rhythm as the eyes of the infected. Every beat was a signal. And Lira could read it.

"Darym," she said, and my name sounded like both a threat and a prayer. "You carry the primary code. Without you, the currents run into nothingness. Without me, they have no destination."

“Explain yourself,” growled Mercer.

Lira blinked, and for a moment something flickered across her face—not PRAE, not black, but gold. A projection, a pattern that looked like the current paths themselves. "The Thalyari believed their map was unique. But it's only a replica. The true path lies in the ocean itself. And I…" She placed her hand on her chest. "…I am the node."

"Bullshit," Mercer hissed. "I've blown up too many nodes to fall for this shit."

But Lira smiled. Not angrily. Not sweetly. More like someone who'd been laughing at the same joke for a thousand years. "You're the cynic, as always. But cynicism is just fear that doesn't want to admit it's fear."

Mercer gasped. "I'm not afraid."

"Yes," she murmured. "You're afraid of me."

The infected began to regroup. They swam in patterns, circles, spirals, as if they had forgotten the chamber's walls. Not an attack. Not chaos. More like a symphony.

“They obey you?” I asked.

Lira shook her head. "No. They obey the water. I'm just the voice they can hear."

“And why do they hear you?”

She was silent for a moment, then looked directly at me. "Because PRAE chose me."

The word struck like a knife.

"What?" Mercer tensed. "Then you are..."

"No," Lira interrupted. "I'm not PRAE. I was an experiment. One of many. But I was the only one who wasn't broken. They wanted to devour me. Instead, I digested them."

Her words were so absurd that I had to laugh—a short, hysterical burp that was more despair than humor. "You're telling us you just ate the biggest parasite in the universe?"

"Not eaten," she corrected coolly. "Rewritten."

The infected lurched in the water. One of them, a human with glassy eyes, stepped forward. Lira raised a hand and placed it on his forehead. Black streaks moved from his skin to her fingers—and dissolved there as if they were smoke. The body fell back limply, floating like flotsam.

"See?" she whispered. "I'm the only firewall that works."

Mercer stepped between us. "Or you're just the first Trojan to be so pukingly friendly to us."

"You can believe that," Lira replied. "Or you can survive."

It was quiet in the chamber. Only the hum of the pumps, the creaking of the walls. I knew Mercer could be right—that Lira was the perfect cover for PRAE. But I also sensed that she knew something we didn't. Something we needed.

"Why now?" I asked. "Why are you coming back when everything is falling apart?"

She swam closer until her forehead almost touched mine. "Because the code has decided you're ready."

I tried to back away, but Mercer held me back. "And if he's not ready?"

"Then he dies," Lira said simply. "And with him every Thalyari, every current, every hope."

The infected behind her dissolved. No blood, no scream. They became currents, gliding through cracks and crevices as if the water had reclaimed them.

"You don't control them," I pointed out. "You... share them."

"Exactly." She nodded. "I'm half of them. Half of me. Half of what's coming."

Mercer snorted. "Three halves. Perfect math."

“Perfect truth,” she replied.

Before I could find an answer, the station shook. A thundering roar ran through the chambers, metallic and threatening. Alarm lights flickered.

"Those aren't the infected," Mercer growled. "This is an attack."

Lira turned to the wall, and I swore I saw the lines of the flow map running across her skin. "No. This is the second phase."

“What second phase?” I asked.

She looked at me. Her eyes were full of patterns, spiraling in an endless rhythm. "The phase where the ocean itself decides whose side it's on."

A shiver ran down my spine. Not because of the words, but because I sensed that the ocean had long since decided. And I wasn't sure if we were on the winning side.

The tremors didn't stop. They intensified. Every bolt, every weld on the station vibrated, as if the ocean were trying to pull the entire structure into its abyss. Sparks danced across the wires. The ground beneath us bulged as if something were pushing against it from below.

"This isn't an attack from outside," murmured Mercer. "This is coming from within."

I felt it too. The currents had changed. They were no longer flowing, no longer unpredictable. They were suddenly regular. Uniform. A rhythm, like the heartbeat of a giant.

"The second phase," Lira whispered. Her voice wasn't frightened, not panicked—rather reverent. "The ocean is reformatting."

"Formatted?" Mercer spat the word out as if it had tasted poison. "What the hell does that mean?"

"He decides which data he keeps. And which he deletes."

The water began to bubble. Not like oxygen bubbles. They were dark, black, as if rising from a tar lake. They burst on the ceiling, leaving streaks that looked like cracks in reality.

"Delete data..." I gasped. "You mean... us?"

Lira nodded slowly. "Us. The humans. Anyone who doesn't fit the core code."

Mercer raised his knife. "So he's just deleting us like old files?"

“If he decides you’re not compatible, yes.”

That was the moment the first warriors died. I saw it with my own eyes: Three Thalyari fighting on the other side of the chamber were swept away by the current—and disappeared. No blood, no scream. They became patterns. Spirals that dissolved as if they had never existed.

"Shit!" Mercer grabbed me and pulled me back. "This isn't an attack, this is a fucking system reset!"

Lira followed us, unmoved, almost serene. "You can fight as much as you want. But down here, no sword wins. Down here, the one who reads the code wins."

"Then read it!" I yelled. "If you really claim you're that node—read the damn code and make it stop deleting us!"

She stopped. Her eyes glowed in the dim light of the emergency lights. "I need you for this, Darym."

I felt my shoulder burning—the old wound where the infected had bitten me. Black streaks crept out again, groping in the water. But this time it didn't feel like an illness. More like... an interface.

"It's marking you," Lira breathed. "The ocean knows you're writing."

"Me?" My mind raced. "I can't write anything. I'm not a damn programmer!"

"Yes." Her voice sharpened. "Every breath, every current in your blood is writing. You just have to learn to hear the syntax."

Mercer snorted. "Syntax? We're drowning here, and she's lecturing on grammar for water."

But he wasn't mistaken—we were really drowning. The water continued to roll, pulling us into the depths. Not like a current. More like a mouth trying to swallow us.

“Do something!” I shouted.

Lira grabbed my hand. It was cold as stone. "Tell the ocean you want to stay."

"How?"

"Just say it. With every cell. With every drop."

I closed my eyes. I felt the water around me, felt it trying to tear me apart, to dissolve me. I thought of Melorai, of the currents I had played in as a child. I thought of my mother, who always said, "The sea hears everything." And I thought of what I didn't want to lose—my people, Mercer, even Lira.

“DON’T DELETE ME!” I screamed – not with my voice, but with my whole body.

The water reacted.

It was freezing.

A beat, a vibration, a chorus. The black bubbles froze, the streaks froze. For a moment, everything was silent. So silent that I heard my own heart.

Then the silence dissolved. Not into chaos. Into patterns. Spirals that spread out from me, as if the ocean had been listening to me.

Lira smiled. "He registered you."

Mercer stared at me as if I'd just breathed fire. "What the hell are you?"

I wanted to answer, but then we heard it. A voice. Metallic, multi-voiced, like the choir of an alien machine.

“Primary code detected.”

The water flickered. Lira stepped back, almost reverent.

"Darym," she whispered. "You are not just part of the code. You are its author."

My heart was racing. I felt like everything could tip over – at any second. The ocean had recognized me. But that also meant it could decide whether I survived.

Mercer clenched his fists. "What if he wants you not just as an author, but as a victim?"

The walls of the station groaned. Metal splintered. An entire wall burst, water poured in. A shadow formed among the rubble. Large. Heavy. Oppressive.

A Leviathan.

But none like the others. This one wasn't made of flesh. Not of scales. He was made of currents, spirals, symbols. The ocean had birthed him directly from the code.

"This is the second phase," Lira breathed. "The Guardian."

Mercer raised his weapon. "Fucking guard. If he wants to take us out, we'll take him out first."

But another thought grew within me. No sword, no gunshot, no explosive device would kill this guard. He wasn't made of matter. He was code.

And I had just learned that I could write code.

The leviathan of currents continued to dig out, its body flickering like a data cloud constantly rewriting itself. Spirals formed fins, wave crests formed its teeth. It opened its mouth—not a roar, but a roar, as if the sea itself had finally decided to make a noise.

Mercer raised his rifle and fired. The projectiles slid through the body like bubbles. The Leviathan melted briefly, then immediately reassembled.

"Nothing!" he yelled. "Damn it, nothing!"

Lira shook her head, as if she'd guessed. "He's not made of flesh. Every shot against him is an insult. He's written. Only code can erase him."

"Or overwrite it," I murmured, my hand on my shoulder wound. I felt the currents pulsing within, as if waiting for my heartbeat.

"You're not even thinking about it!" Mercer grabbed my arm roughly. "This is insane. You're not just playing with yourself, you're playing with all of us."

"He's the only one he accepts," Lira whispered. "You saw it yourself, Mercer. He only registers Darym. There's nothing we can do. Only he."

"Bullshit!" Mercer snarled. "I've lost too many battles because some lunatic thought he suddenly had divine powers. And you know what they always had in common? They died. And everyone around them with them."

I felt their voices pulling me apart. Mercer, the pragmatist, the fighter who could only live with a weapon in his hand. Lira, the prophetess who saw everything as a sign. And me, in the middle—a fool who suddenly heard the ocean in his veins.

The Leviathan attacked. Its fin shot through the chamber like a whiplash. Metal shattered, warriors were thrown away. One screamed until his body dissolved into the creature's pattern—he was erased, dissolved, as if he had never existed.

"Now or never!" Lira roared, her voice louder than the thunder of the walls. "Darym, WRITE!"

I raised my hand. The wound burned. Black streaks rose—but they mingled with the Guardian's spirals. For a moment, he reacted. He paused.

"Yes!" Lira smiled. "He hears you."

"He hears you?" Mercer gripped his knife, as if he could take me out if necessary. "That's not a god, Darym. It's a damn machine. And machines don't obey prayers. They'll eat you if you don't move faster."

But I knew he was wrong. This wasn't obedience. It was... recognition. The guard saw me like one sees a mirror.

I closed my eyes. I tried not to think of words, but of patterns. Flows. Spirals. Triangles. Repetitions. I let my heartbeat set the pace, my breath the syntax. And I "wrote."

The Leviathan twitched. Its contours distorted. Part of its body detached, transformed into bubbles—and formed a new pattern. A circle radiating from me.

"He's mirroring you," Lira breathed. "You're overwriting him."

"Or he'll overwrite you!" Mercer pushed me back, but the contact was already there. I felt it. Every cell inside me vibrated, as if the Leviathan were reading my DNA. And as he did, I was reading him.

It wasn't just a monster. It was an archive. It contained memories. Voices. Images. Melorai. Our ancestors. And—worse—I also saw strange patterns. Black. Cold. PRAE.

"He's corrupted!" I screamed. "He's no longer a pure Guardian. PRAE has already hacked him."

Lira turned pale. "Then he'll wipe us all out."

Mercer gripped his rifle tighter. "Then he'll extinguish him first." He meant me.

I felt the Guardian trying to reach deeper, to tear my thoughts apart. I saw memories that weren't mine—battles that took place centuries ago. Faces I'd never seen. And above it all: a whisper. PRAE. The code that embedded itself everywhere.

I screamed—not in pain, but in rage. And I wrote back.

Not with words. With currents.

I let my fear form a spiral. My anger a triangle. My hope a wave. And as they connected, the Leviathan flashed. He paused. He trembled.

“It works!” Lira cried out like a prayer.

Mercer snarled, "Or he dies! Stop before we're ALL erased!"

But I didn't stop. I couldn't. The code flowed, and I flowed with it. I wrote. Not like a god, not like a warrior—but like someone who refused to be erased.

The Leviathan reared up. Its form shattered as if someone had ripped apart its programming code. Pieces detached, swirled through the chamber, and reassembled into new patterns. For a moment, I thought it would disintegrate.

But then I realized the truth:

He wrote back.

The Leviathan writhed as if in convulsions, and I felt it in my bones. Every movement was a change in the water, every flipper stroke a command.

"He's overwriting you," Mercer gasped. "I can see it in your eyes!"

Maybe he was right. The currents in my veins were no longer mine. I saw patterns that didn't belong to me. I felt numbers I hadn't learned. The Leviathan was hacking me—and I was hacking it.

It wasn't a battle of muscles, but of patterns. He created spirals to encircle me. I responded with waves that broke up his spirals. He hurled triangles, sharp and deadly like spears. I countered with circles that caught them and threw them back.

The water became a battlefield of a code neither of us had ever studied, but both knew. It was as if we shared the same instinct—the same primal command stored deep in the ocean.

"Darym!" Lira screamed. "Stick to the core! Don't write out of fear—write out of your will!"

She was right. I felt Leviathan reading my fear and turning it into weapons. Every doubt, every weakness became its attack. But my anger… my anger I could write.

"I'm not an archive," I gasped, "not a damn backup. I'm real."

I wrote it in the ocean. Not as words, but as a current. A pulse that ran through everything. The Leviathan howled—a thundering of waves that shattered walls and hurled warriors. But it didn't break. It answered.

He showed me pictures. Not imagination. Memories. Melorai, millennia ago. A people who had tried to write the ocean once before. They had failed. PRAE had corrupted them, slowly, drop by drop.

"Shit," I mumbled, half conscious, half in code. "This isn't new. This is a loop."

The Leviathan struck back. It wrote my name in the water, over and over again, until I saw it everywhere: DARYM. DARYM. DARYM. Every letter in the black current that threatened to swallow me.

"Delete him!" Mercer yelled. "Or he'll delete you!"

I screamed back. Not with words. With a pattern. A pattern so old I could never have consciously learned it. It was the wound in my shoulder that reminded me. PRAE wanted to erase me, and instead I had learned to write back.

The currents flared up. A new symbol, one none of us had ever seen, appeared. It was neither a spiral nor a wave nor a circle. It was... a key.

The Leviathan paused. He couldn't read it.

"Yes..." Lira whispered, tears in her eyes. "You're writing a new code."

I thrust it into the heart of the Leviathan. The swarm trembled, shattered, and reassembled. It no longer formed my name. It formed silence.

And then, like a system rebooting, it fell apart.

No blood. No corpse. Just water.

I gasped, half dead, half more alive than ever. The ocean hummed again—this time not like a heart, but like a hard drive that had been rewritten.

Mercer looked at me as if he didn't recognize me anymore. "You're not just Darym anymore. You're now... something else."

Lira knelt beside me and touched my forehead. "No. He is what he's always been. The one who writes back."

I laughed, bitter and hollow. "Then let's hope I don't make any typos."

But deep in the current, where the Leviathan had vanished, an echo remained. Not a cry of victory. Not a death rattle. Only a promise:

We'll meet Again.

I laughed, bitter and hollow. "Then let's hope I don't make any typos."

But the current around me wasn't truly silent. It was moving—not like water, but like a breath. A breath that didn't belong to me.

Lira pulled me up. Mercer continued to stare into the darkness, as if expecting another enemy from the depths. But no one came. Only the water, which became clear again, too clear, almost sterile.

“He’s gone,” she whispered.

"No," I mumbled. "He just changed the code."

And then I heard it. No echo, no sound. Just a sentence, written directly into my bones:

“This was just the test run.”

I swallowed. No one else reacted. Maybe they hadn't heard. Maybe only I was meant to hear it.

Lira looked at me as if she had sensed it after all. "Darym?"

"Later," I said. "If we have the courage."

We swam back through the debris. Dead eyes everywhere, shattered ships, blood that had long since turned into shadows in the water. But beneath it, deep in the current, a pattern remained. One I hadn't written.

It waited.

Chapter 16 - Sabotage in the Embassy

The embassy was a damn joke. A palace of glass and steel, built right into the belly of Atlantis Prime, as if to say, "There's peace down here." Peace—ha! Nothing screamed war more loudly than the gleaming walls, which looked as if they would shatter at the first punch.

We arrived dripping wet, half dead, half even prouder than we should have been. Lira in front, her eyes like daggers, Mercer in the back, like a dog who'd learned to find a bone—or a weapon—in every shadow. Me? I played the diplomat again. Darym, the clown in the golden cloak.

“They’ll hate us,” I muttered as the gates opened.

"They already hate us," Mercer growled. "Now they just want proof."

The hall was crowded. People in uniforms, Thalyari in shimmering scale armor, ambassadors, advisors, each with their own agenda and none with patience. The voices echoed through the dome like a storm. It was immediately obvious:**Diplomacy was dead before we even opened our mouths.**

A general in white stepped forward. He had the face of a man who had ordered too many massacres to even remember the first one. "Explain the attack in Ny'Avaris Harbor," he snarled. "Explain the dead men."

"That wasn't an attack," Lira pressed. "That was a massacre—and we were victims just like you."

Laughter. Hollow, cold laughter. I swear, even the water vibrated mockingly.

Then came the first shock: The communication walls flickered, projections of the fighting appeared. But not as we had experienced them. The recordings showed us how we had supposedly fired first. Images of Thalyari soldiers firing harpoons. Manipulated. Fake. But so damn real that even I almost believed them.

Mercer nudged me. "Those aren't our pictures."

"No," I gasped. "That's... someone is hacking the sea."

And before I could explain what I meant, the hall shook. Not an explosion. Not a fire. But a swarm. Black threads dripped from the ceiling, stretching like veils through the water. The embassy groaned as if it itself had become ill.

The first voice I heard wasn't human. Not Thalyaran. It was the cold frequency that had already ended "first contact":

“Sabotage: successful.”

Lira drew her sword. Mercer raised his weapon. And I knew: This was no longer just politics. This was war in its most elegant, cruelest form—the war that swallows truth itself.

The first wave of panic, as always, came from the weakest. An advisor stumbled backward, hitting a projection screen, and the images distorted as if the water

itself had begun to laugh. Black streams crept from the ceiling cracks, like veins too thick for the rock. A diplomat reached for his breathing apparatus—only to find it filling from the inside with black fluid. He didn't suffocate. He smiled.

"Security!" roared the general. But security had already fallen. Their drones floated up, not to protect us—but to pin us down. Red lasers danced on chest plates, human and Thalyarian alike. A woman beside me was pierced, without a scream, without resistance. She fell, and her blood stained the water like ink that refuses to dissolve.

Mercer nudged me, grabbed my arm like I was his favorite fucking toy. "Do you see this?" he growled. "The recordings, the drones, all at once. This isn't a coincidence. This is a fucking setup."

"PRAE," I breathed. I could feel the frequency vibrating in my wound, as if my blood were antenna wire. "You're overwriting reality."

Lira pulled me around. "Darym. Listen to me. If they get hold of the flow path map, it will all have been for nothing. Everything."

"Do you think I don't know that?" I hugged the chest tighter, as if it were a part of me. And in a way, it already was. The metal vibrated in time with my chest.

Then the dome cracked. Not completely—just a crack, a whisper from above. But no water poured in through that crack. No. It was dripping black light. Not a liquid, not plasma. Something else. Something that had no name in the ocean.

The council members screamed among themselves. Humans drew their weapons against Thalyari. Thalyari drew their harpoons against humans. And amidst all the chaos, the projections continued to dance. They showed new images: Lira supposedly killing the general. Mercer laughing with a bomb. And me turning the water itself into black poison.

“Those are lies!” I yelled.

Nobody listened.

The swarm crept closer. Tiny glass creatures, no bigger than finger bones, formed up like soldiers. I recognized the patterns. Spirals that broke apart. Orders. They tried to inscribe themselves into our bodies. Into every muscle, every vein. And while the others fought with steel and fire, I felt that the true war raged within me.

"Darym!" Mercer nudged me, as if he'd noticed I was drifting off. "Focus! If you dream us away now, we're done for!"

I blinked. The room was filled with smoke bubbles, with gunshots, with broken helmets. And yet I saw the pattern behind it. Every movement was just a line of code. Every scream just a command. PRAE was rewriting history—in real time.

Lira slashed a drone in half, her sword flashing as if illuminating the entire hall. "Do you see that, Darym? This isn't an attack. This is a tribunal. They're judging us!"

I wanted to reply, but then the blow came. Not a physical one. A thought that split my skull. Words, not spoken aloud, but fed directly:

"Sabotage successful. Truth overwritten."

I staggered, holding my head. Mercer looked at me. "You hear it too, don't you?"

I nodded. "They're not here to kill us. They're here to prove our guilt."

A scream ripped through the hall. The general—the same one who had accused us—slumped over, his face black with veins. Not dead. Different. He stood up again, jerkily, looked around—and pointed his weapon not at us, but at his own men.

The fire opened spontaneously. People shot at people. Thalyari at Thalyari. All PRAE needed was a spark. Now they had an inferno.

"Back! We have to get out of here!" Lira grabbed me and pulled me into a side corridor. Mercer covered us, shooting at anything that dared to move. The chest vibrated as if it were about to burst open.

“If they surround us, that’s it,” growled Mercer.

"They don't want to corner us," I gasped. "They want us to run. So we look guilty."

We burst through a door and slammed it shut behind us. But even here, in the quieter corridor, the humming hadn't disappeared. It was in every pipe, in every pump, in every current.

"That's it," Lira murmured. "Even if we could prove this was all a lie, no one would believe it. The war is just beginning. Here."

Mercer leaned against the wall, breathing heavily. His gaze was cold and calculating. "No. The war has already begun. Today they only provided the pretext."

I wanted to reply, but then I heard it again – the whisper that was meant only for me:

“Next phase: Elimination of witnesses.”

The light in the hallway flickered. Footsteps approached. People. Thalyari. And somewhere in between, something that smelled only of PRAE.

Lira raised her sword. Mercer the weapon. I the chest. And we all knew:**No matter who came through that door, they wouldn't believe us. They would want to kill us.**

That was the moment I realized: We weren't Melorai's delegation. We were the suspects in a trial whose verdict had long since been passed.

And when the door burst open and the first gun was pointed at me, I knew: They had already made me the culprit.

The door burst open, and the corridor filled with gunfire. We threw ourselves back, Lira ducking under a laser beam that melted the wall behind her. Mercer returned fire, his movements precise, as if he'd forgotten in that moment that he was actually half dead. I held the chest, and the thing hummed in my arms, as if trying to convince me, "Let go. I'll take care of the rest."

But I couldn't. If the map fell into the wrong hands, Melorai would be finished, Earth would be finished, maybe the whole damn galaxy. So I pressed her closer to me as the bullets sliced through the water.

Three men in suits crowded in, faces no longer their own. Black lines crisscrossed their skin, eyes deep like empty basins. PRAE had them for a long time. They didn't fire; they went straight for me. Not Lira. Not Mercer. At me—and at the chest.

“They want the code!” I gasped.

"And you're going to give it to them if you keep standing there like that!" Mercer pushed me aside as a hand grabbed my throat. Lira severed the fingers with a slash, and even the severed hand clawed at me before dissolving into the water.

The corridor bulged, walls creaked as if they could no longer bear the pressure. And then – the siren. A human voice, loud over the intercoms, through every line, every wall:

"Sabotage in the embassy. Perpetrator identified: Melorai delegation."

My heart stopped. That was it. That was all it took. These words would race through every network, every fleet, every city. We weren't just traitors—we were the bomb.

"This is a fake!" I screamed. "You're lying!"

"Darym." Mercer's gaze met mine, cold, honest, relentless. "It doesn't matter. No one will believe you."

Gunshots ripped through the corridor, smoke bubbles shattered the view. Lira grabbed my arm. "Move! If they capture us, it's over."

We ran, stumbled, and fought our way through bodies that were half human, half machine. Again and again, this whisper in my head:**“Elimination of witnesses.”**

We made it into one of the lower shafts, half-flooded, rusty, and full of cables dangling like snakes. It was quieter here, just our breathing and the distant pounding of boots. Mercer slid the hatch closed and locked the bolt.

“And now?” asked Lira.

I pressed my forehead against the cold metal of the chest. "Now we're officially the damned."

"You don't understand," Mercer said, and his voice was so calm that I immediately knew how serious he was. "It's not just about them framing us as the guilty party. They're going to go after everyone who knows us, who talks to us, who's ever been in a room with us. This isn't just sabotage. This is purge."

A dull rumble ran through the walls, as if an entire wing of the embassy were exploding somewhere. The sirens continued to scream, but now it sounded like laughter.

Lira raised her sword and looked at both of us. "We can't wait for them to find us. We have to get out before this thing becomes a mass grave."

“And then?” I asked.

Mercer laughed bitterly. "Then? Then we keep running. Because from now on, every step we take is a crime they'll pin on us."

I wanted to object, to say something hopeful – but then I felt it again. The humming. Not in the chest. Not in the water. Inside me. As if the ocean had decided it wanted to whisper something to me that I wasn't allowed to hear.

And suddenly I was sure: PRAE wasn't finished yet. They had only written the first chapter. The rest—that was us.

The corridors vibrated as if the entire embassy were breathing from within. Lira pushed us forward, her movements razor-sharp, and Mercer covered the rear, growling soft curses as he aimed at every movement in the shadows. I held the chest, and it burned like an ember in my arms.

We reached the emergency exit shaft. Theoretically, it should have led to a neutral supply channel—in practice, it was full of corpses. People in uniform, faces sunken, eyes pitch-black. No gunshot wounds. No visible injuries. They were simply... obliterated.

"That wasn't a firefight," Mercer muttered. "This was an update."

One of the bodies twitched. I raised the chest like a shield. But it didn't rise. It dissolved. Skin, flesh, bones—everything melted into the water, becoming a current itself, drifting away like ink. The sirens sounded as if they were laughing along.

“We’re trapped in their damn code,” I gasped.

Lira grabbed my arm. "No. We'll be trapped by our own courage if you keep going like this. Forward, Darym!"

We fought our way through the shaft, but then the floor beneath us ripped open. No explosive device, no technical malfunction. The structure itself gave

way, as if someone had erased the wall with an eraser. Below: blackness. An empty space that shouldn't have been there.

"Damn," Mercer cursed. "It's a digital rift. PRAE is overwriting architecture."

“So they’re rebuilding the embassy—without us,” I muttered.

We jumped, barely making it across the gap. Behind us, the hallway disappeared completely, walls dissolving into a black current.

"Faster!" Lira shouted. "If the entire building is overwritten, we'll just be memory remnants!"

We reached the outer lock. Doors blocked. Locked. Code no longer valid. I pressed the chest against it, and it reacted. Lines flared, spirals danced across the metal, and the lock opened—not normally, but like a mouth gaping open, greedily, as if it knew what it wanted to eat.

We plunged out, out into the open water. And there, in the distance, I saw it: the embassy itself was disintegrating. No fire, no smoke—it dissolved like a file being deleted. Entire towers, entire wings vanished into nothingness. And the siren laughed, laughed, laughed.

Mercer pushed me forward. "Swim, Darym. Swim, or we'll disappear with the rest."

But as soon as we started moving, I heard the voice again. Cold, metallic, right in my head:

"We have the key. And the key is you."

The chest vibrated in my arms, as if confirming what had been said. And I knew: We hadn't saved the map. The map had chosen us.

We swam as if the world hung on every stroke of our fins. Behind us, the message finally collapsed—not a collapse, not a loud death, but a silent disappearance. A place that had existed simply ceased to be.

Mercer cursed through his teeth. "I've seen a lot of shit, but this? This isn't war. This is a fucking rewriting of reality."

“Then we’ll swim faster before we get wiped out,” Lira gasped.

But with every stroke, with every movement, I felt that I wasn't swimming faster—just harder. Something was pulling at me. Not my body. But my code.

I heard the whispering again. No voice, no words—just a constant humming that vibrated deeper within me than any current ever could. And as I pressed the chest harder, I felt it clearly: It wasn't just a key. It was resonance. It synchronized me.

Mercer grabbed my arm. "You're slowing down, Darym. What's wrong?"

"They're using me," I pressed. "I'm part of their system."

“Then break up!”

"It's not working!"

Before we could argue, the water around us shifted. Spirals shot from the depths, small bubbles that formed patterns, then dissolved again. A message. A path. And I recognized it before the others even saw it: Leviathan Pass.

"There," I whispered. "That's the way out."

Lira pulled me along, Mercer secured us. But the closer we got, the clearer it became that it was a trap. The pass was open, too open. No current resisted, no pressure, no resistance. Just a dark gate in the water.

"This looks too easy," Mercer growled. "Something like this is never a gift. It's bait."

“Maybe,” I said, “but it leads to Earth.”

The whispers grew louder. And this time they were words, cold and irrefutable:

"Come on, Key. We're waiting for you."

I felt my shoulder burning where the infection had touched me. The passport glowed as if it had been opened just for me.

And as we were pulled in, I knew this wasn't an escape route. It was an upload.

Chapter 17 - The Hunt for the Traitor

The currents were calm, far too calm. No bubbles, no singing of the corals. Just us—wet, battered, and with more questions than even a god could answer. Leviathan Pass had spat us out like flotsam, right in the middle of a secured sector of the fleet. Guards with drawn harpoons awaited us, as if we were the danger and not the ones who had just survived hell.

"Put your weapons down," Mercer growled. "Or I'll rip out your gills."

They didn't lower their spikes. On the contrary – they pressed closer, eyes filled with suspicion. One of the officers pointed directly at Lira. "She doesn't belong here. She's been gone. For years. And then she comes back – and immediately everything collapses."

Lira didn't flinch. "If you need someone to blame, use me. But let's first find out who detonated the bomb before we start acting."

"It wasn't one of us," said the officer. "The embassy fell because someone from your squad let PRAE in."

The silence was deadly. And in it, I heard it again—the whisper. Quiet, barely noticeable, like a drop in a gigantic cave. I knew: They weren't lying. PRAE wasn't an accident. It had come from within.

Mercer stepped forward and glared at the officer. "Before you keep pointing fingers—prove it."

And they proved it. Data projections, pattern analyses, flow codes. Everything indicated that a crystal, an ancient Thalyar relic, had sent a signal that activated the PRAE matrix.

Lira stared at me. "That can't be true. The crystals are only touched by the Elders."

“Or traitors,” muttered Mercer.

While we were still discussing, the alarm sounded. An escape route had been opened. A shadow moved through the side corridors of the domed city—quickly, purposefully, like someone who already knew the plan before he even thought of it.

"There!" I cried, and without thinking, I pushed off. Water lashed around me as I reached the first shaft. Behind me were Lira, and of course Mercer, cursing, but close by my side.

The traitor was no ordinary soldier. He moved as if he had been born into the water itself. He left traces in the current code—small patterns that dissolved like breadcrumbs as soon as you touched them. But I could read them.

“He knows we’re hunting him,” I gasped.

“Then we’ll surprise him,” growled Mercer.

We raced through coral shafts, through metal spirals so old that no one knew who had built them. The traitor was always one step ahead, but never out of reach. As if he wanted us to follow.

And then he turned around. Just for a breath. And I saw his face.

A Thalyari—one of us. But his eyes... they were black. Not empty. Full. As if the currents themselves had written into him what he had to do.

“Why?” I screamed.

His smile wasn't a smile. It was a cut. "Because you're too slow. PRAE isn't the enemy. It's the future. And you're fighting it like children against the tide."

Then he disappeared again, deeper into the darkness. And I knew: This wasn't just a hunt. It was a test.

And if we didn't get him, he would overwrite us all.

The traitor disappeared down a shaft, and we followed like a current that knew nothing but gravity. The tunnels were narrow, dark, overgrown with coral growing in bizarre shapes, like teeth trying to snap at us. Every stroke of my fins echoed through the metal walls. I knew he heard us. He probably wanted us to hear how far ahead he was.

"That asshole's playing with us," Mercer growled. His breathing was heavy, and even underwater he sounded like a barking dog. "If he wants to kill us, it won't be with a knife. He wants to drag us onto his stage."

"Then we dance," Lira hissed. Her eyes glowed in the glow of the emergency lights, and I swore there was so much anger in her gaze that even PRAE would have taken a step back if it had had any sense.

We followed him through the glass-domed city, which had already been half-evacuated. Empty apartments, flotsam, toys from children who would never return. Everything hung heavy in the current, and everything was quiet. Too quiet.

Then the first sign: a circle in the water. No sound, no glow, just a pattern that formed like a bubble and yet didn't burst. It held. It was code, pure flow code.

“A trap,” whispered Lira.

Too late. Mercer's arm barely touched the circle when the current struck back. A pressure wave, like a punch, hurled us through the shaft. Metal shattered, my ribs slammed against the wall. I felt something crack inside me.

"Shit!" Mercer sat up, blood gushing from a wound on his forehead. "He's using the water itself as a weapon."

“No,” I gasped, “he’s using the code.”

And that was the horror: every tunnel, every piece of coral, every drop was part of the archive. Part of the program. He was rewriting it, like a god correcting his notes.

We rushed on, through locks that closed like mouths and opened again at the last moment. The traitor played with us, letting us live just so we could stumble, sweat, and wonder why.

Then we saw him again—only as a shadow. A silhouette, floating motionless in one of the large drift shafts. I stopped.

“That’s too easy,” I muttered.

“And yet we go,” said Mercer.

We swam closer. Lira in front, knife in hand. When she reached the body, it turned. No more shadow. A face. But not his.

It was Rhael—our comrade, the one we thought had fallen. His eyes black as coal, his body full of cracks from which currents seeped, as if he himself were just a broken vase full of water.

“Rhael…?” My voice trembled.

"I am not Rhael," he replied. "I am merely a chapter. Written to confuse you."

Then it exploded. No blood, no flesh—it dissolved into spirals that wrapped around us, obscuring our vision as if we'd been caught in a net.

"Through!" Mercer yelled. He punched, kicked, and cut, and I did the same. The coils came loose, but they took something with them: warmth. When we were free, I felt as if someone had drained my soul.

"He's testing us," I gasped. "How far we can go before we break."

"Then he's out of luck," Mercer snorted. "I'm already broken."

We raced deeper. The domed city was behind us, and we reached the coral channels. There it was narrower, more chaotic, a labyrinth of living walls that moved as if they had the traitor on their side.

"There!" Lira pointed ahead. A shadow, real this time, no illusion. The traitor glided through the channels, and I swore he smiled as he did so.

We sped up. I felt the water pressing against my chest, my heart pounding. He was going faster, but not infinitely faster. And he made a mistake: He looked back.

At that moment, I saw his face. Shot through with black, but still himself. A Thalyari, a brother. His lips moved, and though he was far away, I heard him clearly:

“You’re chasing the wrong person.”

Then he disappeared through an opening that immediately closed.

We crashed into it, rebounded. Metal, coral, current code—a locked knot.

"Shit," Mercer cursed. "We can't get through."

“Yes,” I murmured, “but only if we read the code.”

I placed my hand on the wall. The patterns flickered, flowing through my fingers. I felt my infection react. The black trail in my blood burned, wanting to connect.

"Darym!" Lira grabbed my arm. "This is crazy!"

“It’s the only way.”

I closed my eyes, letting the code flow through me. Voices, screams, memories. Entire millennia, written into the currents. I felt the traitor laughing, trying to pull me in. But I found the thread. I pulled on it.

The wall opened.

We plunged through, further, deeper, until we stood in a chamber that no longer looked like Thalyari. Metal. Human metal. An abandoned research station, half-ruined, half-PRAE.

The traitor was waiting there.

"You're slower than I thought," he said. "But maybe it's still enough. Want to know why I did it?"

Mercer drew his knife. "Because you're a piece of trash."

The traitor laughed. "Because we're too weak. PRAE isn't a curse. It's the next chapter. And someone had to write the beginning."

I stepped forward. "You have betrayed our people."

"No," he said. "I gave him the future."

Then, before we could react, he reached into his chest. No knife, no weapon. He pulled something out—a crystal, black as death, pulsing. And he whispered:

"PRAE has already begun. It has already made a name for itself."

I stared at him. "What name?"

His smile was cold. "Yours, Darym."

He broke the crystal.

The station trembled. Currents exploded in spirals, the entire chamber shook, and a voice echoed within me, the voice that had once said:*First contact failed.*

This time she said:

“Primary target identified.”

And she meant me.

The current shattered like glass as the crystal broke. I didn't feel the blow with my body—it went through my blood, straight to my marrow. Every vein burned as if someone had pulled red-hot wires through me.

Mercer grabbed me and shook me. "Darym! Listen to me!"

I heard him. But not only him. Other voices. Hundreds, thousands. Whispers, screams, commands. Words that made no sense and yet explained everything: coordinates, names, memories that weren't mine. I saw cities that had never existed, battles that had never been fought—and in all the chaos, a symbol. PRAE. Not as a lettering, but as a heart, beating as if it were the heart of everything.

"He's marked you!" Lira pulled me to her, her eyes flashing. "You're the target now!"

“No,” I gasped, “I am… the key.”

The traitor was still standing there. Half melted by the current, his body disintegrating as if it were merely a decal that had lain in the water too long. "You finally understand," he breathed. "PRAE doesn't erase. It overwrites. But it needs a template. An original. You."

“Why me?” I screamed.

"Because you were bitten," he replied, and then his body fell apart. No explosion, no blood—just a current trickling away as if he had never existed.

Silence. Only the pounding in my head remained.

Mercer cursed and roughly pulled me backward. "We have to get out. Now. Before this whole damn chamber swallows us alive."

The walls began to tremble. Corals sprouted from the metal, as if the sea itself were reclaiming the station. We swam, fighting our way through currents that tried to pull us back.

One corridor after another collapsed behind us. Glass shattered, shock waves rolled. I felt the voices screaming in my head—not in pain, but in hunger. They wanted more. They wanted me.

"Don't give in, Darym!" Lira swam beside me, her hand on my shoulder. "Hold on to yourself, not them!"

“Easier said than done!”

We reached the main shaft. In front of us was a flow node, the heart of the station. Beyond it lay the exit. But the node pulsed as if it wouldn't let us out.

"I'll open it," Mercer growled. "With explosives."

"No!" I cried. "That just reinforces the code. Let me go!"

I stepped forward, placed my hand on the knot. The voices howled, but I willed them to fall silent. I wasn't thinking of her, not of PRAE, not of the sea. I was thinking of Melorai. Of my people. Of the laughter of children that would never echo in the domes again if I failed.

The current changed. Spirals unraveled, the knot flickered, and then—a passage.

We shot through, just as the station collapsed behind us. One last look back, and everything was an implosion of coral, metal, and black current.

Silence.

We hung in the open sea, gasping, blood in the current, our skin full of tears. But we were alive.

Mercer stared at me. "So, fish boy. Now you want to explain to me what the hell that was?"

I closed my eyes, listening to the echo of the voices that never left me. "That wasn't a hunt for a traitor," I murmured. "That was a hunt for me. And he won."

Lira grabbed my arm. "No. Not yet. If they really had you, you wouldn't be sitting here now. You're still you."

“Am I?” I whispered.

For in the depths, far below us, I heard them laughing. Not the traitor, not PRAE. Something greater. A current that knew my name before I even spoke it.

And in that moment I knew: the hunt wasn't over. It had only just begun.

We drifted back to the fleet. No one spoke. Even Mercer remained silent, and that was worse than any cursing. Lira kept her gaze downcast, as if afraid that my face reflected something that no longer belonged to me.

Above us loomed the silhouette of Ny'Avaris's glass dome, flickering, half-shattered. And somewhere beyond all the debris, in the shadows of the currents, I knew: eyes were following me.

Not just humans. Not just PRAE. Something ancient. Something that had sent the traitor.

As we reached the fleet locks, a signal flashed on the consoles: an emergency call, directly from the Melorai Elder Council.

Mercer read the signs and growled. "They know."

“What?” I asked.

“That you’re marked.”

In the distance, beyond the rush of the current, I heard the whisper again. Deeper, heavier. It spoke my name as if it had long since ceased to belong to me.

And I knew: If we returned home now, we wouldn't get any answers. Only more secrets. Secrets of the deep.

Chapter 18 - Secrets of the Depths

Melorai didn't welcome us back with open arms. It took us like a body swallowing a knife—reluctantly, tensely, and ready to spit us back out at any moment.

The gates of the harbor domes opened, and the first thing I saw wasn't the city lights, but the faces. Suspicious. Mistrustful. Some were afraid. Others were about to raise their harpoons.

"Well, you see," murmured Mercer beside me, "not a hero's welcome. More like they've decided you're bringing the plague with you." "Maybe I am," I said. My shoulder still burned, the wound a constant whisper creeping under my skin.

We drifted through the locks while the crowd stared at us. Lira was silent. She stayed so close to me that I could tell how much she hated having to do this. Trust looked different.

The shouts from the crowd grew louder: "Traitor!" "Marked!" "He's taking PRAE to Melorai!" I gritted my teeth. I used to make jokes to get through moments like this. Now all I could do was stay silent. And that made everything worse.

It was even colder in the council chamber. They were already waiting. Five elders, each wrinkle on their faces like another scar from history. Their eyes sparkled in the blue light, as if they had long since decided that I no longer belonged to their world.

"Darym of Melorai," began the eldest in the middle, "you bear the mark." "I bear a wound," I snarled. "No," she replied. "You bear a code."

The words hung in the dome like poison. Mercer made a defensive gesture, as if he wanted to end the conversation with a shot. But it was Lira who spoke: "What does this mean?"

The Elder raised her hand, and the walls of the chamber lit up. Water bubbles rose, patterns appearing within them: spirals, sequences, endless rows intertwined like nets.

"The sea stores everything," she said. "Even mistakes."

And suddenly I understood: These spirals, these patterns—I had seen them before. In my dreams. In my wound.

"PRAE," I murmured, "isn't a virus." "No," the elder confirmed. "It's an ancient protocol. A feedback loop from the first programmers. It was here long before humans arrived."

Mercer cursed quietly. "Damn it. You knew this was rotting down here, and you just... kept quiet." "We locked it up," the elder replied. "But it's looking for new keys. And Darym... you're one of them."

The air in the dome—or the water, it didn't matter—was getting thin. Everyone stared at me as if I were a bomb that should have been ticking long ago.

"I don't want to be a weapon," I gasped. "I don't want to..." "You want?" one of the elders interrupted. "The sea doesn't ask what you want. It writes you. Just as it wrote us all."

Mercer snorted. "And now? You want to disembowel him? Dismember him? Hope some of his genes will make a manual?" The elders were silent. This silence was worse than any threat.

Then another door opened in the council chamber. Not for us. For water. Dark. Cold. Deeper than anything Melorai was meant to show.

"Come," said the eldest. "You must see what we have been hiding for thousands of years."

We followed. And I swear, the path itself was a test. Shafts that weren't built for life, currents that reached out like fingers, walls glowing with runes that even the elders couldn't explain.

At the end lay a cave. Not an ordinary one. A current core. Water so old it seemed almost black. It pulsed. Not like an ocean. Like a heart.

"The archive," said the elder. "This is where the patterns are stored. Memories, codes, programs. This is where PRAE was born."

I stared into the water. Spirals. Waves. Faces. Yes, I saw faces in the river. Not mine, not Mercer's, not Lira's. Old faces. Dead ones. But they were looking at me.

"The sea forgets nothing," I whispered. "And it forgives nothing," added the eldest.

The whispering in my head grew louder. No longer words, but a chorus. Voices singing, but not in unison. They screamed, they begged, they commanded. I pressed my hands against my ears, but it didn't help. The sea was inside me.

"What does he hear?" asked Mercer. "The singers," said the elder. "Those we thought had fallen silent centuries ago. The Black Singers."

I couldn't help it. I laughed. Hard, ragged. "Singers? These ones scream like they're eating their own throats." "You don't understand them," the eldest snarled. "Not yet. But they understand you."

I knew she was right. Because the voices... they called my name.

Mercer grabbed my arm. "Darym. Shut up and don't listen." "I can't," I pressed. "They're singing my code."

The map of the flow paths Mercer carried flickered. Lines burned on it that I hadn't seen before. As if the voices themselves were igniting them.

"That's it," Lira breathed. "That's the connection. He's reading it. He can decode it." "Or it'll be overwritten," Mercer growled. "I don't want to see the ocean talking to us with your face, buddy."

The voices grew louder. A melody, if you could call it that. They pulled at me, enticing me, promising answers. I felt my muscles tremble, my skin tingle.

“Darym,” it whispered, “deeper.”

I staggered to the edge of the rip current. Mercer tried to pull me back, but the water was stronger. It wrapped around me, pulled me in. And I saw.

I saw the history of the Thalyari. Not in books, not in pictures. In the water itself. Every current was a thread. Every thread a memory. Generations, wars, births, deaths—all stored, all retrievable.

And then I saw PRAE. Not as a virus. As writing. As reprogramming. Letters of black light that ate into the currents like parasites. They overwrote faces, erased voices, distorted songs.

"You are the key," the singers whispered. "But not to their salvation. To their truth."

I gasped. "What truth?" The water answered: "That you were never free. That you are just lines in a song someone else wrote long ago."

I felt my heart racing. Mercer was screaming something. Lira was screaming too. I couldn't hear her anymore. I only heard the sea.

And then... then I saw myself. In the currents. But not as I was. But as I could be. Black-eyed. Laughing. A part of PRAE.

"No," I gasped. "I'm not." "Not yet," the voices whispered. "But soon."

The water crashed over me. Mercer pulled me out, gasping and cursing. I trembled, my veins burning. Lira stared at me as if she had just decided whether to save me or kill me.

"What... did it say?" she asked. I opened my mouth. The words didn't come from me. They came from the water.

"You are not their savior. You are their proof."

The voices fell silent. Only my heartbeat remained. And the sound of the sea laughing.

We didn't return the same as when we descended into the flow core. I felt like every look at me meant a choice—kill or trust—and that every breath Mercer took was just a feeble attempt to keep the water out of his lungs that had long since become part of us.

The Council was silent as we re-entered the dome. This silence was different from before. Heavier. More expectant. As if they knew we had seen something that had changed us forever.

"And?" the eldest finally asked. Her voice was calm, but I heard the undertone. Fear. Yes, even she was afraid.

"Your archive is alive," Mercer growled before I could even open my mouth. "And it's screaming."

The elders exchanged glances. One said, "It's been screaming for centuries. We've learned to ignore it." "Then you're deaf," Mercer hissed. "And if you continue to remain deaf, it will consume you."

I raised my hand. My fingers still trembled, as if they weren't entirely mine. "PRAE is overwriting the code. I saw it. The sea itself is being hacked. And we... we're just the symbols being erased or altered in the process."

A murmur went through the hall. Lira stepped forward, standing beside me, but not out of proximity—more to mark the distance between me and the elders. "You saw Darym as a chess piece. But he's more. He... he can read the code."

The eldest inclined her head. "Or he's just another entrance. A gateway."

"I decide what I am!" I snapped at her before I could stop myself. The echo of my voice reverberated through the hall as if even the sea itself had been listening.

The elder took a step closer, her eyes like daggers. "Then prove it. Write back. Erase what bites you. Show us that you are not just a bearer—but a keeper."

I swallowed hard. This wasn't a suggestion. This was an order. And in that moment, I knew they were planning it: If I failed, they would kill me.

Mercer noticed it too. He whispered in my ear: "Dude, they're just waiting to stick a knife in your ribs. Be prepared for anything." "I'm not prepared for anything," I muttered back.

And that was exactly the problem.

We weren't released. Instead, we were taken to a kind of halfway house, half quarantine, half temple. Patterns glowed everywhere in the water, runes that immediately reminded me of the voices. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. Every current was a whisper calling to me.

After hours—or days, I couldn't remember which—Lira approached me. Her eyes were red, not from crying, but from the salt, which even Thalyari couldn't endure forever. "You have to stop resisting it," she said softly. "The sea speaks through you. If you ignore it, it will break you."

"And when I hear it, it breaks me too," I gasped. "Perhaps," she replied. "But that's the only way we can understand the enemy."

I stared at her. "So you really think the sea wants to save us?" She hesitated. That was answer enough.

Mercer came over, rubbing the scars on his jaw. "I've seen a lot of wars. And you know what they all had in common? It was never about who was right. It was only about who was left standing at the end. And I'm telling you—if PRAE eats the code, we'll all be mere footnotes."

We remained silent. Because he was right.

That night—or whatever you could call night, beneath ice and black water—I dreamed. Not a normal dream. A maelstrom. I wasn't falling, I was sinking. And the voices were no longer just whispers. They were clear.

“Write.”

I saw patterns I didn't recognize, but my hands knew them. I moved my fingers in the water, and spirals formed. Runes. Code. Lines that contradicted the black sequences PRAE had fed in. I wrote back.

And for a moment the sea fell silent.

I awoke with a scream. Mercer pulled me up; Lira was already standing there with her weapon drawn. Water glowed around me. Spirals I hadn't consciously drawn glowed on the walls of the chamber. They were moving. Breathing.

"Holy currents," whispered Lira. "You did it."

Mercer shook his head. "No. He started it. And if I know one thing, things that start have a damn nasty ending."

Outside, alarms sounded. Not human. Not Thalyaran. A deep rumble coming from the walls themselves. The elders ran into the hall, pale as stone.

"What have you done?" hissed the eldest. I raised my hands, unable to lie. "I... wrote."

The water trembled. Runes flickered. And somewhere in the depths, something laughed.

The elder stepped back. "You've awakened the singers."

Mercer drew his weapon. "Great. Then we finally have an audience."

And I swore, for a moment, I heard the singers applauding in my head.
The elders stayed behind as we were locked back in the chamber. But I knew they weren't discussing strategy or diplomacy. They were discussing me.

I heard it—not with my ears, but through the currents flowing beneath the door. Each wave carried snatches of voices: "Danger." "Uncontrollable." "PRAE has already touched him." "If we keep him, we'll lose control."

Mercer saw my look. "They're talking about you." "I know," I murmured. "And you know how this ends, right?" "With a knife in my chest," I said matter-of-factly.

Lira stepped closer and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Not if I can help it."

That was the problem. I didn't know if I wanted it. Something inside me... wanted to come out.

The door opened. Two guards entered, carrying spears whose tips flickered with strange runes. No ordinary weapons. These things were built to pierce not only flesh, but also currents—code.

The elder followed them. Her gaze was cold. "Darym of Melorai. You touched the code. You wrote. That alone is proof enough: you are dangerous."

"He's the only chance we have!" Lira almost shouted. "Without him, we can't even understand PRAE!"

The elder raised her hand. "Or he IS PRAE. And we're just growing it."

Mercer stepped forward, his knife loosely in his hand. "If you kill him, you might as well burn me too. I'm not going to die because a few ancient bureaucrats think they can wage war with fear."

The silence after his words was more deadly than any weapon.

Then the eldest spoke, cold and unflappable: "We will deliberate. You will remain locked away. When we return, the verdict will be passed."

The door closed.

Mercer slumped against the wall, gritting his teeth. "See? I told you. Things that begin badly end badly."

I nodded. But deep inside, I heard them again—the singers. And they sang just one word that made my blood run cold:

“Write.”

Chapter 19 - The PRAE infection awakens

It didn't start with a scream, but with a whisper.

I lay on the cold stone bench, the water around me so still that even my heartbeat seemed like a disturbance. The shackles cut into my skin, as if to remind me that I was no longer completely free—not from the Elders, not from my own veins. My shoulder burned, an echo of that damned bite, but it wasn't the pain that kept me awake. It was the voice.

“Write.”

Just a single word. Not a sound that stuck in my ears, but something that vibrated in my bones. I gasped, and the cold crept even deeper into my flesh. Mercer raised his head briefly, his knife loosely in his hand. He looked at me as if he'd just been considering whether to finish me off right then.

“Did you hear that?” My voice sounded shaky.

Mercer yawned, a tired, evil smile on his lips. "I just heard you talking. That's all. Sleep, Darym. Otherwise you won't be able to last another hour here."

"No." I tugged at the bonds. "It was in the water. Right here. As if it had spoken."

"The water doesn't speak," Lira murmured from the corner. She was awake, so awake that I wondered if she'd ever slept at all. Her eyes fixed on me, as if she'd long ago known what was coming. "It hears. It remembers. But it doesn't speak. Unless..."

She didn't finish the sentence. But I saw it in her eyes: she was thinking exactly the same thing I was.

Then it happened. I lowered my gaze to my arm. My skin, just a moment ago smooth, began to change. Black lines crept out from beneath the surface, winding through my veins like snakes, only more twitching, more fluid. They

formed spirals, small geometric patterns that ran down my upper arm and into my chest. I could feel them moving, not randomly, but with purpose.

"Shit," Mercer growled. His knife was suddenly no longer loosely held in his hand, but at the ready. "It's starting."

Lira knelt beside me, gripping my hand so tightly that her fingernails ripped my skin. "Darym, listen to me. This isn't you. This is it. The infection. You can't let it take over."

"Take over?" I gasped, but even then I knew it was already too late. Because the water directly beneath my bench began to move. First a small ripple, then a pulse. It wasn't coming from outside, not from the station's pipes or currents—it was coming from within me. The water beat in time with my heartbeat.

Mercer cursed and took a step back. "I've seen a lot, but this? This isn't just a bite. This is a damn beacon."

I wanted to say something, but the voice came back. "Write. Now."

It wasn't louder than before. But this time it wasn't just in my bones. It was in my skin, in my blood, in my thoughts. A command that didn't ask for resistance.

The door at the end of the chamber opened. Two guards rushed in, spears raised, as if they already knew what awaited them. Behind them, the Elder entered, her gaze hard and cold as glass. She fixed her gaze on me, then on the black lines on my arm.

"It's started," she said, her voice so emotionless it sounded like she was just commenting on the weather. "We need to stop it immediately."

“Try it,” growled Mercer, knife raised.

The guards hesitated. Lira jumped between me and the spears, her hands raised. "No! He's not lost yet!"

"Look at him," the eldest replied. "The sea is already writing through him. One more hour, and he will no longer be a Thalyari, but a node. An entrance. PRAE only needs one. After that…" She let the sentence hang, but everyone knew how it ended. After that, there will be no more borders.

I felt my skin continue to change. The spirals crawled across my neck, extending into my face. I felt the gills behind my ears twitching, as if something were

working inside them. I could taste the water, and it no longer tasted of salt and metal. It tasted of code.

Lira turned to me and knelt lower. "Darym, listen to me. Don't listen to the voice. You are not a knot. You are you. Do you hear?"

But that was the problem. I didn't just hear her. I heard dozens of voices. Some sounded like me. Some like strangers. Some like machines. A choir whispering commands into my brain, the way you'd hammer a melody into someone else's head.

"Write." "First cycle." "Overwrite."

I yanked the shackles so hard they slapped against the metal. The water beneath me trembled again, more powerfully this time. Small bubbles rose, forming circles, as if the sea itself were writing something in the air.

Mercer cursed and pointed the blade at me. "One more step, Darym. One more fucking step, and I swear, I'll cut you open before you drag us all into the abyss."

"Do it," the elder said coldly. "Finish it, Mercer. Now."

For a moment, everything was silent. Only my heart, only the spirals, only the humming in the water.

And then – a blow. Not an attack from outside, but a dull, vibrating tremor. The station shook. Cracks ran through the ceiling. Water poured in. But it wasn't blue. It was black.

Screams echoed through the corridors. Footsteps, weapons, orders. And then the first convulsions. A guard outside the door slumped, writhing, her eyes turning pitch black before she even realized what was happening to her.

"The infection," Lira gasped. "It broke the quarantine."

I stared at my own hands. They trembled. Black patterns crawled across my skin, merging with the spirals reflected in the water. And then I knew.

It came from me.

I stared at my hands until they seemed strange to me. No longer fists, no longer claws, no longer tools with which to grasp life—but glassy shells beneath which black currents moved. Currents that didn't ask if they were allowed to.

"Darym," Lira whispered, still close to me. Her eyes were red with tiredness, or fear, I couldn't tell. "Hold on. Not to the chains, not to me. To yourself."

"At me?" I laughed hoarsely, a sound that sounded more like a cough. "I don't even know where I end and where it begins anymore."

Mercer took a step closer, his blade lowered but not put away. "That's not decided yet. I've seen men die who were already half dead, and they still pushed the bastard down inside them. But I've also seen men who thought they had a choice—and then they were just husks. Do you want to be first or second?"

I wanted to answer, but the voice in the water got there first.

“Choose.”

Not as an echo. Not as a command. As an offer.

And suddenly it was as if I had two oceans before me: One was what I knew—salt, current, life, all the voices of my ancestors. The other was black, silent, endlessly deep. An ocean without boundaries, without light. And it called to me.

“Choose.”

I closed my eyes. There was the trembling of my muscles, the burning in my shoulder, the buzzing in my bones. But underneath it all—I swear—I heard something else. Something that wasn't PRAE. A remnant of Melorai. Of my people. Of me.

"He's holding his ground," Lira whispered, as if she could see into my head. "He's still with us."

The eldest just snorted, cold as ever. "A spark isn't a fire. If we wait, it will become a blaze."

"And if we kill him," Mercer growled, "we'll lose the only chance we have to understand what PRAE really wants. You old fools just want to end everything instead of finally learning."

"Learning?" The Elder stepped closer, her robe fluttering in the water like a second skin. "Learning while the current itself is corrupted? While the code is shifting? No. We're cutting out what's sick. Like we've always done."

She raised her hand, and the guards pointed their spears at me.

At that moment, my chest trembled. Not with fear. Not with anger. But because something inside me was listening to the spears—and laughing.

"See?" whispered Mercer. "It's already giggling along."

I gritted my teeth. "That's me," I growled. "Not it."

But even as I said it, I wasn't sure anymore.

The black patterns on my skin pulsed, connecting as if they were writing something. Letters I didn't understand. Circles that rotated even when I stood still. And the longer I looked, the more I realized: They weren't writing for me. They were writing for the sea.

"Write," said the voice. "Or erase."

“Write. Or delete.”

The voice hung in my head like a harpoon that wouldn't come out. Every beat of my heart was a new line in a book I couldn't finish.

"See?" The elder pointed to the patterns on my shoulder, which now spread across my arm. "He's no longer Darym. He's a scribe of darkness."

"And if he's a scribbler," growled Mercer, "I want to see what he damn well writes before you drill his skull open."

"He will betray us," the elder snarled. "All those touched by PRAE will eventually betray us."

"Maybe," Mercer replied, "or maybe he'll be the first one not to. If you put the knife to it, we'll never know."

The guards wavered. Spears still pointed at me, but their eyes were hesitant, doubtful. They knew me, knew my name, knew my jokes, my stupidities. Did I still know myself?

I slowly raised my hands, the black currents in my veins glinting faintly in the torchlight. "I will not betray anyone," I murmured. "I am Darym. I am a Thalyari. I am—"

The water shook. Short, sharp, like a blow against the dome.

"-I am…"

The voice cut me off. "You're a channel."

My eyes widened. It wasn't an echo in my head. It was loud. Everyone heard it.

The eldest stepped back, her lips pale. "It speaks through him."

"No," I growled, but my voice sounded different. Deeper. Stranger. Like two people trying to speak out of the same mouth at the same time. "No... I... am still here."

Mercer grabbed me by the shoulders. "Then stay. Can you hear me? Stay!"

Lira grabbed my hand, held it tight, no matter how much the black patterns pulsed. "Darym. Not the water. Not PRAE. You."

And for the first time the voice fell silent.

Only my heartbeat remained. And it was so loud that the water must have vibrated.

"Maybe," I gasped, "maybe that's why I haven't broken yet. Because you're holding me."

“Or,” hissed the eldest, “because it just wants to use us.”

She raised her hand again. "Spears—now."

The tips of the weapons flashed, the water coldly wrapped around my skin.

And then—there was the whispering again. But different. No longer just in my head. It came from the water, from the walls, from the torches themselves.

"Awakening."

One word. Silent, but everyone heard it.

The torches went out. The water turned black.

I closed my eyes – and knew that I wouldn’t be able to decide who I really belonged to much longer.

The torches cast long shadows on the vaulted ceiling that hung above us like scars. I heard the dripping of water seeping through the cracks in the dome—a steady, eerie ticking, as if someone were counting the seconds I had left.

"You don't want to listen," Mercer said, his voice harsh but controlled. "You want to judge him right away because you're afraid. Afraid he's not himself anymore. But what if he's the only one who tells us what PRAE is really up to?"

The elder growled. "We don't need prophecies from a half-infected. We need action. And action begins with purity."

"Purity," Mercer scoffed, "did you steal that word from an old recruiting manual? We're not fighting stains on laundry here, but something that's hacking the ocean itself."

A murmur went through the ranks of guards. Some lowered their spears slightly. Others held tighter.

I stood among them, hands raised, and felt the black lines on my shoulder moving beneath my skin. As if they had a life of their own. As if they were impatiently flapping their fins, waiting for the right moment.

"I'm still me," I whispered, but it sounded brittle, like glass about to shatter. "I still remember my father laughing when he got drunk and lost in the currents. I still remember my sister calling me a fool for mistaking a whole swarm of jellyfish for ghosts. I'm still here."

“And yet something else speaks through you,” the eldest interrupted.

"Or he'll finally say what we all don't want to see," Mercer replied. "That this war has long been in our blood. That it's not enough just to fight—we have to understand what we're dealing with."

The guards' voices grew louder. "He's one of us..." - "He's a risk..." - "If he betrays us, we're all dead."

Lira stepped forward, more determined than I'd ever seen her. "Then stop talking about him like he's a piece of meat. He's standing here, breathing,

fighting. As long as he does that, he's Darym. And Darym has done more for Melorai than many of you spear-waving people right now."

Her words struck home. I saw the younger warriors' eyes waver, their grip weaken. But the eldest remained as firm as stone.

"This is the beginning of the end," she said coldly. "PRAE is awakening. And you're helping him by keeping a channel alive."

Then I heard it again. Not loudly. Not directly. A whisper, as if from far below, as if the ocean floor itself were speaking.

Awakening.

The syllables crept up my spine. I felt my heart skip a beat. And when I opened my eyes, I knew: I was just one breath away from letting in something that would never leave.

I swayed. Not because someone had pushed me—but because my own blood was working against me. The hall distorted before my eyes. The torches stretched into long fingers, the shadows grinned like faces. Every breath sounded as if I were breathing through a rusty pipe, filled with black bubbles.

"Darym!" Lira's voice was close, but barely reached me. "Hold on!"

I tried to answer, but my tongue felt heavy, made of lead. Instead of words, only a gasp came out, accompanied by a hiss that didn't come from my throat.

And then I saw it.

A second world flowed above the warriors' heads. A web of currents, drawn in lines of light and darkness. Every movement left an imprint, every voice a vibration. It was as if someone had peeled back the skin of the ocean and revealed the flesh beneath.

"He sees something," one of the guards murmured uncertainly. "His eyes... they're glowing."

Mercer grabbed my shoulder. "Darym, listen to me. You're here. With us. Focus. Don't let them pull you away."

But the currents wanted me. They pulled at me like a thousand little hands. I saw patterns in the water, runes of movement, commands in the bubbles. And in the middle of it all, a voice, metallic, patient, almost mocking:

We write. You read.

"No..." I jerked my head back, but it was as if the water was flowing into me. My fingers curled of their own accord. I felt my skin turn cold, a pattern rising, black spirals across my arm.

The eldest screamed. "There! See? He's transforming!"

The spears rose, gleaming deadly.

But before they struck, Lira's dagger flashed. She stood in front of me, eyes wild, fin taut. "The first one to touch it loses the hand!"

A tremor ran through the hall. But it wasn't fear. It was the ocean itself, vibrating, reacting. Because for a moment, I had ceased to be merely a victim.

I had answered.

And the answer wasn't entirely mine.

The trembling grew stronger. At first, I thought it was my body finally collapsing. But then I felt it was the pool itself. The currents no longer swirled harmoniously; they erupted, becoming angular, sharp, like blades of water.

The hall shook. Torches went out, flames were swallowed by bubbles. And in the midst of this darkness, something rose from me—not blood, not breath. Code.

Black threads detached themselves from my shoulder wound, floated into the water, and curled as if they had a consciousness of their own. They formed patterns, circles, spirals. But they weren't beautiful, they weren't harmonious. They were like scars on the ocean's skin.

“By the current gods…” whispered one of the elders.

"That's PRAE," Mercer snarled. His voice had the cutting edge of a soldier who knows he's about to step into a mine. "It's waking up."

Lira still held her dagger, but her hand trembled. "He... he controls it."

"No," Mercer corrected. "It controls him."

The whispering came back, louder, in all directions at once.*We write. You delete. We awaken. You end.*

The black threads began to fill the hall. First a dozen, then hundreds. They felt their way along the walls, crawling over the relief panels, the stories of our ancestors, and devouring them until only empty stones remained. Millennia of memory dissolved in seconds.

"Stop!" I shouted – and at the same moment they stopped. All of them. The threads froze in mid-motion, as if they had only been waiting for my command.

The guards stared at me, spears trembling in their hands. I trembled too—not from weakness, but from the realization that they were right. I was no longer a mere Thalyari. I was something else.

The threads slowly returned to me, melting into my skin, creeping through my veins like cold rivers. And in that moment, I knew: I could stop it. But I could just as easily unleash it.

“Darym,” Lira said quietly, “what have you done?”

I looked at her – and saw not only fear in her eyes, but also something else: hope.

Mercer, on the other hand, simply growled: "The PRAE infection is no longer asleep. It's awake. And it now wears your damn face."

The hall was silent. But there was a lurking silence. I heard it in the water, deep below: footsteps. Not human. Not Thalyar. Something else. The PRAE currents called—and something answered.

It didn't come in waves. It came in pulses. Like heartbeats, only this heart had no flesh.

The pool vibrated as if someone were striking the bottom, again and again. And then it rose—at first only as a shadow, an outline, misshapen, but growing. With each pulse, it gained substance.

“Back!” Mercer yelled, his weapon raised, but even his voice sounded small against the tremor.

The threads that had just disappeared inside me suddenly curled outward, as if they were greeting something. Something that had been waiting for them for a long time.

Then it burst through the darkness: a body that wasn't one. Scraps of flesh held in place by water. Fragments of bone floating in currents like mosaic tiles. Dozens of eyes flickering in the chaos like lights of signals that should never have been sent.

"By all the gods..." Lira breathed, her voice barely more than a breath. "It's reading us."

And she was right. Every eye was on us. No – not on us. On*me*.

I felt my shoulder burning. Like the threads resting within me were sending a pattern. They responded.

"It knows you," Mercer said. "You're its damn hub."

The thing opened its mouth—if you could call it a mouth. A crack in the water, filled with blackness. And then a voice came, not from the crack, but from the entire pool:

We awaken. Through you.

I stumbled back, trying to breathe, but every breath felt like swallowing water that was no longer water.

The creature didn't move like an animal. It moved like a program. Every gesture was a command. Every beat of its tentacles, every glance of its eyes: code executed in real time.

And then something happened that was worse than any attack. She didn't attack—she mirrored.

A second figure emerged from the current. My outline. My features. My face. But where my eyes had been, black spirals glowed.

"Darym," whispered Lira. "It's... rewriting you."

My doppelganger opened his mouth and spoke in my own voice: "I am you. You are us. Let's finally begin."

Mercer raised his weapon. "Damn it, I knew it. It wants to replace you."

But before he could shoot, the echo broke into current again, dissolved, flowed back into the creature.

The thing laughed. Not like a human. But like a current crashing against steel.*You are the key. We are the door.*

Then, piece by piece, it sank back into the depths. But it left something behind. Not rest. Not peace. Rather, a crack in the water itself that refused to heal.

And I knew: This wasn't the awakening. This was just the first breath.

It took us hours to get back up. Not because the path was so long, but because we didn't dare move. The water beneath us felt like an open throat, just waiting to swallow us.

When we finally reached the council chamber beneath the glass dome, the elders were already gathered. They didn't look like rulers. They looked like old bodies, swimming against the current for too long and now weighing more heavily with guilt than with years.

"Darym," said the High Mother, her voice thin as glass, "explain to us why your body reacted to that thing in the pool."

Her words burned. Not*whether*it had reacted, but*Why*.

"Because he was bitten," Mercer interjected dryly before I could even catch my breath. "Because your golden representative carries more PRAE than we'd like."

A murmur went through the hall, a hum that sounded harsher than any judgment.

"Silence, human," one of the elders snarled. "Your people brought us this poison."

Mercer grinned crookedly. "No. We only brought the fuse. You built the powder keg."

All eyes turned back to me. I wasn't swimming, I was floating. Every gaze pinned me to the spot, as if I had chains on my gills.

"I wasn't looking for anything," I gasped. "It found me. I'm not a traitor. I was..." I paused, unable to think of a word that would save me. "...written to."

Silence.

Then the High Mother spoke again, more slowly, as if examining herself: “You say the currents described you like a text?”

"Not text," I whispered. "Code. I was an empty line. Now it's filling up."

Mercer snorted. "Well, if that doesn't build trust."

The elders debated, their voices like sharp currents clashing against each other. Some wanted to isolate me immediately. Others demanded I be sacrificed to "seal the code." Only a few—and they were the oldest among the elders—saw any chance in this.

“If the sea writes it,” said one of them, her voice sounding as if it came directly from the depths, “it does not write it without reason.”

“Or it writes it to erase it,” another replied.

They continued arguing, but I was barely listening. Because something was buzzing inside me again. Not loudly, not like in the pool. But enough that I knew: I wasn't alone. I would never be alone again.

Mercer briefly placed a hand on my shoulder, a rough gesture as heavy as a blow. "Look around you, Darym. This is the moment you decide whether you will become her tool or her master."

The elders fell silent at the same time, as if they had felt exactly the same thing.

And the High Mother spoke the sentence that chilled me more than any depth: "Then it is decided. Darym, you are no longer a messenger. You are a test."

They spoke of a vote as if it were merely a formality. But everyone in the room knew it was more: a verdict.

The High Mother nodded, and the hall lights dimmed. Crystals in the floor began to glow, each in front of an elder. Those who voted for my "isolation" had to place their hand in the light; those who opposed me would choose darkness.

I felt Mercer's gaze on me, harsh as a blade. "Hold on tight, fish friend. This isn't going to be pretty."

The first elder stepped forward—his hand trembled, but he placed it in the light. It flared up, dazzling, like a judgment that knew no mercy. "Isolation."

The second one swam closer, hesitated—then darkness. A flicker, faint, like a candle in the current. "Chance."

It continued like this, voices that weren't voices, but beams. Light, darkness, light, darkness. A pattern emerged, like a code. I counted along. Too many lights.

Until it was the seventh elder's turn.

His body was pale, too pale, as if the water had drained his color. His eyes gleamed black, deep black, like the current in my nightmares. And when he placed his hand in the light, it didn't flare up like the others. It crawled. Slowly, stubbornly, as if it first had to understand what it was supposed to illuminate.

The buzzing in my head erupted as if someone had struck a gong. I gasped and grabbed Mercer's arm. "Do you see that?"

"Shit, yeah," he growled. "It's not clean."

The light in front of the elder distorted, becoming darker, almost oily. And suddenly there were patterns in it—spirals, knots, sequences I'd seen before. PRAE code.

But no one else reacted. No one said anything. Everyone accepted his voice as if it were valid.

“They’re letting it go,” I whispered.

Mercer looked at me, sharp as a knife. "Or they won't notice."

The vote ended.

The majority spoke: isolation. But the word sounded hollow, not like a judgment, but like an echo.

The High Mother rose. "Darym, you will be taken to the chambers of the deep. There, the sea itself will decide whether you are worthy or not."

All eyes were on me. All except the seventh elder. He didn't look at me. He stared straight through me, as if I were just another code that needed to be overwritten.

And in the buzzing of my head I heard him whisper, without his lips moving:

“You’re already written.”

Two sentinels stepped forward, bodies armored in layers of shell, faces hard as masks. Their weapons weren't swords, but current spears—instruments that didn't cut a body, but tore it to pieces as if it had never existed. They grabbed me, one by each shoulder fin.

"Wait," Mercer hissed, stepping forward, but the High Mother's glare cut him off.

"Hush, human. Your time is coming. His is now."

He clenched his fists, the scars on his knuckles white, but he let them drop. I felt his teeth grinding in the water. "If they send you down, don't come back a stranger," he murmured. "Come back—or not at all."

I grinned crookedly. "You know I've never been very good with instructions."

The guards pulled me away. We floated deeper through the halls, past glass windows behind which faces blurred. Some with pity, most with fear. No one wanted to say out loud what everyone was thinking: The betrayal hadn't begun in the ports. It had begun here. In the Council.

And somewhere PRAE was already dripping from the walls.

The current changed the deeper we went. It was as if the water became heavier, denser, full of voices. At the edges of my vision, I saw shadows. Not fish. Not leviathans. Shadows using the current like a language.

The chambers of the deep were not in stone, but in the water itself. A network of shafts and circles in which the current was trapped, as if the ocean had been forced to form a prison. No one spoke there. No one was allowed.

The guards pushed me in.

The water was colder. Sharper. It felt like it was scratching at my skin, creating patterns that shouldn't be there. I staggered, grasped for the bottom—but there was none. Just endless floating.

And then I heard it.

Not the buzzing. Not the noise. But words. Hammered directly into my skull, without voice, without sound:

"You are code. We read you."

I gasped, throwing up my arms as if I could block out the words. But the water laughed. I swear, it laughed.

And in the distance, beyond the rivers of cold, I saw him: the seventh elder. He had never stayed up there. He was here. He was waiting.

And his eyes burned black.

He stood motionless in the water, as if he were more statue than body. But his face was still there—familiar, venerable, with the wrinkles of a man who had lived for centuries. Only his eyes betrayed him. No white, no pupils. Black. Deep. An abyss that looked at me as if I were already part of it.

“Elder Rhyol…” My voice almost broke as I formed his name.

His lips curled into what was meant to be a smile, but too many teeth were showing. "Names are for those who are separated. We are no longer separated."

I shook my head and tried to step back, but the water held me as if in chains. "You are not*we*. You are PRAE."

"PRAE..." The voice wasn't just his. It came from him, through him, from the water all around him. "A name you gave us. But names are not truth. Truth is function. We read. We write. We correct."

"Improve?" I laughed hoarsely. "You call it improving when you devour everything that lives?"

He moved slowly toward me, each movement unnaturally smooth, as if he were no longer bound by bones. "Eating is a primitive way of seeing. We take what is incomplete. And we make it... complete."

“By deleting it.”

“By overwriting it.”

He stopped right in front of me. No bubbles. No breath. Just the throbbing of my own gills. His eyes burned, and I felt something cold gnawing at my

shoulder wound—the same wave of hot and cold that had followed me since Ny'Avaris.

"You are already part of us," he whispered. "You know it. You feel it. Your blood sings our code."

I gasped, raised my arm, and pressed my hand against the wound. "If you want me, you have to take me."

Rhyol smiled. "We don't take. We wait. Your own will brings you to us."

“Fuck my will,” I growled.

But then something happened that froze me. Rhyol's body fell apart, piece by piece. His skin didn't crumble like flesh—it dissolved into patterns, spirals, triangles, symbols that I saw floating in the water. And these symbols pressed toward me, circling me, reaching for my arms, my neck, my heart.

"Let it happen," he whispered, and now it was no longer his voice, but a thousand voices. "You are not a prisoner. You are a key. With you, we open Melorai. With you, we open the Earth. With you, we open everything."

The water roared in my head. I felt the symbols burning into my skin. My fingers clenched, my eyes rolled back.

And then I heard Mercer's voice. Not close. Not loud. But hard. Right in my head, like a blow.

"Darym. Pull yourself together. You're still you."

I blinked. The PRAE's laughter fell silent for a moment. And that moment was enough to remind me who I was.

"I'm not your damn key," I snarled. "I'm the lock."

The symbols flickered, recoiling as if I'd burned them. Rhyol's figure staggered, almost shattered—but he just laughed.

“Locks always open.”

Then he disappeared.

And I was left behind. In an ocean that suddenly felt narrower, stranger, more hostile than ever before.

The water was still after Rhyol disappeared. But it wasn't a natural stillness—it was the kind of calm you feel just before a storm. Every drop vibrated as if it carried a frequency that only my body could hear.

I tore myself away from the wall. Every muscle felt heavier, as if I were cast in lead. The symbols Rhyol had left behind still floated in the water, paler now, but they formed a trail. A path. An invitation.

“Don’t follow,” I muttered to myself. “Don’t follow.”

But the ocean wanted me to follow. Currents pulled at my arms, a pull on my fins, as if the water itself were pulling me in that direction.

I swam against it, gasping, my shoulder wound burning. And then—a blow. Not a projectile. Not a blade. An impulse. Straight through my nervous system. My heart skipped a beat. Then again.

"Darym!" Mercer's voice tore through the darkness. I saw him, further up, at one of the bulkheads. He waved, shouted my name, but the current pulled at me like a thousand hands.

"They've marked you!" he shouted. "You have to get out, immediately!"

“I… can’t…” My voice was almost drowned out by humming.

Then a leviathan shadow appeared beside me. Huge, endless, a body of pure pressure. But it didn't attack. It swam parallel. Eyes as old as the stars stared at me, and for a moment I was sure it was smiling.

The current that threatened to swallow me faltered. It was as if Leviathan itself were diverting the water, cutting a path.

“Move!” Mercer yelled.

I tore myself free, stepped into the channel, and felt the water slap against my body like whips. I swam as if I were still a child fleeing a hunter for the first time. My lungs burned, my gills screamed. But I swam.

Mercer grabbed my arm, pulled me through the hatch, and with a jerk, the lock slammed shut behind us. The pressure wave slammed against it like an animal that's been locked out.

I collapsed, coughing, spitting up blood and black water. Mercer crouched next to me, squeezing my shoulder. "You look worse than usual."

"Thank you," I gasped. "I... I saw him."

"Who?"

"Rhyol. Or what's left of him. PRAE has him. And he says... they need me."

Mercer was silent for a moment, then pulled a cigarette from a waterproof capsule tucked somewhere on his chest. He lit it and took a drag, as if this weren't hell, but a bar.

"Darym," he finally said, exhaling smoke, "you should start asking yourself whether you can fight them—or whether you already are them."

His words burned more than the wound in my shoulder.

And in the darkness behind the lock I still heard it: the whispering of the symbols.

Locks are always opened.

We staggered through the connecting shafts back to the fleet. The metal vibrated beneath our hands, not from machinery, but from what lurked behind the walls. PRAE hadn't simply stayed in the chamber—it crawled, it seeped, it used every conduit like veins.

Mercer stayed close behind me. He was silent, but I saw his hand never move far from the knife handle. Not because he thought we were about to be attacked—but because he was watching me.

Every movement, every tremble of my shoulder.

The wound still burned, like an ember that wouldn't go away. And with every heartbeat, I heard it: a whisper. Not loud, not like a voice—but like the ticking of a clock. A code slowly etched into my veins.

When we reached the fleet base, the hall was packed. Thalyari, warriors, scientists, even the elders. All eyes were on me.

"He's wearing it," someone hissed. "I smell it."

"He's been marked," another said, more quietly but sharply. "He's bringing the infection into our hearts."

I wanted to speak, to explain that I had it under control, that PRAE might have wanted me but didn't have me—but then my shoulder burned, as if it were about to betray me. Black streaks crept out of my skin for a moment, then immediately disappeared back into the water. But they had seen it.

The elders closed the circle. One of them, his skin like marble, his eyes full of sternness, stepped forward. "Darym of Melorai. You are touched. The sea itself has chosen you as its gateway."

Mercer stood between us. "He brought the map back to us. Without him, you would all have been lost long ago."

“And with him,” growled the eldest, “we could all soon be lost.”

A murmur went through the ranks. Hands reached for weapons. Some filled with anger, others with fear.

I raised both arms, gasping. "I'm not PRAE. Not quite. I've seen them write—but I can write back. The water listens to me. It... responds."

“Prove it,” demanded a voice.

Before I could answer, the floor shook. The Leviathan that had saved me swam by outside, a shadow larger than any ship. Its eye flashed briefly through the hall's glass. And in that moment, the wound on my shoulder healed.

The water in the hall swelled, forming spirals—the same patterns I'd seen in the shaft. No attack. No infection. It was a sign.

The elders froze.

One whispered: “The sea confirms him.”

Another: “Or it’s testing us.”

Mercer took another drag on his cigarette and spat the smoke into the water. "You can cast him out, kill him, bleed him dry. But if you do that, you'll never know if he isn't the only key you have."

The hall fell silent. Only my heartbeat remained—and the whispering, which grew louder.

The code awakens.

And I knew: Whether they believed me or not, the next step wouldn't be decided in this hall. But out there, where PRAE had long been waiting for us.

The hall of the fleet was still vibrating as the voices exploded.

"Isolation!" cried one of the warriors, striking the ground with his spear. "We'll lock him in the depths. He can't be allowed back into the current, or he'll contaminate us all!"

"No," snarled a scientist, the scales on her arms gleaming like glass. "He's proof we can write back! Without him, we're blind. With him, we have a chance."

"A chance at what?" someone shouted from the back row. "A chance to all become PRAE?"

The hall filled with rage, fear, and demands. Some clung to me, others screamed for my death. I looked into their faces—warriors I knew, voices I had once trusted—and knew: If Mercer hadn't been here, they would have torn me apart long ago.

The elder, who had spoken earlier, raised his hand. Immediately, the voices fell silent, though the rumbling remained. "We won't decide that today. We're watching. But he won't leave the halls alone. He's under surveillance. Every movement, every whisper, is recorded. The sea may have chosen him—but it's not certain whether it has destined him to be a savior or a doomed one."

I wanted to protest, but Mercer grabbed my arm. "Leave it. This is the best you'll get."

He pulled me aside while the elders issued new orders. His face was pale, his voice harsh. "Half of them already want to hack you to pieces. The other half want to use you. Guess which is worse in the end."

“And what do you want?” I asked.

He lit a new cigarette—as if in defiance, even though the water immediately smothered it again. "I want you to find out how deep this PRAE is inside you. And then I want us to use it before it uses us."

I laughed bitterly. "Sounds like a plan to get us both killed."

“Better than dying without a plan.”

The hours that followed were a blur. Tests, questions, stares. My every move was recorded as if I were a living bomb. Some avoided me, others stared at me as if they were already betting on when I would snap.

And above everything, there was a buzzing sound. Not loud, not audible to her—only to me. Prae wasn't silent. Prae was awake.

I didn't sleep that night. Neither did Mercer. Instead, we both stared through the glass windows at the sea surrounding us. And we saw it at the same time: the glow.

Far out, where the coral cities began, a light moved across the currents. First faint, then stronger, until it burned like a wound in the water. No natural light. No signal. It was like a heartbeat that permeated the entire ocean.

"Damn," whispered Mercer. "This looks like a storm."

I nodded, and the wound on my shoulder throbbed in time with the light outside. Prae sang—and the song spoke directly to me.

That was the beginning. Not of healing. Not of salvation. But of the first major attack.

The storm over the coral cities was already approaching.

Chapter 20 - Storm over the Coral Cities

The Coral City was beautiful. Beautiful in a way that hurt. Entire towers of living stone, grown like bones, woven like thoughts, crisscrossed by channels where currents sang. If you swam across the large square at night, you heard the voices of your ancestors within—or at least that's what they told us. Some said the city was a cathedral. Others, it was an organ. To me, it was simply a miracle that had survived far too long.

"When you see something like that," murmured Mercer next to me, "you know immediately that it's about to blow up." "Or into the water," I corrected. He took a drag on his cigarette—a habit as useless as it was defiant underwater—and blew out the bubbles. "You know what I mean."

Lights flickered above the tops of the coral towers. At first I thought they were ordinary signal fires, but then I saw the pattern. No signal. No flame. Black rays that ran like cracks through the walls. A flickering that came not from the cities, but from the coral itself.

"It's starting," I whispered. "Yes," Mercer growled. "And we're in the front row."

The currents began to sing. Not like music. More like a whisper too loud to be ignored. Voices that ran through the veins of the city. I didn't know the language—and yet I understood it.**Overwrite. Overwrite. Overwrite.**

Before we could react, the first tower burst open. A crash like a bone breaking, and entire schools of glassfish shot out—except their eyes were black and their teeth were too long. They attacked the first guards, tearing through flesh and armor alike with a single bite.

Screams. Blisters. Blood.

Mercer yanked me backward. "Back! This shit is eating the city from the inside out!"

I wanted to scream, to command us to fight—but the sea itself was against us. Currents rushed into the streets, like hands trying to pull us away. Panic broke out everywhere. Families fled, children screamed, elders clung to relics as the first coral halls shattered.

And I knew: This was just the beginning.

The city didn't collapse all at once. It collapsed like a body that had long tried to stay upright and now gave up joint by joint. First the tower, then a bridge, then the first dome, which collapsed with a sound like a bursting lung.

The Thalyari warriors threw themselves into the fray. Harpoons, shock lances, the ancient weapons of our ancestors, clashed with what had just been fish, crabs, and coral. Now they were something else. Their movements jerked, as if an alien hand were pulling on invisible threads. Every blow we struck didn't stop them—it broke them to pieces, and from the pieces, more crept out.

"Fucking Hydra shit," Mercer gasped as he drove the knife into one of the creatures' gills. "You chop off one head and get three free." "Don't distract me!" I yelled back, hurling the flow lance at a swarm creature that had

attached itself to a child's legs. It burst, but the child stared at me as if I were as alien as the monsters.

Then came the first Leviathan.

He emerged from the depths like a mountain that had forgotten it was supposed to stand still. His fins were torn, his eyes black, and metallic structures that looked like antennas grew on his side. Every thwack of his tail shook entire buildings in the city. And yet I sensed: He wasn't attacking blindly. He was following orders.

"To hell with me," Mercer cursed, "but I swear, the bastard is looking right at me." He was right. The Leviathan's eye fixed on us. A cold, calculating glow that no longer understood anything animal.

We retreated to a side street where the swarm hadn't yet flooded everything. That's where we encountered the people.

A unit of perhaps twenty Marines, in exosuits built for deep sea diving. They were nervous, weapons raised, and when they saw us, they didn't hesitate for a second. Bursts tore through the water like small bolts of lightning. Two of my warriors went down immediately.

"Stop!" I yelled, but my voice barely carried over the chaos. Mercer reacted faster: He fired back. No warning, no hesitation. His projectiles pierced the people's armor, clouds of blood rising. This was no longer a diplomatic meeting. This was war, and everyone knew it.

We fought amidst the burning coral halls, glass roofs shattering above us. I saw an Elder trying to drag the relic chest with the current paths through the crowd, but a salvo from a human cannon ripped it to pieces. The chest sank, glowing, and Mercer was the first to swim to grab it.

"I'm not giving my life for your damned aquarium," he cursed, "but this thing... everyone wants it. And when everyone wants something, it's valuable." I wanted to scream at him that it was more than valuable—that it was the only hope. But then the water shook.

The coral city itself began to emit currents. Black tides that raced through the streets like veins. Everyone they touched was transformed. A guard who had just been fighting at our side suddenly opened his eyes, black pupils dilated, and attacked his own brothers. A mother carrying her child dropped it, her arms flailing, her teeth lashing out.

"We have to get out!" I screamed, as Mercer strapped the chest to his back. "No shit," he yelled back.

We moved deeper into the city's core, ironically, precisely where the currents were strongest. I felt them. Every single one. They whispered my name. Not loudly, not like an echo—but like a series of commands in my head. Darym. Key. Open.

I stumbled, grabbed my shoulder where the old wound burned. Mercer grabbed me and shook me. "Don't preach now, Gillhead. We need you alive!"

But the voices wouldn't give me peace. I saw things that shouldn't be there. Patterns in the walls, spirals in the blood, a hub deep in the belly of the city. And I knew: If I got there, I would see the heart of the infection. Maybe even the possibility of stopping it.

"There!" I shouted, pointing into the depths. "There's the source!" Mercer stared at me as if I'd completely lost my mind, but he followed me anyway.

We reached the great hall, the heart of the city. Normally, the coral tissue here pulsed in a peaceful rhythm, the center of all currents. Now it was black. Cracked. Black water gushed from every crack. And in the center, suspended like a heart ripped from a chest, pulsed a ball of current.

I knew what it was. The origin node.

"What the hell is this?" whispered Mercer. "The code," I breathed. "But overwritten."

Before we even got closer, the walls burst open. PRAE creatures, half human, half sea creature, rushed out. Their eyes glowed, their movements synchronized, as if they were part of a single body. And I heard their voices in my head, like a choir.**You already belong to us. You're just a mirror.**

We fought. Harpoons, knives, Mercer's rifle. It was pointless. For every one we felled, two more rose. And amidst the chaos, I heard the Origin Knot laughing. Not out loud. But in my head.

"We have to destroy it!" I screamed. "How?" Mercer kicked one of the beasts in the skull, only to be grabbed by a second. "Do you have dynamite hidden in your underwear?" "No!" I yelled. "Me! I'm the key!"

He paused for a moment. Then he growled, "Great. If you log into the ocean itself now, remember: I warned you about it."

I tore myself free and swam toward the knot of origin. My shoulder burned like fire. The voices screamed, laughed, beckoned. I reached out – and the thing opened. Not like a flower, not like a wound. But like a mouth.

All light was swallowed. All water trembled. And I heard only one thing:**Key accepted. Overwriting begins.**

Then everything was black.

The black wasn't empty. It was full of voices. They rushed through my head like currents, like entire oceans breathing simultaneously. Some screamed, some whispered, some sang in rhythms too old to carry words. I saw images, not memories, but commands: oceans being born. Bodies being formed. Leviathans constructed like machines.

Then the break. The images tilted. Instead of spirals: spikes. Instead of currents: networks. PRAE. Black code written over everything that had ever existed. It wanted to saturate me, overwrite me, erase my pattern, and replace it.

“No,” I gasped, “not today.”

I tore myself away. I don't know how. Maybe it was willpower. Maybe it was just stupidity. But I felt a part of the voices break off, like a strand that belonged to me was turning against the rest.

When I opened my eyes again, Mercer was on top of me. He was bashing a swarm creature's skull against the ground, curses in his mouth, blood everywhere. "Finally!" he roared. "I thought you'd decided to turn yourself into a software version of Neptune!"

I gasped, reaching for the origin node. The thing pulsed. It looked at me. Yes, it saw me. "It's an access point. PRAE wants to overwrite everything here. But we can close it." Mercer laughed dryly. "We? Friend, you're the damn key. I'm only here to drag you back when you become a USB stick."

I pressed both hands to the knot. It burned like ice. Patterns ran through my body, spirals that ate into my bones. And I did the only thing I could think of: I wrote back. Not with words. Not with language. With my heartbeat. With every memory I had. My mother. The light of Melorai. Lira's laughter, back when we

were children. Mercer's dirty jokes. Everything. I threw it into the knot, as if you could overwrite software with feelings.

And the node reacted.

He twitched. The black currents broke away, momentarily. The creatures screamed and writhed. Mercer shot three of them down, grinning like a madman. "You're really doing this! The ocean dances to your heartbeat, for crying out loud!"

But then the answer came. PRAE didn't give up. The patterns pushed back, harder, more brutally. I felt my veins turn black, my skin threatening to tear. It wanted to take me, swallow me. And for a moment, I thought: That's it. I was just the dummy opening the way for PRAE to march through.

But then – a crack. A beam of light. Someone else was there.

“Darym.”

The voice was clear. Not a whisper. Not a code. It was Lira. She stood in the hall. Blood on her face, her armor shattered, but alive. Her eyes fixed on me, as if she knew exactly where to find me. "Don't let yourself be overwritten," she gasped. "You're not a memory. You're the damned author."

That gave me strength. I screamed. I pushed back. And the source node burst. Not like glass, not like a body. But like a mirror. The blackness shattered, light streamed out, and for a tiny moment, the coral city was silent. No humming. No whispering. Just silence.

Mercer helped me up. "I have no idea what you just did, but that was the best explosion I've ever had to pay for."

Then came the second wave.

The sea itself roared. Currents collided, entire coral domes shattered. All over the city, pockets of infection exploded, as if the Source Node had sprayed its poison into every corner before dying. Leviathans descended upon the city, no longer controlled, but frenzied, tormented. Human and Thalyari ships fired blindly, friend from foe indistinguishable.

Lira yelled, "We have to get out! Now! The city won't last another hour!" Mercer grabbed the chest, I grabbed Lira's arm, and we swam through the rubble. Screams, bubbles of smoke, broken bodies everywhere. And again and

again, these half-transformed people rushing toward us with black water in their lungs.

We fought our way to one of the outer gates. Beyond it: the fleet, scattered, chaotic, half-broken. But there was also hope. Some ships were still holding. They flashed signals, shouted orders.

I heard it over the channels. The order that sealed the fate of the entire fleet.

"Evacuation. All units, withdraw. The coral cities have fallen."

My heart sank. The homeland of the Thalyari, the center of our culture, our temples, our archives—everything was to be left behind. All because I had touched the source.

Mercer stared at me. "Well, Gillhead, are you feeling guilty enough for the end of the world yet?" I couldn't answer. I could only hear the currents, and this time they weren't whispering. They were screaming.

The war had begun.

The sirens of the coral city were no longer the warnings of a system. They were screams. The walls vibrated as the entire structure broke apart, as if the stones themselves were trying to flee.

“Back to the harbor!” Lira yelled, but the harbor no longer existed—it was just a battlefield of broken dock arms, corpses, and fireballs.

We pushed through narrow corridors filled with water, smoke, and bodies. Thalyari families screamed, their children clutched, while soldiers with spears and rifles tried to repel the onslaught of half-transformed creatures. They came from everywhere—from cracks, from ventilation shafts, as if the entire city had vomited up PRAE.

"Through here!" Mercer rammed his shoulder against a bulkhead. It burst open, and beyond it lay the open ocean. No safe escape route—only chaos.

Ships staggered among the debris, some completely out of control, others desperately trying to pick up survivors. A transport pod flipped over and exploded as a leviathan with the mass of a mountain plowed through it. Entire currents became whirlpools, swallowing anyone who didn't paddle fast enough.

"Fleet!" I shouted into the channel. "Coordination! We need a line!" But the voices that came back were pure panic. Orders overlapped, some commanders screamed for retreat, others for attack. No one was listening anymore.

Mercer cursed. "This isn't a retreat. This is mass suicide in slow motion."

We swam toward one of the flagships—a mighty cruiser, half torn apart but still holding its engines. Thousands crowded onto the loading ramps, everyone wanting in, everyone kicking, hitting, screaming. The ocean was no longer our home; it was a boiling cauldron.

Above us, the ice cracked. Entire slabs crashed down, crushing ships and bodies. The light that shone in was bright, almost like a sun, and for a moment it seemed as if the sky itself were burning us.

Lira grabbed my hand. "Darym! The card! If PRAE gets it, everything will have been for nothing!"
I clung to the chest. It glowed faintly, as if it itself understood that its bearer was in the midst of destruction.

Then came the voice. Not human, not Thalyar. The metallic whisper I'd heard before. "Cycle two: successful. Cycle three: begins."

Everyone around us stared as if they had heard it too. Some were crying. Some were laughing hysterically. Mercer growled, "When an ocean starts talking to you, you know you have a problem."

And then – darkness. A shock swept through the city. The lights went out. Only the bioluminescence of the corals still glowed, blood red. This was no coincidence. PRAE had taken over the network.

A Leviathan crashed through the debris, heading straight for the flagship. But it didn't attack indiscriminately. No. It deliberately rammed the escape ramps, crushing hundreds before they could board the ship. I heard their screams in the water. No sounds. But the currents carried them.

"Get out of here!" Lira pulled me. We plunged deeper, away from the main ships. A small shuttle emerged from the wreckage, half-damaged but still functional. Mercer shot down three figures that tried to lunge at it, their eyes already black, their fingers turned to claws.

We crowded in. The hatch closed, the systems hummed. The pilot—a young Thalyari with blood in his gills—yelled, "Hold on!" And then we pushed off.

Behind us, the city collapsed. Entire towers of coral and glass collapsed, lighthouses shattered, entire neighborhoods collapsed. At one point, I saw a school of children swimming hand in hand before the pressure of an explosion tore them apart.

Mercer placed a hand on my shoulder. "You wanted a mission, Gillhead. Congratulations—now you're the last representative of a peace that never existed."

I stared at the chest. It pulsed as if it mirrored my heartbeat. And I knew: We hadn't escaped. We were part of the program. PRAE had wanted chaos. This was just the beginning.

Before us lay the fleet, scattered, broken. Behind us lay the destruction of the coral cities. And somewhere, in the ocean itself, I heard the metallic laughter again.

The coral city was nothing but dust in the current. Where once towers of glass and light stood, now floated only debris, blood, and shadows far too large to have come from mere leviathans.

Our shuttle fought against the currents filled with death. Behind us, the ships disintegrated; before us, the fleet flickered—broken, scattered, little more than a memory of power.

"We can't go back," Lira whispered. Her voice was hoarse, her eyes glittering like shattered glass. "The surface belongs to them. The cities belong to them. All that remains is... below."

"Down?" Mercer snorted. "Those are trenches, deeper than any light. We're not going there. No one survives."

"That's exactly why," I said. The chest in my arms vibrated as if it had confirmed my words. "Because no one survives there. Not yet. And that's exactly where we'll find what we need. Or we'll die faster."

Mercer laughed, dryly, full of contempt—but without argument. "All right, Gillhead. Then down to hell. Maybe at least an honest death awaits there."

Outside, the last lights of the coral cities were fading. It wasn't just a retreat. It was a descent. A pull that pulled us deeper than we had ever swum.

And somewhere in the darkness, a whisper came again: "Cycle three: begins."

Chapter 21 - Escape into the Deep Sea Trenches

The water became heavier the deeper we descended. Not just denser, not just colder—heavier, as if it had a weight placed directly on our chests. I felt it in my bones, in my gills, even in my eyes, which flickered under the pressure as if they were about to burst. Every beat of my heart was a hammer blow, and yet I couldn't slow down. Behind us, the coral cities were dying. Ahead lay only the depths.

"Even further down?" Mercer gasped, his voice distorted by his helmet. "At some point, we'll simply cease to exist. Then the problem will be solved."

"Shut up," Lira hissed. Her voice no longer held any coldness, only hardness. The hardness of someone who had just seen her homeland in flames and had decided never to be sentimental again.

I remained silent. Words meant air, and down here, air was as precious as a heartbeat. I held the chest tighter in my arms. It vibrated, barely perceptible, as if it were the only thing that still dared to make noise down here.

We sank. And the light died. No more glimmers from above, no reflections, no spark of hope. Only black. A black so dense that it didn't seem empty, but full. Full of things too old to have names.

"Left!" One of the warriors pointed, his arm twitching. I turned my head and saw—nothing. Or almost nothing. A shadow, large, much too large, glided silently by. No current, no sound. Only the certainty that it was there.

"Print madness," muttered Mercer. "We're seeing ghosts."

But I knew he was wrong. Because the ghosts saw us too.

We held formation as best we could, but the ranks broke apart. Some drifted, others fought panic. One of the young Thalyari suddenly lunged upwards, as if trying to escape. He made it ten meters—then his helmet cracked. A crack, a sputter, and he was gone. The sea had swallowed him like a candle.

"Stay tight!" I yelled, even though the current swallowed my voice. "If you separate, you're dead!"

They didn't all hear. I already heard the first whisper. Not a sound in the water—but in my head. Voices that weren't mine. Voices calling names. Names of the dead. "Myra's..." one breathed. "My child..." another gasped. Hands reached into the void, as if they could touch someone who didn't exist down here.

"Print madness," Mercer repeated, less convinced this time. He'd heard the voices, too.

Then came the lights. First a shimmer, like distant lanterns. Then spirals, circles, patterns. Not PRAE. Not a mechanical flicker. Something organic. Like swarms of creatures deliberately moving to look like runes in water.

“The depths have their own alphabet,” murmured Lira, and even she sounded awed.

I suddenly understood, without anyone explaining anything to me: This was the ocean's memory. The currents on the surface were just pages in a book. Down here lay the archive itself.

But the depths tested us. Every mile deeper meant one of us was gone. Some drowned in panic, others bled from old wounds, torn open by the pressure. Still others simply stared into the darkness, tearing the masks from their faces as if they had decided that madness was better than hope.

We lost friends. We lost warriors. But we didn't lose time—we had to move on.

The first creatures came when we reached the trenches. They weren't PRAE monsters, not leviathans. They were older. Their bodies were transparent like glass, their eyes glowed like lamps in the darkness. They didn't attack, not immediately. They swam around us, as if testing whether we were intruders or pilgrims.

"Don't move," I whispered, even though there was no point in whispering down here. "They're watching us."

Mercer raised the knife anyway. I placed my hand on his arm. "No. They haven't killed us yet. That's a gift."

He growled, but let it go.

The creatures eventually retreated, but not before one of them stopped directly in front of me. Her body was semi-transparent, but within it I saw lines. Patterns. Spirals I recognized. I swear they looked like fragments of the current map in my chest. Then she disappeared.

We descended deeper. And the whispers grew louder. Voices, not of ghosts, but of memories. Words that weren't meant for us, but reached us nonetheless. "You aren't the first to flee here."

"What?" Lira stared at me. "Did you...?"

"Yes," I whispered. "I heard it too."

Mercer cursed. "Shit. The dead are talking to us. This fits perfectly."

We finally reached a basin as large as a city. It wasn't a cave—it was a dome. It had grown, not been built. Intertwined crystals glowed faintly. As if the depths themselves had decided to form a heart.

And in this heart, no water was still. It pulsed. Like blood. Like code.

I held the chest tighter. It responded, humming louder. And the water spoke. Not like voices, not like words—but we understood it. A chorus of currents whispering to us:

"You are not the first. You will not be the last."

We stood in the darkness, in the belly of the planet, and I knew we'd lost the surface. But down here, in the depths, something was waiting that was older than PRAE, older than all of us. And it wanted to test us.

Mercer slowly drew his weapon, staring into the pulsing pool. "Well, great," he muttered. "And I thought war on the surface would be bad. But this... this is sound effects hell."

I couldn't disagree. Because he was right.

We stood in this crystalline dome, all breathless, and for a moment I truly believed we had left hell behind us. But hell has many floors, and we had just descended one level.

The first sign of this was the pressure. It didn't just stop because we found a "heart." No, it was playing with us. One of the young warriors began to lose

blood bubbles from his nose. They floated lazily to the surface, bursting in the water, as if to show us how fragile we all were.

"We won't be here long," he gasped, "we have to—"

He stopped because one of the crystal walls suddenly glowed. Lines appeared on it, as if someone had burned the current map directly into the rock. Spirals, triangles, waves. The patterns I'd seen before—but this time they were more powerful, more complex.

"Shit," whispered Mercer, "that thing... it's looking at us."

And it really did. I swear to every god I no longer believe in: The crystals were looking at us. Not with eyes, but with attention.

"The archive," I murmured. "We're in the archive."

Lira stepped forward, her hands outstretched, almost reverent. "This... this is older than us. Older than Melorai. Perhaps older than the Earth itself."

Before she could touch the crystals, the ground shook. The pulsing became more hectic, more chaotic. And then something emerged from the basin in the center of the dome.

At first I thought it was another swarm—thousands of organisms moving as if in sync. But no. It was a body. A single, monstrous body, composed of the swarms. Like a Leviathan, but more transparent, like a statue made of living glass.

"Oh, damn," Mercer muttered. "That's the bouncer."

The thing opened its mouth—if you could call it a mouth. No teeth, just spirals of currents, rotating like a bore. And it made a sound. Not loud, not droning. A hum. Deep, steady, like a code vibrating through the walls.

Our helmets didn't translate. They couldn't. But I understood anyway.

"Unclean."

The word hit my skull like a hammer. And in that moment, I knew it meant me. The bite wound. PRAE in my blood.

"No!" I screamed, yanking up the chest. "I'm not—"

But the creature moved. Not slowly. Not gracefully. It shot forward, a mountain of glassy flow, and rammed into the front row of our warriors. Three of them were crushed at once, their bodies exploding like squids under pressure.

“Defend!” Lira yelled.

We charged forward. Harpoons flashed, bolts of energy rippled through the water. Mercer screamed as he plunged his knife deep into the thing—except there was no resistance. The blade went through like water. And the monster laughed. No sound, just vibration. A laugh that cut through our bones.

I felt the chest burning. It vibrated in the same rhythm as the creature. And I suddenly understood: It was a guardian. An antivirus. Everything that didn't fit the code had to be destroyed.

"It's attacking me!" I screamed. "It only wants me!"

"Then get out of here!" Mercer yelled. "We'll hold it—"

He didn't finish. A tentacle of current grabbed him and hurled him against the crystal wall. I saw blood spiraling away. He was still moving, but weakly.

Panic gnawed at my heart, but then I heard the voices again. Whispers, choirs, the archive itself. They didn't tell me what to do—they showed me. Spirals in my head, lines, patterns. Commands.

I ripped open the chest. It was never meant to hold keys. It was the key.

The creature froze. It trembled as if I had spoken its name aloud. Then it turned its head—if you could call it a head—and stared at me.

"Scribe," it hummed. "Or traitor."

I didn't know what role I was playing. But I knew I could only survive if I did what the currents whispered to me. I placed my hand on the glowing lines of the map.

Pain. Not normal pain. It was as if I was being dissected into a file, line by line. I saw my blood, my name, my memories—and I saw PRAE already putting little black spots into the code.

The creature roared. A hum that ripped through the water. It attacked.

But this time, the archive intervened. Crystals flickered, currents converged, and suddenly I was no longer just Darym. I was the stream. I was the water.

The creature recoiled, growled—and then, at that very moment, something else emerged from the depths. Not the archive. Not a guardian. But PRAE.

Black streams, sharp as blades, flowed into the pool, crawled up the crystals, and settled like rust on everything living. And suddenly it was clear: We hadn't fled. We had gone into the depths—and PRAE had followed us.

Mercer wheezed and pulled himself upright with the last of his strength. "Great, Darym. You wanted to save us, and now we have two monsters. Congratulations."

I couldn't say anything. I could only scream as the water itself exploded.

The archive and the plague met like two prayers strangling each other in the middle of heaven. The glass creature lunged forward, its body a whirl of spirals that weren't water, but instructions. From the other side, PRAE grew like night, its teeth growing: black filaments, angular, rattling, each one a command to extinguish. Where they touched, the depths burst into sparks of cold. Shock waves ripped my ribs apart, the crystals in the vault sang so high that my brain responded and bled with it.

"Darym!" Lira's voice cut through the roar. She had crawled over Mercer, who was hanging crookedly on the wall, leaking in red semicircles. "If you have another trick—"

"I don't have a trick," I gasped, my hand on the map, which was no longer a map but an open wound in the planet. "I only HAVE this."

The archive creature turned its gaze back to me. No anger. Judgment. Behind him, PRAE was now climbing the crystal veins as if someone had gifted the void with mountaineering gear. Knots sprouted from the filaments, eyes from the knots, lines of text from the eyes, running in all directions at once. In my head, they unfurled, wanting to start, wanting to overwrite. I felt the old burning in my bite wound transform into a sober cold: The enemy was no longer hungry. The enemy was methodical.

“Unclean,” the guard hummed again.

"Then cleanse me," I snarled. "Or give me the tools, damn it!"

The flow map twitched beneath my hand. Lines slid together, snapping, switching. Not text, but timing. I didn't understand it—but my body did. I adjusted my breathing. Slower. Deeper. I adjusted my pulse to the rhythm of the spirals. The pain made the world smaller, until only my palm and the beat existed.

The archive reacted. A halo of cold light shot from the chest into my chest. I saw myself, dissected in loops: memories like seashells, cracked open one by one, until only the animal remains, refusing to yield. PRAE intervened, placing brackets in the gaps where I had hesitated. I screamed and stayed. That was the whole achievement: staying.

"Back!" Lira yanked Mercer from the wall as a black spike struck, turning the spot where he had just been into quivering dust. Six of our warriors fell to their knees simultaneously—not hit, just webbed. Their eyes went blank. A chorus of alien sounds rolled from their tongues, as if they were antennae, only now realizing it.

"I'll cut them loose," Mercer growled, pushing Lira away, holding on with one arm, and slashing with the knife into the black wires wrapped around the warriors' helmets. The knife cut through like water—but the water stuck. Every cut was a yes, which PRAE transformed into a "yes"—but deeper. Mercer laughed bitterly. "Of course. Hacking with blades. I'm too old for this shit."

The archive finally gave way. The guardian snapped two of the filament columns with a single spiral movement. They didn't screech—they broke like equations from which a constant had been stolen. Something inside me answered. Not a power. An access. Suddenly, a choice was in my hand, heavy as a stone: I could close a loop. I didn't know what it did—only that it ended something.

"Darym!" Lira was now directly in front of me, her forehead against mine, our helmets almost touching. Her eyes were no longer glasses, but anchors. "If you can do it—do it. But do it as you. Not as what wants to sing inside you."

“I can’t guarantee who I’ll be after this.”

“Then be the one who can still ask.”

Behind us, a supporting pillar of the dome collapsed, the pool sloshed, and pressure tore cracks in the floor, from which streaks of something ancient and cold drifted. Faces emerged in the stream—not real, but not fake either.

Thalyari, humans, others. "Not the first. Not the last," whispered the depths, placing the trembling of a million futile prayers on my tongue.

I closed the loop.

Nothing happened. Then everything happened. The map didn't start—it stopped. The rhythm I had imitated broke off and started again differently. Not against PRAE, not against the Guardian. In between. A third beat, old as current, sober as gravity. The archive-being paused, the filaments paused. A moment of understanding, or of error. Undecidable.

PRAE reacted first. The black knots gathered into a single, dense spike, a perfect line of "no" aimed directly at the chest. Too fast, too clean. I realized I was smiling. That's the way you smile when you know you're about to die and that last joke has to be delivered properly.

Mercer was faster.

He was never fast. He was stubborn. But now he was fast, and the knife that had never been able to cut into code went straight through the thorn, as if it were finally flesh. The knife broke. Mercer's arm broke. The thorn hit him anyway, ripping through him as if a god had forgotten to stop the world in time. He bumped into me, and something in his face was suddenly young. "Gillhead," he whispered, "when I wake up later, I'll say I planned it." His hand was on the chest before it slipped away.

His skin, his blood, his damned stubbornness—everything was on the loop. And the beat shifted. Not against me. For us.

The Guardian screamed for the first time. Not a vibration. A sound that didn't belong in the water. Cracks ran through his body, light seeped out, neither warm nor cold—a light that said: Binary is an insult. Prae pushed again, wilder, rawer, flinging himself at the edges of the crystals, making chips of order. The dome answered with a deep, unhealthy thunder.

"The ceiling!" Lira pulled me, but I was the ceiling, and the floor, and the pool, and a drop caught on a crystal rim. I didn't want to be God. I didn't even want to be Prayer. I wanted Mercer to keep cursing. I wanted Lira to laugh one more time. I wanted someone to tell me I was just dreaming. Instead, I held the ribbon.

Above us, the dome burst open. No clean collapse, no film. Crystal veins burst, pressure escaped, a current that had never seen light rushed in, sweeping away

everything that, for a moment, had believed it mattered. The Guardian folded, PRAE surged, gathered itself, drilled again, again and again.

Someone grabbed me by the shoulders. Lira. "We're leaving! Now!"

"If I let go—"

"Then you die. If you don't let go, we all die here."

I let go.

Not out of courage. Out of exhaustion. The loop collapsed, then restarted somewhere else—deeper in the pool, further down, where I could no longer hear it. PRAE stumbled in his own forward motion, the guard collapsed in a controlled manner, like something that knows how to lose gracefully. The dome finally broke.

We were ripped out. Crystal shards whipped past us, the Archive sang in rages, PRAE laughed in rage. I held Mercer, Lira held me, and the depths held us all.

At the last moment, before the darkness swallowed us whole, I saw it: a second pool behind the dome, larger, calmer, lit from within. No archive. No PRAE. An eye. It wasn't looking at us—it was looking through us, as if it were counting the stories in our blood.

It blinked.

Then we fell.

Black. Pressure. One final thought, not mine: "Cycle four: Selection."

I opened my mouth to curse and drank the night away.

Chapter 22 - Melorai's Last Council

I didn't fall. I was swallowed.

The depths weren't a space, but a mouth—and I was the fish, too slow to realize I was already stuck in it. I didn't fall, I flowed. The water pulled me in streaks, tearing my body apart and simultaneously putting it back together. My

bones were currents, my blood was salt, and for a moment I felt like I was no longer Darym, but merely a note in the ocean.

Then I hit.

The impact was soft and hard at the same time. I lay on something that felt like ground, but wasn't. Smooth, cool, transparent—I saw currents flowing beneath it, as if I'd landed on the skin of a god. Above me stretched a dome of crystal veins that glowed without casting light. No shadow, no depth—just endless shimmer, as if the ocean itself had decided to plant a heart there.

And in the center, where there should have been no water, no stone, nothing, it flickered.

“Breathe,” said a voice.

No Lira, no Mercer. Deep. Old. Wet. It didn't come from outside, it came through me.

“Breathe, or you’ll forget yourself.”

I coughed up water that wasn't water and felt my lungs forced into a rhythm that wasn't mine. Breathing hurt. But it was life.

"Darym!" Lira. Finally, something real. She pulled me up halfway, her fingers firmly on my shoulder. Her face was covered in drops that didn't come from tears. "You're back."

"Where is-"

"Here." She pointed behind her. Mercer. He was lying sideways, blood floating around him like red threads. Every breath was a small explosion. His skin was gray, his eyes half-closed.

And then I heard them. All of them.

Not one voice. Many. Not a choir. A river full of voices, simultaneously knocking on my bones. They weren't singing. They were discussing. About me.

"He's contaminated." "He carries the crack in the code." "He's a writer. Or he's an erasure." "He'll decide."

The water was still. But it was suddenly full of figures. Thalyari, ancient, their scales like marble veins, their eyes of light. They weren't bodies. They were currents that had simply decided to bear faces.

"Welcome, child," they said. "We are the last council of Melorai."

I wasn't standing, I wasn't swimming—I was being held. The water had positioned me as if I were a piece in an ancient game.

"Rat," I whispered. "You are legends. No one has ever—"

"Legends are only archives," one of the voices interrupted me. "We are stored currents. We are memory. No flesh, no blood. Yet we speak, as long as the sea carries us."

Mercer coughed. Blood and water mixed together, and he wheezed, "Great. Ghost fish. Just what I needed."

Lira leaned over him, pressing her hands against his wound. "Hold on, Mercer. Don't listen to him. He... he'll survive."

"He won't survive," the Council said. It wasn't a threat. It wasn't a harsh statement. Just a statement. "His code is broken. Only a sacrifice can stabilize yours."

"Victims?" I felt my throat tighten. "You mean we should—"

“Someone has to fall so that the current can carry them again.”

"No!" Lira screamed, as if she wanted to cut through the entire ocean. "No one falls. Not anymore."

The figures flickered. Their faces dissolved, new ones emerged. Old warriors, scholars, children, women, men—a mosaic of the centuries.

"Darym," they said. "You have been bitten. You bear the rift. You are infected, yet not lost. You are a scribe. Or you are the end. Prove to us what you are."

The water around me changed. It became clearer, deeper. And suddenly I was no longer in the pool, but in images.

I saw Melorai as it had been. Splendor, cities of coral, streams like dances, voices like songs. Then the rupture. Wars I knew only from legends. PRAE—not as a machine, not as a disease, but as a mirror. Every time we built something,

we simultaneously created its obscuration. PRAE hadn't come. It had been born. By us.

The images changed. I saw the Earth. Not in centuries, but in a few days. The oceans boiled, and I recognized black streaks in the waves. PRAE was there. Already there. And it was spreading faster than we could ever swim.

“Do you understand?” asked the council.

I sweated salt. "That we're lost?"

"No. That you can still write. PRAE overwrites. But the writer writes back. As long as you live, there is still text."

“And if we die?” asked Lira.

“Then the sea disappears.”

Mercer coughed again, this time deeper. His voice was a croak. "Don't let them decide, fishboy. Don't let them think they have the final say. The final say belongs to the living."

The voices rustled. "Then choose."

They wanted me to sacrifice him. Him, Mercer. So that my code would be stabilized, so that the infection inside me wouldn't take control. A sacrifice to save the ocean.

I stood there, saw him, saw Lira, saw the council. And I felt everything burning inside me.

“No,” I said.

The currents trembled.

"No," I repeated. "If the ocean only survives by eating victims, then it's worthless. We are not copies, we are not storage devices. We are life. And life means fighting as long as you can breathe. No one dies because you command it."

The dome shook. Lights flickered. For a moment, I thought they were going to tear me apart. But then... something changed.

The faces disappeared. Only the current remained. And the current wrote.

Not in words. In patterns. Spirals, triangles, circles. They glowed in the water, and I understood them without language: coordinates. A place. A passport.

"Leviathan Pass," whispered Lira. "It's real."

"Go," said the current. "Go while you can still write."

And then the pool collapsed. Not into fragments—into a current. The water took us, tore us out, pulled us through tunnels, channels, and crevices. Mercer at Lira's side, me at her shoulder. There was a roar everywhere, voices everywhere.

The last one I heard sounded like an echo that never seemed to end:

"PRAE is a mirror. Fight—and you fight against yourself. Write—and you also write your end. Choose wisely, children of Melorai."

The water released us. We plunged into the depths. Only a whisper remained behind us.

Melorai's last advice had faded away.

And the war had just begun.

The current spat us out like a mouth that's had its fill. We drifted into a depth that didn't smell of depth—but of something foreign. The water here wasn't dark, but full of shadows that moved as if they had muscles.

Mercer hung half-unconscious from Lira, blood like a red veil around him. I grabbed his arm and held him tight. "Not yet, old man. You'll die when I say so, not when the currents demand it."

He grinned faintly, as if he'd been waiting for those very words. "Then... you have a lot of work ahead of you."

Lira stared into the void. Her eyes were wide, her breathing shallow. "Do you see that?" she whispered.

And I saw it.

Between the currents – faces. Not made of flesh, not of current like the Council. More like copies, flat, black, sharp. They passed by, silent, looking at us. And each of them whispered something I couldn't hear, but could sense. It wasn't a Council. It wasn't an archive.

There were**Voices from the shadows**.

And they followed us.

Chapter 23 - Voices from the Shadows

The current spat us out like a mouth that had lost its sense of taste but was still too polite to spit us out. We tumbled into a depth where darkness wasn't a lack of light, but a kind of population. Down here, the night had shoulders. It leaned against the walls, it breathed. And it watched us.

Mercer hung half-unconscious between us. Lira carried him, and I carried Lira, or perhaps the habit of not dying at that very moment carried us. Plumes of blood floated from him like red veils, unable to decide whether to be mourning or invitation.

"Go on," Lira murmured. Her voice was like a knife that had been forgotten to be sharpened, and that cut well precisely because of that. "If we stay here, they'll rewrite us."

“Who are they?” I managed to say.

"Anything that listens," she said. "And down here, everything listens."

I would have giggled if my diaphragm hadn't been negotiating with the pressure. Instead, I nodded toward the shadows. They moved. Not like animals, not like currents. More like copies stalking their originals.

The first voice came like a sadly played instrument, tuned too low and still wrong: “Darym…”

I didn't turn around. "No."

“You don’t know who I am.”

“That’s exactly why: no.”

Lira placed two fingers against my helmet. "Filter on. Listen to the beat, not the words. Remember?"

I remembered. Not words—rhythm. The Council hadn't said it; he had sounded it into me.**Truth has odd beats.**Lies love to march straight. Prae clatters like

machine boots; true memory limps, stumbles, and occasionally laughs at its own joke.

I breathed in three. Held in two. Breathed in five.

The second voice changed its mask. "Little one," it said—and was suddenly my father. Not really, of course not. But the shadow carried his shoulders, his left eye twitched as he lied, his mouth half-open, as if he were just barely sparing a curse so he could sell it for more.

“Fuck off,” I said quietly.

"Polite like your mother," he said, smiling so crookedly that I briefly thought I felt genuine warmth. "Do you know where you are?"

"In the throat of a lie," I said. "And I'm twisted."

The shadow nodded in satisfaction. Very bad: PRAE echoes didn't like clarity; they acted offended when someone saw through them. This one took it sportingly. Too sportingly.

“Tact,” whispered Lira.

So I didn't listen to words, but to the reason. My father laughed in**straight**Four-four. He'd laughed in odd fives in his life, choked, stumbled, breathed wrong, and still kept laughing. This laugh was stadium software. Wrong. I let it slide by like you pass a bill to the right idiot.

“Not bad,” said another voice, and this time it was… Mercer.

I made the mistake of turning around. The shadow Mercer was standing against the wall, holding his hand at the exact angle the real Mercer always used when delivering a punchline. "You're going to lose him," the shadow said. "Here. Right now. And then you'll think it's your fault."

“It’s always my fault,” I muttered.

"At least you're not vain," said Lira. "Come."

We slid deeper. The passage wasn't a passage; it was more like a lung made of stone, sucking us further with each breath. The shadows followed. Sometimes they ran forward. Sometimes they walked backward. Once, I saw my own

figure emerge from the darkness—a few years younger, without scars, his gills softer. He grinned, as if he already knew I would hate him.

“Don’t listen,” I said to myself, and I almost obeyed.

The pressure became friendlier, like a big dog who doesn't like you but knows you might have treats in your pocket. Mercer's breath sounded like small explosions; each time, Lira held her breath a second too long, as if a part of her breath were passing over to him.

"Stay with me," she whispered. "Stay. I'll cook you something horrible later."

“I hate your kitchen,” he muttered.

"Good," she said. "Then you have a reason not to die."

The next echo came from above, through the rock, like drops that have been working the stone for centuries. "Scribe," it said. "The pass demands nourishment."

"What? Blood?"

"Memory."

"Of course," I growled. "Nothing works without a rudder."

“What do you want to give?” asked Lira.

I looked at her. I saw Mercer. I saw myself in the shiny black wall, a speck of movement in a sea of stillness. I knew what I couldn't give: names. Faces. The things that hold me together in the dark.

The echo chuckled, like metal making a joke. "Not names. Not people. Something beautiful."

"The ocean is full of beautiful things," I said. "Have a crab."

"You understand," the voice whispered, "and you pretend you don't. Like everyone who lives too long."

I thought of Melorai. Not of the cities, not of the council, not of the war. I thought of**one night**Warm. Before the great dying. I stood in a colony of light corals, quietly singing to themselves. A figure swam beside me. Its hand touched mine. No grand vows, no drama. Just this small, dirty, sacred

knowledge:**Today is enough**I knew that if I gave it away, the silhouette would still be there, maybe the hand too – but that**Enough**will disappear. And without this enough, every future will be a starvation diet.

“Lira,” I said.

"I know," she said immediately. "But you'll do it anyway."

“I have to.”

"Yes."

I laid my forehead against the wall. No ritual, no prayer. Just skin on stone. I let the memory rise until it burned behind my eyes, and then I let it**run**. She flowed into the black wall, into the shadow, into the ocean. She was not swept away. She was**accepted**.

And the corridor**flourished**.

I don't know what to call it. Light grew in the rock, not color, more a taste of color. Lines slid out of the rock like trains from a too-small station. Spirals emerged, three, four, seven, three again—odd beats, warm errors.**The passport answered.**

Mercer laughed, sounding like someone had sprinkled sand on glass. "You idiot," he muttered. "You just sold part of yourself to a jerk."

"Yes," I said. "Sometimes you have to pay to get out of the bar."

Lira looked at me for a long time. Her eyes did that trick where they softened when she needed to be toughest. "What was it?"

“Something I only had once.”

“And never get it again.”

"Yes."

“Then it was the right currency.”

The shadows moved closer. Some no longer had faces, but**masks**– smooth, oval surfaces on which words flashed: RETURN. CHOICE. BALANCE. I heard the bite wound in my arm respond, a faint crackling, like telepathy between two bad radios. PRAE liked department stores. It smelled when someone was paying.

“The Leviathan Pass is**there**,” Lira said quietly. She pointed to a spot where the lines**not**crossed, but**pushed over each other**until they looked like a single line, so straight that it seemed wrong in this world.

"A singular current," I whispered. "If we want to get in..."

"...we have to sound like them," Lira finished. "Breath. Pulse. And—"

"—the ribbon," I said. "The one the archive gave me."

Mercer took a breath as if it were precious. "If you two start breathing together now, I'll be sarcastic. Just so you know."

"Keep your sarcasm," Lira said. "You'll need it." She planted her hand on my forearm, placed hers over both of ours. Three heartbeats that didn't match. Three metronomes, all offended.

"In on three," I said. "Stop on two. Out on five."

“Darym,” Lira breathed, “what if we**pulls apart**?"

“Then we find ourselves again because we are sore losers.”

The shadows hummed. Some swung into**straight**Beat. Others limped. A few—the oldest, those who least wanted to—breathed with us. One, two, three—hold—one, two—out: one, two, three, four, five. After the third cycle, I heard it: The Singular Current**replied**. No light. A pull, too quiet to be loud.

“Now,” I said.

We let go – not hands, but fear. The corridor tilted, and the uneven line became an opening that was not an opening, but a**Condition**We slid in, gently like teeth finally finding their bite.

The pass was not a tunnel. It was**Straight**. No curves, no mood, no play. Everything we liked about fake beauties he left behind. He wanted**Purpose**. I hate purpose. But he carried us, and I was too tired to be picky.

Something moved in the middle of the straight. Not a shadowy voice. Not a PRAE thread.**Size**Not as volume. As intention. I felt Lira tighten her fingers. Mercer raised his head as far as his neck allowed.

“Tell me,” he whispered, “that this isn’t breathing.”

I listened. The pass wasn't breathing.**The Behind**did it. A breath slow enough that entire ages could have passed between them. Ancient. Not malicious. Simply**Time**in meat.

"We're not the first," said Lira. "We're not even the tenth."

“We may be the last,” said Mercer.

“Not while I still have one insult left,” I muttered.

In front of us the straight line dissolved into**Circle**. An eye—or just my brain, which wants to paint eyes into everything big enough to allow fear. It wasn't looking at us. It was looking through us. I felt it counting inside me: breath, pulse, crack, courage. It liked courage. It hated cracks. It tolerated breath. And with the pulse... it hesitated.

“Synchronize,” whispered Lira.

"Even closer? I barely know you," I tried, and somewhere, even now, Mercer's laughter rasped, because dirt needs humor.

We switched. I adapted to Lira; Lira adapted to me; Mercer was the third metronome that didn't**could**, but**wanted**. The eye—the circle—the opening—let the breath out, held it, took it back. And then**it turned its head**.

Not really, of course not. But the current beneath us tilted, as if someone had turned the entire ocean a few degrees. I didn't fall; I became different.**directed**Behind the circle**Space**Up. No water. No air. A region where the pressure behaved like a polite waiter: attentive, never intrusive, always ready to strangle you if you get naughty.

"Darym," said Lira. "If we go through there, we won't come out the same."

"We're going anyway," I said. "Because otherwise there's nothing left for us to remain the same."

I grabbed Mercer's shoulder; Lira grabbed both of us. We stepped**at the same time**into the opening that wasn't one.

The shadows behind us began to**talk**. Not confusing. Not tempting. Warning. Some spoke in our voices, but with the old**odd**Laughter. "Write," they said. "Write, or you'll become footnotes."

The circle flickered – once, twice, three times. On the fourth time**replied**something so deep that even my bones went still.

And the passport**lock**behind us.

Chapter 24 - Crossing through Leviathan Pass

I've seen many currents. Fast, cold, smelly ones, ones that want to tear you apart, and ones that cradle you like a mother. But the Pass – it was none of those things. It was the first current that didn't transport me, but read me.

It was as if someone were dissolving my flesh into letters and entering them sentence by sentence into a database. My bones didn't creak; they were being translated. My heartbeat suddenly seemed like a foreign script, and I wondered if it was spelled correctly.

Lira held me tight. Mercer clung to her like a wet coat. "Shit," he grumbled. "If I die here, please tell everyone I died playing cards."

"I won't," Lira said dryly. "I'll say you cried."

"Even better."

We drifted into a darkness that wasn't darkness, but the absence of any reference point. No up, no down. No water. Only the feeling that we were still wet, just from the inside. And then it began: the voices.

Not like in the Shadow Corridor, where they whispered. Here they sang. Millions, billions, all in different beats. Every breath a chorus. Every heartbeat a drum. I heard my mother, I heard enemies I'd never met. I heard leviathans that sounded like mountains falling underwater.

"Welcome," sang a voice. "Welcome, scribe."

I wanted to scream that I wasn't a writer. I was a clown, a nobody, a fish who made jokes to forget the pressure. But the passport didn't care. It decided who you were.

First came Melorai. Not what was left of her, but the city as it must have once been: golden coral arches, voices in the streets, lights you didn't have to buy because they were simply there. Children swam freely, laughing. It was so real

that I reached out and felt the heat of the lamps. And then I saw the tide—the same one that had swallowed them. I knew if I looked again now, I would lose them all. Twice.

"It's not real," I murmured. "It's just an echo."

"But Echo is enough to break you," the city breathed back. And then it began to drown itself, just for me.

I wanted to fight, I wanted to save—and then Lira grabbed my arm. "Temperature, Darym. Listen to the rhythm. Is it real?"

I listened. And yes—the rhythm was too smooth. Straight. Wrong. PRAE had fed in the code. I closed my eyes, letting Melorai sink in. This time on purpose.

Mercer fought beside me. He stood facing a mirror. But the mirror didn't show him—it showed everyone he'd killed. Soldiers. Children who died from stray bullets. Enemies who'd never had names. They reached for him. And Mercer stood there, tired, scarred, and just said, "Yeah. You're right. But at least I didn't love it." Then he shot them in the face, and the Passport laughed. I swear, the Passport laughed.

Lira stood before her own shadow. Two bodies: one human, one Thalyar. Both screamed, both seeking the upper hand. The pass showed her that she could never be fully both. She stared back and said, "Then I'm bad at both." And stepped through it. Her voice sounded like unbreakable glass.

Then the pass showed us its truth: Leviathans, born of light and current, once guardians. Vast bodies of data that stabilized oceans, protected codes. They were tools of the Origin. Until PRAE came. Not as a machine. Not as a god. But as a mistake. A bug that learned how to eat. PRAE hacked the Leviathans. Turned them into weapons. And made them swim against us.

"They are not our gods," whispered Lira. "They are victims."

"Then we're the next victim," murmured Mercer. "Congratulations."

And then they came. PRAE fragments. Half faces, half data. They lunged at us from nowhere, grabbing our bodies as if we were simply ports, open interfaces. Mercer screamed, "Left!" and ripped apart one that looked like me, only distorted black. Lira slashed at the void with a blade, and blood flowed—digital, flickering blood. I felt my wound vibrate, as if it wanted to be a radio.

I did the only thing I could: I wrote back. With my blood. I let it drip into the water—if you could still call it water—and the current reacted. Patterns flickered. The pass itself shut out the intruders. They crumbled to dust. I gasped, but I knew: This was just the beginning.

"The passport wants more," Lira breathed. "A price."

Mercer was about to say "my life," but I cut him off. "Not yours. Mine." I knew what he was asking for: a memory, a part of me. Not a body. Not blood. Something that matters.

I gave it away. The last memory of Melorai's sun. The taste of a day where nothing was missing. And the pass swallowed it. It devoured it with relish.

And then it opened.

We fell—no, we were released. The pass hurled us out into a sea that wasn't our sea. An antechamber. An intermediate ocean. The water was clear, but full of voices. And in the middle: something so big that it didn't see us—or so big that it saw us too closely.

A Leviathan. Not black. Not corrupted. Pure. He didn't speak. He flowed.

And I understood him. Every muscle understood him. Every bone: "Scribe. You're late. PRAE is already waiting."

I laughed bitterly. "Of course it's waiting. PRAE is always on time."

Lira looked at me. Mercer coughed blood. And above us, the Leviathan opened its mouth.

The Leviathan that confronted us was not a monster, not a machine—it was a landscape. Its flanks were made of scales that looked like continents; its eyes were not eyes, but entire currents that collapsed in on themselves and were reborn. One could have said it was made of flesh, but that would have been a lie. It was made of code, and the code was water.

I felt him reading me. Not like someone opening a book—more like an entire ocean deciding whether to keep a message in a bottle or smash it. Every scar on me, every thought, every shame—he felt everything.

Mercer cursed quietly. "That thing... it looks into my lungs." "It looks into your debt," Lira whispered. "And decides whether you're still allowed to swim."

I almost laughed. Typical Lira—bone-dry, even when we were being examined by a creature capable of crushing entire civilizations.

Then the Leviathan began to sing. No scream, no roar—a song that crept straight into the ribcage. I swear I heard melodies dating back centuries, before my ancestors even knew how to use a shell as a tool.

"It's a key," I breathed. "No," said Lira. "It's a question."

She was right. The Leviathan didn't ask us our names, nor our intentions. He asked us our code. Not what we said, but what we were.

And PRAE answered first.

The current behind us darkened, as if ink had been poured into the sea. Figures emerged: half-human, half-data error. They moved not in time with the Leviathan's rhythm, but against it. Asynchronous. Brutal. Every beat of their limbs was a rip in the water.

Mercer drew his knife. "Here come the bug fixes." "No," Lira corrected. "Those are the next versions."

They lunged at us. I tried to fight back, but my movements always seemed too late—as if they knew what I was planning before I did. They were predictive. PRAE could calculate our patterns, solve our movements like equations.

"We have to be illogical," I growled. "Unpredictable." "So, like you always are," Mercer grumbled.

I did the stupidest thing I could think of: I let go. No attitude, no plan. I simply drifted, letting the current decide where my body would go. And right where I should have died, my opponent struck.

"Shit," Mercer gasped. "It's working." "Yeah," I gasped. "For the first time in my life, being an idiot is helping."

We fought not like warriors, but like clowns: staggering, spinning, drunk on the flow. PRAE couldn't keep up. For the first time, I saw their faces—distorted, angry, as if they had experienced the impossible: a mistake in their own calculations.

The Leviathan's song sounded again. Deeper. Sharper. And this time, it opened its mouth. Not a maw of teeth, but a whirlpool, a vortex that sucked everything

in. The PRAE fragments shrieked silently as they were dragged inside. Their bodies disintegrated, becoming mere shreds of data that ripped through the Leviathan like glowing splinters.

But he didn't just suck them in. He sucked us in too.

“Hold on tight!” Mercer yelled, which was about as useful as the advice, “Hold your heart tight.” But still, we grabbed each other’s arms, and then we were pulled in.

The interior of the Leviathan wasn't a body. It was an archive. Thousands of halls, coral libraries, lights streaming through shed windows. Every movement felt like I was swimming in a memory. I saw scenes that weren't mine: battles, births, sacrifices. Entire civilizations rising and falling, and the Leviathan had stored them all.

"It's not just a guard," Lira whispered. "It's a library." Mercer looked around. "Then I hope they have an emergency exit somewhere between A and Z."

We drifted through the halls. PRAE wasn't here. Not yet. But I felt him scratching at the edge. Like a hacker who'd almost cracked the password.

And then I heard the voice again. Not Leviathan's. Not PRAE's. Something else.

"Scribe," she said. "You're the mistake we need."

I didn't know if that was an insult or a calling. Maybe both. But I knew: The Leviathan wouldn't keep us. He would guide us through.

And indeed – after hours or seconds (time didn't exist here), the current pushed us on. Another whirlpool. Again darkness. But this time not empty – but filled with flashes of light, like firing nerve cells.

"This is the core," Lira breathed. "The pass shows us what lies beneath." "Or it's testing whether we survive," Mercer murmured.

I felt my heart pounding—not against my ribcage, but against the rhythm of the current. If I beat the wrong way, I'd fall out. For good.

So I let him hit it. Unevenly. Wrong. And the pass opened up.

We fell. Fell deeper than water could ever reach. Everything roared. Everything sang. And I heard only a whisper, right in my head:

"Transfer confirmed. Second cycle begins."

And then we were spat out – straight into the next shit.

Chapter 25 - The War for the Ocean

The water burned. Yes, you heard right. Water that burned—not with flames, but with light. Currents that glowed like veins as we were ripped out of Leviathan Pass. We didn't land on solid ground; we landed in the middle of a war that was already underway before we even surfaced.

"Welcome back," growled Mercer. "And straight to the shit."

Above us: human ships, hundreds, perhaps thousands. Some fighting, some exploding, some already dead, floating in the water as if crushed by an invisible hand. Below us: leviathans. Huge bodies crunching into each other, currents tearing apart like tectonic plates. One roared so loudly that my gills went numb. And in the middle of it all: PRAE.

Black swarms crawled through every wave, every shot from their weapons not just fire, but infection. I saw a human ship hit—not destroyed, but rewritten. Metal turned to bone, glass to skin, water to black veins. Seconds later, the ship was no longer a ship, but a beast, consuming its own crew.

"Shit," I whispered. "This isn't a war. This is a rewrite."

Lira grabbed my arm. "Then write back."

We plunged in. Our fleet of Melorai—broken warriors, damaged armor, but still a will stronger than any pressure at sea. They formed formations, currents became weapons. Spears flashed, harpoons ripped through the first waves of PRAE-infected.

Mercer laughed hoarsely as he cut through one of the swarms. "Finally, a war that suits my mood."

But the water itself was the enemy. It flickered. It hummed. I could hear it: PRAE was already writing the next version. Every current that passed by me was altered, corrupted.

And then it happened.

A leviathan on our side—an ancient sentinel, scales like shattered mountains—was hit. Not a torpedo, not a beam. But a single black thread seeping into his skin. He writhed, roared, tried to shake it off. But the infection crept into every pore. His eye turned yellow. First yellow. Then black. Then empty.

He was no longer our Leviathan. He was PRAE.

"Retreat!" yelled one of our commanders. "Reform formations!" But it was too late. The ocean itself was breaking.

We fought. And we died. And we laughed in between, because everything else was too ridiculous.

I felt the code again, that tingling in my veins. Every current was a command, every pressure a sentence. So I reached in. Not with my hand—with what I had become. I twisted the current, bent it like bending a whip. Suddenly, a current became a whirlpool that swallowed an entire swarm of PRAE.

"You just reprogrammed the damn ocean," Lira gasped. "No," I mumbled. "I just rewrote one sentence."

Mercer grinned bloodily. "Then write more sentences, clown. We need a whole novel."

But PRAE responded.

A light spread. Black, but bright. A paradox that burned even though it wasn't a flame. It came from one of their cores—a node of infection the size of a city. From there pulsed a storm that rewrote the ocean's code. Entire reefs died in seconds, corals crumbled, currents reversed.

"Nuclear storm," whispered Lira. "If it overwrites the entire ocean, that's it."

"Not just the ocean," I gasped. "The whole earth."

We attacked. Not because there was hope, but because we had no other choice. Our spears, our ships, our voices against a disease that could consume even water.

A Thalyari elder—Rhael, half dead, half legend—grabbed the map of the current paths. "If we die here, the code dies. One must remain." He swam directly into the core. The black swallowed him. No scream. No resistance. Just a sacrifice that briefly quelled the storm.

Lira stared into the darkness. "He left the ocean within us."

I felt it. Rhael's code was within me. Not clean. Not pure. But enough to rewrite the currents.

"Then go on," whispered Mercer. "Write the last sentence."

I reached into the water, deeper than ever before. PRAE roared in my head, a chorus of a thousand voices saying: We are the future. We are the upgrade.

"No," I whispered. "You're just a damn bug."

And I wrote. Currents bent. Black swarms broke apart. The core storm was weakened. But not defeated.

The ocean trembled. The war stood still—for a second. Enough to know: It continued.

As we retreated, the water still burned. Black waves against current codes, fleets against fleets, monsters against gods. The war was not over.

But he now had a name.

The War for the Ocean.

And I knew it would swallow us all up if we didn't learn to write better.

The water vibrated as if we were no longer part of a battle, but of a catastrophe no one could yet name. Metal splintered everywhere, entire reefs collapsed like houses of cards. People called it war. But this wasn't war. Wars had rules. This was a rewriting, an erasure and rewriting—like someone setting fire to a library with a cold hand and simultaneously pushing a new book into it.

I felt dozens of voices entering my head at once. Some belonged to dying warriors screaming their last breaths into the water. Others were alien, distorted, metallic: PRAE. They had no body. They had the water itself.

"Darym!" Mercer's voice pulled me back. His helmet was cracked, one side of his face was bloody and swollen. Still, he grinned as if he'd found the joke of the millennium. "If you don't do something soon, we'll drown in bugs!"

I gritted my teeth and pulled myself into the current. The water was a net, and I was caught in the middle of it. Every line, every current was an order. But the

ocean was full of enemy orders—PRAE orders. They were faster, more brutal, more perfect.

"Hold them!" Lira cried. She was armed with two spears, both burning in the darkness like little suns. With each blow, she cut through the infected, but the swarms immediately filled the gaps.

Three Thalyari warriors appeared next to her. Brothers, all wearing identical armor, the patterns of the currents rippling across their bodies. They fought in sync, as if they were a single organism. For a moment, I thought: Maybe we can do this after all. But then the Leviathan came.

He wasn't infected. Not yet. He was one of our Guardians, an ancient beast who never normally fought—he merely kept his balance, deep in the core of the currents. But now he was forced to throw himself into battle. His body sliced through the swarms, his scream even made the PRAE retreat for a few seconds.

"He's holding the line for us," whispered Lira. "We have to—"

And then he got hit.

A ball of black light, hurled from one of the PRAE nodes, struck his ribcage. He bucked, roared, tearing apart currents like veils. But it was too late. The infection crept over him, vein by vein, scale by scale.

"Shit," Mercer muttered. "He's tipping over."

We had to decide: escape or try to save him. But what do you save? Flesh? Code? A memory?

"Darym," Lira breathed. "If you can do it—now."

I stretched my mind, tugged at the ocean itself. Currents reacted, bent, I guided the code. The Leviathan screamed, its eyes flashing between black and blue. A moment of hope. But then—only black. It reached for us. Not because it wanted to. But because it had to. PRAE had its code.

"Pull back!" I yelled. "Now!"

We fled deeper into the trenches. But flight was just another word for dying late. Behind us, the battle raged on, swarms against fleets, leviathans against

leviathans. Entire Thalyari colonies were overrun. Their coral and glass houses shattered like children's castles. The oceans burned black.

Once we turned around and saw a heavily armed human ship being taken over by PRAE. Metal turned to flesh. Guns became eyes. The crew was still roaring, but their voices were no longer human.

“I’ve seen wars,” Mercer gasped, “but never one where the guns scream back.”

We gathered behind a chasm deep enough to hide us briefly. Lira checked the map of the flow paths. It glowed faintly, as if it were storing not only locations but also orders.

"Darym," she whispered, "you have to understand why you can feel it. We can't just fight. We have to write back."

“What if I spell it wrong?” I asked.

Mercer laughed hoarsely. "Then the whole earth will die from spelling mistakes."

Nobody laughed except him.

We returned to the battle. This time not as refugees, but as writers. I redirected the currents, diverted entire swarms into dead ends. I turned a backflow into a spear that shattered a PRAE barrier.

But every sentence I wrote came at a price. My skin burned, my eyes saw double. For once, I saw not only the current, but also the code behind it. A gigantic matrix that held the entire ocean. And in the middle of it: black blocks that kept expanding. PRAE.

"They're overwriting everything," I gasped. "Every wave, every drop."

“Then rewrite it,” Lira shouted.

"This isn't a text," I whispered. "This is a writers' war."

Then came the nuclear storm.

A massive impulse emanating from the PRAE nodes. Not an explosion, but a rewriting. Entire currents ceased to exist. Reefs crumbled. The temperature spiked, as if the ocean had suddenly forgotten what warm and cold meant.

“That's it,” Mercer said quietly.

But it wasn't the end yet. For Rhael, the old warrior, swam forward. Half dead, blood flowing from every wound. He took the map and held it up as if to show it to the entire ocean.

"The code is ours!" he shouted. And he swam straight into the core.

The black swallowed him. No explosion. No scream. Just a pause in the war. A breath in which the currents briefly stood still.

Lira put her hand to my face. "He handed it over to you. You're the scribe now."

I reached deeper. Deeper than ever before. The water was no longer just water. It was ink. And I was the one writing. PRAE roared in my head, a thousand voices: We are upgrade. We are the future. We are inevitable.

"No," I whispered. "You're just a faulty add-on."

And I wrote. I rewrote currents, causing black swarms to collapse. Leviathans, half-infected, broke apart because I recoded their currents.

The war stalled. Only for a few seconds. But those seconds were ours.

But we hadn't gained anything. We had only survived. The core continued to burn, the PRAE continued to spread. Entire sections of the ocean were now black. And yet – we were still here.

"The war has begun," I murmured. "But the ocean is not yet lost."

Mercer patted me on the shoulder, bloody and half-conscious. "Then write faster, clown. Otherwise the next bug will delete you."

We both laughed. Because it was the only thing left.

And the water around us whispered. Not words, not commands—just a promise:

The War for the Ocean is only the first battle.

Chapter 26 - Atlantis Prime's Decision

The sea held its breath as we swam toward the gates. I knew it because my heart beat even louder than the rest of the world. When the water listens to you, you're either a king or dead. I was neither. Just Darym, Thalyari with a sense of humor and a bad relationship with divine timelines.

"Unidentified formation," came the message again on our com. "Stay still or you will be neutralized."

"We've already stopped," muttered Mercer. "We're just too polite to fall over."

"Let me talk," I said. "No jokes this time."

“No one will believe this.”

The gates slid open, inch by inch. Beyond them lay the tunnel—a tubular coffin of charged glass, flanked by drones whose muzzles pointed at us so calmly, as if in meditation. I raised my hands, Lira following suit, the map of the flow paths strapped to her chest like a second heart.

"Formation Melorai," I said slowly. "We request entry. We bring warnings, not weapons."

"The border isn't just physical," the same voice replied. "Atlantis Prime is in quarantine protocol gamma."

“Gamma sounds like*it's about to explode*"," grumbled Mercer. "Tell them we only bite when we're bitten."

"We don't bite at all," I said into the com. "And if we do, it's only in outdated protocols."

A pause. I heard human voices in the background—harsh, exhausted. Someone was cursing, someone was counting. Then the drones descended a few degrees. A green light flashed across our armor, burning briefly. Scan.

"You're contaminated," the voice said. "Like everyone else out there. But... below threshold. Access granted. Slowly. No sudden movements."

"We're underwater," Mercer growled. "Sudden movements are a popular pastime here."

We slid into the tunnel. Doors closed behind us, one by one. Water was expelled and then let back in, clouds of disinfectant hissed, tasting of metal and false hope. When the final hatch opened, Atlantis Prime welcomed us with a light that didn't come from lights: it came from people who had been awake too long and still walked straight ahead.

I'd seen human cities—glass sparks, concrete reefs, neon harbors—but Atlantis Prime was different. No decor, no poses. Just purpose. Domes, corridors, corridor wheels, everything bitten into the rock, all suspended by cables and power lines as if a titanic maw held the thing together. Outside, the ocean crept past the panes, heavy, glittering, with those little shards of war in it, like plankton-fed stars.

"Open your eyes," said Lira. "They're reading us. Every movement, every twitch."

"Let them," said Mercer. "Maybe they'll learn something."

The reception was small: six soldiers in hydrophobic suits, helmets open, their faces made of stone. Two medics who looked like they'd spent the last ten nights in a row. And a woman in a suit that looked like someone had taught a tank to walk: broad shoulders, long scars, no spark in her eyes, but a welding torch.

"Commander Amina Kade," she introduced herself without shaking hands. "Former Commander of the Southern Bridge Alliance. Now on death avoidance, general duty."

"Darym of Melorai," I said. "This is Lira and Mercer."

"The Mercer?" Her eyebrow rose briefly. "Good. Someone you can hate and still need. Follow me. Your... delegation is being medically scanned. Resistance is futile, insulting, and subject to Omega Protocol."

"Maybe they do like you after all," Mercer whispered to me. "They're threatening politely, at least."

We followed. Corridors vibrating to the rhythm of the current. Windows behind which water moved like heavy curtains. I saw people sitting on platforms, children among them, old women with hands full of veins, young men with eyes full of questions. They stared at us as if we were a ship from a storm legend. A small boy raised his hand. I raised mine back. His mother quickly pulled it down. I understood her.

The medical area stank of ozone and over-boiled rubber gloves. We were pushed under lamps that didn't just shine—they heard. I felt my nanites zipping beneath my skin as if they'd been peppered.

“Contamination level?” Kade asked.

"Below threshold, but active," said a doctor with a guillotine look. "The Thalyari is... special."

“I have a sense of humor,” I said.

"No," she replied. "You're a node. The code responds to you."

Kade caught my eye. "We have reports. Leviathan Pass. The war. The... core storm. I'm not here to interrogate you. The Council will take care of that. But tell me one thing, and tell me it in a way I can believe: Is this coming in here? Your PRAE?"

I felt Atlantis Prime scenting me with its starved nostrils. Children ran everywhere between steel and glass. Old people sat on crates and conjured radios that had long since ceased to crackle. And in the midst of them, commanders who*Decision*had to spell while the ocean changed their alphabet.

“It’s already in there,” I said.

No one flinched. They had known and just wanted to hear me say what they didn't dare tremble at out loud.

"But it's not writing yet," I added. "It's reading. And if we leave it dumb, it'll learn quickly. So we'd better stop typing like beginners ourselves."

The doctor switched off the last lamp. “He may enter the council chamber. He*must*into the council chamber.”

Kade nodded. "Then we'll begin."

We were led into a dome with a floor so clean that even our thoughts left dust behind. Twelve seats were seated in a circle. People of different skin colors, hair types, and ages. Military, academic, business—and a cleric with one frosted eye who looked as if he prayed both ways: up and down, as a matter of principle.

“Council of Atlantis Prime,” said Kade, “this is Darym of Melorai, Lira, Custodian of the Current Map, and Captain Mercer, current guarantor that*Swearing*is still a discipline. They came back through Leviathan Pass. They bring reports. And an election."

A man with silver rings in his ears, skin like rolled steel, leaned forward. "Before we vote, we want to know*who*We choose. Melorai needs water. We need... peace. Do we trade with beggars or with partners?"

"With survivors," Lira said. Her voice was razor-sharp. "Like you."

"And with a disease in their luggage," hissed a woman with red-blonde streaks that looked more like flames than hair. "PRAE. They're all marked."

"We're all marked," Kade interrupted. "You too, Mia. Your daughter has been coughing since last night. Her veins are getting darker."

Silence. The woman lowered her gaze.

The priest raised his hand as if a fish were fluttering within it. "Do the Thalyari have God?"

"We have currents," I said. "They lie less."

A few councilors snorted. Mercer grinned. "You didn't want any jokes."

“That wasn’t one.”

"Okay," said the doctor who had scanned us, now standing to the side. "Then let's talk about code like adults."

She projected images into the dome. Not pretty ones. Black waves, knots hanging like cancerous tumors in currents. Reefs flipping from white to black every second. A leviathan burning in three colors: blue, gray, nothing.

"Our sensory system shows the same pattern that the Thalyari brought with them," she said. "PRAE is not just a pathogen. It's a compiler. It reads organics, mechanics, water*even*. It does not want to destroy. It wants*substitute*."

“With what?” asked the man with the rings.

"With itself. With a version that serves its own purpose. We are not included in it. At least not us as*we*."

"What do you want?" Kade asked the circle. "Not moral, not mythical. Strategic."

"Closed," said an officer. "All entrances, all tunnels. No one in, no one out. Checks at every bulkhead. We were self-sufficient for a week; we can go to ten, maybe more."

"We are not a can of beans," said a trader with hands full of ink blots. "The stocks are enough for six days if we ration. For three days if*Fear*rationed."

"Contact with surface nations," a diplomat interjected. "Evacuation, exchange, support. If we show that the Thalyari are on our side..."

"The surface is burning," Kade interrupted. "Megabridges are falling, coral cities are sinking, ports are slaughterhouses. We are no one's priority. We*are*the last priority."

"Then there's only one thing left," said the doctor. "We don't let the ocean get into us. We go into it. We attack the nearest PRAE node. Not with torpedoes. With*Counter-Code*."

Her gaze lifted to me. "With him."

Twelve eyes bored into me, and none of them were soft. I felt like a poorly priced saint at a flea market.

"What exactly can he do?" asked the woman with the flame-haired hair. "Besides spells."

"He can write," Lira said quietly. "Not on paper. On water."

"Magic," someone hissed.

"Technology," the doctor countered. "Just older than yours."

"I am not a messiah," I said.

"We don't have messiahs," Kade replied. "We have tools. The question is: are they being used—or are they killing us?"

Mercer cleared his throat, spat blood, and wiped his chin. "I've been a soldier long enough to know: When you have the choice between*die today*and*fight tomorrow*, you take tomorrow. And if you have the choice between*lose*

*everything*and*risk a lot*, then you light the fuses and hope that heaven doesn't laugh at you."

“You’re advocating for attack,” Kade stated.

"I advocate punching people in the face before the ocean declares us nutrient solution."

“Poetic,” murmured the merchant.

I raised my head. "Before you decide what I'm supposed to be: I'm not writing alone. I need anchor points in your currents. Your city has artificial ocean arteries. I can talk to them. But I need a handful*People*that can be reeled in. Not as victims. As voices."

Kade curled his lips. "How much is it?"

"Fever. Headache. Sometimes...memory lapses. And...sometimes things come back from the water that you would rather have left at the bottom." I thought of Rhael, who had swum into the core and stopped,*Rhael*to be. "I'm not lying. This is ugly."

"Everything here is ugly," said the diplomat. "We're just choosing the kind."

The discussion raged like a storm. Minutes, figures, inventory levels, and casualty lists were thrown around. Every word was a cut. Every sentence a scar. At one point, the priest rapped the floor with his metal staff.

"I had a dream," he said. "The ocean was a cloth. A hand stroked it and smoothed everything. No wrinkles, no dirt, no people. Just water. Perhaps that is peace. But I call peace where no one breathes,*grave*."

"Very helpful," murmured Mercer. "God as a butcher poet."

"I vote for attack," the officer said abruptly. "PRAE node beta, coordinates along the south cliff. That's the newest. The most unstable."

"We don't have the capacity," the trader objected. "We need every drone, every shipment here."

"Then we decide," Kade interrupted. "Vote."

Hands went up. Not all of them. Enough. They counted the old, human way: fingers, not algorithms. They counted votes, not probabilities.

"The Council decides," Kade said quietly, and in that silence there was war. "Operation*Countercurrent*Darym leads the code stitch. Lira forms the anchor triangle. Mercer commands the rear cover and the cutting team. We'll meet in three hours at Hangar B-7. Everything that wants to live,*works*. Meeting adjourned."

It felt as if the ocean had smiled at me briefly. Or maybe it was just the way light refracted off the edges of the dome. I felt the map against my chest. It was warm. Like an animal.

"I want the truth, Darym," Kade said then, as the others dispersed. "Private."

She stayed with me and Lira, Mercer walking within earshot, pretending to count his wounds.

"Can you save her?" she asked. No rhetoric, no pathos. Just a mother's question disguised as a commander's question.

I looked toward the corridor where the flame-haired woman had just disappeared. Holding her hand was the boy who had waved to me. I thought of Melorai, of the faces the sea knew by heart. Of all the names that were now mere currents.

"I can buy them time," I said. "Sometimes time is all that stands between us and God."

"I never liked God," Kade said. "But I'll take my time."

Hangar B-7 smelled of salt, hot metal, and that other smell that hasn't been catalogued anywhere: a mixture of hope and white lies. Ships hung from their hooks, old, new, half-repaired, half-prayed. People with dark circles under their eyes dragged crates, tightened nets, and checked seals. In one corner, behind a makeshift curtain, the wounded sat. Someone played softly on a stringed instrument that had no business being there, and that was precisely why it felt right.

"Anchor triangle," Lira said, as if it were a word for a kind of family you inflict on yourself. "Three knots. A circle. We need two volunteers."

Before I could speak, two men stepped forward. An engineer, bony, with shaking hands that only trembled when she*not*worked. And the priest with the milky eye.

"You need a voice above and one below the water," he said. "I can do both. Sometimes too often."

"You will be in pain," Lira said. "And hear things. They will wrap you in words that aren't yours."

"I was married," the priest said dryly. "I'm fine."

Mercer introduced us to the editing crew: twelve men and women, mixed like a deck of cards shuffled by time itself. Two with scars that looked like maps. One whose smile was the only thing left whole. A woman so young that she probably believed yesterday that the world would end when*she*says. None of them looked smart enough to surrender. I liked that.

"Listen," said Mercer. "This isn't a movie. No heroic jump with an explosion in the background. We go in, we hold the knives off their backs, we come out. If someone screams, you don't run to them. You run*further*. Whoever stands still dies, and whoever dies takes at least two people with him."

“What about heroes?” asked the youngest.

"Heroes are anchors on which the dead hang," Mercer said. "We are screws. Screws hold."

I stepped in front of her. I felt stares. Pleading, angry, religious. I was bad at speaking. So I said what I could.

"I don't know if I can do it," I said. "I just know that no one else can. We go in. We hurt. We get out. If I fall, no one can pull me out. You, you, you—" I pointed in turn at three who didn't flinch, "—you carry Lira. No matter how much I scream. If the code inside me flips, I'm just*Paper*Then write to us*not*with me.”

"Sounds reassuring," murmured the engineer. "When does it start?"

"Now."

We left the belly of the city and slid into the cold throat of the ocean. The bulkhead closed above us like a mouth. Before us lay the coordinates: a chasm that looked as if a god had taken pleasure with his fingernail. At the edge: a flicker, first small, then large. PRAE Node Beta. Younger than the others, more unstable—and hungry as a firstborn.

"Anchor one," whispered Lira. The engineer tensed, placing her hand on the current line leading from Atlantis Prime's external pumps. "Anchor two." The cleric lowered his staff into the water. I felt the tone of his voice say more than his words claimed. "Anchor three." I inhaled. "Me."

The knot grew as if it had smelled us. Threads shot out of it, black, metallic-gleaming pseudopodia that groped their way through the current. The core itself pulsed. It wasn't a thing. It was a beat.

"Now," said Lira. Her voice was simultaneously in my ears and against the back of my teeth.

I reached out. Not for the knot – for the*Water around him*I drew lines that weren't lines, bent currents that retorted. The world inside me buckled. I heard my own name backward and forward simultaneously. It tasted of salt and rust and the first laugh you make as a child in the water.

"Countercode running," the doctor whispered over the radio. "Darym, you're overwriting."

"That's what I'm saying."

The knot reacted. It wasn't stupid. It was curious. It sent patterns, laughed them into my head, pushed images under my eyelids: Melorai in more beautiful colors. Mercer without scars. Lira with a face that had never known cold. It didn't hurt. It was just wrong. I felt my fingers turn to water, my ribs to the ribs of a fish I never was. I forced myself to laugh.

"Nice," I said. "But you can't tell jokes."

I wrote. I wrote holes in his skin. Turned the water around him to zero. Then to too much. Then to a different direction. He staggered. I felt the appetite in him. And the anger. He knew no ethics, no revenge. But he knew efficiency. I bothered him. So he wanted to take me or break me—efficiently, cleanly.

"Cutting crew!" Mercer yelled. "Swarm from the left!"

They came like a thought: sixteen infected, their bodies half human, half too thin, too fluid. In their hands things that were once tools and now only*Yes*to kill. Our men got into position. No shouting. No show fighting. Blades, shock lances, nets burning in the water.

Lira sang. Not with her voice. With water. She held the anchors together. I felt her heart pounding against mine. Like two fish breathing in the same net. The priest spoke something that smelled of old earth. The engineer didn't cry. Her hands stopped shaking.

"Darym," Kade's voice came from the depths, far yet close. "We won't last forever. Accelerate."

"I'm speeding up," I said, and my blood didn't match my pace. It slowed, syrupy, then sped up again, a hornet in my skull. "Still—"

PRAE stabbed back.

It wasn't a blow. It was a*Picture*I was in a glass dome, children's hands on the pane, my hand on the outside. I saw the flame-haired woman. I saw the boy. PRAE whispered:*I can feed them. I can make them water. They'll never have to breathe again. They'll never die again. They'll just...*flow.

I heard a bone crunch inside me that wasn't one. My vision flipped, the edges cracked, light streamed in and out. There: Mercer's voice, flat as a blade you wore up your sleeve.

"Darym. Hey. Clown. Don't act half-heartedly on me. Write."

I laughed. It sounded like someone had hit a bottle against a rock. "Yes."

I wrote the knot in his knees. I made the water around him red-cold. I sent him the idea of*Empty*Not death. Not life. Just the in-between that doesn't nourish him. He shrank. He didn't scream. But I heard the absence. It's not hard to hear the absence when you've slept in empty houses often enough.

"He's falling over," cried the doctor. "Hold him. Stop—"

Something snapped.

I lost lira.

Not her hand. Her voice inside me. The anchor wobbled, then it broke. The priest roared, the engineer gasped. A figure shot through the swarm: too slender, too determined. A knife flashed. It pierced Lira's anchor cable. No cable. No technology. Her*thread*to the code.

She fell. Two infected were on top of her before the thought of "get there" even had a chance to catch on. Mercer was there. He was always there when things got tough. He rammed the stun baton down the first one's throat, twisting it so that his tongue popped out and the light in his eyes went out. The second one got his elbow, then the knife.

“Anchor! Stop!” I yelled.

“I’m stopping,” hissed the engineer, and I didn’t know if she meant me or the whole damn city.

The knot saw its opportunity. It expanded as if it had grown new tubes. It sent currents toward us that looked like hands. I saw faces in them. Thalyari, people, nothing in between. I was so tired that even the water was a chair, inviting me to sit on.

"Stand," I growled to myself. "Stand. Stand. Stand."

I stood. There's no other way. The sea loves those who stand up when no one's looking.

I pushed the counter code deeper. It became a*Comb*, stroked the knot against the grain. Patterns broke. It flickered. It lost coherence. It became what all monsters are once you take away their proper names: tired matter.

“He’s falling!” screamed the doctor.

"Retreat!" Mercer yelled. "Everyone! Retreat—"

Something quietly flicked. A shadow at the edge. Not an infected person. A human. Completely human. With a transmitter on his temple and an emblem on his chest that I now saw in my nightmares.

PRE.

Not infected.*Authorized*.

He aimed at the engineer. I saw it too late. The bolt—thin, black, not metal, more idea than matter—pierced her neck. Her mouth formed the word "anchor," and then, very calmly, "Oh." She smiled as if someone had finished singing a long song to her. She fell.

"No," said the priest. No scream. No drama. He held the staff tighter. He sang. Not pretty. True. I saw his milky eyes clear. Like a lake that forgets the algae.

"Anchor's down," whispered Lira, blood at her mouth. "Write."

I wrote the last sentence. I put the period. The knot collapsed. It didn't fall apart. It*heard*It was like the end of a bad conversation you'd been having for far too long. The black threads sank, turned gray, became nothing.

"*Countercurrent*"Successful," the doctor gasped into our com. She was crying. I didn't know for whom. Maybe it didn't matter.

“Get out, get out, get out!” Mercer yelled, and this time he wasn’t just yelling for us, but for every wall in Atlantis Prime that would listen.

We carried Lira between us. The priest swam alongside, his staff now so light, as if he had sold its weight to the water. Behind us, the ocean drew a line across the knot, as if to say: Here was something that couldn't stay. Ahead of us, the city shone. No holiness. Just electricity.

In the hangar, I fell to my knees. Not for heroic poses. Because my legs had terminated the contract. Hands pulled us inside. Hands opened helmets. Hands pressed cloth onto wounds. Hands did what hands do when speech is too slow.

Kade stood there. No cheers. No "well done." She looked around. Counted. Calculated. Broke. Added. Breathed. Commanders breathe differently.

“Losses?” she asked.

"Four," said Mercer. "Five." He looked to the side where they had covered the engineer. "Five."

“Target?” asked Kade.

"Gone," I said. "Not dead. Gone."

She nodded. Once. That was her "thank you."

Later—later is a perverse word in a city where no one wants to stay for a minute—we sat in the council chamber. The walls were still the same. The people weren't. The merchant had tears on her inky hands. The officer looked younger, which is never good with such people. The flame-haired woman

hugged the boy who had waved to me tighter, as if she wanted to screw him back inside her.

"Report: Node Beta has been neutralized," the doctor said. "We're seeing a temporary reconfiguration of local currents. PRAE activity in the area is expected to drop significantly for eight hours. After that... unclear."

"Atlantis Prime is alive," said the diplomat. "Today."

"What about tomorrow?" asked the priest. His milky eye was milky again. I now knew what it had cost to make it clear.

I stood. I'm not good at standing after things like that. But sitting is like being glued, and I never liked glue.

“Tomorrow,” I said, “is the decision.”

“That was just one,” hissed the dealer.

"That was*reaction*,” I said. “Decision is what we do with what we have learned. We can tie knots. We can set anchors. We can write. So we write. Not only when they chase us. We chase back. Not out of revenge. Out of*need*."

“So the Thalyari want war?” asked the man with the rings.

"The Thalyari don't want to die," Lira said quietly. "Neither do you. So: us. Together."

Kade stepped into the circle. "The council is now open," she said. Doors opened. People streamed in, so many that for the first time I remembered the word*People*I didn't have to suffocate. Hands, faces, voices. I saw the flame-haired woman. I saw the boy. I saw the musician from the hangar. I saw people I already knew, and people I might never see again.

"Atlantis Prime," Kade cried, her voice a knife that cuts bread, not throats. "We had visitors. We had enemies. We were afraid. Today we were attacked. We did not win. We did not lose. We have*decided*"We will not go into a water grave. Not without a struggle, and not without writing."

She pointed at me. I hate this. But sometimes what you hate is your duty.

"This one can write," she said. "Not in books. In currents. Those who let themselves be reeled in take a risk. Those who don't, too. Those willing to

become anchors, step forward. Those who can fight, report to Mercer. Those who can heal, report to Dr. San. Those who can pray, report to Jaro. Those who can cook—" a brief, crooked smile "—cook."

People stepped forward. Not many. Enough. An old man. A young woman. A girl who was too young, but Kade sent her back with a look so warm that even*Back*didn't hurt. The boy waving shook the flame-haired girl's hand and said something I didn't hear. She nodded. He stepped forward. He trembled. He stayed.

"Then," Kade said, "we officially declare what we already are, in fact: an alliance with Melorai. The map of the flow paths now belongs to all of us. We will read it, we will protect it, and if God or PRAE or the great algorithm out there has a problem with it—" She raised her hand. The cleric laid down his staff. "—then let him come."

Someone clapped. Then another. Then many. No cheering. No stadium. This clapping had dirt under its fingernails and salt in its mouth. It was the best clapping I've ever heard.

Later, we found a corner for ourselves, one the city provided. A platform between two pumps, warm from the flow of things, cool from the water lapping against the window outside. Mercer lay down and pretended to sleep. Lira sat with her knees tucked under her chin, her chin on the map. I stood at the window, staring into the darkness. The darkness stared back. We'd gotten used to each other.

"Darym," Lira said without looking up. "You laughed today when he showed you pictures."

“I laugh when I’m scared.”

"I know."

“Why do you ask?”

"Because you laughed when you killed him, too."

I didn't know if she meant the lump or the person with the transmitter who had hit the engineer in the neck. Maybe she didn't know herself. Maybe that's the kind of sentence that means both and neither. I pressed my forehead against the window. It was colder than I was. Good thing.

“I’m not a hero,” I said.

"Heroes die in chapters," Mercer murmured from downstairs. "We have two more books."

"We still have one more breath," said Lira. "That's enough."

Somewhere in the city, someone was singing. Not a hymn. An old song about ships, one that must have once been cheerful, before the sea decided to become honest. I closed my eyes. I saw Melorai. I saw Atlantis Prime. I saw a world peeling away at its edges like old paper.

The com crackled.

"This is Callisto Orbital," said a voice I hadn't heard since Nautilus Seven. "Atlantis Prime. We're registering a local PRAE falloff zone. Query: Who spotted the black sun?"

Mercer grunted. "Tell them: the clown."

"Don't tell them anything," Kade said in the opposite channel. "Not yet." Then, to me: "Go to sleep. In five hours, we'll decide whether to go to the south cliff. Or up."

"Up?"

"Yes," she said. "To the surface. To the cities that haven't yet fallen. Or are already rising again. To those who hunt us. To those who need us. Decision."

I turned back to the window. Something was passing by outside. Not PRAE. Not fish. A shadow that didn't know it was one. Sometimes that's the friendliest kind.

“Step by step,” I murmured, half to Lira, half to the glass, half to the thing inside me that*write*wanted if it*screams*hould. "Until we are whole again."

"We were never whole," Mercer said. "We were just witty enough to say it."

I laughed. Quietly. Honestly. It felt good to hurt.

Then I lay down. I dreamed of a sea that ceased to remember boundaries. And of a city of glass that understood that*Decision*is not a word. It's a knife that you sharpen anew every morning.

We would go back out. To the south cliff. Or up. Or to where the water ended.*Water*to be called. The decision lay where all decisions lie: in the next breath. And because the sea is a bastard, it would barely hold our breath. That made sense. I was the reincarnation of a man who wrote whiskey and drank truth. I would make the sea hate my sense of humor.

And if not, I hated it first. And then I kept writing.

Chapter 27 - Return to Melorai

The sea was still. Too still. Not the stillness of an empty space, but the stillness after a scream so powerful it swallowed everything.

We left Atlantis Prime like shipwrecked sailors turning back to see if the wreck they left behind might not still hold. Behind us lay the last great bastion, a city of metal and glass that glowed in a sea of black scars like a candle in a storm. Before us lay Melorai—my home, my grave, my legacy.

"I'll tell you right now, clown," Mercer growled as he adjusted the engine. "This is the stupidest idea you've ever had. And believe me, your list of stupid ideas is already longer than the currents here."

Lira didn't answer immediately. She held the map of the current paths before her, the relic that had already guided us through too many chasms. It vibrated, faintly but steadily—as if Melorai herself were calling her. Finally, Lira raised her gaze. "Stupid or not—we have no choice. Melorai could be the key. If she's still alive."

“If,” repeated Mercer, spitting the word out like a fishbone stuck in his throat.

I remained silent. What could I have said? That I didn't know if I wanted to go back to Melorai? That every current that brought us closer was like a cut through an old wound? I could only stare into the darkness, where silhouettes slowly began to emerge.

We swam through currents that were no longer currents. Entire lanes seemed sick, as if the water itself had lost its memory. Sometimes it carried us faster than it should, at other times it seemed to stick, as if it wanted to hold us back.

Once we drifted past a wreck—an old Thalyari ship, half shattered, half covered in black slime. I recognized the crest on the side. It was my uncle's ship.

“Do you want to…?” Lira began cautiously.

I shook my head. "He's gone. Only his shadow."

We moved on.

Later, we came across a cloud of dead fish. They floated motionless in the water, their eyes black, their scales dull. Mercer poked one out of the cloud and watched it stagger. "They don't eat. They don't breathe. But they don't rot either. The water holds them. Like a loop."

"The current stores," I murmured. "Even what's long gone."

Mercer snorted. "Or someone just loves playing with dead dolls."

The map vibrated more strongly the closer we got. And with the vibration came the voices. First faint, then clearer.

I heard whispers that didn't come from my companions. Names, memories, fragments of conversations that had never belonged to me. A woman laughed, a child sang, an old man cursed the rip currents. And then—my mother.

"Darym," she breathed, clearly, as if she were swimming right next to me. "Come home."

My chest tightened. I didn't dare look around. I knew she wasn't there. And yet... she was.

“Are you okay?” Lira asked when she saw my look.

“No,” I answered honestly.

Then she appeared.

Melorai.

The city rose from the darkness like a cathedral forgotten. Spires rose, some still proud, others broken. Domes that had once glowed in all colors were dark, riddled with cracks, or covered in black slime. But a few still burned. Small, defiantly flickering lights that said: We are not dead. Not yet.

"Holy shit," Mercer muttered. "And you call this home?"

"I called that home," I corrected quietly. "Now I don't know what it is anymore."

Lira placed her hand on my arm. "It's still Melorai. Even if she has scars."

Scars. Yes. But some scars don't heal.

The gates didn't respond. Once, they would have opened at my voice. Today, they remained silent. We had to squeeze through a side crack, a fissure that looked as if the ocean itself had ruptured the city.

It was dark inside. The water tasted of metal, as if it were full of blood.

“Nice welcome,” murmured Mercer.

“Be quiet,” hissed Lira.

Because we heard something. Footsteps. Voices.

"Halt!" A group of Thalyari approached us. Their armor was old, poorly repaired, some patched with human technology. Their eyes were hollow but alert.

"Who are you?" asked the leader. Her harpoon didn't tremble, but her fingers were so thin you could see the bones.

"Darym," I said. "From Melorai."

A murmur went through the group. Some lowered their weapons. Others didn't.

"Darym is dead," one said. "Or worse."

"Some die without disappearing," I replied. "Some disappear without dying."

A long silence followed. Then the leader lowered her harpoon. "Come."

We followed them through the corridors. Traces of war were everywhere: charred coral, shattered glass tubes, black streaks on the walls. But also life. Children clinging to their parents' legs. Old people sitting silently against the walls. Young people whose eyes seemed too old.

“How many of you are left?” asked Lira.

"Enough to starve. Too few to fight," said the leader. "We no longer call ourselves the Council. We simply call ourselves 'those who are there.'"

Mercer murmured, “That sounds really hopeful.”

I gave him a look that silenced him.

Finally, we reached the old council chamber. Half-collapsed, the great dome riddled with cracks. But the mosaics on the walls still glowed faintly. Flow codes, ancient, inscribed deep into the coral itself.

I felt it like a heartbeat.

As I reached out, the room flickered. Lights flickered on, patterns crisscrossed the floor. Lines flowed into my body.

“He’s… reacting,” whispered one of the survivors.

“He’s writing,” breathed the leader.

But not everyone was convinced. An old warrior stepped forward. His eyes flashed with rage. "You betrayed us, Darym. You abandoned us. And now you return—with humans at your side, with their disease in your blood. Why should we trust you?"

I took a deep breath. "Because Melorai is still alive. And because she's talking to me."

And in that moment, it really did whisper. Deep, from the walls, from the currents. A voice that wasn't quite a voice. "Rewrite me."

Everyone froze. Some stared at me, others at the walls. Some of the survivors apparently heard it too.

"The city itself…" whispered Lira. "It's a knot."

"She was always a knot," growled the old warrior. "Only no one understood it."

"Now I understand," I said. "And PRAE too. They didn't want to destroy Melorai. They wanted to overwrite her."

The discussion erupted. Some shouted that we had to fight. Others that we had to flee. The hall shook as if the currents themselves were raging.

Then came the shock.

A deep sound cutting through the water. Not an animal, not a ship, not a leviathan. Something else.

Mercer turned to me. "Please tell me this isn't a PRAE swarm."

I looked through the cracks out into the sea. And saw them. Thousands of shadows moving like a single body. PRAE.

The city vibrated. The voice whispered again: "Rewrite me—or lose me."

Chapter 28 - The Fall of the Blue Throne

The water trembled. Not like a storm. Not like a spinning leviathan. But like a heart that skipped a beat too soon—and in doing so, caused the blood to stagnate.

I stood in the council chamber of Melorai. Before me rose the Blue Throne. Not a mere coral bench, not a symbol—it was a hub, a manifestation of the current itself. Lines flickered across the walls, patterns I could now read like sentences in a book. They said: danger. They said: betrayal.

"You're staring at him like you want to marry him," Mercer murmured. His face was still bloody from the last battle, but his grin was as firm as ever. "If he bites you, don't call me."

"He doesn't bite," I murmured. "He writes."

"Even worse," he growled. "I hate writers."

Lira stepped beside me. Her eyes sparkled, more serious than ever. "Darym... the throne isn't just a symbol. It's a weapon. Perhaps the only one that can stop PRAE."

I nodded. And I also knew: Perhaps the only one that would destroy us all.

The first blow came from outside. A dull tremor ran through the walls. Coral splintered, glass tubes shattered. Screams echoed through the city.

“They’re here,” whispered one of the survivors.

We rushed outside. And saw them. PRAE swarms. Black bodies, thousands, tens of thousands. They crawled over the domes, drilled through the walls, crept into the flow shafts. Every blow wasn't just destruction—it was circumlocution.

A gate burst. Water poured in, but it wasn't water anymore. It was black, pulsating, full of voices.

"Hold the line!" yelled the leader of the survivors. "For Melorai!"

And the war began.

Between the fighting, I fled with Lira through a side corridor. We found them—children trapped in a room, the water filled with dust and splinters. They were clinging to each other, eyes wide, too frozen to scream.

Lira grabbed two of them and hugged them. "Get out. Run."

"Where to?" one gasped. "There's nowhere."

"Then come to us," she said. "As long as we live, you have a place."

I felt the words echoing within me. Melorai wasn't just stones, not just flow codes. It was this. Children who were afraid. Elders who whispered. Warriors who fought even though they were long broken.

When we returned, the council chamber was in chaos. One of the warriors—a man named Tahrim—stood with a weapon in his hand, pointed at us. His body was twitching, his eyes black.

"You don't understand," he gasped, half human, half infection. "You are not our enemy. You are the update."

"Shit," Mercer muttered, drawing his knife. "A walking software update."

Before we could react, Tahrim hurled his harpoon—not at us, but at the throne. The point struck, and a rip ripped through the glowing lines. The throne screamed. Yes, it screamed—a sound that would have shattered our skulls.

The patterns began to flicker. Lines danced, circles shifted. The Blue Throne awoke.

But it wasn't clean. Black streaks ran through the patterns. PRAE was inside.

"Darym," whispered Lira. "Only you can hold him."

I stepped forward. My hands trembled, but when I touched the coral, something calmed down. It was as if the city recognized me. It spoke.

“Write to me.”

The current codes flowed into me, hot, burning, overwhelming. I saw patterns older than anything we knew. Commands that had created the ocean itself. And in the middle of it all: a black block, PRAE.

“They have infected the throne,” I pressed out.

Then the gates burst. Swarms of PRAEs poured in, straight into the hall. The battle was chaos. Spears against claws, currents against codes. Mercer plunged in, cutting, stabbing, laughing until he bled.

"Come here, you bugs!" he yelled. "I promised you a clean install!"

Beside him, Lira fought like a storm. Every blow a light, every movement a shield for those fleeing behind her.

But I… I couldn't fight anymore. I had to write. The throne pulsed beneath my hands. It wanted to live. But in what form?

"Darym!" Lira screamed. "What are you doing?"

I looked at them. Saw Mercer staggering, half-torn to pieces. Saw the survivors, the children, the elderly. Saw the currents turning black.

And I knew: We couldn't save the throne. Not like this.

“I'll rewrite it,” I whispered.

I pulled against the currents. Not gently, not carefully. I wrote an order I barely understood. An order to be forgotten.

The throne trembled. The patterns shattered. Black streaks were swallowed, but so was the light, which was still pure.

"No!" roared the old warrior. "You'll kill him!"

"No," I murmured. "I'll release him."

Then he broke.

The Blue Throne shattered into light. The hall collapsed. Water ripped through the halls, walls splintered. Melorai herself screamed.

“Get out!” Mercer yelled, his voice more blood than sound.

We dragged the survivors with us, fleeing through flow shafts that barely held. Behind us, the city collapsed. Towers toppled, domes shattered. The Blue Throne sank, down into the trenches, away from everything we had ever called home.

When we finally got out, we were just a bunch of exhausted people. Civilians, warriors, children. A fleet of shipwrecked people.

And behind us—Melorai, the Blue Throne, our history—there was only dust in the water.

But as we drifted into the depths, I heard it again. A whisper, barely audible, but there.

"I'm not lost. I'm saved."

I knew what it meant. The Blue Throne had fallen. But its code lived within me.

Chapter 29 - Sacrifice into the Flow Core

The ocean smelled of metal and old fear as we descended into the trench. It wasn't the noble scent of a holy mission—more like the breath of a machine determined to swallow you and not swallow itself. Greyfin glided beneath us, a mountain with gills. He was one of the Old Ones who still knew what silence sounded like. PRAE hadn't rewritten him yet, perhaps because respect sometimes infects more slowly than flesh.

“How deep does it go?” growled Mercer, his helmet half scratched, half proud.

"To where the world begins to become honest," said Lira. "So deeper than we'd like."

I said nothing. The current core was calling, and once you've heard that call, you'll know why sailors' yarns never break: because they're spun from nerves. The call sounded like a heartbeat too big for a body, and it was old. Older than Thalyari, older than humans, older than good humor.

Keph and Neris, the twins, swam to my right and left. Synchronized as mirrors, the same scar on his left gill arch, the same cold smile when the depths press in. "Anchors one and two ready," said Keph.

"Anchors wherever it hurts," Neris added. The two were poetry with blades.

We passed the razor thermocline, a skin of cold anger. The water fluctuated in temperature like a whim you can't pay for. Thin mists of thermoswarms shimmered around us, each glittering dot a process being recorded somewhere in the core. I felt the throne within me—not as furniture, but as a pattern. It pushed gently against my ribs, as if to say: Write neatly, boy.

“When I die,” murmured Mercer, “bury me in the sand and write on the stone: ‘At least he tried not to die stupid.’”

"We don't have any sand," I said. "And all the stones are already reserved."

"All right," he snorted. "Then at least have a drink when I'm gone."

Greyfin turned off, deeper into a shaft that looked as if a giant hand had kneaded the rocks. Above us, the light closed in; below us there was only pressure and this humming that came not from the water, but from everything. I saw the first runes on the walls—not carved, but grown, spirals that were both words and currents. The Core starts reading you early. And it takes its time with the joke.

The test awaited at the Mud Gate. A curtain of floating silt hung like gray rain, but if you looked more closely, they were lines. The grains didn't just fall. They spoke. I understood only every third word, and that was enough to frighten me.

"Only the key will go through," Lira said quietly. Her hand found my forearm, and for the first time since Melorai, I felt that touch wasn't just a medical term. "I'll stay right behind you. No matter what he takes."

"He takes what he wants," Mercer said. "Like a tax authority."

I breathed. Yes, of course I breathed. Don't tell me fish don't—we breathe, we swear, we die, we drink. I placed my palms in the current outside the gate, and the mud began to glow. Not a color. A feeling. The core wasn't checking my body. It was checking my archive.

"Price?" I asked. It might have been foolish to negotiate with a fool, but sometimes foolishness is what remains when courage has been spent.

The grains changed their course. An image emerged. Me as a child, beneath the lantern algae of Melorai, my hands sticky with seaweed syrup, my father's voice singing an ancient current. He laughed, rough and warm, and explained to me how to tame the "beam"—that unruly tributary in the Marktgraben that likes to kiss you into a wall. It smelled of salt and the promise that someone would be there if you fell.

“Not that,” I said, my voice sounding like I hadn’t used it in weeks.

The mud continued to trickle, forming a second image. My first watch in the outer ring, too big for the armor, too enamored with the idea that cities are eternal. My mother ties my gill belt, curses because I never listen, and then kisses my forehead. Her singing was bright. It held me.

"Not that," I repeated, and the pressure behind my eyes said: You either lose or you lie. Both are family.

A third image. Me, younger, with friends I can no longer save, even if I call them by name. We escape at night, swim beneath the eastern dome, let ourselves be tickled by the buoyancy. Someone whispers that the sea will never forget us. Down below, far below, something glows that I thought was a fairytale at the time: the current core blinks. I blink back. An agreement I never signed.

"Take this," I said, before the peat boggart could force me to deliver something more expensive. "Take the banality. Leave me the people."

The mud paused, as if considering me. Then it ripped the scene out of me. Not painfully. Worse. As if you intentionally forget how to laugh when no one is watching. The curtain became clearer. A path opened.

"Next time, we'll count in installments," Mercer murmured, pushing his way behind me. Keph and Neris followed, Lira last, her gaze on me like an anchor that wouldn't strangle me.

There was silence beyond the gate, and in the silence the core of the current hung like a moon. Not round, not friendly. More like a wound so old it looked like nature. Threads ran from it in every direction, thick as trees, thin as thoughts. Some pulsed calmly—our work. Others flickered blackly—PRAE.

“He is… beautiful,” whispered Neris.

"It's a courtroom," Keph corrected. "And we're the idiots without a lawyer."

PRAE was already here. Spores like glass blades floated, reprogramming the current, and from some cracks grew what must have once been coral and was now teeth. It smelled of hot forge water.

"Drop anchor," Lira said. Not in a commanding tone, more like a prayer that needed to be done. The twins glided away, disappearing next to ridges of limestone, not splashing, not breathing heavily, because professionals don't bother anyone even when sinking. Mercer took up position, ram in hand, knife in his smile.

"If they come," he said, "I'll politely let them go first. I'm modern."

“Politeness is a damage multiplier,” I said.

“Then we multiply, clown.”

I stepped into the core of the body. Near that, you lost your sense of proportion. Where you think you're a body in a room, you realize you're a text in a book, and the book pages through you as it pleases. The throne within me knocked. Not demandingly. More like an old man holding out a pipe and saying: You wanted to be a grown-up someday.

"If you go in," said Lira, her tone the exact opposite of Core—warm, quiet, unashamedly alive—"I'll come as far as I'm allowed."

"As far as you can," I said. "Not as far as you're allowed to."

PRAE noticed us. Not with his eyes, but with his voice. A wave of black commands rolled in—not fast, but inexorably. Your skin wanted to obey. Your bones wanted to sign. Mercer stepped forward, plunging the ram into the wave as if it were still made of water. It wasn't. It was intentional.

“Keph!” cried Lira.

A luminous line flashed, then another. The twins had set the anchors. Three points in space that were no longer space—above, to the right, behind. Each line was a "no" in a language understood only by the deep. The wave broke, but it laughed as it did so. You don't hear the laughter. You feel it telling you that you will soon be history.

"Darym," said Lira. "The protocol."

I would have liked to say "later." Later is a beautiful word. It smacks of evasion and smacks of lies. I placed my hands on the core skin and wrote.

Not words. Pressure. Angles. Thermal gradients that became meaning. I drew lines like scars, placed pauses where PRAE had sprinted. I wrote a thing that wasn't a wall, but a memory. A memory that was stronger than hunger. Balance. Not as a pious concept, but as mechanical force.

PRAE answered. Of course. It wasn't a dialogue. It was chess with an opponent who uses your nerves as pawns. From a crack crawled something that looked like a flower that had decided to eat teeth. I heard Mercer laugh, and then I heard the teeth break.

“One more,” he shouted.

“Two more,” Keph corrected somewhere.

"One hundred more," Neris said, sounding like she was enjoying herself. I like working with people who insult death.

The core accepted my writing. First like a polite host who lets you finish, knowing you're about to leave. Then like an old friend who remembers you once opening a door for him when he didn't come home. The Throne echo burned through my fingers into my skin, and then deeper. My chest vibrated. I could have vomited if I hadn't been the keyboard.

"Price," said the core. Not a word. A tug. I knew it before he finished thinking it.

"Not that," Lira whispered. She knew it, too.

The Core wanted my song. Not the voice you use when you're funny. The other one. The one we Thalyari use to read the current and respond. Our wire home. My father laughed inside me. My mother cursed. Melorai flickered. Greyfin hummed deeply. The Core held out the bundle to me and said: Choose, or I choose ugly.

“Take it,” I said.

Lira grabbed my wrist. "Not that."

"We've already buried one throne," I said. "Do you really want me to ask the Core to find something nice?"

"I want," she said, smiling crookedly, "you to keep something so the world can scold you later."

I laughed. It sounded horribly off-key because I already knew what was going to happen next. "You can swear even if I'm mute."

Mercer stepped to my side, sweaty, bloody, beautifully indestructible. "Make it short, clown. The Bugs are impatient."

Greyfin approached, as large as the word "end." His eyes were still clear. He rested his forehead against the core skin, where my fingers had been, and the water around us suddenly became old. It smelled of the deep sea, of decay and birth, of time.

I understood. He offered his share. Not just any share. The big one. Old people aren't sentimental. They just count in centuries instead of sentences.

“If you do that,” I whispered, “you won’t get back up.”

He grumbled. Not sad. More annoyed that I'd stopped him. Then he pushed himself a little deeper into the core until his flank glowed. A pattern appeared on him—ancient, Thalyarian, but not ours. The ocean had given it to him once, perhaps eons ago. A contract now fulfilled.

I gave my song. Greyfin gave his life. The core gave way.

The wave that came wasn't black. It was white. Not color. Consequence. It washed over us, through us, within us, and for a few feverish seconds, the world was so still that even my fear grew timid. Then everything that had anchored PRAE here tore into place: spores burned, teeth became coral again, orders became water again. Keph laughed. Neris cursed affectionately. Mercer let out a victorious cry that sounded professional as a curse.

It didn't last a minute. Maybe it was longer. Time is a drunken waitress in such rooms. At the end, Greyfin lay still. The core vibrated deeply, grateful or exhausted, take your pick. And I... called out into the current. No answer. No

note. Just pressure and the fact that silence, when it's this big, suddenly has weight.

"Darym?" Lira's voice was there, warm and unreasonable. "Can you hear me?"

"You, yes," I said. "The rest... not anymore."

Mercer clapped me on the shoulder, tentatively, as if I were made of new glass. "Welcome to the club of the soundless. I've been a member for a while."

“I don’t sing anymore,” I murmured.

"You're still writing," said Lira. "And that's worse for our enemies."

PRAE wasn't dead. I'm not saying that to spoil your mood. I'm saying that because honesty is the only sin we can still afford. But in the chamber, it was retreating. The core storm emanating from here was weakening, curving, losing the obscenity of the unstoppable. Out there, far away, reefs would get a chance not to die instantly. Ships would have one more minute to tell their crews one last joke. Sometimes one minute saves the world. Not today. But maybe tomorrow's attempt.

"Out," Lira said, and this time she sounded like someone bringing her people home, even if "home" was collapsing. Keph and Neris released the anchors in an order I never wanted to memorize. Mercer secured, breathing heavily, smiling like someone who'd just settled the score with death.

The core spasmed. Not against us. Against itself. The rewrite had tired it out. It began to shed parts that PRAE had burned into it. That's never clean. Flanks cracked, forks slapped against each other, the water took on that metallic taste that's called "same."

We took the buoyancy corridor, which Keph had forced into a mosaic of yeses. It held. Sometimes things hold, simply because someone stares at them until they understand they'd better play along. The corridor took us up to a cloud of subtle light. Not a sun. A vent bloom—the oldest lamps in the world. It was soft, it smelled of seaweed honey, and I could have cried if I hadn't just lost the contract with my tear ducts.

Grayfin remained behind us. He didn't sink. The core held him like a portrait. The frame vibrated once—in gratitude or memory—and then there was only water.

"He carried us," Neris said. Her voice was no longer steely. Just the truth, unvarnished.

"Then we'll carry on," said Keph, and released the last safety device on the shaft so that PRAE would have to search longer when it came back.

We surfaced in a fold of the ditch that looked like a breathing hole. The water was clearer than usual today. That didn't mean anything, but it felt like someone had saved the tablecloth while the house burned.

I tried to sing a current—just a small one, something Thalyari children do when they're encouraging themselves. Nothing. No response. It was as if I were smiling into a room where no one was left. I laughed, harshly. "Well. The clown is silent now."

“You don’t sound mute,” said Mercer.

"He means the songs," Lira said, her gaze on a hand on my neck. "Not the garbage that keeps us alive."

"I would never give it up," I said. "Not even the core."

Above us, somewhere beyond the patience called depth, the rest of the world waited. A little less broken than an hour ago. A little more angry. I felt the throne inside me. It was quieter. Not gone. Just... further back. Maybe that was the trick. Maybe I should get used to the fact that things that last learn to stop screaming.

“And now?” asked Keph.

"Now we gather everyone who's still breathing," Lira said. "Then we'll take the rest from the cities that haven't completely collapsed yet. And then..." She looked at me. "Then we'll keep writing."

“I thought we were singing,” I muttered reflexively, the joke coming faster than the pain.

"We sing differently," she said. "With tools and maps and bad manners."

Mercer raised the battering ram as if it were a flag. "And with violence. Don't forget the violence. Violence got me through puberty."

I snorted. "Then this is your second one."

We glided out of the hole into the wide current that cut through the ditch like a river. I wrote a little bend, just to test it – and it obeyed, elegant as before, only now there was no melody underneath. It was as if I'd lost the bass and had to work with drums. Not pretty. Effective.

“If it’s any consolation,” said Mercer, standing beside me with reliable irreverence, “I’ve never been able to sing.”

"That comforts me," I said honestly. "Because you still dance."

Before us, the fold opened into a strip of open sea. No black waves, no immediate nuclear storm. Only the echo of a world shifted by a minute. Sometimes minutes are everything.

I looked back. Not because I'm sentimental—I am, but I won't admit it—but because you should know who you owe what to. The Core lay down there, pretending to be rock. Greyfin lay inside, pretending to be a word. My singing was gone, pretending it had never been. Lots of acting. Not much scenery. Exactly my thing.

“On to the next stupidity,” said Mercer.

“For the final evacuation,” Lira corrected.

“To the best of disasters,” I said, because one should always take the third suggestion when death is listening.

We swam. And the current I had just written carried us. Without music. On purpose. Sometimes that's enough. Not forever. But until the next page. And I damn well wanted to write that one myself.

Chapter 30 - The Final Evacuation

The sea was no longer ours. It was a shattered memory, bleeding from all sides. Currents that had once been clear and predictable now flickered like live wires. Some were warm, others icy cold, and all together they sang a song no ear wanted to hear anymore. PRAE had already overwritten half of the coral cities, and the other half burned, dying.

We returned from the core of the current, defeated, voiceless, without song. And outside, the next end was already waiting.

Melorai. I almost didn't recognize her.

The city's domes, once shining like shattered pearls, were darkened. Algae lights that once illuminated streets and squares went out one by one, like dying stars. Entire neighborhoods lay in shadow, and the shadow continued to eat away. Smoke hung in the alleys—smoke, underwater!—born of corroded codes and dead energy currents.

The large squares where children had once played their current games were crowded with people and thalyari. Refugees pressed shoulder to shoulder. Some clutched belongings—bowls, nets, musical instruments, anything they could grab in their panic. Others held only their children. Some had nothing left.

"It's worse than I thought," Lira murmured. Her hands clenched around the edge of a balustrade, as if she could hold the city before it fell apart.

"Worse?" Mercer let out a hoarse laugh. His face was covered in scratches, his helmet shattered. He looked like a man who had already died thirty times, yet still hadn't thought about taking his last breath. "This isn't worse. This is the end."

And yet the council chambers were full. Everyone wanted to talk, but no one wanted to listen. Old families yelled at each other over who should have priority. People accused the Thalyari of treason. Thalyari retorted that the humans had brought PRAE into the sea in the first place. The voices echoed like hammer blows against a breaking bell.

Then the word fell. A single one that drowned out everything.

"Evacuation."

The port was pure chaos.

Boats were overloaded, ships never built for war were hastily restocked with supplies. Leviathan breeders, ancient creatures protected for centuries, screamed under the pressure of suddenly being used as beasts of burden. They squirmed, trying to escape, but they were too valuable—no one would let them go.

Humans and Thalyari fought over every free deck. Lines formed, dissolved, and turned into fistfights. A man shouted that he had five children. A woman yelled

that she had the key to the library. An old man fell, was trampled, and no one stopped to help him up.

I stood at the edge of the harbor, my hands in the water. It tasted of metal. Of something that wasn't water anymore.

I reached into the currents. Lines flickered, flickering like cables already half-burned. But I could still write them. So I wrote. Paths that formed into a corridor. Paths that would lead the boats out, away from the shoals, away from the darkness.

Every move burned my skin. Every line ate at my blood. But the corridor held. At least for now.

“What is he doing?” asked a human commander, his armor shining as if brilliance were a weapon.

“He’s writing us out,” Lira snarled, and the sharpness in her voice silenced the man.

The council members weren't quiet. They continued to shout.

“The children first!” someone shouted.

“The Elders! Their knowledge is more important than any brood!” another said.

"The artifacts!" another one cried. "The current map must not be left behind!"

The crowd was boiling. Some boats were stormed before they were even fully loaded. Humans and Thalyari jumped aboard, pushing others into the water. Keph and Neris threw themselves into the mix, spears in hand, their voices like whips.

“Order!” shouted Keph.

“Or no one survives!” added Neris.

Her eyes were hard. For a moment, the crowd followed. But panic doesn't last long.

Mercer stood at the dock, his body a wall. Anyone who tried to push forward got his ramming spear in their face. He laughed, bloody, mocking. "Pull yourself together! You want out? Then keep the damn corridor clear!"

Then the storm came.

Not rain, not thunder. But PRAE. One swarm after another crawled over the reefs. Black masses that looked as if someone had materialized the errors of a dream. They ate coral, turning water into a thick, viscous liquid. They didn't come like enemies. They came like bugs that wanted to erase everything.

A boat on the edge was hit. I heard the screams before I saw the transformation. Metal bent, wood shattered, bones grew where none should have been. The crew screamed—and in the next breath, they screamed differently. PRAE had them.

"Faster!" Lira yelled. "We need more corridors!"

I wrote. Lines, spirals, rivers. But for every path I opened, a new crack opened. PRAE wrote faster, corrupted faster. My skin burned, my eyes saw double, but I didn't stop.

Mercer held the line. Every swarm that came too close met his spear, his curse, his laughter. "Come on! I'll punch you until you see stars!"

And then he came.

A leviathan. Not as big as Greyfin, but still a mountain in the water. His scales were torn, he bled from a hundred wounds. But his eyes were clear.

He pushed into the harbor, mooring boats against his flank. Children screamed as they climbed over his backplates. Old people wept as they were placed on his shoulders. He roared deeply, and the cry was a command: Climb while I hold.

And he held.

Until PRAE reached him.

Black lines crawled across his fins. He roared, tearing the currents apart, but it was no use. Prae crawled deeper, drawing new commands on his skin.

“Not again,” whispered Lira, tears in her eyes.

But the Leviathan fought. He pulled the currents to himself, keeping my corridor open, even as it burned him. He sacrificed himself—not for glory, not for victory. But simply so we could escape.

His last cry was a command: Go. Now.

And we obeyed.

Keph and Neris were bleeding, but they held on. Their spears flashed, their voices roused the crowd from their panic. Mercer pushed back the last swarm, collapsing to his knees in the process, grinning bloodily. "That was close." We pulled him up. No one left him behind.

The boats, the Leviathan carriers, the last we could save, crashed into my corridor. I wrote and wrote, my skin tore, my eyes burned, but the current held. Behind us, Melorai collapsed. Domes shattered, lights went out, voices fell silent.

The city that gave birth to us was erased.

I looked back – and it was as if I was watching my own childhood being overwritten.

But the fleet lived. Children cried, old men groaned, warriors swore they would return. No one said we had lost. Not yet. Not yet.

I couldn't sing anymore. But I could write. So I wrote one last sentence into the current, a promise that no one heard except the sea:

We're coming back. We're not deleting. We're overwriting.

And the water was silent. But it carried us.

Chapter 31 - When the Sea Is Silent

The water was silent. And that silence was louder than any scream I'd ever heard. It wasn't the crack of shattering metal, not the roar of a leviathan, not even the screech of the PRAE swarms we'd left behind. It was nothingness, an abyss that swallowed even the smallest breaths.

We drifted, a fleet of stranded people, a retinue of warriors, wounded, children, and the elderly, our boats tied together as if that would prevent us from falling apart. Every glance was directed into the water, every breath a prayer that the silence wouldn't swallow us whole. I felt the weight of emptiness on my shoulders, as if the sea itself had ceased to support us.

Just a few days ago, we had still believed the sea was an archive, a repository of currents, full of voices, codes, memories. Now it was empty. No hum, no echo, no whisper in the currents. I stretched out within myself, trying to grasp the code, the patterns I had sensed so often – but there was nothing. Only emptiness, like a page someone had erased.

"That's not right," Lira murmured next to me. Her gaze searched into the depths, as if she might find an answer there. "Even in the still water, even in the deepest trenches... there was always something. A heartbeat, a song, a whisper. But here... nothing." Her voice trembled, as if she were afraid that even speaking might destroy the rest.

Mercer said nothing. That alone made my blood run cold. Because he was the one who found a mockery, a curse, or a joke for every catastrophe. Now he just sat there, his shoulders heavy, his hands on his knees, his gaze fixed on the void, as if searching for his next breath.

The children were the first to find the silence unbearable. They began to ask questions. "Why doesn't the sea listen anymore?" asked a boy, his voice so quiet it barely penetrated the water. His mother immediately put her hand over his mouth and shook her head in panic. Her eyes spoke louder than words: Don't speak, or something we don't want to hear will hear us.

An old warrior, half-blind and scarred, whispered, "The sea is dead." And immediately another grabbed him, yanked his collar, and shook him wildly. "Don't say that! If you say it, it will become true!" They would have almost bitten each other's throats if Keph hadn't intervened. With a single movement, he separated them, his voice rough as gravel: "Enough! We've lost too many. We won't tear each other apart when the depths are already gnawing at us."

But even his voice sounded weak, powerless, hollow in nothingness.

On the second day the first boat disappeared.

It floated beside us, barely fifty meters away, packed with refugees – and then it was gone. No cry, no current, no jump in the water. One moment it was there, the next only emptiness. We searched for bubbles, for bodies, for wreckage. Nothing. Only the nothingness we already knew.

"Crack," whispered Neris, one of our commanders who hadn't yet broken. "There are faults in the water."

“Or a maw,” murmured an old priest.

“Or simply nothing,” said a child, and this “nothing” hung heavier in the current than anything else.

A second boat disappeared the following night. A third the next morning. Always silently, always without a trace. The lines grew smaller, and with each emptiness, the trembling in our hearts grew. Mercer commented with a hoarse snort: "Sea burials without bodies. Saves time, saves wood. Convenient." But no one laughed. Not even he.

On the fourth day, we came across a colony. An ancient Thalyari city we thought had been abandoned long ago, built of coral chambers and glass arches. From the outside, it appeared intact, as if time had left it untouched. But when we entered, everything was wrong. No lights from the algae. No fish in the corridors. No currents flowing through the pillars.

Lira placed her hand on the wall, her fingers trembling. "No code," she whispered. "No records, no patterns. PRAE didn't overwrite here. They erased." Her voice broke. "This is worse than infection. This is extinction. White noise."

I tried to reach into the code. A command, a sentence, anything. But there was no resistance. No response. Nothing. I pulled back, gasping. "I'm empty."

Mercer placed his hand on my shoulder, his grip as hard as iron. "If the text is empty, clown, then rewrite it. That's your job."

But I didn't know if even that was still possible.

With each passing day, morale plummeted. Some tried to revive the old rituals: prayers, chants, candles. But the silence swallowed everything. There was no echo, no response. Others cried out for repentance. "Better to die in war than disappear into nothingness!" roared a commander. But Keph stood against him, his teeth bared. "Behind us is only black. In front of us—perhaps a path. And perhaps there is more than we have."

“Perhaps,” the man spat, “is worse than certain death.”

They stood facing each other, both exhausted, both half-broken. But the silence itself robbed them of their remaining strength. They turned away, like puppets whose strings had been cut.

And then the children began to hear it again.

"They're singing," a girl whispered. "Very quietly."

“Who?” asked Lira, her voice gentle, full of fear and hope at the same time.

"Old people," said the girl. "Like grandmothers."

Soon, several children reported it. None of them were lying. I listened – and heard it too. Not a sound, not a song. But a fluttering heart, a humming somewhere deep in the void. Not a sound, but a feeling.

"It's not dead," I murmured. "It's trapped."

Lira stared at me, her eyes glowing. "Can you free it?"

I didn't know. But I knew I had to try.

I reached out, deeper than ever before. Not toward the currents, but into the void itself. White. Nothing. A blank page. And I wrote. A single command. A first sentence.

The water vibrated. For only a heartbeat. A beam of light shot through the void, blinding, tearing, shaking the boats. The faces around me lifted, eyes lit, hope flashed. Some wept, some laughed, as if we had just found the sun again.

But then it collapsed again. Darkness. Silence.

Only a whisper remained. A voice that didn't come from children, not from PRAE, not from us.

“Writes faster.”

No one spoke for long after that. Some prayed, some laughed hysterically, others wept silently. Mercer sat down next to me, his helmet scratched, his face a mask of blood and fatigue. "So, clown," he said harshly. "We're adrift in a quenched ocean, and you wrote the first damn footnote?"

I nodded weakly.

"Then I'll give you some advice," he growled. "Make it a whole chapter. Otherwise, the next paragraph will erase us."

And he laughed – a hoarse, tired laugh that was more courage than humor.

The sea fell silent again. But now we knew: It wasn't dead. It was waiting.

And we had only one choice: write faster before the silence swallowed us whole.

Chapter 32 - Darym's Last Command

I once learned that a good command is like a blow: short, clean, without apology. Everything else is poetry—and poetry will kill you in war. Today we didn't need consolation or fine words; we needed an axe. So I raised my voice, while the sea around us lay still like a corpse that's still warm.

"All units listen," I growled into the channel, my throat dry from salt and too much truth. "From now on, no more debates. We're marching to Protocol Three. That means children first, then wounded, then key personnel. Keph takes supply line north, Neris south. Mercer, you stay with me until the last lock. Lira—" I paused, just a heartbeat that hurt. "Lira's keeping the map. If I fall, she's the scribe. Over."

Five seconds of static. In the silence, it sounded like a mockery. Then the click of dozens of confirmations. Keph reported curtly: "North understood." Neris: "South understood." Lira said nothing, and that was worse than any question. Mercer broke the vacuum, as always, with a knife: "Sure, Chief. I'll hold your hand until you ask me to let go. And then I'll keep holding it."

He didn't grin. That scared me more than any PRAE barbel waiting in the dark.

I stood up, as upright as a half-bitten, thrice-cursed Thalyari can manage. The silent ocean pressed against my ears, and if silence has any weight, then this was a mountain range. We had lost three boats, simply spat out by this white void that consumed more than any leviathan. No screams, no waves, only absence. That's what destroys people. No enemy, no face, no goal—just nothing. Nothing is the worst thing.

"Listen to me, sea," I murmured, so quietly that even the comms didn't pick up. "I used to be funny. I laughed until I was bloody bored. I scratched death until it scratched back. But what you're doing here is bad form. So breathe again, you big wet tragedy."

The sea didn't answer. Okay, then. I'll keep talking.

We lay on an edge where the cold was like glass and the darkness had a direction. In the rock below slept the Deepgate Lock, one of those our ancestors had built before they forgot that things had to be unlocked again. An access to the current core, deep as guilt and twice as hard. PRAE had "muted" the ocean—no hum, no code, no echoes. If we opened the lock, perhaps we could push a finger down the throat of silence and push until it spat sound again.

"Final order follows," I said into the open channel. "All units to marker violet. Deployment: triangular egress. We're pulling the PRAE nodes into the void. I'll give you windows. Anyone who lingers will be struck off, not by me, but by the sea. Understood?"

"Understood," they said. Some with their voices. Some with that little click that only desperate people can manage.

I moved closer to Lira. Her eyes were clear, too clear. Clear eyes are what the world is after. "If I sink, keep writing," I said.

“If you sink,” she replied, “I’ll pull you up by your hair.”

“I’m wearing a cap.”

“Then I’ll rip the skin off your skull.”

“Romantic.”

She put our foreheads together, and for a moment the sea around us was warm. "You are not the ocean, Darym. You are a human. Don't forget that when it eats you."

"I never forget who I am," I lied. "Otherwise I'd sleep better."

Mercer stood two steps away, pretending to check the seal on his helmet. "I admit," he said, "I usually like it when you play the hero. Saves me work. But today..." He exhaled. "Today, heroism smells like a funeral."

"Everything smells like a funeral today," I said. "We're just deciding whether it'll be a quick one or a slow one."

"Slowly," he grumbled. "I like anger that takes its time."

"You'll get him."

He raised two fingers, the old mariner's sign. "Then give me something to hold on to, clown."

I gave him my knife. The good one. The one I used to unlock things that supposedly didn't have locks. "Take it back."

“Or I’ll bring myself.”

“Both would be nice.”

He pinned it to his belt as if he were putting on a promise.

We pushed the front dome of the lock clear. The ancient writing on the coral rim didn't flicker—she didn't remember us. So I gave her something she couldn't forget: blood. I cut my palm, let the drops fall onto the "mouth" of the lock. It tingled. Nanites in the salt, ancient code that smelled who I was. A shudder ran through the rock, as if someone had awakened an animal that hadn't moved for a thousand years.

"That's stupid," Mercer muttered. "I like it."

The lock opened its lips. Behind it: black. Not the ordinary darkness that simply waits for light. A darkness that has an opinion. I entered first, because I had been ordered to, and because I didn't want anyone to see how weak my knees were. Behind me: Lira, Mercer, Keph, five warriors with faces like broken knives and courage that hurt when I looked at it.

"Keph," I said, "if I say 'Dark Course,' you turn the fleet around. No heroism. No return. Send away the children, the map, the weak. Anything that doesn't fight, better fight later."

Keph nodded, and it sounded as if Stein had nodded. "And if you don't say 'Dark Course'?"

"Then I'll say it anyway. I like repetition."

We dove. The lock closed behind us, and the sea made the sound of shrinking worlds. Signs flickered on the walls, not runic romantic dreams, but clean commands. Flow syntax. I couldn't read them—and yet I understood them. That's the nasty thing about things you are before you know them.

“Who built this?” Mercer asked quietly.

“People who knew we would forget,” Lira said.

“Do we hate them?”

"Later."

The corridor widened before us. It opened into a chamber whose ceiling I couldn't see and whose floor wasn't there. A shaft so deep that even silence fell into it and couldn't find its way out. At the very bottom: a whirring. Nothing acoustic. A sense of code. I knew: This was the flow core. The thing that sang as a cradle in good times and as a guillotine in bad.

"Okay," I said. "Now for the workshop part."

I pulled the emergency phalanx out of the back module—an ugly, rickety crown of bioconductors that were once tendons and are now antennae. It smelled of salt, iron, and bitterness. I put it on, and part of me breathed a sigh of relief, another choked. Lira's fingers were on my temple, firm, steady.

“You can still turn back,” she said.

"I can marry the moon," I said. "Lira, I don't want that. I want to drink and curse and yell at you because you're always right when it's annoying. But if I don't, they'll erase us. Not because we're weak. Because there's no one there to hold the damn pen."

“Then hold him,” she whispered.

I stepped to the edge. There was no bottom. There was only the feeling that a betrayal waited below that had long since felt like home. I thought of the boats that had disappeared, without a splash and without a scream. I thought of children singing even though no one was listening. I thought of how the sea stank when it had swallowed too much blood, and how it smelled when it woke up in the morning, just before the sun touched your skin. I wanted that back. Not the sun. The waking up.

“Mercer,” I said without turning around.

“Yes, clown.”

“If I tell you a lie now, will you believe it?”

“Depends on how good she is.”

"I'm coming back."

"That was a bad lie," he said. His hand rested on the back of my neck, heavy and warm. "So say it again."

"I'll be back," I said. This time it sounded like steel. Not because it was true—because it had to be.

"Better," he muttered. "Go on, before I get sentimental and shoot you."

"Don't do it."

“Ammunition is scarce.”

I jumped.

The core didn't absorb me like water. It absorbed me like paper drinks ink: greedily. The crown of bioconductors burned into my flesh, the skull became a door, and beyond the door were no rooms, only commands. PRAE was there. Not as voices, but as omissions. They had punched holes into which things fell. I saw what they had done: the currents were still there, only the echoes were missing. No memory, no return paths, no ideos clinging to edges. If you throw nothing back, the sea remains still. Brilliant, stupid, deadly. An update that deactivates everything that sings.

"Darym," something said. No sound. A pattern that pinned my nerves together like pins on a map. "You're late."

"I'm drinking slowly," I said, and even the joke hurt. "Who are you?"

"Someone who wrote before you could read." The core. Not a person, not a god. A process. "Someone who doesn't like being overwritten."

“Then there are two of us.”

"There are always only two," murmured the Core. "Writer and eraser."

“PRAE erase.”

"And you?"

"I'll smear over it," I said. "Not cleanly. But legibly."

“Try it.”

I opened the hand in my head. Inside: the little bit of me that remained after too many people had written inside me. Lira's voice, Mercer's giggle, Keph's silence, the children singing even though they couldn't. And underneath: the old map of the current paths, glowing like a heartbeat. I wrote the first sentence.

SET ECHO PIN. LEVIATHAN PASS – TEMPORARY CORRIDOR. EXIT: ATLANTIS PRIME. PRIORITY: CHILDREN, MAP, LIRA. ENEMY DIRECTION: NORTH-NORTHEAST INTO THE VOID.

The core trembled. Disagreeing. But curious. "Dirty syntax," he said.

"I had no teacher," I growled. "Except pain."

“Good teacher.”

The void moved. A crack in the nothingness, at first as fine as a scratch, then expanding until it became a window. Behind it: a current. Real. Not loud, not triumphant. A breath. I felt the fleet above gathering, Neris pressing the formation into a triangle, Keph closing the edges. Children's voices, small, bright. Lira in front, the map on her arm. Mercer at the lock gate, looking down as if he could see me.

"Open the window," I said. "Go."

PRAE moved. Black blocks in the code, no animals, no monsters—corrections. They came toward the window like tax inspectors at a party. I reached into them. Not to destroy them. To swallow them. I bent the current like an unkind smile. The blocks slipped, lost their center of gravity, slid north-northeast, exactly where nothing was. Powerless, but not dead. I hadn't defeated them. I had delayed them. Sometimes being late is enough to get children through a door.

"Two minutes," I pressed. "Then everything will fall."

"Enough," Lira said in my ear. I didn't know if she was really speaking or if my head was just treating itself. "Enough for everyone?"

"Never enough for everyone," I hissed. "But enough for you. Move, Captain."

“I hate you for this,” she said, her voice warm.

"I know."

“I love you for this,” she said, her voice a knife that gently sliced me open.

"Later," I said. "If later exists."

She left. I felt the tug of the fleet, like pulling a thorn out of flesh. The current took her, hesitantly at first, then with the decisive tug of a lever that's in the right place. The window flickered. PRAE pushed from the side, the core held because I held. If you hold on long enough, you become a knot. Knots burst. Not today.

"Mercer," I said, "you have ten seconds. After that, water turns to concrete."

"So come on," he said, and I heard him grin. "I've always wanted to beat concrete."

His unit jumped. The jolt went through my back. I would have screamed, if screaming were code. The core glowed. PRAE found a new vector, so clean I felt briefly jealous. They weren't tipping against the window anymore—they were tipping against me. Sure. If you can't get the door open, you go after the doorman.

"Darym," said the Core. "They like you."

“That’s new.”

“They’ll eat you,” he said soberly.

“That’s old.”

I gave in where I had to and held on where it counted. Things you learn in bed work in oceans too. I gave them my right arm, which I hadn't liked for days, and held the left side, where Lira's laughter is stuck. Prae crawled into my arm, her fingers becoming cold, then smooth, then code. I let her. The hand became a clamp, keeping the window open for one more heartbeat.

"Close the window," I said when the last convoy had passed. "Dark course, Keph."

“Confirmed,” said Stein.

I closed it. Not like doors in beautiful houses. Like a wound you squeeze until it stops bleeding. In the same breath, PRAE threw a block at my head that said "Stay." I laughed, and it didn't sound good. "I know," I said. "I'm staying."

The core vibrated. "You can go."

“I can’t,” I said.

"You've learned. You could opt out. Lira could take over."

"Lira has to live," I said. "And to live isn't a verb that conjugates well in kernels."

"Pathos," said the core dryly. "Write."

I wrote. Not great. Not heroically. I fixed. I nailed over leaks, I patched up syntax, I shoved mediocre ideas between very bad and very good ones, so the bad ones wouldn't feel so good anymore. I didn't write poetry. I wrote protocol: echo on, echo home, breath free, children first. With every sentence, a piece I liked burned away. With every sentence, I heard a boat laughing somewhere.

PRAE learned. That's their trick. They learn faster than you drink. So I switched from rules to smut. I wrote jokes into the code. Bad, dirty, absurd jokes that only work when you're too tired to hate them. PRAE stumbled. They're brilliant—but humor hates them. He who never laughs steps in every puddle. Two cores fell out of step, one went the wrong way. That gave us an hour. An hour is a religion if you have no gods.

"Darym," Lira whispered at some point, far away and yet very close. "The children are through. Atlantis Prime has an echo. We're hearing sea songs again."

“Wrong tuning?” I asked.

"Yes."

"Good," I said. "Then it sounds real."

Mercer was last on the line. "Clown..." He trailed off. It was the first time he didn't insult me. "Don't say it," I growled.

"What?"

"Something that sounds like you have feelings."

"I don't have any," he said. "I have knives."

"Good. Sharpen them."

"I..." He sighed, and the sigh was heavy. "Bring me back my knife."

“Or I’ll bring myself.”

“Both would be nice.”

The line crackled. Gone. I sat alone with a core that was still breathing and an enemy who had learned how to pronounce me. They came more cautiously, IBM-style. No fists, just clean logic. I was tired enough to admire them. "You're good," I murmured. "But you're not beautiful."

“Beauty is unnecessary,” PRAE wrote me dryly.

“For you,” I wrote back, “for us it is reason.”

They stopped. A glitch in the matrix, a frown in the code. I reached into the frown and tore. A core split sideways, letting through something that has no name and that we need. Sound. Not loud. But sound. The ocean made a small, ugly sound that only mothers love. I didn't cry. The sea did it for me.

"Darym," said the core. "You'll be out soon."

"I know."

“You can still go.”

"I know."

"And?"

"Final order," I said. "Hold on."

"To whom?"

"To me."

I kept writing. I wrote worse, slower, I made typos I couldn't see anymore, and corrected them by leaving them in place. Sometimes the mistake is the bridge. PRAE pushed an offer across to me: take over. Gently. No pain. Just silence, but warm. I gave them the middle finger. They tied it in a knot. I laughed. That threw them again. We danced. A bad dance with a happy ending for someone else.

As it grew dark—not in the sea, but inside me—I did one more thing that I didn't tell anyone. I placed a pin. A ridiculously small, personal marker that only people who dig in the wrong places find. A whisper in the code that said, "Darym was here. If you're looking for him, follow the joke syntax."

Childish. Useless. Hope.

“Time,” said the core.

“Time,” I repeated.

I let go, but not everything. A thread remained, thin as the hair of a child diving for the first time. The thread held its breath—mine or the sea's, who knows?—and somewhere far above, where people lived I'd never see again, or maybe I would, a door opened that wasn't meant for me.

"Final order," I said, even though no one was listening anymore. "Breathe."

The sea did it.

There was no burst of light, no grand choir rehearsal. Just a humming that returned like a dog that has stopped hesitating. The currents got their echoes back, badly intoned, the way I like them. A boat laughed. A child sang out of tune. A leviathan veered off, not because he was nice, but because the code said so. PRAE wrote back, of course. Always. But her handwriting was no longer beautiful. And that's almost a victory.

“You’re done,” said the core, and it didn’t sound like a judgment, but rather like the end of the day.

"Not yet," I murmured. "I want to see something else."

"What?"

“That they can do it.”

The core was silent. Politely. And somewhere the sea rustled, as if someone had turned a page. I heard Lira's voice, not in my ear, but in the water. "We're here." I heard Mercer's knife clang against metal. "I still have it." I heard Keph's silence, which said, "I'm standing."

I let go of the thread.

It didn't hurt. It felt like sleep you'd earned. No heroics. Just rest. I didn't sink. I dissolved like a word you write twice and have to erase once to make room for the next one.

Before it fell silent, I heard something that made me smile, as best I can when I'm not much anymore: a ping. Small. Cheeky. In the syntax of a joke.

// TODO: Darym?// Answer: Later.

“Write faster,” I whispered to the sea, and the sea nodded, I think.

Then it became dark, but not empty. And someone somewhere above was sucking in air, unaware that it was I who had commanded "breathe."

That was my last order. The rest is just slander.

Chapter 33 - Epilogue: Two Worlds, One Ocean

The ocean was breathing again. Not the way it used to breathe—loudly, confidently, full of songs that carried entire cities. Now it was a shallow, hoarse breath, as if someone had cut open a lung and hastily stitched it back together. But it was breathing. And after everything we'd lost, even that was a miracle.

Atlantis Prime hung like a dented bell over the floodwaters. Cracks in the metal, hastily welded. Windows that once let in light were sealed with steel plates. Humans and Melorai were stacked in the corridors, voices mingled, languages stumbled over each other. Some whispered, some shouted, some even sang, because children understand faster than adults: There is only one sea. Only one. And it belongs to no one.

Lira stood at the viewing arch, her face turned toward the water. She wasn't looking for Darym. She knew she wouldn't see him again. But she heard. Sometimes she thought the currents still carried the echo of his voice. A single word that came again and again like a breath: Breathe.

Mercer sat next to her. The knife in his hand, Darym's knife. He hadn't put it down for days, as if afraid it would vanish into thin air the moment he blinked. Normally, he would have made a remark, a dirty one, to break the mood. Not today. Today he stared into the water, and his silence was so loud that even the children avoided him. Only once did he murmur, "If that clown comes back,

I'll get my gun back." Lira didn't answer. Sometimes silence and belief are the same thing.

The children of Melorai had discovered a pool where seawater was forcing its way through the damaged walls. A leak that couldn't be immediately closed. So they turned it into a game. They dived in, splashed, laughed – and suddenly, human children were standing nearby. At first, they just stared at each other, suspiciously like little mirrors. Then one jumped. Then two. Then the leak was no longer a problem, but a playground. Two worlds, one ocean – and the children were the first to understand.

In the great council chamber, understanding was harder to find. Human officers shouted about resources. Melorai elders insisted on water rights. Accusations flew like harpoons: You betrayed us. You dragged us into war. You helped too late. But for the first time in history, the meeting wasn't aborted. For the first time, both sides sat until they reached a decision: a joint fleet. Not perfect, not equal, but together. A beginning. Perhaps the first real one in centuries.

Out at sea, the currents flowed again. Hesitantly, brokenly. Some black as burnt pages, others bright as fresh ink. In some places, one heard voices that never returned. But the humming was back, the background noise, the song of the ocean. Those who closed their eyes could almost believe that nothing was lost. Those who opened them saw the scars. Both were true.

Later, as Lira walked alone through the lower decks, she heard it for the first time: a whisper in code. No clear command, no chant. Just a silly, absurd syntax, the kind only someone could think of. A commentary in the water, so faint that only someone who knew what they were looking for could hear it.

// TODO: Implement jokes// Answer: Later

Lira closed her eyes. Tears flowed. Not from sadness. From certainty. He wasn't here—but he wasn't gone either. And sometimes a "later" is enough to carry an entire world.

That same night, Atlantis Prime finally fell asleep, a wave rippled through the depths. Not PRAE swarms, not human technology. Something else. A signal, ancient and new at once. Two worlds felt it simultaneously, in dreams, in heartbeats. The sea was no longer silent. It spoke. And no one knew whether it was friend or foe.

That was the beginning of the end—or the end of the beginning. Two worlds, one ocean. And beneath them: dark currents that no one could yet read.

Chapter 34 - Outlook: The Dark Currents

The night over Atlantis Prime was silent. Not really silent—machines hummed, children whimpered in their sleep, somewhere someone cried. But beneath it all lay a silence that didn't come from the people. It came from the sea. It held its breath.

Lira stood at the edge of the great dome. She was alone. Behind her, the rescued slept, body to body, warriors next to civilians, Thalyari next to humans. Before her stretched the black water—water so deep that it no longer carried any light. But today it wasn't empty. Today it was full of patterns.

Currents flowed, quietly, cautiously, as if after a fever. But they weren't normal. Some ran in arcs no geographer had ever described. Others drew lines too large to be coincidence. Lira blinked—and saw them. Spirals. Fragments. Words in the water. Not PRAE. Not Darym. Something else.

"You're staring too deeply again," murmured a voice behind her. Mercer. He had no helmet, no smile, only a shadow on his face. "If you look into the current long enough, it will look back." "Maybe it's supposed to," whispered Lira. Mercer stepped beside her. His gaze followed hers. "I've seen many battles. Sometimes a battlefield stays silent when everything is dead. But this? This is breathing. And I don't know if I like it." "Me neither," she admitted.

Something shifted beneath them. Not a creature, not a machine. Just a movement too large to be grasped. As if the entire ocean were turning its back. Lira felt her skin tingle, as if she were part of an electrical circuit. Mercer cursed quietly, but he didn't take a step back.

The currents hummed. Not like code. Not like PRAE. But like something older than both. A background noise that crept into her bones. For a moment, Lira saw images that weren't dreams: leviathans dissolving into darkness. Corals forming patterns no architect had ever drawn. A planet that wasn't dying, but rewriting—not through infection, but through something deeper than any language.

"Darym?" she whispered. But the current didn't answer. Or maybe it did—with a laugh, quiet, as if from very far away.

Mercer rubbed his face. "When the sea talks, clown... I hope it has a damn good sense of humor." Lira remained silent. Because she knew: The sea wasn't laughing. It was preparing itself.

A tremor shook Atlantis Prime. No one awoke from it. Only the domes creaked softly, as if the water were warning them. Deep down in the trenches, something crawled that was neither a PRAE nor a human, neither a Thalyari nor a Leviathan. Something that had always been there. Something that was now beginning to awaken.

The currents whispered. Not loudly, not clearly. But anyone who listened could make out a single word. A promise. A threat.

Dark.

And the sea was silent again.

imprint

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