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AQUARIUS RISING BOOK 1 -
IN THE TEARS OF GOD

a novel by
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We were born in the tears of God.

When the First Creator wept at the fate of His Creation, His tears fell like burning rain to melt the polar ice and swell the seas, the cradle of all life. His grief swallowed the mighty human cities of the coast and gave them over to the realm of Mother Ocean. Humanity, who did not aggrieve the Maker out of malice but out of ignorance, wished to atone for their sins against the Earth. We are that atonement. We are Humankind's offering to the First Creator, the Maker of All. The Great Father – a man, and nothing more – crafted his transforming virus and infected his own kind, so that we might be born as the children of Man and Mother Ocean. Humanity became the Second Creator, Aquarius the Second Creation, and we the stewards of its bounty.

We owe much to Man, who is our father and our brother. We must honor our debt to him. But we must always remember this: he who has the power to Create also has the power to Destroy.

- Delphis, Third Pod Leader of Tillamook Reef Colony, from
a speech to commemorate the Fiftieth Aquarian Birth Day

CHAPTER 1—BIRTH DAY

Ocypode dove through the turquoise waters of Tillamook Reef toward the fringes of the celebration. Revelers floated everywhere. Strings of limpets, whelks, and periwinkles glittered around their necks, clicking when they moved. Brightly colored pigments stained their skin of blue and gray and silver with pictograms symbolizing the history of Aquarius. Ocypode ghosted through the crowd in silence. His own flesh bore no ornaments.

Ocypode of Tillamook had no desire to draw attention to himself.

He slipped through the window of an ancient building, its barnacle-encrusted frame long devoid of panes, and hovered in the opening like a misshapen eye thrust into the socket of a skull. Birth Day throngs made him want to flee toward open ocean. He preferred to watch from the shadows.

The surface shimmered overhead as sunlight filtered down to paint the reef. The drowned Human city had been reborn, bones of steel and concrete covered with a growth of corals. Fish darted between caves marked by crumbling doors and windows, danced across the reef like fragments of a shattered rainbow. Waves soughed beneath the chatter of the crowd. When he listened, Ocypode could almost grasp the secrets hidden in that ceaseless whisper.

Ocypode hated secrets. They had ruled his life for far too long...but not today.

"Are you avoiding me, Ocypode? Or are you avoiding everyone?"

Auriga floated a few meters away, skin gleaming silver in the sunlight, the fin ridges along her arms and legs and ear channels paling to a milky white. She had smeared her body with stripes of ebony and gold to mimic the markings of the butterfly fish from which she took her name. The sight of her made him ache. Foolish. Pointless. The Pod Leader's mate was beyond the reach of anyone, especially an Atavism.

"Stop gaping and come with me," said Auriga. "It's finally finished, and I want you to see it!"

Ocypode swam from his refuge and joined her as she kicked toward the center of the reef...toward the heart of the massing

crowd. A thousand eyes impaled him. Most Atavisms either learned to ignore the stares or avoided them by hiding in the Archive caverns. Ocypode preferred the second strategy. But, on Birth Day, he could not deny his duty. He could not deny Auriga.

They glided into an open space that had been a park when Tillamook lay above the waves. The coral-cruled facades of ancient storefronts encircled it like the walls of an undersea amphitheater. So many Aquarians packed so tightly into this place! Ocypode felt like an injured dolphin ringed by schooling sharks.

"There, Ocypode, in the middle, beside the banquet nets. See how he rises to share our feast?"

Ocypode saw. A statue towered above the sand, massive limbs and torso shaped from interlocking chunks of stone. The head had been chiseled from a block of basalt, its features sharp, aquiline. Disturbing. Seaweed hair grew from the top of the basalt head, swaying in the current. Keyhole limpets formed the eyes, lustrous shells gleaming with intelligence, but hard. Unyielding. Could the others not see that? There was no mistaking the subject: Peter Cydon, the Great Father, the biosculptor whose peculiar genius had given birth to the Aquarian species.

Auriga bubbled with pride. "It's taken months, but it was worth it. I felt him guiding me, helping me place each fragment. He wanted to be here. He wanted to celebrate the two-hundredth Birth Day of his children, and he chose me to make that possible. It's the most important thing I've ever done, Ocypode. My greatest honor."

Ocypode could not find the words to praise her without betraying himself. She would deify a man who was as much a devil as a god! If only she knew the truth.

It was time for *all* Aquarians to know the truth.

A hand clasped his shoulder. "Welcome, Ocypode," said Rhincodon. "I was beginning to fear you wouldn't show."

Ropes of muscle twitched beneath Rhincodon's mottled skin. The Pod Leader had been named after the whale shark, largest fish to swim the oceans. An apt spirit-name indeed. Both were intimidating in appearance; both generally possessed a gentle nature. Yet only a fool would rouse the anger of either.

"My apologies. I got busy in the Archives and lost track of time. A lorekeeper is more slave to his lore than master of it."

"Then you must be the Great Father's most loyal servant. I trust you'll share some of your mysteries with us on this special day?"

Dread squirmed in Ocypode's belly. Still, he nodded as he knew he must. "Of course."

I will share more than you ever imagined.

The Pod Leader wrapped an arm around Auriga, pulling her close. "This is a day to share with those we love, Ocypode. I saw your parents near the banquet nets. You should sample the fruits of Mother Ocean and join them."

Ocypode swam through the crowd, pulled a stone-crab claw from one of the nets and a handful of kelp smeared with spice-paste from another, and rose toward the surface without a backward glance. He didn't want to join his parents. He didn't want to see the way their gaze shifted between his eyes and his deformities, to hear the strain in their voices when they told him how proud they were. Atavisms were emotional exiles from birth: marooned in that genetic limbo between Human and Aquarian, possessing traits of both species. Doomed to be less than either.

He did not need his parents' pity. He needed room to breathe.

The smell of brine and rotting kelp filled his nostrils as he breached the surface. In the distance, Sky-Swimmer knifed above the waves, somersaulting before his streamlined body sliced into the sea. Other Aquarian heads poked above the water

to marvel at the dolphin's agility. They lingered just long enough to fill their lungs before descending to join the others. Mother Ocean shielded them from deadly heat and radiation. Ocypode remained despite the risks. Someone breached beside him: Mobula, his senior assistant in the Archives. She, like all lorekeepers, was an Atavism. Her eyes gloomed dark and fathomless as the abyss.

"So here we are again, Ocypode. The two of us, feasting with all our loved ones."

Before he could reply, Sky-Swimmer flopped into the sea beside them with a thunderous splash, the chatter of dolphin laughter mocking their somber mood.

"Half-brother, half-brother, why float lonely and broken on top-sea like storm-torn kelp when others of your tribe fill bottom-sea with joy?"

Ocypode jabbed Sky-Swimmer on one white-striped side before the dolphin could dance away. "Half-brother, your spirit glows brighter than the sun but does not burn what it touches. You would not understand."

The dolphin flicked his tail, showering Ocypode and Mobula with another spray of seawater. "Sky-Swimmer knows only a fool starves when fish are plentiful!"

Sky-Swimmer streaked away before Ocypode could reply. How

could he explain the source of his unease? Mobula offered him a bitter smile that never touched her eyes.

"What will you tell them, Ocypode? What fairy stories will you weave for them today?"

"I've been asking myself that for weeks. We're not a child species anymore. The darkest stories sometimes teach the most important lessons, don't you think?"

He filled his lungs and plunged once more toward the reef, looking for a place to drift into the festival without attracting notice. He spotted Rhincodon and Auriga near the monstrous monument. As much as he despised the image of the Great Father, Auriga drew him like an undertow. Rhincodon waved him closer. Cords in the Pod Leader's neck tightened as he whistled so piercingly that the entire crowd fell silent.

"My friends, I'm pleased that so many have joined us for this special day. Two centuries ago, the Great Father released the virus that gave us life. Think on that. Almost a hundred and fifty thousand tides have come and gone while our race transformed the Great Father's dream into reality. It all began here. Tillamook Reef. We who are fortunate enough to call this place home play a special part in history. With that privilege comes a burden. We must breathe the legends of this sacred place just as we must breathe the air above."

Rhincodon turned to Ocypode and smiled. "Someone makes that easier for all of us: Ocypode, son of Pandalus and Seriola. He preserves the ancient Archives that contain the knowledge of the Great Father, the One who gave us to the sea and gave the sea to us. Today, Ocypode helps us honor our debt. Today, we will *remember*."

Dread. Dread so thick and turgid he could not even move. The eyes of the crowd crawled across the not-quite-Human, not-quite-Aquarian contours of his body like crabs nibbling a carcass. Ocypode could do nothing but float there, in a void of stifled merriment and frozen conversations, as scavenger eyes stripped the substance from his bones. A year ago, he had stumbled through some comforting myth about the Great Father's wisdom without much trouble, but secrets festered. Lies began to burn.

*They don't want to hear the truth about their heritage.
What will it do to them?*

And...what will they do to me?

Before he could decide how to begin, a mournful cry pierced the ocean's background hiss. The throng began to murmur. Another cry, closer, chilled the waters of the reef with anguish. Ocypode recognized it first.

"Tattered-Flukes!"

The crowd turned like a school of startled herring and swam toward the sound. Rhincodon and Auriga took the lead. Ocypode fell behind the others, cursing his flaccid, puny fin ridges. Something brushed against his back.

"Half-brother, half-brother, Tattered-Flukes calls and I must be your fins."

Ocypode grabbed Sky-Swimmer's dorsal fin as the dolphin towed him in the direction of the cry. Ocypode felt a surge of glee as he and Sky-Swimmer torpedoed past the others, leaving even mighty Rhincodon in their wake. His happiness evaporated when another snatch of whale-song filled his ear channels with misery. An immense shape loomed out of the shadows.

The venerable humpback barely moved. He didn't answer Ocypode's greeting, didn't seem to hear. Ocypode moved closer. He rose to scratch around the barnacles that infested Tattered-Flukes's head, the ritual of welcome between Aquarian and whale, and recoiled. Shiny patches of gray-green rock encrusted the humpback like the skeleton of a giant coral not yet fully formed. Tattered-Flukes trembled beneath Ocypode's hand, sang in purest agony. Ocypode answered with songs of comfort. But, inside, he could not quell his own panic. This was a pain he couldn't take away.

He prayed the others would arrive quickly, and bring with

them greater wisdom than his own.

Rhincodon was the first to reach them, to share Ocypode's shock. Dismay. Helplessness. He turned to another arrival – young, powerfully built – and gave orders. "Fetch the Guardians. Maybe they can heal what we can't." The young Aquarian extended the fin ridges along his inner thighs and legs, interlocked them, and kicked away.

The Guardians: Human scientists who chose to live beneath the waves and continue the Great Father's work, generation after generation. Yes. They were the only chance.

"We need to know what did this," whispered Rhincodon. "Ask him how it happened."

Ocypode swam to the side of the humpback's head so he could make eye contact, a source of reassurance for cetaceans as well as humanoids. He crooned a question, rendering the humpback dialect as precisely as he could.

"Tattered-Flukes, half-brother, what did this?"

The humpback's song grew weaker. So many nuances of tone and pace and rhythm. Ocypode thought he grasped it, for a moment, but that was madness. Madness!

"His words swim away before I catch them," muttered Rhincodon. "Something about Astoria Reef, I think. The rest eludes me."

Ocypode nodded, unable to ignore the humpback's pleading eye as he tried to find some alternate translation. "He's come from Astoria, yes. He sings of catastrophe and evil magic. It doesn't make sense! And yet his back... Dead, Rhincodon. Tattered-Flukes says that all of Astoria Reef is dead. He says they were turned to stone."

CHAPTER 2—MEDUSA RAIN

Ocypode clung to a loop on Tattered-Flukes's towing harness as the humpback glided through the ocean toward Astoria Reef. Guardian technology had saved him. A chemically tailored acid dissolved the calcite patches covering his back without inflicting too much damage on the tissue underneath. Sections of his skin still glistened from the wounds as if some mad cartographer had etched a map of sunken continents into his flesh. But he lived. Tillamook had not lost its oldest ally among the tribes of whales. And Ocypode had not lost his closest friend.

To Tattered-Flukes, he was not a throwback. He was no more freakish than any other humanoid.

The humpback surfaced, spouting spent air from his twin blowholes with an explosive snort. Ocypode, too, refilled his lungs. As Tattered-Flukes rolled onto his side, Ocypode spotted

Rhincodon, Auriga, and Mobula clinging to hand-loops farther down the harness. Under the water, Tattered-Flukes seemed to fly rather than swim. Scalloped flippers over six meters in length steered him like the wings of a gliding bird. Today, though, Ocypode could feel the tension in the humpback's movements. This did not feel like flying; it felt like falling into a bottomless trench.

The Guardians had investigated Astoria Reef for six tides before pronouncing it safe for visitors. They had also warned, with brutal honesty, of what visitors would see. The water brightened to azure in the shallows as the four witnesses from Tillamook Pod reached the fringe of the Astoria Reef colony. It was not as bad as Ocypode had feared.

It was much worse.

Everything – buildings, corals, creatures large and small – lay wrapped in a gray-green shroud of rock. Death wore many faces here. Fossilized fish littered the sea floor, leached of their rainbow splendor. Aquarian statues posed amid the ruins in grotesque mockery of life. Astoria gouged its images deep into Ocypode's memory: an adolescent swallowed by a mound of sand except for his face, features frozen in an eternal scream; a female and her mate locked in their last embrace, fused into a mutant octopus with eight limbs intertwined. A mother who had

tried to shield her baby from whatever plague had struck them down; who seemed, in mute futility, to be swallowing the child back into her womb.

Worst of all was the silence. He would have preferred them to shriek their death-songs into the brooding sea.

Tattered-Flukes sang a dirge too multilayered for translation. Horror squeezed the beauty out of Auriga, caused stolid Rhincodon to tremble. Even Mobula's bitterness gave way to shock. Ocypode read the same thought on their faces.

If it can happen here, it can happen to Tillamook. This graveyard could be ours.

A gleaming whale-shape hovered above them. A hatch gaped in its belly and spat out two figures in silvery gillsuits: Dana Sorenson and Fergus Dunn, the pair of Tillamook Guardians who had volunteered to investigate before endangering others. Dana reached them before her shorter, squatter partner. The translator in her mask converted Human speech into the chattering music of Aquarian.

"It's good to see you all. Under the circumstances, I don't expect you to feel the same."

"You saved Tattered-Flukes," said Rhincodon, "and that was miraculous. But...how can anyone guard against this?"

"We can't," admitted Fergus. "Not yet."

Auriga shuddered. "I helped Sabella decorate this part of the reef just a few hundred tides ago. Cup corals, ghost anemones, feather dusters... It was beautiful. Now it looks like someone painted it with stone."

"That's not far off," said Fergus. "Everything is covered in several millimeters of calcite: a highly crystallized form of calcium carbonate. Whatever happened here happened fast. No known process could generate a reaction rate like this, or a molecular structure so precise. No warning. Nowhere to hide. Poor bastards never had a chance."

"What could have done this?" asked Rhincodon.

The glowstrips framing Fergus's mask gave his face a spectral quality. "We're talking coordinated, high-speed assembly on the molecular level. Only one technology could do that: nanomechs. Carefully programmed, microscopic machines replicating like a virus. Only one group would be crazy enough to use them."

Rhincodon shook his head. "Redeemers would not unleash that madness on the world again. They've spent decades trying to repair the damage caused by Felger's Folly. They, more than any, understand the risks."

Dana held out her hand. A crab sheathed in stone fell from her palm and sank into the graveyard depths. "Aaron Felger

understood the risks as well. That didn't stop him. Maybe they believe they've perfected his techniques. I can tell you this: there's a staggering amount of carbon dioxide locked up in these calcite crystals. Applied on a global level, it might make land in the middle latitudes habitable again, and that's the Redeemers' Holy Grail."

Ocypode's gaze drifted to the ocean floor, where a hundred pairs of cold, gray, unblinking eyes stared back at him. Felger's Folly: the grand Human scheme to cleanse the atmosphere of excess carbon dioxide which had somehow caused the opposite effect. It had taken years to disinfect the planet of Felger's runaway nanomechs. By that time, the world's climate had gone from a simmer to a boil. No one had been able to explain what had gone wrong.

At least, no one had been willing.

"It *is* Redeemer work," agreed Ocypode, "but it's too drastic. I know the lore of Aaron Felger very well. He never planned his reactions to be so deadly. By his own admission, it would do little good to save the land if that meant destroying the oceans in the process."

"That's the worst of it," said Fergus. "Somebody programmed these nanomechs in ways old Felger never imagined. This was a test, and it wasn't designed to reverse global

warming. Somebody has turned Felger's nanomechs into a weapon. And they're aiming it at us."

They floated in silence, drifting with the currents of their private thoughts. When Auriga finally spoke, Ocypode heard no music in her voice.

"So many lost. But if the Reef lives, they won't be forgotten. We can still save Astoria."

Fergus sighed. "Auriga, my dear, look around you. There's nothing left to save."

"You know my meaning! The Living Reef Astoria is countless tides of knowledge and memory and suffering and joy. She's their history. If She lives, *they* live. I won't let you bury them so easily!"

Auriga kicked toward Tattered-Flukes. Rhincodon tried to stop her, but even he couldn't match her speed. She sang instructions to the whale and grabbed the harness before Rhincodon reached her, leaving her mate floundering in the backwash of Tattered-Flukes's mighty tail. The humpback angled west along the devastated reefscape until he and his passenger melted into shadows.

Ocypode stared at Dana, dreading the expression that glimmered through her mask.

"You know where she's going."

"Yes, Ocypode, and I know what she'll find. Grab a handhold and we'll take you there."

Dana and Fergus clambered into the sub while Ocypode, Mobula, and Rhincodon latched onto tow-rings along the side. The sub accelerated toward the literal heart of Astoria: the Living Reef, the entity that was its namesake. Auriga would value it above all else. Ocypode was a lorekeeper. He interfaced with mindless bioelectronics in the Archives. Auriga was a biosculptor: she wove her creations from the very threads of life. To do that, she needed the assistance of the Living Reef itself and had to endure a connection more intimate than Ocypode could imagine.

Down they dove, to where the sun dimmed to a rumor. Something gargantuan sprawled across the ocean floor, dwarfing even Tattered-Flukes. It didn't move. It resolved into the ragged outline of a reef that could not possibly have grown at such a depth. A faint, pervasive odor of decay tainted the waters. As Ocypode's eyes adjusted to the murk, he made out more detail. More than he wanted to.

The Living Reef Astoria lay upon the bottom. Corals and other symbiotic reef creatures that had grown across Her outer membrane over decades now lay entombed in stone. Brain-reefs normally floated in sunlit waters within twenty meters of the

surface, where ecosystems thrived. How many oxygen reserves could a brain-reef store in Her flotation bladders? Enough for four tides...perhaps five?

Ten tides had passed since the attack on Astoria Colony.

Auriga flailed along the Reef's perimeter, searching for an interface slit. Rhincodon and Ocypode released their handholds and kicked forward to pull her away while Mobula floated in the background, watching. As Auriga stroked the folds around one slit in the membrane, a gelatinous pseudopod extruded from the opening. It moved erratically, like an Aquarian chewing dreamweed fronds, but it moved.

The pseudopod explored Auriga's body until it found the smooth contours of her skull. It enveloped her like a mother cradling a child. They Joined.

Auriga's eyes bulged.

"Oh, no. Some were Joined when it started. I see what they saw: loved ones thrashing inside a cauldron, screaming for mercy. The stone is deaf. It swallows them anyway. Statues raining down, Medusa rain. The sea boils. Such pain... the Joined are dying in Her arms! She can't protect them. So heavy. Sinking, sinking. Alone. Abandoned. We are not of Astoria's pod...and we came too late."

Two figures in gillsuits dove from the belly of the sub.

"The Guardians are here," said Ocypode, trying to sound reassuring. "They'll help."

"It's too late! Astoria knows, from my own traitorous mind: Her pod is dead, Her children slaughtered. Not enough oxygen. So many memories lost, slipping away into the darkness. Nothing left to hold Her."

The brain-reef's pseudopod withdrew. Auriga launched herself after the retreating tentacle. Rhincodon reached her first, held her as she struggled to rejoin the dying Reef. Ocypode clung to her as well.

If Auriga Joined with the brain-reef now, she would never leave these waters.

Tattered-Flukes crooned an elegy older than Aquarius itself while six mourners – two Human, two Aquarian, two something in between – floated in a darkling sea. Astoria the Living Reef, repository of countless Aquarian lives, did not wail, or bleed, or writhe. Such displays were beyond Her. She simply expelled the oxygen in Her bladders and collapsed in upon Herself. Bubbles of gas streamed toward the surface. Calcite-cruste membranes settled imperceptibly. The effect was not dramatic, except that no one had ever before witnessed the death of a Living Reef.

The aggregated soul of Astoria Colony dissolved into Mother

Ocean and made the massacre complete.

CHAPTER 3—UNWELCOME MESSENGER

Ocypode clung to the towing harness as Tattered-Flukes swam south toward Sheridan Reef. No one accompanied him this time. Rhincodon remained behind, trying to quell the rising tide of panic in Tillamook. Auriga had been traumatized far more deeply by the death of the Living Reef than anyone but another biosculptor could comprehend. He had not even considered inviting Mobula. Mobula was very bright, brave to the point of recklessness, but her presence on a diplomatic mission would only make things harder.

This mission was already tough enough.

Something sliced through the azure sea ahead. Ocypode took it for another whale until he recognized the outline of a Guardian sub. A hole opened beneath its tail-fin stabilizers and sensor buoys slid from a long tube like eggs from an ovipositor. So. Even if the Elders of Sheridan Reef Colony

refused to believe the Redeemer threat was real, their Guardians took precautions.

"Sheridan flows beneath us, little brother," crooned Tattered-Flukes. "Sing your warning sharp and clear, so all those of your tribe will hear."

"I'll try, but fools and pod leaders usually ignore the truth unless it's their own version."

"This truth has teeth, little brother. If they swim into its jaws, their scars will run deeper than my own, through flesh and splintered bone."

"I know. But Redeemers are a myth to most Aquarians. The Sheridan Pod Leader doesn't believe any humanoid species would wantonly destroy another. He points to Guardians as evidence of the 'maturity' of the Human race."

"Guardians are not dirt-swimmers. Dirt-swimmers swallow whatever they can catch."

"Still, it takes courage to fight for your home when your home has turned against you. I wonder...if we don't owe them something."

Tattered-Flukes cruised over the first rocky outcroppings of Sheridan Reef, scattering a shoal of herring like silver shrapnel. The song he sang had been passed down within the humpback tribe for generations.

*My brother the Orca grows weak from hunger and sinks
beneath the waves.*

His anguish touches my soul.

*I swim to him, but his jaws offer death instead of
gratitude.*

I sing a mournful song as I leave him to his fate.

*I can weep for my brother, but I cannot save him from
himself.*

"I hear your wisdom, half-brother," said Ocypode. "But the truth is not so simple anymore."

The rugged formations of rock and coral below them gave way to the geometric reefscape of the old Human city. Two ancient, crusted towers rose before them to jut above the waves, sentinels guarding the entrance to the heart of Sheridan Reef. Tattered-Flukes drifted to a stop.

"I am the flippers and the tail, little brother. You are the voice. Make them listen."

Ocypode swam between the towers into the crenelated canyon that had once been a major Human thoroughfare. Multi-tiered rectangles and conical spires rose on every side, casting shadows in diluted sunlight. Some lay sheathed in coral but

mostly intact, while others bore great patches of decay like cavities in rotting teeth.

We call them dirt-swimmers and plant our gardens on their graves. What right do scavengers have to be so haughty?

Aquarians hovered around the ruins, seeding the reef with plants and animals biosculpted to fill specific niches. They painstakingly harvested the precise allotment of seaweeds, crabs, nudibranchs, and other mollusks to fill the nets belted to their waists and the bellies of their colony. They marked his passage. Children peered from hiding places amid the rubble where purple urchins clung like spiny burrs. Children bothered him the most; they rarely disguised their curiosity or their distaste. He hoped to find the Sheridan Pod Leader and conclude this business quickly.

In the end, he didn't need to find Lophius. Lophius found him.

"Lorekeeper Ocypode, you're a long way from home. We honor the Great Father's memory well here. You've swum far for nothing."

Lophius, the Pod Leader of Sheridan Colony, was the opposite of Rhincodon: stocky but not muscular, a short, sour, pugnacious creature with drab olive flesh. He bore little resemblance to his spirit-namesake, the goosefish, but he shared

the same voracious appetite. His hunger for power had driven him to the top of his pod. Those who opposed him usually suffered for it.

"I've come on Rhincodon's behalf, because we have difficult decisions to make. We'd like to make them together. The Tillamook Guardians have met with your Guardians, and both have urged you to cooperate. My trip won't be wasted as long as you're willing to listen."

"We *have* listened. The destruction of Astoria Reef was tragic, but no one fully understands what happened there. The Sheridan Pod will not be stirred into a frenzy because of one bizarre, unexplained incident."

Other Aquarians began to gather. Lophius loved an audience as much as Ocypode abhorred one. *Maybe this time the crowd will work to my advantage.*

"The attack on Astoria wasn't as mysterious as you think. The Tillamook Guardians are convinced it's Redeemer work, and your Guardians agree. If they're right, our colonies may be in danger. We need to consider evacuation."

"You're asking us to abandon our home, the place our ancestors have built and nurtured for a hundred thousand tides. We're not frightened children here. We won't flee from ghosts!"

Ocypode reached into his pouch and pulled out a wrasse

encased in calcite, brandishing the fish like a dagger. "Maybe you *should* flee from ghosts. Maybe we all should. There are plenty to haunt what's left of Astoria, all looking like this. Sealed in their own form-fitting coffins. You can't understand unless you've seen it. A fish is one thing; a seafloor littered with Aquarian dead is another. They didn't have a chance to leave. They never will. Don't let pride turn Sheridan into another ghost reef."

Clicks of agitation rippled through the crowd. Anger stiffened the spines along Lophius's fin ridges. "You're not a member of this pod. We won't be chased away by outsider speculations. We won't surrender our heritage to a mutant from another reef!"

Ocypode studied the faces – watched them close like clams behind hard, impenetrable shells – and knew that he had lost. Staring. Always staring. The prejudice swimming in too many of those stares bit with razor teeth. He cursed Rhincodon for sending him, cursed himself for believing he could make them understand. He turned and stabbed the petrified wrasse deep into a coral-crust wall.

"Keep your heritage, Lophius. When you wonder what it will be, this gift from Astoria will remind you."

He rose for air, taunting them with his unhurried retreat,

ignoring the whistles of derision. He owed them nothing. Let them choose their own fate. Ocypode retraced his path through a maze of crumbled Human dreams and liquid shadows.

He had not swum far before the shrieks began.

The sea beyond the sentinel towers began to boil. A wall of bubbles surged toward him, engulfing everything in its path. Invisible armies, Redeemer nanomechs, weaving their deadly mesh of calcite, drawing the net inward from the outer reaches of the reef. Fish thrashed before the wall of turbulence, predator and prey pressed fin to fin, stampeding in a desperate bid for safety. The bubbles swallowed them, their spasms lessening as the patina of death spread across their scales. They sank in a torrent of stone.

Medusa rain.

The bubble wall raced forward. Ocypode floated there, numb with terror, unable to move. He could never outswim it. Even if he did, he would eventually be trapped as the net tightened. Where to hide? How to escape an enemy so tiny it could penetrate any crack or crevice? Nothing in the water would be spared...

The water!

He dove before the hissing wall of foam. He wormed his arms and head into the sand, thrashed flipper-feet with all his

strength to drive himself deeper into the ocean floor. He burrowed like a flounder, squirming deeper, causing the mound to cascade over him. The screams were close now, ending with horrible abruptness. Sand covered him completely.

He could see nothing, but he could feel it. Feel the nanomechs still clinging to his flesh begin to build their stone cocoon. It burned. Oh, it burned! Fire on arms and legs and chest, acid on fin ridges. Sand pressed down, making it impossible to writhe as Redeemer hatred boiled him in a grave of his own choosing.

Ocypode knew, then, that he was a fool. He would die as he had lived: alone.

He didn't know how long he lay there. The pain sharpened to a point that jabbed him in specific places. The wounds that burned his flesh did not concern him at the moment. His lungs burned hotter, begging for oxygen, but surfacing might amount to suicide. He listened.

Silence. No clicks or moans or whistles. His ears confirmed what his brain already knew: Sheridan was dead. Fergus Dunn had guessed that the entire nanomech attack would last thirty minutes. Ocypode's starving lungs told him he had been buried for about that long.

He tried to lift his arms, to use his hands to dig for open

water. He could not budge. The sand had settled. He tried to roll, to push, to twist. His body barely moved. The absurdity almost made him laugh: to survive the nanomechs, only to drown beneath a mound of sand. Ridiculous.

Ocypode crooned the distress cry of the humpback tribe and prayed a friend was still alive to hear.

Something grated against the sea floor. The sand shifted, shoveled from the space above with a power no Aquarian could match. He wriggled free. Something massive pushed him up toward the rippling mirror that marked the boundary of light and air and life. Ocypode shot from the water in a billow of spray. The sun nearly blinded him after so much time in darkness, but he did not care. He relished the simple act of breathing. When his strength returned, he rolled off the fleshy island that supported him and slipped into the sea.

Tattered-Flukes had far too vast a girth for an Aquarian to hug. Ocypode hugged him anyway.

"I never expected to see you again, half-brother. I never expected to see *anyone* again."

"I swam to the deep shoaling grounds beyond the reef to feed. Mother Ocean placed me outside the deadly circle when the evil struck. But you, little brother, you bear the mark, stone that bites deeper than the shark."

Patches of calcite mottled Ocypode's chest and thighs and arms. The skin beneath them burned, but Ocypode had been lucky. His wounds were milder than those Tattered-Flukes had suffered at Astoria. His pale pink flesh would carry some reminders of this day, but he would live.

The members of Sheridan Pod would not.

Ocypode grabbed a ring on the towing harness before Tattered-Flukes submerged and accelerated north toward Tillamook. As they passed over an ancient building near the center of the reef, a phantom loomed out of the shadows. Lophius. The Pod Leader stood cemented to the rooftop, fists upraised. Sightless eyes stared toward the surface as a silent howl of fury echoed from his frozen mouth. Even in death, Lophius towered above Sheridan to proclaim his sovereignty to the gray, indifferent sea.

Tillamook lay between two ghost reefs. Ocypode had no doubt where the Redeemers would strike next.