

## CHAPTER THREE

An island rose to a false mountaintop with a snowcap of terraced white buildings that lapped over the edge of its hollow summit – balconied hotels and transformation clinics for those preparing to join the merfolk. Between the hotels and clinics, forcing through cracks and crevices like some kind of industrial foam, was a dense eruption of rainforest. Throngs of skittish vermilion birds – parrots or parakeets – swept through the burgeoning canopy. Rainbowed cataracts thundered from beneath the hotels, tonguing out into space, raining down onto rimmed ledges, lakes and lagoons, the foundations for still more hotels and clinics, malls and restaurant districts within the mountain’s hollow core. The flier sank into the false mountain, turning slowly on its axis. It was blazing bright much of the way down the shaft, sunlight tossed from mirror to mirror and splintered off where it was needed. Veils of mist rose from the bases of the cataracts.

‘They keep saying demand for our services will peak,’ Mecufi said. ‘The truth is there’s no end to it. Returning to the seas is the oldest human aspiration – much older, much less easily sated, than the simple and rather childish aspiration to fly. We were never *meant* to fly – that’s the preserve of other species. But we all came from the seas.’

‘Go back a bit further,’ Chiku said, ‘and we all came from primordial slime.’

‘They tell me your great-grandmother was just as cynical when she dealt with our founder. Lin Wei was driven by a vision of human possibility, a grand dream of Panspermianism and the Green Efflorescence. Eunice was driven by no higher calling than the need to plant flags on things.’

‘Your point being?’

‘Let me add another name to the mix. June Wing was an old friend of your family’s, wasn’t she?’

‘I wouldn’t know.’

‘Then you’re not much of a historian. June Wing was – is – one of

your father Jitendra's friends. They worked together on cybernetics problems. Like your father, June Wing is still alive. She's busy beetling around the solar system, collecting junk for a museum.'

'And this is relevant because?'

'June Wing, we believe, has a line of contact with Lin Wei – or Arethusa, as she's taken to calling herself. We would very much like to speak with Arethusa, our founder. But Arethusa won't return our calls and June Wing isn't exactly in a hurry to speak to us, either. But at least we know where June Wing is and what she's doing. Now all we need is for someone June trusts to speak to her on our behalf. That's where you come in.'

'I should have listened to Geoffrey.'

'And what did he tell you?'

'Never have anything to do with merpeople.'

'You expressed a similar sentiment to Kanu, and look what happened there. But tell me – from your many conversations with Geoffrey, what did he make of Arethusa?'

'We had plenty of more important things to talk about – your founder wasn't the first topic on everyone's mind, you know.'

She thought of Geoffrey, the handful of times they had met. Of course they had spoken, and of course they had spoken of Arethusa, who had once been Lin Wei but was now something very far from a human woman. But all that was ancient history.

They had reached water at the base of the shaft. Without any fuss the flier went submersible, water lapping its windows. The clinics and hotels and boutiques carried on beneath the surface, except now they were airtight and lit up with neon. Other vehicles and swimmers moved through the water, outlined in glowing colour. There Chiku glimpsed nets and canopies of marine vegetation, darting shoals of electric-blue fish, astonishing pastel-coloured coral formations. Under swimmer supervision, a huge biomechanical monster, like a cross between a lobster and a squid, helped to position prefab building parts into place. Chiku surveyed its claws and tentacles with dread, imagining the damage it could do, but the swimmers appeared unconcerned by their docile helper.

'A construction kraken,' Mecufi said, as if the monster were the most mundane thing in the universe. 'The same sort of animal that Kanu works with. They're actually very agreeable creatures, once you get to know them.'

And then they were moving horizontally along a lit tunnel, into the great vaults of the false mountain.

'We've established that the ghost is a message from your sibling on the holoship,' Mecufi said. 'Tell me about the *other* Chiku – Chiku Red, the one who never came back.'

'What's to tell?'

'Humour me.'

Chiku sighed. 'Eunice had a ship called *Winter Queen*. It was the one she'd used for all her expeditions around the solar system. Long before anyone else knew about the Chibesa Principle, she upgraded *Winter Queen's* engine, set the ship running and headed for interstellar space. She wasn't expecting to get anywhere – it was a gesture, the throwing down of a gauntlet. Eventually they worked out where she was, how far out. But no one thought there was a hope in hell of catching up with her.'

'Except for Chiku Red.'

'There'd been some improvements in engine design that would allow a ship to reach Eunice and make it back, but everything still had to be cut to the bone – one passenger, the bare minimum of redundant systems, no backup if something went wrong. Sixty years just to reach Eunice, even longer to slow down, turn around and travel back.'

'What exactly was the mission objective? To fetch *Winter Queen* – or your great-grandmother?'

'It wasn't about bringing her home. Her body, maybe. And any secrets she might have carried with her.'

'Presumably she didn't mean for those secrets to return to Earth.'

'You didn't know my great-grandmother. She presented her family with one set of challenges from beyond the grave. Maybe this was another. We were hoping for *something*.'

'New physics, beyond even the Chibesa Principle?'

'Who knows?' Chiku shrugged, boring of this inquisition. 'The only way to know was to get out there and look.'

'And what became of Chiku Red?'

'She never made it back. Her ship – *Memphis* – sent a message to say it was on final approach to *Winter Queen* and that it had initiated the wake-up procedure for Chiku Red. Then silence. That was the last anyone heard from her.'

'Then your presumption is that she died out there?'

'My great-grandmother was a twitchy old woman. She'd already installed defences on her space station and an iceteroid, to ward against casual intruders. Something similar must have taken out Chiku Red's ship.'

'Or communications simply failed.'

The vehicle was surfacing in a dome-shaped cave half-full of water. It had been a flier, then a submarine; now it effortlessly assumed the role of boat. As it approached a jetty, another door opened in its hull, this time in the side rather than the belly. Mecufi's mobility exo reappeared, scooped him from his seat and took delicate charge of its passenger.

'Chiku Red never came home.'

'And if she had ... how would that have changed things?'

They disembarked into moist warm air. Windows and balconies rose in overlapping circles to the dome's apex. Suspended by invisible wires and limned by spotlights, the awesome skeleton of a plesiosaur loomed over the flier, its flippers frozen in the action of paddling air.

'It's time to stop playing games,' Chiku said. 'I'm an Akinya. We don't like to be messed around.'

'Once upon a time,' Mecufi said as his exo carried him to the edge of the jetty, 'there might have been some truth in that statement.'

At the jetty's side, a translucent, ice-coloured boat with a swan's neck and head bobbed on the waves created by the flier's arrival. Mecufi slipped out of the exo into the water and vanished beneath the surface. He reappeared a few seconds later, his large dark eyes blinking, and he rubbed them with his hands. He was smiling, floating on his back like a sea otter, suddenly muscular and sleek.

'What am I meant to do?'

'Swim if you like – we're not going far – but you may prefer to take the boat.'

Chiku opted for the boat. It was a two-seater affair with very rudimentary controls – the sort of craft available for hire by the hour at civic boating lakes. Mecufi swam ahead, the boat puppying after him. A water-filled channel beside the jetty took them out of the chamber, down branching corridors with walls of glowing green. They passed another swimmer, an elderly aquatic moving in the opposite direction, but Chiku's was the only boat. She began to feel self-conscious, as if they had made special provisions for her clumsiness.

At length, they entered another chamber and Mecufi hauled himself onto a railed ledge that circled the wall at the water's edge. Chiku's boat bobbed to a halt, nodding its swan's head as she climbed out. Suspended vertically from the ceiling was a spacecraft, like some improbably ornate chandelier.

Chiku's jaw dropped as she realised exactly what she was looking at, but Mecufi spoke before she could.

'Chiku Red did come home – this is her ship, *Memphis*. As you can see, it sustained considerable damage.'

Chiku said nothing for a few moments. It was too much to take in, too much to assess and consider. Nothing she had experienced in her long life had prepared her for this.

Slowly and calmly she said: 'This is either a hoax, or an outrage.'

'We spotted the ship on its way through the system and calculated that it was travelling too quickly to be captured by the sun's gravitational field. We did you a favour and recovered it.'

'You had no right to keep this from my family.' Chiku tightened her grip on the rail, shivering with indignation. 'Anyway, how do I know it's authentic?'

'That's an excellent question – we wondered at first whether someone was playing a hoax on *us*. We brought the ship back here and examined it, piece by piece, performed every test we could devise and finally concluded that this is indeed *Memphis*, returned from deep space. It was a time-consuming process and we saw no need to rush it.'

'How long have you had this?'

'Not very long. A few years.'

Mecufi slipped back into the water and began to swim in the chamber's pool. Chiku followed him, moving carefully around the ledge.

'How many, exactly?'

'Twelve. Since we returned her to Earth. Fifteen since we found her. Scarcely any time at all compared to the hundred and twenty-two she was out there.'

'There'll be hell to pay for this.'

'I very much doubt it, once you've heard the rest. I'm afraid Chiku Red was beyond medical revival – but you always knew her voyage was a high-stakes gamble.'

Chiku studied the hanging ship, wondering if it could possibly be what Mecufi claimed. It was the right shape, and the overall design looked sufficiently antiquated. *Memphis* had been the best that money could buy, at the time of its departure – equipped with the highest-rated engine, the most modern and efficient steering, navigation and life-support systems. But all of it stripped down to the ruthless essentials, until the ship was all lean muscle and nervous system, not a surplus molecule anywhere on the thing. The life-support module was tiny, like a vestigial organ, while the engine and fuel tank assembly was hypertrophied, swollen to ugly disproportion.

It was damaged, too. Bits of the ship had been shot or blown away. There were fist-sized holes all over it. Scorch marks and buckling. It had taken a beating, and not just from the usual rigours of spaceflight.

'What about my great-grandmother?'

'No trace of her. I'll prepare a mote if you'd find that more convincing than my words.'

'How could there be no trace?'

'We found two caskets aboard *Memphis* – one for Chiku Red, the other presumably to bring Eunice home if Chiku found her. But when we recovered the ship, the second casket had never been used.'

Chiku's mind reeled again. First her sister's ship, now the news that her great-grandmother had vanished from the vessel Chiku Red had been sent to find.

'Then where is she?'

'No idea. From the damage the ship's sustained, we're fairly sure that *Memphis* made it to the vicinity of *Winter Queen* – those holes and scorch marks suggest anti-collision defences set at too twitchy a threshold. Beyond that, it's guesswork. Comms systems were damaged and there were no backup systems or spare parts aboard – when the attack took out her antenna, she had no way of replacing it.'

'You don't know for sure that *Memphis* ever docked with *Winter Queen*. Maybe it backed off as soon as the attack started and she never got to look inside.'

'That's one possibility, of course,' Mecufi said, 'but it wouldn't be very Akinya of her, would it – to come so far, and not go the last mile? I mean, be honest with yourself.'

'I don't know what to think beyond your outrageous interference with Akinya affairs. And what does any of this have to do with the reason you dragged me here in the first place? The ghost was sent by Chiku Green, not Chiku Red.'

'In my experience,' Mecufi said, 'most things turn out to be connected in the end.'

Not far from the ship was a white-walled, brightly lit and aggressively sterile chamber that made Chiku think of operating theatres and morgues. A handful of exo-clad aquatic technicians were on duty at a bank of upright consoles surrounding a hibernation casket like a ring of standing stones. The angular coffin was an early twenty-third-century design, raised on a plinth and plumbed via a gristle of tubes and cables into a temporary support chassis. On the slanted faces of the consoles were physical screens and arrays of old-fashioned tactile controls, grouped like an accordion's buttons. Merfolk were like babies in that they liked pushing and pressing things.

Chiku watched graphs and images flit across the screens, accompanied by webs of analysis. Temperature profiles, chemical gradients,

neural cross-sections, zoom-ins of detailed brain anatomy, down to the synapse level.

Visible through the smoked glass lid of the casket was a sleeping form. She bore a face Chiku knew as well as her own.

'You told me she was dead.'

'I told you she couldn't be revived,' Mecufi answered carefully. 'Not *quite* the same thing. The casket kept her in this state all the way home. She's on the edge of life or the edge of death, depending on your proclivities.'

'Why haven't you woken her?'

'She's too fragile. These neural scans ... they're only at the resolution allowed by the casket's own instruments, most of which are broken. We can't get any closer to her head without risking irreversible damage.'

'Then open the casket. Get into her head with nano. Readers and sriptors. Stabilise the structure and revive. This is *child's play*, Mecufi. Machines have already taken my head apart – it's how we became three.'

'Under controlled conditions, with an undamaged mind as the starting point. That's not the case here. She's an ice sculpture, Chiku – the slightest intervention would be like blasting her with a blowtorch.'

'She belongs to me – she *is* me. I want her back. I want custody of myself.'

'Of course she's yours, always has been. You can preserve her like this for ever, if your luck holds out. Or hers. Or you can risk bringing her back to life, when you feel confident enough.'

'That'll be for the family to decide. You've taken this way too far, you know – keeping her here like this, all this time, without telling any of us ... that's got to be a crime under someone's legislation.'

'So ask yourself why we'd tell you about her now, if doing so risks putting ourselves in legal difficulty. There has to be a reason.'

'Now would be a very good time to give me one.'

'There's a device in her head, an implant inserted by Quorum Binding that governs the readers and sriptors. It's identical to the one in your head, except the numeric key in hers is still intact. She hasn't chosen to forget it.'

Slowly, a shivery sort of understanding prickled over Chiku.

'Her key would have been the same as mine.'

'My point exactly. The ghost is a message from Chiku Green, but you can't talk to her. Chiku Red *could* – but she's frozen. Intervention might well kill her ... but if we were able to open her up and extract the implant, and do so quickly, we would stand a good chance of recovering its numeric key. Then we could transfer it to your implant and you

could address the ghost from Chiku Green. It must have something very important to tell you – don't you want to know what that is?'

Chiku returned her attention to the sleeping form. 'At her expense.'

'She's not alive. You wouldn't be taking anything from her.'

'Except the possibility of ever living again.'

'She had a life. No one forced her to risk it.'

Chiku narrowed her eyes. 'Wait – you said "do so quickly". Why? Why does it have to be done in a rush?'

'The implants – hers, yours – they were installed with anti-tamper measures. If the implants *think* they're being extracted or interfered with, the codes will be deleted. We think we understand the protocols well enough to get in and out in time – but you need to understand that this won't be much like brain surgery. It'll be closer to mining.'

'You bastard, Mecufi.'

'Think things over – there's no immediate rush. Take days or weeks if you like. But not months. And definitely not years. Our patience isn't inexhaustible.'

'I want to go back to Lisbon now,' Chiku said.

By the time the flier returned her to Belém, and the tram to Pedro's studio, it was night in Lisbon, night in Portugal, night all over that sleepy hemisphere of the good Earth. Chiku imagined a tide of life and wakefulness sloshing from one face of the planet to the other. She thought about the way dolphins slept, switching conscious activity from one half of their brain to the other.

She told Pedro what had happened. She told him of the complications and the position she now found herself in. She gave more of herself to him in that one conversation than she had in the five previous years of their life together.

Pedro offered love and sympathy and understanding. But he could not make the decision for her.

'I know,' she said.

In the morning, though, it was simple enough.

She rode the Santa Justa elevator to the café, and waited, and at length Mecufi arrived. She told him to do what needed to be done. Mecufi nodded and reiterated the risks to Chiku Red, and insisted she convince him that she fully understood and accepted those risks. If she approved the procedure, it could effectively cost Chiku Red her life. At Mecufi's insistence Chiku formulated a mote which conveyed – she hoped – her state of preparedness. The merman took the mote but bowed to etiquette in not disclosing its contents in her presence.

Later, when Mecufi was gone, she returned to the Baixa and walked to the shore of the Tagus. Plump clouds stacked up high to the south, yellow-bellied with rain. Across the river stood the statue of Christ the Redeemer. Chiku wondered if the kind of redemption she was likely to need was the kind on offer, and found it doubtful. She was glad of the old statue, though. They kept talking about what to do with it, as if in some sense it embarrassed the present, a piece of the past sticking around longer than was circumspect. No one had similar problems with the suspension bridge, but it was just as old. Today it glittered like a thing made from mercury. It was a marvel. Everyone loved the suspension bridge.

She wept for what she was about to do to herself. But her mind was set.