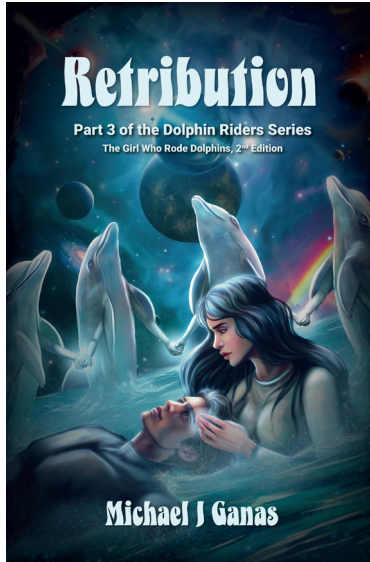


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**Reader Sample**  
**of**  
**Retribution**  
**Part 3 of the Dolphin Riders Series**

**M**cPherson had trouble believing what he had just witnessed. From a distance, he had watched as Jaffey made the airdrop. No sooner had the sounder splashed down, it had been destroyed, blown to pieces by a person skimming across the sea on a waverunner. Nearly speechless, he turned to stare at Ben Loomins. "You're sure it's the same guy?"

Driving the *Sea Lion* forward with the engines wide open, Loomins was beside himself with rage. "Fuckin' A right it's him." For emphasis, he put the spyglasses to his eyes again, taking another look at the man riding the waverunner. "But this time he's gonna pay," he added, his face contorted in ugliness. He put down the glasses and pulled the magnum pistol from the holster strapped to his thigh, clicking open the barrel to make sure the firearm was fully loaded.

"What are you going to do?" McPherson asked in annoyance, looking at Loomins as if he were insane. The sight of handguns had always

made him feel uneasy. This whole situation was rapidly disintegrating, turning into something way beyond his control. Becoming a party to any egregious incidents had not been part of his plan, and he surely had no desire to be implicated in one that might possibly mar his naval career.

"I'm gonna kill that bastard!" Loomins screamed. "I'm gonna blow his god damn brains out!"

Jaffey's voice suddenly blared over the radio. "Stand down, Predator! Do not approach the waverunner!"

Loomins ignored the command, continuing to drive the vessel onward as fast as it would go.

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The radio blared again. "What the fuck you doing, Predator?" Jaffey's voice boomed in panic. "I told you to stand down, the guy on the runner has torpedoes! Stay clear of him!"

The words caused the blood in McPherson's veins to freeze. Torpedoes? A vague remembrance of something to do with waverunners and torpedoes unhinged itself from the back of his mind, but he had no time to dwell on it now. Instead, he grabbed Loomins' by the arm, yanking hard to pull him out of his focused rage. "Did you hear him?" he yelled tremulously. "Stand down! You want to get us killed?"

Loomins lifted the pistol, pointing it directly in McPherson's face and cocking the hammer. "Get the hell off my bridge!"

In Loomins' eyes, McPherson could not mistake the cauldrons of murderous hate. Abruptly, he released the man's arm and backed away, certain Loomins would shoot him if he did not comply.

Loomins waved the gun. "Off my bridge!" he bellowed.

McPherson scampered down the ladder, not having any desire to provoke Loomins any further. Reaching the rear deck, he saw Charlie leaning against the port railing with the Haitian crewmen. The whole group was staring around the side of the vessel, following the movements of the distant waverunner. In Charlie's hand was the carbine rifle he had seen before.

"You've got to stop your brother!" McPherson shouted. "He's gonna get us all killed."

Charlie glanced his way momentarily. "Ben knows what he's doing."

"Jaffey said the sounder was destroyed by a torpedo," McPherson explained hurriedly, aware of his own rising panic. "The guy out there might have another one. He can sink us."

The full impact of McPherson's words seemed to awaken Charlie, for Charlie's mouth suddenly came ajar. "Holy shit!" he cried. Bolting for the ladder leading to the bridge, he started to climb the rungs, but the vessel abruptly lurched and he nearly lost his grip on the hand-railings.

McPherson's eyes went wide as a cloud of wavering darkness seemed to loom up from the sea, portions of it swarming all around and then engulfing the *Sea Lion* in frenzied, bludgeoning violence. Like a cresting wave, it heaved up and hammered down upon him. Something slapped wetly against his chest and before he could fully grasp what was happening, his entire body became entrenched in a rush of flapping, slippery chaos. Shielding his face with out-flung arms, he tried to ward off the silvery-gray throng before being knocked from his feet.

Amid the turmoil, he felt the vessel lurch under him again, this time more violently. Horrified, he sensed the *Sea Lion* teeter precariously to one side before righting itself in a sustained list. As if in protest to the way the vessel was being violated, the clamor of the engines rose in a distressed shriek, only to die away a moment later by whatever was smothering the props.

A dead quiet descended as the confusion ended almost as quickly as it had started. Getting hold of his senses, McPherson tried to rise. With great effort, he forced aside the mass of wriggling, slithering bodies bogging him down, barely managing to stand erect. What in god's name?

"Help me!" The voice belonged to Charlie. Mired deep in the squirming throng, he tried to get to his feet, failing miserably in the attempt.

McPherson stared dumbly at the mass of fish overwhelming the deck. Wading through the bodies, he realized he was bleeding as a red trickle worked its way down his arm. Bringing a hand to his cheek, he located the source, flinching when his finger found where the flesh had been lacerated. Heaped high all about him were barracuda, perhaps thousands of them, their cylindrical bodies continuing to shudder convulsively under the hot sun, their teeth appearing like tiny daggers jutting from protruding lower jaws.

Afraid he might get bitten again, McPherson ceased moving, aware that the Haitians were now busy pushing fish over the side.

"Jesus Christ," Charlie hollered, "will somebody get these goddamn fish offa me?"

The drone of the *Casa* slowly grew in pitch, and like a man in a stu-

por, McPherson looked up to watch the aircraft shoot above him with less than fifty feet to spare. With the *Sea Lion* now dead in the water, he continued to follow the plane as it took on a course that would take it back to the man on the waverunner.

## Chapter 7

She had never been able to understand why she was the hub of the pod, the sentience through which all the others focused their mental energies whenever the synergy inherent of a collective mind needed to be achieved. Such comprehension was irrelevant anyway. To Destiny, knowing when to form a mind meld with the others was instinctual, as natural as satisfying one's hunger for food. Like the moon exerting its pull on the oceans to produce the tides, it was a phenomenon that simply was.

She had seen Jay Jay destroy the mechanism dropped from the aircraft, the thing that had enervated Hermes and Aphrodite. And she had seen the watercraft that had previously captured them bearing straight for him, sensing intense anger emanating from the vessel. And yet there was fear, too. Based on what she knew of its crew, there were also innocents aboard the boat, Haitians that worked for Ben Loomins.

A potentially deadly confrontation had quickly arisen, one that had necessitated defusing, for if left unchecked only misery would follow. And misery was something she and the others felt obligated to dispel whenever they came across it.

Inciting the nearby shoal of barracuda into a frenzy aimed at swarming the *Sea Lion* had been far easier than expected. The mental suggestion she and the others had imparted to the horde was something they had never before tried. And though the act had caused the death of numerous fish, she felt no remorse. Unlike a human, the mind of a barracuda was very limited, entirely governed by instinct and incapable of conscious thought. Whatever members of the pack had perished would ultimately become food for other predators in the food chain, their essence continuing to live on.

As Destiny looked across the water at the vessel drifting aimlessly

without power, she sensed the outrage lessen, replaced by confusion and frustration. Still linked to the others, she could clearly feel it. The negative emotions pulsing from Ben Loomins had ebbed sufficiently for a shred of rational thought to take hold of the man. But there was something else hanging in the air, something far more puissant than Loomins' ire.

Startled by the strength of it, she stared back at the island. An overpowering iniquity seemed to lurk somewhere to the northwest of her position. It was the same feeling she had experienced during her first sighting of the submarine, but much more pronounced this time. Her mother had taught her long ago never to ignore perceptions that lay beyond the boundaries of her physical senses, for when they occurred, they often portended undesirable events yet to come, events that might be averted. And while such extrasensory attunement was infrequent, tending to come at the oddest moments, Amphitrite had stressed it could be taken as a forewarning from God to be on one's guard.

Bashir, Destiny knew, was currently somewhere on the island, taken there by Jimenez to right a wrong he had abetted. What exactly that wrong was, she had no knowledge, though she did perceive it had something to do with the sub.

Do not try to understand everything going on about you, her mother had emphasized. You have a special purpose to fulfill in this world. All will eventually become clear, but first you must take heed of the inner voice that resides deep within you.

Turning her gaze in another direction, Destiny spotted Jay Jay as he steered the waverunner back up the retractable launching chute extending from his boat's stern. From her vantage point, she could see the *Sea Lion* was far enough away from the *Avenging Angel* to pose no threat. For the time being, the Loomins brothers would be busy trying to repair their vessel.

Satisfied with the outcome, she let her eyes linger on Jay Jay as he climbed off the Kawasaki, now snug within its berth atop the *Angel's* rear superstructure. Here was the man prophesied by the painting on the cave wall, the man she had come to think of as 'The Protector' long before fate had brought them together. She had known only a few men

in her life, all of whom she loved dearly. And although Jacob, and to a lesser extent Emmanuel, had become father-figures to her, the feelings she held for them in no way came close to what she felt for Jay Jay, for whenever she was near him her heart beat faster. This was a different kind of love, one that utterly confused her, and yet one she could not deny.

She had gotten insights into such love from the novels Jacob had given her to read, a love that could only exist between a man and a woman. And now she was actually feeling it for what it truly was. Though eternal like the limitless wellspring of pure love flowing forth from infinite dimensionality, there was a physical side to the emotion she was experiencing. It was a deep yearning, an inexplicable hunger akin to the albino matings that occasionally intruded their way into her awareness.

With great difficulty, she tried distancing herself from such thoughts, knowing she should investigate the source of evil originating from somewhere further back on the island. Strangely, she was besieged by a sudden impulse, recognizing that Bashir needed her help.

Just before Hercules submerged, she cast her eyes upon the *Avenging Angel* one more time. Those aboard the vessel still required Jay Jay's protection. The unknown danger she sensed was all too real for him not to remain where he was. One threat had just passed, only to be replaced by the possibility of another, one that might prove to be far worse.

And she realized, too, that the safety of Dr. Gramm was especially important to her. Without knowing why, she felt an unaccountable closeness to him. Oddly, this last thought stayed with her as Hercules dove beneath the surface.



From the bridge, Ben Loomins watched the Casa shrink to an indistinct dot before disappearing over the horizon. The last thing his partner had told him was that he would return with a boat to tow the *Sea Lion* back to Port-au-Prince if the vessel remained inoperable.

He knew Jaffey must be ready to kill somebody by now. A short time earlier, Jaffey had made one mad water-skimming pass at the man on the waverunner, trying to ram him with extended landing gear. Their assailant had easily dodged the maneuver, veering off to one side at the last moment and adding insult to injury by firing on the aircraft with an automatic weapon. After that, Jaffey had immediately backed off, circling at a distance, and remaining clear of both the waverunner and the vessel that had launched it.

Loomins could not recall his partner ever sounding so enraged over the radio. Normally, Jaffey tended to be the most levelheaded between them. "That bastard shot a hole in my wing!" Jaffey had screamed. "I'm losing fuel!" Just before flying away, Jaffey had had the presence of mind to inform him about one little oddity he could clearly see from the air. "There's a really big dolphin down there, a white one with someone riding it."

Disgustedly, Loomins mulled these things as he dropped his gaze to the mass of fish strewn over the rear deck. The Haitians were still busy clearing away hundreds of barracuda swamping the boat, most of them inundating the vessel's port side. Slowly, the *Sea Lion* was coming back on an even keel.

He could tell Charlie was still shaken by what had happened. In all his years at sea, both he and his brother had never experienced anything that had come close to this.

"What now?" McPherson said, staring up at him.

"We try and get this boat up and running again," Loomins said heatedly. "The props won't turn."

"How could something like this happen?" McPherson persisted.

"I don't know!"

McPherson turned his gaze in the direction of the other boat anchored a quarter mile away. Every so often, a white dolphin made an impressive leap close to the vessel. "Maybe these white dolphins are tamer than we think." As he spoke, the creature made another spectacular leap. "That one there seems to be with the people aboard that boat."

Loomins felt his frustration growing. "Nothing I can do about it unless I get the props turning again. They're froze up solid." As an afterthought, he said, "Stay on the lookout for more of those creatures. Frank told me he saw a big one with somebody riding it."

"Maybe it's that girl you let get away the other day," McPherson criticized smugly. "You know, the one your crew calls the white witch."

The sound of barracuda being tossed into the water abruptly ceased, halting the biting retort about to fly from Loomins' tongue. He glanced sharply at the Haitians to see why they had stopped. All three of them stared speechless at McPherson.

"Get back to work!" Loomins snarled.

For the moment, all three men ignored the command, pulling their eyes from McPherson and looking nervously at the surrounding water.

"If you want to keep working for me, you'll do as I say," Loomins

threatened.

With great reluctance, the men went back to work, their efforts now considerably slower.

Loomins looked over at his brother. "Charlie! Grab a mask and hop over the side. I need to know what's fouling the shafts."

Charlie pointed to the other vessel. "What if that guy decides to take a run at us while I'm in the water?"

"Are you blind?" Ben decried. He addressed his brother as if speaking to a child. "Can't you see his waverunner's back on that boat? Get your ass in the water!"

Charlie stared up at him defiantly. "No way I'm gonna let myself become chum. Look what these fish did to me." He indicated his wounds. "Their teeth are like razors. If I go in the water, I might get torn to pieces."

Ben turned heated eyes back to McPherson. "What about you? You got any balls?"

The naval captain bridled in annoyance. "You forget who's in charge here. You work for me. Already you seem to have forgotten about the \$80,000 I advanced you to deliver me a dolphin, and so far you've screwed up twice."

Ben gawked fixedly down at McPherson for a long moment, his mouth hanging agape. "Goddamn!" he finally bellowed, moving to the ladder and climbing down from the bridge. "Get me the dive gear, Charlie! I'll do this myself!"

It took Ben less than three minutes to shed most of his clothing and don the scuba gear. The magnum pistol was turned over to Charlie's keeping. One by one, he stared contemptuously at the others. "I guess I'm the only one around here with any moxie. The rest of you are nothing but spineless wimps!" With that said, he lowered his dive mask and jumped into the sea.



Destiny had never fully explored all the underwater terrain surrounding Navassa Island. Neither had the other members of the pod. What she was looking for did not require exploration, however. Homing in on Bashir's location was more like following a scent, though the use of her olfactory senses to accomplish this was not needed.

The island was like a huge mesa of honeycombed limestone jutting above the sea, the top of a submerged mountain rising from the oceanic depths abutting the Cayman Trench. Hidden within the upper portions of this geologic structure were a vast maze of interconnected tunnels and vaults, all of them created over the eons by the incessant action of carbonic acid eating away at the remnants of the ancient coral



reef comprising the rock. The huge subterranean grotto housing the *thurentras* was only one of numerous caverns that lay concealed beneath the island's surface.

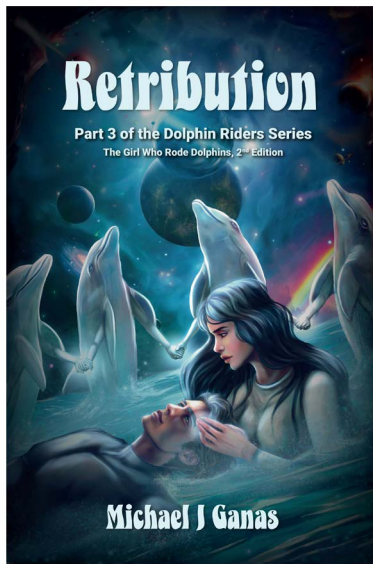
As Hercules skirted the lush coral, Destiny studied the life-encrusted topography intently, knowing they were getting close to Bashir's position. Passing a collapsed section of reef, a sense of deep foreboding suddenly grabbed hold of her, its malevolence springing forth from an inky maw that yawned wide. Here it was again, the raw strength of it nearly disorienting her. The feeling passed quickly as Hercules ignored the opening and continued on for perhaps another hundred meters, eventually finding a darkened crevice amid a thriving forest of elkhorn coral. Intuitively, Destiny knew they had reached the right place as Hercules sent a pulse of biosonar into the cavity to gauge its configuration.

Rising sixty feet to the ocean surface, both Hercules and Destiny recharged their lungs before descending once again, this time entering the opening. With her mount periodically emitting bursts of sonar, Destiny was able to catch vivid mental pictures of what lay before them. Like the tunnel that led to the structure the dolphins were constructing, this one gradually wound its way upward, although it was more constricted in several places. At one particular bend, Hercules was barely able to squeeze through, and Destiny had to hug the dolphin tightly in order to avoid portions of jagged rock protruding down. A short distance beyond this point, they emerged into a small domeshaped cavern partially filled with water, the chamber inundated with ebony blackness.

With his built-in sonar, Hercules continued to share the images he was receiving, and in spite of the total darkness Destiny was able to perceive a shelf of rock off to one side. Wide enough to accommodate her small frame, the shelf was only slightly submerged. Climbing from the albino's broad back, she stepped onto the ledge, her feet covered by several inches of water. A sense of Bashir's presence suddenly came to her again, now much stronger than before.

Somewhere ahead, a light flickered, and with it the sound of someone talking. Wading through the water, she groped her way through the darkness, guided by the cavern's arched wall where it met the shelf. Following the sound, she was able to hear the voice more clearly. Stealthily, she poked her head around a bend where the light still glimmered.

Standing several meters away were two men in heated discussion, the muted light from a handheld lantern dancing eerily off the face of one of them. Destiny recognized the man immediately. It was Bashir.



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