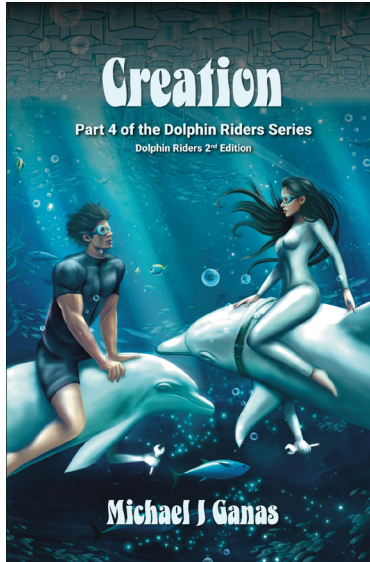


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**Reader Sample
of
Creation
Part 4 of the Dolphin Riders Series**

*M*aximus sneered caustically as he eyed the target on a threedimensional display. At full magnification, he could view his quarry as though it were less than a hundred feet in front of him. For reasons unknown, the Hind had given up its elusive and erratic maneuvers, so effective that he was beginning to believe its pilot was psychic, eerily anticipating his every move. But now the Hind was his for the taking, a virtual sitting duck that would be easy to obliterate. In spite of its titanium armor, he knew it could not possibly withstand simultaneous hits from his two remaining missiles. Easing back on the throttle, he slowed his attack speed by one-half as he guided the drone toward the target. This time he would not miss.

With his thumb poised eagerly over the launch trigger, something suddenly coalesced on the screen before him. The thing snaked and twisted without form, coming alive with a full spectrum of dazzling color against the heralding light of dawn. It took Maximus another second before he realized what he was seeing, and by then it was too late. Overcome with dizzying vertigo, he felt the bile rise in his throat as uncontrollable nausea engulfed him. With mouth parted wide, a stream of vomit spewed copiously from between his lips as though from a broken sewer pipe under enormous strain. A pain like nothing he had ever before experienced knifed through his brain, a blinding, searing agony so intense that it made him feel as though he had been cast into the deepest part of hell itself.

Standing further back from the screen, Osgood was only vaguely aware of his boss' seizure as Maximus collapsed to the floor and filled the room with a piercing scream. All the angst and depression churning his guts moments earlier was suddenly gone, replaced by a sense of

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brehtaking euphoria and happiness as he fixated a trancelike stare on the monitor. Unable to pull his eyes away, he became oblivious of the room around him. In stark contrast, Maximus squirmed and writhed in a pool of vomit, clutching his cranium as though to contain skull fragments from erupting in all directions.

Osgood felt whole again, continuing to savor the afterglow of the thing he had witnessed as it disappeared from sight. With Maximus' guiding hand no longer on the joystick, the drone veered away from the Hind and plunged for the sea as though it were a sea eagle sensing prey on the water below. Another second passed before it burst into a thousand fragments as it collided with the water at twice the speed of sound.

Jake released the trigger on the bazooka-like device, breathing a sigh of relief as he looked down. Under the lightening sky of dawn, he was able to discern wreckage from the drone scattered over more than five acres of ocean surface. His gambit had paid off beyond his expectations. The albino art had strange effects on people, and the extent to which a person fell victim to those effects depended on a person's core nature. Symptoms ranged from mild to severe, with a small percentage of viewers remaining unaffected at all. The symptoms, however, were normally temporary in duration and usually faded within a short length of time once the art was no longer visible to the onlooker. Some people became violently ill, while others experienced various degrees of nirvana.

Jake was one of those who fell into the latter class, as did all human members of the colony. But it was the dark mentalities that could be

made ill just by looking at these cryptic artistic expressions, and the extent of their illness always depended on the level of their innate malevolent dispositions. It was this that he had counted on, an inherently sociopathic mind at the controls of the drone. And while twodimensional representations of these bizarre creations were certainly effective, holographic projections were far more powerful in the way they affected an individual.

A glimpse of the dolphin art was always profoundly calming to Jake, and even more so when it was displayed three-dimensionally. In aiming the holographic projector at the approaching drone, his eyes were automatically drawn to the vision it invoked. As Jacob had explained on more than one occasion, the intertwining abstract lines pulsing with multi-colored light held mysterious qualities that did something to the human psyche, bordering on the hypnotic. On some deep esoteric level incomprehensible to human awareness, the brain was able to interpret the meaning of the convoluted symbolism subconsciously. And in doing so, it somehow found a way to bring a person's true essence to the surface, forcing them to feel it on both physiological and emotional levels. People who were basically decent at heart often experienced euphoria, while people who walked a fine line between good and evil usually felt nothing. But people who were essentially wicked would invariably become physically ill. Thus, the dolphin art was quite literally capable of bringing humans to the doorsteps of heaven, the void of purgatory, or the brink of hell depending on their deep-seated psychological traits.

This knowledge made Jake's thoughts wander back to the prison in Port-au-Prince when he, Mat, and Zimbola had helped Destiny rescue her mother, Jacob, and the Baptistes from the clutches of Henri Ternier and Erzulie. It was there Ternier and his acolytes were brought to savage though temporary illness by a conjured hologram of one of Achilles' enigmatic creations. With Destiny and Amphitrite mentally linked to the conjoined pod mind, they had managed to bring forth the vision for all in the prison to view, including the inmates and guards. Images of the rapturous looks of those unjustly imprisoned and the contorted facial expressions of others collapsed and writhing in extreme agony were firmly etched in Jake's memory, with Ternier seemingly suffering as though his head were about to explode. Through some telekinetic miracle, the doors to all the holding cells had magically sprung open, with more than half of the inmates in rhapsodized stupors filing unhurriedly out into the streets. Joyful and feeling as though he were floating on air, Jake had ambled dazedly among the slowly milling crowd, all the while letting Destiny lead him from the prison by the hand until his blissful condition began to subside.

Still warm and content from his exposure to the hologram, Jake pondered what had just happened. It had taken little more than a second for the art to work its magic, suggesting that their attacker was quite

iniquitous. The drone had simply nose-dived into the sea, and this told him its pilot must have been hit by an acute seizure to lose control of the aircraft so quickly.

Preoccupied with this evaluation, Jake was totally unprepared for what happened next. The Hind was suddenly jolted by a heavy impact that nearly sent him flying out the open doorway. Only his quick reflexes saved him as he flung out a hand to grab a stanchion. With his body fully extended and hanging precariously from the cabin, his gaze fell on a dark shadow as it zipped past overhead.

“We’ve been hit!” Fernando bellowed sharply.

Jake managed to get another hand on the stanchion, fighting hard to pull himself back into the cabin. He realized he had completely forgotten about Badger, and he berated himself unmercifully for letting the hologram stifle his alertness.

The chopper had listed over, rapidly gathering speed, and he had to shout at the top of his lungs to be heard above the rush of wind that swept into the fuselage with gale force intensity. “How bad?”

“We’re going in!” Fernando screamed back. “Hold on!”

The Hind’s powerful turbines screeched out in protest, the sound growing to a raucous wail that was painful to the ears. It was obvious to Jake the engines were severely damaged and no longer had the power to keep the chopper aloft.

Fernando had also forgotten about Badger. Like Jake, his vigilance had also been corrupted, having been caught in the hologram’s soothing spell. But now fully awakened from its rapturous effects, he went to work swiftly. Taking the pitch out of the main rotor, he let the Hind drop toward the water with the aerodynamic characteristics of a brick approximating free fall. The cyclic fought him as tried to take the aircraft out of its sideways plunge, and he could tell the hydraulically powered controls were beginning to fail. With considerable effort, he managed to bring the Hind back on an even keel with its nose pointing down in a steep glide.

Jake was familiar with the maneuver and held on tight, his bowels feeling as though they were climbing into his chest with the rapid descent. Fernando was going to soften their crash landing by autorotating the bird in. He would conserve the momentum of the main rotor as much as possible until they were close to the water and then flare up the nose as he threw maximum pitch into the blades to slow the chopper’s vertical descent.

At a height of fifty feet above the sea Fernando barely managed to level the Hind off, using all his strength to pull back on the stick and the collective simultaneously. The Hind responded sluggishly, slowing as though in annoyance as the nose rose up begrudgingly. At that mo-

ment the hydraulics failed completely and the controls locked up.

"Brace yourself!" Fernando yelled.

The warning was unnecessary. Jake increased his grip on the stanchion, knowing this was going to be have a severe impact as the sea loomed up far too swiftly. Something slammed into the side of his head with brutal force, and a kaleidoscope of bursting colors swirled before him. Another instant passed, and he had the sensation he was being drawn into a bottomless black hole at the center of the galaxy.



Badger followed the stricken Hind down, watching lugubriously as it sent up a towering spray upon impact with the water. Shooting it down gave him no satisfaction, for he had grown especially fond of these helicopters since joining up with Zinova. In his opinion, Hinds were in a class second to none among rotary wing aircraft. They were quite unique and difficult to replace on the international market. Undoubtedly, the Reaper would be more than displeased at losing one of his prized assets, that is, assuming he were still alive.

Bringing his own Hind to a hover, Badger scrutinized Zinova's chopper as it wallowed in the waves and began to sink. The destruction of such a valuable piece of hardware made him feel as though he were losing a close friend, and as it began to disappear from view, he replayed in his mind the recent course of events that had led up to this moment.

He had caught sight of the approaching aircraft a full two seconds before it swept in at blinding speed, seemingly coming straight at him. In a knee-jerk reaction, he had banked hard right to avoid a possible collision. Executing another series of complex evasive maneuvers, he had used all his piloting skill to steer well clear of both this new intruder and the pursuing Hind. Periodic glances at his radar screen had told him that he was no longer under attack. At seeing no imminent danger, he had swung his chopper around in a wide arc. Directly ahead, Zinova's Hind had slowed to a near hover, and in the sea below he had espied remnants of what he assumed to be the other aircraft. Another look at his radar confirmed the existence of only one blip in the surrounding sky.

Greatly puzzled, he had tried to make sense of his commander's unexplained attack and the downed intruder, but then his copilot and weapons operator had brought immediate light to the riddle.

"It's Javolyn!" his copilot had yelled over the intercom, his tone ringing with stark amazement. "He has taken Zinova's copter."

Thrown off balance by such a ridiculous assertion, he had found it necessary to question the claim. "Are you certain, Ivan?"

"It's him, I tell you," Ivan growled back testily. "I can see him clearly in the open doorway."

Badger had known at once that his copilot had seen an enhanced view of Zinova's Hind on his telescopic ranging screen. Zinova had briefed the team carefully on this operation, providing all his men with photos of the people they had been hired to capture. But Javolyn, the former Navy Seal, had somehow found a way to turn the tables on the Reaper and had commandeered his ship. That thought alone had been difficult for him to accept, for he had never known the Reaper to be beaten by anyone.

Throwing a surge of power into the main rotor, he had headed directly at the other Hind, coming up quickly on it from behind. "Blow him out of the sky!" he had ordered the copilot.

With the element of surprise on his side, Badger had watched as the copilot unleashed two air-to-air missiles in succession that caught the Hind squarely on its engines' exhaust.

Badger dropped these thoughts as the downed Hind rolled over and slipped into the depths, her chin bubble bobbing to the surface one last time before disappearing completely. Continuing to hover, he suddenly became aware of something in the water below. Narrowing his eyes, he realized a body had floated to the surface. "Look to your left!" he instructed Ivan. "Do you see it?"

"It might be Javolyn," came back the reply.



Badger studied the sea, gauging the swells. Doesn't look too bad, he thought? Perhaps they could salvage something from this. Making a quick decision, he issued an order. "Ivan, get back there and retrieve him. I'll bring us lower."

"He's floating face down. How do we know it's him?" retorted Ivan, his tone conveying he was not so eager to carry out the command.

Badger gritted his teeth. Sometimes his copilot could be quite difficult to deal with. If not for the fact he was deadly with the weapon systems, he would have asked Zinova to replace him long ago. "Do as I tell you!" he roared harshly.

Ivan unbuckled himself and stomped irately to the rear, glaring impudently at Badger as he passed. "I hope you know what you're doing," he grumbled in annoyance. "A rogue wave could swamp us and then we'd be out two Hinds, not to mention food for sharks."

Badger brought the Hind lower, careful to keep the belly of the fuselage just above the water. The sea had calmed considerably, with wave heights averaging no more than a half meter in his estimation.

"Bring us right another meter," Ivan shouted. "He's just beyond my reach."

Badger sidled the Hind a tad sideways, judging that he had posi-

tioned the chopper correctly.

“Good!” Ivan yelled. “Keep her steady.”

Badger craned his head around to watch as Ivan lowered the folding retractable steps and grabbed a length of rope from a storage box. Prudently, Ivan put on a harness and clipped on a safety strap that would prevent him from falling into the water. Tethered securely to a bulkhead, the strap would also provide him with leverage as he leaned out to grab hold of the body.

“Let me know when you have him,” Badger yelled back impatiently. He turned his head forward to watch for any change in sea conditions, setting his eyes on the horizon as a reference point to hold the chopper in an unwavering hover. The chopper was so low that it seemed to him as though it was floating rather than hovering. The cruise ship he had been prepared to attack upon Zinova’s command lay in the distance at one o’clock.

Ivan moved down the steps slowly, careful not to lose his balance. Planting his feet firmly on the lowest step, he let out an obscene curse as his boots were suddenly awash from a small wave. Leaning out, he managed to get a hand on the body bobbing idly before him. He quickly realized it was the shorty neoprene wetsuit the man wore that had kept him afloat. Cautiously he pulled him closer, prepared to fend off an attack, for it was possible the man could be playing possum and was purposely luring him in. But the blood clouding the water quickly allayed his fears. The sea in the immediate area ran red with it. It seeped from a deep gash marring the man’s left temple. Lifting the head clear of the water, he scrutinized the face.

Smiling devilishly, Ivan raised his voice to be heard above the deafening cyclonic rotor wash as it blasted the water into frenzied agitation. “It’s Javolyn, all right,” he shouted proudly, trumpeting out the words as though it was he who had decided to retrieve the body.

“Hurry it up!” Badger yelled back irritably. “What’s taking you so long?” Being this close to the water made him edgy.

As far as Ivan could tell, Javolyn appeared dead. This was further substantiated when he placed a thumb over the man’s carotid artery and was unable to detect a pulse. Securing the rope around Javolyn’s torso just under the armpits, he climbed back into the cabin.

Badger craned his head around again. “Is he secure yet?” he asked hotly.

“Give me a sec to tie off the rope.”

Badger was anxious to get going. And while delivering Javolyn’s remains to Cardoza held a high priority, rescuing Zinova was even more important. Assuming he were still alive, there was a good chance he was being held captive aboard the *Southern Star*.

Ivan shouted again. "I've got him slung like a side of mutton. You want me to pull him in?"

An idea began to take root in Badger's mind. Maybe he could make a trade: Javolyn for Zinova. The fact that Javolyn was dead would not matter, for Zinova's captors wouldn't know that. He wanted the offered trade to be obvious, but he also figured the sight would keep the captors from firing upon the Hind. "No, leave him hanging," he ordered. "Get back up front."

Badger held the hover long enough for Ivan to reclaim his seat in the weapons' bubble. Seeing that his copilot was ready, he put pitch into the main rotor and felt the Hind begin to rise. Something thumped heavily behind him, and the airframe abruptly shuddered as though a heavy load were suddenly imposed on it. The chopper yawed stiffly, its nose coming around to starboard, and he knew at once it was struggling to gain altitude.

Perplexed, Badger craned his head around the side of the seat to look for the cause. His eyes immediately went wide with shock. A dolphin rested on the cabin floor, a large white dolphin with its tail jutting out the open doorway. Extending outward from the creature's body was a set of grasping appendages, and held within its right appendage was a length of rope that trailed behind and out the doorway. The dolphin turned its head briefly to stare at him, and in those black orbs he sensed a deep abiding intelligence.

The dolphin turned its head again, this time seemingly studying the closed door on the opposite side of the cabin. Using its free appendage, it reached up to grasp the door latch and slide the door open. Another moment passed as Badger continued to stare transfixed, not trusting his eyes as the creature reached over to pull its considerable bulk through the opposite doorway and fall back into the sea.

Still stunned, Badger's eyes fell on the rope as it slid snakelike across the cabin floor, coming in one door and out the other, pulled along by the creature that held it. Something banged loudly against the lip of the doorway through which the dolphin had entered, and he caught a fleeting look of a large shackle tied to the rope. It bounced haphazardly into the cabin before flying out the opposite door. Attached to it was a steel cable at least one-inch-thick, and he suddenly realized what that cable represented. The thought sent a heavy jolt of fear coursing down his spine, and it galvanized him into putting maximum pitch into the rotor blades. With the full power of the turbines behind the blades, the Hind began to rise again. A quick glance at the altimeter showed fifteen meters, then twenty.

Badger spun his head to look aft again. The cable was still there, moving rapidly across the cabin floor in a rasping slither. What he was witnessing couldn't be real, he told himself. Things like this just didn't happen.

With mounting dread, he snapped his eyes forward again. The Hind was still climbing, just passing the thirty-meter mark. And then his dread turned to full-blown fear as the chopper's upward progress was suddenly halted. The abrupt stoppage jarred him to the bone as he came up short against his shoulder straps, but they saved him from being catapulted into the cockpit roof.

As if from far away, he heard Ivan yell out angrily to demand what was wrong, but he had no time to for explanations. Swiveling his head, he saw the cable was now stationary and taut as a bowstring. In desperation, he pulled harder on the collective in hopes of breaking the cable's tenacious hold, but the collective was as far as it would go. With the engines screaming, the Hind swung pendulously from side to side, fighting insanely to overcome the thing keeping it from going any higher.

Looking out the port window, Badger espied the cable stretching to the water, aware that its angle was rapidly changing. It was slicing through the sea, moving out laterally from the vertical. Glancing out the starboard window, he saw the same thing happening. The ends of the cable were being pulled in opposite directions. Horrified, he looked at the altimeter. The Hind was dropping.

Sweating profusely and with pounding heart, Badger looked off to his left again. Where the cable cut through the water, a huge dark shape easily forty meters in length breached the surface. His first thought was that it was a submarine, but then he saw the spray of rising mist that spewed from it, and he realized it was a whale spouting. Girding its head was some kind of a harness, and shackled to the harness he discerned the end of the cable. Glancing out the opposite window, he spotted another whale. The whales were working in concert, inexorably pulling the Hind down.

This isn't real, he tried to convince himself. *Wake up you dumb*

Ukrainian! he admonished, hoping this impossible predicament would simply vanish. Do you hear me? Wake up, it's only a dream! he screamed inwardly. But the sight would not go away.

Badger closed his eyes and braced himself as the sea rose up to claim the Hind. The airframe bucked severely as it met the water, then tilted sideways just enough for the main rotor to catch the surface. The abrupt impact with the aqueous medium was too much for the rotor shaft to bear, causing it to buckle and send a brutal shock wave that carried into the turbines to tear them apart. Almost immediately the blades stopped spinning and the fuselage began to flood.

Unbuckling himself quickly, Badger made for the storage compartments further back where the life vests and inflatable life raft were kept. Ivan was right behind him, cursing up a storm. "You crashed us," he accused angrily.

Badger was too stupefied to reply, instead noticing that Javolyn's lifeless body bobbed aimlessly in the waves just off to one side of the floundering aircraft, still tethered to the rope Ivan had looped around him. Three white dolphins suddenly broke the surface and rushed forward, one of them removing the knife strapped to Javolyn's calf and cutting the line holding him. The same dolphin turned to lock eyes with Badger for one brief moment, and in a sudden flash of perception, Badger knew those eyes belonged to the same creature that had entered the Hind minutes earlier.

Ivan pushed past him furiously, pulling the inflatable raft from its place of storage and yanking the inflation cord. As the raft inflated with an audible hiss, he turned back to eye Badger with derision. "What's the matter with you?" he scolded heatedly, seemingly unaware of the dolphins. "Can't you see we're sinking?"

"Didn't you see?" Badger uttered lethargically, still mesmerized. "They have hands."

"Have you lost your mind?" Ivan shot back. "Snap out of it!" He didn't have a clue as to what Badger was talking about. Up until the Hind was stopped dead in its climb, he had been checking out the readouts on the weapons systems. After that he had turned to berate Badger for his inept flying. He hadn't witnessed any of the things Badger had seen.

Turning, Ivan pulled the fully inflated raft toward him by its tethering line, but as he did so, the dolphin Badger had been eyeing slapped the water brutally with its tail to send a blast of water into the faces of both men, momentarily blinding them.

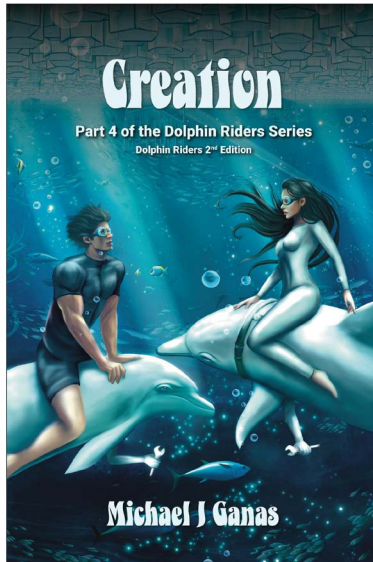
Wiping the water from his eyes, Ivan felt the tethering line go taut and fly from his fingers. Regaining his sight, he realized the raft was moving away. In desperation he dove forward with outstretched arms to retrieve their best chance of survival, but his fingers merely grazed the wet rubber as he fell headlong into the water. Surfacing quickly, he looked on in disbelief as the raft drew rapidly away, moving as though under its own volition. Stroking wildly, he made an effort to swim after it but soon discovered the attempt was futile. Exhausted and coughing up water he finally gave up the chase, gulping air into heaving lungs and staring dazedly as he watched the raft drift farther away. Treading water clumsily, he was suddenly aware that it was being towed by dolphins. Struggling to stay afloat, it occurred to him he had forgotten to don a life jacket, and he immediately spun around to go back to the Hind to get one before it sank. He was not a strong swimmer and he knew Badger couldn't swim at all.

Ivan glanced around apprehensively, a spasm of panic knifing sharply through him as he scanned the surrounding water. The chopper and Badger were now gone. The thought that had been haunting him ever since Badger had brought the Hind close to the water suddenly grew to monstrous proportions, for one of his biggest fears was sharks.



Amelia Amhurst awoke with a start, finding herself sitting upright and breathing sharply. Realizing where she was, she let out a deep sigh of relief, then leaned back to rest her head on the soft pillow once more. To her surprise, she discovered she had been weeping in her sleep, for her cheeks were wet, dampened by tears of anguish. Remnants of the nightmare still clung to her like prickly burrs from a thorn bush, and with a cautious dread she tried to make sense of it before it faded completely like most of her dreams.

She had been standing on one of the exterior esplanades gracing the colony's central structure, gazing in fascination at the thing hanging high in the heavens. It glowed with a vibrant luminosity in the midst of a pale dawn, a vision of morphing color and writhing motion. The



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