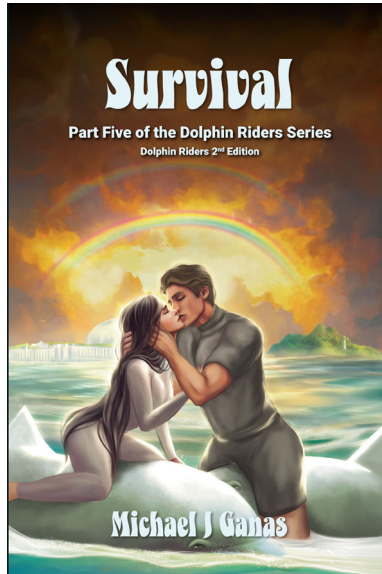


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Reader Sample
of
Survival
Part 5 of the Dolphin Riders Series

Jake treaded his way lightly on the stone steps, his senses on full alert. With only a half-spiral to go, he stopped and whispered to the man behind him. “Stick to me like glue!” he ordered gently.

Rising up the remaining distance, he poked his head above the landing. Three men, two of them wearing United Nations blue helmets, were just taking up positions to monitor the immediate area, their heads swiveling back and forth nervously. He surmised the man lacking UN garb to be one of Cardoza’s goons. Ducking down quickly, he activated his Portable Holographic Projector, sliding it over the lip of the top landing and off to one side so that it would not be directly between him and his adversaries. He was unsure of what to expect, but he nevertheless had to give it a try. Based on what Phillippe had told him just before leaving the *Southern Star*, the UN troops may have found a way to counter

the effects of the dolphin art using drugs. Phillippe had seen the blue helmeted captain lift a small convex cap strapped to his thigh and slap down hard on a tiny nodule the cap had protected. The captain had done this just prior to activating Option 2 on the Masker he had taken from Kalid and had remained unaffected by the hologram while his men had fallen violently ill. The captain had made reference to a drug, berating his men for not taking it. Upon learning of this, Jake had immediately asked Achilles for a visual accounting of the event. Achilles had then conjured images of what Perseus had witnessed through Phillippe's eyes, projecting them into Jake's mind as though Jake were viewing a movie, and he was not surprised to see the pockmarked face of Captain Francisco Alvarez leering back at him. The tiny nodule Phillippe had described was in full view, making him conclude that it was a tiny syringe, and he knew that Alvarez had injected himself with something.

Mat had also alerted Jake to the hologram's possible ineffectiveness against UN troops during his last conversation with him. Mat had related Kalid's description of what had taken place prior to his wounding. Kalid had said that the hologram had at first worked and then it didn't.

With these things weighing heavily on his mind, Jake stood fast, waiting for something to happen. His concerns were partially allayed by a loud howl of pain, and he poked his head up a second time to glimpse a man writhing on the floor, his body jerking like a jackhammer. The man was not one of the UN mercenaries, and he could plainly see that the blue helmets were alternating confused gazes between the stricken man and the hologram, their faces harboring scowls. Strapped to the right thigh of each commando was a small convex cap similar to the one Alvarez had worn. One other conspicuous item Jake had not noticed before was the sheathed corvo the mercenaries carried, and he immediately knew these men were members of Alvarez's team.

Taking full advantage of the situation, Jake sprang up and let loose with the Sledgehammer, squeezing off two quick shots. The frag-12 rounds caught their intended targets, exploding on impact and blowing gaping holes through the Kevlar body armor protecting the chest of each commando. Both men went down, killed instantly.

Jake scooped up the PHP and turned it off, avoiding eye contact with the light show as he did so. Pocketing the device, he glanced back at Mort to see how he had reacted to the display. The fear Mort had manifested a moment earlier was now gone, replaced by a faraway look of serenity and contentment.

Turning, Jake noticed the Cardoza goon had stopped twitching and was trying to stand. Taking a few quick steps, Jake unleashed a vicious kick that caught him on the side of the head. The man went down again and lay quiet.

Moving back to Mort, Jake took him by the shoulders and shook him hard. "Stay alert!" he ordered. "Better that you're scared than languid."

With UN troops supposedly immune to the dolphin hologram, he wondered if the PHP was worth using any longer. He had no time to consider culling out possible good guys, for to do so would surely get him killed. In light of the present situation, his only option was to assume every man he came upon deserved what he was going to dish out.

Pulling Mort along with him, Jake rounded a bend and nearly ran into three more blue helmeted commandos, catching them by surprise. At close to point-blank range he fired from the hip. Two of the commandos were thrown back violently as the rounds tore through their body armor and slammed them brutally against a wall. The third man dropped to a knee and nearly got off a shot, but Jake was quicker and fired again. The frag-12 caught him full in the face, disintegrating his head. In a weird knee-jerk reaction, the Uzi he had been holding flew backwards to go clattering across the stone floor.

Jake turned to study Mort again, happy to see the serenity supplanted by fright once again. He knew fear could sometimes be a good thing when a person's life was on the line. Fear got the adrenaline flowing. Fear made an individual fight harder.

Continuing on at a trot, Jake was careful to avoid the smear of brain tissue, blood and shards of bone that littered the floor before him. Mort was not as careful, and his feet nearly slipped out from under him as he followed in Jake's wake. In an effort to keep from falling, he managed to get a hand on Jake's shoulder, holding on for support.

"Watch your step!" Jake chided, holding his voice to a whisper. Clearing the mess, he stopped and removed Mort's hand. If they were going to survive, it was critical his body and limbs remained unimpeded. "You know how to use a firearm, Mort?" Mort shook his head nervously.

"Well, you're about to learn," Jake said, continuing to monitor the passageway before him. Reaching down, he snatched up the Uzi dropped by the commando he had beheaded. Removing the clip, he checked to see if it was topped off with bullets. Satisfied, he replaced the clip and chambered a round, making sure the weapon's safety switch was on before he handed it over to Mort.

Mort looked terrified, holding the Uzi as though the metal comprising it was toxic to the touch. "How do I operate it?" he asked timidly.

"It's really simple. Just point it at your target and pull the trigger," Jake instructed soothingly, doing his best to quell Mort's unease. "Just be mindful where you aim it, and above all, don't point it in my direction.

Can I count on you, Mort?"

When Mort nodded numbly, Jake put the weapon's safety in firing mode. Though Mort's inexperience with a firearm was a potential liability to both of them, some deep inexplicable instinct told him it was the right thing to do under the present circumstances.

"Just remember to keep your finger off the trigger until you have a target to shoot at," Jake said. "You ready, Mort?"

Mort took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before nodding vigorously. "I'm ready," he finally acknowledged.

Jake turned and resumed moving down the corridor again. Up ahead he saw another ninety-degree bend. "You know where this passageway leads, Mort?" he whispered over his shoulder.

"There's an open courtyard just beyond the turn," Mort answered back, his tone seemingly calmer now.

Jake nodded, reaching for something in his utility belt. He only carried one baseball grenade and hoped it would be enough. Pulling the pin, he held down the spoon, advancing cautiously toward the bend. Hugging the wall, he risked a peek around the inside corner. He was immediately met by a hail of bullets. Withdrawing his head and ducking down low, he released the spoon on the grenade, counting off two seconds before tossing it into the courtyard beyond. Contained by stone walls on each side, the detonation was loud and piercing as it sent out shrapnel in all directions.

Feeling wildly indestructible and lightheaded, Jake sprang out into the open. A few low-watt incandescent lights spaced at intervals along the courtyard's outer perimeter provided just enough illumination for Jake to see, and with reckless abandon he let loose with the Sledgehammer, whipping the muzzle around to take out the first two men he came upon. Both were blue helmeted commandos, already bloodied and staggering from the grenade. The frag-12 rounds exploded against their Kevlar chest protectors and hurled their bodies backwards as if tugged by some mighty hand from behind. Three other blue helmets were already down, two of them unmoving and seemingly mortally wounded. One of them, however, was trying to rise to his feet, dazed and bleeding profusely from the shrapnel that had peppered his neck. Taking no chances, Jake pumped off another round, catching the commando in the side and nearly cutting him in half.

Totally consumed by the warrior's lust for battle, Jake took in the courtyard at a glance, looking for other adversaries. From discussions with Belachek, he knew it wasn't so much a courtyard but an area between the inner and outer defensive walls. Based on Belachek's description, he knew the inner wall was actually the façade of the keep, the main living quarters situated in the center of the stronghold.

Jake tensed at the sound of drumming, a low pitched cadence that grew quickly and echoed out into the open area where he now stood.

Looking for the source, his eyes were drawn to an arched entrance on the inner wall side, and he recognized the beat of running footsteps in a tunnel. Bolting headlong from the entrance like horses leaving a starting gate, three of Cardoza's thugs were suddenly before him. Startled by Jake's presence, the lead thug skidded to a halt and attempted to raise his weapon, but before he could do so his accomplices flew into him from behind, knocking him off balance. In rapid succession, all three were flung back as the Sledgehammer's explosive rounds found their mark.

Another sight grabbed Jake's attention, one Belachek had briefed him on. It was the Bengal tiger within a large cage situated within a recessed section of inner wall off to his left. He had once seen a rendering of Cardoza's pet carnivore on the ceiling of the mystical chamber behind the cove's majestic waterfall, but now he was actually seeing it with his own eyes. The beast was pacing back and forth, baring its fangs and roaring ferociously, maddened by the scent of blood and carnage filling the courtyard. Years earlier Destiny had claimed the rendering had originally portrayed Jake being mauled by the tiger, but by the time Jake had viewed it, the rendering had changed to show Walter McPherson as the mauling victim.

The clatter of an Uzi abruptly pulled Jake from this momentary reflection, and he spun around in reaction to the sound. Mort had fired his weapon, and to Jake's amazement he saw another blue helmeted commando stagger back as several rounds collided against his body armor. Jake followed up with a round of his own, and the commando was knocked off his feet as though tackled by an NFL linebacker.

Jake looked at Mort with newfound respect, surprised that the man had held up under such stressful duress. If not for Mort's alertness, the Chilean mercenary would have surely got the drop on him. "Nice job, Mort!" Jake praised as he scanned the courtyard again. "Any suggestions which way we go from here?"

Mort pointed toward the courtyard's far end. "That way!"

A familiar sound suddenly impinged on Jake's awareness, escalating quickly from a soft susurrant to a discordant din. Glancing up, he glimpsed a spotlight playing back and forth on the ramparts above. The spotlight's beam abruptly steadied, and Jake suddenly found himself caught in its blinding glare.

"Get back!" he shouted, grabbing Mort forcefully by the arm and hauling him roughly out of the light. No sooner had he done that, sparks flew up from the stone pavement as a shower of 7.62 millimeter rounds suddenly rained down. Bullets seemed to be ricocheting everywhere as Jake raced for the entrance on the inner wall side, and in less than two seconds he reached the safety of the nearest passageway. Dragging Mort with him, he moved well back from the entrance.

A storm of rounds continued to carom and hammer the opening, sending splinters of stone and fragmented bullets zinging and humming down the passageway but miraculously missing both men. With them no longer visible to the gunner, the sound of heavy machine guns immediately cut out, upon which Jake ran back to the entrance to risk a peek. For one brief moment the spotlight moved searchingly about the courtyard before infringing on the battlements higher up. Jake watched as the silhouette of the Hind shifted beyond his line of sight, the cacophonous din of its powerful engines and rotor blades fading to a dull whine as the stone battlements reflected the sound away.

Prepared to venture back out into the courtyard again, Jake pulled up short as movement caught his eye. The tiger had gotten free of its cage and was now roaming the courtyard. Jake watched as it moved silently among the dead men, sniffing the sprawled bodies before singling one out. Hunkering down on all fours, it began to feast.

Mort moved up behind Jake to crane his head over Jake's shoulder. "This is not good," he said dismally. "That animal's a killer. How do you suppose it got loose?"

"Some of those rounds must have hit the locking bolt on the cage," Jake offered, "but we can't stay here. Stay behind me and don't make any sudden moves." Mort did not protest or cower in fear as Jake ventured beyond the entrance and crept noiselessly along the inner wall.

Sensing the men, the tiger stopped its gnawing and went rigid. Lifting its head, it locked fierce yellow orbs on Jake, a low throaty growl rumbling forth from behind barred, bloodied teeth.

One of the things Jake had heard about big predatory cats was that you didn't look them directly in the eyes, otherwise you immediately invited attack since the cat would take it as a challenge. But something deep down made Jake do just that, something he could not explain. Keeping his Sledgehammer trained on the beast, Jake moved slowly along the wall with Mort sticking to him like glue. Unless it attacked, he had no reason to kill the beast.

The Bengal remained tense, its head swiveling slowly as it fixated on both men sidling past, the low growl continuing to rumble unabated from its throat, and for one fleeting moment Jake expected it to spring. But the tiger suddenly relaxed, dropping its fierce gaze from Jake and resuming its feeding.

Jake blew out a sigh of relief and picked up the pace, turning only once to look back at the cat, which was now ignoring him and feasting contentedly. Based on Belachek's rough sketch of the place, Jake assumed they were heading toward the portcullis. If they were going to escape this place, the drawbridge needed to be in the down position.

Jake opened up a mental link to his bond mate. *What's your status, Achilles?*

We're still avoiding detection, JJ, the dolphin shot back, but it's doubtful Franklin can continue holding his breath each time I submerge. His condition is fragile. On the bright side, all of Cardoza's vessels have been sunk.

Jake projected another thought. *Is the drawbridge still up?*

Unfortunately, yes, JJ. Stuck in this moat, Destiny and I have no way of helping you.

Jake continued following the inner wall, reaching where it turned ninety degrees. Taking a quick peak around the corner, he saw that the area beyond was deserted.

Mort grabbed his shoulder, speaking softly. As though he had heard Jake's interchange with Achilles, he said, "We don't need the drawbridge to get out of here."

Jake's expression turned hopeful. "Another way?"

"Yes, about fifty paces ahead there's a doorway a short distance from the gatehouse. It gives access to a portal that opens to the moat." *You hear that, Achilles?*

Yes, JJ. I noticed a wooden hatch cover to the south side of the drawbridge just before Fernando dropped me in the moat.

Hold tight, Achilles, I'm going to make a try for it.

Jake turned to Mort. "I hope you're good at sprinting, Mort, because I need you to run like the wind." Having said that, Jake leapt past the corner and raced diagonally for the opposite wall, running in the direction of the gatehouse. Scanning the corridor before him, he prepared to dodge more bullets. In moments he reached the door Mort had described without taking any fire. Finding this odd, he did a quick mental count. So far he had taken out eleven commandos and four of Cardoza's thugs, with one enormous shark dispatching Cardoza and three more of his goons. Altogether, that added up to nineteen men. Perhaps that accounted for most, if not all, the combatants he would face.

The actual number is twenty-one, Achilles corrected, reading his thoughts again.

You mean there were two others? Jake shot back.

Yes, Destiny says she zapped two more of Cardoza's boys just before we reached her, but they either drowned or became shark chow.

Good to know, Jake replied. So I take it Destiny's getting back to her old self.

Seems that way.

We better cut the chatter, Achilles. More bad guys might be lurking about. Even though the exchange had occurred in less time than it took to blink, Jake knew a distraction of this sort was potentially dangerous.

With Mort right behind him, Jake examined the door, judging it to open inwardly. Reaching for the door handle, he pushed. The door appeared to be made of solid oak planks and would not budge. "Move back!" he yelled at Mort, aligning the barrel of the Sledgehammer with the door's locking mechanism and stepping away. Just before squeezing the trigger, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. An assailant poked his head around the side of the gatehouse wall, bringing a weapon to bear on him. Jake spun and fired before the man could get off a shot. The round went high, barely missing the assailant and sending a shower of stone fragments to explode from the wall above his jutting head. For emphasis, Jake let loose another shot as the man ducked back out of sight, sending more stone shards flying.

Turning, Jake pumped off another shot, this time disintegrating the door handle and blowing a jagged hole through the heavy oaken plank supporting the lock. The impact swung the door inward and Jake hastened the movement by throwing a shoulder against the wood. "Go!" he yelled, looking back at Mort and stepping aside.

As Mort sprang through the opening, Jake pivoted to squeeze off another shot. The frag-12 detonated with a muffled sound, this time meeting flesh and bone as it caught the same assailant full in the face as he foolishly leaned out again from his place of cover. Leaping through the doorway, Jake grabbed the edge of the door and slammed it closed. Someone had forgotten to turn off a single low-watt light bulb that lit the room beyond, and he grabbed the first object he saw. It was a large table with piles of paper littering its top. Sweeping the paper off it, he discovered it was quite heavy. The table was topped with a slab of granite and had a cast iron frame.

"Give me a hand!" Jake yelled, glancing briefly at Mort. Grunting laboriously, both men managed to slide the table up against the door. Lying nearby was a stack of small crates, and without hesitation Jake lifted the topmost one, placing it on the table to block off the hole in the door. In rapid succession he stacked a few more crates on the table, noticing the strain they put on his back in moving them.

"Why was Cardoza holding you prisoner?" Jake grunted, hefting another box.

Mort was breathing hard from the exertion, but managed to speak in gasping, halting sentences. "I was a hostage. He was using me as leverage so as to keep my twin brother working for an associate of his, a man of incredible wealth and affluence. We're scientists. We used to work for the U.S. Department of Energy at Los Alamos. We-"

Mort suddenly stopped moving boxes, laboring for breath.

"Take a rest, Mort," Jake said, moving one last box into place. "You were about to say?"

"We retired from government service five years ago to go into busi-

ness for ourselves. We lent assistance to Uncle Sam as private contractors. My brother specialized in electronics and computers, I in laser science. After Cardoza kidnapped me he somehow learned about our breakthrough."

"What kind of breakthrough?" Jake prodded encouragingly.

"Percy and I were on the threshold of a new idea that would revolutionize laser weaponry. Up to now the most powerful laser developed only puts out thirty kilowatts of energy. Our design, however, could unleash ten times that amount. At least in theory. Without me, Percy could not possibly construct such a weapon. It was not his area of expertise. But together we could. Cardoza wanted the design. When I refused to give it to him he threatened to kill me." "An interesting story," Jake said.

"There's more to the story than just that," Mort huffed. "My brother and I managed to compile a mountain of incriminating evidence against Cardoza's associate, a man who heads a cabal conspiring to control the world. The reach of this man is enormous. He has tentacles embedded covertly in all the major governments across the globe. Cardoza is subservient to this man, who they call the *Sublimis*."

Jake frowned with puzzlement. "*Sublimis*?"

"The *Sublimis* is the head of the snake that controls the organization. He is at the top of the pyramid of power. The cabal has existed for generations, with the title being passed down from father to son through the ages, and now they have become more powerful than ever. The *Sublimis* knows we have acquired evidence against him and all his associates, and Cardoza has been assigned the task of retrieving it."

"So have you given it him?"

"No. My brother has it stored in a place they'll never think to look, one you might say is right under their noses."

"That is quite an extraordinary story," Jake muttered, his attention preoccupied with the objects now bracing the door.

Satisfied for the moment, he eyed the room. It was a moderately-sized chamber, obviously used for storage. While stacks of boxes, crates and various other items cluttered the walls, one object grabbed his immediate attention. A long wooden shaft the size of a telephone pole dominated the room's center, and attached to its tip was a pulley. The pole was aligned with the hatch that was supposed to be their way out. The pole sat on rollers in a long guide embedded solidly in the floor. A sturdy T-bar situated at its aft end rose up to the height of a man's waist, and he immediately ascertained its purpose. With a man on each side of the pole pushing against the T-bar, the pole could be slid forward or moved back. From what Jake could see, the pole could be extended through the hatch and out over the moat, making him wonder what it was used for, though it reminded him of a buccaneer's cannon waiting

to be fired once its muzzle portal was opened.

"You're looking at Cardoza's latest form of amusement," Mort said, correctly reading Jake's curious expression. "He lowers men from it to feed the sharks. I was to be their next meal."

"Well, you don't have to worry about Cardoza anymore. One of his sharks had him for dinner," Jake murmured absently, continuing to study the contraption. Moving to the hatch cover, he saw it was hinged at the top and had a heavy sliding bolt that locked it down. It could be raised by using a ratchet pulley that connected to a chain attached to its lower edge.

Jake slid back the locking bolt and grabbed the chain, but stopped short to survey the room again, curious to know what was stored here. His eyes fell upon a large cluster of wooden boxes stacked up against a side wall, all labelled with the word *AZUCAR*.

Achilles immediately translated, sensing Jake's puzzlement. *The word means sugar in Spanish.*

Jake sent back an assessment. *An army couldn't eat that much sugar in a year.* Reaching for a crowbar that lay on the floor next to one of the stacks, he pried off the cover of the topmost box. Probing around momentarily, a smile overtook his features. "Now look what we've got here," he announced blithely.

Mort moved closer to peer inside the box. "What?"

Jake pulled out a small brick-like object. "TNT!" he mumbled softly. He counted thirty-three similar boxes. "There's probably enough here to blow half this place to dust."

Jake swept the room searchingly again, spotting a crimper sitting atop an adjacent stack several feet away. Knowing what such a tool was used for, he scrutinized the small cardboard box that sat next to it. His smile grew larger when he looked inside the box. "Just what the doctor ordered," he remarked jubilantly, "blasting caps and fuse." Removing a three-foot length of coiled fuse, he inserted one end into a blasting cap and secured it with the crimper. Pushing the cap into the small brick of TNT, he placed the brick back in the box he had taken it from. The box held a total of forty bricks, each brick weighing one pound.

"You never told me your name," Mort said, watching the procedure intently.

Jake removed his K-bar from its sheath and sliced through the cord, shortening its length by a foot. "My friends call me Jay Jay." "Thanks for saving my hide," Mort said.

Jake glanced up with a sober expression. "I'd hold off on the thanks for the time being if I were you. We're not out of the woods yet." Pulling a tiny butane lighter from a pouch on his utility belt, he flicked it several times to test the flame. On the third flick, the flame caught and held

steady. "Do us a favor, Mort, and open the hatch."

Mort placed the Uzi down on the floor next to the hatch and grabbed the vertical section of chain attached to the ratchet pulley. Pulling it down, he forced the hatch cover to swing into the room and pivot toward the ceiling.

Jake moved to the opening and poked his head out, seeing that the drawbridge was still up. Withdrawing his head, he stepped back to light the fuse. "I suggest you make the plunge, Mort," he said calmly.

The fear Mort had previously shown was back with a vengeance, and he stood fast on the lip of the hatch opening, uneager to jump. "What about the sharks?"

"They're going to be the least of your worries if you don't get moving."

"I should tell you I have a problem with heights," Mort stammered nervously as he looked down at the water. With the surface of the moat considerably lower, the drop would be close to thirty feet.

A heavy pounding suddenly reverberated against the door to the chamber. Jake glanced behind him to see the table bracing it move back several inches. Abruptly, he snuffed out the lighter and picked up the Sledgehammer. Firing back to back rounds into the door below the level of the table, he was careful to miss the heavy crates he had placed on top of it. God only knew what was in them, and the last thing he needed was to set off an explosion. The pounding abruptly stopped as the rounds blew open the door's lower portion, and a muffled scream followed.

"Give me your weapon, Mort!" Jake commanded sternly as he strapped the Sledgehammer over his shoulder.

Mort turned, reaching down to retrieve the Uzi where he had left it, glad to step back from the precipice. Jake spoke quickly as Mort rose back up and handed him the weapon. "Sorry, Mort, but out you go." Mort let out a startled cry as Jake gave him a powerful shove, and he fell backwards through the opening, dropping from sight.

Jake spun around as more pounding resumed, and he saw the table begin to inch back again. Based on what was stored in the room, he had to assume they wouldn't dare fire their weapons through the door. Taking full advantage of this, he took careful aim with the Uzi and fired. The clip emptied in seconds, sending a barrage of rounds streaming through the jagged holes in the door's lowest section and invoking additional screams.

A sudden vision flashed before Jake's eyes, and he saw two of Cardoza's goons go down on the opposite side of the door, their shins bloodied. Another goon lay off to one side, his left leg blown off at the knee where a frag-12 had caught him a moment earlier. Four more thugs scurried in quickly to drag the first two men out of the way as four blue

helmets moved in to place a heavy steel plate against what remained of the lowest section of door. With the shield in position, they picked up a heavy length of pipe that was being used as a battering ram.

The vision blinked out just as the pounding resumed, and Jake saw the door begin to lurch inward inch by inch with each powerful strike. Tossing the Uzi aside, he grabbed the lighter, flicking it savagely to ignite a flame. Though it sparked, it would not light this time. Stubbornly he kept at it, cursing as he ran his thumb over the roller again and again. Almost ready to give up, a flame suddenly caught on the wick and held, and without hesitation he applied it to the fuse. Satisfied that the fuse was silently burning, he placed two more boxes in front of it. Seeing that it was now effectively hidden, he turned and dove through the hatch. From his stint in the Seals, he was quite knowledgeable on the use of explosives, and based on the length of fuse he had cut, he knew he had roughly two minutes to get away from the devastating blast that would be forthcoming.

Spinning in midair like a cat, Jake adjusted his body posture to meet the water feet first. On the way down he caught a fleeting image of the drawbridge, suddenly aware that it was coming down. Driven deep by the force of his plunge, he felt Achilles' powerful forelimbs latch onto him. A heavy glare beamed down into the water, giving him a shadowy glimpse of the surrounding murk.

Where are the others? Jake asked Achilles, surprised at not seeing any forms clinging to his back.

Franklin and Mort are a safe distance away where I left them standing in waist-deep water. I discovered a narrow ledge below the surface that juts out from the fortress.

What about Destiny? Jake projected the query like a shotgun blast.

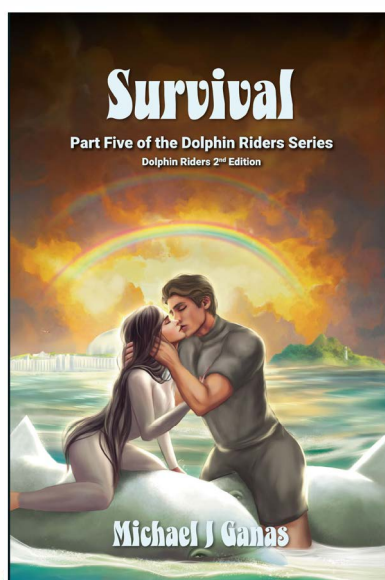
Achilles was suddenly unresponsive, and before Jake could press him again, the surrounding water was abruptly alive with a cascade of small projectiles zipping by like wind-driven hailstones. A muted though familiar buzz reached Jake's ears an instant later, and he immediately knew the cause of the sound. He didn't bother to look up. The image was sharp and distinct in his mind's eye, and he saw the Hind hovering ominously above the moat as though he were viewing it from high up.

Without hesitation, Achilles dove deeper to escape the fusillade, bolting along the canal's rocky bottom at full speed. *Where's Destiny?* Jake demanded as he was pulled along. Already he sensed they were well beyond the glaring light and the firestorm of rounds.

She's with Esmerelda, Achilles finally answered.

You're not making sense, Jake fired back.

You'll understand soon enough, was all Achilles would offer.



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