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mel keegan

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AQUAMARINE

Mel Keegan

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

AQUAMARINE

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AQUAMARINE

Chapter One

The heat of the midday sun was like a hand pressing heavily on Russell Grant's back, and sweat tickled his ribs. He lay on his belly on a rug, on the expanse of white sand above the tidal zone, listening to the hoarse cries of the gulls and the restless voice of the sea. A gaudy sunshade fluttered over his head, but at this hour the sun glared so ferociously off the ocean that the shade afforded little protection. A coat of sunblock was still slick on his fair skin, and his eyes, shielded by polarized glass, scanned the endless columns of data that filed obediently through the screen of his laptop.

Hydrography was a consuming subject, though it was not Russell's own field. This project was Bill Murchison's, but as usual Bill had found a reason to be over on Pacifica when there was work to be done, data to be gathered and processed. He was, Russell decided, a pain in the butt. The next time Bill made application for a continuation of his funding, he would very likely find himself kicked out on that portion of his anatomy. Gerald Duquesne did not take kindly to passengers and parasites, and Murchison knew this too, but he seemed to attach little importance to the looming spectre of unemployment.

As he idled through the data collection and ran the preliminary analysis, Russell wondered if Bill were telling the truth, and he had been offered a job elsewhere ... if the 'position' could be dignified by calling it a job. Working as a hustler in a beachside crotch-shop would be just about Murchison's speed. And that particular sex shop, The Beach Bum, would suit him right down to the ground. He probably wouldn't get a pair of pants on for weeks on end. Just Bill Murchison's style.

Meanwhile, his project was going to wrack and ruin, and when several days' worth of data had mysteriously failed to appear in the main computers over at the master lab, memos began to arrive on the terminal Murchison shared with Russell. Russell could scarcely turn on the machine without seeing a message, flagged for his attention, asking what had become of either Bill or the data, or both. The back room boys were starting to get as restless as Murchison was bored.

In the interests of peace and mental health, Russell let Bill go his own way. He loaded his laptop aboard the *Tiger Shark*, packed a lunch hamper, rubbed his arms and legs with enough sunblock to shut out the killer ultraviolet, and determinedly, repeatedly, called his partner.

He was almost ready to shove off when Eric Devlin answered. He was calling from the reception desk of the Acropora Hotel, and he sounded more than a little annoyed. Perhaps his morning had been as nasty a bitch as Russell's.

"Yeah, Rusty, what is it?" he said quietly into the phone, as if he were also in the midst of unwelcome company, and overheard.

"Lunch," Russell suggested. "You hungry?"

"It's only ten," Eric said reasonably.

"And in two hours it'll be noon," Russell added. "I've packed the frij. I have to cruise over to Headland and Breakwater. I just thought you might like to get away from it all, come with me, if you've got the chance."

A pause, and then Eric's voice asked shrewdly, "Which means Bill Murchison's done another vanishing act, and Gerry Duquesne is bellowing for his data?"

"Something like that. You interested? Lobster, prawns, crab and a little green salad, and I think I can manage a bottle of something white and dry." He paused. "If you can get away."

"Of course I can get away!" Eric chuckled. "This is the quiet time of the year, quiet time of the week. I'll be over in fifteen, Russell. Don't you dare shove off without me!"

Not that Russell would have dreamed of leaving without him, as Eric was perfectly well aware. Russell would have waited half an hour for him, if need be. Or an hour. So Duquesne would get his data an hour late, what difference did it make? None, to the boss. But to Russell, the opportunity of a whole afternoon in Eric's company was too precious to be missed. They did not see enough of each other in these last few years, since their work had taken them in different directions.

The *Tiger Shark* was tied up at the lab's own private boatramp, between the fish farm on one side and the water purification system on

the other. Atop the concrete boatramp, the lab sprawled along the artificial waterfront, looking into the southwest, where the Pacific Ocean was an almost unbroken frontier as far as Antarctica.

Few land masses remained above water in this part of the sea now, and even those were slowly being submerged. Duquesne was impatient for every morsel of data pertaining to the rate of the water's rise: was it still as rapid as it had been a century ago, when the continents were inundated and the whole face of the earth changed forever?

To a man of Duquesne's generation the picture was so much more clear than it would ever be to Russell, much less to Eric Devlin. Gerald Duquesne was one hundred and two years old. His memory stretched back to a time when cities such as London and Paris and Los Angeles were still thriving megalopolises, days when humans went about their business, contentedly blind to the repeated warnings about simple, routine global warming, much less the risk of a cometary impact. People a century ago scarcely gave a thought to the planet's delicate climatic mechanisms. Only a handful of scientists and environmentalists were aware, or cared, that the machinery of the world's atmosphere was already in the process of breakdown even before the 'Event,' the arrival of the comet called Chen-Goldstein 4.

At first it was slow. Russell had studied the data in his third grade classrooms, as did every child, and it was easy to see how people had overlooked the truth. But it was nonetheless accurate that massive typhoons often announced themselves with a single, stinging drop of rain.

First came the storms. Each winter brought worse storms than the one before, and 'locals and yokels' were constantly reporting how the flooding was the worst they had seen in their long lives. Salt water was recorded fifteen kilometres further inland than ever before ... a bridge that had never been known to flood went under ... a ULCC oil tanker was overturned and broken in half by thirty-metre waves. Every year brought its own 'hundred year storm.'

And then came Chen-Goldstein 4, and her tidal wave changed the face of the globe.

December 22, 2049. She plunged in like a lightning bolt from Zeus — an early Christmas gift, incredibly beautiful, incalculably deadly. For a billion years, more, she had crossed Earth's orbit over and over. Now, satellites photographed her awesome beauty as she died, smashing into Antarctica, just inland of the Ross Ice Shelf.

The tidal waves of massive typhoons were nothing new or surprising. In the early 1990s, after one specific event, such monsters were

given a name. The 'Bangladesh Effect' was a researcher's dream come true.

Scientists were morbid creatures, Russell had always thought. They were never happier than when they discovered some new fatal illness, some new plague, a comet about to impact like a battering ram with the earth, or a quirk in the planetary weather mechanism that spelled disaster. Grants galore would be allocated for the study of these catastrophes. Wives could be supported, kids educated, mortgages paid off, on the proceeds of study into the current media buzz.

This time, however, those scientists who were intent on settling their mortgages on the back of the Bangladesh Effect found themselves victims of it. After Chen-Goldstein 4's storms came endless floods, over every part of the world. Religious groups huddled together in a show of moral solidarity, likened the situation to the Deluge and blamed the apocalypse on Immorality. It was the wrath of God, who had sent the comet to punish mankind.

Several hundred individual Arks were actually built during the two decades, 2030 to 2050, but only one of them was effective. The *Requiem Mundi* was launched in Kure, Japan, where she had been built by the same company that constructed such supertankers as the *Tokyo Maru*. She was built by a consortium of self-styled, not-so-eccentric millionaires from Europe and the United States, and with funding from every continent. With extraordinary fanfare she launched in 2052, while the ocean broke over the rooftops of the houses of the labourers who had finished her.

Chen-Golstein-4 was blamed for the catastrophe, but in fact she just put the finishing touches to a long, slow decline that had been in progress for a century. 'Global warming' was a term Russell had always admitted he found difficult to grasp. He was born in 2074, and to him the world had never been any other than it was right now. Warm, balmy, serene, more or less peaceful ... more or less wet. To him, the world map was a thing not of wonder but of tedium. An unbroken sheet of blue punctuated here and there by a few co-ordinates which pointed out an island chain or a small nation.

The greatest surviving nations were Himalaya, Alpina and Andea, but in childhood he had learned — to his astonishment — that these rich, coveted lands had once been in the hearts of vast, impoverished nations. Not long before he was born, they had been no more than spires of rock thrusting so far above sea level, their crowns were capped with ice.

The only major land masses in Russell's world were those which

had been the mountainous regions of the old Earth; the rest had gone the way of a place called Atlantis.

Gerald Duquesne was more or less sure the water had stopped rising, but he wanted to be certain to the tenth decimal place before he closed the hydrographical surveys once and for all. Each year for a minimum of a decade, laborious, painstaking readings would be taken, collated, analysed. It was by no means a full time job, yet it paid reasonably well and it was a prestige position.

Damn it, Russell thought as he watched the data file through the screen in orderly ranks, Bill Murchison should be damned glad to have this work, not looking for a job, moonlighting at The Beach Bum! But Murchison had always been a waste of time. Back in college, where was he? A safe bet — propping up the bar, screwing half the swimming team or dead asleep and probably stoned, in the back seat of his father's jetskiff.

Why Russell should be surprised when Murchison abandoned his work and found any, every, excuse to be far away from the lab, he did not know. He sighed, and his fingers tapped keys as he cycled through a set series of analyses. Once he got involved with the work it was interesting enough, but this was hardly the point. Russell had plenty of his own work to do, without pulling double duty.

Not, he admitted moments later, that the occupation was totally without its perks. Breakwater was a cay, a sand island deliberately created by the dumping of an enormous cargo of rocks, coral rubble and sand, and then the systematic, deliberate introduction of vegetation which would help to stabilise the tiny land mass. It was only a science platform, and Duquesne had funded the construction of Breakwater only because it was far cheaper to build an island than to leave a hydrographic research ship here, station-keeping, for a decade.

The sand was eye-blisteringly white. The coconut palms were five years old and well grown; the ferns and fronds, secondary growth, were well established. Even when Duquesne was satisfied and closed the project, Breakwater would remain on the map until another freak storm broke it up and swept it away, as so many of the inhabited islands of the Pacific had been scattered on the four tides.

The satellite imaging report for the day's weather, sent down from the *Atlantis* at five that morning, promised light winds and a small chop, intermittent cloud, before heavy weather came in, in the mid-afternoon. Right now it was just before noon. Russell was hungry, hot, drowsy, exasperated by Bill Murchison ... and just beginning to wonder where Eric could have got to. Breakwater was exactly two hundred

metres long by sixty metres wide, and the highest point on the sand-island was twelve metres above the tidal zone. How in the world could you get lost?

Not, he admitted, that the dimensions of the island would in any way limit Eric. In fact, Aquarians tended to look upon the dry land as the impediment. Often as not, it just got in their way. Russell lifted his head and looked up and down the beach, but of his partner there was no sign. The *Tiger Shark* was bobbing at her mooring line, twenty metres offshore. The blue and white hull was so highly polished and reflected the sea so perfectly, she almost seemed camouflaged. Russell feasted his eyes on her for some time. She was *his*. Lock, stock and barrel — whatever the old saying meant. Every nut and bolt of her, from the sharp-nosed prow to the transom, from the keel, with its fish-finder sonar to the single mast and its thorny crown of microwave communications antennae, belonged to him.

Yet the pride of ownership was not without a thrill of pain. Inheriting something, anything, was a double-edged sword, and Russell had said a hundred times, he would rather have his father back, alive and well, rather still be “Junior Russ,” as Duquesne called him, and still muddling along in the lab for his own amusement, than be Doctor Russell in his own right, lord of the lab, master of the *Tiger Shark*, coordinator of Project Aquarian.

A cloud passed over the sun but he did not notice. His mood darkened to match, and for a time he did not even see the data displayed within the confines of the screen. There were times when responsibility weighed so heavily on Russell’s young shoulders that it threatened to overcome him.

And there were also times when youth and vitality were his best allies, and when he chose to forego his father’s science in favour of what his mother had called “blood sense.” Instinct. The sixth sense with which the healthy young animal knows what it needs. Russell’s memories of his mother were few and faint, but this much of her wisdom, he never forgot.

The first he knew of Eric’s presence was the soft rasp of a footfall in sand behind him, a shadow cast across his bare back and the drip of water, shockingly cold on his sun-hot skin. He yelped, rolled over and shielded his eyes against the glare of the sky. Above him, Eric was bronze, bare and ... Eric. Aquarians were mostly the same. They were proud of themselves, with good reason, and as the old aphorism went, ‘If you got it, flaunt it.’

“I brought you something,” Eric teased, and before Russell could

move he dropped a very large, very live crab onto Russell's middle. With a yelp, Russell squirmed away and knocked the creature onto the sand. Eric snickered and picked it up by one claw. "Do you want it for lunch?"

"I packed the frij for lunch!" Russell protested. "Lobster, prawns, green salad and white wine."

"I know." Eric looked into the crab's face. "I guess you get a reprieve, kid," he told it, before he looked down at Russell, eyes dancing. "I'll put him back. And I'll fetch the frij."

"Do that," Russell groaned as he sat up, propped his elbows on his knees and brushed damp sand from his torso.

Eric's eyes were very light in his deep, bronze face. His hair was a shaggy, uncut mane of rich brown which could be soft, silky, but was at this moment slick and shining with water, glued to his skull. The rest of him was almost hairless, as was so typical of the Aquarian subspecies. His legs, his chest, even his underarms and groin wore only the slightest suggestion of body hair. Apparently, it was the trade-off for the specialised nature of his skin.

As Russell watched, Eric strode into the surf and without even pausing to take a breath, dove under. But unlike Russell, or any 'normal' human being, Eric did not resurface. If Russell was any judge, he would be down there, looking for exactly the right burrow for the crab, a nook in the rocks where he could place the creature and safely leave it. He could be down for ten or fifteen minutes. To Eric it was all the same. As soon as he went under, the rest was automatic. He did not even have to think about what he was doing.

The third eyelid, that nictitating membrane, would close over his eyes to protect them from the water. The muscles of his chest, so much stronger than Russell's, would begin to work, forcing the water into his lungs at ten regular 'breaths' per minute ... and in those lungs, the magic itself took place.

Somewhere inside Eric Devlin, and inside the fifty other Aquarians who lived and worked in and around Pacifica, was something very like the genetic pattern of a salamander. Something that modified the tissue of their lungs, made the organs so receptive to oxygen that even when it was suspended in water, it was possible for them to breathe it.

In air, Eric breathed only three or four times per minute. He could derive all the oxygen he needed to walk and work, run and make love, without breathing much at all. Only in water did he 'breathe' as often as Russell breathed. Only in water did the profound differences between his physiology and Russell's become really apparent.

Sometimes the differences fascinated Russell; sometimes he hardly noticed them. Today, he could not have cared less how Eric had been bred, who his parents were, who had carried and birthed him. The sight of Eric's smooth, bronze skin, his wide back and the perfect globes of his bare buttocks as he walked into the surf to put back the crab — all this conspired to banish work from Russell's mind.

He waited, unconsciously marking time, until Eric surfaced. He had been down twelve minutes when his head appeared, far from shore, beyond the boat. He sculled lazily toward the *Tiger Shark* and hoisted himself over the transom, seemingly without effort. Aquarians were like that. They were born in the water, took their first breath underwater, learned to swim long before they could walk. Even their thought processes were different.

They thought not in two dimensions, but in three ... they approached problems of logic from angles which a 'normal' human would never have anticipated ... they were so strong, pound for pound of body weight, that they were disconcerting. They could run so fast, so hard, and for so long, not even an Olympic athlete of previous decades could keep up. It was all about oxygen-transfer, Russell knew, and yet none of the science made any difference when his glands began to play their own games.

He was two years younger than Eric, and he had no memory of a world without Eric in it. Once, he had stretched his memory back to its furthest reaches, trying to pinpoint his earliest recollection. He thought he glimpsed the sunlight dancing on the surface of the water, thought he felt the warm caress of the afternoon heat on his skin as he lay on his back and kicked. Someone picked him up, turned him over and held him, buoyant, in the water, until he learned to float and keep his nose up out of the liquid, and dog paddle in the pool. A shape was moving beneath him, fluid and supple, and quick as an otter. It surfaced then, and childish laughter gurgled into Russell's face for a moment before the older boy was gone again, down into the depths of the pool, where the lobsters and crabs nested. Russell tried desperately to follow his new friend, and was snatched back just as his lungs began to burn and his mind began to reel ... it was the first time he realised, he must never, never take a breath beneath the surface. He was not like Eric. He would never be like Eric. The knowledge infuriated him.

Twenty-seven years later, what had changed? Russell brushed the drying sand from his limbs and shaded his eyes as he looked out toward his boat. The *Tiger* bobbed, moving under Eric's weight as he found the refrigerated hamper and checked it. The engines started with

a growl and he nudged the boat back inshore, into the shallows just off the white sand, where she had begun. In another hour the tide would carry her off again, but her mooring line would hold her steady. The current would not make off with her completely.

As her bow touched the beach Eric shut down the motors, and Russell watched him hop over the side. His skin was gleaming, the colour of burnished copper after a lifetime's exposure to the sun and elements. But that skin did not age the way normal human skin must. It would be plump, smooth and supple until Eric was in advanced old age.

The magic was just beneath the surface: fat. A layer of special fatty tissue, oddly similar to that worn by dolphins and orcas. To the touch, Russell was never aware of it, but it insulated Eric from the cold of the surface layers of the sea, and much more importantly, it prevented his skin from losing or absorbing very much water. If Russell remained in the sea for longer than an hour he would look down to find his fingers, toes (and various other extremities) reduced to prune-like wrinkles. Eric never pruned. His skin was smooth, plump as a child's, brown as a ripe hazelnut, hairless and perfect. Aquarian.

All this, Russell knew on an academic level. He could quote the gene syntheses that had been used to build his partner; he could quote the poly-chromosomic structure of the language of his biochemistry. Countless times, he had seen a videotape of the actual moment of Eric's conception, when John Grant's hands took the genetic material from a donor egg and implanted the vastly modified DNA of Eric's father. Russell had poured over the screen a hundred times, watching his own father's hands, the instruments, a glass dish and a wisp of living tissue that was invisible without a powerful microscope.

In that instant, under those lights and lenses, Eric Devlin began. Was Man playing God? And if he were, should he not? Where lay the future? Gerald Duquesne believed he knew.

The thoughts were both inspiring and disturbing. Russell thrust away the haunting images as he watched Eric hop back over the side of the boat and splash ashore through water no more than knee-deep, with the lunch hamper tucked under his arm. He was everything John Grant and Gerald Duquesne had hoped for. He was the first of the Aquarians, the great experiment, and for three decades they had called him "Russell's project."

Technically, if he was anyone's project, he was John Grant's. But since John's death old Duquesne had tacitly agreed to let Eric almost escape. Almost. The more rope he gave the young man, at this crucial

age and time, the better the grip on Eric he would maintain. And Eric still had to fulfil one very specific duty before his involvement in the project could ever be properly concluded.

He must breed, and breed true. And this, Russell knew, was what worried Eric more than anything. He closed down the screen on the computer and shuffled sideways to make space on the rug as Eric fetched the hamper. It was past time that Eric tried to make a baby. He was thirty years old, and he could have been called upon to further the experiment as long as ten years ago, if Duquesne had chosen to insist.

If he had, Russell guessed, Eric would have quit Pacifica. Russell sprawled out on the rug and looked up at his companion against the sky. The nictitating membrane had closed over his eyes, protecting them from the brilliance of the sun, and he was not squinting. His hair was beginning to dry, falling in glistening ringlets about his neck and shoulders. His chest rarely ever moved when he was in the air, and his skin was so smooth, Russell felt his fingers seduced once more.

He ran them up Eric's smooth thigh, cupped his buttock, and when Eric turned toward him, Russell held the bony pelvis between his hands. Eric looked amusedly at him, and Russell deliberately kissed his belly, between his navel and the root of his cock. Eric gave a throaty, husky chuckle, and his own hands cradled Russell's head.

"I thought you said you were hungry," he protested.

"A man does not live by food alone," Russell remonstrated.

Eric fell to his knees, and his hands clasped at Russell's nape. His eyes were as blue-green as the sea, very light against his tan. "Something's bothering you, Rusty. It's been bothering you for days. When are you going to tell me about it?"

"Aquarians are not natural telepaths," Russell said drily, though he shivered. Sometimes it did seem that Eric could read his mind.

"You and I have been together our whole lives," Eric scoffed, "I don't need to be a mind reader to know when something's got you twitchy."

"The only thing that's twitching," Russell said gruffly, "is my cock, and that's because you're here, and close, and gorgeous, and I want ..."

"To be fucked?" Eric leaned closer and kissed him.

His mouth tasted of the sea, which was only fitting. When Eric came, the seed of his loins tasted of the sea too, and his musk smelt like the tide at slack water. Russell loved every scent and taste of him. He could not remember a day when he had not been in love with Eric, though he conceded that there must have been a few years in childhood, before he had any knowledge of sex and physical love, when his

feelings must have been better tagged as profound friendship.

The friendship was still there, as strong as ever. That would never change, but since Russell had been twelve years old and Eric had been fourteen, they had been much closer than friends or brothers. Russell celebrated the anniversary of the day when they become lovers more fervently than birthdays or holidays or graduation from school.

"So, what's wrong?" Eric asked as his tongue traced Russell's lips, outlined them and delved within. "Is Murchison bothering you? Why don't you kick him out of the lab? He's screwing up his project in any case. Two words to Duquesne, and he'd cancel the lunatic's grant right here and now."

"And what about his measurements, the survey?" Russell made a vague gesture at the sea.

"You can finish out the project." Eric threw open the hamper. "Lord knows, you're doing most of it now. If it comes down to the wire, Russell, I can take it over. When it comes to water, I'm qualified." His eyes sparkled.

"Over-qualified," Russell said ruefully.

"Have a prawn." Eric waved one under his nose. "Is it Bill Murchison?"

No." Russell sprawled on the rug in the shade and watched as Eric twisted in a corkscrew and then tugged the cork out of a bottle of Pacifica Moselle.

He sniffed at the neck of the bottle and made a face. "Phew. They're not improving the wine, are they? Still smells like it's been brewed from seaweed and old socks." Eric set it aside to breathe in the hopes it would improve, and returned to the the hamper for the lobster. "So if it's not Murchison that's worrying you —"

"It's you," Russell said quietly.

Eric hesitated, looking down at him with arched brows. "What have I done?"

"Nothing," Russell said drily. "Yet." He waited, watching as Eric's forehead creased a little more, and nodded. "Yeah. *That*. The big *that*."

"You've had a memo," Eric guessed.

"On the system this morning," Russell affirmed. "From Duquesne. He's getting impatient."

The lobster went back into the hamper and Eric parked his buttocks on the rug. He cupped his chin in his hands and glared at the sea. "I don't have to take part in this."

"But you should." Russell rubbed his back soothingly. How soft and gorgeous was an Aquarian's skin. The little layer of fat that insu-

lated him against the cold and the water gave him an almost childlike feel, and yet underneath this were the steel-hard muscles of a man. The combination made Russell shiver again, as it had made him quiver almost every day for twenty years. "Eric, will you just give it a try? It's only to please the old man."

"I know." Eric turned toward him, kissed his neck, tongued deliberately inside his ear, which he knew drove Russell wild. "Let's not talk about it now."

Russell sighed, even then surrendering. He let Eric move him down on the rug, flat on his back. Argument and logic fled from his mind and he grasped after the last tendrils of rational thought. "Got to talk about it some time," he warned as Eric straddled him, knelt astride his thighs and lifted him out of the scrap of white lycra he wore.

"Some time," Eric said huskily. "But not now. I'm hungry, I'm thirsty, I'm drowsy. I want my lunch, I want to fuck you and I want to take a nap before I have to go back to work."

"That's my boy," Russell said fondly as he stroked Eric's chest. "Never backwards about coming forwards."

"Why, should I be?" Eric kissed him soundly, while his hand did wondrous things between Russell's legs, fetched him up as hard as a harpoon. Eric's tongue traced down and down across his chest, circled his navel and explored territory that was long, long familiar.

The first time they had done this, they had been in Eric's jetskiff, four or five kilometres to windward of the *Atlantis*. The two young boys had gone out to collect fish samples, which meant Russell would handle the holding nets, the Polaroid, the ruler and scales, and Eric would dive down and fetch both the best and worst looking specimens. After an hour of this they were bored. Eric climbed back onto the skiff and stretched out to warm up, and Russell noticed that he had cut himself on the lines or nets. A little wound was bleeding sluggishly on his shoulder. Before he realised what he was doing, he was sucking it clean; and Eric was holding him; they were kissing and rubbing. Becoming lovers was so natural, they hardly noticed they had done it at first, but Russell's heart was suddenly so large it seemed to fill his whole chest, and even as a young boy he knew what love ought to feel like.

Today, the sky was fleecy blue, but the satellite pictures promised heavy weather. Flat on his back with Murchison's work and the cold lunch basket completely forgotten, Russell smiled and squirmed and sighed as Eric worked a lot of lotion into him and lifted up his legs. He wriggled his shoulders on the rug and cautioned, "Careful of that sand."

"You mean, careful I don't get any of it up you?" Eric leaned down and kissed the corner of his mouth. "Now, would I be so careless? What's this feel like?" Very slowly, he slipped his fingers around Russell's soft, well-accustomed anus. "That ought to feel like silk and velvet!"

"Silk and velvet," Russell admitted. "I won't say another word."

"Yes, you will!" Eric was suddenly between his legs, taking them up over his shoulders.

"Will I?" Russell's voice was a little breathy, since his knees were pressed into his chest and his balls were churning with glorious excitement, like an exquisite fire. "What will I say?"

"You'll tell me how much you love me," Eric challenged. He laid the snub, hot tip of his cock against Russell's opening, stroked it there but did not even begin to enter. "Tell me before I do one more thing!"

"Or ...?" Russell would have chuckled if he'd had enough breath. "That sounds like it ought to be delivered complete with an ultimatum."

"Tell me, or ... I'll change my mind and have lunch instead," Eric said teasingly.

Not for an instant did Russell believe this, but he knew how much Eric loved to hear those words. In the dark at night, cocooned in their bed above the lab, it was Eric's pleasure to speak of love, and it was a language he spoke so fluently, Russell wondered if it might be yet another characteristic natural to Aquarians. He caught Eric's forearms in a firm grip and held him tightly as he said,

"I love you. I adore you. I don't know what I'd do without you. Succinct enough?" His tone was light, bantering, teasing, but the words were absolutely honest, and their truth was not lost on Eric, though he appreciated the banter.

"Mmmm," he rumbled, as if pretending to consider. "I think so." And, as if to prove it he thrust swiftly through the clench of Russell's sphincter and was suddenly inside him.

Thought fled from Russell's mind like clouds before a gale, and what became of the next half hour, he would never know.

Chapter Two

The clouds massed up while Russell was dozing, and when he stirred awake it was to find the whole sky grey, the sea some colour between gunmetal and green, and the wind uneasy. Out toward the horizon he saw whitecaps, and the *Tiger Shark* was shifting restlessly.

He looked around for Eric and saw him at once, perched on a boulder, a little way down the beach. The laptop was on his knees and if Russell was any judge, he was finishing Murchison's work. He seemed to relish it. Perhaps he did. Little academic was asked of Eric, and yet he had a fine mind. No one was more aware of this than Russell. As boys they had taken their schooling together, first in Pacifica and later on the *Atlantis* under Duquesne's eagle eye. Eric had never been behind Russell in the work, yet when they were eighteen it seemed natural for their academic ways to divide.

Russell went on, working alongside his father and slowly, deliberately building his degree. Eric was often called into the lab, but always "on the far side of the microscope," as he put it. The Aquarian wasn't on the project. He *was* the project. Eric bore it all with a resigned sigh and a smile. When he was not in the lab, enduring tests and scans, exams and exercises, he was in his natural environment. The sea.

He earned his living as a shallow-water diver, and around Pacifica he was never going to be short of work, though not all of it was well paid. Still, he earned better wages than Russell, who was muddling along on the last of his father's research grant while he waited for the approval of his own. This week Eric would be tagging fish or counting lobsters, examining shark nets and checking tidal charts; next week he would be conducting guided tours of the 'underwater wonderland' beneath Pacifica, though it was the work he liked least.

Tourists from Himalaya and Alpina arrived in Pacifica by the plane

load, almost every day. The big wing-in-ground-effect jets roared in from the north, docked on the North Quay and disgorged their enormous human cargoes. In an hour, after Customs were done scanning for illegal substances, the vacationers were installed in their closet-sized rooms at hotels like the Acropora, and began to look for amusement. The whole reason they came to Pacifica was to get into the warm, blue-green water and see the marvels of Gerald Duquesne's industry.

Their guide ensured that they put their breathing gear on the right way and did not actually drown one another, and Eric Devlin was very good in the part of chaperone. On the West Quay, his party would get into dive skins, put on the rebreathers, and just before they hit the water Eric told them the truth. He was a living example of the very marvel they had come here to see.

Then, they gawped at him. They stared as he went under and began to breathe, they wanted to touch him to see if he was warm, as if they believed he was half fish, cold and scaly. Before they were told he was an Aquarian, they treated him as they would treat any other human being, but as soon as they learned that he was different, Eric swore he was treated like a freak.

Worse yet, he was accustomed to it. Fifty more like himself lived and worked in Pacifica, and all of them, though they were unofficially called 'Duquesne's Children,' suffered the same unthinking discrimination the moment they came into contact with visitors to Pacifica. It was never easy to be the outsider, the one who was ostracized for his differences.

In other centuries, Russell had read, men were given similar treatment because their skins were dark, their eyes were slanted, they called God or gods by a different name or names; or because they were sexually attracted to their own gender. None of it made any sense to Russell. Sometimes he wondered if he would have survived at all in the world of the past ... or if he would have wanted to. To a man of this age, it seemed so cruel.

He stretched, reached for his shorts and wriggled into them. He had been asleep for an hour after thorough sex and a large lunch, and every cell in his body felt renewed. When Eric fucked him, for hours afterwards he was aware of a delicious shivering inside himself. There was no other feeling like it, and he almost preferred it to the heart-racing excitement of being the aggressor in their lovemaking. Almost. Then again, there was no other feeling like being inside Eric.

The Aquarian was engrossed in the work and did not notice as Russell stood. Perched on his boulder, he was bronze-skinned and still

bare. He had tied on a sweat band to keep his hair out of his eyes as the wind rose and he began to concentrate on the screen, but otherwise he was gloriously naked. The juxtaposition of the animal and the academic — the computer and the long, glistening bare limbs — never failed to woo and excite Russell, but for the moment he was sated. He only feasted his eyes for several minutes before he began to repack the frij and drop the sunshade.

“Are you anywhere near finished, Eric?” he called up the beach. “Going to have to leave soon — see the sky!”

“I’ve been watching that come up for the last hour,” Eric shouted over the tossing wind. “I thought you could use a little sleep, but if we don’t get this done in the next half hour, Alice is going to be coming down on top of us like an express ferry.”

“Alice?” Russell was rolling the yellow sunshade around its tubular steel legs.

“Tropical Cyclone Alice, first of the season.” Eric gestured at the northwest sky, though he was still intent on the laptop. “It was on the radio while I was showing those tourist jerks around the fish farms this morning. The weather monitors have been watching her for the past couple of days. Pacifica will go onto station-keeping in a few hours. The mechanics were rushing to fix a couple of the lateral thrusters while I was down there.”

“Hmm. All of which means we ought to get back and secure the lab,” Russell guessed. “I wasn’t aware it was going to be a full storm.”

Eric looked at him over the top of the laptop’s screen. “You scientists are all alike.”

“What?” Russell was labouring toward him with the hamper under one arm and the bundled-up shade beneath the other.

“You can see about as far as your own pet project, and anything else that happens is on another planet!” Eric gave him a cheeky grin, knowing full well that he had invited a joke at his own expense.

Always quick to respond, Russell looked him over with hot blue eyes. “Well, I can certainly see as far as my project,” he growled, and licked his lips salaciously. “I’ve still got a lot of research to do. A lot to study.”

With a chuckle, Eric hit the standby key and closed down the computer. “What kind of study?”

“Responses and reactions,” Russell purred. “I’d like to know how the Aquarian glands respond to various ... stimuli.”

“Oh, yes?” Eric’s brows rose. “Want to run a wire up me and see what comes up on the computer?”

"Nope." Russell leaned over and kissed him. "Want to run my cock up you, and see what comes up right below your belly."

"That," Eric decided, eyes sparkling, "sounds like a plan. Home?"

"Home." Russell nodded at the *Tiger*, which had drifted out on the tide again and was tugging hard on her mooring line. "You'd better get her in, I don't want to get this gear wet."

Leaving the laptop on the boulder, Eric was up and moving in one lithe bound. Russell envied him those genes. He didn't burn in the sun, never needed sunglasses, and he rarely seemed to feel either heat or the cold. He plunged into the hip-deep water and did not resurface until he had gone past the boat. The next Russell saw of him, he was hoisting himself onto the transom, water streaming from him in bright cascades.

The powerful V8 engines gargled into life and he brought the boat inshore with a few gentle nudges of the throttle. She grounded with a rasp of her keel on the white coral sand, and Eric perched on the bow, hands outstretched to take the hamper and shade. As he stowed them in the well, under a fluttering blue tarpaulin, the wind began to gust strongly, and Russell was not surprised to see him fiddling with the radio.

The mooring line was coiled up on the bow, and as Eric tuned the big shortwave Russell reversed the engines, opened the throttle and let the *Tiger* pull herself off the beach. The sky was steely grey now, and the sea had that certain smell. He looked back, saw the palms along the whole length of Breakwater beginning to toss and thrash. Tropical Cyclone Alice would do the cay a lot of damage, and perhaps a repair crew would have to come out from Pacifica next week. Artificial islands were so delicate ... and natural islands were almost unknown now.

The bow came around as Eric found the channel, and Russell cocked an ear to the radio before he opened up the engines for the ride home. The weather forecast for the next twelve hours was repeating continually on Channel 44 in five languages, and many warnings were out. All of Pacifica would be determinedly battenning down, and the pilots would soon be moving the *Atlantis* into a position where she could provide shelter, as a windbreak, between Pacifica and the incoming cyclone.

"Move it, sunshine," Eric advised as he turned off the shortwave, "or you're going to get your feet wet! And you," he added with a little self-mockery, "don't have webbing between the toes."

"Neither do you," Russell quipped.

"Only because your Dad didn't write frog code into the recipe that cooked me up," Eric sighed. He lowered himself into the seat beside

Russell's and rummaged in the footwell for the jeans and tee shirt he had left there as soon as they had put Pacifica behind them. Eric was indifferent to being wet so long as he was naked.

He detested clothes because they felt 'disgusting' when they were damp, yet the water was as natural to him as dry land was to Russell. If it had been socially acceptable for him to be naked in Pacifica, he would have been grateful. But even here, even now, the only men and women who went about in the state the gods created them were the hustlers, the star attractions from sex shops like The Beach Bum, and nothing annoyed Eric Devlin more than being treated like a hustler.

One afternoon when he was seventeen, his usual state of undress had got him into a lot of trouble and only his quick wits and quicker fists had fetched him out again. A crew was in from the Flinders Islands, the land masses that had once been the tops of a range of mountains in Australia. The vibrant, raucous, violent crew considered everyone in Pacifica fair game. Someone had told them that a beautiful bare backside on the waterfront was ripe for the plucking, because it invariably belonged to a hustler. No one had bothered to tell Eric he was in any jeopardy as he tied up his skiff, lugged his gear ashore and packed his bag for the walk home from South Quay.

The next he knew, he was caught between three enormous Australian tuna farmers, draped over a barrel between The Barnacle Inn and the bait shop. Kicking and screaming did not fetch anyone to his aid, nor did it deter the men. Not until he caught one of his admirers by the balls and the other by the ear, and wrenched both hard enough to draw blood, could he struggle to his feet. He was strong and quick, and a flurry of good, economical blows put the men down while they were still too astonished to protest.

Then he ran, and didn't stop until he was home. Outraged and indignant, he told the story, and John Grant snorted with laughter as he handed the young Eric a pair of cutoff jeans. Let it be a lesson to him, John suggested glibly, not to flaunt his butt like a hustler — or he would certainly be identified as one.

It was apparently the first time Eric had fully realised, other people saw him as a man, no longer a youth, much less a kid. At seventeen he was almost fully grown, and his body was already superbly muscled, since he had worked it hard all his life. He had taken no harm from the encounter on the Quay, and it changed the way he regarded himself. All at once, he began to think of himself as a man, an adult, and a sensualist.

Today, he wriggled into jeans and tee shirt as Russell jockeyed the

boat through the rising chop. The ride was very rough and they were thoroughly shaken by the time they had put Breakwater on the horizon, but Russell had already seen the flash of colour, the masts and towers of Pacifica. He throttled forward to get them home fast as the sky darkened another shade and a few enormous spots of rain began to fall.

Already the *Atlantis* was manoeuvring, and Russell gave it all the sea-room he could manage. The prop-wash from the ship was so powerful, it could actually sink a small craft, and when she got up any kind of speed she was literally unstoppable. It took five or six kilometres to slow her, and tugs to stop her completely, so today she was manoeuvring at dead-slow, just a few metres per minute, with her tugs, the ocean salvage vessels *Alexandra* and *Zenobia*, coupled port and starboard for safety. And still she was an awe inspiring sight. Russell could never see her without being overwhelmed, breathless, though he had grown to manhood in her shadow.

She was Gerald Duquesne's dream: three times the dimensions and mass of a supertanker, with six engines, six screws, powered by the reactors salvaged from two American nuclear submarines. She stood so tall above the water that clouds seemed to form around her radio masts, and from a position on her stern, one could not even see the bow. She was the life's blood of Pacifica.

Aboard that ship was the factory that processed seawater, producing every drop Pacifica drank; the generators that provided the city with its power; the schools and universities that educated its children; the hospitals that cared for its sick; the hydroponic greenhouses where Pacifica's fruit and vegetables were cultivated; the tanks where the city's sewage was turned into fuel and plant food. Aboard that ship were the machine shops that serviced and repaired every mechanism on Pacifica; the factories where clothing and furniture were made; laboratories where drugs were produced and tested; and the offices from which the entire city was controlled. On the massive stern was a landing field; on the bow was an earth-station dish twenty metres in diameter; amidships, multiple docks opened in the side, where smaller vessels, freighters and trawlers, could be drydocked to refit.

She was so massive, she even seemed to create her own weather patterns, and when a storm like Alice threatened, her enormous engines were started, to manoeuvre her into position where, like an immense wall, a mountain range, she would deflect the wind and calm the water in her lee.

In her shadow, Pacifica rested uneasily, but at least it did rest. The

city was fragile, even flimsy, but for the past forty years the *Atlantis* had taken care of it like a hen with a single chick, and it was stronger now than ever. Five thousand vessels, ranging in size from Russell's powerboat to small freighters, were moored along the straggling quays which radiated like the arms of a star from a central body which had been known as the Waterfront since before Russell was born. Most of the boats were people's homes, but many more people lived on the Waterfront itself.

Businesses of all kinds thrived 'ashore,' from the bordellos where Bill Murchison liked to spend his time to the more conventional taverns, markets, and the arcades where traders jostled for space. Waterfront was the hub of Pacifica, and most of the city's people thought of it as dry land. In fact, it floated on a buoyancy tank the size of the dome of a cathedral, but it was so large — five hundred metres across — that it hardly seemed to move with the tide. When one was accustomed to the roll and yaw of a deck, Waterfront seemed completely stable.

When they passed into the lee of the *Atlantis*, the wind fell away and the sea calmed. Russell had cut back his speed as he crossed the wake of the enormous ship, and threaded through the log-jammed inshore traffic with an expression of impatience. He had one eye on the threatening sky as he turned into his parking space and killed the engine, and Eric was already moving.

From West Quay they had only a short walk home, but the laptop was not exactly waterproof. Eric hopped over onto the concrete and reached back over to take the machine out of Russell's hands. "Go on, you get home and send the data," he said as Russell joined him on the sun-warmed 'ground.' The impression was that one had actually come ashore, for white walls and gaudy banners, shingle roofs and communications masts at the far, inshore end of West Quay welcomed the traveller home. "I'll secure the boat and meet you," Eric promised. "I want to do some shopping."

"If you're sure," Russell said doubtfully. He twisted his neck to see the sky, up above the towering shape of the *Atlantis*. "You're going to get drowned."

"Me?" Eric tousled his companion's hair. "Not even physically possible, Rusty, my man!"

"Figure of speech," Russell said primly. "Even you can get a stinking cold, and you know how miserable it makes you. Six months ago, your nose was ..." he searched for a word. "Incandescent. You could read in the dark by it."

"I'm Aquarian, not immortal," Eric said tartly. "And I want to get

some eggs and sausages and tomatoes, and beer." He straightened and helped Russell off the boat with the computer and hamper. "Ten minutes. Twenty, max, I'll be home."

"Tea or coffee?" Russell asked sweetly.

Eric gave him a grin. "Coffee. Black, with honey and a drop of the Irish."

"Your wish is my command," Russell said resignedly as he began to toil toward home and Eric jogged away from him down the wharf.

In fact, it was no imposition. Another day it would be Eric struggling home with a load of heavy gear, dive tanks or ripped nets, while Russell rushed off to market. Pacifica sprawled away along the line of Waterfront, a maze of humanity, a labyrinth of industry and activity, while to seaward a hundred boats were jostling into and out of parking spaces, reminiscent of the road traffic Russell had heard about, and seen on the videos which depicted the world that was gone.

Home was a building on the south side, on Aurealis Wharf. It could have used a lick of paint, Russell thought as he picked up his pace, hurrying through the steadily gathering rain. The sea wind quickly stripped the paint of any surface, and one's only recourse was constant running repairs.

The lab was downstairs with the apartment overhead; long windows overlooked the wharf and the fish farm, and on the gentle slope of the roof sat their communications dish. In the alley between the building and the shed belonging to the fish farm was a rainwater tank which gathered the run-off from the roof.

Just as the rain began to pelt, Russell ducked inside. Harvey squawked loudly from the shelf in the window, among the potted plants, and Russell gave the big scarlet macaw a glare. "It's all right for you, tucked up warm and cozy," he grumbled to the bird as he kicked shut the door. "Some of us have to work for a living!"

The doorway opened into his tiny, cluttered office. The lab was to his right, the stairs right before him. Harvey had the freedom of the whole building, but for some reason he preferred the office to the apartment. Perhaps because he could screech at the passersby more effectively from the window there. He hopped onto Russell's arm and pecked his ear. Russell scolded him, and headed for the stairs.

The apartment was warm, dim, a little airless. He flicked on the lights and the air conditioning, plugged in the kettle with one hand, and with the other put down both the laptop and Harvey. The screen in the corner was flickering for his urgent attention with a welter of email, and as he spooned coffee into matching mugs he scanned the list

of the afternoon's messages, looking for anything that could not wait till tomorrow.

Two were from Duquesne's office on the *Atlantis*. Of course. Where the hell was the data? One was from Bill Murchison, and at this, Russell swore. Murchison was asking for 'a small loan,' which meant he had been gambling, or might even have been rolled by a hustler off a ship that had recently pulled out and left. It had happened before. The man was a fool, and if Russell could help it, he would not be separated from his money on Murchison's behalf.

The other messages were unimportant. An account from the gas-shop across Waterfront that filled his argon tanks, and yet another email from an Aquarian girl on South Quay who had been trying to woo Russell into choosing her to be Eric's partner in the next phase of the Aquarian project. She was a nice kid, and Russell was seriously considering agreeing, so long as he could talk Eric around. And *that* was the doubtful part.

The water was boiling, and he made his own coffee, with cream and three sugars, while he queued Duquesne's flood of data for transmission. As he sent it, an alarm in the corner of the screen gave him fair early warning of trouble, and he grunted as he read off the news. Harvey squawked for attention and Russell petted him absently.

"Damn, we've lost a linker."

"Lost a linker, lost a linker," Harvey echoed in his hoarse little voice.

Russell looked into the macaw's dark eyes, and not for the first time wondered how much he understood. Not enough to answer the phone coherently, more was the pity. "Lost," he repeated, "a linker. Which means old man Duquesne's office will just have to send someone over here for a flashdrive, because we're not going to be back on the air till it's been fixed ... and it's not likely to get fixed in this weather!" He shooed the bird off the desk, picked up his coffee and the phone, in that order.

He was punching numbers when he heard the door and Eric's voice called, "It's only me! Do you know the wiring conduit is busted between the eaves and our aerials?"

"Might explain why we seem to have lost our uplink," Russell said drily as feet thundered up the stairs. "I'm calling the *Atlantis*, they'll have to send someone over for a flashstick. No damn way am I climbing about on the roof in a gale." As Eric appeared, Russell made a face. "You're soaked."

"I know." Eric lobbed a plastic-wrapped parcel at him.

Russell fielded it deftly as the phone began to ring and a voice said

pleasantly in his ear, "You've reached the *Atlantis* Hydrographic office."

"Hello love, is that Cynthia? It's Russell, here. I know you've been waiting for your data, but we're off the air, sweetheart. Can you send a courier over tonight? We can't send a thing till we make some repairs, and with the cyclone coming in ..."

He listened politely as she rambled about her work, the office, her family, old Mr Duquesne, and promised to send someone, first chance she got. Russell was only listening with half an ear. Lightning flickered brightly, mauve and white; the lights momentarily dimmed and Harvey squawked in alarm. Russell shushed him and watched with appreciative eyes as Eric stripped out of the cold, sodden jeans and wrapped himself in an enormous blue-and-white bath sheet.

He stood by the heater, hands around a coffee mug, rubbing one foot on his other shin for warmth. Beautiful. The line of his back and hip and leg was sheer poetry, Russell thought, and he had lost the thread of Cynthia's ramble when she said loudly,

"Hey, you still there, Russell?"

"Still here," he assured her. "Say the last bit again."

"I said, it might be morning before I can get someone out to you for the data," she repeated. "This storm is just about right on top of us. We've got an incredible view of it from this side of the *Atlantis*. You're not going to see much from where you are, but if you turn on your TV, we're going to broadcast the whole time."

"Oh, great, I'll do that. Ciao, honey," Russell said swiftly, and took the opportunity to hang up. "My God, that woman can talk!"

"Because she fancies you," Eric said glibly.

"She what?" Russell scoffed. "She's old enough to be my mother!" He unwrapped the parcel and murmured in appreciation as he saw the fruits of Eric's shopping. Four thick sausages made of chicken, rabbit and herbs, two plump tomatoes and four big, brown eggs. "Nice! We having these for dinner?"

"Mmmm." Eric stretched luxuriously. "My treat."

"Damned expensive," Russell said doubtfully. Real meat, real fruit.

"I can afford it." Eric dropped his towel and turned his chilly back and rump to the heater. "Dinner in bed?"

Russell chuckled. "You're a hedonist."

"I know. I like it." Eric gave him a wink and poised, hands on hips. "You shove the food in the wok, I'll fix the bed and tidy up some of this mess. It looks like a typhoon hit this place!"

They had been busy for days and the apartment betrayed their neglect. Books, drives and hard copies, movies, Russell's discarded

clothes, used crockery and beer cans littered every surface. While the food sizzled in the deep electric wok Eric made swift work of the mess, and by the time the sausages were crisp, the eggs were firm and the tomatoes soft, the 'disaster zone' had been converted back into a comfortable apartment. The bed was made with the pale turquoise sheets, Harvey had been fed, the TV was on, and the mattress was still bouncing under Eric's weight as Russell fetched a tray and plunked down beside him.

"This is the life," Russell groaned as he punched his pillow, skewered a sausage on his fork, caught Eric in the crook of his arm and began to eat.

Thunder rolled and the sky whited out with lightning. Rain sluiced over the window glass, shutting out the whole world and making the apartment feel like a closed cocoon. Cosy, Russell decided. It was warm and humid, the food was good and the company was exquisite. Eric was warm and smooth, plastered down his right side as they curled in the middle of the bed. Drowsy and content, Russell nuzzled his shoulder and gave his attention to the TV.

As usual when a spectacular storm hit, the *Atlantis* broadcast a whole, live show. They were recording and editing the storm, and every spectacular lightning flash was displayed. The film crew saved them over the space of ten or fifteen minutes, and then rolled their amazing footage. Between light shows they ran file footage of the great storms of years gone by, interviews with Pacifica personalities who told firsthand accounts of hair-raising experiences, educational segments which explained to children how storms were generated, what made them go, and sometimes curious music videos drawn from the last century, depicting storms breaking over the land.

Land fascinated Russell, because he had never seen it. His whole life had been spent in Pacifica, on the *Atlantis*, and on the tiny artificial islands, sand cays like Breakwater and Headland. One day, he promised himself drowsily as he finished eating and curled up with his head on Eric's chest, one day he would travel, go and see the world. He would get down to the Australian islands, take a look at trees that grew in dirt, see animals in a field ... but not soon. Not when there was trouble brewing again.

"You heard there's war again in Rhutan?" Eric whispered, as the video crew took a break and the *Atlantis* broadcast the day's news. "Goddamn the bastards, they're at it again! Fighting over ten square metres of dry land. I mean, what's the point?"

"The point," Russell told him, "is that it's the only ten square

metres they've got left, and they have an objection to getting wet." He reached over and turned down the sound as the pictures of atrocity, violence and despair in the tiny island freestate of Rhutan became too depressing. It had been a lovely little archipelago, and the idiots were ruining it. Russell could abide almost anything but stupidity. He turned his back on the TV and buried his face in Eric's chest. "I don't waste my time with that."

Eric's arms closed around him. "What do you want to do?"

Russell snuffled against the Aquarian's sweet, soft skin. "Guess," he invited as his teeth nuzzled toward Eric's left nipple and gently bit.

"Oh," Eric crooned as he wriggled down in the bed. "Now, guessing is one thing I just don't have to do."

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