

(From) SWIMMER, A NOVEL

Reader Orientation:

Ailana is a Swimmer, bioengineered to forage the dying seas for medicinal sponges, tunicates, and snails, largely for the benefit of elite Passengers living aboard a “cityship.” The year is 2482, and the Port of Atlanta is the last stronghold of what remains of humanity. Catastrophic climate change has decimated life on earth and brought sea levels to their highest possible point.

The novel opens as Ailana, thousands of miles away, in the Southern Sea, is cast from a giant blowhole onto an apparently-deserted island that should not exist. With her protective swimskin torn and herself severely injured, she manages to find shelter in a cave in the nearby bluff. Without knowing so, she is suffering from a drug-induced amnesia. The last thing she remembers of her home is a giant wave rising over it.

This excerpt begins Chapter Three, in which Ailana’s memory begins to return to her, and she is able to recall the morning of what will prove to be her final day in the Port.

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Three: Ingrid

6 January 2482.

Port of Atlanta. Day of the Wave.

As I Remembered...

I stepped outside my dormitory, stretched my arms. *Seventeen. The year of my full strength.* The 7 AM temperature was below 115 F—cool enough for walking the half-mile to the Breeding complex and Birthing center, where I would have my hour with Ingrid. A rare smear of blue showed through the gray haze of the climate shield.

“I will call a robocab.” Pike followed me. Likely, or so I thought, he was more anxious about my returning in time for the afternoon mission than anything else.

“No, thank you, Pike. I wish to walk.” I slipped my reflective silver tunic over my head and waved at the sky. “The weather!”

“Remember your value,” he reminded me. “And guard your time. There is the afternoon mission to the Texas shoals to prepare for.”

I often thought that if the nerves in his face had not been deadened, he would be working his expressions to the extreme. The Government believed that surgical and chemical “corrections” of this sort discouraged apprentices from forming attachments to their Handlers. Maybe it worked for some Swimmers.

Dola, on her way to the outer Louisiana sandbars, rolled her eyes. “She is *seventeen*, Pike. And she is our very own Platinum. ... Happy birth date, partner.” We raised hands, one several inches from the other, palms flat, fingers outspread. This morning, Dola would join the Douglas and Ridley duo. She was not thrilled about it. I could see it in the way she tightened her mouth, the corners turning down, the way she had greased back her newly sheared hair, the nervous way she picked at the swimskin on her arm. We had lived together, worked together since we were five. I knew her mannerisms by heart.

“Do not take risks with your body, on your so-called *walk*,” Pike continued. “Watch your feet. Sometimes the Sweepers fail to clean as they should. ... Activate the alarm on your computer if anything seems out of the ordinary. A Trusty will come immediately.” Pike was such a worrier.

What luxury to be out on my own, unchaperoned even for a few hours. I pulled the loose hood of my tunic over my head and tried to enjoy the walk, despite the awkwardness of actually walking, given my natural turn-out, my hips and legs optimized for swimming—and despite my nervousness. All my life, Pike had been my mentor as well as Handler, the one individual with permission to correct my behavior by touching. Surely, he did not suspect... Surely no one suspected anything. I had been more than careful.

I slowed my breathing, stabilized my heart rate. Aberrant readings could send an alert to the Trusties automatically. *Trust no one*. I heard in my mind Rebeke’s voice.

Anyone I passed could be a Trusty. Some were androids these days, masters of disguise, flawlessly programmed to mimic workers of all sorts. ... I was taking take no chances. I carried in the deep pocket of my tunic only a few tokens and my Platinum award, genuine paper, rolled and tied.

I had secured permission to show it to Ingrid. Nonetheless, the guards at the Birthing center would inspect every inch of it. The high-tech Swimmers' computer on my wrist—that would elicit only a cursory glance. I was counting on it, at any rate. The micropipette-syringe, small as a sliver of fingernail was well-hidden beneath the wide silver band. It lay flat against my swimskin where—if I was mistaken and the guards insisted on examining it—all I had to do was flick my finger. The injection would pierce both swimskin and underskin, stop my breathing, then my heart. I would not risk compromising Rebeka and Ingrid.

All the structures in the Port, white concrete poured over steel, were egg-shaped, arranged in various configurations. These monolithic domes could withstand up to Category 19 storms. Concrete walkways meandered through the sandy yards that surrounded each complex. Pike had not needed to worry about debris or even dust. The Sweepers had swept and scrubbed; the walkways were pristine. They had raked the yards flanking the paths into their typical patterns—spirals, interlocking circles, parallel lines, starbursts.

I took the southern path, past the Dolphinarium with its dark secrets that made my jaws clench, secrets I almost wished I had never uncovered; the marsh—too unstable for building—where Ingrid had taken Rebeka and me when we were small; the harbor where supply vessels left

nightly to make deliveries to the cityship. Where, in weather emergencies, the *Pride of Atlanta* squeezed itself in.

Inland, to the west of the harbor lay the expansive Museum compound that included the Aquarium and Plant Conservatory. Because there was still a chance that our missions might expose us to the life forms on display there, we Swimmers had been allowed to visit both the Aquarium and certain open areas of the Conservatory, the rows of greenhouses being off-limits. I lifted my chin, inhaled deeply. If I were lucky, the curious perfumes from flowering trees and shrubs might reach the walkway. But today, there was not the scent of flowers but something else. From habit, I looked for the worker, a Sweeper, who seemed to appear along with that particular smell, an odd combination of sea salt and earth and pine.

Directly across from the Museum compound was the main entrance to the sprawling Government compound with its even higher wall. This was the center of the Port, its nucleus, “the still point of the turning world,” according to the Sweepers, who had their own names for things. Here I had to move aside as small hulled robocabs with dark-tinted windows hummed in and out of the gates.

There he was. A male Sweeper, his head lowered, working on his hands and knees near the pathway. It was odd, the way this Sweeper, with his distinctive scent and wide shoulders that even his robe could not conceal, seemed so often close by. It was almost as if he were stalking me. But that was a ridiculous notion.

At the moment, he was utterly focused. He was designing with a metal hand-rake rows of zig-zags interspersed with diagonal lines. The wide brim of his head-shield hid his face completely. Never looking up, he sang in a low voice, almost a whisper: *I will show you fear in a handful of dust*. Was he speaking to me? Surely not. I picked up my pace, continuing west along the blinding-white concrete path.

Other workers, including Trusties, ignored these designs, the nonsense words. “The murmurings of imbeciles,” they said.

I knew better. Rebeka had taught me to be alert, especially to the markings in the sand. Three triangles arranged in pyramid-form warned of danger. She had taught me to listen to the puzzling words, or rather, word puzzles, the Sweepers sang. “Pay attention,” she said, “to the mood and tone—what is left unspoken behind the words. Listen and take heed.”

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow, chanted a pair of young female Sweepers, *out of this stony rubbish?*

They sang in a high-pitched minor key, all the while raking spiral and starburst patterns in the yard that stretched to the entrance of the Manufacturing quadrangle, our source for nutrition, clothing, and electronics. The power grid was also located here. A black-suited Trusty, too sullen to be an android, stood by as guard. Followed me with her eyes. Meanwhile, I chose to ignore the warning in the Sweepers’ tone.

Near the Engineering complex, its center dome surrounded by seven smaller ones, a Chemical Engineer in her deep green bodysuit gazed toward me a few seconds longer than she should have. A Mechanical Engineer in orange coveralls turned his head to follow me as I passed. Engineers for real, or Trusties in disguise? There was no way to know.

Slow down, Ailana. I will be at the entrance to sweep in seven minutes. Rebeka's thought-message jolted me. I pulled the hood of my tunic down over my face. I steadied my breathing, my pulse. Trusties, especially those who were androids, caught even the slightest odd expression, the smallest unexpected movement.

I stumbled. That would appear innocent enough. Swimmers were clumsy walkers. Everyone knew this. I moved out of the path of an oncoming robocab and knelt, massaged my right foot, then the left. I rose, stepped with more deliberation. I paused to scold a female Sweeper who crouched, scrubbing the path in front of me. The pinkish sores of sun poison disfigured her face; she was likely reaching the end of her usefulness. *Fear death by water*, she whined. She reached claw-like fingers toward my ankle. I stepped aside. Her mind was gone, poor thing. Several decades of scopolamine compliance patches could do that to you. Especially a Sweeper whose mind was weak to begin with.

We—Rebeka, Ingrid, and I—had never forgotten ourselves when it came to thought-speech. As soon as she discovered we had the gift, Ingrid began teaching us to conceal it. I will never forget my Birther's vivid descriptions of "deletion": Trusties dragged you outside the Port, outside the safety shields, and abandoned you in the Frontier. There, huge black birds called

vultures—yes, some birds still survived, she insisted—red-eyed birds bigger than we were, would hold you down with their giant claws and peck off your flesh bit by bit with beaks sharp as knife blades. The eyes went first.

A complete fabrication, of course. Deletion, Pike later insisted, involved humane incineration. But what choice did Ingrid have but to burn into our brains images that inspired terror?

Rebeka's psychic ability far outstripped both Ingrid's and my own. It always had. At this moment she knew precisely where I was and exactly when I would reach the entrance to the Birthing center.

Sure enough, just as I reached the sheltered porch, Rebeka, broom in hand, stepped as though by accident from the Underground. She looked like any common Sweeper in her floor-length mud-colored shift, her wide-brimmed head-shield—a necessity, since Sweepers were expected to clean pathways and other public areas even during the toxic midday hours, when the other workers sought shelter. The climate shield was far from perfect. Even my own swimskin and tunic couldn't provide 100% protection.

Rebeka went to her knees, hands raised, in an attitude of begging. She kept her face lowered. I questioned her harshly. "What have you done for the welfare of the workers or of the Passengers that I should reward you?"

Year after year, this humiliating charade, although it never fazed Rebeka.

“What will you buy with the token, if I decide to give it to you? Speak up. I cannot hear your mumbling.”

Ingrid's time came. Earlier than we anticipated. Rebeka's thought-words flowed like an underground river.

Blood rushed to my face. Our plans—what I knew of them—were ruined.

I fixed my gaze above Rebeka's lowered head. I folded my arms, sighed in an impatient manner. “I do not have all day. Explain. What have you done to deserve the token? And what nutrition will you purchase?”

Rebeka's physical voice wheedled on about her empty stomach. Her mind-voice ran beneath: *Just yesterday, a boy. Webbed fingers and toes, wide shoulders, large heart and lungs, twenty-six inches! Longer even than we were. A perfectly-formed Swimmer. Born with a cetacean swimskin. A successful Series Four. ... Our plan has changed, but we will continue. Have you prepared the injection?*

Fourth series. My new bloodkin was my replacement.

Rebeka moved her head a little, but she kept her face toward the ground. I half-wished she would look at me. Her eyes were a deep green color, aberrant like her hair and skin, like everything about her. My frown remained firm. I refused to bend even slightly, despite my impulse to reach down and touch the red curls escaping from the head-shield. An absurd thought.

Touching was forbidden. And to touch a Sweeper!—that would set off alarms throughout every inch of the Port.

With my mouth-voice lecturing Rebeka for her laziness, I spoke with my mind: *I have what you requested.*

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A year ago, when I—we—turned sixteen, Rebeka had thought it wise not to be seen with me. But on my way out from visiting Ingrid, she guided me telepathically to the edge of the walkway where it met the sand, the walkway she swept and scrubbed every day. She directed me to lose my footing near a pebble beneath which she had hidden a micropipette-syringe no larger than a splinter. She had fashioned it to lock inside the wristband of my computer. It held a micro-drop of extender which would interact with the conotoxin that I, over the course of the year, must somehow divert and collect from the rare conus.

We would have one chance to save Ingrid's life. Her next, this twelfth, birth, would be her final one. Retirement was mandatory. She would be permitted to nurse the infant for six months. Then, the Trustees would transfer her to the distribution wing of the Surgical complex, where her organs would be harvested, then transplanted or banked for future use. Years ago, she had agreed to this, to ending her life as a Donor.