

VOYAGER 15 SNEAK PEEK

The Seventh Wave

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PRELUDE

The aftertaste of fear.

It'd been the title track from his first platinum album. Back then he didn't know what the hell it'd meant; he'd just sung what they handed him and sucked up the success. Now its metallic bitterness coated his tongue so thickly he could barely swallow.

He hawked and spat through the limo's open window.

Damn head cold.

He inhaled and drew power down into his abdomen just like they'd told him. Immediately the cold symptoms subsided.

'Nearly there, Mr D,' the driver said over his shoulder.

'Yeah, right,' Double D said, wishing he could snort a quick line, but they'd been adamant about that. No drugs. Not even booze and the Club had the chits on him to force the issue.

A million. How the frig had I hocked up a million to them? The last album was supposed to have fixed it, but it had bombed — 'hype without the spike' had been the kindest review.

Now he was being sent out to do PPAs (private-personal-appearances) like some 'He used to be ...'

What the hell! Who would know if I had a quick heart-starter to get me past this head cold?

Double D squished himself into the corner so the driver couldn't see what he was doing and pulled a silver hip flask from his inside jacket pocket. Halfway to his mouth his hand froze. Icy tendrils slid beneath his shirt and clawed their way up his back.

No! Not again. How could they know what I'm doing?

How did they know anything?

He mouthed a protective incantation. The snaky coldness paused, hovering, as if it were listening from the hollow space at the back of his neck. When he'd finished the incantation it slid in anyway, spreading throughout his head like spilt black ink, causing him to cry out as the pain blossomed.

He sobbed and threw the flask out the window.

'All right! It's gone. It's gone! Just stop it.'

The pressure wavered.

Frantic, he repeated the protective chant and begrudgingly the pressure drew back and out of him like a stinking, sucking ebb tide. Gulping with relief, he willed the tightness in his chest to subside, finally feeling it sluice back to the pit it had emerged from. As it disappeared he thought he heard someone laughing inside his head.

Can they read my freaking mind?

Awareness gradually crept in through his senses: the rich leather smell of the upholstery, random raindrops on the window opposite, while outside, one of his old songs, duff-duffed with bass, played from a boom box Holden pulled up at the lights beside them. The people inside saw him, pointed; one stuck out his tongue and wiggled it in imitation of Double D's old trademark. He closed the window, isolating himself behind the tint from the very ordinariness of the Sydney night.

'You okay back there, Mr D?' the driver asked.

'Yeah, sure,' Double D mumbled, shivering away the last of the attack, if 'okay' meant just being alive.

'The hotel is up ahead.'

'Thanks.'

Double D flipped up the lid of the make-up case and peered into the mirror. A puffy face with red-shot eyes stared back. He forced himself not to look away, then rubbed a concealer stick into the lines radiating from the corners of his eyes. It was like looking at someone else. Someone ugly. He sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

Damn cold.

The limo dropped him back at his Elizabeth Bay apartment just after midnight.

He collapsed onto a softly cushioned lounge. He was exhausted and still needed a drink. Damn teetotal event run by the hotel staff raising money for who knew what. He'd hugged and kissed everyone as he'd been 'told', sung his three songs and then cleared out.

He needed a drink.

He reached for the phone on the small table beside him to ring for one, his hand jerking back in surprise when it rang.

'Hello?'

'You left early.'

Double D sat up. In the mirror opposite, his eyes looked wide and scared. He recognised the voice.

'Mr Cervantes?'

'Good of you to remember. How is your cold by the way?'

Double D sneezed three times in quick succession. When he recovered he spoke slowly, realisation dawning slowly. 'You did this. Why?'

'In three days Helix will be having what they call a Gathering. All of the heads of the white covens and clans will be coming together for the very first time. They'll all be staying at the Adelphi and, thanks to your efforts tonight, they'll catch the virus that you have so kindly given to the hotel staff.'

Double D felt lightheaded, his face in the mirror was white. 'What's the virus? What have you given me?'

'Oh, it won't affect you, don't worry, or even give the waiters and porters any more than a mild head cold for that matter. But anyone who uses magic to suppress the symptoms, or uses their particular talent while the virus is circulating in their system, will die; most horribly too.'

The silence expanded into the space between them.

'But I tried to suppress the symptoms. Are you sure it won't affect me?'

'Absolutely. We have other plans for you.'

The voice chuckled at the end of the phone, then laughed. It became louder. Double D held the receiver away from his ear. The sound continued, filling his head, echoing throughout the room, and did not end until Double D slammed the receiver down.

Double D hadn't exactly signed in blood when the Club offered to help his lackluster singing career five years ago, but he hadn't realised that the 'life' in their membership offer would be theirs if he ever crossed them.

Now he really did need a drink. He pushed himself to his feet and immediately doubled over.

The metallic taste returned to his tongue — the dark pressure was coming back.

They were coming for him. He'd heard stories about this. He thanked his stars that he'd listened to his paranoia and prepared a safe space.

With an effort Double D regained control and hurried into the master bedroom, unclipping the latch that made the twin beds into a king. He pushed them apart to reveal a pentagram painted on the floor.

Hastily he poured salt over the outline of the pentagram from a drum kept in the cupboard then lit candles and placed them at the four cardinal points, reciting a ward over each. He repeated the ritual around the doors and windows before stepping over the salted lines and into the pentagram.

Double D tried to concentrate. It was harder without the coven's energy.

The lights dimmed and darkness rolled in from all sides like thick, black fog. In the distance he thought he could hear chanting. He focused harder, pushing so hard against the encroaching darkness that he could almost taste its foulness. It felt oily and corrupt.

Why haven't I been able to see that before?

The chanting faded, the darkness hesitated as if unsure. He was winning! He pushed back a little harder. His wards were holding. He was going to be all right.

In the stillness the door to the balcony rattled as if someone were trying the lock. Whatever it was moved to the windows, seeking a way in. His gaze went to the adjoining bathroom.

The vents! I didn't seal the damned vents!

Something black and red streaked through from the bathroom and exploded against the inside of the balcony doors. They burst open, slamming against the outside walls and shattering the glass. Wind howled through, whipping and flapping the thick drapes.

Inside the pentagram, Double D dropped to his knees. The man's voice on the phone repeated itself in his head: '... we have other plans for you.'

The wind was bitterly cold, chilling and prickling his flesh, sucking at his strength and energy. It carried something else within it: snatches of the same disembodied chanting.

The Club was singing me!

He bent over, covering his ears with his hands, crossing his legs, instinctively shielding his genitals. In one of the other rooms something was howling.

The oily, dark tide came rolling back, teasing the very edges of his protective pentagram.

'No,' he wailed. The velocity of the wind increased. It hurtled around the room, faster and faster until it formed a mini twister.

He covered his eyes, but his traitorous, shaking fingers spread apart. Through the gaps he watched the twister work along the lines of the pentagram, greedily sucking up the salt crystals.

His makeshift psychic defences crumpled one by one, gagging on the foetid blackness that flooded over them like foul backfill.

Death came slower, but all the while the terror remained.

It remained for a very, very long time.

CHAPTER ONE

Contacting the undead was easier than convincing them to stay put and chat.

Freda placed her hands on either side of the scrying glass and tried again.

'Come on, love, where are ya?'

Sometimes she talked out loud. That was the beauty of living on her own. She could do whatever she damn well pleased.

Normally she wouldn't need the glass. Aemon used to say she could scry in a puddle of her own pee if she really had to, but that was when they were kids in Sydney — when they still talked as well as fought.

She brought Sivia's image to mind and tried again. This time the surface of the glass shimmered. Freda could feel Sivia in there, but it was like she was beneath the surface of a frozen lake, unable to break through. Freda sighed and turned away, flopping back into her old rocker.

Sometimes the rocking helped make a connection. If nothing else, the regular creaking rhythm helped her think and was comforting against the wildness of the Tasmanian winter outside. Often she'd start rocking like this and the next thing she knew the sun would be gone, swallowed whole by night. But not now. Not with Sivia needing her.

Her niece was in the Netherworld, neither fully alive nor completely dead. Freda'd been trying to get in touch with her for days now but the reception from that damned channel was always snowy.

Freda decided to try a different frequency. Hauling herself out of the chair she carefully covered the scrying glass, allowing her fingers to trail fondly across the velvet cloth. It had been purple once, cut from a swatch she'd had left over from some curtains. Now its faded lavender pile had worn thin with age and use. A bit like her.

She left the table and hobbled down the narrow tongue-and-groove hallway that bisected her small cottage, heading towards an old bakelite phone. Everyone with talent was using those new thought thingys nowadays, or they had until that damn virus stripped them of power.

What were they called again?

'Ah, Thought Messages, that's them. TMs,' she said out loud, nodding, pleased with herself. Telepathing a packaged chunk of thoughts along with the attached emotions/baggage always sounded a bit too personal for her liking.

She picked up an old address book from beside the phone and turned to one of the dog-eared pages, her finger tracing the words as she recited them at the wall mirror. Then she dialled a three-digit number.

When it connected she placed the handset on the table and stared into the mirror. This glass was ether-based so it operated at a higher frequency than the water-element Venetian scrying glass she'd just tried to use in the living room. White mist rolled in from the sides, filling the glass. Freda brought her hands together in front of the mirror then moved them apart as if drawing open a set of

muslin curtains. The fog swirled back and gradually the image of a young woman appeared, her long blonde hair wafting about her head as if she were floating in water. Her face was chalk white, highlighting full red lips and violet eyes.

‘Sivia. Can you hear me, love?’

‘Yes.’ The voice sounded flat and carried a faint echo. Freda placed her forefinger at the ‘three’ in the phone’s rotary dial and turned it halfway. The echo disappeared. ‘Aunt Freda, can you hear me? I’ve been trying to get through to you for so long.’

‘Yes, I know, love. It’s taken me a while to figure it out. We’ll have to be quick though, this link is still wonky. I don’t know how long I can hold the connection.’

‘I got it, Aunt Freda. I got the Plate. The Club won’t be able to capture the wave without it.’

‘You what?’ Freda momentarily lost her concentration and Sivia’s image shimmered, threatening to disintegrate. With an effort she re-assembled it, feeding juice into the connection.

‘Where is it? No, don’t tell me. This is like a party line. Anyone could be listening in.’

‘The Plate breaks down into three pieces. I sent them into the Void, Aunt Fre. The co-ordinates are all in a TM I sent you before the Club caught up with me. You need to pick up the message. It’s important. Tell Dad —’

Sivia’s image in the glass grew smaller. She was moving backwards as if she were hooked on a fishing line, her eyes pleading, mouth moving without sound. Freda touched her fingers to the glass, over Sivia’s lips.

‘Love.’

Sivia’s hand reached out and Freda imagined her niece’s mouth replying ‘forever’ before she shrank to a coloured dot at the very edge of the mirror, and finally winked out.

‘Oh, love,’ Freda said, shaking her head and wiping a tear from her cheek with the back of her hand. There was no way back from the Netherworld. The best she could wish for her niece was a speedy crossing once the Club, or whoever had her trapped there, let her go.

Freda shuffled back to her rocker. There was no telling if anyone had been listening in, and even now was zoning in, waiting for her to retrieve Sivia’s message.

Being a seer was no picnic. You didn’t get next week’s Gold Lotto numbers. All Freda ever received were isolated flashes. Sivia had been coming to her in dreams for the past week and Freda had been trying to synch in ever since.

Now she had to decide whether to meddle or not. Usually she ‘knew’ when to. She would just feel it. That was the difference between being a seer and a doer. Whenever she did interfere there was always a price to pay and a cost for someone to bear. It all depended on whose lines of power she crossed as to who and how much. That was the trouble with the damn universe; everything was connected. Change one thing and three others would tilt over and crash into nine more.

She had to find that Thought thingy, that was for sure. Sivia had sacrificed too much not to. What's more, she wouldn't be able to tell anyone about it. Not yet. Not until Sam and Callum accepted their legacy and Aemon took his head out of his backside.

This extract is not final and should not be quoted for review purposes.

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