

# swanwatch

Officially, the five exiles on the station were the Initiates of the Fermata. Unofficially, the Concert of Worlds called them the swanwatch.

The older exiles called themselves Dragon and Phoenix, Tiger and Tortoise, according to tradition based in an ancient civilization's legends. The newest and youngest exile went by Swan. She was not a swan in the way of fairy tales. If so, she would have had a history sung across the galaxy's billions of stars, of rapturous beauty or resolute virtue. She would have woven the hearts of dead stars into armor for the Concert's soldiers and hushed novae to sleep so ships could safely pass. However, she was, as befitted the name they gave her, a musician.

Swan had been exiled to the station because she had offended the captain of a guestship from the scintillant core. In a moment of confusion, she had addressed him in the wrong language for the occasion. Through the convolutions of Concert politics, she wound up in the swanwatch.

The captain sent her a single expensive message across the vast space now separating them. It was because of the message that Swan first went to Dragon. Dragon was not the oldest and wisest of the swanwatch; that honor belonged to Tortoise. But Dragon loved oddments of knowledge, and he could read the calligraphy in which the captain had written his message.

"You have good taste in enemies," Dragon commented, as though Swan had singled out the captain. Dragon was a lanky man with skin lighter than Swan's, and he was always pacing, or whittling appallingly rare scraps of wood, or tapping earworm-rhythms upon his knee.

Swan bowed her head. *I'd rather not be here, and be back with my family.* She didn't say so out loud, though. That would have implied a

disregard for Dragon's company, and she was already fond of Dragon. "Can you read it?" she asked.

"Of course I can read it, although it would help if you held the message right-side-up."

Swan wasn't illiterate, but there were many languages in the Concert of Worlds. "This way?" Swan asked, rotating the sheet.

Dragon nodded.

"What does it say?"

Dragon's foot tapped. "It says: 'I look forward to hearing your masterpiece honoring the swanships.' Should I read all his titles, too?" Dragon's ironic tone made his opinion of the captain's pretensions quite clear. "They take up the rest of the page."

Swan had paled. "No, thank you," she said. The swanwatch's official purpose was as a retreat for artists. Its inhabitants could only leave upon presenting an acceptable masterwork to the judges who visited every decade. In practice, those exiled here lacked the requisite skill. The captain's message clearly mocked her.

Like many privileged children, Swan had had lessons in the high arts: music and calligraphy, fencing and poetry. She could set a fragment of text to a melody, if given the proper mode, and play the essential three instruments: the zither, the flute, the keyboard. But she had never pursued composing any further than that, expecting a life as a patron of the arts rather than an artist herself.

Dragon said, kindly, "It's another way of telling you your task is impossible."

Swan wondered if Dragon was a composer, but would not be so uncouth as to ask. "Thank you for reading me the letter," she said.

"It was my pleasure," Dragon said. It was obvious to him that Swan was determined to leave the Initiates and return home, however difficult the task and however much home might have changed in the interim. Kind for a second time, he did not disillusion her about her chances.

## SWANWATCH

Tiger was a tall woman with deceptively sweet eyes and a rapacious smile. When Swan first met her, she was afraid that Tiger would gobble her up in some manner peculiar to the Initiates. But Tiger said only, "How are you settling in?"

Swan had a few reminders of her home, things she had been allowed to bring in physical form: a jewelry box inlaid with abalone, inherited from her deceased mother; a silver flute her best friend had given her. The official who had processed Swan's transfer to the station had reminded her to choose carefully, and had said she could bring a lot more in scanned form, to be replicated at the station. But where homesickness was concerned, she wanted the real item, not a copy.

Swan thought about it, then said, "I'll adjust."

Tiger said, "We all do." She stretched, joints creaking. "You've seen the duty roster, I trust. There's a swanship coming in very soon. Shall I show you what to do?"

Although Swan could have trusted the manuals, she knew she would be sharing swanwatch with Tiger and the others for a long time. If Tiger was feeling generous enough to explain the procedures to her, best not to offend Tiger by declining.

Together, Tiger and Swan walked the long halls of their prison to the monitoring room. "You can do this from anywhere on the station," Tiger said. "The computers log everything, and it only requires a moment's attention for you to pray in honor of the swanship's valor, if you believe in that at all. Once you've been here a while, you'll welcome the ritual and the illusion that you matter. They do value ritual where you come from, don't they?"

"Yes," Swan said.

"How much of the fermata did you see on your way here?"

"They wouldn't let me look." In fact, Swan had been sedated for her arrival. New Initiates sometimes attempted escape. "They said I'd have plenty of time to stare at the grave-of-ships as an Initiate."

“Quite right,” Tiger said, a little bitterly.

Doors upon doors irised before them until at last they reached the monitoring room. To Swan’s surprise, it was a vast hall, lined with subtly glowing banks of controls and projective screens. Tiger grasped Swan’s shoulder firmly and steered her to the center of the hall. “The grave-of-ships,” Tiger said, adding an honorific to the phrase. “Look!”

Swan looked. All around them were the projected images of swanships in the first blush of redshift, those who had cast themselves into the fermata and left their inexorably dimming shadows: the Concert of Worlds’ highest form of suicide art. In any number of religions, the swanships formed a great fleet to battle the silence at the end of time. Some societies in the Concert sent their condemned in swanships to redeem themselves, while others sent their most honored generals.

“The ship doesn’t need our assistance, does it?” Swan said.

“What, in plunging into a black hole?” Tiger said dryly. “Not usually, no.”

Tiger muttered a command, and all the images flickered away save that of the incoming swanship and its escort of three. The escort peeled away; the swanship flew straight toward the fermata’s hidden heart, indicated in the displays by a pulsing point.

Swan did not know how long she watched that fatal trajectory.

Tiger tapped Swan on the shoulder. “Breathe, cygnet. It’s not coming back. You’ll just see the ship go more and more slowly as it approaches the event horizon forever, and you don’t want to pass out.”

“How many people were on the ship?” Swan said.

“You want statistics?” Tiger said approvingly. Tiger, Swan would learn, was a great believer in morbid details. She showed Swan how to look up the basic things one might wish to know about a swanship: its crew and shipyard of origin, its registry, the weapons it brought to the fight at the end of time.

“I had thought it would be more spectacular,” Swan said, gazing back

at the swanship's frozen image. "Even if I knew about the—the physics involved."

"What were you expecting, cygnet? False-color explosions and a crescendo in the music of your mind?" Tiger saw Swan bite her lip. "It wasn't hard to guess how you'd try to escape, little musician. It's too bad you can't ask Tortoise to write music for your freedom, but all Tortoise does anymore is sleep."

"I wouldn't ask that of Tortoise," Swan said. "But I have to understand the swanships if I am to compose for them."

"Poor cygnet," Tiger said. "You'll learn to set hope aside soon enough."

Tiger kissed Swan on the side of the mouth, not at all benevolently, then walked away.

In the silence, Swan listened to the ringing in her ears, and shivered.

After her nineteenth swanship, Swan hunted through the station's libraries—updated each time a swanship and its entourage came through—for material on composition. She read interactive treatises on music theory for six hours, skipping lunch and dinner: modes and keys, time signatures and rhythms, tones and textures, hierarchies of structure. The result was a vile headache. The Concert of Worlds was as rich in musical forms as it was in languages, and despite Swan's efforts to be discriminating, she ran into contradictory traditions.

Swan returned to the three instruments she knew, zither, flute, and keyboard. The station replicated the first and third for her according to her specifications. Drawing upon the classics she had memorized in childhood and the libraries' collection of poetry, she practiced setting texts to music. Sometimes she did this in the station's rock garden. The impracticality of the place delighted her absurdly.

Dragon often came to listen, offering neither encouragement nor criticism. Rather than applauding, he left her the figurines he whittled. Swan decorated her room with them.

"Are you an artist?" she asked Dragon once after botching her warm-up scales on the flute.

"No," Dragon said. "I could play a chord or two on your keyboard, but that's all."

Swan turned her hand palm-up and stepped away from the keyboard, offering. Smiling, he declined, and she did not press him.

After fifty-seven swanships—months as the station reckoned time—Swan asked the others if she could move her keyboard into the observation room. Dragon not only agreed, but offered to help her move it, knowing that Swan felt uneasy around the station's mechanical servitors. Phoenix said she supposed there was no harm in it. Tiger laughed and said, "Anything for you, cygnet." Swan was horribly afraid that Tiger meant it. Tortoise didn't respond, which the others assured her was a yes.

Swan wrote fragments of poetry for each ship thereafter, and set them to music. The poetry itself was frequently wretched—Swan was honest enough with herself to admit this—but she had some hope for the music. She was briefly encouraged by her attempts at orchestration: bright, brassy fanfares for ships that had served in battles; shimmering chords for ships built with beauty rather than speed in mind; the menacing clatter of drums for those rare ships that defied their fate and swung around to attack the station.

Tiger deigned to listen to one of Swan's fragments, despite her ordinary impatience for musical endeavors. "Orchestrate a battle; orchestrate a piece of music. This isn't the only language that uses the same verb for both. Your battle, cygnet, is a hundred skirmishes and no master plan. If you plan to do this for every swanship that is and has ever been, you'll die of old age before you're finished."

"I'm no general," Swan said, "but I have a battle to fight and music to write."

"I can't decide whether your persistence is tiresome or admirable," Tiger said. But she was smiling, and although she didn't seem to realize it, her foot was still tapping to the beat.

## SWANWATCH

Swan had already returned to the keyboard, sketching a theme around the caesuras of an ancient hymn. Lost in visions of ships stretched beyond recognition, she did not hear Tiger leave.

Phoenix had held herself aloof from Swan after their initial introduction. This was not a matter of personal ill-will, as Dragon told Swan. Phoenix didn't hold anyone but herself in high regard, and she locked herself away in pursuit of her own art, painting.

Perhaps Swan's diligence impressed Phoenix at last. It was hard to say. Tiger paid as little attention to Phoenix as possible, and urged Swan to do likewise. "She's forever painting nebulae and alien landscapes, then burning the results," Tiger said contemptuously. "What's the point, then?"

Dragon said that everyone was entitled to a few quirks. Tiger remarked that anyone would say that of a former lover. At that point, Swan excused herself from the conversation.

"I have heard that you started the first movement of your symphony. I should like to hear it," Phoenix said to Swan through the station's most impersonal messaging system.

So Swan invited her to the observation room at an hour when no swanships were scheduled to arrive. She played the flute—her best instrument—to the station's recordings of the other parts; the libraries had included numerous sequencers. Phoenix applauded when Swan had finished. Her expression was reluctantly respectful. Gravely, she said, "This captain of yours—"

*He's not mine, Swan thought, although perhaps I am his.*

"—do you know anything of his musical preferences?"

Swan shook her head. "I tried to find out," she said. After all, if the captain had possessed enough influence to send her to the swanwatch, he might also be able to influence the selection of judges. "He commissioned a synesthetic opera once, which I have no recording of. Beyond that,

who knows how he interprets the grave-of-ships? And if I am to do each swanship justice, shouldn't I draw upon the musical traditions of their cultures? Some of them contradict each other. How am I to deal with this in a single finite symphony?"

Phoenix lifted an eyebrow, and Swan felt ashamed of her outburst. "Do you know why we're here, Swan?" she asked. She was not referring to their official mission of contemplating the fermata to further their art.

"It seemed impolite to ask," Swan said.

"Tiger is a war criminal," Phoenix said. "Tortoise is a scholar who resigned and came here to protest the policies of some government that has since been wiped out of time. It might even have done some good, in the strand of society where he was famous. I, of course, am here as unjustly as you are." She did not elaborate.

"And Dragon?"

Phoenix smiled thinly. "You should ask Dragon yourself. It might make you think twice about your symphony."

Swan wouldn't have realized anything was wrong if Tiger hadn't sent her a message while she was in the middle of working on her second movement. The idea had come to her in the middle of her sleep shift, and she was kneeling at the zither, adjusting the bridges.

"Urgent message from Tiger," the station informed her.

"Go ahead," Swan said absently, trying to decide what mode to tune to.

Tiger's voice said, "Hello, cygnet. It's Tortoise's watch, but he seems to be asleep as usual, and you might be interested in going to the observation room."

Tiger's tone was lazy, but she had flagged the message as urgent. What was going on?

"Station," Swan said, "who's in the observation room now?"

"No one," it said.



## SWANWATCH

"Is there a swanship scheduled to arrive soon?"

"There is an unscheduled swanship right now."

Swan rose and ran to the observation room.

Tiger had been correct about the importance of ritual. No matter how smoothly a ship descended into the fermata, Swan always checked the ship's status. Swanships did occasionally arrive off-schedule, but she wondered why Tiger had sounded concerned.

So she looked at the ship, which was tiny, with an underpowered sublight drive, and its crew, a single person: Gzhien of the *Circle of Swords*.

She knew that name, although ages had passed since she had used it. It was Dragon.

She asked the station what the *Circle of Swords* was. It had been a swanship nearly a century ago, and all but one member of the crew had passed into the fermata on it.

"Swan to Dragon," she said to the tiny ship, which was one of the station's shuttles. "Swan to Dragon. Please come back!"

After a heartstopping moment, Dragon replied, "Ah, Swan."

Swan could have said, *What do you think you're doing?*, but they both knew that. Instead, she asked, "Why now, and not tomorrow, or the day before? Why this day of all days, after a century of waiting?"

"You are as tactful as ever," Dragon said, "even about the matter of my cowardice."

"Please, Dragon."

Dragon's voice was peculiarly meditative. "Your symphony reminds me of my duty, Swan. I came here a long time ago on the *Circle of Swords*. It was one of the proudest warships of—well, the nation has since passed into anarchy. I was the only soldier too afraid of my fate to swear the sacred oath to *sing always against the coming silence*. As punishment, they left me here to contemplate my failure, forever separated from my comrades."

"Dragon," Swan said, "they're long gone now. What good will it do them, at this end of time, for you to die?"

"The Concert teaches that the fermata is our greatest form of immortality—"

"Dead is dead," Swan said. "At this end of time, what is the hurry?"

The door whisked open. Swan looked away from the ship's image and met Tiger's curious eyes.

"Damn, 'Zhien," Tiger said respectfully. "So you found the courage after all."

"That's not it," Swan said. "The symphony wasn't supposed to be about the glory of death."

Loftily, Tiger said, "Oh, *I'd* never perform suicide art. There's nothing pretty about death. You learn that in battle."

After a silence, Dragon said, "What did you intend, then, Swan?"

The question brought her up short. She had been so absorbed in attempting to convey the swanships' grandeur that she had forgotten that real people passed into the fermata to send their souls to the end of time. "I'll change my music," she said. "I'll delete it all if I have to."

"Please don't," Dragon said. "I would miss it greatly." A faint swelling of melody: his ship was playing back one of her first, stumbling efforts.

"You'll miss it forever if you keep going."

"A bargain, then," Dragon said. "I was never an artist, only a soldier, but a hundred years here have taught me the value of art. Don't destroy your music, and I'll come back."

Swan's eyes prickled. "All right."

Tiger and Swan watched as Dragon's ship decelerated, then reversed its course, returning to the station.

"You've sacrificed your freedom to bring him back, you know," Tiger said. "If you finish your symphony now, it will lack conviction. Anyone with half an ear will be able to tell."

"I would rather have Dragon's life than write a masterpiece," Swan said.

## SWANWATCH

"You're a fool, cygnet."

Only then did Swan realize that, in her alarm over the situation, she had completely forgotten the theme she had meant to record.

Dragon helped Swan move the keyboard out of the observation room and into the rock garden. "I'm glad you're not giving up your music," he remarked.

She looked at him, really looked at him, thinking of how she had almost lost a friend. "I'm not writing the symphony," she said.

He blinked.

"I'm still writing music," Swan assured him. "Just not the captain's symphony. Because you were right: it's impossible. At least, what I envisioned is impossible. If I dwell upon the impossible, I achieve nothing. But if I do what I can, where I can—I might get somewhere."

She wasn't referring to freedom from the swanwatch.

Dragon nodded. "I think I see. And Swan—" He hesitated. "Thank you."

"It's been a long day," she said. "You should rest."

"Like Tortoise?" He chuckled. "Perhaps I will." He ran one hand along the keyboard in a flurry of notes. Then he sat on one of the garden's benches and closed his eyes, humming idly.

Swan studied Dragon's calm face. Then she stood at the keyboard and played several tentative notes, a song for Dragon and Phoenix and Tiger—a song for the living.