

### 23: The Storm Event

Note: CAVE means Computer Augmented Virtual Environment

Srese entered Ferd's cubby in the Performance Suite just about exploding with laughter. "All those padded jacket make-overs people are wearing out there ...?" she hiccuped. "Crusted with yellow and orange embroidery crusted over the lapels? Really? People think referencing the way I vomited all over mine is to be celebrated?"

"Told you people want to be involved," Ferd said. "Would you like to view last night's instalment of the entrainment?"

"Uh uh." She shook her head. "Seeing it will be almost as bad as it happening to me. I'd rather see the journaling videos, if you don't mind."

"Historical or what's happening now?" Ferd said. "I recommend historical, to be able to pick and graze." At her nod, he keyed in the requirements.

The whole backwall became a larger-than-life view of the surf's edge. About fifteen paces beyond the wall, Srese recalled from her first ever visit outside. "We're witnessing a farewell scene?" she said.

"I think so," Ferd said.

Arno and the youth hugged their three brothers goodbye as they all stood in the wash. The young one, with his torn legging, never more than ankle deep. At least the reason for that was now obvious. The brothers each had a plump water skin around his neck, and a backpack netted of kelp-fibre filled with fish and shell food.

The three travellers ducked through the surf and then one of Gammy's eyes high on the cliff tracked them south. The two remaining, Arno and the youth, walked toward the lagoon.

While the camera did its usual catch-up routine, Srese noticed a series of cuts encircling the youth's arms and legs. "What's wrong with the kid?"

"You won't want to know, Srese, but I guess I'll show you anyway." Ferd said. "We don't know what they're doing, or why. Even with Zoya's help we don't know much at all." Ferd pulled up an earlier scene as murmured his litany of comfort.

In the new-but-older display, the youth lay down in the shallows of the surf and allowed his arms and legs to be held by his brothers. Prefaced with some of the signing Srese's care-mother had not been able to translate, Arno incised several lines around each of the boy's limbs. The rest of the mermen washed the cuts that bled, and appeared to thrust their fingers between the wetsuit skin and the boy's flesh, again and again.

Srese blinked and blinked to miss the most sickening parts.

"All day yesterday the kid himself sharpened that knife." Ferd was full of admiration.

Most upsetting was how these big tears rolled down the kid's face without him uttering a sob or sound. *Yelling* had always helped her. "So the signing?" she said, pinning Ferd with her gaze.

He grinned. Thinking he knew her strategy, probably. "Well, the signing. We were too hopeful. Zoya often knew only that signing was taking place. Because she didn't know what the mermen were talking about, she had no idea what their hand movements referred to, or what words/letters/sounds the signs represented."

"Meanings are culture-specific," Srese said recalling a study topic.

“Sometimes, because Zoya knew the old-time-meaning of a sign, we could have a guess without being able to get confirmation.”

“So we still know nothing about merman culture,” Srese said.

Ferd yawned on with what he’d learned overnight about non-speaking species, like gorillas and parrots, that were taught various sign languages.

Srese cut in. “What about today’s entertainment?”

“I extracted a couple of scenes from the journaling videos,” Ferd said. “Food getting, grooming, and sitting around signing. I added a doctored version of your last contact visit. The scenes with sign language look very exotic now that we know that that is what they are doing.”

They were watching that collation when Royland, chief of biotech, barged in. He grinned. “Bad news,” he said. “The skins they wear, going on the samples we got, is definitely human and definitely female.”

Srese concentrated on keeping her disquiet off her face. She hoped Royland grinned from nerves.

“So the collection program is even more important,” he said.

“Why?” “What program?” Ferd and Srese said together.

“Well … If these mer-people aren’t human, what are they?” Royland counted the points off on his fingers. “Where did they come from? How many more are there? Are they looking for a new place to live? What if they want ours? So you see, we need to find out whatever we can. Eventually we may need to frighten them off.”

Ferd made a rude noise.

“What collection program?” Srese repeated, sounding shrill even to herself.

Royland held up his hands in mock surrender. “All right. All right.”

“You look like you’re enjoying yourself,” Srese said.

He gave her a dazzling smile. “Whenever Gammy organises these games, the bio lab collects reproductive DNA or organises a natural pregnancy event. Which is what my predecessor did when Ferd was the primary avatar. Whatever is deemed appropriate for the particular circumstances.”

Srese barely grasped the significance of the words. “Pardon?”

“You may know that our population is mostly cloned and frequently infertile even with AI-assisted fertilisation?” He waited, as if to find out if she knew.

“I’m waiting as well,” she said.

He raised his eyebrows at Ferd and shrugged. “In the years past we almost died out at least once, from unidentified infections, before we could redress the situation with the help of wayward travellers.” Now he smiled apologetically. “Penetrative ejaculation into a biologically embedded collection receptacle is our preferred strategy, because only in such circumstances is the harvesting almost infallible.”

“Plain language would be good,” Ferd said with a glance at Srese.

Royland nodded and grimaced. “In this case, of course, we may not be able to achieve an *actual* womb pregnancy. And anyway, if the mermen are of a different species to ourselves, fertilisation probably won’t eventuate. Historically …”

“What is he on about?” Srese demanded of Ferd.

“He’s saying that we are to keep this charade going until he can get either merman sperm. Or you pregnant to a merman. Or both.”

“You mean he wants me to grow a merman kid in my *own* body?”

“That is what he is getting at. Yes.”

She didn’t need any help for her reaction. No Gammy. No nanobots. “If you want a cannibal kid so bad, have it yourself! In there!” She whirled and punched Royland in his midriff and ran out doing her flight thing.

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A crowd was gathering in front of the Pit. People carried box meals, privacy tents, bedding, torches and teddy bears.

“What’s going on?” Srese asked Relda waiting impatiently in the queue waiting. She was laden with box meals.

“It’s a storm vigil,” Relda said excitedly. “Caro is already in there bagging our spot, hopefully the one between the bits of the roof.”

Srese recalled their favourite spot in a storm vigil with difficulty. How were either the storm or the spot the most important things on the menu?

“You’ve got a lot of food there, who is all going to be eating it?” Srese said.

“Caro and Zachie, Tye and me. And Phin probably,” Relda said. “You know, our friends. Long time no see, stranger. You’ve already forgotten us?” She blushed. “Sorry. I know you’ve been busy. There will be plenty of blankets if you want to come along. It’s meant to be an all nighter.”

All Gammy’s exterior audio sensors and cams would be directed into the weather. Interspersed with archival cuts of ancient extreme-weather-events, the resulting audio/video was played continuously around the walls of the Pit so that people could experience the recorded mayhem at the same time as the noise and splattering of wind and rain against the per-glass dome. Had to be better than being out in it, people always said.

And that thought led Srese back to the mermen. How they would cope out in it with the huge black waves that she imagined, thundering up the beach, and maybe slamming the mermen against the bottom of the cliffs.

She turned away and pushed back, against the flow. She wouldn’t go through the Nest though, to be waylaid by her care-mother. No problem, the streets through the dormitory urbs were desolate and empty as was the Four Ways in front of the performance complex.

“Good to see you,” Ferd said. “Let’s not worry about Royland and his requirements right now. We have some interesting times ahead.”

“What with the storm warning?”

He grinned happily. “And Gammy wanting the lens shut a.s.a.p. Yours truly resisting.”

“You? What about your bots?”

He looked like he’d caught the hero bug.

“Gammy is exceedingly busy with the image transmissions and the extra sound he’s recording and broadcasting. Plus keeping the habitat going despite temperature fluctuations. With ninety percent of the population in the Pit, Ferd is the only one on the loose who knows

the routines for battening the hatches. Therefore it isn't wise to put Ferd out of action, even if Gammy could spare a circuit."

"But *why* resisting?"

"Here we are with our pretty faces, attracting—in the words of Royland Bio-boss—wayward travellers. Then, when we have them in the cave out front, we shut the doors in their faces? And because why?" He waited for her input.

She shrugged. "The storm?"

He nodded. "We expect a sea storm and can't afford water in our hole. We don't want water damage to our electronics, sensori-felt, and all the other really really important entertainment paraphernalia when they out there have only their *lives*?"

Srese nodded. *Get to the point, Ferd.*

"Their cave is shallow and surge worn. Formed, in effect, by storm waves. And so, yes of course we must have the mermen inside before we shut the hatch."

"They seem to need to be in water," she said.

"That's right. They must have water. I thought ... mmn ... well, we should get on with it. The sea is rising."

Srese followed Ferd closely stepping through the lens. Outside, the air was so cold that she started shivering almost straight away. The waves, as she'd imagined, were huge and black and threatening. The mermen also shivered, and they sat under the dripping arch!

Ferd gestured, and Arno came. The kid didn't. There was a storm of signing between Arno and the kid, and every time the kid met glances with Srese, he refused harder.

"Srese," Ferd said. "Come inside. Let Arno convince him."

"Surely he can see they wouldn't survive in what's coming?"

Already the forward wash lapped the sill of the lens. Like he had a brainwave, Ferd popped the lens display.

The kid smiled and walked in of his own accord, practically on the crest of the first really big wave.

The thundering roar of it was like nothing Srese had ever heard. Ferd dragged her with him and slammed them both to one side of the lens frame. Arno and the kid sprang to the other side.

The next second they were all neck deep in strong, cold water swirling through the lens opening, and in dire danger of being sucked out with the backwash. Ferd's arm across Srese was nearly the only thing that stopped her floating out.

The water swirled back outside, leaving the airlock filled to the top of its sills, and them standing shin deep in water. The water that had poverflowed into the CAVE sank instantly into the floor covering.

"Is that enough water in here?" Srese said. "Because I can hear the next roaring beast coming for us?"

Gesturing at Arno—as in help-me-mate—Ferd sprang to a mechanical wheel set in the wall like he gave up on the electronics as being too slow and or unreliable. They got the sliding outer door across just before the next wave beat against it with a muted roar.

All four of them stood frozen, Srese thought, listening. Wondering whether the shutter would hold? Water pressed through the joins and dribbled down to join that between the sills. “Is there um a weather seal?” she said.

Ferd swore and sprang to the second wheel by the side of the other door.

Arno helped him, probably taking the brunt of the work.

The sound of the hullabaloo outside lessened further, and then Srese couldn’t help but stare.

The kid’s arms and legs were tattered and scabby with a yellowish fluid oozing from a couple of raw, wet patches. His whole body said he hurt, even the way he was standing kind of scrunched together. His face was flushed like he had a fever.

“The kid doesn’t look so healthy,” Srese said toward Ferd. “We should maybe message Ghulia to bring a bag of medi-tricks.”

The kid burned redder, like he blushed because she talked about him. Did that mean then, that he understood what she said? Or he was really good at body language, like she was, and worked it out from the way she’d looked at him.

Arno, beside him, stared at Youk’s sea scene glowing patchily in the CAVE space. Then he glanced at her and stepped forward.

All of it to get her attention away from the kid—she was convinced.

The young one’s head snapped up. With a broad smile on his face he sprang after Arno.

Ferd held her back and made her follow sedately. As though he thought the mermen were wild animals that mustn’t be frightened by undue attention.

Water sprayed from the mermen’s feet. They were ankle-deep in there as the pair of them danced a silent paroxysm of grotesque capers. The virtual stuff came and went under the onslaught of their feet, in blocky fragments and globules of pearl-essence, like giant soap bubbles.

Srese nudged Ferd. “They’re laughing at the display. Switch it off.”

The way the mermen looked at Srese and Ferd was unbearable. So … so superior!

With a serious expression, Arno came to stand in front of he. He simplified his signing, as if he thought her a child. He gestured at the sea scene. “Dream. Sea not kind.”

He transferred his gaze to Ferd—at the same time pulling a wide-eyed honest look so obviously planned—Srese was sure that Ferd would notice.

But no, Ferd only looked interested.

Arno spread his hands to take in the whole room. “Good for mothering.”

“What? How?” Ferd was bamboozled at the sudden turnabout.

Arno showed him. He stepped to the wall and whipped a knife from under his loincloth it looked like, she was too embarrassed to watch closely. He cut a couple of ends in the bottom of the sensory felt, then invited Ferd and Srese to help by tearing it upwards and pulling it off the wall while he loosened another few sections. And while they were busy with that, Youk sidled in.

“Hey! What’s going on in here?” Youk said. He seemed aghast at what was happening to his sea-scape and kept lifting his feet and shaking them. His expression of bewilderment mirrored her feelings exactly.

The kid came out of the airlock and went over to Youk and looked him up and down. Carefully, and without showing any feelings that Srese could guess at.

Youk stared back visibly trying not to wrinkle his nose.

Srese was almost sorry for him when Arno joined him and the kid and both the mermen silently exclaimed over his eyes.

“Just go with the flow, son,” Ferd said from the sidelines.

The mermen smiled like they knew Youk. Arno started to show him how to wield the knife on that sensory felt. He gestured to explain Ferd’s and Srese’s roles tearing the strips upward. Then, leaving Ferd and Srese and Youk at it, he and the kid withdrew into the airlock and lay down in the water.

“That settles it,” Ferd said. “Neither I nor Youk can leave now. That leaves you to run messages, Srese. We’re on the emergency power supply, so there’s obviously a break in the power grid, but I need to get word to Gammy about events down here.”

“That’s what I came to tell you,” Youk said. “This storm is a beauty. It appears water has got in. Probably here, I just realised. There’s a short circuit somewhere. And some idiot in the Pit thought he’d get up real close to the storm. His cronies dared him to touch the dome. He couldn’t reach. Got his cronies to stack him a tower of rocks. Still couldn’t reach. So he thought he’d throw something. Overbalanced and fell, the stones after him. Death and destruction of many.”

Ferd wasn’t impressed. “I can only say that what we have here is more important than a dozen incidents. I need living quarters down here, somewhere to lay my weary head. Tell Gammy as soon as he’s back online.”

Srese hovered with a pretend memin in hand, to find out the rest of the messages.

“Just put it in as a request signed with Ferd. Also, we need food, and the mermen need food. That’s a request for the food lab. Best go there in person. And if I can’t record our conversations, so as to work out later exactly what was said, I’m going to need Zoya here full time. That’ll do for now, but please hurry!”