

Sard woke with a start. The life-suit squeezed him the way he'd once imagined a boa constrictor might take its prey. He gasped. "Ye-esh! I'm awake."

< To interact with the assembled cast, all you need to do is follow my instructions once you enter the CAVE system. >

*Ouch. I totally recognise the way I used to act. I bet Youk programmed that in for me to recognise. But good. The suit is allowing me to organise myself from here to wherever I decide to enter the CAVE. No question but that I will retrace the steps of the Seapeople.*

He sealed the life-suit's hood over his face and covered his hands. He stashed his gear beside the beginning of the path south that Ahni's people had taken. He briefly stood on the alive-to-background cloth to think its parameters at it, then draped it over his packs. Still holding onto an edge, he finessed his instructions, mumbling, "Allow the deep-shadow holding pattern to swing with the varying input of the sun."

< You + I + a-to-b cover = amalgam >

Sard gritted his teeth. *One minute the life-suit acts like it has been reprogrammed, the next that the old programming pushes through. Is that what I'm supposed to think?*

Thankfully, no answer. Barring the tracks made by the Seapeople, the beach lay empty, once more a picture-perfect idyll lacking only palm trees. A tiny breeze ruffled the surface of the lagoon within the stony elbow of the ridge.

After climbing down, Sard sidled along the feet of the cliffs. The waves were quite far away with a large swath of wet sand between them and the narrow strip of dry sand. Low tide. The main risk were the sensors everywhere. *Here's hoping Youk isn't at his standalone tracking me.*

The main entrance arch had probably been opened specially for the Seapeople since all CAVE's openings to the outside were temporary. Another smaller arch beside it had already been sealed again though the upper cover was still set on transparent. No one on duty at the console behind it so no one tracking Sard.

He allowed himself a tiny flicker of satisfaction at his management of the journey so far. In under the arch, the cold-air curtain spurted ineffectively. Things were in disarray if energy was being allowed to dissipate like that. This area of CAVE was all but open to the weather and the ocean's eternal audio-patterning. *Civilisation has been sloughed off.* Never was Sard's sense of a disaster-unfolding so acute.

He dropped his gaze from the felt strips—wall covering—sloughing from the walls and ceiling. Dug into the sandy cave floor was a shallow pool. Three adults lay fast asleep in the water with their heads close together on the edge of the pool.

Sard blinked when he saw Zoya, Srese's care-mother—had to be Zoya—with a baby high on her chest for it to be above the waterline, presumably. The baby suckled on Zoya's breast. His jaw dropped when next he saw Ghulia—*his* care-mother—arm in arm with the merman, their heads pillowed close. He stared a long time trying to make sense of the scene. His mother and Zoya, had he even known them?

In the next room, again entered by a wide open arch and with the same lack of climate control, viewing galleries had been built recently—he'd never seen them—that looked like they'd been abandoned about three minutes ago. All the usual stuff lying about that people brought to events. Picnics. Shawls. Cuddle blankets. What on earth could be more riveting than Zoya's and Ghulia's show? *If* an entertainment was what that little scene was meant to be, he thought glumly.

The exit from this space into CAVE had a self-closing door so was the first obstruction to his progress.

< What is the hold-up? Don't talk out loud. >

"I don't have bots." He mumbled. "How will I pass through?"

< Put your palm on the lock. >

He did and the latch slid back. The door opened to his touch. *Useful skill. Not sure if the earlier program could do that. I might've warmed to this version if I hadn't been so sure that Youk wrote it.* He could see uninterrupted all the way to the Nest at the centre of the complex. Where was everybody?

*Wait. I can hear them.* The sound was of a crowd in one place, a composite of talking weeping shouting and braying-with-laughter. He frowned. The latter did not at all sound good. Was the event in the Pit? He listened more carefully—what direction should he take?

All the usual background sounds were as usual. Pumps hummed extracting heat. The energy plant thrummed. All events had their musical accompaniment. This one too. Though that music right now seemed to be building to a crescendo. He recognised the early phrases of *Ravel's Bolero* among the more familiar tech tympany. Something definitely about to happen.

He ran through the narrow lanes parallel to Second Circle. Through the Simmonds and Wingham Quarter, useless to try and remember the *proper* directional words, and crossed into Parks & Gardens. From there he'd see what he could see happening at the dining hall, which was the place where the music seemed to be leading him.

*Okay. Yeah. Makes sense.* It was after all the place where important events were *assimilated* never mind that they usually happened elsewhere. Sard sidled into the back entry of the kitchen. No Greg or Relda was the first surprise. Greg had definitely said that Relda would be Greg's understudy. But okay, good, since he was pretty sure that him being alive-to-background would mean some very strange visual disturbances for anyone seeing him.

*I need clothes,* he thought at the life-suit. *An anonymous face and hands.* For a wonder the life-suit didn't quibble or try for extra information. Not like the original program again. He stepped into the pantry to vaguely hide the process, but to his amazement, the six or so kitchen attendants lining the serving counter were so engrossed that they probably didn't even know he was in the kitchen with them.

He inspected his black-and-white checked pants and a white tunic resemblance. *Good. Like every other kitchen attendant.* He soft-footed toward where he could see for himself what so engrossed them. All the action, and attention of everyone present in the dining hall, was on

the fixed holo-wall.

Royland, medical technician wielding his famously preferred instrument, a plain knife, inscribed a long careful cut on someone. Likely a woman, going by the swag of smoky dark hair pulled forward and to the side. The cut went up the neck to an ear, C-shaped around that then lightly over the woman's temple. Laying bare the woman's face, one of Royland's assistants swagged the hair to the back of her head.

*Ahni! It's Ahni whom they ... ?* Royland wore no gown, no protection against the transfer of matter that might cause infection. Sard grew hot and cold in quick succession, if he hadn't been wearing the life-suit he might've been covered in a cold sweat. *Do something*, he ordered the life-suit.

< Too busy >

Royland steered the knife-tip along the top of Ahni's forehead, and then along a pre-shaven track round the top of her head. Not a lot of blood meant that Royland had probably frozen her skin along the intended cut line. Royland lay down the knife.

Sard's gorge rose as Royland and his assistant eased Ahni's head skin from her head and just let it hang there, Sard saw with quick little glances between swallowing away the horror. He saw, hardly watching at all, how the assistant eased a metal cap from Ahni's head while Royland freed wires and other bloody lines all along the cut he'd made which went—Sard now saw—all the way down Ahni's arm to the palm of her hand.

Royland and his assistant lifted the cap and the attached wires and laid them reverently in the womb tank they had ready, the cam with them all the way. Everyone else present in the dining hall breathed a great sigh of release as the object was gently laved with the life medium.

"They'll bring it here now," said one of the kitchen hands. "Always stating the obvious," said someone else.

The double entry doors slid open as if on cue and a confusing mass of people pushed through. Sard made out Royland and his crew clustered around a womb-tank on its trolley. All of them ensuring as shock-free a journey as possible.

With per-glass sides, the womb-tank was like an aquarium. Its passenger, what Sard could see of it, resembled an alien sea-creature trailing wires instead of tentacles.

The group stopped the cart at the in-hall game station. Royland's techies sprang to link the womb-tank to CAVE's network. With a measured formality—great smile on his face—Royland flipped the switch.

The expectant silence exploded. A raving ravening crying screaming banshee wailing filled the dining hall with its cacophony. Some people pushed from the hall with their hands over their ears while the majority surged forward. People fell over chairs and each other. Royland's assistants linked arms around the tank trolley.

As Royland dampened down the volume, Sard slipped into the scrum and emerged at

Royland's side. "Is it alive?"

Royland laughed indulgently. "No, no, no. It's a particularly fine example of a bionic implant. Where have you been these last few days?"

"In solitary, for my para-tech exams," Sard said. First thing that came into his mind. *Who does he think I am?*

Royland went into a spiel for the mikes. "Largely unused for years, we suspect, since the Seapeople's life-style hardly warranted such a sophisticated machine. A very valuable tool, we'll find it."

Sard clenched his jaws on anything he might've asked in previous times. He already knew who Royland had cut up to get it.

"The implant proved to have been transferred into the girl only recently," Royland continued. "Very fortunate, as its circuits hadn't had time to fully integrate. Much less attrition to the machine than we expected." He bent his head toward the speakers from the womb-tank and fiddled with the volume controls. "Ah. Got it."

An unbroken stream of memes flowed from the tank. "Intercom ... neoprene ... epidemiological studies ... crepitation ... carbon neutral ... water governance ... ENSO ... tropical maritime ... plagioclase twinning ... companion planting ... protein synthesis."

Sard worked his way to the back of the mesmerised crowd and with his hands over his ears made like he was one of those escaping.