

1. Zebe

Zebe flitted to the wet room before dawn. And anyway, in the below-sea-level tunnel of the Reefarium, dawn was a foreign concept. Lights would begin to glow in the different tanks at the appropriate times for their individual days to start. Each tank had its own cycle.

Yesterday, like a rabbit trapped in a python's stare, she'd stayed all day watching the mysterious new process. By the end of the day, the mass moved of its own accord with silver specks glittering through it as if they were alive.

She laughed nervously because this morning krill-type beings swarmed through the tank. All of them with a silver element in their body organisation. Waie oh waie, she thought in the sing-song voice of her grandmother when something didn't compute and had to have a new way thinking applied to it.

She pulled across the overhead robo-cam by its extendable arm. She set the cam to its macro function and snapped a couple of 100x magnification close-ups and saved them to her workstation in the dry-research department.

The salt-rotted two-way communication system crackled into life. "Zebe! Up here! Now!"

Uh oh. Joe Loreno, sea-life expert of renown and sounding peremptory. Zebe didn't answer, not wanting him to know where she hung out these days. She ran silently through the staff byways that cut through and across public access areas.

Man wasn't in his office.

By way of the two-way and a speaker near her desk, he said, "I'm at your workstation." As if he could see her.

Her excitement became trepidation. She zigzagged between the workstations. No one else up yet was good. Joe at her actual desk, glowering at her most recent files open in front of him ... not so good.

She came up behind him. "Yes?" Like several other staff, she never gave Joe the satisfaction of hearing her call him boss.

Joe gestured at the monitor looping a five-second take of the silvered krill. "That is a near-extinct species. Not seen for a good few years. Yet the loop is framed as if by the display window of our aquaria. I know for a fact we don't have any of these little beauties in our collection. Beardy, the so-called krill expert, will tell you the same."

So-called? Joe was always all about putting others down to build himself up. Zebe puffed. "Long story." She pulled a couple of heaving breaths into her lungs. "I'm out out of condition."

"Take up long-distance swimming," he said.

With the toothy creatures hanging around out there? Don't think so.

Joe got up from her chair. "We'll go to the wet room. You can tell me there."

"I don't think we should leave that ... swimming up there," Zebe said.

"Why not?" he said belligerently. "Because your buddies will know instantly it's a recovering species? The greatest sign of hope and you want to keep it from your mates?"

"It mightn't be what it looks like. I was coming up to compare it to the database." She reached past him to the keyboard.

He gripped her wrist. Squeezed her fingers cruelly.

Bastard. "It really isn't good seeing this without first knowing the whole story," she said. She waited for him to release her hand, then closed the file and switched off the monitor.

They met no one retracing her footsteps. Her vaunted workmates still in bed, in the accommodation wing, not knowing there was anything afoot to hurry to work for. Only public visiting days got anyone out of their quarters punctually.

The wet room smelled of salt, rotting algae and seepage. The complex was a hundred years old and there still hadn't been a product invented that could keep out the ocean.

Zebe forced herself not to look at the curtained krill-filled tank. Fortunately she had left the robo-cam on its arm pointing away. She led straight to the jars, to start at the beginning.

Joe said, "Did you really think I wouldn't wonder if you cleaned out the wet room before dawn, and spent half a day on the waterworks?"

"That was a few days ago. I suppose you were up in the cafe?" When the complex was closed to tourists, the staff used the facilities for their recreations. The cafe/restaurant was usually above water while their common room was always below the waterline. He must have seen her on the seawater intake pontoon, fiddling with the plumbing.

"Beardy says your sister works at SoHAB," Joe said. "What have they got we haven't?" Clownishly he hit himself on the head. "Why, the alien of course."

Behaving like a four year old. Joe was completely enraptured with his four-year-old daughter. Mostly his co workers forgave him his kiddie-theatrics. This time he was over the top. Zebe rolled her eyes.

He grabbed her shoulders and shouted into her face. "I demand to know what you brought into my facility!"

His facility. Pff. "Okay okay, I heard you." Should she further inflame the situation by wiping his spit from her face? *Probably not.* But no way would she give him Claire, and therefore the dolphinate, and so also Callum.

Claire and Callum had their quarters separate from the dorm wing, in the servant quarters of

the mostly closed-up wing of high-end guest accommodation. Whenever Zebe visited, she had to call Claire on her mobile to be let into that corridor. Claire ordered and took delivery of domestic stores, food etc. Zebe ordered and took delivery of the professional stores, chemicals, glassware and such. Both dockets were paid for by Mr Moneybags, Claire's code name for her mysterious client.

Was Joe so blind that he didn't see the dolphinate come into existence just around the corner from where he had his quarters? Even Beardy and Laura seemed blind to the evidences Zebe saw everywhere. Though that might only be because she knew what the clues pointed to.

"You're right. SoHAB has the alien, and Beardy is right that my sister works there." Zebe carried on fabricating. "Xanthe sent me some of the adulterated dust that they vacuum from the cage."

"Why?"

Zebe shrugged. "We're sisters. Twins. We play games. We send each other mysterious stuff to try and identify. We award each other points for winning and losing."

Joe narrowed his eyes. "I'm waiting to hear about the krill."

Zebe turned to the curtained-off tank and switched on its internal display lights in the passing. Swept the curtaining aside. Almost said, *Ta-rah!* Turned back just in time to see Joe's face as white as if his blood had drained away. Like he was one of the walking dead. He pointed at the display with a trembling finger.

The water was bluish and clouded like a gassy underwater nebulae, crowded with silvery points, that, as they swam in behind the inset disc of magnifying glass, enlarged to the krill creatures.

Joe pressed up close to the tank and was silent for many minutes. "So what we have here," he said finally, "is some kind of quick-grow material sprinkled into illegally siphoned-off live water! How could you when we have so little! I should sack you for just that!"

Zebe hardly heard Joe's accusations, he was so impressive in his anger. He turned to face her halfway through his tirade. He was red now, with fury. Cords stood out in his neck. His fists clenched as he stepped toward her.

She stepped back, despite her disbelief that he would do something physical.

Laura walked into the wet room, Claire behind her. "Beardy is checking the water levels but I don't believe Zebe would do anything of the sort," Claire said.

Joe's turn to be speechless. He dropped his arms and stood aside as Claire and Laura joined him in front of the tank.

"This is very impressive, Zebe. Would you recommend excitement?" Laura said.

Zebe flicked a glance at Joe. Was it safe for her to say anything?

Claire said, "Leave Zebe to me, Joe. Technically she is my student."

Technically Claire mentored Zebe and non-technically they were friends. Zebe was fine with Claire saving her if Claire could do that without endangering the dolphinate and Callum.

"I'm definitely on Zebe's team for this," Laura said. "What you do to her, you'll do to me."

Wow! Laura was going to save Zebe too, when Laura and Zebe were cool because Beardy once upon a time had a thing for Zebe. Zebe had switched to studying corals to get out of Laura's way.

Beardy put his head around the door. "The water levels are good."

Claire, Laura, Zebe and even Joe looked at Beardy and then at the tank. Involuntarily. Beardy was the krill fanatic.

He came in. Stared at the tank. The swimming creatures. "You stupid bastard!" he said. "You're a goddamn idiot to even *think* of sacking Zebe!"

Beardy, though technically a student, never gave anyone respect who didn't earn it. "If it was me who discovered this little beauty and you sacked me, I'd have been out of here as soon as the words left your gob. On my way to the competition, *with* my krill."

Joe spluttered.

Ignoring Joe's burbles, Beardy grabbed one of his arms. "Laure, get his other arm. Let's get him out of here so Zebe can get her story out."

Claire locked the door behind them. "Only to keep them out, not you in."

"Yeah, that's okay. It *is* all a bit amazing."

Claire smiled. "Not very, when you remember that that little creature is meant to be practically extinct and the water it is swimming in is meant to be the worst poison on the planet. Care to enlighten me?" She gestured at the communication unit listening to every word.

"I can only tell you what I ... what I did." Good thing *she* was a known stutterer when she was nervous. Thinking the story up a kilometre a minute she was.

Claire narrowed her eyes. "That's a good start."

"Well," she started to walk around a bit. "I filled the tank with water from outside. Not stagnant water. I fed the hose-end into one of the fairly clear pools a bit further out." Near the dolphinate's pool, she said with the finger-signs of the new species. Those who could not speak signed their wants.

"Got that," Claire said.

“Tide was rising. I made the intake slow, so the pipes didn’t gurgle and give me away. It took a couple of hours to fill the tank. Then,” Zebe hesitated. “I should really take you through the beginning of it all.”

“No need. Heard it all over the PA. How much of the dust?” Claire said.

“A ... a micro ... micro ... gram in this first tank. Increased by doubling.” Had she just endangered her own sister in favour of Claire?

“What did you mean by adulterated?”

Zebe realised Claire had listened closely earlier. The others probably too. “As it was collected. Straight out of the vacuum bag. Mixed with every other kind of dust sucked up during that shift. You can see the patchy results even in the jars.” She moved to the bench along the wall the others hadn’t even noticed. All the unused jars she could find, all with agar and various amounts of the silvery dust.

“I see. Three of them with hardly any growth,” Claire said for the benefit of their excluded audience.

“I have an antique microscope in my quarters. So I spent my spare time the day before yesterday separating the silver dust from the grey dust.” For one desperate moment she wasn’t sure any more whether the alien’s dust *was* silver.

“The furniture in the tank ... the coral, the sand, and the fake seaweed ... are its original furniture?” Claire said.

“Yes. I filled the tank with the wild, supposedly dead water. That was going to be my test. To see if it really was dead.”

“Do you think perhaps the dust contained the larvae?”

Krill larvae in the dry dust from the aliens’ cage in Brisbane? *Don’t think so, Claire.* Zebe said the impossible. “I think the larvae were in the water, encysted perhaps.” There, she’d said it. What she believed.

“Then maybe Joe is right that the stuff acts as a quick-grow remedy,” Claire said.

“I don’t know what or how it does whatever it does. I know only what I see.”

“That’s fair,” Claire said. “We’ll research it. I’m sure Joe will agree to suspending all the other lines. Won’t you, Joe?” she said to the comm unit. She unlocked the door.

Joe, Laura and Beardy trooped in.

“Yes of course suspend all the other work,” Joe said. His eyes glittered with a plan. “What’s more, we’ll take out ten litres each for a personal supply. See what we can come up with.”

The other two were so intent on their work of netting out the krill and freeing it in a clean jar, Zebe suspected them of a plan as well.

The next day Laura, Beardy, and Joe went home for their monthly weekends. Zebe wanted to ask Joe if he was leaving his quick-grow supplies behind, but his expression forbade her to touch him with her questions. She recognised the bulge of a four-litre-bottle under his coat.

Laura and Beardy went off together. They carried a sealed esky between them and an only half-hidden air of excitement.

Though the end product of her discovery was out of the bag for sure, Zebe felt weak with relief that at least one of the parties she was scamming was gone. Probably with only Claire, Callum and Zebe rattling around in the establishment, Zebe could keep Claire from wondering. Time to talk to Xanthe and make Zebe's invented scenario come true.