

This story has that certain verissimilitude that speaks of first-hand experience. During my brief tenure as a credentialed whore at UBC's Marine Mammal Unit, I interacted extensively with aquarium apologists, animal rights activists, and behind-the-scenes grunts in their natural habitats. I observed them. I took notes. I resisted the temptation to toss them cookies as a reward for their performances, as I resisted the (somewhat stronger) temptation to break their fucking skulls over the endless political bullshit that kept me from doing any real biology.

What I couldn't resist was the temptation to write this story. I had a lot of help from my collaborator—not so much on the biology perhaps, but definitely on the funny bits. "Bulk Food" first appeared in On Spec in 1999; the illustration that ran with it is on display in the Gallery.

*The science—the resident/transient stuff, the infant-mortality rates, all the chrome that predates *The Breakthrough*—is pretty much legit. Race Rocks is a real marine mammal hangout. Those familiar with the layout of the Vancouver Public Aquarium might experience a certain sense of *deja vu* as they follow Doug Largha on his adventures. The characters themselves are, sadly, more real than you'd like to believe; in fact, even the names bear a certain (but utterly nonprosecutable) similarity to actual public figures on both sides of the whales-in-captivity debate.*

God help me, looking back I almost miss those duplicitous scumbags.

Bulk Food

Peter Watts & Laurie Channer

Anna Marie Hamilton, Animal Rights Microstar, bastes in the media spotlight just outside the aquarium gates. Her followers hang on every movement, their placards rising and falling like cardboard whitecaps to the rhythm of their chant: *two, four, six, eight, Transients are what we hate--*

One whale-hugger, bedecked in a sandwich board reading *Eat the Transients*, shouts over the din at a nearby reporter: "Naw, it's not about the *homeless*--it's a *whale* thing, man..."

The reporter isn't really listening. Anna Marie has just opened her mouth. The chanting dies instantly. It's always interesting to hear what Anna Marie Hamilton says. It changes so often, these

days. Back before the Breakthrough, she was actually trying to *free* the whales. She was going around calling them *prisoners*, and *hostages*, for Christ's sake.

"*Save the whales...*" she begins.

The reporter grunts, disappointed. *That again...*

Over at the turnstiles, Doug Largha swipes his debit card and passes through. The protesters register vaguely on his radar. Back in his student days, he considered joining, but only with the hope of scoring with some of those touchy-feely whale chicks. The things he did, back then, to get laid.

Hell. The things he does *now...*

* * *

A foghorn calls across the Strait. Visibility's low on both sides of the world; the murk is gray above the waterline, green below. The sea around Race Rocks is empty. This place used to be a wildlife sanctuary. Now it's a DMZ.

Two hundred meters out from the islands, perimeter sensors listen patiently for intruders. There are none. The day's too cold for tourists, too foggy for spies, too damn wet for most terrestrial mammals. Nobody tries to cross over the line. Even *under* the line, traffic is way down from the old days. An occasional trio of black-and-white teardrops, each the size of a school bus. Every now and then a knife-edged dorsal fin, tall as a man. Nothing else.

There was a lot more happening out here a few years ago. Race Rocks used to be crawling with seals, sea lions, Dall's porpoises. It was a regular Who's Who back then: *Eschrichtius*, *Phocoena*, *Zalophus*, *Eumetopias*.

All that meat has long since been cleaned out. Just one species comes through here these days: *Orcinus*. Nobody asks *these* visitors for ID. They've got their own way of doing things.

Five kilometers east, the commercial trawler *Dipnet* wallows forward at half throttle. Vague gray shapes crowd restlessly along the gunwales, slick, wet, hooded against the soupy atmosphere. Even a fog that drains all color from the world can't dampen the

enthusiasm on board. Snatches of song drift across the waves, male and female voices in chorus.

"*And they'll know we are sisters by our love, by our love...*"

Twenty-five meters down, a string of clicks ratchets through the water column. It sounds like the drumming of impatient fingers.

* * *

Doug's got everything figured. He's found the perfect position; right next to the rim, where the gangway extends over the tank like a big fiberglass tongue. Other spectators, with less foresight or less motivation, fill the bleachers ringing the main tank. Plexi splashguards separate them from a million gallons of filtered seawater and the predatory behemoth within. On the far side of the tank, more fiberglass and a few tons of molded cement impersonate a rocky coastline. Every few moments a smooth black back rolls across the surface, its dorsal fin stiff as a horny penis. No floppy-fin syndrome *here*, no siree. This isn't the old days.

The show is due to start momentarily. Doug uses the time to go over the plan once more. Twenty seconds from tongue to gallery. Another thirty-five to the gift shop. Fifty-five seconds total, if he doesn't run into anyone. Perhaps sixty if he does. He'll beat them all. Doug Largha is a man on a mission.

A fanfare from the poolside speakers. A perky blonde emerges through a sudden hole in the coastal facade, wearing the traditional garb of the order: white shorts and a ducky blue staff shirt. An odd-looking piece of electronics hangs off her belt. A headset mike arcs across one cheek. The crowd cheers.

Behind the blonde, some Japanese guy hovers in the wings with an equally-Japanese kid of about twelve. The woman waves them on deck as she greets the audience.

"Good afternoon!" she chirps resoundingly over the speakers. "Welcome to the aquarium, and welcome to today's whale show!"

More applause.

"Our special guest today is Tetsuo Yamamoto, and his father, Herschel." The woman raises one arm over the water. "And our *other* special guest is, of course, *Shamu!*"

Doug snorts. They're *always* called Shamu. The Aquarium doesn't put much thought into naming killer whales these days.

"My name is Ramona, and I'll be your naturalist today." She waits for applause. There isn't much, but she acknowledges it like a standing ovation and goes into patter. "Now of course, we've been able to understand Orca ever since The Breakthrough, but we still can't *speak* it—at least, not without some very expensive hardware to help us with the higher frequencies. Fortunately our state-of-the-art translation software, developed right here at the Aquarium, lets our species talk to each other. I'll be asking Shamu to do some behaviors especially so Tetsuo here can interact with him."

Figures the kid would be center stage. Probably some Japanese rite of passage. Number One Son looks like a typical clumsy thumb-fingered preadolescent. This could be the day.

"As you may have learned from our award-winning educational displays," Ramona continues brightly, "our coast is home to two different orca societies, *Residents* and *Transients*. Both societies are ruled by the oldest females—the Matriarchs—but beyond that they have don't have much in common. In fact, they actively hate each other."

A rhythmic stomping begins from somewhere in the crowd. Ramona cranks up the smile and the volume, and forges ahead. *Research and Education*: that's the aquarium's motto, and they're sticking to it. You don't get to the good stuff until you've *learned* something.

"Now we've known since the nineteen-seventies that Transients hunt seals, dolphins, even other whales, while the Residents feed only on fish. We didn't know why until after The Breakthrough, though. It turns out that Residents are the killer whale version of animal-rights activists!" This is obviously supposed to be a joke. Nobody's laughed at that line since Doug started casing this place over a year ago, but the song remains the same.

Unfazed, Ramona continues: "Yes, the Residents consider it *unethical* to eat other mammals. Transients, on the other hand, believe that their gods have given them the right to eat anything in the ocean. Each group regards the other as immoral, and Residents

and Transients have not been on speaking terms for hundreds of years. Of course, we at the Aquarium haven't taken sides. *Most* humans know better than to interfere in the religious affairs of others."

Ramona pauses. A faint chant of assembled voices drifts into the silence from beyond the outer wall:

"Hey *ho*—hey *ho*—the *Matriarchs* have *got to go*—"

Ramona smiles. "And despite what some people might think," she continues, "there's no such thing as a vegetarian orca."

* * *

Not yet, anyway.

Dipnet chugs steadily west. Her cargo of ambassadors scans the waves for any sign of the natives, their faith too strong to falter before anything so inconsequential as zero visibility. Not everyone gets to commune with an alien intelligence. A superior intelligence, in many ways.

Not in *every* way, of course. Many on the *Dipnet* long for the good old days of moral absolutes, the days when *Meat Was Murder* only when Humans ate it. Everything was so clear back then, to anyone who wasn't a puppet of the Industrial-Protein Complex. There was a ready answer to anything the Ignorantsia might ask:

How come it's okay for sharks to kill baby seals? Because sharks aren't *moral agents*. They can't see the ethical implications of their actions.

How come it's not okay for people to kill baby seals? Because we can.

Now orcas are moral agents too. They talk. They think. They reason. Not that that's any surprise to *Dipnet's* passengers, of course—they knew the truth way back when all those bozo scientists were insisting that orcas were basically chimps with fins. But sometimes, too much insight can lead to the wrong kind of questions, questions that distract one from the truth. Questions like:

How come it's okay for orcas to kill baby seals, but we can't?

If only those idiot scientists hadn't barged in and *proved* everything. Now there's no choice but to get the orcas to give up meat.

The Residents have the greatest moral potential. At least they draw the line at fish. The Transients remain relentlessly bull-headed in their mammalvory, but perhaps the Residents can be brought to full enlightenment. Back on shore, one of the west coast's best-known Kirlian nutritionists is working tirelessly on alternate ways to meet *Orcinus'* dietary requirements. She's already had some spectacular successes with her own cats. Not only is a vegan diet vastly more efficient than conventional pet foods—the cats eat only a fraction of what they used to—but the felines have so much more energy now that they're always out on the prowl. You hardly ever see them at home any more.

Not everything goes so well, of course. There've been setbacks. In hindsight, it may have been premature to dump that thousand heads of Romaine lettuce onto A4-Pod last summer during their spring migration. Not only did the Residents fail to convert to Veganism, but apparently they'd actually been considering certain exceptions to their eat-no-mammals policy. Fortunately, everyone on the boat had made it back okay.

But that's in the past. Live and learn. Today, it is enough to stand in solidarity with the Residents against the mammalphagous Transient foe, to add Human voices in peaceful protest for a just cause. The moral education can come later. Now it is time to make friends.

The men and women of the *Dipnet* have the utmost faith in their abilities in this regard. They're ready, they're willing, they're the best of the best.

What else could they be? Every last one of them was hand-picked by Anna-Marie Hamilton.

* * *

Shamu sails past Doug in mid-air, his ivory belly a good two meters above water level. Their eyes meet. For all this talk about killer whale intelligence, it still looks like a big dumb fish to Doug.

It belly-flops. A small tsunami climbs the splashguards. A few scattered voices go *oooooh*.

"Now, Shamu is a Transient, so of course he'd *never* normally eat fish," Ramona announces. This is not entirely true. Back before the Breakthrough, fish was all captive Transients *ever* got. A decent meal plan was one of the first things they negotiated when the language barrier fell. "So to feed him what he *really* wants, he knows he has to *hide* for a bit."

Ramona touches a control on her belt and speaks into the mike. What's coming out of the speakers now isn't English. It sounds more like fingernails on a blackboard.

Shamu spits back a series of clicks and sinks below the surface. Waves surge back and forth across the tank, playing themselves out against the walls. Doug, standing on tiptoes, can just barely make out the black-and-white shape lurking near the bottom of the tank like a squad car at a radar trap.

Peripheral movement. Doug glances up as a great chocolate-colored shape lumbers out onto the deck. It's twice the size of the man who herds it onstage with a little help from an electric cattle prod.

"Some of you may recognize this big bruiser." Ramona's switched back to English. "Yes, this is a *Steller sea lion*. When he was just a pup, scientists from the North Pacific Fishing Consortium—one of the aquarium's proudest sponsors-- rescued him and some of his friends from the wild. They were part of a research project that was intended to promote the conservation of sea lions in the North Pacific."

The sea lion darts its head back and forth, snorting like a horse. Its wet, brown eyes blink stupidly.

"And not a moment too soon. As you may know from our ever-popular Pinniped habitat, Stellers were declared extinct in the wild just five years ago. This is now one of the only places in the world where you can still see these magnificent creatures, and we take our responsibility to our charges very seriously. We go to great lengths to ensure that everything about their environment is as natural as possible.

"Including..."

Ramona pauses for effect.

"...Predators."

A ragged cheer rises up from the bleachers. Spooked, the sea lion bobs its head like a fat furry metronome. The animal wheels around the way it came, but the guy with the prod is blocking its way.

"Please try not to make any loud noises or sudden moves," Ramona smiles belatedly.

With a few final nudges from the cattle prod, the sea lion slides into the water. It dives immediately, finally curious about its big new home.

Apparently it discovers all it wants to in about half a second, after which it shoots from the center of the pool like a Polaris missile. It doesn't quite achieve escape velocity and hits the water running, lunging for the edge as fast as its flippers can churn.

Shamu rises up like Shiva. One effortless chomp and the Steller explodes like a big wet piñata. A curtain of blood drenches the plexi barriers. Streamers of intestine fly through the air like shiny pink firehoses.

The audience goes wild. This is the kind of award-winning educational display they can relate to.

Shamu surges back and forth, mopping up leftover sea lion. It takes less than a minute. By the time he's finished, Ramona has the harpoon set up on the gangway.

* * *

Two kilometers out, one of the Chosen hears a blow and alerts the others. The pilgrims again fall expectantly silent, undaunted by the fact that the first three times turned out to be the first mate blowing his nose.

To be honest, nobody here has ever heard a real orca blow, not first-hand. No *civilized* human being would ever patronize a whalejail, and whale-watching tours have been banned for years—they *said* it was a harassment issue, but everyone knows it was just Bob Finch and his aquarium industry cronies out to eliminate the competition.

The passengers huddle quietly in the fog, straining to hear above *Dipnet's* diesel cough.

Whoosh.

"There! I knew it!" And sure enough, something rolls across a fog-free patch of surface a few meters to port. "There! See?"

Whoosh. Whoosh.

Two more to starboard. Leviathan has come to greet them; her very breath seems to dispel the fog. A pale patch of tissue-paper sun lightens the sky.

There is much rejoicing. One or two people close their eyes, choosing to commune with the orcas telepathically; no truly enlightened soul would resort to crass, earth-aping *technology* to make contact. Several others bring out dog-eared editions of Bigg's *Guide to the Genealogy and Natural History of Killer Whales*. Anna Marie has told them they'll be meeting L1, a southern Resident pod. Hungry eyes alternately scan the pages and the rolling black flanks for telltale nicks and markings.

"Look, is that L55? See that pointy bit on the saddle patch?"

"No, it's L2. Of course it's L2."

One of the telepaths speaks up. "You shouldn't call them by their Human names. They might find it offensive."

Chastened silence fall over the acolytes. After a moment, someone clears her throat. "Er, what *should* we call them then?"

The telepath looks about quickly. "Um, this one," she points to the fin nearest the boat, "tells me she's called, um, Sister Stargazer."

The others ooh in unison. Their hands fly to the crystals nestled beneath their rain ponchos.

"Six-foot dorsal," mutters the first mate. "Male."

No one notices. "Oh, look at that *big* one! I think that's the *Matriarch!*"

"Are you sure this is even L-Pod?" someone else asks uncertainly. "There aren't very many of them—isn't L1 supposed to be a *big* pod? And I thought I saw... that is, wasn't that big one P-28?"

That stops everyone cold. "P-28 is Transient," says a fortyish woman with periwinkle shells braided into her long, graying hair.

"L1 is a *Resident* pod." The accusation is clear. Is this man calling Anna Marie Hamilton a *liar*?

The heretic falters in the stony silence. "Well, that's what the Guide says." He holds the document out like a protective amulet.

"Give me that." Periwinkle snatches the book away, riffles through the pages. "This is the *old* edition." She waves the copyright page. "This was printed back in the nineteen-*eighties*, for Goddess' sake! You're supposed to have the *new* edition, the one Anna Marie approved. This is *definitely* L1." Periwinkle throws the discredited volume over the side. "Bob Finch had a hand in all those old guides until '02. You can't trust anything from before then."

The wheelhouse hatch swings open. *Dipnet*'s captain, a gangly old salt whose ears look as though they've been attached upside-down, clears his throat. "Got a message coming in," he announces over the growl of the engine. "I'll put it on the speakers." The hatch swings shut.

A message! Of course, *Dipnet* has all the technology, the hydrophones, the computers, everything it needs for the unenlightened to communicate with both species. There's a speaker mounted on the roof of the cabin, pointing down at the rear deck. It burps static for a moment, then:

"Sisters. Hurry." A squeal of feedback. "Grandmother. Says. Hello."

Count on crass western technology to turn a beautiful alien tongue into pidgin English.

"Ooh," says someone at the gunwales. "Look." The orcas are pacing *Dipnet* on either side, rolling and breathing in perfect synch.

"They want us to follow them," Periwinkle says excitedly.

"Yes, they do," intones one of the telepaths. "I can *feel* it."

The orcas are so close to the boat they're almost touching the hull. *Dipnet* plows straight ahead. Just as well. The whales aren't leaving enough room for course changes anyway.

The chair on the gangway is obviously not meant for children. Ramona fusses with the straps, cranks the cross-hairs down to child-height. She offers patient instruction in the use of the harpoon. Papa-san hollers up instructions of his own in Japanese. Conflicting ones, apparently; Tetsuo, bouncing excitedly in the harness, gives nothing but grief. Herschel continues his cheerful instigation: *Hey, lady, we pay ten grand for this, we do it our way thank you so much.* He doesn't seem to have noticed that Ramona's smile shows more teeth than usual.

This looks very promising. Doug glances back over his shoulder; the route's still clear. *Fifty-five seconds...*

Shamu rolls past on the other side of the plexi.

The crowd laughs. Doug turns back to center stage. Ramona's had enough; she's jumped down from Tetsuo's perch and is barking at Herschel in Japanese. Or maybe in sea lion. Herschel backs away, hands held up placatingly against Ramona's advance. It's entertaining enough, but Doug keeps his eyes on Tetsuo. The kid is the key. Adult squabbles don't interest a ten-year-old, he's strapped in at the controls of the best bloody video game since the parents' groups came down on Nintendo. If it's going to happen at all, Doug knows, it's going to happen—

Tetsuo squeezes the trigger.

—*Now.*

Ramona turns just in time to see the harpoon strike home. The crowd cheers. Tetsuo shrieks in delight. Shamu just shrieks, thrashing. A pink cloud puffs from his blowhole.

Doug is already half-turned, one foot raised to motor. He checks himself: *Wait for it, it still might be clean...*

“*Shit!* You were supposed to *wait!*” Ramona's mike is off-line but it doesn't matter; you could hear that yell all the way over in the Arctic Exhibit. She brings her translator online, barks syllables. The ringside speakers chirp and whistle. Shamu whistles back, spasming as though electrocuted. His flukes churn the water into pink froth.

“His lung's punctured,” Ramona calls over to the guy with the cattle prod. Prodmeister disappears backstage. Ramona wheels on Tetsuo. “You were supposed to wait until I told him to hold still!

Do you *want* him to suffer? It'll take *days* to die from a hit like that!"

That's it. Go.

He knows what's coming. Herschel, out his ten thousand dollars, will demand that his son get another chance. The Aquarium will stand firm; ten grand buys one shot, not one kill. No, sir, you can't try again unless you're willing to pay.

Herschel's own shrieks will go ultrasonic. Prodmeister will come back with another harpoon, a bigger, no-nonsense harpoon this time. Perhaps the Guests will try and wrestle it away. *That's* resulted in an unfortunate accident or two.

Doesn't matter. Doug's not going to be around for any of it, he's already halfway out of the amphitheater. From the corner of his eye he can see his competition, caught flat-footed, just starting to rise from the bleachers. Some of them, closer to the main theater entrance, would still have a chance to beat him if he was going the usual route. He's not. Doug Larcha may be the first person in recorded history to have actually *read* the award-winning educational displays in the underwater gallery, and that gives him all the edge he needs. That's where he's headed now, at top speed.

Herschel and his ten grand. Tetsuo and his lousy aim. Doug could kiss them both. When a guest makes a kill, they get to keep the carcass.

But when they fuck up, it's whale steaks in the gift shop.

* * *

Well, no one expected the whales to be such assholes.

Certainly not Anna Marie Hamilton and her army of whale-huggers. The Gospel according to Anna Marie said that orcas (you *never* called them "killer whales") were gentle, intelligent creatures who lived in harmonious matriarchal societies. Humans were ethically bound to respect their cultural autonomy. Kidnapping these creatures from the wild, tearing them from their nurturing female-centered family units and selling them into bondage for barbaric human entertainment—this went beyond mere animal abuse. This was slavery, pure and simple.

That was all before the Breakthrough, of course. These days, it's kind of hard to rail against the enslavement of orcas when every schoolkid knows that all orca society, Resident or Transient, is *based* on slavery. Always has been. The matriarchs aren't kindly nurturing feminist grandmas, they're eight-ton black-and-white Mommie Dearests with really big teeth. And their children aren't treasured guardians of the next generation, either. They're genetic commodities, a common currency for trade between pods, and who knew what uses they got put to? It's a scientific fact that almost half of all killer whales die before reaching their first birthday.

That infant-mortality stat has been a godsend to the aquarium industry ever since it was derived in the nineteen-seventies—*Well of course it's tragic that another calf died here in our habitat but you know, even in the wild killer whales just aren't very good parents*— but even the whalejailers were taken aback to be proven so utterly right. It didn't take them long to recover from the shock, though. To embrace the irrefutable evidence of this kindred intelligence. To see the error of their ways. To reach out across that immense interspecies gulf with a business proposition.

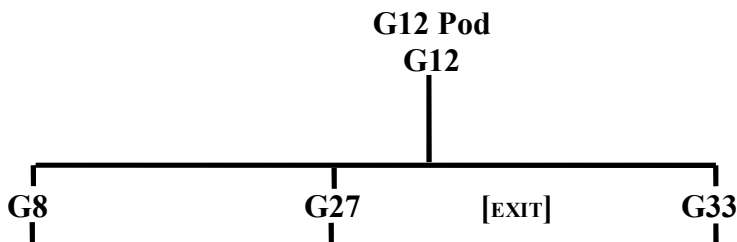
And what do you know. The Matriarchs were more than happy to cut a deal.

* * *

SLAVERS OF THE SEVEN SEAS, a wall-sized viewscreen shouts in capital letters. Beside it, smaller screens run looped footage already seen a million times in every living room on the continent: priests and politicians and longliners and whale-huggers, riding the *Friendship Flotilla* out into history to sign the first formal agreement with the Matriarch of J-Pod.

On the other side of the gallery, past two-inch plexi, the pinkness in the water is already starting to fade.

Doug skids to a halt in front of an orca family tree, no less boring for its catchy backlit-pastel-on-black color scheme. He scans the headings:



There. Between G27 and G33. Evidently, municipal building codes require an emergency exit here. For some reason the aquarium has incorporated it into the Orca Family Tree, right there in plain sight as the law requires, but subtle, unobtrusive. In fact, damn near invisible to anyone who hasn't actually read the genealogies line-by-line.

This is Doug's secret passage. He's done his homework; the blueprints are on file at City Hall, accessible to anyone who cares to look. On the other side of this invisible door, backstage corridors run off in three separate directions, each servicing a different gallery. All of them, eventually, end up outside. One of them opens into the gift shop.

Doug pushes at a spot on the wall. It swings open. Behind him, a muffled *poomf* filters through from the main tank, followed by an inhuman squeal. Doug dives through the doorway without looking back.

Turn right. Run. Backstage, the gallery displays are ugly constructions of fiberglass and PVC. Every object gurgles or hums. Salt crusts everything. Doug's foot slips in a puddle. He starts to go over, grabs at the nearest handhold. A rack of hip waders topples in his stead. Left. Run. A row of filter pumps tears by on one side, a bank of holding tanks on the other. A dozen species of quarantined fish eye his transit with glassy indifference.

He rounds a corner. An unexpected barrier catches his shin. Doug sprawls across a stack of loose plywood. Splinters bury themselves in the balls of his hands.

"*Fuck!*" He scrambles to his feet, ignoring the pain. There are worse things than pain. There's the wrath of Alice if he comes home empty-handed.

Right there: a wood-paneled door. Not one of the crappy green metal doors that are good enough for the fishfeeders and janitors, but a nice oak job with a brass handle. That's got to be the entrance into the gift shop. He's almost there, and it's even *opening* for him, it's opening from the *other side* and he dives straight through, right into the waiting bosom of the woman coming from the other direction.

He thinks she looks familiar in the split second before they both go over. Doug catches a glimpse of someone else as a dozen vectors of force and inertia converge incompatibly on his ankle. There's a moment of brief, bright pain—

“Owwwww!!!!”

--before he hits the floor. The good news is, he lands on a carpet with a very deep pile. The bad news is, rug burn tears most of the remaining skin off his palms.

He lies there, taking collect calls from every sensory nerve in his body. Two people are looking down at him. He forgets all about the pain when he recognizes who they are.

Saint Anna. And the Devil Himself.

* * *

Dipnet has arrived.

The perimeter is all around them: a float-line demarcated by warning buoys, a limited-entry circle a kilometer across. Scientists are only sometimes permitted here. Tourists are forbidden. But the gate swings open for *Dipnet*.

Now she chugs towards the center of the Communion Zone. The fog has partially lifted—the perimeter gate fades astern, while a tiny white dot resolves in the distance ahead. *Dipnet's* escort remains close on either side. They've said nothing since that one brief message in the Strait, although the telepaths say the orcas are brimming with goodwill and harmony.

The floating dock is close enough to see clearly now, anchored in the center of the Zone, a white disk about twenty meters across. It seems featureless, beyond a few cleats for tying up. This is the way the orcas like things. This is *their* place, and they don't want

it cluttered with nonessentials. A place to land, a space to stand, and Race Rocks looming out of the fog in the middle distance. Beyond that, only orcas and ocean.

“Is there a bathroom?” someone asks. The captain of the *Dipnet* shakes his head, more in resignation than answer. He pulls back on the throttle while the mate, waiting on the foredeck with a coil of nylon rope, jumps onto the platform and reels *Dipnet* in to dock.

“This is it, folks,” the captain announces. “Everybody off.”

The engine is still idling. “Aren’t you going to tie up?” Periwinkle asks.

The captain shakes his head. “You’re the ambassadors. We’re just the taxi. They don’t want us in the zone while you *commune*.”

Periwinkle smiles patiently. She hears the resentment in the captain’s voice, but she understands. It must be hard, seeing the Chosen Few going to make history while he just drives the boat. She feels sorry for him. She resolves to chant with him when he comes back to pick them up.

The captain grunts and waves her away. He sniffs and wonders, not for the first time, if this woman remembered to clean the snails out of those shells before incorporating them into her own personal fashion statement. Or maybe it’s one of those *natural* fragrances they’re advertising these days

The passengers file onto the platform. The first mate, still holding *Dipnet*’s leash, leaps back onto the foredeck. The boat growls backwards, changes gear, and wallows off into the haze. The sound of her engine fades with distance.

Eventually all is quiet again. The Chosen look about eagerly, not wanting to speak in this holy place. The orcas that guided them here have disappeared. Swells lap against the floats. The Race Rocks Lighthouse complains about the fog.

“Hey, you guys.” It’s the heretic again. He’s watching the boat recede. “When exactly are they supposed to be coming back for us?”

The others don’t answer. This is a quiet moment, a *sacred* moment. It’s no time to chatter about logistics. This guy doesn’t

know the first thing about reverence. Really, sometimes they wonder how he ever made the cut.

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One whole Plexiglas wall looks into the turquoise arena of the killer whale tank; a pair of tail flukes disappear up through the surface in ratcheting increments. The opposite wall serves as little more than a frame for the biggest flatscreen monitor Doug has ever seen. Murky green water swirls across that display. Wriggling wavelight reflects off a glass coffee table in the middle of the room. An antique oak desk looms behind it like a small wooden mesa.

In the middle of it all, Doug looks up from the floor at Anna Marie Hamilton and Bob Finch, executive director of the Aquarium. Anna Marie Hamilton and Bob Finch look back. This goes on for a moment or two.

“Can I help you, sir?” Finch asks at last.

“I—I think I got lost,” Doug says, experimentally putting his foot down on the floor. It hurts, but it feels limpable, not broken.

“The viewing gallery is *that* way,” Anna Marie announces, pointing to a different door than the one through which Doug arrived. “And I’m in the middle of some very tough negotiating, fighting for the freedom of our spiritual sib—”

“Actually, Ann—Ms. Hamilton, I suspect that Mr.—Mr. ...”

“Largha,” Doug says weakly.

“I suspect that Mr. Largha isn’t all that interested in the boring details of our, er, negotiations.” Finch extends a hand, helps Doug up off the carpet. Doug stands unsteadily.

“I was looking for—the *gift shop!*” His mission! Precious seconds, precious *minutes* irretrievably lost while all those other dorks and bozos line up to lay claim for *his* meat! If he doesn’t come home with the steaks, he’ll be sleeping on the sofa for a week. Doug turns and lunges towards the door he came through. He forgets all about his ankle for the half-second it takes for him to try and run on it. By the end of that same second he’s on the floor

again. "My steaks--" he whimpers. "I was going to be at the *head of the line*... I had it *planned to the second*..."

"Well, I must say," Finch extends a helping hand again, "it's heartening to see someone so enthusiastic about the Aquarium's new programs. Not everyone is, you know. Let me see what I can do."

Anna Marie Hamilton stands with her arms folded, sighing impatiently. "*Mister Finch*," she says, "if you think I'm going to let this *distract* me from the liberation of—"

"Not now, Ms. Hamilton. This will only take a moment. And then I promise, we can get right back to your tough and uncompromising negotiations." Finch takes a step towards the door, turns back to Doug. "Say, Mr. Largha, would you like to talk to a killer whale while you're waiting? A *Matriarch*? We have a live link to Juan de Fuca." He raises an arm to the flatscreen on one wall.

"Uh, live?" Emotions squabble in Doug's cortex. The pain of failure. The hope of salvation. And now, a vague discomfort. "I don't know. I mean, they *are* okay with this, aren't they? The whole whale show thing?"

"Mr. Largha, not only are they okay with it—it was their idea. So how about it? A conversation with a real, alien intelligence?"

"I don't know," Doug stammers. "I don't know what I'd *say*—"

Anna Marie snorts.

Finch draws a remote control from his blazer. "I'm sure you'll think of something." He points the remote at the flatscreen, thumbs a control.

Nothing obvious happens.

"Back in a moment," Finch promises, and closes the door behind him.

Anna Marie turns her back. Doug wonders if maybe she's offended by someone who would be in such a rush to line up for orca steaks.

Or maybe she just doesn't like people very much.

A long, mournful whistle. "Sister Predator," intones an artificial voice.

Doug turns to the flatscreen. A black-and-white shape looms up in the murky green wash of Juan de Fuca Strait. Lipless jaws open a crack; a zigzag crescent of conical teeth reflects gray in the dim light.

That whistle again. In one corner of the flatscreen, a flashing green tag: *Receiving*. "Fellow Sister Predator. Welcome."

Doug gawks.

Clicks. Two rapid-fire squeals. A moan. More clicks.

Receiving.

"I am Second Grandmother. I trust you enjoy Aquarium and its many award-winning educational displays—"

Bzzt. In the upper left-hand corner of the screen: *Line Interrupt*. Silence.

At a panel on Finch's desk, Anna Marie Hamilton takes her finger off a red button.

"Wow," Doug says. "It was really talking."

Anna Marie rolls her eyes. "Yeah, well, it's not like they're going to beat us on the SAT's or anything."

* * *

A reporter waylays Bob Finch in a public corridor on his way to the gift shop. She seeks a reaction in the wake of Hamilton's demonstration. Finch considers. "We agree with the activists on one score. Orcas have their own values and their own society, and we're morally bound to respect their choices."

He smiles faintly. "Where Ms. Hamilton and I part ways, of course, is that she never bothered to find out what those values *were* before leaping to defend them."

* * *

The door opens. Finch the Savior stands in the doorway with a wooden box in one hand, a plastic bag in the other.

Doug, rising with his hopes off the couch, forgets all about the Matriarch and his ankle. "Are those my steaks?"

Finch smiles. "Mr. Largha, it takes several days to prepare the merchandise. Each sample has to be measured, weighed, and studied in accordance to our mandate of conservation through research."

"Oh, right." Doug nods. "I knew that."

"The gift shop is only taking a list of names."

"Right. "

"And unfortunately, all of today's specimen has already been spoken for. The line-up stretches all the way back into the Amazon gallery, in fact, so I brought a couple of items which I thought might do instead," Finch says. He holds up the bag. "There was quite a run on these, I was lucky to get one."

Doug squints at the label. "L'il Ahab Miniature Harpoon Kit. Rubber Tipped. Ages six and up."

"Everyone wants to prove that they're better shots than our guests." Finch chuckles. "I suspect a lot of family dogs may be discomfited tonight. I thought your children might enjoy—"

"I don't have kids," Doug says. "But I have a dog." He takes the package. "What else?"

Finch holds out the wooden box. "I was able to locate some nice harbor seal—"

Finch the False Prophet. Finch the Betrayer.

"Harbor seal? *Harbor seal!* Your gift shop is *lousy* with harbor seal! It was marked *down!* My in-laws are coming over this weekend and you want me to feed them *harbor seal?* Why don't I just give them baloney sandwiches! My *dog* won't eat harbor seal!"

Finch shakes his head. He seems more saddened than offended. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Mr. Largha. I'm afraid there's nothing else we can do for you."

Doug wobbles dangerously on his good leg. "I was injured! In *your* aquarium! I'll sue!"

"If you *were* injured, Mr. Largha, you were injured en route from somewhere that you weren't legally supposed to be in the first place. Now, please..." Finch opens the door a bit wider, just in case Doug hasn't got the point.

"Not supposed to *be* in! That was a fire exit route! Which, by the way," Doug's voice is becalmed by a sudden sense of impending victory, "was *improperly signed*."

Finch blinks. "Improperly—"

"You can barely *see* that exit sign," Doug says. "It's buried way down in one of those stupid orca family trees. If there was ever a fire, nobody would even *find* it. I mean, who stops to read *award-winning educational displays* when their pants are on fire?"

"Mr. Larcha, the viewing gallery is solid cement on one side and a million gallons of seawater on the other. The odds of a fire are so minuscule—"

"We'll see whether the fire marshal's office thinks so. We'll see whether the *News at Six Consumer Advocate* thinks so!" Doug triumphantly folds his arms.

There is a moment of silence. Finally, Finch sighs and closes the door. "I'm really going to have to put my foot down with the art department about that. I mean, aesthetics or no aesthetics..."

"I want my orca steaks," Doug says.

Finch walks to the wall behind his desk. A touch on a hidden control and a section of paneling slides away. Behind it, cigar boxes sit neatly arranged on grillwork shelves, lit by the unmistakable glow of a refrigerator lightbulb.

Finch turns around, one of the boxes open in his hands. Doug falls silent, disbelieving. It's not cigars in those boxes

"As I said, there are no orca steaks available," Finch begins. "But I *can* offer you some beluga sushi from my private stock."

Doug takes a hop forward. Another. It's almost *impossible* to get beluga. And this isn't the black-market, Saint-Lawrence beluga, the stuff that gives you mercury poisoning if you eat it more than twice a year. This is absolute primo *Hudson Bay* beluga. The only people harpooning *them* are a few captive Inuit on a natural habitat reserve out of Churchill, and even *they* only get away with it because they keep pushing the aboriginal rights angle. Nobody's figured out Belugan yet—from what Doug's heard, belugas are probably too stupid to even *have* a language—so nobody needs to cut a deal with them.

The box in Finch's hands costs about what Doug would make in a week.

"Will this be acceptable?" Bob Finch asks politely.

Doug tries to be cool. "Well, I suppose so."

He's almost sure they don't hear the squeak in his voice.

* * *

To the untrained eye, it looks like rambunctious play. In fact, the cavorting and splashing and bellyflopping is a synchronized and complex behavior. Co-operative hunting, it's called. First reported from the Antarctic, when a pod of killer whales was seen creating a mini-tidal wave to wash a crabeater seal off an ice floe. Definite sign of intelligence, that, the first mate's been told. He squints through his binoculars and the intermittent fog until the whales finish.

The first mate pulls open the wheelhouse hatch and climbs inside. The captain throws *Dipnet* into gear, singing:

And they'll know we are sisters by our love, by our—

The mate picks up the tune and rummages in a locker, surfaces with a bottle of Crown Royal. "Good show today." He raises the bottle in salute.

* * *

Doug Largha safely departed, Bob Finch extracts a pair of wineglasses from the shelves beneath the coffee table. He fills them from a convenient bottle of Chardonnay while Anna Marie taps a panel beside the flatscreen. The distant gurgling of Juan de Fuca fills the room once more.

Finch presents the activist with her glass. "Any problems on your end?"

Hamilton snorts, still fiddling one-handed with the controls. "You kidding? Turnover in the movement has always been high. And *nobody* turns down a chance to commune with the whales. It's a real adventure for them." The wall monitor flickers into splitscreen mode. One side still contains Juan de Fuca, newly

restricted; the other shows one of the Aquarium's backstage holding tanks. A young male orca noses along its perimeter.

Finch raises his glass: first to the matriarch on the screen—"To your delicacies." Then to the matriarch in his office: "And to ours." Finally, he turns to the image of the holding tank. The whale there looks back at him with eyes like big black marbles.

"Welcome to the Aquarium," Finch says.

A signature whistle carries through the sound system. "Name is —" says the speaker. *No English Equivalent*, flashes the readout after a moment.

"That's a *fine* name," Finch remarks. "But why don't we give you a special new name? I think we'll call you—Shamu."

"Adventure," Shamu says. "Grandmother says this place adventure. Too small. I stay here long?"

Bob Finch glances at Anna Marie Hamilton.

Anna Marie Hamilton glances at Bob Finch.

"Not long, Grandson," says an alien voice from the cool distant waters of Juan de Fuca. "Not long at all."