

opening extract from

voyager

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Part One

1

The instructions about drifting logs were clear and simple. The smaller ones could be ignored, but anything over four metres must be taken in tow and brought to land. Often half-submerged and yawing unpredictably, they were a hazard to small craft, and the log sighted by the crew of the *Laurentia Bay* was a giant, twenty metres at least, almost as long as the vessel itself. It was passing them on the starboard beam and as the helmsman put her about they had time to assemble the chains and grappling hooks, but as the *Laurentia Bay* bore down on her quarry one of the seamen called out that there was something odd about this one.

Halfway along its length was a thing – he could not come up with a better word – some kind of a plant perhaps or a seaweed that had taken root. As they gathered to look the boat drew closer and they could see that it was a bushy tangle of white threads, some

matted, some loose and blowing in the sea wind; springy, spiralling, apparently growing out of the trunk which still had long scabs of bark adhering to it. Then there was another shout, startled and wary. Whatever the strange growth was, there seemed to be a living creature under it.

When the *Laurentia Bay* came alongside they could see it clearly. It looked almost human; they could make out impossibly thin limbs, bony hands and feet, all burned dark brown, almost black, by long exposure to the sun. As they leaned over for a closer look they saw that the growth of white fibres, under which it hid or sheltered, was its hair.

They had sailed the tideless oceans of Demeter all their lives, and seen marvellous sights. Being men with little learning and mightily superstitious, they had made the sights more marvellous in the telling. This was something they had told of but never seen.

One of them said, 'Mermaid?'

'It's got legs.'

'It may have a tail as well.'

'Where's its head?'

'Shut your gibbering faces and get the hooks ready.' The bosun was as curious as any of them. He did not believe it was a mermaid but he did not think it looked fully human, either; such dark skin, such white hair. Still, it was clear to him exactly what it was. 'Two of you get down on that log now!'

They were reluctant to go. The thing had started to

stir. At the bosun's shout it opened its eyes, mere slits in the taut skin of its face that looked more like tanned leather than anything living, and gazed up at them. The head did not move but the eyes fixed themselves on the prow which had just come level with it.

Whatever it saw frightened it terribly, and without getting up it began to scrabble with its hind claws at the trunk where it was sprawled. The forepaws, with their blunted nails, paddled uselessly as if it were trying to swim. It was a weak and feeble monster but it started to creep forward and the great horrible quivering mass of its hair crept with it.

'Get it, catch it,' someone cried. 'Quick, before it dives in.'

The happy thought of what they could do with a monster got them moving. The landsmen's law forbade exhibiting monsters unless they were dead, in which case collectors had been known to pay. But there were people on shore who would be interested in a live one, and this monster looked as if it would be easy to catch. For all its frantic pawing it had moved barely a metre and now they could see that it was tethered to the log by a length of orange twine.

Two of the crew went over the side, boarded the log and converged upon the creature. It struggled slightly and croaked, but put up no real resistance, and it was very light to handle although neither of them much wanted to touch it. There was something unwholesome about that hair. When the seaman

severed the orange cord and threw the creature over his shoulder the hair, instead of hanging down, remained in a rigid sphere like a giant seed head.

He put his burden down on deck and the crew surrounded it, instinctively kneeling or squatting so as not to frighten it, but it could hardly have been more frightened than it already was. It had evidently been in captivity before; at some point somebody had made an attempt to clothe it. It was hung about with rags of fabric but under the tatters they could see it trembling, ribs rising and falling beneath its leathery skin as it gasped and shuddered. Its face had disappeared under the hair when it was set down, but now it peered out, hissing through dry blackened lips.

They stared in horror. The bosun, more horrified than any, although for a different reason, went to find someone sensible. He heard a cry behind him. 'It's got no tongue!'

Someone reached out a hand to investigate but it clamped its mouth shut and folded its limbs together, drawing its head into its bony shoulders under the hair.

If it had no tongue it could not complain and its claws were harmless. Someone began to prod it with a stick, another suggested putting it in a bag with some food while they decided what to do with it. But what would it eat, a tongueless monster?

'*Eat*?' A furious voice scattered them. 'What have you got there?'

The skipper's wife, summoned from the galley by the bosun, had come on deck. She was armed only with a wooden spoon but they all leaped up. The deckhand told her that they had found this thing clinging to a log.

'A log? And have you secured it? What's the drill?'

The two crewmen disappeared over the side again. The skipper's wife crouched in front of the monster and, fearlessly seizing its hair in two massive hands, lifted the springy mass and peered under it.

'Mermaid?' the deckhand ventured.

'Mermaid? It's a child.'

'That hair—'

'What of it? Can't you recognize a child when you see one? Is this the first castaway you've ever picked up?'

The creature hissed again, desperately.

'It's got no tongue, Missus,' someone explained. 'It's been cut out, maybe?'

'Of course it's got a tongue. Get out of the way, you great idiots. You find a human child floating on a log and you think it's a monster. It's too parched to speak and you think its tongue's been cut out. Who knows how long it's been adrift – dried out like beef jerky – look at it. Monster or not you could have given it water. The sun fried your brains long ago; has it shrivelled your hearts as well?'

She scooped up the child with one hand and strode

down the deck to the after-cabin. Their last sight of it was the terrible, fascinating hair.

She called her daughter to pump up some water for the tub. The poor scrap of humanity – mermaid! – was so parched that the kindest thing to do would be to souse it, but first she laid it across her knees and dribbled water into its mouth until it could swallow. Then she tore off the rags which parted as easily as weed, sat it in the tub and the two of them poured water over it. It was a girl, impossible to guess her age; her arms and legs were like sticks, belly caved in against her spine. The skipper's wife kept the hair dry; she did not want to find out what it was like to handle when it was wet and, in any case, it would have to come off. It was filthy, matted up with debris and standing out a forearm's length from the scalp – no wonder those fools on deck had been so struck by it. She herself had never seen anything like it.

Between them the skipper's wife and her daughter hauled the girl out of the tub and rubbed her down. By now she had stopped trembling but when she saw the razor being stropped she clutched her neck and wailed and kicked out. The skipper's wife wished she had trimmed those claws while she'd had the chance.

'She thinks you're going to cut her throat,' the daughter said.

At the sound of words, even if she did not understand them, the girl stopped wailing.

'You can't keep it like this,' the skipper's wife said. 'It's past washing and if you think I'm putting a comb through that muck you can think again. It looks to me like it's got things growing in it. Now, you keep still, like a good girl. I'll shave your head for you and you'll wonder why you let it get like that. You'll feel light as air.'

The door opened and the skipper looked in.

'What's this about the men dredging up a mermaid? Is that *it*?'

'Those halfwits. No more brains between them than a pickled sarling. It's a little girl; she was drifting on that log we're towing – who knows how long. She's in a poorly way. Pity we can't get her ashore.'

The skipper came over, stooping under the low deckhead, and loomed over the chair. 'Poor little lass. God help us, what's that on her head?'

'Hair. I'd hate to see what they look like where she comes from. I'm getting it off before it walks off on its own.'

The skipper touched a gentle hand to the girl's face. 'Don't you fret,' he said, 'you'll soon be safe. Then we'll have to find out what's become of your mammy and daddy.'

As he went out the woman pointed encouragingly at her husband's shining weather-beaten head. 'Do you understand? I'm not going to cut your throat, I'll just have you looking like that, bald as a kneecap.'

It had the wrong effect. The girl began to howl

wordlessly, kicking again as she tried to free herself. The hair flailed as she swung her head from side to side.

The skipper's daughter stepped forward.

'Ma, she doesn't want her head shaved.'

'Doesn't want? I dare say she doesn't, but I'll not have that mattress stuffing loose on board my boat. Have you ever seen anything like it? She's from one of those places with a funny religion, I dare say. Do hold your noise, child, it'll soon grow back.' She picked up the razor again.

'Ma, don't. She's crying.'

The screaming had stopped. From under the hair came the unmistakable sound of weeping.

'Can't you just cut it real short and then wash it?'

'I suppose so, though if I wanted this kind of trouble I'd keep a dog. Fetch the scissors.'

'Cut it the way you cut mine, over your hand. That'll be short enough.'

The girl had lost all will to resist. Head bent she did not move when the skipper's wife took the first handful, measured it over four fingers and snipped. Bit by bit it came away in a vast cloudy clot, but none of it touched the floor until the last strand had been cut, and then it fell silently, all of a piece, and bounced.

'Will you look at it?' the skipper's wife said, awed. 'Put it in a bag out of the way. Someone may want to see it when we take her ashore – though that won't be

for a while. They might be able to tell where she came from.'

While she was talking she reached into the tub, dipped up a handful of suds and began kneading furiously at the crusted scalp. The girl, aware of having been reprieved, hung limply over the rim, flopping down when she was pushed into a chair and her head towelled and combed.

'Better ask Bosun if there was anything else on that log, stuff she had with her.' The skipper's wife took down a mirror from the wall and held it in front of the girl's face. 'Now, isn't that better? You look halfway human, at any rate.' The girl gazed blankly at her reflection as though she had never seen a mirror before and did not recognize what she was looking at. She had stopped crying. There had been no tears, she was too dry for that, but her breathing had quietened.

'Right, get her another drink, a warm one, and put honey in it. We'll get her to bed and with luck she'll sleep the clock round.'

She knelt in front of the girl and taking one bony foot in her hand began to cut the curling nails. Her daughter fetched the coffee pot, twined a spoonful of honey into a mug and held it to her mouth until she began to swallow.

'There's no flesh on her at all,' the skipper's wife said. 'Look at this leg. I can close my hand around it.'

'You going to do her fingernails too?'

'No need, they're worn to the quick. How long's

she been out there, do you think? Well, she won't be going anywhere for a while on these twigs. Was it a shipwreck, I wonder? How did she get separated from the rest of her family? If they've survived they'll think they've lost her forever.'

'Haven't there been distress calls?'

'Could have been weeks ago,' her mother mused. 'Once those logs get out into the current they can go around for years.'

'Won't it have come from Newvancouver, like the rest?'

'Sure, but how long ago? Let's get her into a berth for now; she can share your cabin. She's asleep already.'

She opened the door and the sudden draught sent the great sphere of hair floating across the cabin floor.

'Oh, get that out of sight, do, it gives me the creeps.'