

Koga

On a sunny, clear March day with the others of her pod lazing about her, she was at peace in the crisp, clear water. The fishing had been good, their bellies were full and their languid clicking and squeaking was conversational rather than the hurried checking and cross checking in the excitement of a hunt as they chivvied and herded the panicked shoals into the death-trap of their combined intelligence.

Her calf had outgrown her but he nuzzled her empty teats, companionable rather than in need. Contented and pleased, she rolled onto her back and pressed his head momentarily against her belly with one pectoral fin, before righting her long, beautiful, silver-grey body and gliding away.

Like the naked Ama girls she had seen, closer to shore, she tilted her flukes and dived, perpendicular and without effort, levelling out at no more than a hundred feet, far deeper than those floundering humans in their daily grubbing for pearl-bearing oysters or sponges.

There she hung, suspended in her crystal amethyst world and at her ease, her wise eyes rolling upward at the tiny, torpedo shapes of the others as she listened to their socialising, occasionally adding a squeak or contradictory chitter of her own, all clearly conveyed and understood in this liquid element. As the lead female, she was responsible for them and they were content to let it be thus.

Far, far below, the sea-bed was a dark and indistinct mass. The crack and scuttle and clicking of a billion Crustacea were audible and identifiable by her sonar, by their nature and even by their edibility.

While her people enjoyed the thrill of a shoal chase and the challenges of evasion and capture, they would forage among the sea-grass for unwary crabs, relishing the sweetness contained in those fragile shells. Even octopus, relying on coloration and a camouflage were worthy quarry, to be hunted and teased until their indigo dye, ran out and they succumbed, exposed and exhausted and spent.

It was on this day that she became aware of the sudden silence below. A silence as though all life had ceased to breathe and had paused to listen. To a sound that could have been a landslide in the great abysses far out from shore, huge slabs finally pried loose from their resting places of millennia and rumbling down into unimaginable depths. She had heard murmurs before, but this was a strange, harsh grating as though the sea-bed itself was somehow parting.

The vibrations became shock-waves transmitted through fifty miles of ocean and now, she was truly alarmed. Arching her body she streaked to the surface like an arrow from a bow. Her pod were milling on the surface, sonar temporarily disorientated as they scanned for the source of the disturbance. It had grown, within moments to a tangible force, out to sea and

from somewhere far, far below, welling upwards so that the surface broke into a sea of tiny ripples that stretched to the horizon - an horizon that wavered and dissolved against a darkening sky.

She chirruped reassurance, circling the others and reassuring them somewhat. The distant gloom was explained when the tsunami came into sight. It came in an unbroken wall that stretched across a fifty mile front, a towering wall of water that at first rose, rose and then fluttered at the crest before it settled into a vast, gleaming barrier and marched towards them.

To sea creatures so supremely adapted to their environment it was regal and majestic and fearsome all at once. Its sheer size and extent intimidated even these ocean speedsters; their experience of swells and waves limited to those of the benign tides that beat on the half-dozen coasts in their range. This was not such a wave.

The bolder ones breached almost to their vents to see it more clearly, supported on powerful thrusts of their tail flukes, while the timid chose to watch its approach from surface level, turning snouts this way and that to favour one eye or the other.

Within a short distance, the gigantic wall had settled into a fast-running wave, feeling the drag of a shallower bottom, and began to break and peel away quite symmetrically in either direction from the centre. Enormous though it was, this was how a wave should look, and the pod began to mill again, hesitantly at first, then as the excitement grew and their playfulness was aroused, they jockeyed for position in line and began a slow, rhythmic tail beat that propelled them, but allowed the wave to catch up.

Clicks and squeaks grew in intensity as all were caught up in the moment, and then it was upon them in a towering, roaring avalanche of water that squeezed the air out of its own belly as it broke evenly and cleanly to the left and, as one, the dolphins launched themselves into the force of it, surfing the biggest wave any would ever see.

On shore, the tsunami warning had been sounded, and Ryoko shed her gumboots and dropped her broom to race, barefoot to the flat roof of the Waterworld building.

Below, in his tank, Koga was circling restlessly, pausing here and there to breach and listen. She'd seen him do this many times in the years they'd been together, but at this distance from the sea, surely it was impossible that he could hear wild dolphins. When he performed those prodigious leaps to take fish from her hand, she'd wondered if he could briefly see the sea, and in her aching heart had hoped he couldn't.

To Ryoko's whistled commands, Koga entertained and charmed and fascinated the weekend crowds and school outings and then returned to his solitary circling when Ryoko retired each night. Sometimes he slept. Cradled in the warm, still waters of his enclosure, in which the only

detectable sound was the sly siphoning of his own wastes by the murmuring purification plant somewhere far away.

The tsunami was rushing towards the shore-line, still in its perfectly shaped form. Ryoko was mesmerised, clinging to the balustrade rail and almost without fear. There was something so inevitable and primal about it that it seemed pointless to flee. Instinctively, she realised that she was high enough to be out of reach and then it hit the shore; a stretch of wooded parkland that sloped gently upwards to the first buildings.

Trees went down like nine-pins and great sprays of earth and lawn showered the buildings as they dissolved like rice-paper before the roaring mass. As she stared, she became suddenly aware that in all that thundering confusion, there were lithe grey bodies, darting swooping, dodging debris and leaping ahead to disappear again into the welter.

Koga had been calling for some moments now, urgently, stridently, and Ryoko realised that even she could hear the strangers, her human senses no match for Koga's sonar, blunted as it was by disuse.

The wave hit the front of the Waterworld structure with a hollow boom that shook it to its foundations, but it held, and disappointed, the sea parted, racing around the great complex to seek easier prey beyond.

At that point, the broken wave had ceased to provide the enormous thrust the dolphins had ridden, and now, in twos and threes, they coursed here and there, seeking the source of Koga's cries. The water was still fathoms deep, but the pod instinctively sensed that it would not long be so. Waves intruding on the land always retreated at some point, and this one, mighty though it was would be no different.

Koga was frantic and they were anxious and concerned. They could not see each other but it made no difference. Their language sufficed to tell them all they needed to know.

Something clinked against the rail and Ryoko realised that her whistle still hung around her neck. She put it to her lips and blew a signal. Reluctantly, Koga obeyed at her third attempt. Sullenly, he swam to the far end of the tank and waited under Ryoko's platform.

At the next whistle, his great caudal muscles, seven times stronger than comparable muscle groups of any other mammal, churned the water into foam as they propelled him to top speed in just four or five massive thrusts. Ryoko's last shrill call saw him planing upwards from the depths of his pool in a glorious, soaring arc, that, fuelled by his frustration, took him high, high over the banked seating, over the safety fence of the paved surrounds to disappear over the side of the building and into the receding flood.

Ryoko clambered down from her perch and peered over the fence. It was impossible to tell which dorsal fin might be Koga's, as the others jostled and crowded to be the first to welcome him.

She held out the whistle at arm's length, let the lanyard slide through her fingers, and turned away before it hit the water.

Mike Job