

La Sirène

On a submarine housing children born with a genetic mutation, people of faith wrestle with the sin of causing an ecological disaster.

By Karen Engelsen

Illustrations by Carolina Rodriguez Fuenmayor

An alarm buzzed, yanking Benny's gaze away from his bank of video feeds from the underwater observation drones.

Someone's left a baby in the Safe Haven Box.

Torn, his attention wavered. Two of the drones still floated freely, not yet stowed safely beneath the Mission — and a hurricane loomed mere miles off Old Louisiana's coast.

Hurricane's not quite made landfall. That baby is more important than docking drones.

Rising winds lent him urgency. Benny keyed in the auto-dock on drone #18 and sprinted down the hall. For the most part, ballast kept the Kateri Mission floating steady, her sea anchors holding her in place. But storm surge was already hitting her broadside in waves. It wouldn't be long before it drove them beneath the surface of Timbalier Bay for safety.

Lazare, as usual, beat him to the receiving chamber. He shifted impatiently from hand to hand, waiting for Benny to open the box and retrieve the surrendered infant.

“How the heck do you run so fast?” Benny glanced down. The kid wasn’t wearing his leg prosthetics. *Again.*

“How do you run so slow, old man?” The boy shot back, grinning as he plumped his torso on the floor and crossed his arms.

Not a boy — a young man of 16. But a young man who will never have an adolescent growth spurt. His body will always be too small for that big personality.

The thought saddened him.

Benny knuckled Lazare’s head. “Hey — I’m only nine years older than you.”

Between seminary and engineering at the Mission, “Deacon Benoit Naquin” feels like he’s 100 already. Just wait ‘til I make the Priesthood. He laughed at himself.

I’d do anything for kids like Lazare.

Hydraulics groaned as the Box’s exterior door finished sealing. Outside the Mission, rising winds made their supply airship’s docking mast vibrate. Its thin wail pierced the foam-crete walls.

Uh-oh. Winds have reached Category 1, over 74 miles an hour.

Uneasy at the thought, he glanced out the window. Water churned against the plexiglass: dirty water in Nature’s washing machine, debris flying sideways, white foam lashing clear to the second floor.

“I saw no sign of a boat when I got here.” Lazare, too, sounded worried.

Benny spared a small prayer for the infant’s mother. He couldn’t imagine how someone from the bayous crossed the open waters paddling a pirogue. Not in this *ouragan*.

The sound of hydraulics ceased, and the indicator light blinked green. Benny thumbed the lock, and the Box door released. Water dripped through the hinge, moisture darkening the wall as it opened.

Inside the compartment lay a small bundle, swaddled in a wet blanket.

“Someone got you here safe and sound. Let’s see who the storm brought us, then.” He cooed as he reached for the crying infant and peeled down the wet swaddling.

A full head of dark hair crowned the infant. A starfish hand waved fitfully in midair. Benny slid his finger into its grasp, touching the palm. Like the tendrils of coral anemones, tiny fingers wrapped around his finger.

The child huffed and settled.

Perfect little torso, perfect chubby arms, the fine thread of a pulse tangible to his touch. But below the navel, what should have been two legs tapered into a single, narrow column ending in twisted flipper-like feet.

And also the wide-set eyes, broad nasal bridge, and epicanthic folds of Potter's Syndrome. *Another sirenomeliac, poor little thing. Another victim of oil's heavy metals. It's poisoned our waters since the Time of Hungry Ghosts.*

"You've got a sweet little sister," Benny said.

"What is she — my 30-second sibling now?" Lazare scoffed as he scuttled over to see, his empty shorts dangling under his half-body.

"Settle down, and you can hold her while I lock up." Benny slipped her into the kid's eager arms. Once the Box sealed shut, the ballast pumps could engage, pulling the Mission underwater, safely beneath the gale.

Lazare drew a finger down the girl's fused legs, to her twisted flipper feet. "Just like me," he said, his tone wistful.

Like so many, born without viable kidneys, unable to survive without the Mission's care. Always needing life support, never to live lives of purpose. We've saved them, but is that enough?

Benny straightened. The girl needed surgery to integrate her with a life support unit. *Thank Bon Dieu the Church has deep pockets. And a guilty conscience.*

A loud crash shook the chamber. Shock shot through Benny's veins like hot whiskey. His gaze flew to the source of the sound.

A large, gutted fish battered against the plexiglass window, water churning ever higher as the storm strengthened. His heart skipped a beat in his chest.

"A busted observation drone," he said. *One I didn't stow away. Number 19 or 20.*

Modeled after a yellowfin tuna, its fish-shaped silicone exterior had ripped wide open, exposing a disjointed carbon-fiber spine inside. Electropolymer muscles had torn loose, dangling freely in the water. The head carrying sensory electronics dangled by a wire, banging against the window with the motion of the waves.

"La Sirène is not happy with us," Lazare said. "She's throwing our fish back in our faces."

La Sirène. Mami Wata. Blessed Mary, Star of the Sea. She of many names, many faces: the lighthouse that guards, the guiding star that brings a sailor home through storm — or kidnapper of babies to raise them undersea, the mermaid that drowns men in her embrace.

The pitch of the wind rose, the Mission's sensor mast vibrating with the harmonics, an eerie, tonal wailing. They'd have to withdraw beneath the surface soon. Without sun, batteries would see them through the worst of the storm, but if the winds kept them under the surface more than two days, they'd have to ration power.

"La Sirène calls to us," Benny said. *With the most beautiful voice of all the loa.*

He sighed, torn between two worlds, and shook off his frustration. "I'd best get her to surgery."

Lazare looked up. "What should we name her?"

Benny spared a last glance at the wreckage of the drone. Electronics gone, its gutted silicone body thrashed against the window, storm surge lending it the semblance of life.

“Nola,” he replied. “After the city that drowned a hundred years ago. New Orleans.”

“Nola.” Lazare nodded his approval as Benny took the child from him. “Stormborn.”



Benny studied the small, still form in the regen-tank.

The charge nurse, Sister Cecely Couteau — *Cece*—wiped sweat from her hairline with a forearm. “Surgery went well,” she said. Cat-like satisfaction stole across her face.

Nola’s tiny body hung suspended in the tank, supported by an inflatable, petal-like float that kept her face above the straw-colored fluid. The bottom of her torso ended in a neatly bandaged bulb, connected to the life-support unit via flexible tubing and wire cables.

“Little froggy on a lily pad,” Lazare chanted, his nose pressed to the glass.

Nola’s arms twitched.

Benny glanced up sharply.

Cece read the monitors as she gestured to the baby. “EEG shows the electro-stim is working. You can see the neural link has stabilized.”

“Good.” The stim would keep her muscles from a state of atrophy.

Benny relaxed too-tight shoulders and exhaled a long sigh of relief.

Waiting in surgery always leaves me such a mess.

Named after the Patron Saint of Ecology, the Kateri Mission’s initial purpose was coastal wetlands restoration — a task which came to mean salvaging the lives of sirenomeliacs as well, lives that otherwise would be lost.

But that isn’t always easy, or even possible.

As Benny watched Nola sleep, his old anger bubbled up. *Children wouldn’t suffer like this if Mother Church hadn’t spent two millennia promoting ecocide in the name of dominion over the earth. It’s taken her too damn long to come to her senses.*

His feelings must have shown on his face. Cece patted his hand. “We won this one. Take the win, Benny. She’s not going anywhere.” She gently guided him toward the rocker in the corner of the recovery room. “How long has it been since you slept? By the look of you, not since God wore knickers. Get some shut-eye.”

“I’ll watch her for you,” Lazare said. His fingers made the sign of the cross, lips moving with his own silent prayers.

He sees himself in babies like Nola. They make him less lonely.

“Come get me if anything changes.” Benny said. He eased back against the worn cushions, letting the bubbling sounds of the tank soothe him as he halfheartedly rocked.

He rested tired eyes on the many invocational banners hung on the walls. Their brightly colored satins, sequins, and glass beads depicted guardian Saints and Vodou healing spirits. Saint Patrick/Damballah the Rainbow Serpent, Saint Claire/Ayizan the purifier, an old woman in white and surrounded by palm trees — each one an emanation of *Bon Dieu*, the good God.

Cece had even drawn a vèvè — a Vodou religious symbol — on Nola’s tank with a white marker. The curlicue lines, stars, and two snakes facing each other invoked the protection of Saint Patrick/Damballah.

She’d also cleaned away bad energy with Florida Water. Its pungent, limey scent bit the back of Benny’s nose. Beside him, on an altar, candles flickered at the feet of a sculpture of Mary, Star of the Sea. Bowls of roses at her feet emitted a cloud of sweet perfume.

Phrases of her votive mass washed through the back of Benny’s mind.

... Mary, shine forth as the Star of the Sea and protectress for us who are tossed about on the stormy waves ...

The sacred memory soothed him. For the first time in what felt like days, Benny closed his eyes, merely listening. No wailing skies. Only the faint pulse of the pumps felt through the soles of his feet — the Mission’s heartbeat.

Benny let himself drift. He’d had a tough day punctuated by frantic rushing, then the long, tense wait as the storm raged overhead.

The smell of rose grew thicker, sweeter. The soft cloud of scent reminded him of the Mary shrine back home in Houma City.

“You did well bringing her here.”

Cece’s voice — or is it? Benny drifted too deeply to care. He felt her gentle hand on his shoulder, and raised his own to cover it.

“But you need to let them come to me.” Fingers dug into his shoulder.

His eyelids felt as if they’d been glued shut. Benny struggled to open them, to see who pinched him.

A face blurred before him: *Cece*? No — this woman’s café-au-lait skin was dappled with fine traces of scales, her body nude to the waist. And below? An iridescent blue-green fish tail. It coiled beneath her like the body of a snake, lacework fins twitching as she balanced upright upon a bed of seagrass that waved beneath aquamarine waters.

“La Sirène ...” Benny murmured, not quite able to form a coherent thought.

How am I breathing underwater?

“I come to tell you, Benoit Naquin —” her words tumbled out in the patois of the deep bayou, the sound of water tumbling across a broken reef, “— that your little fake fish do not satisfy me. No hero can conquer me. No man alive has the power to control the sea.”

La Sirène undulated seductively, balancing atop her snake-like tail. “Your children will be mine, for I will take them back into my bosom.” Her grip released him, fingers snapping into a fist in front of his nose.

Benny jerked, tipping the rocker backwards.

He swung it forward again. “I won’t let your storms and tantrums imperil our children.”

Candles flickered, the flames growing higher, casting the sea floor with bars of light and darkness. Howling winds became the wail of an infant, forlorn, bereft.

La Sirène tossed her head in fury, dusky blond braids flying like sea wrack. “You are no savior, stopping up your ears, deaf to our cries,” she roared. “The world is not your plaything, to be used and discarded at whim. They suffer —” she flung out an arm, water splashing from her fingertips onto Nola’s tank, “— because of men like you. It is your arrogance that wounds them.”

She speaks truly. If only men listened, when the seabed wept oil, and the land begged for water. “What must I do?” Benny whispered, aghast.

Her gaze narrowed. “Suffer the children to come to me,” La Sirène replied. Tears glistened at the corners of her eyes. “Let me rock my babies in my waters. I will care for them, and they will become strong.”

Like a tempest swirling around the eye of the storm, her mood shifted. “If you do not give them to me, I will take them,” she thundered.

Benny’s head spun, the roaring of her voice overwhelming him. A terrifying vertigo threatened to pluck him from his body. He cried out as he pitched from the rocker, sprawling on the cold, concrete floor.

“Wake up, Benny.” Someone shook his shoulder. Benny heard the sound of water dripping. His shoulder was shaken harder.

“C’mon, dammit.”

It’s Cece. Cece calls me.

“Storm surge broke open a section of the oyster reef,” Cece said, her voice tight with worry. “You’ve gotta get an ROV out there and repair it. Before salt water destroys the freshwater marsh.”



“It’s not that simple, Cece.” Benny had massaged his temples, trying to shake the last vestiges of dizziness. “Yes, a Remote Operated Vehicle *maybe* could tow out an artificial reef for oysters to grow on. But sediments have likely clogged the beds by now, choking them out. We’ll have to use the filter barge to clear the water so they *can* grow back and fix the reef.”

And that barge cannot be deployed until the storm dies down.

“Damn.” Her shoulders sagged. “Technology’s never been the answer, has it?”

Benny could only shake his head in agreement.

Back in his workshop, Benny showed Lazare how to read the satellite weather feeds, the kid all but wiggling out of the chair as he tried to concentrate. *So much energy. He should be doing something physical.*

He still couldn’t shake the conversation with Cece.

There should not be so many sick infants abandoned by their mothers. Or surviving kids like Lazare, tied to life support. A hundred-fifty years of environmental damage proved anthropocentrism leads only to destruction.

“We still haven’t learned our lesson, have we ...” Benny murmured as he studied the broken drone, now retrieved and lying on his workbench.

Observation drones were shaped like the fish they observed — but demanded a human operator to keep them safe. Filter barges — couldn’t work in current conditions. ROVs — too limited in range and motion to plant mangroves or tend oyster beds.

We’re still standing apart, applying our heroic measures to “fix” Nature. And it’s not working.

Frustrated, disgusted at his limitations, Benny began to pace.

“Lazare, what was that you said about La Sirène and fish when this showed up?”

“That she was throwing ours back in our faces. Why?” Lazare looked puzzled.

She doesn’t want to be “managed” by drones. She wants mutuality. A co-equal relationship, man and sea. She even mentioned “her” babies — the sirenomeliacs?

As Benny fingered the drone’s dangling electronics, Lazare hauled himself up onto the workbench, shifting position as he sat.

To avoid disturbing his bio-ports.

Benny looked down at the cabling in his hand, and back to Lazare. A clear image presented itself — the perfect solution, wedding a small person to a very mobile, low profile prosthetic, one able to work freely underwater.

His heart lifted, spirits buoyed as he sensed the possibilities.

It'll open the world to Lazare. Give him a real purpose, a job that only he can do.

And make La Sirène happy.



Father Superior Xavier de Charlevoix, head of the Kateri Mission, inspected the jury-rigged prosthetic taped to Lazare's torso.

Benny fingered his rosary. *Will he greenlight this project? Give the kids a real chance to make a difference?*

Lazare tweaked the manual controls. The drone's tail flopped back and forth behind him, mimicking the motions of a fish.

"You say this will enable him to swim?" Doubt wreathed Xavier's careworn face.

"It should. But it will work far better once I mate the data module from the prosthetic —" *yes, call it that, not a "tail,"* — to Lazare's neural port."

The Father closed his eyes, and scratched his forehead. Sighed. Jittered one foot.

"I can't countenance this. I *want* to. But no."

"Why?"

Father Xavier spread his hands. "Quite simply, Archbishop Raimondo will pull our funding. He's already on the fence about supporting our work. Raimondo *still* refuses to acknowledge that contamination of air, land, and water are ecological *sins* that the Church has a responsibility to remediate."

Shocked, Benny fumbled for words. "That's a throwback to the Age of Hungry Ghosts, isn't it? Back in the day of carbon fuels, when the unity of man and nature was said to be heresy?"

Xavier nodded. “Yes, but the traditionalists still believe eco-theology is mere paganism. And this —” he indicated Lazare’s prosthetic tail, “— all Raimondo would see is dissolution of the sanctioned boundary separating Man and Nature. He would not look kindly upon it — nor your candidacy for the Priesthood.”

“But —” Benny floundered. *Hurricane-churned waters aren’t nearly as treacherous as politics.* “Wasn’t the issue of ecological sin determined by the Pope in 2015, and ratified by Vatican III?”

Xavier shook his head sadly. “For us, yes. For the prelate who holds our Mission’s purse strings — *no*. Raimondo barely tolerates our multicultural expressions of faith. I don’t want to push him further.”

Father Superior has made his position clear. Further pursuit not only risks my future vocation as a priest, but risks the children’s well-being.

Xavier patted Benny on the shoulder with a warm, consoling hand. “Think of it this way, son. The Church is like an old supertanker — it has a lot of moving parts and enormous momentum, making it tough to turn. Set this project aside, and we’ll say no more.”

The thought of blind obedience — against his clear discernment of a higher good — left Benny with a hollow ache in his chest.

But for the sake of *les innocents*, he folded his arms and bowed his head.

Obedience does not mean blind subservience. There has to be a way.



Father Xavier stood behind him, watching the video feed as Benny panned the air-drone’s camera across the Mission’s roof. Thankfully, they’d survived the initial blow. Now was their golden moment of calm as the eye of the hurricane passed overhead. They could surface for inspection.

The camera revealed a roof dripping with seaweed, its paint scoured by debris from the churning water and spattered with small black blobs.

More tar-balls. A nasty mix of old oil and sand, churned up by the storm.

“Looks like just the mast was damaged,” Benny said. The three-story pole dangled askew, hanging from the central peak of the roof by its cables.

“Can you repair it?” Father Xavier asked. Not only was it a mooring mast for the supply air-ships, it was also the radio tower and location beacon for this sector of the coast.

Benny shook his head. “We’ll have to cut it loose before the storm surge on the other side of the eye beats it against the roof.”

“Is there time?” Xavier asked, his voice thin with tension.

“It’ll be close.”

The external hatch clanged open and crew scurried aloft, up the rails secured to the outside of the clamshell roof. One attached a marker buoy to the mast, while another cut the remaining wires.

The Timbalier barrier reef will not be so easy to fix. Rough seas had pounded open a channel through which wind-driven seawater surged. The surf broke down the marshland’s soft mats of grasses, strewing dead plants and mud. Sixteen feet of surge eroded new channels in the marshland, salt water flowing in, threatening the lives of freshwater species.

So much wetlands remediation wasted. Benny seethed. *Was that La Sirène’s satisfaction I heard in the voice of the tempest?*

“It’s free,” the repair chief announced over the comm. The mast slid down the slope of the clamshell roof, and toppled into debris strewn water, the buoy marking its location for later retrieval.

Winds began to pick up, waves chopping the surface of the bay. The cloudbank to the southwest loomed darkly.

Their work done, repair crews scrambled back inside and dogged down the roof hatch.

“They’re in. We can be under before the back wall of the eye strikes us.” Benny engaged the ballast pumps. Down on this level, their low pulsing throbbed through his feet.

Thrum. Thrum. Thrum. Thrum.

Thra-thrum. The rhythm stuttered, split. *Thra-thrum.*

A groaning shudder ran beneath his feet. Benny glanced at the window. The line of water marking their descent slanted. *The Mission is tilting.* Benny checked the readout on the ballast pumps. Both drew power. But only Pump One drew water onboard, pulling them down to safety. *Either Pump Two cracked ... or the intake got clogged.*

He turned them both off, then on again. They powered up, sensors responded — but readouts showed no water flowing through Pump Two.

Benny pressed the comm. “Ballast Pump Two is down,” he announced. “Prepare for a rough ride.” Without full ballast to pull it under, the Mission must ride out the rest of the storm above the surface.

Not good.

“Can you fix it from inside?” Xavier asked.

Benny shook his head. “It’s likely debris blocking the intake. Sending out an ROV to remove it.” Its remote operated arms and hand-like clamps were designed to handle external repairs. The smaller arm would fit up the 3-inch pipe — a familiar task.

Xavier's sigh puffed out his cheeks. To his credit, he said not a word ... just prayed under his breath.

Benny was more than aware that 18 adults and 33 children risked death if the rear eye-wall of the hurricane struck the Mission while above the surface. He felt the tension rise, as if the entire facility crackled with electricity.

Saint Raphael, keep the gulf quiet ... He'd better find the problem, and fast.

Cameras showed increasingly murky water as the ROV dropped down the chute toward the bayou floor.

"... and now we see through a glass darkly ..." Xavier intoned.

Benny guided the undersea drone with small ticks of his fingers on the joystick. Clumps of seagrass struck the ROV's camera lens as it followed the underside of the Mission, the long strands tumbling, whipping against the lens. Twin cones of light from the headlamps barely pierced the murk. He angled the lights upward, revealing the oval of ballast intake port #2.

Covering it — a thick, black tar-mat, oil mixed with sand; ancient sin made manifest.

The pump's suction must have drawn it up. Benny manipulated the waldo controls, tele-maneuvering the ROV's hand to grip the tar. Its claws broke through the sandy crust and sank into the gooey mass. He eased the gripper downward, hoping to pull the tar away from the intake.

Instead, a long string of goop stretched downward. When it sagged and broke, viscosity pulled most of it back into the mat.

Benny opened the gripper, to release the tar he'd managed to pull away.

The hand jammed. He could feel the grinding through the haptic feedback. "Poo-yi-yi that is *stuck*, stuck," Benny growled. "Sand in the gears. And I can only imagine how gummed up the ballast filter is."

"What now?"

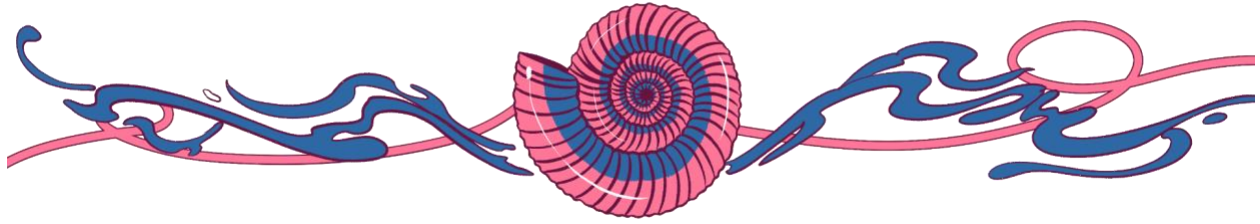
Benny shook his head. "It'd take too long to reach the filters from inside. It'll have to be cleared manually, outside. But a diver's hand won't fit up that little opening."

An adult's hand won't fit. But a boy's?

They both looked at the radar feed on the weather monitor. The eye wall was almost upon them.

What's the point of obedience, if it kills us all?

Benny shot Xavier a look from under lowered brows, then thumbed the comm. "Lazare, come back to the workshop."



Benny watched Cece wrap waterproof skin tape around Lazare until he was thoroughly bound to the finny end of Observation Drone #19.

Looks good. The drone's tracer is still live. If worse comes to worst, the ROV can pull him out.

Cece eyeballed her handiwork, her mouth set in a grim line. "Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked.

Lazare squeezed the manual controls, wagging his silvery "tail" at her while grinning from ear to ear. He held up the other skinny little hand, his expression grown serious. "I want to clear the tar," Lazare said. "For my siblings. For us all."

In that moment, Benny saw the man that Lazare might become, if only given the chance.

Capable. Determined. *Brave.*



Sea and sky merged into a roaring, raging torrent. Battered by 130-mile-an-hour winds, the Mission shuddered and groaned. Her clamshell shape deflected some of the blow, but not enough. She bucked and shrieked as the sea anchors tore loose, dragging them along the lakebed.

The drone Benny sent with Lazare had spun out of control in the currents. Shortly after Lazare dropped through the hatch, the ROV's camera lost sight of him. The last Benny had seen was the tiny cone of light from Lazare's headlamp receding as he maneuvered from hand-hold to hand-hold across the Mission's underside.

Benny prayed for what felt like hours as he kept a forlorn watch on Lazare's tracer signal, his heart gripped with shame and terror. ... *O Virgin, Star of the Sea, Our beloved Mother, we live in the shadow of a danger over which we have no control; the Gulf, like a provoked and angry giant, spreads chaos and disaster. During this hurricane season, we turn to You ...*

He prayed until a head popped through the hatch, the dark curls dripping water. "It's clear," Lazare coughed. "Start the pumps."

Benny rushed to pull the cold, exhausted youth the rest of the way through the hatch. Lazare flopped limply onto the floor in a tangle of debris.

"She helped me," he gasped, his chest heaving with great breaths.

Benny noticed Lazare wore no scuba mask, carried no air-tank on his back.

"Where's your gear?"

"She took it." The young man looked up at him, his eyes wide with wonder. "Said as I was half fish, I didn't need it. Then she helped me pull out the tar."

How can that be? Was he really down there without air for over a half hour ... The hair on the back of Benny's neck rose. "She?" he asked.

"La Sirène," Lazare replied.

Thrum. Thrum. Thrum. Thrum. Benny felt the low pulse of two pumps through his feet.



Father Superior Xavier de Charlevoix sat next to Benny on the Mission's airboat. Strings of Mardi Gras beads from the boat parade still hung from the canopy above them. The beads swayed gently as the airboat rocked in the wavelets, the big propulsive fan behind them silent as they observed the children playing in the sunlit bay.

Lazare towed a line of children wearing floats, his silvery tail flashing in the sunlight. No more skin tape, no more kludged prosthetic: Lazare's new tail was designed for purpose, a perfect fusion of biotech and boy.

With one outstanding flaw: It still lacks a brain/computer interface. But I've pushed this as far as I can, without outright rebellion.

"Congratulations on the new design." Xavier favored Benny with a sidelong look.

Benny sensed the judgment coming and thumbed the turtle beads of his rosary. "It's still a work in progress. There's more to do integrating haptic feedback so Lazare 'feels' his tail."

The neural link. Benny couldn't help but walk where angels feared to tread.

“I see,” Xavier hummed. “And the artificial kidney?”

“That’s all Cece — ’twas her idea to miniaturize life support systems, fit them in the tail.”

The youngsters squealed with glee, arms splashing. Soon, Lazare would be able to teach them to swim. *If* Benny got the financial support to build them all prosthetics. *If* he could build and miniaturize neural links, so the tails functioned naturally for young children.

Cece slipped off the air-boat’s deck into the water, Nola in her arms.

“And what will they do as they grow up?”

Much more than they would tethered to life support units. Benny bit back the retort.

“I hope to engage them in wetlands restoration projects. Replanting seagrass, rebuilding barrier reefs, bio-remediation. *Bon Dieu* knows we need all the hands we can get.”

“Hmm.” Xavier snorted. “I see.”

Father Superior shifted in his seat to face Benny, his expression grave. “You probably know I can no longer, in good faith, recommend you for the priesthood,” he said.

Benny’s heart sank as he watched Nola grab at the water, splashing Cece. He couldn’t imagine leaving the Mission, his work. The *children*.

“Disobedience cannot be rewarded. I have discerned your path has diverged. Therefore I’ve sent recommendation to Father General —”

Benny swallowed back tears.

“— that you continue with us on the path to ordination as a lay Brother, *in charge of the Mission’s new Sirenomeliac program*. Its utility is undeniable. Permission has been given and funding secured to develop that neural interface of yours.”

Benny tried to keep his cool. He really did. “Raimondo’s footing the bill?” His voice cracked.

“No,” a slow grin spread across the Father Superior’s face. “You’ll be answering to a higher power now, son.” Xavier leaned forward, his voice a low, conspiratorial whisper.

“Rome.”

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