The Sea Eternal: Characters and Choices

Format: Story Path Text
Here, the player's merfolk friends Arria and Estre disagree on what it means and how to deal with the humans who live with them under the sea. This is especially pertinent, because a new human, a romantic interest, has followed Tephra down into the city.

The two friends have come to you because of your first hand experience: you used to date the only other human living in the city of glass beneath the waves.

In this exchange, you have a chance to explore Tephra's new problem while starting to unpack your own old relationship wounds as well.

Through the haze, you recognize the two approaching fellow merfolk: Estre and Arraia. Their arms are linked, their pace perfectly matched.

Arraia has discreetly and fashionably wrapped her transitional area in a loose wrap. She'd normally adorn her hair to match, but you notice it loose and tangling in her wake instead. Estre's hair is short and slicked back. He's always had a preference for painting his body instead of covering it, and as he approaches, you can just barely make out today's pattern: green overlapping knots with cornered edges.

It's strange that neither of them is carrying any bags. The sensitive lateral line running down the length of your body twitches at how hard they're thrashing to get to you. It must be important.

As you push off to meet them, you start to feel a bone-deep reverberation: sonar. It's whale song, and you curse the timing. The song will most likely have an important message, but one you can only hear if you stop to properly listen.

*fake_choice
  #Stop and listen; the other merfolk will catch up with me.
    You slacken your body and concentrate on the vibrations of the deep sea noise: "SQUID. They are attacking us, they are fighting back, our minds hurt, we call upon your help, Everwardens, you must respond." That sounds serious. The on-duty merfolk will go to rescue them, but you feel a twinge of guilt that you can't. You shake yourself and refocus on Estre and Arraia. They're two Everwardens themselves, but they didn't take the time to listen to the message. Their own news must be dire. Or maybe they're just not on duty.
    *set Action %-40
    *set WhaleMessageKnown true

  #Rush to meet Estre and Arraia.

You lash your own tail furiously to meet Estre and Arraia, doing your best to catch snippets of the whale song's vibrations. You vaguely sense something about "Everwardens," with some feeling of a summons, like a council summons. Estre and Arraia don't even stop to listen to it. They're Everwardens themselves, so it must not be that important. Or at least, it must be less important than whatever Estre and Arraia have for you. You move to catch up with them quickly, and the three of you level out to speak.
    *set Action %+40
    *set EarlyTephra true

Estre does a quick scan of the area while Arraia speaks. "I'm so glad we found you," she says. "It's about Tephra." She takes a moment to catch her breath, although it feels like there's some additional hesitation in there as well.

*fake_choice
  #"She returned?"
    Arraia bobs her head yes-and-no, her long blue hair wisping up and around her face. She pushes the mess back. "Actually, yeah, she did return, even brought back the Eternity Orb. The mission was a success. She saved us all."

  #"She failed?"
    Arraia pushes back the long blue hair wisping up and around her face. "Not at all!" she says. "She succeeded. Saved us all, brought back the Eternity Orb. A rousing success."

  #"Oh no. Did she betray us?"
    *set Action %-10
    Arraia throws her head back in a laugh as her long blue hair wisps up and around her face. "Not at all!" she says. "She succeeded. Saved us all, brought back the Eternity Orb. The mission was a success."

  #"Why don't you just tell me?"
    *set Action %+10
    Arraia pushes back the long blue hair wisping up and around her face. "It's good news," she says. "Tephra saved us all, brought back the Eternity Orb. The mission was a success."
Her hair floats into her face again, forcing her to pull it all back and keep it in place with her fist.

Estre pulls out a small strip of shark leather and starts pulling at Arraia's hair. "And on top of that, she brought back Cinza," he says. He braids the rest of Arraia's hair and ties it off. "Cinza…she's being held as a prisoner."

*set Mortality_text "Safely immortal once again."

*fake_choice
  #"I was starting to worry she might have failed."

Estre lowers his eyes. "Nobody wants to admit it, but I think we all were worried that she might have failed," he says. "I mean, what if that really was the end? Mortal. Just think…."

Arraia pulls at a strand of hair that Estre missed. "And just because of one person going crazy like that?" she says. "I think there may be some changes." She sighs out a long stream of water. "Maybe even the kind that go too far."

 #"Is Cinza in danger of retaliation? Or injury?"
    Estre's face darkens. "I'm worried that she might be in danger from the others," he says. "There seems to be some discussion about just how severe her punishment should be. About what's an appropriate deterrent against others doing the same thing. I think it needs a few weeks to blow over before we can deal with her, maybe help her out of whatever madness possessed her."

    Arraia places a hand on Estre's shoulder. "We're not going to let things go that far, though, are we?"

 #"What was the rush to meet me?"
    "There's something we need your help with," says Arraia.

 #"The whales mentioned something…"
   *if (WhaleMessageKnown = true)
    *set WhaleMessageTold true
    "The whales mentioned a squid attack," you say. "They're calling for your help."

    Estre curses. "Of course. The gall of their timing. I wonder if they saw Cinza's return and knew it was a vulnerable time to strike."

    "We're obligated to go and help the whales," says Arraia, "but that can wait a bit."

   *if (WhaleMessageKnown = false)
    You elaborate: "All I could catch was something about Everwardens and a council, but I didn't get anything else."

    Arraia bobs distractedly. "A council meeting, eh? We'll ask about it after we take care of this."
*comment Paragraph break

Estre avoids eye contact. "We came here specifically to get you," he says. He flips around and grabs Arraia's hand, motioning for you to follow as he starts the swim back to the depths.

Arraia looks back to check that you're following. "Tephra brought back more than the Orb," she says, "more than Cinza. She brought back…" She trails off, focusing on the path straight ahead.

Estre finishes for her: "A human."

Really? Ha! That paragon of self-control Tephra must've fallen for a human, brought it back. And now Estre and Arraia are here because, well, you did pretty much the same thing. And that kind of makes you the resident expert on integrating humans.

*fake_choice
 #"I'll do anything to help."
   Arraia looks back, grinning. "I was hoping you would say that. It's why I thought of you first."

   Estre clicks in mild disapproval. "What does that mean?"

   "Simply that I knew ${YourName} would be understanding," says Arraia.
 #"Why did Tephra bring back a human?"
   Arraia shoots back coldly, "I guess she just wanted a souvenir of the trip."

   Estre clicks in disapproval. "Now, don't say that. You're talking about a person."
 #"Maybe we should introduce the humans to each other."
   "Yes, I'm sure your human would enjoy having some company, don't you think?" says Estre.

   Arraia shifts uncomfortably. "Oh, yes, I suppose. I…just thought of you first."

   Hm. Not too surprising that they came looking for another merperson first.
 #"How has the human been? Sick? Adjusting?"
   Arraia looks back. "Oh, well, I haven't asked. I thought you might prefer to be the one to ask it those sorts of questions."

   Estre clicks in disapproval. "That's the kind of thing I'm talking about," he says. "Even if it weren't doing well, I don't think we're the best judges of its health, its progress."
As the three of you swim farther down slowly, the light from up above fades, and your natural phosphorescence takes over.

"Tephra shouldn't have brought it down," says Arraia. "Humans don't belong here. Their bodies, their minds can't take it, and it's not fair to them."

This new human must be going through the same process that you know happens to humans who are around merfolk down here. Their bodies fill with salt water and strengthen against the crushing cold, but getting used to the sensations takes a while. After a time, the merfolk's immortality even rubs off on them, and they stop aging.

Estre wriggles uncomfortably. "This new human, it chose to come down here itself, knowing it would have to stay," he says. "Do you really think it shouldn't be allowed to control something like that in its own life?"

*fake_choice
  #"That decision can't be made with a full understanding of the consequences."
    *set Action %-10
    Arraia lashes her tail harder. "That's exactly what I'm talking about," she says. "How can some mortal commit to that kind of decision forever?"

    Estre pushes himself hard to catch up. "The alternative is to treat their kind like they're lesser, like they're below us, unable to make their own decisions. It's infantilizing."

  #"Humans should be allowed to make their own decisions, even if they are mistakes."
    *set Action %+10
    Arraia lashes her tail harder. "Yes, but did it really know the decision it was making? What kind of life it'd have to live here? It's not fair to ask a mortal to make that kind of a sacrifice blindly."

    Estre pushes himself hard to catch up. "I think the only thing that makes it unfair is that mortals are never allowed to return," he says. "If we changed that rule, if we made some kind of allowance, then it wouldn't be a problem."

  #"Let's give the human a chance to get used to things."
    *set Feral %-10
    Arraia lashes her tail harder. "It'll resent us for years," she says. "I mean, not that your human resents you…."

    Estre pushes himself hard to catch up. "This new human, it'll get used to things here. I heard it used to study marine biology."

  #"Well, hopefully that's a decision that makes it happy."
    *set Action %-10
    Arraia lashes her tail harder. "It'll be a miracle if that mortal can ever manage to forgive us for what this life will be like," she says. "If that were me, I'd probably kill us all."

    Estre pushes himself hard to catch up. "I don't think we should jump to conclusions. There's a lot we can do to make its time here more comfortable."

  #"The human made the decision, and it's not for us to question its judgment."
    *set Feral %+10
    Arraia lashes her tail harder. "It's about making informed decisions," she says. "Humans just don't have full agency if they choose to stay down here. They certainly don't have any if they choose to leave."

    Estre pushes himself hard to catch up. "$!{YourName}'s own human came to enjoy things here, eventually," he says, then looks at you apologetically. "You know, even if the two of you didn't end up lasting."

*comment Paragraph break

You glide deeper still as the sandy seafloor turns to bubbly smooth rocks: pillow lavas that indicate you're close to the rift where the city is located. You think you can see the gleam of the city in the distance, but it may just be another merperson coming or leaving.

Arraia slows her pace. "I guess giving them the option to return if they want is really the only solution that makes sense," she says. "I'm going to push for that, I promise."

"I doubt the council's going to change their minds on that," Estre says. "It's tied up in whale politics. I say we do our best to be welcoming, to make this place as pleasant as we can."

"Yeah, forget autonomy," Arraia huffs. "We'll gild up the cage instead."

*fake_choice
  #"If that human wants to leave, we should let it."
    *set Feral %+10
    Arraia pauses to look back at you. "I'm glad you agree, at least," she says. "Maybe that can help sway the council. Maybe it's soon enough that we can make up some kind of story about it all being just a bad dream."

    "Either way, the human's here now, and it deserves to enjoy life here," Estre says. "You're the expert on this; we need your help."

  #"Living here is pretty amazing. Here's hoping the human likes it too."
    *set Action %-10
    Estre pauses to look back at you. "I sure hope the human likes it here," he says. "We'll have to make sure that that's the case. We need to make the transition smooth."

    "I suppose we have to," says Arraia, "considering that the council won't let it leave anyway."

  #"That human made its own decision. We respect it."
    *set Action %+10
    Estre pauses to look back at you. "That's right," he says. "I mean, this human's free to make its own decisions."

    "Except the decision to leave," says Arraia. "Because it won't be allowed to."

  #"The rules are clear. No human is allowed to return, and there are good reasons for it."
    *set Feral %-10
    "That's right," says Estre, "so we need to do everything we can to make the transition smooth."

Arraia twitches her tail. "I still think that we can sway the council to change, or make an exception."

  #"You know, the human wouldn't even be here if the council had sent me instead."
    *set Feral %+10
    *set Action %+10
    Arraia bobs her body up and down in agreement. "I think that's something the council didn't think about, when they passed you over: that you wouldn't have made the mistake of bringing home a human. Not twice. They were probably being shortsighted, taking a hard stance just to make the consequences clear."

    Estre glares back at you. "Either way, it's here now, and it deserves to enjoy what this new life will be like," he says. "You're the expert on this, and it needs your help."

  #"So what do you know about this human? I don't want to just call it 'it.'"
    *set Feral %+10
    *set Action %+10
    "Oh, we know basically nothing about the human," Estre says. "As soon as we heard about it, we volunteered to go get you."

    Arraia grits her teeth. "Everyone's just been calling it 'the human.' I guess you could say that's one of the reasons we set out to find you."
*comment Paragraph break

You reach the edge of the rift, and the conversation dies down. You don't go down into the spreading seafloor below, but instead travel along the edge of the small cliff to find a guideline to the city suspended over the rift. Slowly, from out of the depths comes into view the pulsing glow from the crystalline city. Home.

*finish Into the City of Glass