A Storm at the Farm

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A Storm at the Farm

by jotc

Summary

When a fierce storm hits Mensah's family farm, she and Tano venture out to rescue a malfunctioning agricultural bot. In theory, it's just equipment. In theory, it can withstand a direct lightning storm anyway. And yet, they can't bring themselves to leave it at risk.

Meanwhile, Mensah wrestles with balancing her political responsibilities with her role in the family and Tano's brother has many opinions on who should contribute genes to family's children.

Slice of life, pre-canon, TV-rooted but draws on book lore such as AgBots.

Notes

Afaik Tano's pronouns are never specified (we know so little about Mensah's family!) For the purposes of this story, I made Tano male and also gave Tano a brother named Chaga. Update post Platform Decay: Tano is now canonically male :)

Amena was ignoring her. In just two days, Mensah would leave for three months to attend a conference. She'd reserved some time off before the trip to help on the farm (there were always a thousand things that needed doing on the farm) and to shower her family in all the love she wouldn't be able to show them while she was away. The younger kids had thrived on hugs and bedtime stories. But every time Mensah tried to pull Amena into conversation, Amena wasn't interested. Every time Mensah suggested teaming up on a chore, Amena said she could handle it alone.

She's twelve, Mensah reminded herself. It's natural for her to be seeking a greater level of independence as she grows up.

And yet it had bugged her enough so she went looking for her marital partner Farai. Her other marital partner Tano was in the main barn monitoring a host of storm mitigation measures.

"Do you think Amena's upset with me?" she asked.

Farai just laughed. "She's a teenager, of course she wants to show you how grown up she is."

"You don't think she's angry that I'm away so much?"

Farai shook her head firmly. "She's proud of you. You should hear her brag you up when you're not around. But you know kids, she only ever says it when you're not listening."

"That is a relief," Mensah admitted.

"You know none of our kids are love starved. Not with three parents, two in full time attendance, and a whole stack of aunties and uncles too."

"I guess it's just ego. I want them to miss me as much as I miss them. It's good that they don't, though." Saying it aloud was a little embarrassing, but this was Farai. She'd understand.

"We all miss you, but the kids are too busy to be sad about it. Just remember, you're the one going off alone, while the rest of us are left with each other." Farai's gaze grew a little heavier. "That's why I want to leave you with something to remember tonight."

They'd put lovemaking on the schedule. With a house this full and so many children underfoot, if it didn't get put on the calendar, it didn't happen. That went triple during storm season. A shiver of warmth ran through Mensah, and Farai drew her in for a leisurely kiss.

When they broke off the kiss, Mensah drew her into a hug. Mensah let out a long, slow breath and felt her body relax a bit.

She was always wound up before these trips. It was important to her not to bring that tension home, so she drew in another deep breath. Farai turned her head and nuzzled Mensah's neck just a bit. It almost tickled but not quite. Paying attention to Farai's lips was an excellent way to get out of her own head. Mensah held still and was rewarded with two more neck kisses.

Then Tano pinged them in the feed.

One of the AgBots just went unresponsive. At the same time, sensors registered lost contact with a set of raised beds near it’s position. I’m going to check things out in person. Chaga’s taking over the monitoring.

I’ll come with you, Mensah said. A non-responsive AgBot could be a quick job or a major one. Having a second person along wouldn’t hurt. Moreover, she didn’t like anyone going out alone in the storm.

Full environmental suits, Farai reminded them. The storm brought lightning risk and the suits would protect them.

#

Mensah made her way to the hauling vehicle near the main barn. Rain hitting her environmental suit always left her feeling damp, though she knew it was an illusion. Tano grinned at her.

“We get to share a little adventure before you leave,” he said.

She grinned back.

The thick dark clouds and steady rain made visibility poor. Mensah drove slowly so as to not outpace the truck’s headlights. She kept a wary eye out for fallen trees and washouts, although hopefully she wouldn’t encounter anything like that this early in the storm.

They arrived at the unresponsive terrace. The ground squelched under her feet as Mensah exited the vehicle. Looking uphill, Mensah could see that part of the terrace had given way. Everything had slid downhill and into the drainage ditch which ran parallel to the road. She could just make out a pile of twisted, splintered wood slats and a gleam of something which might or might not be the AgBot’s metal body. Water rushed over and around the wreckage.

Tano said, “I was afraid of this, but ugh, what a mess. Even after losing contact with the AgBot, I still hoped it would be just a sensor fault.”

“We’d better keep an eye on the water level in the drainage ditch. If it starts rising, we need to leave.”

“The AgBot must have gotten hit by the raised beds when they gave way.”

“Yes, but I wonder if it was already malfunctioning? They’re such rugged units.”

The AgBot was nine feet tall and had twelve jointed legs. Even if a limb or two got damaged, it should still be able to right itself. It was also thoroughly waterproofed, with enough internal redundancy so its internal systems should stay dry.

“Probably. Let’s drag it out of the water. It’s not safe to work down there.”

“It’s not safe to enter the drainage ditch at all right now,” Mensah pointed out. The environmental suits wouldn’t protect them if part of the wreckage suddenly decided to give way and rush downstream.

“Maybe we can toss a loop of chain around one of its limbs?”

“We can try. It doesn’t have to hold long. Even shifting the bot a little might help get it into better position for the next go.”

The two of them took out a chain and fastened it to the truck. Maddeningly, the chain consistently fell just a bit short of the AgBot.

Mensah asked, “How badly do you want to get home soon? I can get a bit closer, but I’ll have to leave the road. With this soft ground, I risk getting the vehicle stuck. We’d have to call for pickup.”

Tano shot her an amused look. “You’re the one who has plans with Farai.”

“True.” Mensah sighed, wistfully thinking of Farai waiting for her back home.

Tano’s face sobered. “I don’t really want to leave it,” he admitted. “I know the manufacturer said it can withstand a direct lightning strike, but I’ve never been a big fan of testing specs to their limit.”

“I don’t want really to leave it either,” Mensah also admitted. “If I get us stuck, I’ll just have to deal with Chaga’s teasing.”

She backed the vehicle toward the ditch, keeping the front tires on the road. Hopefully having two tires on solid ground would provide enough traction to pull the AgBot.

Mensah and Tano took turns throwing the chain. It felt oddly like a children’s game but with higher stakes. Finally Tano succeeded in looping the chain around a stray limb.

Tano joined Mensah in the vehicle to put more weight up front. Mensah slowly applied power. The vehicle inched forward. She could tell from the resistance that the AgBot was moving at least a little. Then the chain slipped free and hit the vehicle with a clang.

They got out to check their progress. The AgBot had shifted position such that its head poked up.

“We can loop it again!” Tano said. “Halfway there! I think we can even make a sort of slip knot this time.”

This time Mensah was the one to get a lucky throw. This time she dragged the bot’s neck and two of its limbs over the edge of the ditch. At that point the rear tires started to spin and sink into the mud. Mensah stopped the vehicle and gritted her teeth.

Tano said, "No, this is good! There's a secondary access panel on its head, I can reach that from the bank."

The fading light made it hard to see details, but Tano knew every bit of the family AgBots. Mensah held a tarp in place to deflect some of the rain while he popped the access panel open. He plugged in a diagnostic tool.

The AgBot slowly righted itself. A wide smile spread over Mensah's face.

"That wasn't me," Tano said with alarm.

The AgBot extended two of its gripping arms and grabbed Tano by the waist. Mensah backed away, uncertain what it was trying to do. But two more arms shot out faster than her eyes could track and the bot grabbed her too.

Her feet kicked as if of their own accord to try to find purchase, her arms flailed, and her brain helpfully reminded her that depending on what drove its malfunction, the AgBot could easily crush her.

"What???" she yelled, unable to see Tano's face as she dangled. It wasn't the most coherent question but it was all she could manage.

Tano yelled back, "I don't know. It's not feed-locked but it's still not accepting commands."

The AgBot picked its way up the muddy slope. Its twelve limbs let it distribute weight as it pleased and helped it remain stable in the mud. Mensah gritted her teeth and kept silent. The best thing she could do was avoid distracting Tano, who she trusted was trying every possible feed command to make sure they weren't in danger.

It set them down at the top of the slope, neither roughly nor gently. Then it turned and headed back toward the wreckage. It extended four limbs and yanked out four twisted and broken planks with no particular difficulty. It extended its other arms at various angles, presumably for counterbalance. It carried the planks up the slope and laid them next to Mensah.

"I think it's trying to clear the drainage ditch," Tano said.

"It's still not responding to you over the feed?"

"No. It was definitely malfunctioning before getting knocked over or it would have let me finish the diagnostic. But I think it's acting on old priorities about maintaining infrastructure. It never got the command to return to the barn."

"What about us? Did it think we were wreckage?"

"We need to get out. If it's not recognizing us as human, we don't know how roughly it might toss us around."

Tano pulled a face. "By getting it upright, we've just increased the chance of a lightning strike. I hate that all we did was make things worse."

"I know." Knowing it wasn't sufficient consolation, Mensah said, "It is rated to withstand lightning strikes."

“But how many? This storm will last another three days at least.” Tano hesitated before saying awkwardly, “I’ve just never been sure.”

Mensah knew what he meant. The manufacturer said these bots had no self-awareness, but Tano said he could tell them apart. That they each had their own quirks and individuality.

She’d never been sure either. Where was the line between projecting consciousness which didn’t exist and failing to recognize a being simply because it was unfamiliar? Between what the manufacturers deliberately created and what might spontaneously come into being over time?

“We could just wait until it finishes its current task and see what it does next,” Tano said.

“All right, but we need to return to the vehicle and get a little distance. Next time it—wait, what’s it doing now?”

Instead of wreckage from the ditch, the AgBot grabbed the vehicle’s rear end.

“That’s not even in the stream!” Mensah said.

“It’s close enough to be a hazard in terms of blocking the drainage.”

“Don’t defend it!”

The AgBot grasped the back end of the vehicle. It lifted and pulled. They watched in fascinated dismay as AgBot started to slip. The vehicle-and-AgBot duo spun sideways and with the AgBot still firmly latched on, rolled toward the ditch.

The AgBot pulled its legs and arms inward. The vehicle’s top made unfortunate crunching noises as it tumbled into the remaining wreckage.

“Everything’s still fixable,” Tano said.

“Yes. After the storm.”

The AgBot unfolded and stood back up. It picked its way back up the slope toward them. Mensah looked around. There really wasn’t any place to run to.

The AgBot came to a halt in front of them.

“I think it recognized a malfunction and approached the nearest human for assistance!” Tano said.

“Can you…??”

“I’m going to hardwire in!”

Tano moved quickly to attach the hardwire. The AgBot didn’t move.

“I put it in safe mode. It’ll only follow commands which I input directly. We can cover it with some insulated tarps to reduce the lightning risk, then I’ll tell it to walk back to the barn?

Mensah thought a moment. “How do you feel about riding it?”

#

With the road providing solid ground and feed markers flagging the path, the AgBot moved fast and smoothly. Mensah held tight to its neck, one arm looped around Tano. She found herself grinning. She hadn’t hitched a ride on an AgBot since she was a child.

The day had grown late while they worked. She could see very little through the rain, but bright flashes of lightning illuminated the world for a fraction of a second. She felt the thunder in her bones.

They arrived at the entrance to the barn. Mensah and Tano let go of the tarps and jumped down. They grabbed the tarps and folded them up. Then as they walked in, Tano slipped in the mud.

Mensah grabbed his arm and they both went down. Somehow splatting in the mud after everything else that had happened struck Mensah as hilarious. She tapped the humor icon in the feed while fighting giggles. Tano tapped it back repeatedly as he walked the AgBot inside and closed the door.

They pulled down the hoods of their environmental suits.

“We did it!”

“Back safe!”

“Up one AgBot, down one vehicle!”

They met each others’ eyes and both cracked up laughing.

“That was insane!”

“It all seemed reasonable in the moment.”

Slowly the laughter tapered off. Tano’s brother Chaga arrived at the entrance and Tano gave him a quick update.

“You were worried about the AgBot getting struck by lightning, but not about yourselves?” Chaga asked, his face severe.

“A lightning strike is comfortably within what the environmental suits can handle,” Tano said. “I didn’t have the same certainty about the AgBot pulling down one strike after another if we had to leave it in the field through days of this.”

“I suppose. At least you could work together. It’s good you were here.” Chaga looked at Mensah meaningfully.

“It was,” Mensah said in a much more neutral tone. She knew Chaga thought she ought to spend more time here at the farm, but she hoped it wouldn’t turn into an argument tonight. She didn’t want to leave on a sour note.

“If you hadn’t been—”

“If she hadn’t been, then one of the others would have come with me,” Tano said sharply.

“Of course. But Mensah, sometimes it seems like you’re running away from your responsibilities at home.”

Her jaw tensed. She worried about how to balance her roles enough on her own. But this conference at least was one she felt no guilt over attending.

“If you followed Preservation news more closely, you might understand the need for my presence,” she said firmly.

“Perhaps. But I guess I’m more generally concerned about family roles.”

“Chaga,” Tano said flatly. A warning sign, if Chaga would only listen.

“You’re having a seventh and final child soon, right?”

“It isn’t a secret,” Mensah said evenly.

“And the genetic donors will be just you and Farai?”

“You know it’s our policy not to keep those decisions within the marriage,” Tano said.

“Yes, you’ve always been unwilling to discuss it. And you have six now, including a direct clone of Mensah, and none with a genetic contribution from yourself.”

“Chaga! Enough!” Tano burst out.

“I’ve tried to have this conversation with you privately, Tano, but you won’t hear it.”

“Because it’s not your business!”

“And yet surely you can understand, my brother, why I might be concerned when you alone are denied the chance to pass on your genetic legacy? Shouldn’t you be—”

“Chaga, you are digging up the seed to see if it has sprouted.”

Chaga paused at that. All of them had the same kindergarten experience of planting a bean seed. It took the seed about seven days to break the surface of the soil and show that first hint of green. Every year the teachers warned the kids not to dig up the seed and peek, and every year a child or two would do it anyway.

“When I was sick as a child, you did a lot for the family,” Tano said. “But our parents also sheltered you a lot. You don’t know how hard some things were.”

“With modern gene scrubbing—”

“Did you know the survival rate for childhood cancer plummets if there is even a single recurrence?”

Chaga fell silent. Mensah found herself holding her breath. Tano rarely spoke of this part of his childhood.

“I asked our parents not to tell you that fact. But they couldn’t keep me from finding out. It’s such an easy thing to find on the feed.”

Chaga stood there awkwardly a bit before finally asking, “Are you still worried about passing on high-risk genes?”

“It’s not that. The doctors say the scans are radically improved from our parents’ generation. I guess if I chose to contribute genes, I’d worry a little. But if I wanted to contribute, I’d find a way to handle those fears. But Chaga, you’re my brother. Haven’t you been able to figure out by now that this isn’t a happy subject for me?”

“You blame your genes?”

“No, I don’t blame my genes! I don’t blame our parents, I don’t blame the doctors who kept me alive and restored me to health, and I don’t blame the deities. I blame the corporates who abandoned our ancestors and left them needing to risk radiation exposure to get somewhere safe!”

Tano took a deep, calming breath and continued. “I’m deeply grateful that I was born and that I received the medical treatment I needed to survive and live in good health. But I don’t want to pass on my genes.”

Chaga bowed his head. “I misunderstood the situation. I’m sorry—”

But Tano wasn’t done. “Do you think I won’t be as close to the children without that genetic link?”

“Of course not!”

“Then why did you care? You want to apologize now, but why did you say all these things in the first place? If you want me to believe your apology was sincere, first tell me why you haven’t dropped the subject all the many times we told you that genetic contribution wasn’t a subject we wanted to discuss outside the marriage?”

“It’s just that we try to preserve genetic diversity like we try to care for every resource. And with one child being Mensah’s direct clone and five more utilizing genes from only two parents, I thought…”

Chaga obviously didn’t want to finish that sentence.

Tano glared at him.

“I thought you maybe you weren’t being treated the way a full marriage partner should be,” Chaga mumbled.

“Aaghh you drive me crazy!”

Chaga straightened, made eye contact, and said somewhat formally, “I obviously misunderstood the situation. I’m sorry.”

“Chaga, I love you, and you also infuriate me sometimes! You want to protect me so much that you make up problems where none exist. I love that I can always go to you, and I wish you would trust me to actually go to you when I need something. And above all, I wish you would accept that you don’t need to micromanage my marriage!”

“I’m sorry.”

Tano didn’t slow down a bit. “Do you even know why our first child was Mensah’s clone?”

“No…”

“I was the one who suggested it! Mensah had such a solid health record. Cloning is simple, easy, reliable, and these days it’s paired with high quality gene scanning and scrubbing. Knowing we would be creating a direct clone of her took away so much anxiety on my part.”

“You were really that anxious?” Chaga asked.

“I didn’t like to talk about it too much because talking just seems to reinforce these fears. But yes, I worried. Yes, even after all the therapy I did as a child. Therapy doesn’t make life un-happen, it just gives you coping skills.”

“And now I dug up the seed again,” Chaga said with remorse.

Tano nodded.

“What can I do to make things up to you?”

“I just want you to stop seeing me as the baby brother who you have to protect all the time. And apologize to Mensah.”

She really wished Tano hadn’t said that. She truly did not want to have some deeply emotional conversation with Chaga about whether she was neglecting her family. But Chaga was family too, she reminded herself.

Chaga faced her and said, “I’m sorry for harboring unwarranted suspicion and for accusing you of mistreating my brother.”

Mensah said, “Thank you, Chaga. Tano is very dear to me. And equally dear to Farai. I’m glad he has family who care about him, and I hope this conversation put some of your concerns to rest.”

Lightning flashed outside. The walls shivered as the crack of thunder followed a split second later. The three of them instinctively paused, but it was just the storm overhead.

“I’ll handle the rest of tonight’s monitoring. You two should spend some time together before the conference,” Chaga said.

“Why thanks for taking over, it’s much appreciated. Mensah and Farai have plans, it’s on our schedule,” Tano said tartly.

“Ahh…” Chaga looked dismayed. As to whether it was because he’d inadvertently put his foot in his mouth or because he regretted volunteering, Mensah wasn’t sure.

Well, no matter. She and Tano headed back to the house.

#

Tano was still fuming when they got inside. They stopped in the mud room to strip off mud-spattered environmental suits. Both of them were sweat-soaked and Mensah resolved to shower as soon as possible.

“That brother of mine, he drives me crazy!” Tano said. “Ugh! He didn’t even apologize for the thing I was most upset about.”

“He didn’t?”

“He said you were neglecting your responsibilities here.” Tano stopped to look at her intently. “Mensah, you know how proud we are of the work you do, right?”

“I do.” She tried to keep the doubts out of her voice.

“And you know we don’t love you any less when you’re away?”

“I do.”

“Then put those words out of your head. You’re one person, you can’t be everywhere at once.”

“I truly wish I could,” she admitted.

“Don’t we all! But we are only human.”

Mensah tried to shake off her doubts. “I had fun tonight,” she said.

“I did too!” Tano’s face lit up, then faltered. “Even despite Chaga?”

“That argument had to happen. I had no idea what he’d been brooding about. But yes, even despite Chaga. I got to ride an AgBot!”

They traded grins.

“Tano, I think Chaga upset you much more than myself. He dragged up a topic you’ve done your best not to dwell on. Why don’t all three of us spend the night together, just being close?”

Tano shook his head firmly. “I’ll be more annoyed than ever if we change plans. I’m going to go sulk, and then I’m going to get over it because ugh! I’m lucky to have a brother who loves me so much.”

“Yes, love can be quite a burden,” Mensah said dryly.

That set them both off laughing again.

“Every sweet thing has its bitter side,” Tano said. “But enough. We had our little adventure and it was a finer one than either of us expected. I’m going to go shower, you should go find Farai.”

#

She found Amena before Farai. Amena grinned at her.

“We picked vegetables from the clean greenhouse. Then we washed and trimmed them, and I got everyone to help make gifting baskets! I didn’t let the little kids use the knife. I had them make cards instead.”

Amena pointed proudly to a row of wicker gifting baskets, each lined with cloth. Each basket held a rare treat—crops grown in clean, safe soil.

The baskets held bright red radishes, carrots with greens attached, tender baby bok choy, and snap peas so crisp and crunchy Mensah’s mouth watered just looking at them. The radishes were neatly trimmed and some spots had been cut out from the wobblier carrots—that must be when Amena had needed a knife. This produce would never have to be run through the detoxification factories. Everything in these baskets was safe to go straight from the ground to a person’s mouth.

And then there were the cards. Mensah examined them one by one. In bright crayon, the younger had drawn scenes from the farm.

“I know it’s a lot but you said this conference was extra important and the council did a lot of work to prepare. It’s not too much, right?” Amena looked away a little awkwardly.

Mensah’s heart felt so warm she could just burst.

“It’s perfect.” She waved Amena over and pulled her into a hug. To her delight, Amena leaned in and hugged back. Mensah savored the moment until Amena pulled away, rolling her eyes.

“Moooom,” Amena protested.

“It’s just that I’m so incredibly proud of you,” Mensah said, her heart overflowing.

“They’re just baskets!”

“Not only for the baskets. Just in general.”

“Mom, you’re embarrassing me!”

“Okay, I’ll stop now,” Mensah said with a laugh.

#

Mensah found Farai doing a last minute check of the house’s power supply. Once she finished, the two of them began the process of bedtime stories, tooth brushing, and everything else involved in putting the little ones to bed. Tano finished his shower and tagged in while Mensah took hers.

Once Mensah was back, Tano gave Farai a quick summary of the fight with Chaga. He didn’t try to hide his exasperation, which Mensah thought was a good sign. Tano tended to shut down when truly angry.

“It sounds like it was a good fight,” Farai said.

A good fight was one which settled things. A bad fight left everyone raw and hurting with wounds deepening instead of moving toward reconciliation.

“It was,” Tano said decisively. “But I’m still annoyed and I still want to sulk. I could use some alone time. Don’t worry about me, I’m not going to brood or nurse a grudge. I’ll probably draw for a while.”

They parted ways with hugs and promises. And then it was just Mensah and Farai and the bedroom they used when they were spending the night together.

Mensah thought, I’ve been looking at this backwards. Whenever I’m away, I want to be home, and whenever I’m home, I want to be away. But that’s as much a source of happiness as of pain. I have so many people I want to be near and so many things I care about getting done.

Right now she wanted to make Farai happy. She drew Farai toward the bed, or maybe Farai was the one who drew her in. She wasn’t sure. And then she reached out to feel the warm weight of someone she loved in her arms.

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