

The Guilt of the Deep

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It's so damned quiet down here.

Except it wasn't quiet. It was downright noisy, but the noises were deep and slow, the sounds muted and distorted by the murky waters around him.

And cold. It was cold out there.

Inside his beloved submersible, the *Golden Bell*, Ted Stevedore noted the temperature. 5 and a half degrees above freezing. Much colder, and the vessel would be locked, frozen solid in a block of ice.

That damned squid would like that, he suspected. ChiffChaff was currently manning the scope, peering through it with his one good eye. Ted gave him a rude gesture, but the squid-faced Nautilus didn't see it.

They were just the two of them, locked in the submersible. ChiffChaff could breathe water, but going out in the nearly-frozen waters would have been a death sentence for him as surely as it was for Ted. Ted, at least, was a warm-blooded mammal, natural and the way God had intended. His tolerance for the cold was higher than the amphibious Nautilus people.

He had come to the Nautilus for the UnderAether. First, to trade. When it became clear the squids saw the UnderAether as too precious, too *holy* to send to the surface, he had taken things a step further. Things got violent. Blood was shed. He wasn't particularly sorry about cutting down the squids--

"Da Da!" The slow, distorted scream of a child from deep inside a shell-encrusted cavernous rock. The one-eyed, scarred veteran raising his crossbow, taking aim. The bolt that cut through the water, nicking his arm and, more dangerously, the thick tubing leading from his air tank to the mask. Warm water flooding the mask, his mouth, his lungs. Eyes wide. The squid-faced Naut looming over him, crossbow poised as he drowned, helplessly, the powerful laser dropping from his hands as he lost control over his grip.

He'd awoken inside the rocky cavern, the Naut glaring at him with his one good eye. "I should have allowed you to perish," he said in perfect English, his words carefully formed and bearing a

slight accent from the Old World. There was no underwater distortion, and with that realization came the other-- Ted could breathe.

“What the hell have you done to me?” he demanded.

The squid glared at him for a moment, sighed, then shook his head. “You topsiders are so imbecilic,” he murmured. “Look around you.”

Ted glanced around, noting the dark, blue-cast light in the cavern. He could smell the reek of saltwater, fishy and strange. Then he paused, sniffing. Breathing. He could breathe. There was air. Clean air. *Of course there's air*, he thought bitterly. *They have everything.*

“You are in my home. As my guest--” the Naut hissed the word, his eye narrowing. “I expect you to observe a modicum of honor here.”

Ted sat upright, immediately provoked. “How dare you--” but he was cut off by the Naut continuing to speak, as if Ted hadn't tried to interject.

“I have lived among you topsiders,” the squid-face continued. “I know the rules of hospitality and etiquette. Observe them here, or we will have a problem.”

“Oh? What kind of problem?”

The Naut did not answer immediately, then finally shook his head. “The water is deep, the deep is cold,” he said softly. “There are many dangers, and I doubt anyone topside is even looking for such as *you*.”

Marie. Her name came unbidden to Ted's mind, but he pushed the thought away. There was no time for thoughts of her, not right now. Not as a prisoner of the Nautilus, when every thought must now be of survival and escape.

“Why did you spare me?”

The Naut chuffed. “Because *we're* not ravenous monsters,” he said pointedly.

“Hah-- look at you! You're creatures from the deep--”

“You are *in* the Deep, right now. Do not presume *this*” the Naut passed a hand over his own face “is the face of evil, while *that*” he gestured at Ted “is the face of God.”

It was Ted's turn to humph. “What could you possibly know of God,” he muttered.

The Naut shook his head, sadly. “I refuse to debate theology with the likes of you, topsider” he

said calmly. "Rather, I have come to ask you about your vessel."

"My ship?"

"Yes. What are its capabilities?"

Ted resisted answering the question, for several days, but in the end, he found himself back on his vessel, with Algernon ChiffChaff, a veteran of the Nautilus Defense Guild, as well as a one-time visitor to the Topside.

They were going, against Ted's wishes, into the Cold Deep. An area of the world ocean so far south and so deep in the trenched, neither the Topsiders nor the Nautilus could know what secrets it held.

Exploring the Cold Deep was the answer to a question Ted hadn't known to ask, but which ChiffChaff had. *Why is the UnderAether diminishing? Who else is using it?*

As Ted had learned, the Nautilus were normally very frugal with the precious substance, and yet the uppermost stores were being depleted at an alarming rate. The pool of UnderAether that they drew from, so far as was known, extended well into the Cold Deep. They suspected the Topsiders had a pipeline or mining operation drilled into it. And yet-- Ted insisted that such was impossible, else he'd never have needed to come so far down to collect what little UnderAether he could store in his ship..

Unfortunately, the Nautilus had no manner of reaching the Cold Deep. Their bodies went into a hibernative state at low temperatures. Even when visiting the Topside, ChiffChaff related how he had needed to move towards the coast, buffered by the ocean's currents, when winter approached.

And so, here they were. In the deepest part of the world ocean, deeper than any Topsider had ever been, to Ted's knowledge. Surrounded by the strange, undulating noises of the constantly-flowing ocean.

The current had carried them a few clicks further than Ted wanted to go, but he was still confident their air supplies would hold out. ChiffChaff had helped mitigate the air needs by sleeping in a warmed-up tub of water, which they emptied and replenished each night.

The desalinizer worked perfectly, so Ted had a plentiful supply of fresh water.

They were running low on food, though. A few fish, caught here and there through the portal were not going to keep them alive, even if their air held out.

ChiffChaff, still at the scope, "snapped" his webbed fingers together, making a strange, quiet

“shff” sound in the closeness of the Bell. Ted approached the scope, annoyed.

Every time there'd been a light in the scope, they had chased after it. And every time, it turned out to be a school of bioluminescent life, or a reflection of their own ship, or, in one very odd moment, a field of molten lava bubbling to the surface of the cold oceanic floor.

Ted peered into the scope. “It’s just another one of those weird lantern fishes,” he said irritably.

“Look carefully, Topsider. See how it moves-- the lantern fish swims sideways, not up and down.”

Ted nodded. “Some kind of new dolphin, then? Whale?”

ChiffChaff shrugged. “Possibly. It appears small for a whale.”

Ted went to the sketchbook and started a new page: “Lantern whale?” He began sketching what he'd seen while ChiffChaff returned to the scope. Having no experience with paper and pen, ChiffChaff's people had a very rudimentary tradition of visual arts. Ted was a better sketch artist overall, though ChiffChaff usually helped with keen observations.

After a moment, ChiffChaff cleared his throat. “It appears to be getting larger. Are we approaching it?”

Ted checked the controls, then the scope's orientation. “No-- we should be sidelong.”

“Then I believe it is, as they say Topside, coming right at us.”

Ted sprang from his seat and hit the large blue button that would open the gun ports. He set the sketchbook on the floor and pulled down the weapon sights. Portside. The scope had been oriented portside.

He peered through the sights into the gloom.

There. It was indeed coming at them, a bobbing light in the darkness.

The first time they'd seen a lantern fish, Ted had shot first, then felt rather foolish as the sea around them filled first with the glowing chum of the exploded fish, then the scavengers who'd sensed it and come running. At the first ominous shark, however, ChiffChaff had suggested they move on, quickly, so they had been at a safe distance. Still, Ted was on the scope then, and had been unable to avoid seeing the carnage when one of the largest predators of the sea swooped in, scooping everything before it in massive, dagger-lined jaws.

It was not *quite* as large as the *Golden Bell*. But it could have punctured the vessel easily and

killed them both.

After that, they adopted a “investigate first, shoot later” approach. Now, as the bobbing light came closer, ChiffChaff began to chuckle.

“It’s a dolphin,” he remarked. “With a lantern fish in its mouth.”

But as the two watched, the dolphin seemed to be moving towards them at a speed unnecessary for one of the frolicksome creatures. And in the fading light of the dying lantern fish, they saw more of the sea’s creatures.

“What in the Deep--” ChiffChaff muttered. It was the closest to swearing Ted had ever heard him come.

“They’re... migrating?” Ted suggested, though he doubted it.

“Fleeing,” the Naut countered. “Let’s go!”

Just beyond the range of the sight, Ted saw a school of the bioluminescent creatures, flowing through and around the fleeing pod of assorted life. And yet, instead of increasing as it approached, the light was fading, dissipating.

Eaten.

Ted slammed the gun sight up and dropped back into the piloting chair. He barked orders to ChiffChaff-- the two had an uncomfortable command structure most times, but when piloting the *Bell*, Ted was unequivocally in charge.

They fled, using a tiny bit of the UnderAether they’d stored with them to boost the engines to propel them forward and up. They gained elevation, rising above the depths until the darkness was almost beneath them. Ted brought the gun sights down to watch as the darkness swirled below, like the shadow of an enormous beast. It continued for a few hundred feet the way they’d been going, then abruptly disappeared.

Ted shuddered. It had moved like nothing he could name. Like part serpent, part bird-- something with the writhing agility of a snake, and the swift surety of a winged creature.

Dragon, he wanted to say, but his voice refused the word, refused the possibility.

He picked up the sketchbook and opened to a new page. ChiffChaff added his observations, from the more acute scope. The gun sights were accurate for shooting, but were not as good at relating the kind of detail the scope could.

“Where did it go?” Ted remarked, pulling out the map. They stalled the engines, halting in the water and now at the mercy of the thin currents around them. Ahead, in the uncharted waters, he made a note “shadow creature? den?”

Without discussing it, Ted pushed the engines, moving forward. He didn't need to confer with ChiffChaff. The yearning he felt, to find out *what was that thing* was too great.

The ocean's floor ahead appeared featureless, an expanse of dirt and rock... and then nothing. They came to the edge of a chasm, peering through the scope into a deep rift in the world.

It was ridiculous. They had thought they were in the Cold Deep. Had assumed they were in the coldest, deepest part of the ocean.

And now, here they were, perched at the edge of the world, into an abyss of nothing.

There was no going further. The ship might make it another 200 feet before cracking, but they had been near the limit of its capabilities for days.

To go further would mean almost certain death. Damage to the hull would kill them.

Ahead, far in the distance of the murky deep, Ted saw a bobbing light that abruptly winked out. They turned back, dissatisfied and angry-- with themselves, with each other, over their failure.

In time, Ted returned to the surface. The bobbing light haunted his dreams. The slick shadow, engulfing the bioluminescence ahead of it, glided through his nightmares, devouring his careful plans, his maps, the tiny tubes and tendrils of his carefully-designed machinery.

The sketchbook filled up, slowly at first, then with increasing rapidity. With designs. Diagrams. The *Golden Bell* with thicker hull, larger air storage. A second high-acuity scope.

More guns.

Ted's eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep. His hand was ink-stained to the elbow, and his hair was tied back in a scraggly tie. He had seen Marie only once since his return, and their meeting was tense and imperfect.

A knock on the door brought him to his feet. He opened it.

Dressed neatly in a brown suit and bow tie stood Algernon ChiffChaff. A leather eye patch covered his missing eye, and he seemed oddly at ease in the center of the *Topsider* capitol.

He held a sealed tube in one hand, which he held up. Without preamble or greeting, he spoke the only words that mattered to Ted.

“I have a map of the Cold Deep. We can find the dragon’s lair.”