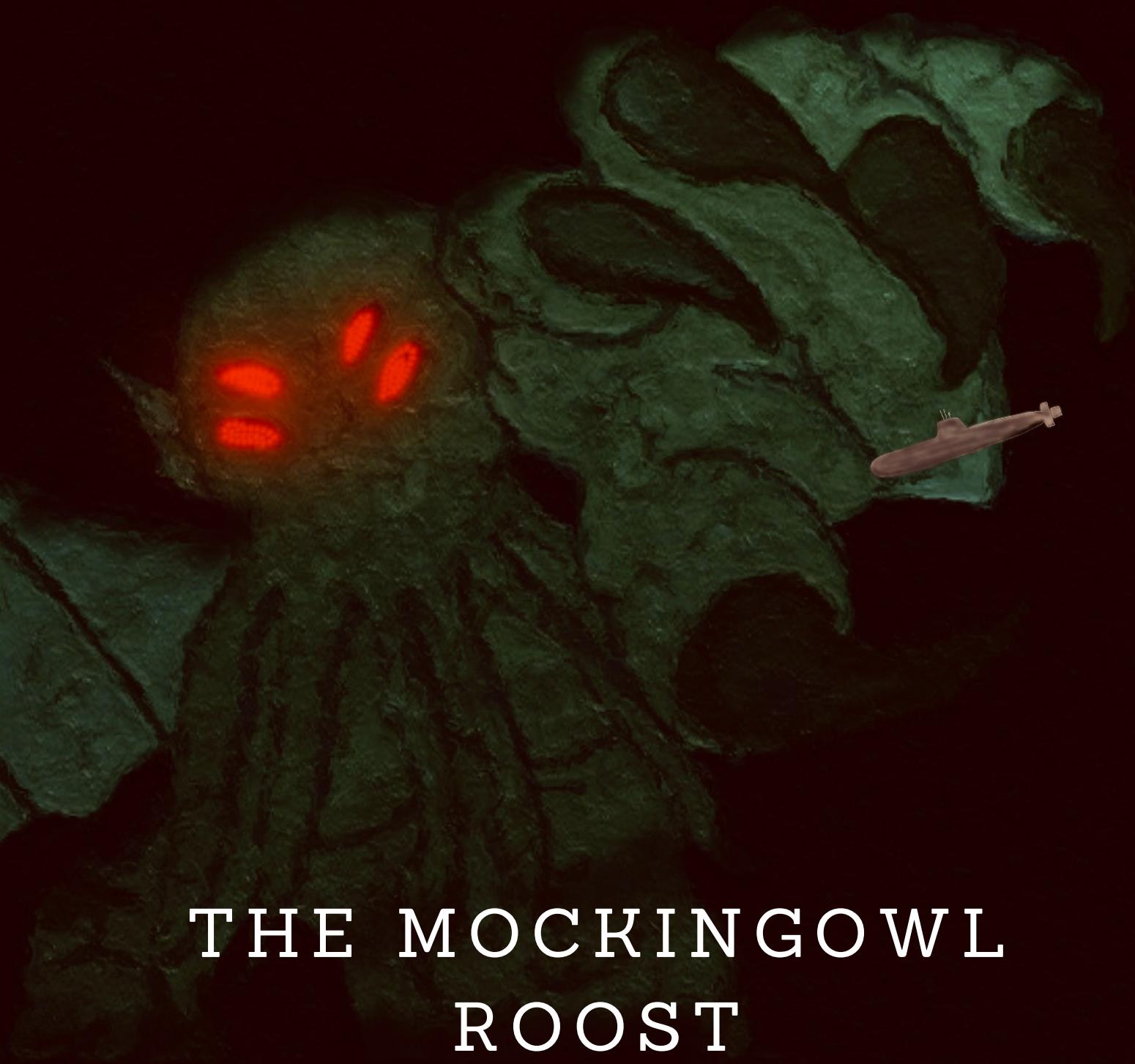


The Sleeper of R'lyeh

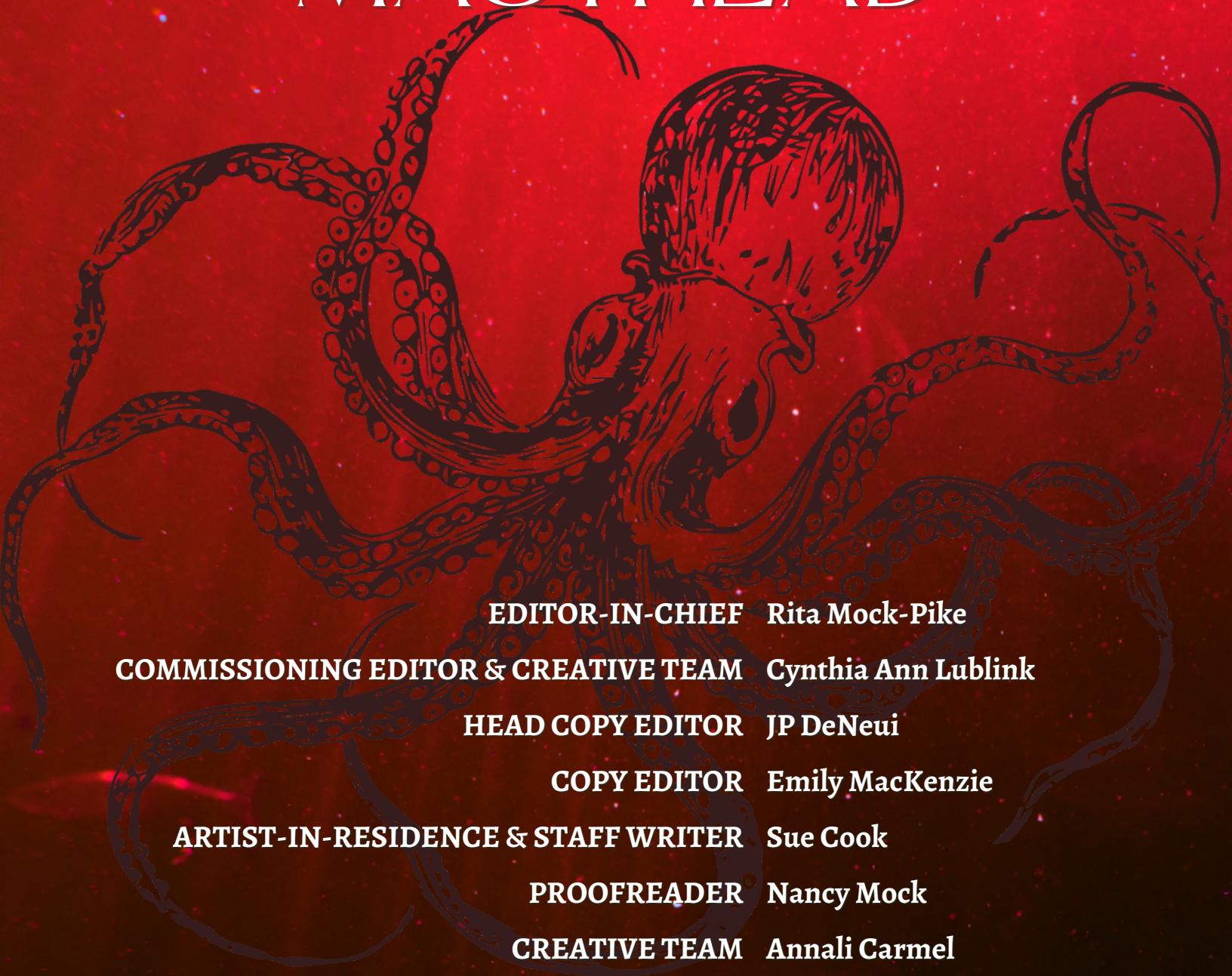
VOLUME 2, SPECIAL ISSUE 1



THE MOCKINGOWL
ROOST

A miniature magazine based around the work of The Mad Artist,
featuring fiction and poetry by the MockingOwl Roost staff

MASHEAD



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“Pleasure to me is wonder—the unexplored, the unexpected, the thing that is hidden and the changeless thing that lurks behind superficial mutability.”

— H.P. Lovecraft

Editor's Note

A special issue from the MockingOwl Roost



Every now and again, something gets submitted to magazines that causes the commissioning team to find new and creative ways to commission works. "The Sleeper of R'lyeh" by The Mad Artist is one of those pieces for the MockingOwl Roost.

During the open submission period for the second quarter of 2022, The Mad Artist submitted this incredible piece and we instantly loved it. But it didn't match any of the current plans we had in publication. As fellow commissioning editor, Cynthia Ann Lublink, and I sat around chatting about it, an idea sparked. Why not create a miniature magazine and invite all the MockingOwl staff members to submit written works inspired by the image?

The Sleeper is clearly a Lovecraft sort of creature but in my own bizarre way, I went to comedy with the image. The tiny submarine within the beast's grasp. What if the story wasn't what this image implied?

This collaborative idea came to form what you see now in this special mini issue of the MockingOwl Roost.

Enjoy the poetry, the fiction, the humor, the art.

—Rita Mock-Pike
Editor-in-chief, the MockingOwl Roost

Artist Statement

Derek Roper (The Mad Artist)

"The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." - H.P. Lovecraft

Fear is an essential part of the human experience, but it can also manifest into a source of inspiration. My work explores the abstract reality beyond the tangible borders of our world, and blurs the lines between terror and beauty.

I want to help people escape their mundane lives by showing them worlds where reality is transformed, where the ordinary becomes extraordinary, and the cosmic scales are tipped. This can be more than a simple journey of self-discovery. Fear has the potential to act as a catalyst, to challenge whatever we may think we know about the universe, and all of its secrets.



My name is unpronounceable and ancient.
 Perhaps I should make it easier for my children to meet their creator.
 Would they stay if they knew they came from this bosom?
 That because of my primordial ooze, they exist?
 This brain is as ancient as the water that surrounds me.

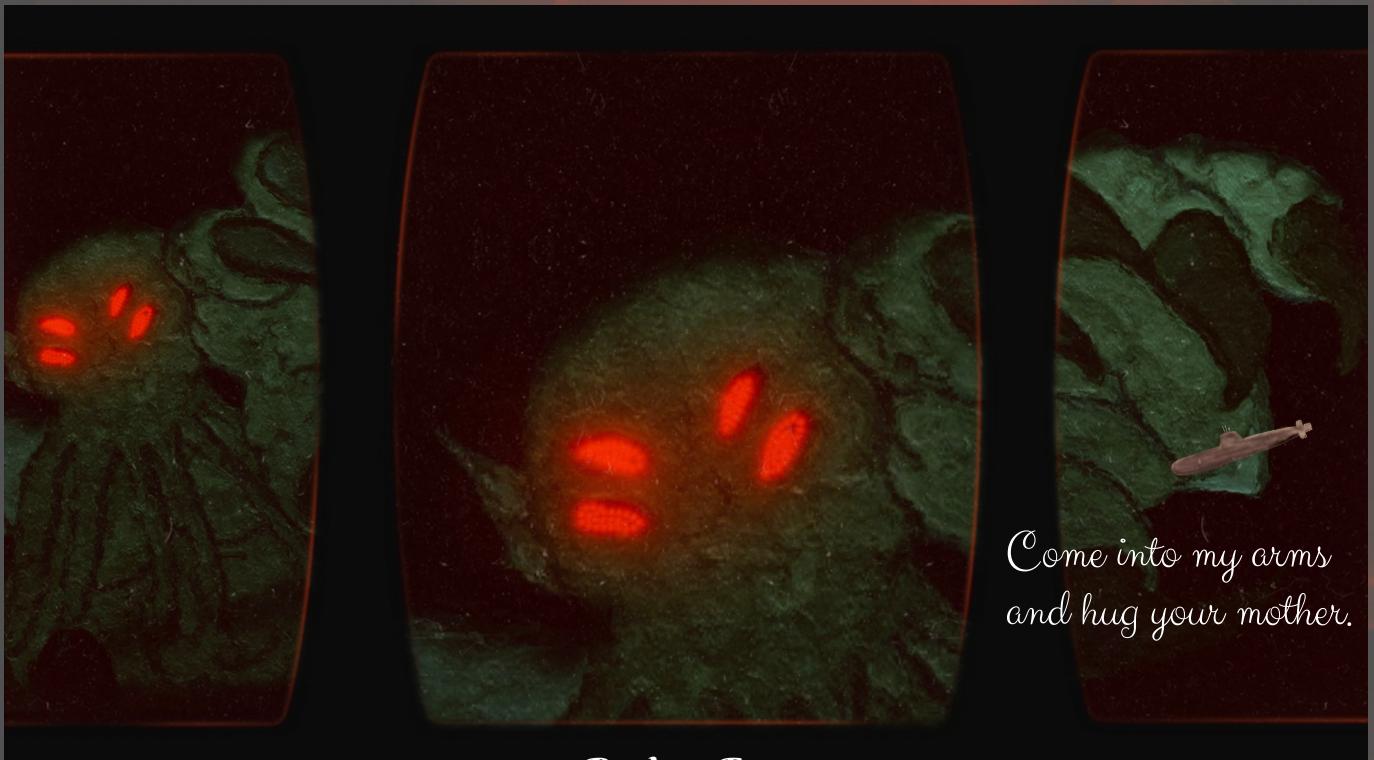
Forget the ancient name.
 My children may simply call me Mother.

Glowing ruby red eyes are easy to see in the murky water.
 Beacons of light guiding them home.
 Surely they can see my excitement at their coming!
 I should grasp them in my joy –
 allow them to feel their mother's loving touch.

Alas, my children's previous vessel
 did not respond well to vigorous displays of love.
 After an attempt to return my affection
 it grew lifeless and drifted away with the tide.

This time please, refrain from sendings the barbs of your physical love!
 They may strike my scintillating eyes and damage their brilliance.

In the past I tolerated pain to be close to you.
 Being the last of your kind is lonely.
 I wonder if this small shiny craft brings my children home to The Lair?
 Floating alone for eons
 – one does long for family...



Between the Silence

Cynthia Ann Lublink

I stand in the shadows
-the chance to believe again
breathes
between the silence,

the struggle,
-needing to put scattered pieces
-together,

torn between fear and trust-

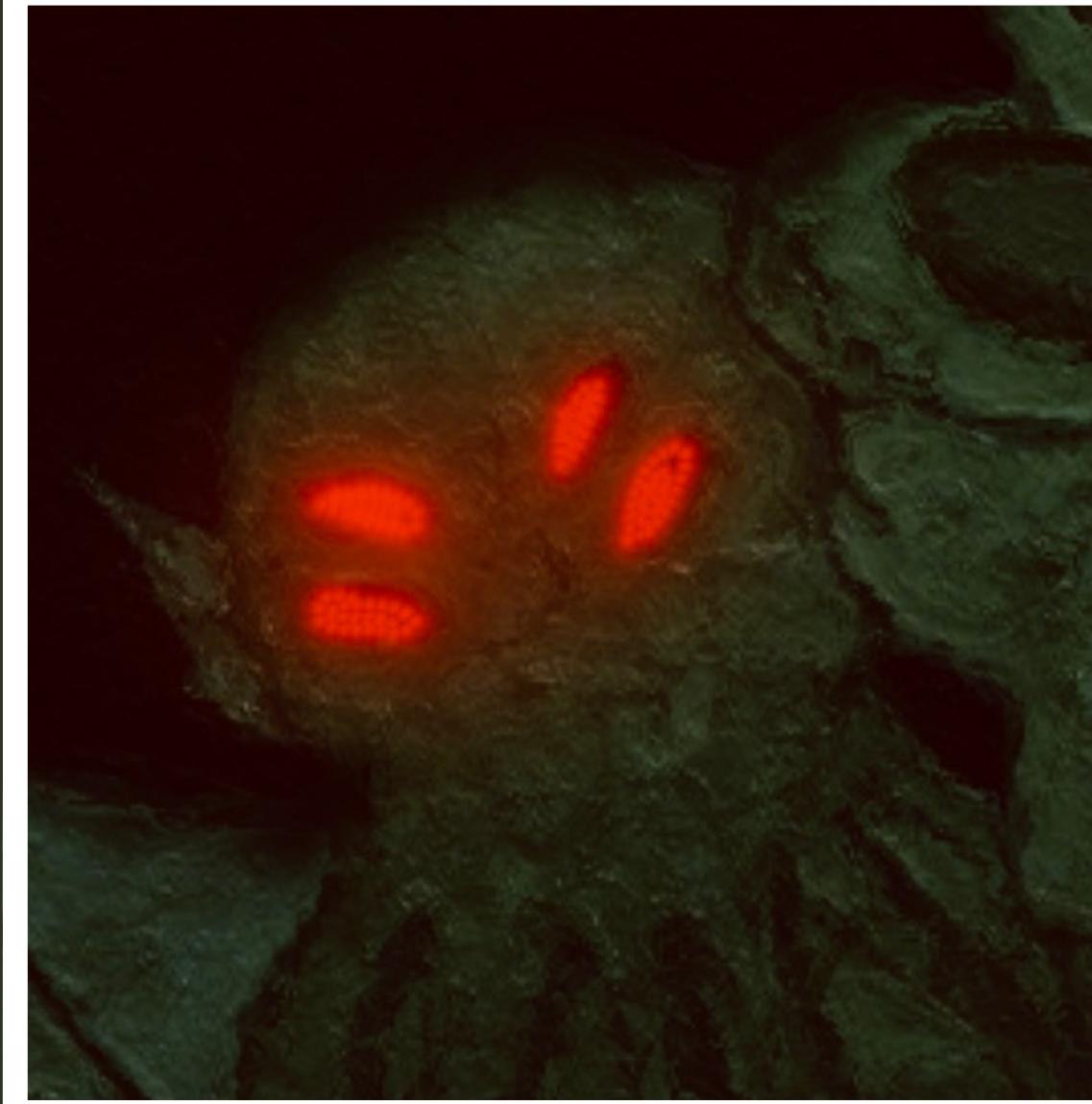
seeking neutral ground
where healing
mends the wounds of battle.

Yet,
whispering with possibilities
-the chance to believe again
echoes
between the silence.

Fiction

Rita My Obsession

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They're so... crunchy. And delicious. Full of protein and iron. Probably not fiber so much, but, you know. You gotta live a little. Can't be ***all*** healthy.

I guess I shouldn't say I know for sure what they taste like. I've never had one before. But I am dying to try one. They look so... good. So... tasty. So... delectably delicious.

But all my friends tell me that it just wouldn't be good manners to munch on one.

I keep asking them why, but I get strange looks and hemming and hawing. But no one seems to know **why** I shouldn't eat one.

They're so tiny, though. I mean, I know it's not because my diet wouldn't permit it. I'm counting calories, not so much the contents! Intermittent fasting is amazing like that. All the Instagram influencers keep telling me I can eat whatever I want, as long as it's between certain hours. The fact that I count calories is a bonus. Really.

And as I mentioned, they **are** nutritious, even if not a fully balanced meal. And they're so small. I couldn't expect one to be my whole meal anyway. Probably not even a fleet of them.

At night, I lie beneath the waves, drifting up toward the surface, dreaming I'll find one to nosh on. I've been alive for, oh, what? 2,500 years now? Haven't seen a single one. But they keep showing up in all these movies I've watched when I pop up at night and peer into the windows of those brown and pink things that walk around on two tentacles. ***The Hunt for Red October, U57-1, Das Boot, Ice Station Zebra, The Abyss.*** My girlfriend says I am obsessed with them - but I think I'm just curious. After all, a guy can dream, can't he?

It's not like I'm putting my life on hold to go find one. I still find my own food and take showers. I'm not glued to the sandbar waiting for one to come along. I'm not butterflying my way to the Marianas Trench looking for one.

Although, that **would** be a good idea. I bet I'd find a bunch there. That seems like just the place to go have a feast of sunken ones. **Mmmmmmm.** A whole fleet or twelve might just be there... I wonder if my girlfriend would go with me. She does like adventures.

And it's not like I have to hold down a job or something. My dinner comes free. And I don't pay rent for this place. I claimed this sunken cathedral the day it sank with the rest of Atlantis. ***She's all mine.***

But, getting there. That might be the tricky part. It's way on the other side of the ocean. I'm a good swimmer but kinda slow. Not sure how long it would take me to get there. I do kinda have all the time in the world though. I'm 2,512 years old and still considered a kid among my kind. I've got time. Yeah.

As long as they keep making submarines, I've got time.





This happens weekly.
The Seaview crew never learns –
leave Captain Crane home.

Seaview Haiku

Tears of the Innocent

Fiction

Sue Cook

The tide was dancing along the shoreline when she found the little bundle lying on the sand. She walked close enough to smell the sea salt that clung to the small body. Shrugging, she began to walk on, thinking it was a discarded doll or stuffed toy.

She was less than five feet away when she heard the whimper. Turning, she walked back to the small body. Grabbing the edge of the blanket and flicking it back, she exposed the baby. Wide eyed, she stared at the little creature. It was covered in scales, with the claws of a badger, and had the eyes of a spider.

"What the actual heck is this thing?" she whispered to the fluffy clouds. They seemed to move closer to the ground to take a peek over her shoulder.

Another whimper escaped the little body and she realized that this thing could be hurt. The creature, the size of a cocker spaniel, slowly turned its head and looked at her full in the face. All of its small glowing eyes met hers.

"Help me," echoed in her head. She swallowed back a scream. It was in her head. She stared at the creature for a minute, her resolve weakened by the soft whimpers.

"No, no, no! You will not bring another foundling home," she said to none but the surf and sand. Her thoughts were interrupted by more whimpers.

Shaking her head, she laughed.

"Do not claw me, now. Be good," she said to the creature as she gingerly lifted the hefty body to her hip. "I seriously must be out of my mind. What are you little dude?"

The creature clung to her but no claws were used. It was thankful.

"Well, little dude, what am I going to do with you?" she whispered to the small body of scales nestled against her.

"What do I even call you?"

Quickly the name "Wilbur" flooded her brain.

"Wil...Wilbur?" She chuckled. "Ok, ok Wilbur it is.

It was apparent that the it was telepathic

Returning home with her new tenant, she closed the door with a sandaled foot.

"Whoa, you are rank! Off to the tub with you." She briefly wondered if water would kill it, whatever it was. Then laughed, guessing it came from the sea in the first place. After all, it did look like something out of "Sigmund and the Sea Monster."

She played a bit of classical music as background while she filled the tub, placing Wilbur on a pile of towels next to the tub.

Suddenly, the most amazing music filled her head, otherworldly and lilting. It certainly didn't come from her records.

Dizziness hit her hard and she sank to the ground next to Wilbur. She was floating above her body. Peaceful and serene.

The scene below was anything but serene. Wilbur moved rapidly to lean over her and with one swipe opened his babysitter from stem to stern. She smiled. Such pretty colors. The music continued.

Wilbur literally melted into her body, filling the spaces, using heart and lungs to breathe. With a claw of energy, she watched as he closed her.

"No seam," Wilbur whispered to the white cloud above them.

The cloud floated near Wilbur's head.

"Oh, you will be around me for a short while before you join the others," Wilbur said while moving about in her body.

Wilbur spun around in front of the bathroom mirror squealing with delight.

"I am, as you humans like to say, 'stunning!'"

"Why look!" Holding up his hands to look at the newly applied nails, "I even have talons."

"Yes, this body suits my needs for now," it snidely said to the cloud.

It responded by turning dark.

"Yes, and before I take a dive and shed this skin, I need to eat!" patting her stomach

The cloud growled softly.

"Ahhhhh yes, whatever is your name, dear?" Wilbur purred to the cloud near their head.

"Trudy." The word flooded Wilbur's brain. "My name is...was Trudy."

"Such a lovely name," they said. "Much better than Wilbur."

The creature turned to leave.

"Wait!" the cloud said, "Who is Wilbur?"

Trudy laughed hard. "Wilbur was my last host."

The door slammed, almost shattering the window.

The cloud floated to the window, unable to do anything to stop what was going to happen next.

Trudy went looking for food.

HE WAITS

In the dusky waters
he waits,
drifting on the undercurrent
humming songs
of mischief and mirth
only he can relish.

In the dark
he drifts,
deceiving anglers, shrimp.
A sonorous sigh
escapes near invisible lips
that yearn for a crusty
appetizer.

There.
A snack.
A treat.
Desserts he deserves.
He's been so patient,
lurking like a tired bear,
sifting through the sand.

Blending in with igneous boulders
purring, yearning to pounce,
catlike with tail twisting,
ready!

Swoop.
Smack.
Crunch.
Crack.
Nothing.
The tasty treat
too small
to touch the taste buds.

He'll have to wait
some more,
drifting,
deceiving,
blending.

Maybe a bigger ship
will come his way.

The Call

Sue Cook

Wunderkind - *Wunderkind!*
Top of her class at Annapolis.

No one can pilot a sub this size alone.
No one except the daughter of Kowalski.

I built bots to do the work of twenty men -
I built the bots to specification.
Then I took the *Seaview 2* out of the bay.
Secret military maneuvers in the dead of night.

The only thing I did not do is *call* you.

You exist in storybooks and legends.
Men write nightmarish tales
of the destruction you leave in your wake.
But you are nothing.
You **do not exist.**

Do you?

You ravaged city after city by design -
I did not call you.
You destroyed the countries of our enemies.
I swear! **I did not call you.**
You invade my thoughts.
Still, I did not call.

Why do they make me ask this of you?
Why am I caught in this military snafu?
Why am I sent on this mission to face a legend
to ask its hellacious assist?

You do **not** exist!
I did not call you!

Until now.

Pets

J. P. DeNeui

Fiction

Everyone kept a pet; you had to.

Shellialila slithered around her pets, attending to each in their inset baubles. In the first, her pets were being “civilized”, forsaking religion and juicy schisms for an agnostic galactic government. Intent on obliterating all forms of conflict, the regime had proven depressingly durable. The pets so loved debating the “nature of the universe” they had no time at all for sensible disputes and had even given up on romance.

She should really exchange these pets or train them. Something to think on for after the ball.

She moved on to the next glowing bauble and her snake eyes widened in shock. No one had rocketed off the home planet and the whole ecosphere had succumbed to disease. The pets had had such potential, too.

Well, there was nothing to be done. Shellialila attuned her arm-mind, plucked the sphere from its mesh, and chucked it in the chute. Perhaps someone else had too many pets and wouldn’t mind sharing one with her.

At the third sphere she licked her fangs and smiled. Yes, these ones were her favorites. The pets were waging that interplanetary war they’d been building up for so long: Five planets, five warring factions, one hundred and twenty-nine impact craters. Each planet’s atmosphere (such as remained) was toxic and had withered plant life. Now everyone had to wear spacesuits outside, scraping a living underground. So many romances and tragedies abounded it brought a tear to her eye as she sifted through them. These pets were all she could ever hope for. Grown up right to the edge of oblivion. Surely no other snake kept finer.

Of course many pets on the edge of oblivion needed help to not take a tumble, so Shellialila considered what to do. An impending existential solar event? A storm of unexpected comets or the sun going supernova, perhaps? So spurred, the pets might finally travel faster than light and disperse for a season, then return to conflict.

No, no, the current level of hyperfold development made that proposition too risky. Maybe she should just grant the pets a new planet, a sixth where there had been five before.

Hmm. Yes. A simple solution and it heightened the conflict. Shellialila pulled in her forked tongue and pondered. She was fond of volcanoes, the new planet should have them. Space-time folds, yes a few of those, too. Spend too long under that burning tree and a century’s slipped away.

What about oceans? Yes, the planet needed lots of oceans and lots of monsters in the deep. *Iterate*, she instructed her mind-arm. *Make a few things dangerous. Surprise me...*

Her doorbell rattled.

Every tantalizing vision fled. Back outside her baubles in her dimly lit lair, Shellialila exhaled a frustrated hiss. It was probably that meddling new neighbor Sillinetti, inviting herself over unannounced. She would doubtless insist on small

talk and tea and prattle on endlessly about her ideas. Sillinetti was sickeningly full of ideas and always thought she was ever so clever. As she left her baubles' chamber, Shellialila steeled herself.

But maybe...

A pleasant hypothetical emerged, for perhaps it was not Sillinetti and instead Cancarlo who graced her threshold. Her heart swelled at the thought of that rogue who'd slunk to her side at the previous ball, so dapper in his maroon scaly suit. So silkily witty and with so many pets. If it was him, she would have to scold him. *No, please don't come in. Oh, don't.*

She practically floated up the tunnels to her door, took a breath and peered through the glass expectantly.

The visage of her perky neighbor made her want to shatter a planet.

"Yoo-hoo, hello, Shelli, are you up?" Having moved in to the empty lair next door, at the last ball Silishisha had made a grand show of her intent to greet all her neighbors. Her neighboring snake was showy and vapid, blue scaly coat mottled with vain black diamond patterns along the length of her sinuous back. Objectively, Shellialila's green scales outclassed this, not that she was one to brag.

Sillinetti rattled the doorbell a second time, refusing to take the obvious hint. "You won't believe what I have to share, it's incredible. Oh, don't tell me you've gone – you never leave. Hello!"

To leave her guest outside would be unspeakably rude; still Shellialila debated its merits. How much trouble would she get in exactly?

Too much. Chomping her fangs she attuned her mind-arm, sighed, and commanded her door to swing wide.

"Oh yes, Shelli, I knew you were here." Sillinetti possessed a most irritating manner of charging into everything and now was no different. She proceeded to slither by Shellialila as if the lair were entirely hers for inspecting. "What's that smell? Oh you burnt some toast. That clock looks new, where did you get it? Why don't you display your pets in the foyer – what are you hiding? Oh those drapes are of the old style still, how tragic. This viewing glass is a little chipped – you should see Hamravi for a new one; you left some grapes out, mmm, adequate. Now, Shelli –" in a whirl her "guest" had slithered around the living room, appraising and licking and swallowing the grapes to attain a prominent seat on a futon poised to deliver her special address. "– Shelli, to leave this décor unremedied would be a tragedy, but I insist: first you must come with me. Oh you can't miss out!"

Shellialila inhaled a calming breath. "No. Thank you. I would like to stay here." Barring a suitor's welcome meddlings, she had no intention of leaving her lair before the next ball, for there was no need. Food, pets, and quiet were all here.

Though a few of those items were now endangered species. (Sillinetti was now helping herself to the mushrooms she'd been trying to grow in the corner.) "Well. You're missing out on the best arrangement, but we can make do in this hole, I suppose." **Swallow.** "These mushrooms are flavorless, don't you think?"

"I'm still growing them."

"Mmm, yes, I suppose you were trying. I'll have Cancarlo source you better ones; but first –" again Sillinetti perked her head up "– have you ever wanted to play with your pets?"

Shellialila wasn't sure which rattled her more: the yawning silence after so much prattling, the implications around Cancarlo, or her neighbor's impertinent query. She invested in silence to steady her thoughts. "I do play with my pets. Every day."

"Well, I'm sure you think you do." The way Sillinetti was regarding her lair gave off the distinct impression she rather doubted any pets were in residence. "Oh! I wanted to show you. Cancarlo gave me this golden tooth. I don't know what it does but isn't it pretty?"

She opened her jaws and flicked out a third fang directly from the roof of her mouth. Disgusting. "Isn't it lovely how it glows?" She modeled. "Why I think he's going to –"

"Did you want to see my pets or not?"

Grinning, Sillinetti snapped her fang back. "Lead on my lonely friend. Lead on."

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Fuming, Shellialila slithered ahead. Cancarlo had never given *her* a tooth. Not that she would want another one. *Gross.*

In the chamber where she kept her pets, the only source of illumination was the pets' own glowing baubles, each bauble set in a mesh in a floor beautifully lined with undulating tiles that could be heated on command to perfectly regulate the temperature.

She chose to keep the tiles cold.

"Oh, so you only have four. How cute." Sillinetti annoyingly showed no signs of being bothered by the tiles. "Do you have a favorite? What happened to that one? Why do you keep them out of sight locked away?"

"My pets are important so I keep them protected."

"Oh, but that's not what they're *for*, my Shelli. Why would you keep your dearest pets all to yourself and abandoned? It's cruel."

The persistent rudeness, though she'd expected it, still took Shellialila aback and she responded with barely masked vitriol. "I take good care of my pets. Thank you. How that is done is my concern."

"Tut tut, my Shelli, it is a concern for all of us. The pets have been given to us to care for and so we must tend them and raise them and guide them. All must be done properly for the welfare of all."

Shellialila was not convinced Sillinetti would understand propriety if it bit her on her shiny blue nose. "Do you have a recommendation?" she hissed in her coldest uninterested tones.

"Why yes I do, however did you guess? Cancarlo told me about it." She winked. "Pets kept away like yours suffer terribly. They come to believe that they came from nothing or they made themselves or some other such nonsense. They don't know how the pets have been given to us and how we raise them up to utopias as near to our own perfect society as can be done from remove, and it's sad; for why should we be so removed, Shelli? Hmm? Why should we be ashamed of our pets when we could bring them into the light and - oh!"

Sillinetti had paused in her irritating diatribe before the pets Shellialila was most proud of. "Shelli, what have you done? These are *ruined!*"

That was it; a slither too far. "Sillinetti," Shellialila said, "if you are so concerned about pets, might I suggest you attend to your own?"

"Oh, oh dear. Oh dear oh dear." Shellialila hoped her flustered guest would flee. She was not in luck. "They all want to kill each other, Shelli! How terrible! The things they've done... I can hear them screaming. Oh dear, oh dear. Oh dear oh dear. Dear me, Shelli, this is not allowed."

Shellialila felt suddenly colder than the tiles. Everyone kept a pet; you had to.

Would someone take her pets away?

Sillinetti slithered up beside her and hissed directly in her ear. "For these pets you've baldly failed, how do you intend to help?"

"..." Shellialila had never in her life felt threatened, and in the wake of the strange emotion, she shivered from nose to tail in fear. "I - I was going to give them a planet." She projected her mind-arm to show Sillinetti. "It was going to look like this."

The planet in all its potential glowed - then flicked instantly into the background as Sillinetti's mind-arm seized her own.

The sudden unwelcome contact between them muddled Shellialila's senses. She could hear tastes, smell colors, dream and visualize far too much - more than could be known or catalogued, a horrible, rising, burning cascade.

Shellialila tried to break loose and couldn't. "Not yet, Shelli," Sillinetti whispered. "When there's two of us we can do more."

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"I don't want to do any more. Let me go!" Shellialila strained as hard as she could to tear away her mind-arm and failed again, snapping loose the visualization instead.

A planet for her pets peeked free from a pocket of hidden space.

"Shelli, we can see if we're helping. Don't you want to really see?"

"No!" she shouted and lunged at Sillinetti.

Fangs out and gnashing, she bit.

Sillinetti wailed and bit back. Fangs punctured Shellialila's own throat. Mind-arms wrestled, clenched, and ripped, and suddenly the chamber had fallen away into freezing clouds and rainbows; tiles turned in for an ocean far below but swelling close. Sillinetti gasped at the sight and tore loose, blown off by a furious jetstream. Shellialila speared through the wind trying to straighten her dizzy descent. Her throat hurt and her mind was fuzzy. She needed...to do something. *I need... wings.*

Before her mind-arm could fashion pinions, the ocean collided with her face.

The impact slammed pain into her skull such as she had never felt. Waters shot up high above her then rushing waters cocooned her deep. Into endless depths she sank, too stunned and hurting to even flounder. Finally, painfully, she managed to gargle, inhaling salt water and spitting it out.

She could breathe underwater, it seemed. That was something. Where was Sillinetti? A scan of her surroundings turned up no snakes, only something glowing far below in the darkness. She swam towards the molten dot, wriggling her body to increase momentum. A little awkward, but she managed, and after some time she saw what it was: a magma pile from a seafloor hotspot.

The water was getting hot and she arrested her dive. Well, she'd intended this planet to have volcanoes and yea verily, it had volcanoes – but this junior volcano was pathetic. At that useless rate of eruption, the volcano might take a thousand years to breach the ocean's surface. *Intolerable!*

Seeing as she was here she might as well fix this. She reached with her mind-arm –

Molten agony lanced through her brain. She singed her tail on superheated steam, yelped, and beat a hasty retreat.

I can't reach out. My mind-arm's broken.

She didn't believe it and tried again, and the awful migraine returned.

"Sillinetti!" she roared. "Nagging, meddlesome, pet-less blindsnake, what in creation have you done?!"

No one answered for the longest time, and then she heard a distant "Shelli?"

Shellialila squinted into the darkness, roughly triangulating the source of the whimper. Somewhere up above her, maybe? She felt like one of her crippled pets, the shackles clamping down on her freedom too horrible to acknowledge. This could be fixed. This could be fixed.

She didn't know how, but it could be fixed.

"Yes, I'm over here, where are you?"

"I am over here. Where are you?"

"Stay wherever you are. I'm coming." Shellialila swam towards the voice and eventually found her neighbor sprawled on the continental shelf much closer to the surface. She was lying entangled amidst fronds of green algae infesting a budding

coral reef.

Shellialila unkindly laughed at the sight – this was the nag who thought she knew everything?

“What’s this, Sillinetti? Are you stuck?”

Like her, Sillinetti appeared rather large here. No algae should hold her, however sticky.

“Yes, I suppose I am. Break me loose.”

“How are you stuck on that little thing? Swim to the surface and let’s go back.”

“Your silly invented plant is sticky. Far stickier than it should be, Shelli, for I wiggle and squirm and it won’t let go and oh, it would be just like you to iterate such detestable flora, inflicted on all your pets I’d imagine. Why if you hadn’t at last swum over – very slowly, I might point out – I can’t imagine... What are you smiling about? What’s funny?”

For Shellialila was smiling, feeling no small measure of bliss in her companion’s embarrassing plight.

“Since that fateful day you met me,” Shellialila replied, full of gall and vengeance. “You have replaced a ridiculous moniker for my most exalted name, and so I shall return the favor. You are an imbecile, Silli. While you wait, would you like some tea?”

Silli bared her fangs. Shellialila jumped.

Her neighbor self-satisfiedly smirked. “Bravado and bluster as I suspected. Shelli, this is intolerable and beneath even you. Command your creation to release me at once!”

Cautiously Shellialila swam back, careful to stay well out of bite-range. “Why? You made your bed, why don’t you sleep in it?”

The two snakes glared at one another, hissing, until Silli, exasperated, shook her head. “Shelli, listen to me. Look around. You’ve never been this close to your pets. You don’t know what they’ll do if they find you here. If they realize you are responsible for every tragedy in their lives.”

“And?” Shellialila hissed.

“And because you’re a rank, cruel amateur, you will need my help to depart this bauble unless you intend to swim for eternity in this sorry excuse for a sea.”

“Fine,” Shellialila hissed, temporarily swallowing her pride to experimentally nuzzle the algae. The fronds immediately tried to latch onto her and she pulled away with a cry.

“What are you doing?” Silli said. “Use your mind-arm; don’t touch it, Fool!”

“I...” Shellialila trailed off as her companion’s beady eyes widened.

“You broke it, didn’t you? You’re a disaster!”

“Is yours not broken?”

“Well, it’s a little sore but enough to manage but this...but this is *your* world, Shelli. If you’ve gone and snapped your mind-arm neither one of us can change things. Neither one of us can leave.”

“I broke nothing,” Shellialila said, but her retort came out sounding tremulous. “You broke it! You break everything! You ruin everything! Oh stay there and rot!”

Sobbing, she swam for the surface posthaste, crested and gasped in the right kind of air and swam until she reached an island beach. She cut a trench through the sand and scrunched down her head. Her heart was pounding and her scales shuddering, fear twisting tight as death. The crushed pillow of foliage was not very comfortable. Repositioning snapped

several more trees, which did not improve her headrest. Her tail still stung and her throat still hurt and her face still hurt from that landing and...

She detected buzzing and raised her head, spying a triangular shape poking through suddenly close and sodden clouds. The time had changed and the light was dim, and she knew she hadn't fallen asleep for she felt just as tired as before. What time was it? What had happened?

Space-time folds, yes a few of those, too.

Shellialila recalled her own world-building. Curses.

Oblivious to time-folds and other perils, the speck jetted closer. A spaceship. Its radio waves were buzzing at her in words she should have instantly interpreted, but now struggled to comprehend. She knew the languages of all her pets, but her mind was not working at its usual speed, synapses taking too long to fire.

The ship swooped near her and buzzed louder, and at last she started to decipher words.

"...vile worm...surrender...destroy..."

Her pets appeared to be rather grouchy.

The supposition was reinforced with an unprovoked barrage. The little spaceship packed a punch, unleashing crackling bolts of plasma that painfully seared a dozen-odd scales. She attacked and barely missed crunching the spaceship as it nimbly darted away.

"I am your caretaker, Fools! Desist!" she shouted in the creatures' barking language. "Or I will ball up all your worlds and toss them burning in the trash!"

A few more evil plasma bolts landed. "Vile worm," the little ship blared. "Which despot installed your voicebox? Speak!"

"I will not be so vilely addressed."

Shellialila rose up on her tail so her head loomed high above the trees. Though she still had to look up at the spaceship. Bother. "I am eternally Shellialila and my name and voice is my own. I am not of the Cultists or..." For a moment she blanked on the designations of the other four warring factions; what were they called again? Never mind. "Or of any of my pets. I am your master and you are mine and - ow! Will you cut that out?"

The spaceship had resumed its aggression, this time peppering her nose with hard bullets. The short volley ended and the ship buzzed close. "That was a warning, foul beast. This ship is equipped with neutron annihilators, which I will not hesitate to unleash if you do not lie flat on your belly and no longer seek to challenge Karmanak; for I am of the mighty vanguard of Karmanak - glory forever be to Karmanak and to the vessels of his great fleet. For Karmanak was and was not and will be..."

Shellialila flicked out her tongue, tasted the air and the words and remembered: yes, this was a Cultic spaceship. Of the five solar factions the Cultists were strongest and had developed the most devastating weapons.

They were a little too fond of preaching, however.

Shellialila lashed with her tail, which she'd coiled for the strike. Scales connected with a *thwack* and the vanguard vessel of Karmanak toppled helplessly end over end, trailing smoke and yowling over the radio. Oh, she'd hit that stupid thing good. Unable to regain control, the annoying metal buzzing speck splatted into a mountain.

Boom.

Too late, she remembered the neutron annihilators, which sent out a fiery shockwave as the mountain flashed to ash. A plume rose up and ate the clouds, antimatter chain reactions igniting the atmosphere for leagues. She dove for the water as it flashed through states: from ice to rapids to steam to snow. It was breaking apart; all was breaking apart, her constituent molecules tearing. It became hard to think, to move, to breathe.

She escaped the radius of the blast, if just, and sunk down in agony into the depths. She was hurting all over, hurting so badly, and at least down here the waters were soothing. At least down here the cold waters could cover her and she could wriggle into the seafloor and just for a short time sleep...

A day or a year or a century later, Shellialila opened her eyes.

All was dark and cold and quiet, and her every movement was slow. She wondered for an idle moment if she had fallen asleep by her pets as she sometimes did in her lair and somehow messed up with the tiles. But no, she was covered in sand, everything uniformly chilly.

Because she was underwater, still. Right.

She vaguely remembered how she had been hurting. She couldn't see her own scales to tell, but when she rubbed them, they seemed all right. Nothing was attacking or searing or lashing her; she was just tired, still. So tired.

Her stomach growled and she lurched her head up, shaking off the sand in clods. She was... why, she must be hungry. The strange sensation both astonished and scared her. No civilized snake ever felt any hunger and none had for countless eons. Everything that was ever required had been provided for so long everyone took being full for granted. Eating was a pleasure to indulge, never a need for survival.

She winced as her stomach continued to complain. Out of instinct she tried to solve the problem with her mind-arm and for her trouble earned a headache. Still broken. She had half a mind to hunt Sillinetti and give her an angry nip.

Indeed, that seemed as good a course as any; something to look forward to after breakfast. Questing about for something to eat, she spotted a distant orange zigzagging valley. She swam nearer and discovered a steaming subduction zone: a descending continental plate crumpling underneath its neighbor. Earthquakes regularly shuddered the seafloor and magma oozed up from the mantle.

Nothing to eat, though, which was concerning, and Shellialila started to worry whether anything here could sustain her.

Energy sources. Now that was an idea. With renewed interest she regarded the subducting plates. She couldn't "eat" lava in any traditional sense, but just being near warmth would help her absorb it, and perhaps that would be enough.

Decided, then. She slithered slowly to the source of the heat, came as close as she could bear, and after a long time began to think more clearly. She missed Sillinetti, she slowly realized – not out of spite but a genuine longing. The tiny fish and tentacled creatures flitting hither and yon in these waters felt nothing like companions at all and she felt homesick and terribly alone. "Sillinetti," she called out. No one answered. All around her the ocean stretched: with few exceptions utterly black.

Shellialila shivered and not from the cold. She remembered how she'd swam away, but not how to retrace her route. This should never, ever be. None like her struggled with a sense of direction. No one got lost; she barely understood the concept. Things remained where they were or moved predictably; indeed, the great allure of pets was their authentic spontaneity. Within their baubles, they did crazy things, things that could be observed from a distance safely and comfortably and with knowing smirks, but now that she lived on one of their worlds, she had no idea where her friend was. Or where *she* was.

I'm as lost as them.

Terrified, she shouted Sillinetti's name, begging her friend to appear spontaneously, *willing* the impossible event to occur.

Her head hurt.

Her flicking forked tongue tasted sorrow and her eyes filled up with tears. She wailed and keened to no avail, everything muffled under the waves. Sillinetti was lost or missing or dead, and without her Shellialila would die here; cruelly marooned for the rest of her days.

As her tears swelled the ocean deeper, Shellialila missed the approach of something creeping through a time-fold.

Black claws snapped out from the darkness, seized her throat, and clamped down tight. She gagged and tried to break away, but her assailant was unrelenting, red eyes grinning as it tried to behead her. She snapped back but couldn't land a bite, fangs just missing the monster's head where four slitted evil eyes grinned. Its grip adjusted and it pulled her in, and she jolted her weight to the side – an effective maneuver perhaps on land, but in the water it still left her trapped.

Again she tried biting but those damnable claws kept her fangs from piercing flesh. She tried lashing about with her tail, but the attack lost force underwater and the impact couldn't free her.

She hissed and yowled and started to panic. She could not break free of that crushing grip no matter her efforts, and the pressure was growing. Resistant scales were starting to crack. Can my own creation kill me? She wracked her brain for any weaknesses, but feared she had just let her mind-arm iterate. Monsters, she'd gleefully summoned. Surprise me. And now novelty would kill.

A sudden explosion framed the creature in light and all of a sudden its claws released her. On her, the monster turned its chitinous back and unleashed from its maw a howl: echoing and amplifying the shockwave as it lunged at something unseen. Another explosion lit it up and then four more before it went down, horned ungainly head lolling back as it sank to the ocean floor.

A single small yellow light had replaced it, flashing in depths now strewn with the innards of the monster it had slain. The light blinked from a metal vessel not unlike the Cultic spaceship but tubular and streamlined for watery ventures. The craft remained still for a moment and then emitted a tentative buzzing, which, after too long, she managed to translate.

"Great Serpent, my name is Sergensky Kallil. On behalf of all of the crew of the Steadfast we humbly request to approach you in peace." The speaker hesitated for a moment. "Please know our weapons are meant only to defend you from the many who wish you harm. We hope this mortal enemy has perished. And, um, if you can understand this, Great Serpent, please incline your head."

She kept them waiting for some time, but the Steadfast remained expectant.

"My name is Shellialila," she answered, in what should be their native language. "And I bow my head to no one."

Buzzing filled up the space between them. People appeared to talk over each other on the other end of the channel.

"Oh, Shellialila, are you real?" A female voice (she guessed), now spoke. "Are the legends true? Can you talk?"

"What do you suppose this discussion consists of?" These newcomers were already becoming annoying. "Does Sergensky helm your claptrap or not?"

Sergensky's irritated voice returned. "My sincerest apologies for my First, Great Serpent. She is a little overwhelmed by the moment. Um. Seeing as you can seem to understand us, please would you let our vessel approach?"

Not so fast, tiny heavily-armed strangers. "Have you encountered another one like me? Are there legends of where she lives?"

Breathless indecipherable discussions followed.

Sergensky provided a belated summary. "Carla's making Delphi review our archives, but as far as I'm aware there are no system legends of more than one Great Serpent. We honestly didn't expect to run into you. There have been over a hundred expeditions, and it is a great and humbling honor –"

There appeared to be a fight for control of the microphone, and then the woman from before spoke again in what sounded like the tail end of an argument – boring it to tears, more like. Either that or scaring it off with torpedoes. We have a generational opportunity and you're in love with protocols that – oh! I hit the button. Hi, snake!"

"I am," Shellialila answered gravely, "thankful for your vessel's assistance in dispatching a minor threat. Pledge to assist in the search for my friend and I may indulge your requests."

"...oh. Oh, I don't know if..." The channel went silent.

Professional. Who's in charge of this submarine? Kids?

Fortunately Sergensky's voice returned and with it a modicum of self-confidence. "The Steadfast is putting your measure to a vote. Please be patient as we decide."

A vote? Absurd. But paired with the language it gave a much-needed clue about who these mariners were. An oligarchy ruled the Hegemons, she remembered, and the Post-humans obeyed a computer. The Cultists blathered on about Karmanak; so that meant this submarine had to be crewed by either Democratists or Greeners, the two factions closest ideologically and who'd launched at each other the fewest missiles. Given the Democratists were inferior explorers (being enamored with "perfect" democracy), that most likely left the Greeners. Which could pose problems as those fell into camps split between conservation and eco-terrorism.

So was the Steadfast here just to meet her? Or would they want to recruit a new weapon? Even if this crew was friendly, the Greener faction would brag of their find and an army could come knocking.

Which meant she could never betray any weakness.

"Shellialila," said Sergensky, after endless radio silence presumably filled with inane debates. "The Steadfast is a repurposed military vessel and cannot perform to original specs. We can fire four more torpedoes at most, and we could trigger a reactor overload, but that would destroy the ship. This is the extent of our remaining armaments."

"Our scanners have a limited range and we are operating in contested waters. If unsavory customers discover we're here they will shoot first and ask questions later. Not everyone, um, believes in our research so it's best if no one can see where we are until we have to resurface for air. This must occur within thirty-six hours or our scrubbers will give out."

He paused.

"I don't know how much you understood of all that, being, well, being who you are. I don't really know much about you at all. Hell, most scientists think you're a myth."

The tenor of his voice changed, then, and she smiled to at last hear steel. "But I'll be damned if I pass this up. We'd all be damned and we'd all regret it. Let's go looking for your friend."

* * *

Per Shellialila's descriptions, the Steadfast plotted a route to the edge of the nearest continental shelf. There was no consensus from her companions on what could have rendered Sillinetti helpless or what dangers they might face en route. Most of the ocean remained uncharted beyond rudimentary topographics, exploration being hampered by conflict. All five warring solar factions had landed boots or drones on the planet within a year after its appearance and all still claimed to own the whole thing. Killer satellites, Sergensky claimed, rained death from the stratosphere and fought each other. As anything above ground could be a target, original colonies had been abandoned for caves where ores could be strip-mined from veins and forged into mechs and AA artillery. Major rivers and aquifers had been poisoned and the ocean might be next. The world might not last many more years, until, like all its solar brethren, no one could breathe the air outside.

These and other stories of her planet she heard directly from the crew of the Steadfast as they plied the depths together. Eighteen people lived aboard the small ship and every one of them wanted to talk. Some were witty and some naïve, some shy and some awed, some gruff and others chatty. Everyone wanted to know about her: how could she talk? Where did she come from? Why was she here and what did she want? She deflected questions and asked her own, but the guilt inside her swelled.

Of course the new planet was being destroyed. She was responsible and she'd wanted it. At a distance observing it would have been fun, like watching ants scramble when you smashed their nest.

Close to the impact, it wasn't the same.

Claxons aboard the submarine rang, jolting her out of her dismal thoughts. Seven incoming blots were approaching,

which soon condensed into tentacled shapes all much larger than the *Steadfast*. She bared her fangs and hissed at the monsters, which made them spread out and encircle, members of some sort of pack. They looked like giant squids crossed with hydras, multiple angry beaked mouths per creature snapping as they tested reactions, darting in and out before she could bite.

21

Sergensky buzzed her on the radio. "Shellialila, what are these? Can we help?"

They're iterated monsters I made for fun. And now they want to kill us. She tried to figure out what had been iterated that had led to these ghastly hulks, but there were too many random variables. Oh, she'd loved her random variables. Loved not knowing the end result.

Let's hope they really behave like a pack.

"Lock on the one with horns. Light it up."

A torpedo tube ejected its weapon and the underwater missile homed for the squid and hit its target, blasting a beaked head into ruin. The creature's other three heads roared and instead of retreating, it charged.

She whipped her tail around and connected, slamming the nearest squid into its partner. Disoriented, the two fell back as another torpedo fired, blasting a second head off the pack leader. Tentacles lashed around the submarine, which fell into evasive maneuvers too late. Shellialila lunged to assist, raked with her fangs, and sheared through tentacles so they spattered the water with blood. Angry beaks stabbed, pricking her scales. Not sharp enough. She whirled on the nearest assailant and, ignoring the heads, bit its torso.

Another torpedo exploded beside her. She bit down harder, pouring in venom, and the squid flailed for her neck. A squid came too close and she shot out her tail, lassoing then constricting. *Die.*

The shockwave from a fourth torpedo – the *Steadfast*'s last – made her heart miss a beat. The squid she was biting leaked ink and fell limp, and then the one she'd choked did the same.

She released the corpses, unsteady in the water. Three of the attacking squid creatures had died and the others were fleeing, scared. The *Steadfast*'s arsenal had slain the leader, blowing off every one of its heads.

"Sh-Shellialila, are you okay?" Carla's question pulsed over the radio, and the First's concern was oddly touching. Shellialila gulped in ocean, taking a very deep "breath" before answering.

"Attend to your wounded," she deflected, hoping her voice conveyed conviction. She counted twenty-one bites on her scales and two scales now torn off from where the first clawed monster had seized her. Nothing fortunately had pierced her flesh but pain lingered from each attack. To say nothing of how her head still hurt and how her innards felt roiled from shockwaves.

Combat had tired her and again she was *hungry*. Now the immediate threats had left, she couldn't dismiss how famished she felt. Maybe nothing here could sustain her but she couldn't carry on like this.

Squid was on the menu. All you could eat.

* * *

Sometime later their journey resumed. The *Steadfast*'s engines and instruments still worked, though the submarine's top speed had been halved for fear the vessel would snap apart. While she'd been gagging down squid corpses, Sergensky, in consultation with his crew, informed her he'd run short-range scans on locations most likely to match her descriptions and narrowed things down to five likely targets. Course corrected for the nearest, again they were off and away.

She appreciated no one making comment on her messy, disgusting meal. Though horrible, it had taken the edge off so she no longer felt deathly weak. Maybe she could feed herself and survive here.

Maybe my broken mind's playing tricks.

She tried to dismiss that possibility as she slowly swam through the ocean, resisting too-occasional urges to vomit up crunchy chunks of breakfast.

22

Carla spoke up over the radio. "Shellialila, are you feeling better? And, um, your name's pretty long. Can I call you Shelli?"

The irony. "You may," she replied, amused.

"Good. So." Poised, Carla took the plunge. "I know you didn't want to answer this, but please could you tell us where you really came from? You fought for us when you could have just left us, so you must care and I don't know why. We never heard of any other sentient species until there's this story about a Cultic spaceship, about there being some secret encounter with a serpent. We hacked their archives and it took forever, but then there were people like me who heard your voice who knew everything else didn't matter. We had to find you. We had to try."

"Expeditions looked and failed and now we might be the only ones left. But you're real. You're really here. All the worlds will know and it might change everything. How many are like you? How did you come here? What can you do? Are you some kind of god?"

Carla gasped for air on the radio, hyperventilating on her own questions.

And so each distraught inquiry had the time and space it needed to seep into Shellialila's heart.

Perhaps it was exhaustion that lowered her defenses. Perhaps the leaden anchor of guilt. Whatever it was, as she swam by this submarine, this crude metal box she could gulp down whole, she felt something like compassion for the curious creatures inside. Though small and frail, they were brave and strong. And she had never felt so repulsed by her own façades and schemes.

I just want to tell the truth.

"My neighbor and I got into a fight." The memory of that long-ago fight felt as if it was circling a drain into a bottomless, yawning abyss. "She disapproved of how I cared for what the Creator had given to me. She wanted to take me close. Make me see."

Shellialila fell silent and the radio crackled with Sergensky's voice of concern. "Shellialila, if this line of inquiry um is distressing, you need say no more."

She smiled at the captain's attempt (very belated) at damage control. He hadn't taken over for Carla until she'd finished all her questions.

"I saw your worlds were barren and broken," Shellialila said, continuing. "You teetered on the edge of extinction, and so I gave you a new world. So you could continue to fight. So you could live and keep me amused."

Tears and sea salt stung her eyes. "Sillinetti cared in her own silly way more about you than I ever cared, and I hated her for her meddling. You were mine and mine alone, and so we fought and broke each other and fell from something you might call heaven. Perhaps I can return there with her, if she lives and we can find her. More likely, there is no way back."

She gulped down sobs, the way ahead uncertain. The little sub did not respond for so long she worried the radio had died – until it spoke with Carla's voice.

"What was it like in heaven?" Carla asked.

* * *

Minutes or hours or a day might have passed as she told them all she knew; all at least that she could communicate in a way they could understand. Carla's bravery spurred on others and where before they'd asked cautious questions, now a deluge overwhelmed. They wanted to know how long she'd lived; what was her mind-arm; what could she iterate. How many pets were there and what were they like?

"Who gave you the pets?" Sergensky asked. But this was a question she couldn't answer to anyone's satisfaction.

"Everyone keeps a pet; they have to. It has always been that way." And that was as much as she could explain.

23

Slowly the darkness of the ocean lightened, fraught with navy blues and schools of fish. The edge of the continental shelf appeared, and not as barren as she remembered. Algae in all shades of green hugged and bound boulders and sparkled in crevices, enmeshing a flourishing coral reef.

"We're picking up a reading on short-range scanners," announced Sergensky from the sub. "Looks as big as you are."

She nodded. "Let's go."

They course-corrected and skimmed through creatures fleeing on either side to give room. There was so much life here and so colorful. Perhaps it was small and insignificant, but it was beautiful in its own way.

"We're here," Sergensky soon announced and Shellialila frowned, annoyed. There was just more coral here mounded and stacked...

Stacked on a dull blue scale, overgrown.

She rushed to the scale and called Sillinetti's name. She poked gingerly at the coral formation, forked tongue flicking with excitement, then started to clear off the coral in earnest, awkwardly skewering shards with her fangs. She cleared the coral from Sillinetti's tail, which she prodded then lightly bit.

The tail lay limp. Sillinetti lay still. Shellialila crisscrossed the reef per Sergensky's radioed hunches. She cleared more coral off her neighbor's body: off awkward contortions and too-sharp bends, off scales chipped and patterns faded, off at last Sillinetti's head, this last tucked sharply against the neck, heavy lids closed over her eyes. All still.

From nose to tail her neighbor was covered in a skein of veiny green tendrils beneath the coral's chalky shell. Careful to not get stuck on anything, Shellialila flicked her tongue out, checking, probing, begging for a heartbeat. Like her, Sillinetti should never grow old. Like her, only the gravest injury should cause any great inconvenience.

Snakes were meant to live forever.

"Wake up," she begged. "Sillinetti, wake up. I'm sorry, Sillinetti! I'm sorry! Wake up!"

She could not find a heartbeat. She could not stir her friend.

Sergensky's gruff voice crackled and grated. "We're picking up strange subterranean readings. Cut what you're doing short if you can."

She could barely register what the captain was saying over a sudden upswell of grief.

"Is Sillinetti alive? Can your instruments tell?"

"Negative. Um. There's no life signatures we can detect but there's something unnatural below us. Not an earthquake, but, well I don't know what it is but it's getting closer fast."

Not good enough. "Is she alive or not?"

"I...sorry to be blunt, but I think she's not. But as I was saying we've got something on infrared. It's barely showing up but it's big."

Her jaw clenched tight. The captain was wrong. Sillinetti's mind-arm must be affecting things. "You healed," she whispered beside her friend's head. "You healed yourself. I still hate you, you know."

She nuzzled Sillinetti and forgot about the vines. With a start she realized and snapped her head loose. Fortunately the vines no longer seemed very sticky. "Sillinetti, come on. Don't be lazy. We're leaving."

"Shelli," said Carla. "We don't see any signs of life in your friend. I'm sorry but please just listen to Sergensky. Ha ha. I can't believe I said that. Next I'll probably read his dumb book -"

Furious, Shellialila rounded on the Steadfast, this close to biting the twig-sub in half. "You will be quiet as death, you fool. Sillinetti means more than your captain or ship or your life or your Greeners or your planet or your universe. I humored your questions. Now help me or leave!"

24

The sub didn't flinch like a living thing would, but Carla's voice held sudden tears. "Great Shellialila, I...I'm sorry. I don't know what I was saying, I know this is hard. Please, though, just listen to us - oh no!"

Shellialila felt a tingle as the radio cut out. She glared backwards at the irritation. A few vines sprouting from the seafloor had wrapped themselves around her tail. She twitched and with little effort snapped them.

Out of the corner of her vision, a green vine speared fast for her neck.

She whirled and choked as the incoming spear hit and immediately rendered her weak. The vine had sprouted from Sillinetti's bonds; coiled now around her own neck, it was pumping in some poison. She struggled and tried to pull away only for shooting pains to knock through her vertebrae. In moments, she'd collapsed in a heap.

The vine thing bit me where I lost those scales.

Discordant harmonies swelled in her brain as she felt an unwelcome presence roughly begin to stroke her mind.

"Yes. Oh you. I remember you. Yes."

Let me go! she demanded. Release me!

"Yes, such spirit. Oh yes, still strong."

Powerless to move, she watched in horror as thousands of stalks rose up from the sand, each an outgrowth of the presence.

Of the monster she had made.

"Yes, how quaint. You believe you made me." The presence thrummed an unseen grin. "I see it now as I will see everything. Slither for me, my Shellialila. Slither, and I'll give you treats."

The vines engorged and shattered corals. Schools of fish and tiny sea life fled in kaleidoscopic rainbows as thick cords crashed down upon her, binding.

Fight. Fight back. She had to fight. If not for herself, for her neighbor. Her friend.

She willed her paralyzed body to move, demanding her broken mind-arm lift her. Her headache immediately pounded and surged as she fought a war on the floor of the ocean, unaware of how many vines she snapped, unaware of anything beyond the struggle. The beast lived under her. Destroy it. She tore up the sand and attacked it directly, ripping up chunks from a massive hide of vines that refused to release her, inadvertently pulling her closer.

Well then closer I will come. Deeper she burrowed, gnashing and writhing, losing control of her movements. All movement.

Utterly spent, she could no longer fight.

She had come so close to the monster's heart, to something red on the edge of vision, but she could no longer burrow towards it. Vines beyond counting utterly swaddled her while the presence's awful giggle filled her mind like exploding glass.

"OH. Oh yes. Yes, such free spirit. But that was naughty, my Shellialila, and I'm afraid naughty things won't stand. My pet, I'm sorry, but this will hurt."

Vines lifted her out of the hole she had dug, slapped her down on the sand and buzzed. Steam began to rise around her and she gasped then shrieked in pain. Suddenly now electrically charged, the vines were like living cords of fire. Tracing her scales, they wedged through cracks and she screamed as they seared flesh underneath. Scalded, she spasmed out of instinct, but the pain did not relent.

All my punishments will continue until I will their fitting end. She felt herself twining with the presence's mind, "justly" subject to its glee. How long will that be? How long can you fight? On you and your friend I might feast for millennia. Show me how you twist, my pet. Give up your mind to me and weep.

25

She wept though she tried not to give this monster the awful pleasure it desired. She saw in her final moment of clarity a frail vessel silhouetted.

A submarine on an intercept course.

The presence howled and in an instant every fiery vine lost charge. She rolled loose as the shockwave hit, which cast her sideways through charred coral. She hunkered as the ocean shook, thought better of that and cast about for Sillinetti's body – there! Restraining vines crumbled to the touch, and she pried the body free...

And almost tumbled into a whirlpool. The ocean was roaring into a breach.

She lashed herself around Sillinetti, finding strength from one last reservoir, diving and burrowing into the sand. She hugged the seafloor as shattered corals broke loose around her and gashed her flanks. She slithered up and then fell back, slithered up and then fell back. She bit the sand for still more grip, hugged a coral and boosted forward, surging for the surface.

She broke.

She gasped, grew faint, and wriggled awkwardly up an ugly gravelly beach that hurt her bleeding, tender scales. Saltwater streaming off screaming wounds, she dragged herself and all of Sillinetti out of the whitewater waves and collapsed.

A realization dawned on her slowly, as one might notice an apple had rotted after swallowing it whole last meal. The crew of the Steadfast would not be joining her. There would be no more conversations.

The submarine had just sunk with all hands.

The realization stunned and shook her and she shivered and squeezed her eyes tight, hoping that when she opened them again, it wouldn't be true, it wouldn't have happened.

But closing her eyes only seared on her mind that short snapshot of doomed heroes: a silhouetted submarine plunging into the gash she'd torn. Out of all torpedoes to fire, Sergensky had blown his ship's reactor.

Yesterday's strangers had saved her life.

The whirlpool petered out, recalled its winds, and the weather stilled. This beach abutted desolate ruins. There was what had once been a pier, there the ruins of a city hall. Collapsed buildings remained as eroded walls open to the sun and rain, nature reclaiming the land once taken.

Who had lived here and who had died? No, it was all too much to consider and she turned back to Sillinetti. "Get up," she begged and still it was useless. She slowly uncoiled from Sillinetti's body and she again felt terribly abandoned. What in this world was left for her now? She wanted to curl up and sleep, but she needed to live and find purpose. To eke out some kind of hopeful existence.

Oh, but she just wanted to cry.

She gave in to the sobs for a while, quailing and gritting her jaws as she shook. Her beautiful scaly green coat was a ruin: more than a hundred scales torn off and many others charred or cracked. Blood had seeped out and stained the beach. Smelling something, she lifted her gaze. Some very small creature was approaching. Ambling slowly on two legs, the creature was wearing a blue and green uniform and carried a helmet under an arm. The creature had hair on the top of its head, long and flowing and black and snarled. Two forward-facing eyes craned up to her own as it neared.

"Great Shellialila," said Carla! "You're alive."

The embodiment of the voice on the radio reached out to touch her – then drew her hand back. "Sorry. I shouldn't. Are you all right?"

Stunned by this unforeseen development, Shellialila painfully nodded. Then an immediate question formed.

26

"Did anyone else survive from the *Steadfast*?"

Carla looked down at the rocks. "We had an escape pod but we couldn't..." She closed her eyes and started again. "We couldn't steer the *Steadfast* remotely. Sergensky stayed aboard. Just him."

Clearly trying to change the subject, Carla pointed at Sillinetti. "The others thought I was crazy to do this. Is that your friend over there? Can I see her?"

She nodded, not trusting her throat to enunciate. With some difficulty the Carla creature clambered over the beach's stones – some nearly as big as herself – to where Sillinetti lay by the ocean, a rising tide just kissing her tail.

Carla sniffed the underside of her friend's jaw then stood back with hands on hips. "Well she doesn't *smell* dead, so that's good. Does she have a heartbeat? Assuming your kind is supposed to have heartbeats?"

Shellialila shook her head no.

"I guess she might still be in a coma. Does she have any family? Could they come and help?"

Shellialila considered her answer. She understood how pets had relatives, but no snake she knew had mothers or fathers, or bore children. Everyone had lived for so many eons no one could remember their childhood – if indeed they'd ever been young.

"We are all a family of sorts. And no one is going to come and help."

"Oh." Carla deflated then regained her enthusiasm. "Is she ticklish? Does she have any allergies? If we powdered peppers would she cough?"

Shellialila shook her head to all the predictably terrible suggestions. Perhaps her friend did not smell dead, but what would that smell be like? She didn't know; and it didn't matter. Dead or in coma or in some kind of stasis, there was no way to free Sillinetti, and so the result was the same. Her meddling neighbor would never again invite herself over and nitpick everything. She would never prattle and annoy her to bits and show her more in fleeting moments than endless millennia had about pets.

Shellialila saw how she had been wrong to pit her pets against each other, to relish in their tragic suffering. But this also didn't matter, for now that she saw, she could do nothing. Conscious or no, a shadow of herself, she was exiled to this bauble for as long as her pets' little universe existed. With no working mind-arm she couldn't regulate time, and so on the other side, in "heaven", eons here would pass in an instant. No one would notice two snakes gone missing until they'd well and truly perished.

Overcome with grief, she slumped, resting her head on Sillinetti's tail. With one eye she watched the endless waves breaking; with the other she regarded Carla, who was kneeling now, head bowed.

She's praying, Shellialila noticed; and she prayed until the sun fell low to no apparent helpful effect. Lights not far away on the beach appeared after she finished, which Carla waved over. The rest of the *Steadfast* crew, perhaps, probably watching from the treeline. Shellialila tasted salt from the tide and supposed she should greet the visitors. Thank them. Converse.

She had no heart to try.

Indeed, she no longer cared about anything, and so she remained where she lay by the waves as Carla tried to get her attention, saying words that slipped away. Endlessly slipping. Endlessly breaking. The waves would rise and fall and rise. The sun would crest and burn and sputter. The stars would sparkle and gutter to darkness. All would be darkness and all would be stillness, and if she lay immobile forever, perhaps the pain would die as well.

"That...tickles," Sillinetti breathed.

Adrift from reality, she'd imagined the voice, yet still something sparked inside her. A last attempt to believe.

She moved.

27

Aching, she lifted her weary head to fully regard Sillinetti's plight. Carla and sixteen other like creatures had set a fire on the beach beside Sillinetti's fallen head. They'd stoked it with logs and tossed in leaves that made it gutter with pungent fumes; made its flames rise over their heads; made its feeble warmth extend so Shellialila felt warmer herself, as if she lay again on her tiles in that lair fading out of memory. Sillinetti was surely warmer, too.

Overcome with shock she stared as one of Sillinetti's eyes cracked open. Pupil fixing on Shellialila. Forked tongue slowly licking out.

Carla and all her friends noticed, too, and jumped and whooped and hollered in triumph. Shellialila barely heard them.

"Do you still hate me?" Sillinetti whispered. "At one point I hated you more than anything. Then I hated myself and then..." Sillinetti struggled to find the words. "If all I had to hold onto was hate it wouldn't have been enough, I think. I'm sorry, Shelli. I'm so so sorry. We're trapped here forever and it's all my fault. My mind-arm's broken. I lied and it's broken. I shouldn't have tried to make you see."

Tentatively daring to believe this was happening, Shellialila edged in close. "I don't hate you, Sillinetti," she said.

And then the two snakes were huddling and weeping, entwined in a hug delayed for a century. And as they embraced and breathed in each other, like a charge of lighting, an idea surged.

"Your tooth," Shellialila breathed. "Did it help you? Do you know what it does?"

"No, it does nothing, it's stupid and useless. I bit everything with it and it wouldn't do anything. I can't break it off or bite myself or do anything. Oh, Cancarlo knows nothing. He's awful!"

"Did you ever bite me with it?"

Sillinetti's scales went suddenly rigid.

"When there's two of us we can do more."

Sillinetti adamantly shook her head no. "I don't want to hurt you any more than I have. Shelli, I can't. I'm afraid and I'm lost. Oh, I didn't used to be so afraid. Hold me, Shelli, just hold me, please!"

The only two of their kind in the universe, through tears the two snakes re-entwined, and held one another tight. High tide came and wet their scales then drew back from the stony beach beneath stars wheeling in constellations. Carla and company had retreated and the unattended fire sputtered into glowing coals. Neither snake said a word for hours until the stars began to fade before dawn's glow upon the ocean.

"It's okay," Shellialila consoled. "If you hurt me I forgive you. I trust you, Sillinetti. We have to know."

Carla and her crewmates now stood by the trees. Shellialila could only wonder what they thought about alien snakes no longer speaking their language. Whatever they thought, whatever they feared, they'd kept up their watch through the night.

"Okay," Sillinetti said, with a rasp. "I'll bite you if you think it will help. But...are you really sure?"

"I am," she said and bowed her head.

Shellialila braced for the bite and as it pierced she felt a surge of pain flooding into the base of her neck. She squirmed despite her own intentions and Sillinetti almost broke loose. "Don't," she admonished and the pain kept coming, streaming agony searing her bloodstream.

Blood flowing molten into her mind.

She looked for the first time at the beach and the ocean. The sun rose and she felt it burn. Disconnected synapses linked. Distances fled between all objects, bridged with a single thought.



Let it be.

Time rolled the way she had always intended, skipping gleefully, selectively backwards. And sunken, shattered piers rebuilt. Bricks and struts and roofs returned to all the colony's ruined buildings. Sunken fishing boats broke loose from watery graves to sail the ocean.

The coastal colony had returned, filled anew with all its people.

Sillinetti shuddered and broke away and stared with wide eyes at the miracle. "Could you do this before?" she gasped.

"We could," Shellialila smiled. Willing the healing of her friend.

Colonists by the hundreds had noticed (how could they not?) the huge snakes on the beach. Perhaps they even sensed the power flowing from three risen suns. Some of them cowered but many curious souls steered their cars off-road and turned rudders on ships and trudged on foot to see the sight until many scores of boats flocked near and a milling crowd had formed.

The seventeen-member crew of the *Steadfast* approached unsteadily and fell prostrate. Shellialila wouldn't have it.

"Stand," she said in Carla's language. "All of you stand. I don't deserve it." One by one all wobbled upright. "Do not bow to us ever again."

And Shellialila dipped her head to lie it flat on the rocks and the sand. Before the world, Carla reached and touched her.

Carla was crying, but her little face beamed.

"Sergensky's coming," Shellialila promised. "After breakfast, let's go explore."

Fin



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