

Stars and Static

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“Are you fucking kidding me?”

A crowd of faces bobbed back and forth with each other in front of a widescreen display. Their hairlines shimmered from the static that now populated the monitor. A couple figures clutched their heads in frustration and stumbled back toward their desks. An unfortunate elbow from one of these stumblers met Arthur’s face.

“Sorry boss,” the man mumbled.

Arthur simply rubbed his nose. In his younger years, a similar collision would have set off a flood of blood. Luckily, he had his blood vessels cauterized shortly after his interest in oceanography began.

But he almost wished that a medical emergency—no matter how small—would pull him away from the screen and speakers whose static spoke only his failure. A sigh through his stinging nostrils sent all heads twisting his way, with one quickly closing in.

“Final depth before loss of communication: approximately 10500-meters. We gotta send another one.” Ernest said. His face sharpened as Arthur blinked through watering eyes.

“No, we’re not sending another drone in. Each one of those is a 300,000-dollar loss, and I’m not about to let us break seven figures.” The words already felt impotent by the time they left Arthur’s mouth.

Another face appeared beside him—Morgan. “Arthur, please. At least one more, we’re about to establish an exact radius around it. This is the discovery of our lifetimes.”

“No, no. Not just ours. The human race. This will be the greatest discovery in the lifetime of humanity. An enormous landmass appearing in the middle of the Mariana Trench roughly one mile in diameter, yet unobservable by any sensor technology but the naked eye?” Arthur found his voice rising to encompass the attentions of all the faces. “I understand the importance.” He saw a couple employees tense up, crossing their fingers at their sides. The hope in their gazes touched the room, like the shimmer of heat. “Which is why we won’t be sending another drone.” He paused to let a couple of groans pass. For the most part, they remained silent seeing Arthur with words still unsaid. “We’ll be going down there personally... *I’ll* be going there personally. Manned vessel, floodlights, glass dome. We’ll only be using sensor tech to get there, and we’ll get a glimpse of it in person.”

“Are you crazy? Another 300,000 dollars is too much, but losing a multi-million-dollar submarine is okay? Never mind the fact you want to kill a couple people along with it?” Ernest said.

“First of all, watch your tone, I’m still your boss. And second of all, no one is dying. The only problem with the drones is that we lost communications with them, and sensor capabilities. The sub will have failsafes. In the event that we lose control of it, we will resurface, and we have

the area surrounding the anomaly mapped down to the micron—not that we needed that much accuracy, it’s mostly open ocean.”

Ernest’s brow furrowed. He had more emotional investment in this than almost any other employee. His objection to the submarine was a formality at most.

“I’ll shortlist you for the sub crew.”

His brow unfurrowed.

Arthur looked down at the ocean, checkered by steel grating, and swayed. In concert with him, the submarine suspended from the platform swayed too. And Morgan swayed to his left, waiting for an opportunity to give a report.

“The instruments in the sub are all green. You’re ready for departure. You have... no volunteers for the crew.”

“Who knew people would be apprehensive about going in person on a voyage that’s already killed every drone we’ve thrown at it?” Arthur shrugged his jacket off and bared his arms to the ocean breeze. The deep inhale of salty air did nothing to assuage his vertigo. “Just you and me,” he muttered under his breath, inaudible to Ernest, who was already clambering into the vessel.

“Wish me luck.”

Arthur was already dropping himself into the submarine before any words had left Morgan’s mouth.

The heat of the sub was smothering and suffocating, just like the sun overhead. Sweat immediately sprouted on his skin, and he shifted uncomfortably as the belt and seatback enclosed him. His ears pricked at the sound of the hatch sealing behind.

“Ready.” Ernest spoke into the console he sat before.

Arthur’s arms nearly came up to guard him from his approach into the ocean. A stone dropped from heart to gut as the sub dipped headfirst into the water and the subsequent sloshing sent Ernest rocking in his seat.

“All systems clear,” Ernest said. “Beginning preliminary descent. Testing 100-meters.”

The submarine buzzed to life, and the ballast tanks hissed as they took in the surrounding water. Arthur couldn’t help a last look upwards at the ocean closing in on them. He felt his weight shift again as the propellers spurred the sub down. Within a minute the submarine darkened, and the interior was tinged in an ever-deepening blue.

97

98...

99...

100.

The ballast tanks adjusted to bring the sub to a tenuous rest.

“All systems clear,” Arthur said.

“Continuing descent.”

Arthur felt a pressure at the back of his neck. The glass dome was wide and encompassed his field of view nearly completely. In the corners of his vision, he could see the consoles and monitors that tracked their dive. But his eyes were fixed toward the depths—on the texture of the ocean. He watched the specks pass by. Like dust caught in sunlight, suspended. Their sub was an errant breath that parted the way, sending the marine snow swirling in their wake.

“Approaching 9500-meters.” Ernest reported. At this depth no light reached them. They had been traveling in darkness for some time.

“About time to switch on the floodlights—HIT THE FUCKING BRAKES!”

Ernest jolted in his seat, once from the controls, and once more from the deceleration. The entire vessel shuddered as the propellers reversed.

“What the fuck.” Ernest said.

They found themselves staring at myriad stone ridges. They snaked across each other, tan stony vines.

“First human eyes to set sight on the anomaly,” Arthur muttered. “What does the rangefinder say?”

“Zero. Nothing. Shit doesn’t work here. We’re within its radius.”

“Well, we shouldn’t be. Either dozens of our sonar scans were wrong, or the newly calibrated altimeter was. I know we’ve been hemorrhaging money, but we haven’t skimped on our instruments. Certainly not enough to be nearly *1000-meters* off.”

“I’m pulling us back—not all the way, just to get a better look.” Ernest preempted.

Like a chicken, Arthur felt his head lock into place, following gravity, unwilling to part ways with the anomaly as the sub inched backwards. His eyes widened as if to accommodate the sub’s increasing sightline. Their steps back revealed more ridges, tendrils that they could now see spiraling out from a central position. Arthur’s scalp tingled, like a spider was crawling across it, and he was waiting to feel the sting of its fangs.

“Bring us down.”

The submarine descended, this time past the rounded edge of the tendrils, taking a wider berth around the stone. The ship reoriented itself horizontally, but Arthur still felt a tension across his chest. They passed the lip where the ridges ended and a round arch began. Beneath the arch was an inset whorl. Arthur imagined it wasn't too dissimilar to the whirl created by the ship's propellers. Nestled within the arch was a tunnel, pitch black. Unlike the stone above, this was pockmarked and porous, like pumice. No matter how hard Arthur clutched at his chest, he couldn't free himself from the grip that held it. It was tight, compressing his heart until it sank to his stomach on its own.

“We're not heading in there, right boss?”

“No. Take us around.” The fist clutched tighter, yet the pit in his chest did not shrink. It remained vast and colored his emotions dark. Nausea and the drift of the sub sent his pulse racing. His heart slammed hard against his ribs, and he could almost hear it knocking with the additional weight of dread.

“*It's a face.*” Ernest was slack-jawed. “*It's a whole fucking statue.*”

Arthur had always hated statues. Even now, as an adult, he could scarcely get close to them. Especially now, he felt that repellant force across the front of his body—that repellant force called *expectation*.

Expectation that the statue will *move*.

But Arthur couldn't hear Ernest. Every pump of blood was deafening to his ears and too quick. Every flood became a river and a singular rush through his head. Every nerve was loud with an indiscernible static. Arthur felt a tingle behind his nose—perhaps deeper—as the floodlights illuminated the head. They were too close to capture it in its entirety.

Just like the *ear*, the *skin* was pockmarked, porous, pumice. Perfect for shadows to be cast in every pit and pocket by the first light that had shone down there in years.

But not the eye.

The eye was smooth and uniform in both texture and tone. A singular shade of beige untouched by any shadow.

And the eye blinked ghostly. The stony pupil now glittered with stars. The displacement of water from the movement of such a large object should have sent them spinning. Seismometers on the surface would have picked it up. But the sub never fluttered.

Arthur felt a trickle along his upper lip, and the taste of copper in his gaping mouth. His head spun, dizzy, and dipped forward, drawn to the statue and toward the glass.

Not stars.

Cracks.