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“Forward I reach for the vision of grace.” -- Lovecraft

Ship called Squid

by Mark von Schlegell

Karsden had climbed to the very rear-most portion of the spacecraft. Gipfel joined soon after. they nodded, and remained in silence, puffing lungprotectors. This was Karsden's favorite spot. Here, looking out on the rejected timespace, one could best imagine the slender triangulating tip at the other end of the long-snouted ship. The sameness of the relation, coming here at the antipode to an intensity, proved it. According to first principles, one could not be closer or farther away from the squid.

Immune in its bubble even from ill effects of zero gravity, the mutated jumbo squid remained, as was widely believed, content. For more than a generation it had not communicated. Ensnared in its turquoise bubble-sleeve spotted green with oxygenators, it was free to jet itself strangely through the empty, cavernous first chamber. The hull had been grown according to cutting-edge bio-engineering breakthroughs, and offered this forward portion of the hull full transparency. The squid swam in open space -- free to bend its stiff mantle, elongate its ten stubby, needle suctioned tentacles, opening beak, flashing skin colors outrageously against the frozen ancient stars.

And now, for the first time in fifty-five years, the Squid was returning close to the bubble-sleeved Earth. The new course allowed for a brief two hour close pass. By an early decree they were not permitted to study Earth or monitor its situation "after leaving atmosphere." But a unanimous decision of the council had allowed for monitoring to begin and end during this quick pass inside the upper regions of the atmosphere.

It had been Karsden who had stood forward, a week ago, as was the right of any aboard, to propose the Squid make the derivation from the standard course, directly into the atmosphere. Karsden's nerve had taken everyone by surprise. Whence came this challenge to the squid's autonomy? Karsden was the first to admit that everyone aboard certainly owed their existence to the squid's prescience and intervention, way back when. And blind adherence to its principles had served them well since. But there had not been a proven single instance of the squid's interest in the human crew for more than fifteen years. And the instances before could well be imaginary. Karsden didn't actually say any heretical words, or go far as to suggest that the squid might not be all the Squid believed it to be. But once they'd allowed Karsden to be the one who proposed the derivation, and risked alienating the squid by this intervention, they were willing to hear the proposal. Karsden was strangely disappointed when the squid did not react, killing them on the spot, as it had done poor Norx back in twenty-seven.

Seeing that Karsden survived interrupting, Gipfel had immediately come forward in support, pointing out that technically 1) According to decree, it would be legal to monitor Earth for the duration of the passage through the upper atmosphere, and 2) they would undoubtedly pass close enough to drop a multimedia package describing various inventions and breakthroughs the Squid had achieved that might come in handy down on Earth, whatever was going on these days. The last motion was only rejected by one vote. And Karsden, after proposing the original derivation, was not harmed by the squid. This everyone could see.

There was a feeling of looseness on board, as if they were on holiday off Earth.

They could use a holiday. It took all of the round-the-clock labor of more than four hundred persons divided into ten divisions, with an eleventh, "the Beak," for anomalies, to keep the ship called Squid and its habitats possible, and the squid itself at large. Karsden was part of the psychology department, making sure, in conjunction with phys. ed., that Church of Squid (COS) remained, to some extent, healthy in body and mind, as it went about its insane business.

Pollution and carbon had caused widespread dementia among Earthbound humans. Sanity could be found in service of the squid. Unlike a god, it was real and could communicate, after a

fashion. When the ship first launched, the church was made up almost entirely of scientists and engineers. Karsden's manuals called the fact that they had given over their will to a gnomonic, telepathic cephalopod a "necessary unreason." It might have been a juniper bush. In the sea of hyper-reason, for the Machiavellian Humboldt squid, what mattered was the weird tale. It was the irrational, uncalled for statement that had to be most carefully allowed for, and safeguarded. For instance, it was entirely understood by everyone aboard that from time to time this Kraken killed the nearest human; and ate it.

Why should the human be at the top of the tree of life? The larger purpose remained a conundrum. In the meantime, the old mad voyage was full of possibility, of shock and awe. The squid was Hobbes on a species scale, an Ahab seeking infinite whales. And for Karsden, who was born aboard, in full-earth gravity, to serve an animal whose mind by nature could delve deeper than one's own in countless directions, while not a utopic situation, in the current troubled context, was good enough. Karsden's was a life of mystery, and of natural awe. Most humans had no relation to anything like authentic nature. In return for this abdication of sovereignty, nature still opened her bounty. The spontaneously occurring vacuum jets that from minute to minute massaged the deformed squid's craving for the old deep pressures of the ocean currents (causing certain tentacles to develop sexual organs) depended on numerous hydrodynamic engineering concepts unknown on Earth.

The truth was, and had never been divulged, that Karsden had risked reputation, and indeed rank, because of a secret conviction the squid knew who respected its true rule, and who went through the motions. The older generation no longer understood, or believed in the creature itself. It might have been any monster they followed. But for Karsden the creature held all the beauty in the world.

After the motion was passed, Karsden and Gipfel had been cast out of first chamber. They had been ignored ever since, kept out of all deliberations. Yet it was because of their own courage that they looked out over their old home. Now, still an hour to go over Earth, puffing a lungprotector, not even looking down at that lost paradise, Karsden was doubting the squid like never before.

"What are those flashes?" Gipfel asked aloud, referring to the sudden illuminations, and flashing glints of objects tracing ever downward, half gliding, half creeping away into the scud behind them.

"Field-shields," Karsden said, naming another innovation of COS, one whose success had persuaded many first rate engineers to come aboard. The electromagnetic super-field managed to vaporise the large amounts of debris that threatened the hull. "Apparently more space junk than ever. Must be quite a show up in first chamber."

Gipfel seized on this opportunity to speak of what had happened in that place. "Karsden? Don't take this the wrong way. But how did you come to propose that we dip into old earth orbit? What gave you the idea?"

"The idea came to me in a dream," Karsden said.

Gipfel took this in. "You weren't frightened?"

"Just as I enjoy the certainty that the squid is real, present, I have always been sure that it remains, towards me in particular, anyway, benign."

"Strange," Gipfel said. "I have the very same sort of certainty. But only recently." And it was true. Something had changed in Gipfel.

Exactly then they received their summons. It was Tcharenka who came carrying -- a direct order from the algorithm.

17:00 hours. Karsden and Gipfel attending.

Karsden and Gipfel looked at one another, dumb-founded. By order of the algorithm, once or so a year, at an impossible to predict moment, every crew member attended the squid -- alone with no human guards. Not every such visitor survived. Karsden had never heard of a two person attendance. But the original algorithm, scripted under the creature's strict observation, still created a rigid schedule. That the mysterious calculations had been able to catch Gipfel and Karsden together, exactly now, over Earth on a pass it could not have predicted, seemed to them both an extraordinarily, even mystically, perfect occurrence, considering the circumstances.

There was no single way forward into the chamber. But red floor lighting showed each specific applicant the current open route. Theirs took them, by long conduit and detour, out of sight of any crew.

Guards allowed them into first chamber in silence. Karsden was hit by the wet fishy smell of

the zero g aquarium, with fish in balls of intelligent water floating about for the squid's hunting. The two humans fixed themselves to gimbaled standers, which gave them the illusion of stability before the squid, forward but low in that hypaethral chamber. Colored in the darkness like a continent emerging from the primeval seas, the creature's blunt, two-finned mantle faced them mute, as the eye ignored the terrifyingly crowded debris field the ship had not yet escaped, and gazed at the oceanic planet below.

All around objects ignited, like fireworks announcing the ship's passage. A wave of admiration passed through Karsden, seeing the ship so defended. What had happened off Earth? An enormous field of debris now surrounded the mother planet, nothing functional remaining of the skein that a united globe had at last failed to complete, in effort to cool the earth, and gain free energy in the meantime. The squid's cold fusion powered the ship forward through dreams in smithereens.

As the field shields engaged, and the extraordinarily vivid light show exploded all about, Karsden noted the squid's red-devil husk still facing Earth. And there visibly approaching twisted an object almost certainly too large for the field shields. Turning over slowly in its relatively motionless orbit, nevertheless approaching the Squid at a terrifying speed, came the greater portion of an ancient space station -- extremities broken off, interior long exposed, trailing its own debris field.

"Should our hull be compromised," Gipfel said. "The squid will freeze in its smart bubble instantly. It will be flushed out into the atmosphere of Earth."

"No doubt hitting the South Pacific at an oblique enough angle to survive. Impressive." Perhaps that was its intention. Karsden had never really seen more than the squid's glow in previous attendances. Now against the hull, in its shining orange-green sleeve, the creature appeared as a single, preserved gesture, frozen, pale, hurtling through space.

"Karsden, do you see it?" Gipfel gestured towards the squid. The skin now a pure and creamy white, the mad blue eye looked upon them.

Behind it, the great wreck spectacularly ignited. As the Squid passed on through, the fragments exploded again, like lanterns all around. Karsden felt like a bride. "Yes. I do."