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Our purpose is to garden, as it were, what has survived; not blindly so as to ensure or prevent the dominance of life-forms and their selfish agendas, but to ensure the survival of ourselves and the memory of our ancestors. The true secret of reason is that it isn't all that difficult. Even relative children, for we really are something like the aristocrats of history weak, increasingly effeminate, can understand. What ensures these goals will be the maintenance and production of balanced, human-healthy biosystems. This the Doll said, somewhat drunk. He'd brought along some very rare whiskey that had come from Space via capsule in a yearly time capsule. Deary, who was naturally high, did not partake. Thusly, perhaps, as always, she was exasperated by the doll's unimaginative mouthing of the Founders.

But the whiskey had made him bold. Go on Deary, he said, prove me wrong the, for I can see in your eye that you think I don't understand.

Well then why, she said, herself though she hadn't partaken, now also bold. Bold enough to tell him what she planned? what she really planned to do on this reconnaissance?

What do you mean why?

Why. I mean why? Why preserve ourselves and the memory of our ancestors?

Why? You're serious? Because it's the most reasonable of responses to our existence?

~~Whyxxxxxxx~~ She looked at his hard wooden face, the ridiculous three fingered hands. You call this reasonable? she said.

He intuited what she was thinking about -- like usual, it was uncanny how well they knew one another by now. Hey he said. Don't judge a book by its cover. I must say so far the persona has worked quite well. I'm waiting to see how it will turn out.

I know what you're waiting for, said Deary to the doll. And you can forget about it.

②
When they were far enough away from Cove so that they really were free -- that's right, the Doll thought in the middle of one of the deep soliloquys that come upon you in the deeps, especially when your companion is always ahead of you, you being the type, as the Doll knew he was (did he know?), that's right Doll, you are free. Except youre following Deary as if she were the very freedom of your will. And where is she going? The others at Cove expected certain things -- algae collections, careful acidation reckonings and highly accurate fish counts. They'd done none of it so far. They had passed reef long ago, following the ridges of the Great mountains whose final following off marked the farthest reaches of the Cove's waters. And Deary had collected nothing. It was like she was making fun of his need to follow her.

In the caves when they slept (or sometimes in the makeshift cave he carrued folded in his pack) the Doll had managed some observati. All seemed surprisingly good. The local waters, as Doug had said -- and the Doll had always doubted -- could be improved. Was it because of Cove? Doug -- current Captain -- predictably believed this was the case -- believed that the kelp farming in particular was responsible. He was out there right now in fact, the doll's console told him. Every morning (they kept a daily cycle going at Cove to keep themselves sane) Doug was out there stroking the long brown stalks, disrupting nesting predators and pampering the god damn slimy things. Always making everyone else, even the Doll himself, feel lazy, guilty, and somehow at least in respect to Doug, alienated by his relationship to the Kelp.

Deary, who was in fact Doug's sister, or so the records said, was the only one who didn't feel that way. But of course Deary had always been different.

They werent allowed to speak outside of Cove waters on radio (Doug believed it was raw interference, i. e. interference without ~~any~~ benefit) they were only allowed to listen to music.

3.

Deary found the stash around 5 in the afternoon. And it really was afternoon. She could tell it by the long fingers of light shafting through the plankton laden shallows up at the last heights of the Watts Reef. In a little grotto found via arrow shaped plantings of phosphorescent plants, a dry cave, complete with seaweed sticks (replace what you take on your way home, in a little note said, yellowed with age and nearly distinguishable. Books! Deary rejoiced coming upon the canvas wrapped stack of genuine paper books, old landside printings rebound lovingly by who knows who.

She could see the Doll was not pleased. Why did reading sometimes seem to offend the people around you, Deary wondered, finding a glorious copy of Walter Scot's Redgaubtlet and buzzing the tight dry pages, almost see through they were so thin and compactly printed. Even in a social order that specifically protected, supported and survived as a result of The Right of Reading.

For instance tonight, after the Doll had cooked up some delicious, yes she admitted it, rice noodles and fresh scallops, she was just about lost -- really inhabiting a peculiar green and stony border region where men fished from horseback with spears, and one faced life with wondrous blooming, a youth, she supposed from back when life and what it meant were so much more gentle. Always interested in religion, Deary enjoyed Scott's portrait of the Quaker as a sort of hole in the world.

Knock knock; the Doll's admittedly somewhat cute button eyes blinking

It's not fair, The Doll said.

What's not fair?

Your always reading.

Deary sighed, putting down the book. She was sleepy anyway

4.

They were not allowed to radio, so the Dolls conversations (he was apparently doomed to have them -- and it was a fact that when most of your day every day is spent under water, when your throat can even breathe it, it's as if the ordinary voices gain resonance) concerned many things that would doubtless surprise Deary could she hear them. The vehemence of his argument, he figured, would also astonish her. He imagined her glassy eyes wide with something close to amazement as she realized what could be the white hot fire of his rage at what they'd inherited.

God, it appalled him this so-called survivable settlement under the sea and all it demanded. Reading! Books from another world -- childish impressions of a world not understood. Oh the doll read them, he did indeed. Anything Doug had read, he made sure to have read too. And now on this mad journey he had attached himself to, he was following Deary as she read. He wasn't about to let her out of his sights even there in that most private and personal of her environments. He scoffed rhetorically as he hurried to follow what was now only a thumbsiyed blip in the looming distance out where Watts Reef dropped away. Was she holding on to a dolphin? How could she move so fast, and where the hell for that matter did she thin she was going?

He'd finished Redgauntlet. What a load of rot that book raised into the brain. Jesus H. Christ they were already decimatn the salmon population in, what was it, 1748. And what monsters he and deary would seem to Scott's heroes, coming fin-footed and enslimed from out of the sea. Like something out of Lovecraft, only smaller, not ancient, and easily subdued with musket.

We're not even fucking animals any more, the Doll raged, wooden smile belying the state of the perma-canned interior.

"Doll?" -- It was Deary over radio, she must be in danger!

Did she even need the Doll? Well obviously she did, because frankly she could have lost him long ago. Yet she didn't. When she'd gotten far enough now so that she was where she intended to be -- that is out in the fullness of it, the big deep, near where all the attributes of her social self fell away before the great wonder of the deadened void -- still when it was time to rest she waited for him, waited for his little cave to unfold and hold them there together in the little balanced shell of dryness and warmth. They're lying together during the nights, her naked flukes wrapped around his pulsing wooden torso, and waking up the same way, prying herself off, already craving water, salt and the sea -- emerging again into the wonder while the Doll's breathe-holes whistled in similarly expansive dreams -- or so he told her.

Deary had never felt at home in Cove, this though their little community did everything it could to present itself as symbiotic nourisher of its people's lives. But there were only twenty-four of them (twenty-two) now that she and the doll had made a reare claim on the "right for two to roam." Well, she was here now, near at least to where she longed to be, and she hoped it would have an effect on the doll as well.

Yet evidently, it didn't. The Doll's behavior if anything was growing more desperate, more dangerous, even -- dangerous not only in regard to their survival, there was little left to eat and drink and he still got drunk at least once a day, but also in reagrds to her own aims, which surely demanded something more than patience from those around her, if as was certainly the case with the Doll they chose specifically to accompany Deary on whatever crazy quest she happened to imagine she was on.

Damn it here she was, open armed, open legged naked in fact in the nothingness, even filling it blooming now inside her cold waterlogged heart, and her head was reverberating at the doll. If he wasn't there?

6.

The Doll got spooked first, naturally. He'd lost Deary in the deep and endless darkness, she was just a blip on his console. He'd read accounts of Spacers lost in the immensity. There alone in the Universe, many of them had gone mad. Others were permanently crippled by the force of their physical panic. But how more immense, how more horrible this streaming void, thick with only invisible numbers. No stars to wish upon, just the occasional monsterface deep-dweller and its absurd jaws of pure death. He became dizzy, strangely dizzy, and lest the Bends came on he breathed pure water. He took it hard chest straining to let in the cold and his screams could not sound.

And Deary never knew it. She never cared to wonder.

Oh she waited for him in a warmspot eventually, cocooned up with James Ellroy's Brown's Requiem. She waited to finish a chapter before even looking at him. When she put the book down and looked at him she saw at once, he saw, that something had changed. But not a word of comfort, not a question as to his current state of mind.

Yet that night she drank with him the last of his Kelp brandy, firing up inside him like a rebirth of all he was. And in the pseudo-starry depths of his cave's warm interior she clung against him naked, her body fitting newly familiar with his wooden limbs.

When the horror's coming is inevitable, the Doll coned, the coward comes out on top. He was a new man, or man-thing if you prefer He was now the undead and nothing would intimidate him again. Doug, for instance, Doug could fuck the well off. And Deary hadn't gotten there yet. Deary didn't know if she'd make it at all. But she had been spiralling on the razor's

7.

She had promised Doug when she had set out (the Doll accompanying) not to swim West after Watts Reef. Yet West she swam, towards the sun, the fat sun presumably, that was kind enough to warm these waters even here at this depth.

She found a Dolphin School -- a surprise since multicellular organisms were supposed to be a thing of yesterday, even here so far out. Cove had its share of dolphin visitors, but they were invariably old, depressed, often crazy, and always, without exception, they were alone. Lone solitary wanderers of a defunct sea, in fact she'd modeled herself on one they called Zade -- a rare wandering female. A wanderer between worlds, who had come last time she'd visited Cove bearing if not gifts then at least something like jewelry. A piece of silvery steel, at least as big and long as the Doll's member trailing a barbed three-pronged swivel hook, whose barbs had caught in her blowhole.

Deary had seen Zade first and removed it, heart beating with this first sign of other human life in (how many?) at least seven years. She didn't tell a soul. When she was free of the cursed hook Zade had pressed up against Deary and spoken of the upside down creatures whose islands floated about at will perhaps a week's strong swim towards the colder waters -- out oddly enough where there had never been any land.

But now a school of dolphins -- a pack. One male and his five companions and some tykes bringing up the rear.

She hung on and left, she presumed, the Doll far behind no longer empty, no longer lost, but as one with the sea.

Goodbye, Doll therefore -- such were her thoughts when the nets caught her and the dolphins all.

8.

They had hoisted her up on the aftmost mast and were standing around her wild-eyed, when the Doll surfaced some fifty meters from the pirate trawler. Surface dwellers, men all by the look of it. Hard men willing to go to great lengths for the meat and oil of the all but extinct dolphin.

Great Neptune, the Doll thought drifting casually near the black smoldering vessel.

They had never seen anything like Deary. Surface dwellers were a superstitious lot and it was evident that enough of them were so stunned by her beauty -- silvery scales of her dorsal sparkling rainbows in the naked sun -- that they kept those that wanted to take her, cut her or kill her there at bay.

It's a fucking mermaid, we've got to keep her alive.

She was unconscious, strung up above them, but it seemed she wasn't dead. Oh Deary the Doll thought has he floated, now look what you've gotten into, now that you've swam so far away from Cove. But isn't that right, Doll, he imagined her answering. Isn't that the way it should be for us. What good is our underwater Utopia if there are not those among us who yearn to be free from its presumptions, its condescending Doug-like authority. Let me hang like a flag then for freedom.

Oh no Deary the Doll made silent answer, floating now directly by the stern, like some piece of flotsame.

What the --- ! The crewman focussed on the doll unable to take in what he saw. What the fuck -- revolted, sick, vomiting is sudden horror.

You'll be no one's flag today.

