

The Lighthouse

“Doctor Green,” Captain Wood said, turning in his chair slightly. “Are we seeing this?”

The small, blue submarine tilted, turning around the spire at the bottom of the ocean. The beam of light scanned the base of the ocean, spiraled through the dark, cloudy abyss.

“I...I’m a biologist, Captain,” Doctor Green said, running a hand anxiously through her dark ponytail. “This is beyond what I learned for my doctorate.”

Captain Wood was a stocky man with surprisingly dextrous hands that were as big as bear paws. Ensign Aines, a skinny boy with a buzz cut, turned back to the spire and squinted. He was the youngest in the vessel at twenty-three and eager for adventure. “It looks like a lighthouse.”

The powerful beam of the structure punctuated the dark water. Sharks swam in lazy circles around the spire, the beam of light reflecting off their grey skin. A swarm of minnows passed through the lighthouse beam, glittering like a mirror. The crew deployed the submarine when the ship’s radar had picked up a strange spike on their radar. Ahead of schedule, Captain Wood and Ensign Aines decided to go down and investigate. Doctor Green had come in hopes of getting some pictures of deep-sea life, but now she focused her camera on the structure.

Doctor Green moved towards the front of the submarine, pushed her glasses further up her nose and squinted. “It looks real enough. I don’t know what else it could be besides a lighthouse, even if it is a bit bigger than your standard lighthouse. What’s it doing down here?”

“You think this is where lighthouses go to die...” Aines remarked.

“We’ll take a pass by the tower and have a peek inside,” Captain Green said.

“And hope to see what?” Doctor Green asked. “What’s our best-case scenario here?”

“No idea what to hope for without more information,” Captain Wood said, lightly tapping the controls. “If it’s empty, we can investigate more on the way back. Who knows, Doc? If it’s watertight, maybe you can make this your new laboratory...”

“Maritime salvage laws are pretty unclear about structures,” Aines chuckled. “This could turn into a squatter’s rights issue?”

The submarine banked hard and dove deeper towards the lighthouse. Closer, it was a tower of faded, grey stones stacked in layers. The lights of the submarine peered in through clear windows and shined in what looked like a pleasant 19th-century lighthouse. It was hard to make out, but it seemed to be dry on the inside. Doctor Green raised her camera and took a few pictures as the submarine spiraled up towards the top of the spire. The glass room at the top was a large octagon topped with a cone of reddish-brown tiles. It was difficult to see against the glare, but Captain Wood thought it looked vacant on the inside.

“Well certainly is picturesque,” Aines said, looking at the room. “Gotta wonder what the rent on a place like this would cost if it weren’t for the location...”

“Something moved!” Doctor Green shouted, pointing at the window. “Did you see it?”

“I can’t see anything with that damn light flashing at us every five seconds!” Captain Wood squinted against the bright beam as it skimmed over the front of the submersible. The beam of light rotated away from the submarine and Captain Wood blinked the spots from his eyes. Inside, the glass room a figure moved on two legs. Captain Wood refused to believe it was possible that such a being was human.

The being stepped towards the glass wall, hands on their hips. After the light passed by again, Captain Wood saw the being wave. Doctor Green smiled and waved back, confused by

the exchange. The Lighthouse Keeper walked over to a device, stopped the beam of light, and started flashing a smaller, less intense light at the sub.

“Is that—“ Doctor Green squinted.

“Morse code...” Captain Wood said. “And it’s in English...”

“What do they want?” Aines asked.

“They’re asking the date...” Captain Wood said, looking over his control panel. “Which button controls the headlights?”

“You want to respond?” Aines asked. “That’s kind of against protocol...”

“They already know we’re here.” Captain Wood flipped a few switches. “What’s the point of hiding?” The headlights on the front of the submarine flashed on and off, spelling out a reply in the older language.

“August...” Captain Wood spoke aloud, “3rd...2019...”

There was a moment while the figure digested this information. They started flashing their lights again. “Care to come inside?” Captain Wood translated, surprised. “‘Been...ten years since I had any company.’ Is this guy serious?”

“How are we supposed to get in there?” Doctor Green asked.

“Do we even want to get in there?” Aines said. “We’re talking about going into someone else’s house without knowing who they are.”

“I’m willing to give it a try,” Captain Wood said. He went back to manipulating the headlights. “How...do we...get in?”

The Lighthouse Keeper turned on their light and pointed the lamp downwards. Captain Wood tilted the submarine downwards and saw a large opening at the base of the lighthouse. Captain Wood shrugged. “Guess we should let ourselves in...”

The submarine spiraled around the base of the spire, moving closer to the base of the tower with each circuit. Captain Wood adjusted the angle of the craft and glided the submarine into the entryway. As they entered, the doors closed behind them, making the darkness even darker. Aines audibly swallowed before the chamber started draining water, lowering the submarine. Captain Wood rubbed his chin with one of his big hands. "Let's hope we have a hospitable host..."

The submarine bounced against the floor of the cavern as the last of the water drained. Captain Wood stood and walked up to the overhead hatch. With a few sharp turns, the latch scraped open and the door swung upwards. With his knife in his hand, Captain Wood climbed to the top of the dripping submarine. As Aines followed up, a smaller entryway opened. A young woman rushed out, no older than eighteen. Two, blonde braids touched her waist and her smile surprised Captain Wood.

"About time someone came!" The Lighthouse Keeper laughed. "I've been waiting for someone to come! I can only entertain myself for so long...tell me you heard my distress signal!"

"Distress signal?" Captain Wood asked. "Sorry, we only came here because —"

"Damn it all!" The Lighthouse Keeper cursed. "I knew I should have replaced that terminal module before I ran out of oxygen! Fat lot of good that signal has been doing me if no one can hear it...old piece of junk!"

"What is this place?" Aines asked, helping Doctor Green out of the submarine.

"Sub Spire One," the Lighthouse Keeper said, "it's the bones of an old research station..."

"You've been here for ten years?" Doctor Green asked. "You're still a teenager!"

"Sub-nautical human development was part of our research," the Lighthouse Keeper said.

“Growth under intense ocean pressure, psychological development without sunlight—“

“Social isolation?” Aines muttered. Doctor Green slapped the man’s arm and glared. If the Lighthouse Keeper heard anything, she didn’t respond. She motioned towards the others, leading them into the underwater base. There was an abandoned scuba suit by the door, made of the same stretchy material the Lighthouse Keeper was wearing.

“With water levels rising, my parents got a grant to test livability beneath the surface,” The Lighthouse Keeper said. “Not so bad when you get used to things. Time of day is kinda hard to figure out down here, so I have to go based on what the system reading say and I had to restart it a few times.”

“Did they...leave you here?”

“Uh,” the Lighthouse Keeper fidgeted with her braids. “No? Not on purpose. My parents went up to get supplies from the surface: replacement radio parts, oxygen tanks—“

“How have you been living down here without oxygen?”

“The gardens help a bit,” the Lighthouse Keeper turned a corner. The group entered a large room of fruit trees and green tufts coming up in neat rows from a vegetable bed. “And I have oxygen scrubbers to help cycle out the limited carbon dioxide I make!”

“Where are your parents now?” Doctor Green asked.

The Lighthouse Keeper held herself, rubbing her upper arms. “Gone. Their sub barely made it a hundred feet before— God, it’s all my fault!”

The Lighthouse Keeper ran up the spiraling stairs of the tower. Doctor Green rushed after, followed by Captain Wood. The next level had a free living space, with a table and a few chairs. The next floor was a simple lab with some equipment that seemed clean but went unused for a long time. There were two sets of bunk beds on the next level, each with stuffed

animals tucked beneath the sheets. In the highest room of the lighthouse, Captain Wood saw the Lighthouse Keeper huddled on a small bed. The young woman pressed up against the furthest wall as the beam of light passed overhead. Doctor Green sat on the bed with her. She shivered a little at the doctor's touch, but the Lighthouse Keeper relaxed and wiped her eyes.

"I'm sorry," the Lighthouse Keeper said, holding herself. "I'm afraid I haven't had the chance to process everything. Lots to do and I've kept myself more than busy."

"That's fine...what's your name?"

"Oh!" The young woman laughed. "Carol Winslow...I haven't used it in a while."

"Carol," Doctor Green smiled. "My name is Wendy Green. We're with a research vessel. We can get you back on dry land."

"I don't know if I can," Carol shrugged. She unfolded a little and sat on the edge of the bed. "I was born and raised down here. I've only ever known the base. My mom talked about getting me to the surface one day, but that was only if we could prove I'd be alright. That's half of why she left. If I leave, I don't know what it will do to my body..."

"Well, we can't just leave you here," Captain Wood said. "Doc, could you run some tests?"

"Possibly," Doctor Green said. "I'd have to do some research and—"

"My mom's research is still here!" Carol said. "Copies of it, at least. We can work based on that!"

"Carol, it's gonna take some time," Doctor Green said. "Even with the research, I'm a marine biologist, not a human doctor."

"We could compromise," Captain Wood said. "We could run up and do a resupply and maybe find you a new doctor who could—"

"No, please!" Carol dropped to her knees and grabbed the Captain's leg. "Don't leave me

alone again! Please, I can't take the overwhelming, deep quiet down here! There are days when I'm so lonely it feels like I can't breathe!"

"Hey, Carol!" Doctor Green dropped to her knees and held Carol's shoulders. "It's alright. We're not gonna leave you down here alone."

"Doc," Captain Wood said. "We might not have that option."

"How long would it take you to get to shore and come back with another doctor?"

"Six weeks, maybe?"

"Carol?" Doctor Green asked. "Could two people survive on the supplies you have here?"

"Possibly...it would be some more work, but I've always had plenty to eat. My only concern is the oxygen scrubbers. If the radio equipment gave out, then the other equipment might give out."

"We have a few extra tanks of oxygen onboard the ship," Captain Wood said. "Could get some people down here to do some repairs? Nothing major, but a quick patch job?"

"Food should be fine then," Carol said, doing math in her head. "I've just been worried about the oxygen scrubbers. It sounds like we could stretch everything out a bit longer."

"Doc? You sure you wanna do this? Six weeks is optimistic, it could be six months."

"Give us some emergency supplies," Doctor Green said. "We can survive long enough for you to get a medical doctor down here and check in on Carol. If there's a chance Carol can get up top? We have to try."

"Agreed," Captain Wood said.

"So...you'll stay?" Carol asked, looking at Doctor Green.

"Long enough until we figure out how to get you on the surface," Doctor Green said.

"Looks like we were right. I got a new research station after all."