

Alex NORK



DEADLY
WHITENESS

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Аннотация

After the performance of a military experiment in the Central Atlantic the squadron led by American supercruiser went home. But the disappearance of the vessel detained in place made them return. Something strange and frightful is going on in this region. People vanish, F-16 is brought down, health resort island is completely ruined.

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Алекс Норк

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A Happy Morning

It happened just as it had to happen, but still he got excited. Though he was so sure in advance that without being frightened to endanger his success he bought two crates of champagne before sailing.

Today it will be drunk for his and their common success.

Tuccert thought once again about the champagne which should be sufficient for the officers of the flag-cruiser and for those who will arrive from three other ships. Two dozen for thirty people will certainly be enough.

According to the sea tradition he was first congratulated by the radio-operator. Only after this did he read the order of the Minister of Defense and his congratulations on becoming General.

Let anybody say whatever he likes, pretend to be a modest employee, but he will not pretend, moreover before himself. To enter the ranks of elite officers of a great power with the greatest navy in the world is a tremendous honor. And it is not given for nothing.

He gave twenty five years to the ocean.

As one gives oneself to a friend. Because ocean had always helped him. All victories, all joys were here and not in the studies and research centers. The final results were summed up by the ocean.

So yesterday he summed up the results of long work of Tuccert and his team, scientists, technologists and those on the top of the Navy who did not believe in the project and tried to slow down its movement.

They have won again – he and his ocean.

A happy coincidence – his brother happened to be near on his research ship. Just about a hundred miles from here.

“A happy coincidence is God’s praise deserved by the man”, – their late father used to say.

It is strange that inspite of his experience and education he always feels tiny before the image of his father, a simple hard-working farmer in far-away rural province, preserved in his memory. He had been very religious and hardly read anything besides canonical books, he had not watched films and had watched TV quite rarely. But Tuccert was sure, not only in his childhood, but at present, that father knew everything. Knew not quantitatively, but qualitatively, to the very depth. As the ocean knows everything and about everything.

Tomorrow the squadron will go back, leaving here for remaining final touches of work a little ship. And already in the middle of the day they will cross with Marc, his elder brother.

Five years difference in their childhood had never been an obstacle between them. One of the reasons was that Marc who went through his mother’s death at the age of six thought that his

junior brother suffered most of all the members of his family. He was doomed not to know the real childhood at all.

The two village children had a wonderful fate.

They had always been crazy about the ocean. They saw it in the cinema, in the pictures, on TV. But until Pete was seven and Marc twelve the living ocean was the main attraction for them.

By that time their father could afford to leave his work for a week and take them to Atlantic coast. They came to the hotel late in the evening, that's why they had to wait till morning. But just at the dawn Mark woke up small Pete and both of them, nearly trembling, went to the long-expected meeting.

In the skylight, still without sunshine, the ocean was incredibly enormous and quiet.

Pete suddenly saw, at the distance of half a mile from the shore, a lonely and motionless navy ship with a high deck, exquisitely curved towards water from the bow and the stern. They saw the masts with technical gadgets the function of which was ununderstandable. They also saw the above-mast ovals of fire complexes.

Elegant and fearless master of the ocean was standing peacefully before them. It was as noble as its own silhouette.

He wanted to point out the ship to his brother, but the latter was looking fascinatedly into transparent water spread at their feet: at the stalks of seaweeds, at small fish gliding among them, at the gentle semisphere of a jellyfish, which seemed to breathe, enjoying the quietness near the shore.

It was then that they made their life choice – he and Marc, who has become a very well-known specialist in ocean fauna.

An Uncomrehensible Find

– Marc, something happened with the lads!

Professor heard the engine of their high-speed boat rattling overboard their ship and, having rushed to the deck saw it breaking away and rushing, leaving a foamy tail.

– Sharks?

– Most probably. – His permanent assistant in expeditions Christian pointed in the direction of the boat. – The fellows sailed up far away from the ship and began calling for help.

– Hell, can there be tiger sharks again?! Haven't I said, one should not go up sharply in such cases!

– Don't get nervous, the boat is already in its place.

– The leg may be out of place, Chris! You know it very well yourself. Where is the binocular?!

– Wait, I can see without the binocular... both of them are loading into the boat. Look there, their flippers are flickering in the air.

The boat made a semi-circle and reassured them by returning at low speed.

– Don't scold them too much, Marc, they are just unexperienced students.

The boat approached and has just switched off its engine to come close to the ship and the divers – to open their mouths to make explanations when professor Tuccert snatching at the side

of the ship with his hands was shouting:

– I've told you ten times, no, I've told you twenty times! You can escape the sharks only moving along the bottom. With the frame held vertically. Until you are under the bottom of the ship. There there is a cage. Get into it, and you will be lifted. Isn't it clear? I've told you twenty times, should I tell one hundred and twenty?!

– There aren't any sharks there, Professor, – said one of the divers while he was taking in the air.

Marc Tuccert froze staring at them from up and then asked in a quiet and quite calm voice:

– Why all this circus then?

– If you were in our place, Professor, – said the other diver in an offended tone.

– Thanks a lot, but I would rather stay on mine.

– There is a terrible skeleton at the bottom, – said the first one again, – you will shout if you see such a one in your dream.

– The skeleton of a pirate who is guarding a chest with gold?..
Speak clearly at last!

– We couldn't understand clearly, that's why we decided to sail up. The skeleton belongs to a creature of gigantic size. You should just see its jaw!

– A very clear explanation. Try to preserve this wonderful style up to your future examinations.

Tuccert looked at the smiling Christian.

– Get our aqualungs and camera! You must have remembered

at what distance from the ship they rose to the surface?

One may not have asked. He had long ago stopped to be surprised at the fantastic eyesight and ability of his assistant to judge by eye.

They came back after quite some time.

When the boat moored to the ship the faces of both of them expressed deliberation.

– First of all, – announced the professor climbing up the deck, – I congratulate you on not having recognized the skeleton of a cachalot.

But the reproach, not like usual, did not sound aggressive at all.

– And, secondly, the case is very funny in itself. That’s why I am inviting everybody to the crew’s quarters.

In a few minutes, when the four students were sitting around in polite expectation, Tuccert, having exchanged glances with his assistant, instead of words scratched his bushy wiry beard.

– Well, – after some silence he began at last, – haven’t I said already that the case is quite unusual?

– No, – answered the little trouble-maker who had already tried to be rude in the boat.

– And what have I said?

– Just: “A sort of a cachalot and you are simply making fun!”

– Yes, thank you for being exact. – He again scratched his

beard. – Really, it is very funny, because I and Christian don't understand at all what happened to this gigantic cachalot.

– Gigantic?

– Not less than twenty meters long, – said the assistant. – It is a huge, and that means a very strong male.

– He died of old age and has been lying here for many years? – supposed someone.

– No. – Professor let go of his beard and spoke quickly and energetically. – The skeleton has been picked, and picked, as they say, to bone. This in itself is amazing, and I am going to tell you why. But now about something else: we have examined cartilage chords and interbone ligaments. I can bet that the cachalot was alive at least thirty six hours ago. And besides, cartilages and ligaments show that this animal was in the prime of life.

– What of that? Somebody treated himself to him, – the little rebel interfered again and looked at his watch. – We should also get food regularly. It's time for lunch, by the way.

– Treated oneself? And won't you tell me who is capable of treating himself to cachalots?

– From your impressive lectures I remembered, respected Professor, that cachalots mainly hunt squids, and very large squids can resist and wound a cachalot mortally.

– You are a clever guy, – Chris smiled approvingly. – Only when I was a student of our Professor I remembered also the jaw structure and digestion characteristics of squids.

– Not you alone! I also know that the powerful hook of the

squid has the same strong jaw apparatus with which it beats and tears its victim at the same time. And of course it devoured not the whole cachalot but a small part. The rest was eaten by sharks, and what remained on bones – by other fish.

– And all this within one day? – somebody else interfered.

– What of that, I eat my beefsteak in five minutes.

– Well, if a hundred gluttons like you worked there...

– Be quiet, be quiet! Let us better speak about the sizes, and many things will become clear. Sizes are the main thing here.

– Excuse me, Professor, – one of the students politely asked for a word. – You were yourself telling that judging by the two feet traces of squid's suckers which could be found on the bodies of cachalots in the depths supersquids of the size of two hundred feet are sure to live. Two thirds of this are tentacles. Why couldn't such a giant win over the cachalot?

– It could, moreover we have all the reasons to believe that there are squids in the ocean even of larger sizes. But recollect, where do such giants live? In the depths. Even not the largest specimen forty-fifty feet length rarely come to shallow waters. That's why cachalots hunt them even at the depth of three quarters of a mile. And there he can really himself become the victim of the supergiant.

Professor cast a look at the young people and continued:

– My friends, you have missed the main thing: the fight which takes place in this case. A seventy-tons cachalote is very mobile, and gigantic super-squid – still more so. Their deadly fight lasts

not for a minute. During it they move up and down for hundreds of feet. It is especially important for the victory of the squid.

– And our skeleton is lying just at two hundred, – finished Christian, in the tone which is used with small children, – now you understand, don't you? Such a squid simply has no place for movement here.

– That's clear! – the little rebel cast a contemptuous glance at him and gave the same glance to the professor as well. – It means I am alone among you who remembers the oceanic map of the place. Not far from here there is a two-mile hollow. Isn't it so? It is there that the fight of the cachalot and the squid took place. Then the deadly wounded cachalot dragged his ass here and kicked the bucket for the joy of sharks... Haven't I deserved my beefsteak, Professor?

– You may even take half of mine.

The happy young people rushed to the deck and somebody asked the clever impudent fellow:

– And what will you do if the squid attacks our ship?

– I will spit in its eyes, that's what I will do!

– Marc, do his words seem truthful to you?

– About spitting in his eyes? I don't doubt. And the cachalot could have really sailed here after the fight, but only in case he himself had wounded the squid very seriously. In other case it would not have let it go. But the skeleton, Chris...

– It's too clean, isn't it? I also can't understand it. Of course

the sharks would have come together and teared off the meat in two or three hours but small remnants on the bones are not for their teeth. So small fish could be feeding here for another week.

– That is what is strange!

In the middle of the day they saw the flag cruiser.

Even at the distance of many miles from here, just when the eye could take in its contour, one could understand that something big and very powerful was moving. There is no, and there can be no obstacle in the ocean to this movement, and that even the strongest storm waves will break and disperse in small drops colliding with its sharply curved front.

And in another half-an-hour Professor, having climbed a ladder put just near water, was in the arms of his junior brother.

– My congratulations again, my boy! Very happy for you!

Then he shook hands with a dozen of handsome sun-tanned officers in such elegant and perfectly ironed uniform that one could think that they were getting ready to take part in an expensive television show. And the cruiser itself over which they had a half-an-hour excursion appeared to be a fantastic work of technology.

His brother was showing and explaining...

Invisible under the middle of the stern part defense rocket complex was ready to destroy anything flying in the air in the radius of a few hundred miles.

– Two such cruisers can close the access from air on all

Atlantic or Pacific coast of the country, – said Pete contentedly.

– And how many such cruisers are there all in all?

– At present one, but soon there will be more.

The attacking complex distributed in several parts of the great ship.

– It can destroy completely all strategic objects, well, for example, of Iraq and Syria, altogether. Not only military: electric power stations, bridges – it is sufficient for all this as well.

– Pete, once you already hit an air-raid shelter with children in Iraq.

– And this became a very serious reason for further perfection of exactness. Not a single rocket launched from here will decline from its aim. Don't think, Marc, please, that military men have some different blood flowing in their veins. – The general took his brother's arm and, lowering his voice, said very contentedly: – I will disclose to you a secret. Now after tests which we held not far from here the cruiser has another unique kind of armament. Not a single enemy's submarine can approach to attack us. It will have been discovered in advance, but the main thing, it will be destroyed by a special manned rocket. And that with hundred percent probability, that is for sure.

– Have rockets learned not only to fly but to sail under water?

– They could do it before. But now the submarine cannot escape them.

– Will it be exploded?

– No. Directed attack of the crew with gamma-rays.

Techniques will not suffer, and the people will perish almost immediately.

– As a biologist I am quite pleased to hear this.

– But any submariner, whether Russian or Chinese, would have reacted differently.

– Would he be happy, Pete?

– Don't get excited. Yes, he would be happy, can you imagine it? Death in water is much more terrible than death on land. And it is still more terrible under water. Because in case of a usual defeat the submarine does not perish all at once. The tragedy is that it will not be able to get out of the deep. In many compartments people remain who are alive. I could tell you what those who inspect the raised lost-submarine see, but I won't.

Professor thoughtfully tucked at his beard.

– It is difficult for me to judge, my dear brother, but listening to you one gets an impression that Pentagon will soon get a Noble Prize for humanism and love for mankind. – Suddenly, having thought about something, he raised his head, and his eyes were dark with anger. – And what about the ocean? You were just testing some awful things!

– Don't worry, please. Yes, in the radius of half a mile your fishes have been severely irradiated. But this is much less than a drop in a glass of water. Besides, just remember, your colleagues in the laboratory pitilessly cut up mice and rabbits for experiment. Others doom kind and meek dolphins to captivity in oceanariums. And so on.

– We do it for the sake of... eh...

– Ha! Now let's go to my place. We do our job for the same purpose, I can assure you.

– All right, – said the Professor in a reconciling tone. – So everything is superb here?

– Decidedly everything! This ship is more expensive and more modern than any space program of NASA.

Cabin-saloon of the general also appeared to be superb.

– They could have saved tax-payers' money here, – grumbled the Professor, having examined this “de luxe”.

– Even our sailors have comfortable lodging. Believe me, Marc, in reality there is nothing extra here. People must live in the ocean for months on end. And work with extremely complicated and very dangerous technology. We cannot afford even the slightest psychological tiredness, and moreover, irritation over daily discomforts. – The general pressed some button, and less than in a minute the steward rolled in a cart covered with napkins with plates and champagne in a silver bucket in the middle. – Let us now drink for us. No, – he looked at the photo on the wall, – first, for our father.

Time, it is always short for everything good.

It is already time to part.

– Pete, can't I fill up my ship here. Then I would not, have to drop to some local island port in a week.

– I've got plenty of fuel, but it is not comfortable to pump it from the cruiser. Just twenty miles from here is our small ship. It's continuing some experiments. I'll give an order, they will supply you with fuel.

Then professor waived to his brother from the boat, going back to their modest ship. He started feeling sad.

In his childhood he had never had this feeling. Maybe because he had to help his father all the time, to take care of his younger brother, to study as well as he could to enter the University. And there he had to be among the first, not bothering, due to his scholarship, his already elderly parent.

When did this uncomprehensible sadness start to appear? After his father's death?..

No, if old people go away like this, with clear consciousness, quiet, already prepared for the other world, their death causes quite a different feeling in those around them. Different... something which one sometimes experiences here, in the ocean. It suddenly pierces one with a feeling that life cannot disappear. That the real world is much larger than the one people live in because of habit, clutching at the small pieces of the fleeting, and thus limit themselves foolishly and hopelessly. He also notices such things in himself, and with age this mess of the great and the petty is beginning to bring sadness.

– You are all the time thinking about something, Marc, –

noted Christian when they were finishing their tea in the crew's headquarters. – About this strange skeleton?

– About this too.

– I can't get it out of my head. Do you remember how two years ago we were dragging back to the ocean a female blue whale?

– The one which threw herself to the shore?

– Yes. We dragged her, but then she started dying on approximately the same depth. Sharks ate it up very quickly, but then we could watch for six days different small fish which sailed there. And how many new data we got, what wonderful specimen we managed to catch.

– Add here, Chris, that the female was much smaller than the cachalot, – added the professor rather absent-mindedly. – And it would be interesting to see the squid who could manage to kill it.

His assistant shrugged his shoulders not very happily:

– No, Mark, you are still thinking about something else.

Deadly Whiteness

Night is not the best time for moving in the ocean on a ship like theirs, that's why Tuccert decided to move further tomorrow. And first of all – to approach the military ship which will complete filling them with fuel.

But the impudent fellow who was on night duty decided in his own way. At dawn, when everybody will be still sleeping he will himself lead the ship according to the coordinates marked in the journal. This is a good chance to have practice. Let them get angry and shout afterwards. It is always pleasant to watch people get back before his cool-headedness. And this crank of a Professor first of all.

That's why just when the night darkness began to disappear he started the noiseless engine and stood at the wheel.

He calculated that it was a little more than an hour's way to the military ship. It means, people will not get awakened by that time. He wondered if he would be able to find the exact place according to the coordinates pointed out.

Less than in an hour the young man was nearly enraptured with joy – in the light, pre-morning ocean the ship could be seen straight ahead. Wasn't it great! Now it was just about fifteen minutes' way to it...

The ship appeared to be so-so; its sides were higher, but the size – not much bigger than their own.

When there were some three hundred feet left a sailor appeared at the deck of the military ship and waived his arms in greeting. And when the distance was twice smaller he could be seen already quite clearly and made a sign to moor to their closest side.

The impudent young man was a little at a loss, because he had never moored, moreover, not to the pier, but straight in the ocean.

But, having reduced the speed to the minimum, he decided that he would try anyway. And having turned the steering-wheel to move side by side came out to the deck to prepare the mooring end.

He had already bent to the rope folded in the figure of eight, but suddenly everything raised, and the site at which he was heeled sharply upwards. The impudent fellow lost his balance and fell on his back, having hurt his shoulder painfully.

– What the hell is this?! – he just said but felt at once that the deck returned to the correct position.

Having stood up he again was quite perplexed.

It seemed that the wave which had hit their ship, was holding them, because the end of the mast of the navy ship appeared at the same level with his eyes.

No... the mast has just disappeared and their light ship was dragged by the stern towards a large screw-shaped crater...

Professor was not too frightened by the wave which had shaken their ship because everything got stabilized again. Such things happen, solitary waves sometimes appear from nowhere.

But the wave was not important, at least not squally.

The morning light could be seen in the porthole and he wanted to look at the clock when a heart-rending shriek was heard at the deck.

In two seconds professor, who had rushed to the deck, collided with Christian. The latter moved him from the way and rushed to the deck cabin. And almost at once the engine started working with all its power.

All the rest also appeared on the deck, almost naked.

– What happened, Professor? What?

– I don't understand myself! – he went into the deck-house where Christian was already standing at the steering-wheel.

– Can you explain to me what is happening?

– Let us get away from here, Marc! To the shallow waters!

Order everybody to get to crew's quarters! At once!

Tuccert, still not understanding, ordered the fellows not to come out of the crew's quarters and only now noticed that there were three of them, not four.

– And where is our watchman, Chris? – having fully awakened from his sleep and ununderstandable mess he asked. – And whom are we running from? My God, what's happened to you? Your face looks like white paper.

His assistant made an effort, overcoming a lump in his throat, and than spoke in an unnaturally distinct voice:

– Marc, the lad is already dead.

– What have you said?!

– An albino squid. A giant tentacle... raised over the ship and licked him like a speck of dust.

– Are you in your right mind?

– Almost. Though one can get crazy of such horror. Our ship is like a grain for such a creature.

– Get away from the wheel!

– What?

– Get away from the wheel at once!

– Marc, if we do not move to shallow waters as soon as possible...

– Get to the boat with the lads and rush there at full speed.

– Listen, it is impossible to save him! I can bet, he perished in the moment when the tentacle got him.

– And I bet I will kill you if you do not obey my order!

When the boat rattled Tuccert had already replaced the steering-wheel and turned the ship in the opposite direction. “That’s good, – he thought, – at such speed they will soon get not only to shallow waters but to the nearest islands. I wish I had learned more from Chris. A giant squid? What was it actually?”

The door of the deck cabin was suddenly opened.

– Everything is all right, Marc. I’ve sent them.

– Chris! What the... Why have you stayed?

The latter looked at the panel with the clock and compass.

– Take a little to the right... In four minutes we’ll be in the place again.

Tuccert suddenly felt burning shame. How could he let himself speak in such a tone with his best and most devoted student in his life a few minutes ago? In reality he insulted him accusing him of cowardice. Insulted the man devoted to him, with whom, if one remembered the fifteen years of their joint work, they went through a lot of difficulties. He reproached him with faint-heartedness for the attempt to save the rest of the crew.

– You, well – said the professor in a low voice, – tell me, please, what could you notice?

– It was just a second and a half, Marc. I rushed out just a little earlier than you. The lad was standing at the fodder as though looking into the water. And at once... in about eighty feet from the fodder the ocean foamed up in a stream as though a huge geyser started working and then a huge white tentacle rose in the air. Of fantastic size, Marc.

– Try to remember the size.

– Diameter near water... not less than ten feet.

Professor shuddered.

– And that end which rushed from the height and seized the lad was about four feet. It squeezed him across his body, so only his head and legs could be seen. It again arched up, and all this disappeared under water with an unnatural speed.

– Chris, if the tentacle has ten feet in diameter, the whole length of the squid must be not less than six hundred feet. This follows from its anatomical structure, – professor shook his head. – I can't imagine anything like that.

– Though it is you who are the author of the theory about gigantic marine invertebrates which are hidden from us.

– But I haven't prepared myself for a meeting with one, as you can see.

– I don't want to frighten both of us, Marc, but I didn't mean that the tentacle's diameter was ten feet at its basis.

– I don't understand, what do you mean?

– The basis is the body. But nothing like that appeared near water. It seemed that the tentacle was coming out somewhere from the depth.

– It means that it is just its intermediary length?

– It looks so. Put out the engine, we are at the place.

– Whatever will be, will be! – Professor took his binoculars out of the case and went out to the deck. – One should see everything, Chris, and I pray God that he should help our boy.

Low sloping waves were opening the vast expanse of the ocean's surface...

Everything was empty.

They covered another mile. Then they circled around looking into the water... And strange though it was they have never felt danger for themselves.

– You know, Marc, I just cannot digest what has happened. I am all the time catching myself at the thought that nothing happened in reality. My mind does not want to accept it as reality. It seems to me we shall soon come back, and our lad will be there, among other fellows...

Professor looked in the face of his assistant, and he did not like something in it.

– Go to my cabin, Chris, there is a bottle of brandy in the cupboard there.

– I don't want brandy.

– Neither do I, but still go there.

He came back to the deck cabin and, having launched the engine at full speed, got to the reverse motion.

– This is good brandy! – When the bottle appeared Tuccert said in a voice which was not to be contradicted. – Pour out half a glass at once for you and me.

– I don't know why, I cannot feel the taste, – announced Christian, having drunk his portion.

– You understand yourself, my dear, what the switching off of taste receptors means.

– Stress?

– Strong stress. And in order to overcome it you should not allow what you saw to hide in your subconscious, otherwise it will transform into a nightmare. Think about what has happened as a reality. If possible, try to remember the details in cold blood.

– It looks, headache has gone, – said the assistant in five minutes. – And as to the details... Yes, white colour, I would even say, milky-white. And something else, there were no suckers there.

– You might not have paid attention.

– Might have... though not likely. I think they were not there.

– You are saying there were no signs of the body near the surface?

– Nothing at all.

– Then how could the squid direct his tentacle? Of course he saw our ship from below, but how could he direct it at the man? You are saying it shot upwards vertically?

– Just so.

– It means the creature was down and not somewhere at the side. Maybe it was by chance? The squid was simply circling around with his tentacle?

– It was not circling around. I swear to you, Mark, it swooped at the lad like a hawk who is flying at his aim.

– It is strange... Squids are rather dumb, and his tentacles have only rough sensitivity to mechanical irritants.

– Look here, we have not paid attention, – the assistant pointed his finger at the ship journal. – It is opened at the page with the coordinates of the military ship. That's why we happened to be so far from shallow waters.

– Did he bring the ship here while we were asleep?

– According to this, this was just that.

– Then why did not we see these military fellows? Everything around is empty up to horizon.

Suddenly radio started working. Tuccert responded and at once heard a polite voice. The officer on duty of the cruiser was speaking.

– Good morning, Sir. Have you met our ship for refueling? They are not answering our call sign, and you seem to be somewhere near?

Professor was silent for a while, thinking over the best answer.

– You see, we appeared at the same place, but we have not found your ship. Besides, something happened here, and I would like to talk to Pete.

– Excuse me, Sir?

– Yes, with General Tuccert, of course.

It looked his interlocutor hesitated.

– Night duty is finishing only in twenty minutes. Excuse me, Sir, but I cannot wake up the commander of the squadron without sufficient reason.

– Well, O.K. But report to him about me as soon as he wakes up.

– In twenty minutes exactly, Sir.

– Their ship, Christian, is not answering the call sign.

– The things are lousy, Marc. How much can a six hundred feet squid weigh?

Professor thought for a while and frowned his eyebrows somberly.

– Yes, at least more than a light ship.

In twenty two minutes he heard his brother's voice.

– What's happened, Marc? And haven't you really found our ship yet according to the coordinates?

– I would not like to upset you, but it's quite possible that it had the same fate as one of my crew members.

– That is?

– An attack of a six hundred feet squid, Pete.

– Isn't it a slip of the tongue?

– Unfortunately, no. My assistant managed to see only one of his tentacles. The rest is the matter of simple calculations.

His brother was silent for a while...

– Where are you now, Marc?

– I'll be in shallow waters soon. Don't worry, it is safe there.

– A reconnaissance fighter will fly to your region soon. It will be there in fifteen minutes. It means, I will soon get the information of the inspection from air and will communicate with you again.

– Please, let it better not fly low.

– Will two miles height be all right?

– Quite.

An Unexpected Turn

The general ordered to transfer the connection with the pilot to the main command post and took his place there himself in fifteen minutes, having had enough time to shave.

– Came out to the sector. – It could be heard by communication. – Beginning to fly around.

Later the pilot reported the situation every thirty or forty seconds, as it was supposed to be.

The situation was sad. There ship was no to be found. Alongside with it, the borders of the sector were selected in such a way that the ship could not cross them in the time passed after the latest communication, even if it had put forward such a foolish task.

– Flying round is finished, – it was heard ultimately in the end, and it was something which one did not want to hear at all.

– Let him return, – ordered the general somberly.

He sat for another minute in the armchair and when he wanted to get up he heard the excited voice of the pilot:

– I've been attacked! Attacked, but I do not see the enemy. Two holes in the wing!

Pete Tuccert reacted at once:

– Get back to the coastal line!! – he shouted in such a voice that the officer on duty did not have to repeat it in the air.

– Yes, Sir, to the coastal line.

The general himself got connected to the pilot.

– Fire on board?

– No fire. But the wing is becoming bare.

This term, maybe funny for the civilians, means a very fast approaching disaster. The damaged metal on the frame is becoming to get torn by the air streams. The rest, according to the type of the aircraft, is a matter of a minute or ten seconds.

– Is it tearing strongly?

– Middling...now, already strongly.

– Catapult!

– Can hold on for a while.

– At once!

He knew what every second could bring with it. Pilots get nervous and miss the moment when the aircraft, losing at once its aerodynamics, starts flying down, circling and whirling. And the catapult saves rarely in these cases: the pilot dies having hit his own wing, or he is covered by the machine falling from up.

But thank God! The signal of the working catapult has already sounded.

The rest of the orders took no more than a minute. He had only, having declared the general alarm, to call the number of commands known to each subdivision.

Two fighters on battle duty flew into the air in ten seconds,

and in one and a half minutes four other battle machines followed them. These six were to block the sector from the air and, having discovered the enemy, hit the target. Straight after them a rescue hydroplane followed to pick up the catapulted pilot. These were standard measures. And now their innovation – launching a rocket from the side of a ship. It will reach the given coordinates already in two minutes and in the middle of the sector at the height of five miles a parachute with a minilocator station will hang down. The parachute will not lower down, because the station has a vertical motor unit. It will start to transmit everything here, looking not only through air, but water, at the depth of a mile, that is the depth lower than which modern submarines cannot go. The one who attacked the aircraft, thus, is sure to be found. He will have no time to leave the sector.

The cruiser and three other ships already turned in the opposite direction and were sailing at full speed.

But who could, who could dare to to attack a fighter of the US navy? What kind of weapon was it? Hit at the height of two miles... The pilot did not record an explosion of an anti-aircraft missile the splinters of which could do it. Then what? And where from? The pilot would have seen any ship when flying around. It means, from a submarine. And the volley has been made from under water. Whose submarine? The Chinese, the Russians'?

North Atlantic allies were warned about the tests in this region, his own people – more so. What follows is that it was not a chance mistaken volley.

The general gave one more command, having ordered the fastest of the three ships to follow the coordinates of the downfall of the aircraft. They were lucky, it fell down near the coastal line. It will not be difficult to lift it.

Quiet Shallow Waters

They managed to find the boat with the lads quite soon. Because they have taken the only correct decision: at the place of the unique find, where the day before yesterday the skeleton of a cachalot was discovered, a buoy was set up, and they guesses that it was the best to loiter around that place.

The news about the terrible death of their comrade shocked all the three.

– In the present conditions I am obliged to stop our research work and get you at once to the nearest port, – Marc Tuccert announced to them. – You must not stay in such a dangerous neighbourhood.

– And you, Professor, can you?

– I do not know still what I shall do myself, but judging by the unusual size of the squid it will not be difficult for it to overturn and drown a ship like ours.

– But why has it not done it but just attacked a man?

– Maybe because he was busy with other catch under water.

– With a military ship, – explained Christian, – which was to be in that very place.

– And before this the squid finished up the cachalot?

Professor thought for a long time. Everyone became silent watching his fingers tuck at his wiry beard too nervously.

– Everything is too unclear, – he said at last. – Too much!

Even for me it is too difficult to believe in such gigantic size of the squid.

– If he is an albino it means that it lived at a very great depth, – one of his students dared to suppose. – But something drove it away from there.

– This is not the point! – Tuccert frowned, irritated. – I don't understand, first of all, how such tentacles could let go of the cachalot from the depth. For them it is just a toy. But the main thing is something else. The jaw hook of this giant must be no less than thirty feet, and its blows can be compared to the force of an enormous industrial press. But the skeleton is intact. Not a single broken bone, not a single dislocated part due to fantastic squeezing by the tentacles. – Professor let go of his beard and spread his hands almost angrily. – I don't understand!

– Besides, – Christian reminded, – I have not seen the suckers on the tentacle.

– Why can't it be some unknown deep water species, Professor?

– Because everything which acquires quite specific qualities not characteristic of other individuals is already not species! – he kept silent for some time and added gloomily: – It is another animal.

– Do you want to say that it is not a squid at all? – asked the assistant.

– Yes, one can't exclude it.

In half an hour they entered the bay of a small resort island

and tied up at the pier.

It was strange that with all this nightmare having happened he was feeling hungry. But of course, they did not have breakfast, plus the brandy...

But nobody mentioned breakfast, and the lads were looking at him as though awaiting new explanations.

They sat down in gloomy silence under the bow tent into folding cloth chairs.

– We have examined everything there, – said Tuccert guiltily, – only water was around...

– Do not torture yourself, Professor, – said one of the students consoling him, – you are not to blame.

– Besides, he took the ship to the ocean himself, – supported someone else, – what did he need it for?

– “When a man suddenly perishes in the world”, my father used to say, “it means there is something wrong with this world”, – he answered sadly.

And, after a short silence, spoke again:

– I don't know if I have the right to let out the information known to me... in any way, I did not sign up anything. Well, just recently in this region military men conducted experiments: gamma-irradiation at the depth. And I suspect that by this they troubled and brought in an aggressive state someone who would never think of sailing to the surface.

– May I ask a question, Professor?

Tuccert nodded.

– It is known that gamma-irradiation is deadly for man, but can cause growth and mutations of primitive organisms.

– They can, but not in such short time. If we were speaking about plants or microorganisms, then yes, the effects can be seen quickly there. But squids are not primitive at all, this is the first point. Secondly, if we mean the mutation mentioned, its basis is the following. – Suddenly he stopped and looked at his assistant. – Christian, you know all this very well, that's why look after breakfast. We haven't eaten anything yet.

Three pairs of eyes stared at him in expectation.

– Well, colleagues, mutation is often equaled to regeneration of cells and structures consisting of them. It is only partly so, because one should be very attentive and cautious towards the word «regeneration». It means transformation from one state to another. Do you understand me? One should at once make a conclusion that another state is in principle made possible by nature for the given species of animals. In other words, the natural potential of any organism is much wider than what has been concretely formed. Why? Because in the process of evolution all living beings tried to get the maximum safety margin. Otherwise there would have been no evolution. – Professor raised his finger. – This is the most important point, and I will explain it now. Imagine that a man has ideally tuned himself to one and only situation. What, I am asking you, does that mean?

– Well... – there was an indefinite answer.

– It means – he subjugated all his resources to it rigidly, – said Christian, going towards crew’s quarters. – And he won’t be able to adapt himself if the situation changes a little.

– Thank you, but do not get distracted from cooking.

– The stomach is like the one of a hungry shark, – a pitiful voice supported the professor.

– But the blood does not flow from the head, – he consoled. – Well, friends, listen attentively further. Primitive theory of evolution thinks this way: the one conquers in nature who is adapted to today’s circumstances better than the rest. It is nonsense. It means he would be the first to perish during their frequent changes. And hence follows, accordingly, that it is not profitable to adjust as much as possible to concrete circumstances, that is, to give all the strength to this task. But what is then profitable?.. Two things: proceeding from the given conditions of life to percept its main contents, and not the details, directing maximum strength at the answer to all possible changes of the details. In other words, only the minimum strength is directed to the necessary present moment survival and maximum for the readiness for the changes of the situation. The one who follows this principle preserves himself the best in the animal world.

– Excuse me, Professor, can we say like this: nature makes the living being give away its resources for the programming of the situations, making stronger the one who looks aside?

– Not just can, but must say like that.

– But you have mentioned some second point...

– Yes. And you will not find it in Darwin's works, moreover in the works of his not too intelligent followers. The second point is the collectivity of survival of any definite species. Even the man – a very young creature compared to any species of oceanic fauna – is guided first of all by collective motives of survival. All wars which have ever taken place were caused by ethnic or macrogroup social interests. And if a "middling man" did not put them subconsciously higher than personal ones no war would have taken place. But the man, as I hope you understand, has not quite proved his evolutionary stability yet. It is not clear whether we shall exist in thirty or forty thousand years, but it is clear that in this very ocean the same squids, sea-urchins, jellyfish will exist... What do we know at present about their program potential and collective methods of survival stored in them?.. Now, going back to mutation: this is just switching over to one of other programs which corresponds to new conditions better. But however did the Colorado bug, for instance, mutate, he still remains a bug, and you can be sure, he will not get transformed into a rain worm.

– But why can't we suppose that the mutation of the squid has led to its losing his hook and jaw apparatus and acquired instead of that a huge sucking hole.

– You mean that now he can swallow the food alive and digest it till only skeleton remains? I am not against most fantastic suppositions, and the same thought, I confess, came to my head

too. But it was not difficult to make some calculations in my mind. We cannot go beyond the main and fundamental biological laws. For example, the speed of certain chemical reactions. It has its limiting constants. The same, in their own way, as the speed of light. The military men conducted their first radiation here just eight days ago. Transformation of living structures could have begun at once. But even according to boldest calculations it is a funny term for the squid to change its supersolid and superfirm jaw apparatus and the chemical complex of digestion system. These are not those wonders in which one should believe.

– Maybe my question is not very competent, – began one of the students cautiously, – but was the difference noticed between one organism subject to radiation and a group of them? I am asking it in connection with your words about collective survival.

– A wonderful question, my boy! Unfortunately, it has been studied very little still. But the problem you formulated is one of the most important. Imagine that a man appeared alone in a burning house. What will he do? Simply save himself, run away. Everyone will have this program working in him. And if there is a big group of healthy strong men in the house? They will undertake quite different actions: begin to extinguish fire, save the belongings. Moreover, interacting they will launch several different programs: somebody will bring water, somebody will take the fire away from curtains, take away the furniture which has not caught fire yet, and so on. That is, the program of escape will not work at all, and instead of it there will be a complex

of several functional links. Something like that may happen with a big group of similar organisms. But the difficulty is that the unexpected laboratory conditions should really put into action one of potential programs of collective action. What experiment and in regard of what organisms is it better to conduct? Alas, it is very difficult to plan such investigations.

– If one follows the suggested logic, Professor, squids are very old creatures on the planet. They used to exist in the epoch of ichthyosaurs. Nature has changed since then, but the squids stood it. It means they have a great inner potential. Why could it not respond to stiff gamma-rays?

Professor nodded, agreeing reluctantly:

– I do not state categorically that the squid failed to transform. But then we should make a conclusion that we know almost nothing about the genuine speeds of biological reactions.

– And why – not? Einstein's theory of relativity is also doubted by some scientists.

– Let it be so. But we know very little about sea depths. Who could be preserved there besides the squid?

– I've got everything ready, – declared Christian putting his head out of crew's quarters.

The Search for the Enemy

Already in the first minutes of its work the location system established with the help of missile launching signaled the sector. Zero! No objects!

General Tuccert did not expect this at all.

And, strictly speaking, he had to make only two conclusions: the fighter was attacked not from water but from air. And the plane which had attacked it was invisible of “stealth” type because radar installation on the fighter controlling surrounding space did not respond. And the second: the enemy submarine could go down at the depth of more than a mile. But there have never been any data in the intelligent services of the country about the existence of such military technology and even of their projects in Russia or in China.

As such there are more than enough means of immersion to big depths in the world. Only this is purely research technology. They are very heavy because of the thickness of their body meant to sustain big pressures, slow and unable to maneuver, but the main thing is that they cannot surmount large ocean spaces independently. More so with armaments on board, which can aim exactly from under water at a modern fast fighter plane. But where could this slow moving vessel go? And that taking into account that the enemy has no military bases nearby. As to fighting submarines, their depth limit is a little over half a mile.

He reported everything to Navy headquarters. There they were also perplexed and confirmed: there are no large ships of the enemy which could be the means of transporting the deep-water submarine in the radius of several hundred miles from here. They asked what help was required.

He did not know it himself.

A ship and a deck fighter have been lost. Just like that, without any signs of the enemy.

Mark also told some terrible things about six hundred feet squid. Does it mean that its length is just a little less than that of the cruiser?.. It is difficult to believe, though its weight ought to be a hundred times less than the cruiser's, anyway.

His brother is simply in panics, no doubt. It is clear, their small military ship became the victim of the same aggressor as the airplane. Military ships are always battened down safely. And no squid can drag such a ship under water. Because the resistance here is caused not by weight but by the tonnage. But anyway, there is too much abnormal in everything happening.

Pete Tuccert looked at the photo of his father, as though expecting help. It is strange... sometimes it seems to him that father looks from the photo kindly and even caringly, and sometimes like now, like in their childhood, when he and his brother happened to be guilty of something.

Only one thing is consoling: now it is only eight o'clock in the morning, in seven and a half hours they will be at the place, and there will still be enough daylight to look into the things.

He got a report that the catapulted pilot had already been found and the hydroplane which had picked him up was on the way back.

In half an hour the pilot was brought.

The general knew already that he was an experienced pilot who had flown a lot, and actually there were no novices on the cruiser.

– Sit down, Captain. How are you?

– Quite normal.

– There is no “quite normal” after catapulting. You will go to the doctors all the same, but first tell me everything in order.

– During flying around, as I reported, nothing was found, except a small ship that was moving towards the coastline. But I was warned that it was known about it.

– Yes, a research ship.

– Having got a command to return I turned around and flew back.

– Where were you at the moment of the attack?

– Approximately at the place where these arched for ship was to be according to the coordinates.

– Go on.

– I felt a side blow and spontaneous bank to the left. I looked at the right wing. There were two lacerated holes at the distance of a foot from each other. It looked as though I had been attacked by a large-caliber machine-gun.

– From below or from up?

– Definitely from below. It could be seen by the bank of the machine, and by the metal characteristically damaged in the places of the attack.

– They could not fire from water, Captain, could they? The fighter has too high a speed to attack it from a machine-gun, and that at the height of two miles.

– Very unlikely, Sir.

– Then it could only be another plane which attacked you somewhere from below, from the side of the fuselage.

– Will you allow me to speak out my opinion, Sir.

– Yes, I am listening.

– It could only be invisible stealth, otherwise my radar would have discovered it.

– Certainly.

– I can't understand, Sir, then he would have completely destroyed my wing. I know the technical data of the enemy's planes and their shooting equipment. Simple machine guns have long gone into the past being not effective enough. During the last ten years they have not been used either by the Russians or by the Chinese. They have been preserved only at the old models which can't be modern "stealth".

The general nodded in agreement.

– And one more consideration, Sir, – said the pilot somewhat hesitantly. – If the holes had been made by splinters of a missile "air-to-air"...

– I know, Captain, your board radar would not have recorded

“stealth” itself, but would have certainly recorded a rocket launched by it.

– Just so, Sir.

– We’ll find out what it is! – encouraging himself more than the pilot said Tuccert. – Soon your fighter will be lifted, and the expertise will show what kind of holes there are in the wing.

In an hour the general, having thought over everything again, ordered to connect him to his brother.

– Where are you?

– In the bay, – professor called a small island. – I am standing near the pier moored.

– And I am going back. To the place where our ship disappeared, where our fighter was shot by someone unknown and where, in addition to all that, as you claim, there lives some fantastic animal. You must not sail to the ocean on your old tub, Marc, that’s why I invite you to be a guest on my cruiser, and I will soon deal with all submarine villains at once.

– With pleasure, Pete. Moreover, I would like to share some ideas with you, but I would not like to do it in the air.

– That’s all right, I’ll soon send a hydroplane for you.

It is Still “Far till Evening”

– Listen, Chris, the lads will have to be sent home. And you will wait for me here and look after the ship. I request you not to sail into the ocean.

– Marc, why shouldn't I work in shallow waters? I could do something alone according to our research plan.

– It is dangerous, think yourself. That whom we think to be a squid is too strong.

– Listen, but judging by the words of your brother it is already clear that the military ship perished as a result of somebody's diversion and not because of a sea beast.

– And what about the tentacle which you saw?

– But it did not attack the ship, it selected a man.

– Is it not enough for you? Besides, I suspect that this giant is able to act in shallow waters. That skeleton, Chris. We have not found a clear explanation for it.

– Though the skeleton is lying in shallow waters, but just at the edge of a hollow. Most probably, the giant, having digested the food, threw it out somewhere not far away to the surface. You know, there is a strong current to the shore, and before the skeleton sunk it was brought into shallow waters.

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