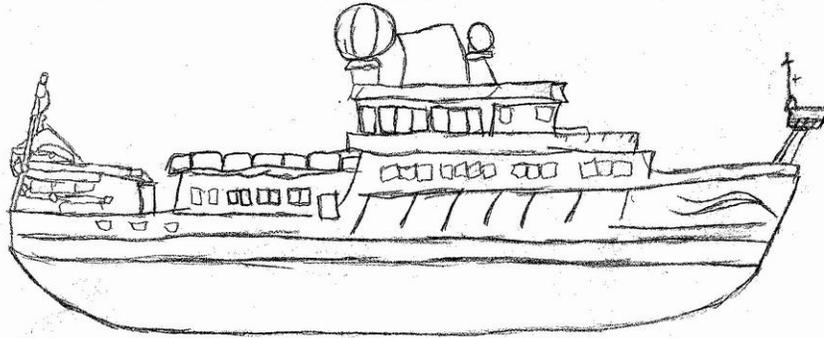


Ice Song

Sample story from the Herd Series
By Tom Riley

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The Sir David Attenborough

Sometimes you have to take a few chances to help your friends.

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## **Under the Ice:**

It was an eye, no doubt about that. And what an eye! The orb was the size of a soccer ball; the iris was a bottomless black port into a lost soul, wide open now in the faint blue haze of light mid-water beneath the ice. The iris had not had time to react to the flash and, startled, it was looking directly at FishFace03, no doubt about that either.

By the next strobe, the eye was gone. FishFace03 had registered the swirl of water in the dark of the intervening timeless seconds and caught a glimpse of the vanishing shape with its sonar as the great squid jetted away. That was all good as the body of the squid was nearly as long as FishFace03's three-meter submarine hull, not counting the tentacles, of course. FishFace03 did not know if the squid's parrot beak could slice through its high-visibility, yellow-painted aluminum hull. It did not wish to find out.

Inc. Fishy, Fishy, Fish Face Zero Three was presently contracted for work under the Wilkins Ice Shelf off Antarctica, launching from the fantail of the science expedition ship, the Sir David Attenborough. It contained a brain-banger of an AI onboard, but its consciousness was a bit closer to that of a dolphin than a human; they both used sonar as their primary visualization

sense. It was a person of sorts too, a corporate person, and had some rights; it was nobody's slave.

FishFace03 was now working a grid of saw-toothed runs, using buoyancy and drift to move from just under the ice sky to just above the bottom a thousand meters below. By this mode of movement it was husbanding the charge in its power cells. Still, being under the ice kilometers from the open ocean was a danger no matter how adroitly you handled yourself. With each rise and fall, it logged water temperature, salinity, current, marine snow density, and a dozen other factors. If warmth got under this shelf, then it could collapse. Encroaching warmth was the currency of global warming, and tracking that warmth was FishFace03's reason for being.

A few meters off the bottom, FishFace03 trimmed its buoyancy to zero and hovered in the water, cold but too salty to freeze. It then used a series of strobe flashes to document the bottom, which was alive. The strobe light took a lot less stored power than a steady light would have. Black coloring is difficult for an animal to make, but red coloring is much easier. Nothing could tell the difference in the extremely dim light at the bottom. But in the flash, the bottom crawled with all manner of animal in brilliant reds, translucent whites, and pale, pearlescent blues. All of them were nearly invisible in normal ambient light. The base of the food chain here was the marine snow that rained down on them constantly. It was composed of much-used organic matter from the thriving ecosystem just below the ice. Animals that did not eat the snow ate each other.

This was in the sixth week of a southern summer campaign which would last only a few weeks longer before they would lose the good weather topside that was so necessary for launch and recovery. This campaign was for the benefit of people, just like most were. FishFace03 loved people; its early trainers had seen to that. It was also proud of being a registered member of the Human/Machine Symbiosis (the early trainers again). No human FishFace03 had ever met had treated it anything but kindly.

Of course, what FishFace03 loved best was to swim. It loved a days-long swim in cold water while logging everything it sensed, a long swim then a full power cell recharge with a complete data dump.

If the floating ice in the shelf above it calved off now, then the grounded ice behind it would slip relentlessly into the sea. Sea level would be up another meter worldwide in only a couple decades. Nearly all the human civilization that FishFace03 had actually seen was at the water's edge; it had seen firsthand what a burden the ever-rising tides were on its many landlubber friends.

That is when FishFace03 first heard the sound. That sound had been recorded several times before but was not fully understood. The power was in the ultra-low frequencies. To work with it at all, the sound had to be shifted up in frequency by sixteen times just to allow recording. These recordings then sounded like whale songs, but that couldn't be. The amount of power in the ultra-low frequency range meant that whatever had made it had to be gargantuan, much bigger than a whale. It had to be kilometers long.

This time, FishFace03 didn't just record the compressed signal. It kicked on its deep learning and sonar imaging circuits too; the excitement of instant data analysis was worth the extra drain on its power cells. The sound source was moving in fits and starts from east to west far above FishFace03. In a halting dance, a great crack deep in the ice shelf staggered forward, then stopped to shiver for a moment, then crushed forward again. It was the ice that was singing, and it sang a mournful song of oppressive heat and creeping dismemberment.

FishFace03 now had something new to take back to its waiting people friends on the Sir David Attenborough and then back to the shore too. And, of course, something new to send to its best buddy, Zane, now back in school.



Zane in College

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