

The Guardians

by

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The Guardians

On its surface the blue sea mirrored a cloudless sky, yet within shimmered startling hues of flora and fauna. Graceful fronds enticed wandering fish into their lairs, weaving green into bright yellows, oranges and blue. Here and there, pink coral glistened as sunlight penetrated lapping shallows, and waves could be heard washing unsuspectingly over the stones.

The scout's progress through the water was unobtrusive. Scarcely an eddy disturbed the latent brine. He listened attentively to the symphony of the sea; the coarse rasp of croaker fish, the roar of retreating waves and the repeated smacks and plops which were part of the living ocean.

Although fascinating, these sights and sounds did not distract him; his investigation was not prompted by mere curiosity. Food had been scarce for many weeks and, after much discussion, the elders had sent their scouts to seek fresh pastures. It had fallen to him to go before; to search for unexplored hunting grounds. So, recording every detail, he turned his head from side to side, listening for returning echoes.

He squinted through the milky gloom. Ahead loomed the multicoloured coral reef with its blue sea fans, where hogfish and snappers swam through its candelabra of branches. Pausing for a moment, he gazed impassively at a hermit crab, scavenging among the polyps, then recoiled at the waving pincers of the boxer.

The sea was no stranger to him, he had enjoyed its freedom for as long as he could remember and, times without number, had been faced with that unexpected element which might prove fatal. Within his blood ran the thrill of the hunter-hunted which had become their way of life.

Leaving its florid inhabitants basking in the sun-dappled waters of the reef, he resurfaced for air and took stock of his bearings. On one side, the ocean stretched to a hazy horizon, whilst on the other, dark, black hills rose above the indented waterline. His eyes swept the coastline, alert for signs of habitation. Beyond the beach, a small fishing village sparkled at the foot of the mountains; its startling white walls re-echoing the shock of the midday sun. In the shallow waters, bathers pushed their airbeds and threw balls to one another, splashing and screeching with excitement. Longing to join them, but aware of his responsibility, the scout merely called in welcome. Sadly, their shouts muffled his voice and he passed unnoticed.

Breathing easily now, he swam on the surface of the water, leaving the brown-skinned people to their games. He had felt a sympathy with them which he found difficult to understand. They were of a different kind; their bold arrogance had conquered the world. Yet, beneath their apparent confidence, they also suffered a vulnerability reminiscent of his own. For as many aeons as his genetic memory extended, he knew they had shared a common destiny with his kind and his heart went out to them. Was he not indeed one of The Guardians; their own maritime protectors?

With a sigh, he pushed away from the shore, making for deep water. The same smooth waves washed his skin, the same sun assaulted his head, yet now there was an added dimension which at first he could not quantify. Then he became sensitive to a disturbance, as if a shadow haunted his path and he realised he was being followed.

Skimming cautiously over the reef, where unsuspecting bathers could tear themselves on its cruel needles, he pushed on into the stream of ebb tide which swept down the estuary, creating Jacuzzi bubbles in its wake. The scout paused, uncertain of which direction to take; it seemed he had been swimming for hours yet had nothing of significance to report. Curious to discover who was following him, he glanced behind

but his eyes were not able to detect the small boy on an airbed who was drifting out to sea. So, leaving the mystery unsolved, his mind returned to his task and, resurfacing for a lungful of air, he prepared to plumb the depths.

Underwater, the gloom held its own secrets. Cautiously he dived into shadows where shifting sands, disturbed by his movements, whispered over the seabed. He stopped, testing his senses. There was an unnatural obstacle ahead, irregular in shape and varying in texture. He swam slowly at first, senses vigilant, then more quickly towards the steadily emerging shape.

The wreck was old, many years had passed since its incarceration on the ocean bottom. The stout wooden boards which comprised its hull had splayed apart like a gutted shark, splitting the deck. Through fragmented holes, which gaped like rotten teeth, sergeant-major fish investigated in lazy, inquisitive circles. Hovering above the once busy deck, the scout scrutinised the irregular apertures, committing to memory exact shapes and sizes.

Where whole sections had disintegrated, the holds revealed barrels, weighed with unknown substances and partially covered by encroaching sands, but still stacked in pristine order. Clay vessels, disguised by encrusted limpets and the pervading coral, lay forsaken in the haunted galley. The scout swam through a jagged breach, to the lower decks, laid bare by rotting boards. There were long bunks and arsenals, covered in their coralline shroud. At the point of leaving, he was arrested by a stark white object which floated in the eddies, stirred by his movement. He started! But the skull merely stared through empty sockets.

Satisfied as to the thoroughness of his search and almost on the point of leaving, the scout sensed that the pattern of fish behaviour had altered. There was another being approaching the wreck. He strained, listening to the familiar low voice which carried through the water. Lingering cautiously in the old hull, he watched and waited as the long winged, grey shape materialised above him.

As its silhouette threw a shadow over subterranean contours, the sea grew quiet. Its insatiable appetite hovered like a blanket of fear. The scout too, although attuned to the hazards of the deep, waited in respect as the large grey shark glided across the wreck.

Surfacing for air, the scout watched the dark, triangular dorsal steadily recede. Then he stiffened. For the first time, he noticed the small boy who had left the security of the beach and drifted into deeper water on his bright orange airbed.

The scout's keen nose smelt disaster. He raised his voice and called but the child, either ignoring or unable to hear his cries, continued on his course. The scout instinctively summoned his colleagues but they were too far behind. He turned this way and that, seeking assistance but no response stirred the breathless air. Only a small child, with an innocent expression of rapture, drifted into the path of the great white.

An inevitable choice lay before him. If he went to the aid of the child, he would be alone. Yet his destiny called loud and clear. There was little alternative.

Accelerating, torpedo-like, towards the grey menace, he kept his eyes fixed on the flash of bright orange. The boy panicked and began to flail, frightened by the splash of the scout's lithe black body. The shark, attracted by his distressed calls, sensed a source of food and doubled its pace, targeting the victim.

The child's screaming intensified as razor-sharp teeth penetrated his airbed, catapulting the small body backwards into the water. He struggled frantically to regain his breath. The scout pushed nearer, quicker and more urgently, sucking long deep breaths.

He dived, and surveyed his opponent. The large muscular predator that hovered above him exposed its soft-boned stomach, hanging naked and defenceless. As the wide jaws opened a second time, reaching for one of the boy's flailing legs, the guardian rose, battering into the blubby body of the shark, releasing its life in a violent red cloud. Ruby streams drifted through the water, turning the green hue into ruddy browns. The boy coughed and spluttered, spitting foul shark blood back into the salt. He turned dazed and vomiting and, seeing the guardian swimming toward him, threw up his hands in an instinctive bid for life.

Leaving the wounded shark to its spiralling death, the scout swam beneath the child and lifted him above the disturbed surface. Gasping for air, the boy wrapped his arms around the thick black neck, pressing his cheek against the head which overlooked the broad bottle-nose. Clambering more securely onto its back and gripping the stout dorsal fin with his knees, the boy sobbed pathetically as hysteria broke from within him.

Enduring the child's fearful cries, and soothing with his sympathetic spirit, the guardian slid away from the scene of death. The boy wept at first and then, in exhausted composure, lay on the dolphin's back, gasping fresh air.

'Thank you,' he murmured at last, stroking the long bottle-nose. 'Thank you, thank you!' he repeated, unable to express his relief and gratitude.

The dolphin swam quickly, distancing the boy from the dying shark. Then he turned towards the shoreline, where the swell sparkled in the late afternoon sun, covering the vibrant hues of the coral reef with its lapping waves. They swam where sargassum weed snaked the surface of the water and the boy, his arms still wrapped around the scout's thick neck, gazed with relief into a blue ocean, guarded by a bluer sky.