

From the Deepest Depth by David Hartley

The man smelled of squid guts and dead salt. There were white flecks in his beard and his fingernails were crinkled like fragments of shell. His eyes would not meet mine. They darted around in their sockets, minnows in rock pools.

'Thanks for seeing me,' he said. He held out the vial. 'This is it.'

Thick, clouded glass stopped with a cork. Liquid inside which looked dark, but it could have been the tint of the glass, hard to tell. There was a space on the table for acquisitions and I had my gloves on ready, but he kept a tight hold.

'Thanks for bringing it in. Take your time.'

'Don't want nothin' for it.' Spit foamed at the corner of his lips. 'Nothin'.'

'A donation?'

He nodded.

'Very generous.'

That seemed to soothe him. He wiped his mouth, scratched his chin, readied himself.

'Its water,' he said, 'From the deepest depth.'

'From where?'

'From the deepest depth. The deepest point of the deepest place. From the bottom of the Mariana Trench.'

I frowned. His breaths deepened, his grip on the vial tightened.

'Please,' I said, indicating the table.

'You be careful?' Dart, dart, dart went the eyes.

'Of course.'

'Don't open it. Promise me.'

'I promise.'

He set it down as gently as placing a landmine. I took it into my hands with just as much care. It was nothing. Just a small vial containing a small amount of liquid which could have just as easily come from the tap in the men's toilets in the foyer. No marks on the glass, nothing on the cork, no labels or stamps.

'Deepest depth,' he muttered. His eyes were fixed now, right on mine, circles in circles in circles. I was, for that moment, held and then, a moment later, swept in.

'I'm sure we can find a place,' I said.

He nodded. A small smile, to himself. Another nod, and then; 'Thanks.'

He turned on his heel and marched away. As he wrestled with the door to get out of Collections, his coat knocked against the wall. Tinkle, tinkle, clink, clink; he swore, put a hand against the bulging pocket to stop the sound, then barged his way to freedom. The door clicked shut. The smell stayed.

I ran my finger around the edge of the cork, round and round and round. I didn't want to look at the vial again. I would find a place for it.

I didn't move for a while. It was raining outside, I was quite sure; a heavy downpour. And the pipes of the museum were flush and full, like blood vessels of some giant body forever thirsty. And in my own body; my mouth an arid desert, my stomach a dried-up lake. A bead of sweat burst from my forehead, streaked down my cheek to feed my lips, then seeped its way to my tongue. It was salty, it was precious and it was gone too soon.