

## *The Scorpacuda of the Dead Zone*

By A, J, and F

One day, in the middle of the bay, a strange looking creature wanted to play. He searched for his friend, the smiling green fish. He looked up, but all he saw were jellies. He looked down, but he only found worms. It was difficult to see. The weather was overcast algae.

He kept searching for the green fish. He longed to play tug-o-worm over an urchin and ring-around-the-anemone. He missed building mud forts and throwing mud-balls or ninja sea stars at each other. Recently, his friend had seemed so tired. He wasn't swimming as fast or agile as in the past. So they would lean back and watch the algae blooms grow. They pretended they saw shapes in the algae clouds: a shark, a sunken ship, a dolphin.

Now his friend was missing and so were the sea stars, urchins, and anemones. The algae was so thick, the day was dark.

As he searched, he saw mysterious bubbles rising over a tiny ridge. Curious, he swam right over to investigate. He discovered a diver such as he'd never seen before and scurried to greet him.

The started diver exclaimed, "A scientific breakthrough! A new creature never before observed!"

The curious creature turned right, then left, then behind to see this breakthrough. Then he started twitching from the tickling of the diver's touching. He felt his body being picked up and soon he was fact to face with the diver.

"Why what have we here?" asked the diver as he examined the creature. "A tail like a scorpion, perhaps you are a relative of the horseshoe crab. But those teeth look like a barracuda. I think I'll call you a scorpacuda."

The scorpacuda was delighted to finally know his name. He had always wanted to have a name. He was anxious to tell his friend, the smiling green fish, his name and looked around.

“My name is Professor Tinkerbot,” said the diver, “Hungry, eh? I bet you are hunting a fish.”

Professor Tinkerbot was right, but for the wrong reasons. The scorpacuda, despite his sharp teeth, only ate plants. But Professor Tinkerbot knew why there were no fish to be seen.

“I’m taking measurements of this unhealthy water. It is a wonder you are so peppy in it. Most of the other animals have left. It all happened because rainwater carried too many nutrients from fertilizer and sewage to the ocean. There was an algae bloom, and when the algae died, bacteria used a lot of the dissolved oxygen to decompose the algae. That created a region where animals that need oxygen in the water can’t live.”

Professor Tinkerbot wanted a picture of the scorpacuda, and noticed that it was attracted by his talking. So he kept talking while aiming his camera.

“I’m here today to study the dead zone. This region has no fish because the dissolved oxygen has been used faster than the plants and wind put it into the water,” he explained. “That is why the jellies are doing so well. They like this unhealthy water. But there won’t be any fish until the wind churns up the waves and brings more oxygen.”

Suddenly the scorpacuda started doing multiple figure 8’s swimming all the way to the surface, and flipping his tail up and then down into the water. He wanted to put oxygen there so his friend the smiling green fish would return.

Professor Tinkerbot thought the scorpacuda was trying to communicate with other scorpacudas.

“You must be trying to tell them there are no fish here to eat,” he sighed. “This would be such an amazing thing to share with scientists, but I’m out of film and can’t even get a good picture of you.”

Just then, the scorpacuda gave Professor Tinkerbot an idea.

“Maybe we could build a great big machine that used waves to churn the water and bring oxygen to these lower levels!” he exclaimed as he rushed back to the ship to tell everyone about his latest invention idea.

The scorpacuda was worn out from trying to churn the water, and fell asleep for three days. When he woke up, he didn't see the smiling green fish but he saw Professor Tinkerbot had returned.

"Why hello there, I've come for more measurements and to get a photo of you," said Professor Tinkerbot. "I've got good news. After convincing conservationists that this wavemill will not interfere with migrating fishes, we managed to get funding to build a prototype. My calculations say that enough dissolved oxygen can be added for fish."

The scorpacuda was excited. He wanted so badly to see his friend. Professor Tinkerbot kept talking and aiming his camera, getting it lined up just right. To keep the scorpacuda's attention, he kept rambling on about his research.

"Oh but the floor here is not ideal for breeding fish. There are not enough rocks and crevices for them to hide. We need to improve the chances for the baby fish to survive," said Professor Tinkerbot sadly.

The scorpacuda jetted away so quickly it startled Professor Tinkerbot. Within a few minutes he was back with a small piece of coral. Back and forth the scorpacuda went gathering a pile of debris from the ocean floor.

"You must be building a trap," thought Professor Tinkerbot, "I really want to get a picture of this, but the batteries in my camera died."

Suddenly, Professor Tinkerbot had another idea.

"You gave me a great idea," he said. "We could put an artificial reef here. I know you have no idea what I'm talking about. So I won't bore you with the details."

But Professor Tinkerbot was wrong. Everyone under the water knew about artificial reefs, those luxury cities created from stuff humans threw out. The scorpacuda wondered what it would be maybe an old tank he could pretend to drive or part of old factory. He hoped it would be a sunken ship complete with a treasure chest. He and the smiling green fish would pretend to be pirates!

When he stopped thinking about the reef, he realized that Professor Tinkerbot had left. He hoped that he would come back soon. But the very next day, loud noises were heard all over the bay. Professor Tinkerbot's new wavemill was installed and started grinding the waves to create oxygen at the depths below. An old vessel was donated by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute. They were going to use it for a museum, but when they heard about the bay's need of an artificial reef, they voted unanimously to place it there.

The scorpacuda was amazed to see a few minnows swimming about. Then he saw his friend Professor Tinkerbot and swam up to smile a big thank you to him. Professor Tinkerbot explained that this was his last trip to the bay. The project had been successful and funding for more of his time was not available. Besides there was a problem off the coast of Africa with some penguins, and he was needed there.

Professor Tinkerbot finally had his camera full of fresh film and fresh batteries. He was so excited at the thought of discovering a new creature, but knew nobody would believe him without some evidence.

Just when Professor Tinkerbot was about to take a picture of the scorpacuda, the scorpacuda saw something – something that made him suddenly jolt and bolt away – his friend the smiling green fish!

“Oh fishsticks!” said Professor Tinkerbot, “that poor scorpacuda must be so hungry for a fish I'll never get that photo before I have to go.”

The scorpacuda would have gladly posed, but he was too distracted with chasing and playing with his friend, the smiling green fish. Professor Tinkerbot just sighed and waved goodbye.