

Episode 22: Kushtaka

Written by Julia Schifini and Jarod K. Anderson

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If you find yourself on the shore this evening, take a moment to consider the stars reflected in the dark water. Some of those points of light are actually stars. Others are the eyes of something larger beneath the surface, considering you right back.

Welcome, to The CryptoNaturalist.

Howdy, listeners.

I've opened up my studio windows, so you can probably tell exactly where I am from the way the waters are lapping against the shore right now. That's right: Biorka Island, just off of the Sitka Sound. Clouds are rollin' in, turning the water that slate-gray that whispers of a bone-deep chill awaiting curious swimmers. It's inviting in a way, the way the waves curl like beckoning fingers. A kind of friendly hello, saying "Come on in, visitor! We are here for you. Kick your feet up and stretch out on a bed of our comfortable kelp. Why, that deep cold you're feeling is just our way of saying welcome."

Perfect time for a swim, if you ask me! If you're in the area, why don't you come on down and take a dip with me? You are so kind to host me here in your ears, listener, I think it's only fair for me to act as host in kind.

In addition to the cool, welcoming waters here, there's so many different kinds of critters for burgeoning CryptoNaturalists to discover and observe here on the Alaskan shores. Nothing too dangerous, don't worry. Even the most amateur of my listeners would get a kick out of watching Shooting Starfish rocketing through the waves, leaving a bioluminescent glow in their wake. Yes, these ominous clouds rolling in will make this the perfect night to watch them dash and glimmer without the distraction of the real stars reflecting on the sound's surface. It really is a sight to behold. Of course, these aren't true starfish. I don't know of any CryptoNaturalist who has survived seeing a true star fish, but that's a topic for another time.

Now, these Shooting Starfish are completely harmless. Beautiful to boot. Harmless and beautiful. Just like the cold, flinty waters by which I'm parked. I'm hoping you're heading this way as we speak. You wouldn't want to miss a night like this, no indeed. The dark waters and the bright starfish, well, it's a sight you'll remember.

I do really hope you'll stop by. If you're having trouble finding me, just look for the tallest pine tree on the shore. As soon as I'm done with this transmission, I'll be resting beneath that old tree for a spell, waiting for you all, just observing nature. If you get lost, just give me a little whistle, just like this one:

[whistles, high-pitched, low-high-low]

I'll whistle back in kind. Just follow that sound, and you'll find me.

When you do arrive, you might even get the chance to see the Kelpie Sea Serpent. Now, that name might seem terrifying to anyone unfamiliar with this deceptive creature, but it's just a big ol' photosynthesizin' softy. Unlike his Scottish cousin, the Common Kelpie, who loves parading around as a horse and pulling folks into the depths for a person-snack, our Kelpie Sea Serpent in this neck of the woods is a vegetarian. His serpentine body will poke out of the sea when it peaks its head out on moonless nights, looking like floating patches of kelp. On those kinds of night, be careful taking your boats out, listeners. Getting tangled in the leafy tendrils of the Kelpie Sea Serpent's back and tail is all but impossible to get out of. And while he won't try to eat you like his Scottish cousin, he won't bat a glossy, double-lidded eye before he pulls you and your little vessel down with him.

If you're looking to avoid getting all tangled up while this Kelpie is taking his snooze on the surface, it's time to break out the punting poles. Sure, it'll take a you a bit to get where you wanna go, but it's better than having to make a claim to your insurance company. They rarely pay out for sea serpent-related accidents, Trust me on this one.

Well, while I wait for you to arrive, let's observe our tradition of enjoying some human writing. It's time for this week's Hidden Lore segment:

Today's Hidden Lore is a short piece by Doug Marshall.

Hidden Lore Segment:

The Seaweed

Rough, green, and tangled, my odor lays heavy upon the breeze; thick and tangy with the salt and bitterness of the sea's scorn.

Forsaken by the tide, adopted by something new and inconspicuous that surveys the littoral wastes from the shadows of my brittle mossy labyrinth.

The tenants roil within me, and while I should cast them out I have no agency or whim to do so; thus, content with the moist depths, they remain.

Did you know that you, too, are the seaweed?

Hmm. I find this piece particularly appealing today. There are many secret lives to be discovered beneath the water, if you just have the courage to seek them out.

Doug Marshall, known to many as Spyglass, is a crepuscular gremlin of the twilight hours who engages in a variety of creative pursuits, including the creation of two podcasts: the science fiction anthology Starhopper Radio, and the upcoming actual-play tabletop RPG show called The Escape Artists. He is an avid consumer of fiction in many forms, a student of astrobiology,

and an occasional world traveler on the side. He can be found under the handle of SpyglassRealms on Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr.

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I'm still waiting. I know it's probably not your fault, Listener. The waters and woods are dark, certainly, but I know you're the adventuring bunch. I'll wait. I'll keep waiting.

[clears throat]

I suppose in the meantime, while I wait, I'll tell you a bit more about the amazing flora and fauna of this beautiful area. Even the most experienced CryptoNaturalists have only gotten a few glimpses at Divine King Crab. While resting, they look similar to a nugget of gold. Of course, if you were to get over eager and pick it up, however, you'd find your fingers going instantly numb. That would be because of the paralyzing poison secreted from its nearly indiscernible, needle like "crown" - a ring of spines atop its shell. Just around then, you'll notice the crustacean's spindly legs emerge, ready to either scurry away from its perceived threat - you - or towards whatever prey it thinks it might be able to gobble down - your fingers.

Really, it's pretty darn cute, even if it does take about a week to get the feeling back in those fingers of yours. Maybe, once some of you arrive, we can go scouting for a few of them. They make some delicious eating, too, once you remove those spines. We could have a bit of a cookout. Doesn't that sound nice? Maybe that's why some of you haven't arrived yet - you're cooking something up to eat. I don't blame you. I'm hungry, too.

The sooner you get here, the sooner we can *all* eat.

Let's see, what else do we have around here that might entice you? How about mushrooms? Everyone loves a good fungi, especially if you are also connected to the ground via mycelium. We've all been through that before, haven't we? Sometimes you just can't quit it, despite trying to cut the cord, as it were. What is mycelium if not the Internet of plants and fungi, am I right?

There's a wonderful specimen of mushroom here on the shores of the Sitka Sound; the Labyrinth's Walls. Plenty of fungi have wonderful names - Destroying Angels, Shaggy Manes, Slippery Jacks. The Labyrinth's Walls live up to their name, as any CryptoNaturalist who has explored the forests of Northern Alaska will tell you. Under the right circumstances, the Labyrinth's Walls grow to tremendous proportions, and their growth patterns create a maze that is incredibly easy to get lost in.

That reminds me of a story, of the last time I was in Alaska. At the time, I was just an amateur CryptoNaturalist, still green around the gills--

[A sudden burst of static, threatening to overtake the recording]

Wait...No-- No, he shouldn't be able to transmit onto this frequency! I thought I took care of-- Hold on just a minute--

[Wavering static before it cuts to:]

Field Report:

Huh. There we go. Didn't think I was gonna be able to get through. Hello? If you're hearing my voice... well, hearing my voice through this transmission but also hearing it somewhere else, then it seems like someone or something is trying to draw you in. I urge any listeners not to go to whatever location he is trying to lure you to. I'm not sure who or what he is, but there are plenty of creatures out there that use mimicry for less than pleasant purposes.

I'm transmitting from... well, somewhere. Come to think of it, I don't think I want whoever is pretending to be me right now to know exactly where the real me is. But, I can tell you that I woke up a few hours ago in the middle of a damp, fungi maze that I managed to wander out of despite the ever shifting walls. Honestly, the Labyrinth's Walls mushroom isn't too complicated to escape with just a little four-dimensional thinking. I suspect someone put me there, given the tracks I encountered, tracks that changed shape from footprint to footprint.

Once I did get my bearings, I attempted to track down Cassandra – but first, I found this transmission with... well, with me. But not me. I must say, hearing my own voice is a jarring experience. Is that really what I sound like?

At any rate, I heard the gist of what that imposter was saying and it's not what I would call sound advice. Be wary, listeners and keep your distance. For now, I'll give this identity theft a fair warning – I can always find Cassandra and I'm nearly there.

The CryptoNaturalist - the REAL CryptoNaturalist-, over and out.

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I don't-- Listeners, I don't know what that was. But sure as silver slippers, that was some sort of...imposter. Some doppelganger or fetch taking up my voice to try to trick you into disbelieving me. Me! Your friend. Like I've been saying, come down to the shore and see me in person. I'll show you I'm Me. The Me you can trust. Don't worry about the Kelpie Sea Serpents or get distracted by the Shooting Starfish. Get here now, while you can, before--

[footsteps approach, a scuffle, a growling hiss, the same high pitched whistle from earlier, and the splash of water as the Kushtaka transforms and dives into the water in order to escape]

[a little winded] Ooof. Sorry about that, listeners. Looks like a crafty ol' Kushtaka managed to take over Cassandra, posing as yours truly. Ack. Hang on. My beard is dripping seawater onto my recording equipment. Sigh. This studio is gonna smell like otter and decaying fish for weeks. I'm gonna need t get all of my bats dry-cleaned. This is why I'm always a little bit suspicious of

those adorable faces of sea otters - you never know if they're actually a shapeshifter looking to lure folks into the icy waters. Also, nothing that cute can be purely good. That's just how it is.

Again, sorry about the confusion, listeners. But it's clear we've got plenty of experienced CryptoNaturalists in the audience who were able to spot the fake a mile off. Heck, who would ever believe that ridiculous accent he was using anyway. Looks like that little shapeshifter is going to go hungry tonight. Now, I've got some work ahead of me, cleaning out all the empty mollusk shells and abandoned crab legs this kushtaka left behind. What a mess.

Until next time, we're all strange animals. So, act like it.

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Show Notes/Credits

Credits

This episode was thought-up and mostly written by the wonderfully talented Julia Schifini. Julia is a writer, sound designer, voice actor, and aspiring professional wrestler. She is the co-host and producer of Spirits, a boozy dive into myths and legends. She loves world-building, fancy cheese, and all things creepy and cool. She works with networks like Multitude Productions and The Whisperforge. You can hear her work on other shows such as Janus Descending, Tides, What's the Frequency, 1994, and Greater Boston. (You can also hear her on episode 14 of this show.)

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Show Notes: Episode 22: Kushtaka (00:18:31)

You can't always believe your ears and you shouldn't trust cute, furry faces peering up from the sea.

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Our hidden lore piece "The Seaweed" was written by Doug Marshall. Doug Marshall, known to many as Spyglass, is a crepuscular gremlin of the twilight hours who engages in a variety of creative pursuits, including the creation of two podcasts: the science fiction anthology Starhopper Radio, and the upcoming actual-play tabletop RPG show called The Escape Artists. He is an avid consumer of fiction in many forms, a student of astrobiology, and an occasional world traveler on the side. He can be found under the handle of SpyglassRealms on Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr.