Into The Abyss

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# CHAPTER 1

A box.

A huge cardboard box. One could fit an adult horse there, provided it’s lying on the ground. Is it for my birthday? I see a small, crumpled note:

*Jacob,*

*You are eighteen now, so I won’t give you a golden watch or flowers. I think that you don’t need it. We don’t need another object; we desire adventure, don’t you think? We want a world in which we can be someone else, experience another’s life, visualize new concepts, and develop our horizons. To leave our personal bubble and comfort zone.*

*So there you are.My peculiar box. A key and door to every world imaginable. I received it a long time ago from a friend of mine. I don’t know the age of this thing or the source of it. It can take you wherever you want and return back, but there’s a catch! You can return only with a creature that is native to that land.*

*What are you waiting for?! Hop in and close the lid, and you will be surprised by what you can find.*

*your loving uncle, Hippolyte.*

*PS.*

*Make ABSOLUTELY sure that you know what you are wishing for! This machine has its moods, but it never killed its user.*

*At least I think so.*

“Uncle Hippolyteis as high as a kite…” I murmured to myself, remembering my dad’s opinion about him. He has always been the family's black sheep. He was always interested in so-called “arcane arts” and believed in various superstitions, and he always dressed in bright clothes, mostly completely unsuitable for the occasion. Despite this, I sort of liked him. He was always natural and never cared about others' opinions. He felt genuine, completely opposed to today’s world of fake individuality. I put the letter in my pocket.

But now, I was worried if he completely lost it this time. A cardboard box that can transport you anywhere you like... only with a creature... native... Close the lid.

“Nonsense! Uncle Hippo overdosed on his medicine and forgot about my birthday, so he simply sent TV cardboard from his basement!” A voice in my head shouted.

“But he was always genuine and never lied or exaggerated on anything that was important to him, and he’d always liked me. What stands in my way of trying it?” Said another voice.

I don’t know which of these was a voice of reason and which one was a voice of sheer stupidity, but I’ve made up my mind.

But what do I want from this box?

The letter says that it can provide me with a unique experience and that I’ll be able to experience genuine adventure.

I’ve stopped and thought.

An adventure!

This is it!

I crawl into the box.

I hold my breath.

I'm closing the lid.

Complete darkness.

It's unnatural.

Complete opposite of light.

Deepest space abyss.

The distance to the nearest sun is immeasurable, even by the best of the earth's computers.

Sudden pain.

Or not?

I don't feel anything.

Just like the spirit.

I’m present but not measurable.

Am I split into atoms?

Am I reduced to the elements of the elements?

Carried by space wind at infinite speed for an infinite time?

It can't be right.

I feel it.

My spine.

My neck.

Pain.

It wrecks my tissue, it shatters my soul, and it devours my nerves.

It won't stop.

Ever.

Something moves.

Then, the atoms come together. They crash into each other with unfathomable energy. A sun? I witnessed it with my own eyes. It burns them with its unrestricted energy. I blink.

I'm staring at a white ceiling.

“Hey, you are finally awake!” Someone exclaimed with surprise in his voice. “How are you feeling, dark one?” I’ve heard this person’s footsteps not far from me.

“Ugh… My head…” I’ve barely processed his words. My head was filled with pain; it felt like it was sliced in half. I touched my face and hair, just to be sure.

The person approached me. I was finally able to look at him. He was extremely pale, paler than his white overalls. I’ve never seen anyone so white; it looked like even the albinos had a darker skin tone. His black glasses and dark hair, with a hint of gray, contrasted with it.

“Yeah, you were in very bad shape when a security officer found you. What on Jupiter tempted you to go out in just a T-shirt and pants? You started to develop hypothermia! But don’t worry; I took care of it, so you are pretty good to go. What is your name anyway?”

What is my name? I froze. There is a complete emptiness in my mind. I don't remember anything, and I don't know anything. Confusion, hopelessness, and cluelessness. I wasn’t known for a great memory, but this is unnatural. I tried to recall previous events, but I forgot how I even got here. It feels like an artificial mist has covered my memories… It felt like hours had passed, but then I suddenly…

“Jacob, that's my name,” I said with a firm tone, so firm that I surprised myself.

"Hmmm,” the man said, pushing his glasses up his nose. “It seems that you have problems with your memory. But it will pass... At least I think so,” he immediately corrected himself. “But anyway, there is a question of my payment. I did not find any money on you, so you are in debt.”

“How much?” I asked surprised.

“Three hundred Federation Credits.”

“Three hundred Fed - what?”

“It is our currency, don’t you know? That memory loss has impacted you greatly,” he scratched his head. “Maybe this could refresh your memory?” He handed me a letter. “That was the only thing you had with you.”

I took the crumpled, yellowish note and straightened it on my knee. It read:

*New Dawn submarine, Captain von Wasserwacht, dock no. 16*

“A submarine?” I read it aloud. I was sure I had misread someone’s crooked handwriting, but the doctor was quick to dispel my doubts.

“So, you are a member of a submarine's crew?!” He sounded almost excited. “My congratulations! I tried to enlist there myself years ago, but after one cruise, I resigned. It is not for the faint-hearted like me.” He looked thoughtful.

It must've been a mistake. I know nothing about submarines and have no qualifications whatsoever, apart from being relatively short… But it looks like this Captain von Wasserwacht is the only person who will be able to explain things to me without taking me for a mad person or a sclerotic.

“Oh, before you leave, take this,” he said, extending his open hand towards me with a dozen white pills.

“What’s that?”

“Vitamin D, stupid. You won’t get it naturally here; without it you’ll die from even the least dangerous illnesses.”

I thanked the doctor for healing me, and after asking him for directions to the docks and receiving some warm clothes, I walked through the exit. The doors were weird; I haven't seen anything like this before. They didn’t have a handle; instead, they were opened by touching a green flashing pad in the middle, after which the doors slid open. My head was brimming with thoughts. I was lost. What am I doing here? Why am I here?

# CHAPTER 2

The corridor was very narrow, where two people might have trouble passing each other. The walls, floor and ceiling were dark, with a metallic shine. There was a faint light in the form of green floor lights. A claustrophobic person would certainly freak out.

I walked a few dozen meters and then opened a door similar to that leading to the doctor's office. The next corridor was much wider, though made from the same material, the lights were coming from the ceiling, they were light blue and brighter.

As I was walking, I noticed several posters. The first one showed a human silhouette bathed in darkness running from something. I looked closer - I saw something that looked like a bomb. The text made it clear:

*The threat posed by the so-called “Jovian freedom fighters” terrorists does not sleep!*

*Report ANY suspicious activity to the nearest security officer!*

I moved to the next poster, feeling like some twisted art critic, desperately trying to get my bearing.

The second poster was similarly in shades of gray. It depicted a submarine inside some sort of enormous cave, navigating bravely through gray water, with searchlights coming from all of its sides. In the corner, I noticed several steel-blue creatures moving towards the submarine. They weren't human, that was for sure - the two legs were too massive relative to the rest of a body, they also had a massive fin on their backs - but it didn't remind me of any animal I've ever seen. The text confirmed they weren't friendly:

*These fearless Europan Federation sailors brave the Europa's dangerous ocean for YOU!*

I’ve read it twice to make sure I read this correctly. ‘Europan’, not ‘European’?

This poster only deepened my confusion. I've started to think that I'm hallucinating, or I’m having a weird dream. But anyway, I had to get going.

I followed the signs leading to the docks. I opened another door and immediately saw a sign pointing down. I saw a ladder, but when I looked down, I saw only darkness. I swallowed with difficulty, and finally decided to descend - finding that captain looked like the only reasonable thing to do. The steps were ice-cold, and the light was so faint I barely avoided falling a couple of times. After what felt like a quarter of an hour, my foot finally stepped on the floor. I pushed the pad of another door and instantly regretted my decision.

Freezing air washed over me immediately and left me stunned for a short moment. I crossed my arms and started rubbing myself in order to get at least some warmth. That thick jacket and pants felt like wearing a summer t-shirt in the middle of December's snowstorm. Better to find this damn submarine, or I’ll freeze to death…

I tried to focus my eyesight on a sign showing the way to different docks, but it was difficult, because I was distracted by the white dots on the wall. I stepped closer.

I was looking through a window.

At first, I thought I was looking at space, with an immeasurable amount of stars, but then I noticed that those white dots were moving.

It was water.

All the pieces of the puzzle started to fit together. I was in an underwater dock, in the middle of Europa’s ocean. But it's not Earth's continent. Fortunately, I paid attention in my astronomy class.

I'm on a Jovian moon.

Crazy uncle was right. This cardboard worked - that means, if I want to return home, I have to get my hands on some creature from this moon.

“Are you lost?” A voice from behind nearly made me jump. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-” I turned to face him, and we were both surprised from what we saw. He had giant, red colored glasses that made his eyes glow orange.

“Oh, excuse my glasses,” he chuckled. “They are supposed to show you open wounds in low light environments”. He rotated them in his hand. “I bought them today, I’m getting used to them - they might come handy.” He took off his glasses.

“So my glasses did not lie, you are really dark-skinned, you know?” Like the doctor I met earlier, he was as pale as paper. On top of that, he had an unbuttoned jacket, which showed his white t-shirt, while I was nearly freezing. Maybe he was used to these temperatures. I was looking at him disoriented, as he continued, piercing me with his eyes like using X-rays.

“Are you seeking adventure here, dark-skin? You are a high-upper, aye?”

“I'm what?” I immediately asked, a little bit too loud, being both confused and surprised.

“Now, don't take it too seriously,” he chuckled, possibly assuming my reaction was a sign of indignation, not that of confusion. “I was only a bit suspicious. These rich fellas from the highest decks of the stations treat our submarines like an attraction for tourists, not like the means to keep us all alive.” A grimace filled his smallpox-scarred face. “They sunbathe in solarium to make their skin darker, to stand out from the poor low-uppers. That's why I thought you were one of them.”

“No…” I looked at my note. "I'm actually looking for dock number 16 and captain von Wasserwacht…”

The stranger's raised eyebrows rapidly turned into a smile.

“So you are a new sailor!” He nearly shouted. “Fantastic! I'm Cappy, the local sawbones,” he explained, while we shook hands. “We are in a dire need of fresh blood. Let's go - I need a hand with some boxes, and I'll explain everything on the way.”

# CHAPTER 3

We’ve been walking through this seemingly endless corridor for ten minutes, with our footsteps echoing away. Each of us carried one box full of medical supplies (“Full of bandages, frozen blood, saline, antibiotics, cocaine and methamphetamine - everything a submarine crew would ever need” - Cappy said). We were passing by the entrances to submarine docks and small offices. The temperature was still unbearable, but movement eased that nasty feeling. Heating here would be pointless because of the harbor's proximity to freezing Europa’s ocean - my guide explained. Some parts of the corridors were glazed - I was able to take a look at some of the docked submarines.

There were white research submarines, gigantic transport ships for ferrying goods and menacing looking attack submarines, though every submarine on Europa was armed, they were outfitted with especially high numbers of guns in varying sizes.

“Our New Dawn isn't as majestic as some of these ships, but she gets work done.” Cappy said, but I could swear I saw a twinkle of jealousy in his eyes. “We are close…”

He wasn’t wrong. Shortly after, I stood in front of an airtight door with the inscription: “Dock no. 16”.

“Well, I'll take your box from here, you go to the office. Good luck, lad.” He tapped me on the shoulder to encourage me. “See you on board”, he said, and left me before the office door to the side of a much larger dock door.

I sighed to reassure myself and entered.

“Oh, good evening, mister Hearth, I assume?” A man wearing a woolen captain’s hat sitting behind a metal desk looked at me. I immediately saw numerous scars on his face, with one particularly deep on his clean-shaved cheek. He was smoking a large wooden pipe, with the smell of tobacco hanging in the air. The other sailor, with impeccable, straight posture, gestured at the chair for me to sit down. The room was claustrophobic as any in the lower decks of the outpost, with just enough space for three men to sit. On the other hand, it had a small radiator, thanks to which I could forget about getting hypothermia. However, I had no clue how he knew my name.

“Yes, good evening, captain,” I said tensely as I sat down. “I’m here for a… job interview.”

“Of course you are,” Captain von Wasserwacht coughed slightly. “It won’t take long, we have to set sail soon. I'm captain James von Wasserwacht. This sailor on my left is my first mate and gunner, Trevor McKenzie." He nodded at the mention of his name. “We are looking for a new crewmate… and from what I heard through the door I assume that you met our medical officer?”

I nodded. “We met a moment ago. I helped him with carrying medical supply boxes.”

The captain and his colleague looked at each other. “Ha! This young man is eager to work!” the captain stated. He smiled (at first I thought it was a grimace, because of his scars) and took a sip from his pipe. Officer McKenzie nodded again, his face expressionless, but with his eyes focused on me.

“First things first” Captain started, “Are you aware that voyaging through Europa is extremely dangerous?” He asked, taking another sip from his pipe.

“I am, captain.” I tried to sound confident, but he saw through it quickly.

“And that you have no useful skills” he continued, “meaning that you'll have to learn everything on board?”

“I'm aware that I have no experience, but I have a lot to offer.” I almost surprised myself by being so determined. It was my only way to get out of this world.

“Ha! So you are talking seriously!” He pointed at me with his pipe. But then, his comrade spoke.

“W- why do- do you want to wo- work for us, mister Jacob He- Hearth?" He said, stuttering. It was weird - I would've never thought that a man of his presence would have problems with stuttering.

“Well, I want to see an Europan creature and to… see how it looks from up close, dead.” I finished lamely, but I was telling the pure truth. I could return to my safe, boring home only with a creature from this world.

The sailors looked at each other for a while. It probably wasn't longer than a few seconds, but for me, it felt like a month. I already started thinking about alternatives on how to get my hands on this moon's creatures… Do they fish here on Europa?

But then, the Captain took the last sip from his pipe, and put it down on a desk.

“So it’s decided,” Captain von Wasserwacht said. “We will meet again on the bridge soon. You can take your things aboard. I think there aren’t many of them. But before that, let’s sign these documents…”

“Welcome to New Dawn’s crew,” Scar said after the paperwork, and shook my hand with great force. “From now on, I will be your captain, your adoptive father, so to speak.”

# CHAPTER 4

I got down the ladder and stepped on a metal floor. The warmth of the submarine enveloped me. The submarine’s interior was far better lit than the outpost's corridors. The room I was in was full of supply boxes, which made it even more cramped. The walls were gray, with stripes of reflective paint. In front of me was a ladder down, and massive doors with a sign, which read: “Armory”. A slight shiver of anxiety ran through me. For sure, they don’t have to access it very often... Behind were doors to the electrical room, as the door’s sign indicated.

I smelled. It felt like a well-stocked kitchen. The room was filled with the smell of fruit, mushrooms and vegetables. There also was a weird, cold smell, which I classified as a smell of Europan sea.

Although as cramped as every room found in lower decks of stations, I felt excited. It was my chance for true adventure. Certainly, finding a creature with which I could return to my world can not possibly be hard?

“Hey, greenhorn! Stop dreaming and help me with these tanks!” I turned and barely caught two heavy cylinders, losing my breath in the process.

“Help me with these, I need them in the engineering room!” A man of impressive stature in orange work clothes passed me and shook his head. He gestured at me to follow him and then started to climb down the ladder. I barely got down, carrying these cylinders, and followed him. We passed through what looked like a medical room, stairs down another level and a moment later through a heavy door with a radiation sign. The man opened it (it opened by touching a pad in the middle, as every other door here).

“Put it here,” the man pointed at an empty spot between two big, orange boxes. “I'm Max Spider, this sub's engineer. If yo won't get in my way, we'll get along with each other just fine,” he said while turning various knobs on a strange machine.

“What's that thing?” I asked curiously.

“Eh, Cap warned me that yo don't know anything,” he sighed, irritated. “It's our nuclear reactor, our main source of power here.”

I took a step back.

“So, can it explode?”

Max looked at me, even more annoyed.

“No, but it can melt down,” he started talking with a tone in which one speaks to a child. “Anyway, if it does, it suddenly won't be our problem.”

Before I could process his words, he picked up a wrench and looked at it. He murmured something to himself, and then he looked at me.

“I’m busy starting up this reactor. Yo better get this wrench downstairs to Screw, yo'll recognize him easily. He doesn't shave regularly… and has a characteristic odor.” He chuckled at his own joke, and passed me this tool.

I took the stairs down and started looking for an unshaved sailor. I was walking slowly, looking at the floor and my sides regularly. The room was filled with weird machines, shelves for various boxes, tools and cylinders. I learned to watch my steps after I nearly fell under the floor, because the slab that covered the pipes and cables under the floor was missing. It was easy to miss something. But suddenly I tripped over something and fell down, with my wrench making a metallic noise.

“My leg!” Said that ‘something’. Someone got up, groaning. I immediately recognized Screw, not because he was unshaved, but because he stank of alcohol. It was saddening. Wherever humans might venture, alcohol will follow. “Who are you, anyway?” He asked, looking all over me.

“I'm Jacob, I'm new here. I was asked to…”

“Aha! A new friend aboard!” He didn't let me finish, shouted and hugged me. It wasn't a pleasant experience, however, I immediately started worrying about him passing that smell on me. “I’m Screw, I repair machines!”

“Max sent me to fetch you your wrench.” I said, while he started to release his grip. I bent down to pick it up. “Here you go.”

“Thank you! You are really kind!” Screw said enthusiastically. I looked at him - Max was right - his beard was unkempt, with gray strands of hair, which made him look even older. And old he was - he was probably the oldest member of New Dawn’s crew. He was shorter than me, wearing a navy blue jacket and pants, and - like everyone here - had extremely white skin.

Before I could answer, a voice came from the loudspeaker.

“All sailors report to the bridge for briefing. Immediately.”

“So, we are gonna to set sail soon,” Screw suddenly became serious. “Let’s go. James hates latecomers.”

Captain von Wasserwacht was standing in front of the huge monitor panel, with various buttons, diodes and joysticks on the bottom. First mate McKenzie was leaning against a wall, standing in front of a periscope in the middle of the room. Medical officer Cappy found his place in the corner while chewing something - maybe a gum, I thought. Engineer Max had his arms crossed on his chest, which made his figure even more impressive. Mechanic Screw stood with his hand in pockets.

It was tight. Our crew of six barely fit here. Before I could find a comfortable position to stand, the captain spoke.

“This is it.” Captain looked at each one of us with a serious look. “As you may know, when our ancestors landed on one of the few Europa’s craters, they drilled through the ice crust and found liquid water—which we now call The Great Sea. We found life. Extremely hostile life, but extraterrestrial life it was. For decades, we lived around Alpha Crater, the place where our colonization began. But in the year 2087, a terrible tragedy has befallen us. The E-parasite outbreak destroyed our biggest city, just under Alpha Crater. It turns people into husks to provide it a room to grow. These abominations are able to somehow withstand Europa's immense pressure without dying” said Captain, with a horrific grimace, as he saw them with his own eyes.

“Earth had put us into a quarantine, which lasts to this day; they cut their communications with us and forgot about our existence. Many of us thought it was a death sentence.” We all looked at each other during that pause. “ But we prevailed. No, we have flourished! For a long time, routes deeper into the bottomless Europa's ocean were deemed too dangerous, with deadly wildlife and vents leading straight into the abyss. But again, humanity proved that we set boundaries for ourselves only to cross them again and again. Our colonists ventured deeper. Our miners found bountiful mineral deposits. My dear crew, we have waited for this moment for weeks, preparing to venture deeper into the depths of Europa. Now, with stronger hulls, better armaments, and fearless crews, we are going to conquer the depths! “

“Our first mission is simple. Besides transporting boxes with documents to another outpost, we were tasked with killing an especially aggressive specimen of Hammertail, which frequently attacks submarines on a trading route. But it's nothing we can't handle!” He waved his hand dismissively, "Now everyone gets to work. The Eye of Europa awaits!” He raised his hand with a smile on his scarred face. We all cheered. Max and Trevor nodded in approval, while I, along with Cappy and Screw, was clapping in excitement.

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“That’s the last one.'' Screw said, breathing heavily. I was in a much worse state - I wasn’t used to carrying such heavy loads, but didn’t want to admit that I was more exhausted than a man in his fifties.

“I’ve never thought that boxes of documents can be that heavy“ I touched my burning back to make sure that everything was in its place.

“The only thing that saves us from bureaucracy is inefficiency, “He said it like a philosopher. “But it won’t save us from the heavy paper it produces,” he chuckled.

I heard a low grunt behind me. I turned and saw our First Mate. He was holding a mask with a thick hose leading to a tank in one hand and another, spare one, in his second hand.

“O-oxygen mask. Wi-with two t-tanks,” McKenzie said quietly. “ ALWAYS we-wear them in case of a-a submarine's f-flooding. And he-headphones, so we c-can co-communicate during e-emergency.” He waited for me to put headphones on my head and to attach the mask to my belt. “We-we are pulling a-away from the do-dock right n-now. “ He said as he left, heading to the bridge.

“Finally,” said Screw, when McKenzie disappeared behind the door. “ My bones hurt from sitting in one place. “ He laughed, but I didn’t know if laughing with him was appropriate.

The shaking of the boat jolted me out of my dilemma. I heard the slight whine of the reactor in the next room. The boat shook again as the engine began its work, driving the turbine. We began our journey. After a few moments, the hoarse, irregular sound was replaced by a calm, rhythmic melody. The turbine tossed the boat around a bit, making me stagger slightly. I heard water under my feet, as if it were flowing inward on the deck below. Almost instinctively, I reached for my mask. But Screw calmed me down - it was the ballast tank that began to fill - allowing us to dive deeper into the depths of the space-black Europan ocean.

# CHAPTER 5

Someone’s voice woke me up in the night - at least I had that feeling, because there is no sunlight in the Europa, not to mention the submarine - during the night, white light was replaced with the red one, much darker.

“Hey, Cub, wake up! “ Said someone with a firm and stern tone - characteristic only of Engineer Max. “Now is your shift. Report to the Captain. “

The first day was uneventful. I mainly helped Screw with carrying the load and McKenzie with looking at the state of our ammunition for turrets and checking the turrets themselves. New Dawn had two light coilguns, one covering the bottom of the ship, and the other protecting our upper back. On top of that, we had a powerful railgun, which could shoot almost everywhere, except our back and bottom. It used an extreme amount of energy to launch a solid projectile with enormous force, overcoming the water resistance.

I got up from a tight hammock with great difficulty, ignoring Cappy’s snoring above me. I didn’t even know for how long I slept. It’s always hard to fall asleep in a new place, but this place was especially hard to sleep in. The doctor’s snoring almost drove me crazy.

I descended the ladder and walked through the main deck, towards the bridge in the submarine's front. I opened and walked through the heavy door. Captain was looking at one of the big monitors - the only one that was on - rubbing his chin with one hand while holding the headphones with the other. I looked at the main screen; it showed hundreds of rows of green lines, each one pulsating randomly at random intervals. There was a second, smaller screen which showed our current depth - 2400 meters, and descend speed - a stable 1 meter per second.

“They look complicated, these things“ I stated. Captain looked at me with his keen eyes.

“Hah. It makes an impression on the freshmen sailors. It’s the main way to navigate those caverns and spot possible dangers. This thing is passive sonar. It listens to the sounds outside. The pro is that we are nearly invisible to others - other submarines and wildlife alike. But the con is that rocks, ice spires, and icebergs don’t emit sounds.“ He talked like a physics lecturer.

“So, how do we avoid them?“ I asked, but Captain looked like he was waiting for this question.

“That’s when the active sonar comes to play. It sends out a pulse of energy that travels through water, reflects off of an object, and returns to me - a receiver. Thanks to active sonar, we have the ability to locate objects that are too quiet to be detected using passive sonar. I’m going to turn the active one on. That’s why I wanted you to be here with me - I need an extra pair of eyes.“ Captain proceeded to push a few buttons, opening a new window on the monitor. I heard a single ping - loud at first but fading away immediately. He leaned toward the monitor. It now showed moving red and blue waves in three dimensions as the sound emitted by the sonar traveled the sea.

“Saw anything?“

“No, I didn’t… I don’t know anything about sonars, Captain.“ I said it truthfully.

“Of course you don’t.“ He nodded his head while still looking at me with his brown, keen eyes and rubbed his chin again. “I was only testing your attitude. You wouldn’t believe how many landlubbers who believed they knew everything about the art of sailing I met during my service as an officer in the Europan Federation Navy.” He shook his head critically.

“I didn’t know that you were in the Navy, Captain.”

“Most of the Captains here have a past in the Europan Navy. It is such a small world,” he cackled. “It’s a lo-”

Before Captain could finish, something shook the entire boat with such force that I lost my balance and fell into the monitor, while he could barely stay in his chair. I heard a high-pitched voice coming from above the submarine. In the next second, something heavy hit the upper-deck. I heard something that sounded like a small explosion and immediately after that there was the sound of falling water, like a giant waterfall.

“Verdammt!” Captain pushed a big red button labeled “Emergency” and pushed a push-to-talk button below his microphone.

“Emergency! Emergency! All crew - main your stations, we are under attack! Emergency! We are under attack! We have a hull crack in the upper deck! To your stations!”

“You!” He pointed at me. “Get to the lower deck, put on a pressure suit and help Screw with welding!”

I sped through the door to the gunnery corridor, now illuminated by blue, pulsating alarm lights, passing through Max and McKenzie, who manned the controls of the two upper guns. Max was woken from his sleep - he was only wearing pants and shoes, revealing a chest that was impressive even on Earth, with numerous cuts and scars. As I descended downstairs to the lower deck, I heard a rhythmic rumble - one of our guns. Max, McKenzie and Von Wasserwacht were communicating via radio installed in our headphones:

“One o’clock! He’s descending towards us! Trevor, fire that railgun when in sight!“

As I ran towards Spirit, who was already putting up his suit, I heard a loud, thundering sound, partially muffled by water. I heard a juicy curse from McKenzie.  
 “Missed! He is going to hit us!“

As I got to Spirit, the whole submarine was again shaken from another hit from the monster’s tail.

Our mechanic explained to me how to put on a pressure suit. I thought it was more complicated - I only had to turn the valve on the back of the suit, which opened the entire back half of the suit. All that was left was to climb up and get inside. It had been sealed automatically. It looked like an astronaut's suit, but it was green, with orange stripes on the back. It had a large visor, which provided a large field of view. I immediately felt more powerful and the whole situation looked less scary - I was somewhat isolated from the environment.

“We are dressed up,” reported Spirit. “We are going to the upper deck to weld these cracks.”

We began to climb the stairs up to the middle deck. The suit was pretty comfy, but moving swiftly took some getting used to.

“We are descending fast from that water ingress!” Captain informed us, as we were speeding through the middle deck in order to climb up the ladder leading to the upper deck. “We are going to hit the bottom in seven minutes!”

“I’ve hit him once! He’s bleedin’! Max shouted in excitement.

We climbed up and soon stood in front of doors leading to a flooded room. We both inhaled heavily and Spirit touched the pad in the middle.

We were immediately hit by a wave, which felt like a tsunami. Not only that, but we both fell down, and started to be flushed to the other side of the room. But we got up almost immediately - we knew that our lives were at stake, that without our submarine we would perish in these cold waters. We marched upstream, it was like swimming against a current with the speed of a rocket, but we soldered on. Spirit held firmly two welding tools, while I helped him stand. Our headphones were still filled by the gunner's communication, and after a few dozen seconds the water level reached our visors.

“We are five minutes from the bottom!” Captain said amidst Max and McKenzie tactical communication.

Spirit jumped forward, and began to swim towards the opened door. I followed him, but compared to his near-perfect crawl, my paddle looked pathetic. Fortunately, he didn't see that.

We closed the door behind us. When we were approaching the crack, I heard another shot coming from our railgun. Both Max and McKenzie began to cheer loudly.

“We got him! He's split in half!”

“That was nasty, good job!”

The crack was almost big enough to fit a grown man, with the hull's steel plates protruding inwards it looked like a hole made by a torpedo, not an animal. I wouldn't have believed that a living creature could do something like that if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.

We began to weld. To be honest, Spirit did most of the work, but despite it being an emergency, he instructed me how to weld. He later explained to me that submarine's hulls are made from ilydium - metal found only on Europa.

After a few minutes, we've finished our work - rushed by our captain through the radio. Water began to be pumped out, and we stopped sinking just in time - we were about one hundred meters from hitting the bottom at a high speed.

“Good work, everyone.” Captain said, when gathered on the bridge. “Great skills and even better coordination are the key to survival on a submarine. But there's just one thing before we can resume our voyage…”

“Yeah, we know.” Max crossed his arms. “We have to collect proof. I'll go with Trevor and Greenhorn.”

“Then we are organized.” Von Wasserwacht nodded. “I'll spot the carcass, and you will cut the end of his tail with a plasma cutter. Put your suits on, and let's go.”

# CHAPTER 6

The three of us crowded into the airlock. It was tight for two people, so three men in bulky diving suits were packed like sardines. As water was pumped in to even pressure, I tightened my fingers on the rope. It was supposed to show our way back into the submarine, in case our equipment broke.

“It’ll be a cakewalk, even for yo, Greenhorn.” Max said, but that didn't calm me down. I was about to leave the safety of our submarine, even though it was an illusory feeling. “It will only take a few minutes.”

McKenzie opened the hatch outside. “Dark” was an understatement. Ocean felt like outer space, a place between two galaxies, like being inside a black hole. Our flashlights allowed us to see at most a few meters, so we had to rely on the Captain's instruction. The carcass should be a dozen meters above the submarine.

We moved from the submarine’s bottom and began passing it from the side. The silence was unnerving. I could almost hear my heart pumping. The only loud sound was my inhaling and exhaling, which were assisted by my suit.

“We-we should be-be able to s-see that ba-bastard in an m-moment.” McKenzie said, looking at a smartphone-sized monitor, used to receive data from the submarine.

And indeed - we saw its body. It was long, muscular, serpent-like, with brown colored and white patches. Deep scars were everywhere - it was certainly an old specimen. Max went to one side, hoping to find his tail. We both followed. I shuddered when I realized its size - it took us a dozen seconds to reach its end.

“Here you are.” Max directed the flashlight light. The tail was hammer-shaped, bony, with a thin layer of shiny, smooth, white skin. It was enormous. When Max closed in with a plasma cutter, I realized that it was slightly bigger than him, and Max certainly wasn't a dwarf.

It took a good minute to cut through thick skin, massive muscles and steel-hard bones. Finally, the tail fell off, releasing a small cloud of red blood. I shined a flashlight on the tail, while they put ropes all around it to ease the transport back to the sub.

I was constantly in fear that something could jump on me from every angle. My whole body was trembling as I tried to focus on my task.

“D-done,” Trevor reported.

“Copy, get back to the sub,” Captain answered.

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The trip back was longer, because all three of us had to carry that giant tail in addition to our equipment.

We were a dozen meters from the submarine, when we heard a shrieking sound so loud that even in the suit we were left stunned by it. All of us flashed their lights all over the place, to try and locate the sound.

“Cap, there is something here with us!” Max said, with extreme tension in his voice, his self-confidence apparently disappeared.

We saw our submarine's small lights, indicating the hatch's location. While we frantically tried to reach it, McKenzie screamed to the radio, when something threw him at the submarine hull.

We both jumped to help him. At this moment, we forgot about our exhaustion. We had to get him and get back aboard along with our bounty.

We dragged the injured McKenzie through the hatch and into the airlock. I tried to open the airlock doors to get inside, while McKenzie groaned in pain. We heard the shriek again. When Max pushed the button to close the hatch, a creature burst through the hatch.

It was the most disgusting thing I have ever seen. Its head was horrifyingly similar to a human's, but it was bigger, with a protruding jaw. It had six small, muddy eyes. But the worst was his jaw - with two rows of countless, saber-like teeth, perfectly suited for ripping flesh. His muzzle was dripping with dense, brown saliva.

We closed the hatch and had to wait here for water to be pumped out. Because of that, the creature lost its balance - the only reason why it didn't shred us to pieces yet.

“I'm on the way along with Cappy! Use your harpoon gun!” Von Wasserwacht commanded via radio.

Max picked up a harpoon gun dropped by McKenzie, but the creature attacked with its tail from above. It threw him out of balance, making him hit the wall and drop the weapon.

The water was nearly pumped out and the creature began bubbling - it couldn't breathe air. But this fact apparently only maddened it even more. It looked at me and opened its massive jaws. My legs went weak when I realized it would only take two to three bites for this thing to devour me.

With both Max and Trevor being unable to defend themselves, I picked up the gun, aimed it at the creature and put my shaking two fingers on the trigger.

“We can't enter, when there's still water in the airlock!” shouted Cappy.

I've heard a cutting noise from behind me. Captain and Cappy tried to use a plasma cutter to get through the doors.

This neither a reptile nor a fish began to crawl slowly towards me.

“It's you, or me.” I thought, desperately trying to encourage myself.

I pulled the trigger.

A harpoon flew towards the creature and hit it between its jaws. A moment later, I heard a dull crack.

The creature made a horrific scream and began swinging its head, striking the walls with its protruding harpoon.

But moments later, it braved through the excruciating pain and focused on me again. I looked at my gun and realized I was defenseless - the only ammunition for my weapon was sticking from the monster’s jaw.

I covered my visor with my hands, ready to meet my fate, when I heard a door open and along with it - a muffled gunshot sound.

Blood gushed from the creature's head. I was lucky that I had covered my visor - or else it would've been covered with blood.

Captain continued marching forward, firing shot after shot from his personal revolver, each time the creature screaming louder. Only after emptying the whole magazine - six rounds - the creature stopped moving.

“Stay. Dead.” Von Wasserwacht said through his teeth, lowering his gun.

I got up and saw Cappy checking on each wounded sailor.

“I don't see any penetrative wounds.” He reported.

“Good. Help me get them out of their suits, let's get them to your med bay.” Captain commanded, still breathing heavily, more from the stress than from exhaustion. “Jacob, get that tail to the engineering room. The quicker we get over it, the quicker we will be home.”

Home.

I have to get home a creature native to this land, does a *dead* creature count? I have to find out. Otherwise, I'll be stuck here for God knows how long.

Our would-be killer laid harmlessly, curled up into a twisted ball. I would be sad if it didn't want to kill me. I approached it, battling my thoughts (maybe it’s still alive?), and touched it.

# CHAPTER 7

I felt familiar dizziness and pain, like being pushed through a pipe. Again, I lost track of time.

Suddenly, I found myself lying on a rug. I looked around the room. It didn’t have a metallic floor or walls, and most importantly - it wasn’t as cramped as a box, where my adventure started. I was home.

Was there an adventure? Or did I dream it? How much time has passed?

The stench made me realize it wasn't a dream. I felt the blood drain from my face as I saw the creature von Wasserwacht had killed. It still had a harpoon sticking from its lifeless body.

“What is that smell?!” My mother screamed from the other room.

“Oh my.”