



The Loch

CHAPTER 1

Sargasso Sea, Atlantic Ocean
887 miles due east of Miami Beach

THE SARGASSO SEA is a two-million-square-mile expanse of warm water, adrift in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. An oasis of calm that borders no coastline, the sea is littered with sargassum, a thick seaweed that once fooled Christopher Columbus into believing he was close to land.

The Sargasso is constantly moving, its location determined by the North Equatorial and Gulf Stream currents, as well as those of the Antilles, Canary, and Caribbean. These interlocking forces stabilize the sea like the eye of a great hurricane, while causing its waters to rotate clockwise. As a result, things that enter the Sargasso are gradually drawn toward its center like a giant shower drain, where they eventually sink to the bottom, or, in the case of oil, form thick tar balls and float. There is a great deal of oil in the Sargasso, and with each new spill the problem grows worse, affecting all the sea creatures that inhabit the region.

The Sargasso marks the beginning of my tale and its end, and perhaps that is fitting, for all things birthed in this mysterious body of water eventually return here to die, or so I have learned.

If each of us has his or her own Sargasso, then mine was the Highlands of Scotland. I was born in the village of Drumnadrochit, seven months and twenty-five years ago, give or take a few days. My mother, Andrea, was American, a quiet soul who came to the United Kingdom on holiday and stayed nine years in a bad marriage. My father, Angus Wallace, the cause of its termination, was a brute of a man, possessing jet-black hair and the piercing blue eyes of the Gael, the wile of a Scot, and the temperament of a Viking. An only child, I took my father's looks and, thankfully, my mother's disposition.

Angus's claim to fame was that his paternal ancestors were descendants of the great William Wallace himself, a name I doubt most non-Britons would have recognized until Mel Gibson portrayed him in the movie, *Braveheart*. As a child, I often asked Angus to prove we were kin of the great Sir William Wallace, but he'd merely tap his chest and say, "Listen, runt, some things ye jist feel. When ye become a real man, ye'll ken whit I mean."

I grew to calling my father Angus and he called me his "runt" and neither was meant as an endearing term. Born with a mild case of hypotonia, my muscles were too weak to allow for normal development, and it would be two years (to my father's embarrassment) before I had the strength to

walk. By the time I was five I could run like a deer, but being smaller than my burly, big-boned Highland peers, I was always picked on. Weekly contests between hamlets on the football pitch (rugby field) were nightmares. Being fleet of foot meant I had to carry the ball, and I'd often find myself in a scrum beneath boys twice my size. While I lay bleeding and broken on the battlefield, my inebriated father would prance about the sidelines, howling with the rest of his drunken cronies, wondering why the gods had cursed him with such a runt for a son.

According to the child-rearing philosophy of Angus Wallace, tough love was always best in raising a boy. Life was hard, and so childhood had to be hard, or the seedling would rot before it grew. It was the way Angus's father had raised him, and his father's father before that. And if the seedling was a runt, then the soil had to be tilled twice as hard.

But the line between tough love and abuse is often blurred by alcohol, and it was when Angus was inebriated that I feared him most.

His final lesson of my childhood left a lasting impression.

It happened a week before my ninth birthday. Angus, sporting a whisky buzz, led me to the banks of Aldourie Castle, a three-century-old chateau that loomed over the misty black waters of Loch Ness. "Now pay attention, runt, for it's time I telt ye o' the Wallace curse. My faither, yer grandfaither, Logan Wallace, he died in these very waters when I wis about yer age. An awfy gale hit the Glen, an' his boat flipped. Everyone says he drooned, but I ken better, see. 'Twis the monster that got him, an' ye best be warned, for—"

"Monster? Are ye talkin' about Nessie?" I asked, pie-eyed.

"Nessie? Nessie's folklore. I'm speakin' o' a curse wrought by nature, a curse that's haunted the Wallace men since the passin' o' Robert the Bruce."

"I dinnae understand."

Growing angry, he dragged me awkwardly to the edge of Aldourie Pier. "Look doon, laddie. Look doon intae the Loch an' tell me whit ye see?"

I leaned out carefully over the edge, my heart pattering in my bony chest. "I dinnae see anythin', the water's too black."

"Aye, but if yer eyes could penetrate the depths, ye'd see intae the dragon's lair. The de'il lurks doon there, but it can sense oor presence, it can smell the fear in oor blood. By day the Loch's ours, for the beast prefers the depths, but God help ye at night when she rises tae feed."

“If the monster’s real, then I’ll rig a lure an’ bring her up.”

“Is that so? An’ who be ye? Wiser men have tried an’ failed, an’ looked foolish in their efforts, whilst a bigger price wis paid by those drowned who ventured out oot night.”

“Ye’re jist tryin’ tae scare me. I’m no’ feart o’ a myth.”

“Tough words. Very well, runt, show me how brave ye are. Dive in. Go on, laddie, go for a swim and let her get a good whiff o’ ye.”

He pushed me toward the edge and I gagged at his breath, but held tight to his belt buckle.

“Jist as I thought.”

Frightened, I pried myself loose and ran from the pier, the tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Ye think I’m hard on ye, laddie? Well, life’s hard, an’ I’m nothin’ compared tae that monster. Ye best pay attention, for the curse skips every other generation, which means ye’re marked. That dragon lurks in the shadow o’ yer soul, and one day ye’ll cross paths. Then what will ye dae? Will ye stand and fight like a warrior, like brave Sir William an’ his kin, or will ye cower an’ run, lettin’ the dragon haunt ye for the rest o’ yer days?”

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Leaning out over the starboard rail, I searched for my reflection in the Sargasso’s glassy surface.

Seventeen years had passed since my father’s “dragon” lecture, seventeen long years since my mother had divorced him and moved us to New York. In that time I had lost my accent and learned that my father was right, that I was indeed haunted by a dragon, only his name was Angus Wallace.

Arriving in a foreign land is never easy for a boy, and the physical and psychological baggage I carried from my childhood left me fodder for the bullies of my new school. At least in Drumnadrochit I had allies like my pal, True MacDonald, but here I was all alone, a fish out of water, and there were many a dark day that I seriously considered ending my life.

And then I met Mr. Tkalec.

Joe Tkalec was our middle school’s science teacher, a kind Croatian man with rectangular glasses, a quick wit, and a love for poetry. Seeing that the “Scottish weirdo” was being picked on unmercifully, Mr. Tkalec took me under his wing, allowing me special classroom privileges like caring for his lab animals, small deeds that helped nurture my self-image. After school, I’d ride my bike over to Mr. Tkalec’s home, which contained a vast collection of books.

“Zachary, the human mind is the instrument that determines how far we’ll go in life. There’s only one way to develop the mind and that’s to read. My library’s yours, select any book and take it home, but return only after you’ve finished it.”

The first volume I chose was the oldest book in his collection, *The Origins of an Evolutionist*, my eyes drawn by the author’s name, Alfred Russel Wallace.

Born in 1823, Alfred Wallace was a brilliant British evolutionist, geographer, anthropologist, and theorist, often referred to as Charles Darwin’s right-hand man, though their ideas were not always in step. In his biography, Alfred mentioned that he too was a direct descendant of William Wallace, making us kin, and that he also suffered childhood scars brought about by an overbearing father.

The thought of being related to Alfred Wallace instantly changed the way I perceived myself, and his words regarding adaptation and survival put wind in my fallen sails.

“ . . . we have here an acting cause to account for that balance so often observed in Nature—a deficiency in one set of organs always being compensated by an increased development of some others . . . ”

My own obstinate father, a man who had never finished grammar school, had labeled me weak, his incessant badgering (I need tae make ye a man, Zachary) fostering a negative self-image. Yet here was my great-uncle Alfred, a brilliant man of science, telling me that if my physique made me vulnerable, then another attribute could be trained to compensate.

That attribute would be my intellect.

My appetite for academics and the sciences became voracious. Within months I established myself as the top student in my class, by the end of the school year, I was offered the chance to skip the next grade. Mr. Tkalec continued feeding me information, while his roommate, a retired semipro football player named Troy, taught me to hone my body into something more formidable to my growing list of oppressors.

For the first time in my life, I felt a sense of pride. At Troy’s urging, I tried out for freshman football. Aided by my tutor’s coaching and a talent for alluding defenders (acquired, no doubt, on the pitch back in Drumnadrochit) I rose quickly through the ranks, and by the end of my sophomore year, I found myself the starting tailback for our varsity football team.

Born under the shadow of a Neanderthal, I had evolved into *Homo sapiens*, and I refused to look back.

Mr. Tkalec remained my mentor until I graduated, helping me secure an academic scholarship at Princeton. Respecting my privacy, he seldom broached subjects concerning my father, though he once told me that Angus's dragon story was simply a metaphor for the challenges that each of us must face in life. "Let your anger go, Zack, you're not hurting anyone but yourself."

Gradually I did release my contempt for Angus, but unbeknownst to both Mr. Tkalec and myself, there was still a part of my childhood that remained buried in the shadows of my soul, something my subconscious mind refused to acknowledge.

Angus had labeled it a dragon.

If so, the Sargasso was about to set it free.

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The afternoon haze seemed endless, the air lifeless, the Sargasso as calm as the Dead Sea. It was my third day aboard the *Manhattanville*, a 162-foot research vessel designed for deep-sea diving operations. The forward half of the boat, four decks high, held working laboratories and accommodations for a dozen crew members, six technicians, and twenty-four scientists. The aft deck, flat and open, was equipped with a twenty-one-ton A-frame PVS crane system, capable of launching and retrieving the boat's small fleet of remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) and its primary piece of exploration equipment, the *Masset6*, a vessel designed specifically for bathymetric and bottom profiling.

It was aboard the *Masset-6* in this dreadful sea that I hoped to set my own reputation beside that of my great Uncle Alfred.

Our three-day voyage had delivered us to the approximate center of the Sargasso. Clumps of golden brown seaweed mixed with black tar balls washed gently against our boat, staining its gleaming white hull a chewing tobacco brown as we waited for sunset, our first scheduled dive.

Were there dragons waiting for me in the depths? Ancient mariners once swore as much. The Sargasso was considered treacherous, filled with sea serpents and killer weeds that could entwine a ship's keel and drag it under. Superstition? No doubt, but as in all legend, there runs a vein of truth. Embellishments of eye-witnessed accounts become lore over time, and the myth surrounding the Sargasso was no different.

The real danger lies in the sea's unusual weather. The area is almost devoid of wind, and many a sailor who once entered these waters in tall sailing ships never found their way out.

As our vessel was steel, powered by twin diesel engines and a 465horsepower bow thruster, I had little reason to worry.

Ah, how the seeds of cockiness blossom when soiled in ignorance.

While fate's clouds gathered ominously on my horizon, all my metallic-blue eyes perceived were fair skies. Still young at twenty-five, I had already earned a bachelor's and master's degree from Princeton and a doctorate from the University of California at San Diego, and three of my papers on cetacean communication had recently been published in *Nature* and *Science*. I had been invited to sit on the boards of several prominent oceanographic councils, and, while teaching at Florida Atlantic University, I had invented an underwater acoustics device—a device responsible for this very voyage of discovery, accompanied by a film crew shooting a documentary sponsored by none other than *National Geographic Explorer*.

By society's definition, I was a success, always planning my work, working my plan, my career the only life I ever wanted. Was I happy? Admittedly, my emotional barometer may have been a bit off-kilter. I was pursuing my dreams, and that made me happy, yet it always seemed like there was a dark cloud hanging over head. My fiancée, Lisa, a “sunny” undergrad at FAU, claimed I had a “restless soul,” attributing my demeanor to being too tightly wound.

“Loosen up, Zack. You think way too much, it's why you get so many migraines. Cut loose once in a while, get high on life instead of always analyzing it. All this left-brain thinking is a turnoff.”

I tried “turning off,” but found myself too much of a control freak to let myself go.

One person whose left brain had stopped functioning long ago was David James Caldwell II. As I quickly learned, the head of FAU's oceanography department was a self-promoting hack who had maneuvered his way into a position of tenure based solely on his ability to market the achievements of his staff. Six years my superior, with four years less schooling, David nevertheless presented himself to our sponsors as if he were my mentor, me, *his* protégé. “Gentlemen, members of the board, with my help, Zachary Wallace could become this generation's Jacques Cousteau.”

David had arranged our journey, but it was my invention that made it all possible—a cephalopod lure, designed to attract the ocean's most elusive predator, *Architeuthis dux*, the giant squid.

Our first dive was scheduled for nine o'clock that night, still a good three hours away. The sun was just beginning to set as I stood alone in the bow, staring at endless sea, when my solitude was shattered by David, Cody Saults, our documentary's director, his cameraman and wife, and the team's sound person.

“There’s my boy,” David announced. “Hey, Zack, we’ve been looking all over the ship for you. Since we still have light, Cody and I thought we’d get some of the background stuff out of the way. Okay by you?”

Cody and I? Now he was executive producer?

“Whatever you’d like, Mr. Saults.”

The cameraman, a good-natured soul named Hank Griffeth, set up his tripod while his wife, Cindy, miked me for sound. Cindy wore a leopard bikini that accentuated her cleavage, and it was all I could do to keep from sneaking a peek.

Just using the right side of my brain, Lisa . . .

Cody chirped on endlessly, forcing me to refocus. “. . . anyway, I’ll ask you and David a few questions off-camera. Back in the studio, our editors will dub in Patrick Stewart’s voice over mine. Got it?”

“I like Patrick Stewart. Will I get to meet him?”

“No, now pay attention. Viewers want to know what makes young Einsteins like you and David tick. So when I ask you about—”

“Please don’t call me that.”

Cody smiled his Hollywood grin. “Listen kid, humble’s great, but you and Dr. Caldwell are the reason we’re floating in this festering, godforsaken swamp. So if I tell you you’re a young Einstein, you’re a young Einstein, got it?”

David, a man sporting an IQ seventy points lower than the deceased Princeton professor, slapped me playfully across the shoulder blades. “Just roll with it, kid.”

“We’re ready here,” Hank announced, looking through his rubber eyepiece. “You’ve got about fifteen minutes of good light left.”

“Okay boys, keep looking out to sea, nice and casual . . . and we’re rolling. So Zack, let’s start with you. Tell us what led you to invent this acoustic thingamajiggy.”

I focused on the horizon as instructed, the sun splashing gold on my tanned complexion. “Well, I’ve spent most of the last two years studying cetacean echolocation. Echolocation is created by an acoustic organ, unique in dolphins and whales, that provides them with an ultrasonic vision of their environment. For example, when a sperm whale clicks, or echolocates, the sound waves bounce off objects, sending back audio frequency pictures of the mammal’s surroundings.”

. . . “Like sonar?”

“Yes, only far more advanced. For instance, when a dolphin echolocates a shark, it not only sees its environment, but it can actually peer into the shark’s belly to determine if it’s hungry. Sort of like having a built-in ultrasound. These clicks also function as a form of communication among other members of the cetacean species, who can tap into the audio transmission spectrum, using it as a form of language.

“Using underwater microphones, I’ve been able to create a library of echolocation clicks. By chance, I discovered that certain sperm whale recordings, taken during deep hunting dives, stimulated our resident squid population to feed.”

“That’s right,” David blurted out, interrupting me. “Squid, intelligent creatures in their own right, often feed on the scraps left behind by sperm whales. By using the sperm whales’ feeding frequency, we were able to entice squid to the microphone, creating, in essence, a cephalopod lure.”

“Amazing,” Cody replied. “But fellows, gaining the attention of a four-foot squid is one thing, how do you think this device will work in attracting a giant squid? I mean, you’re talking about a deep-sea creature, sixty feet in length, that’s never been seen alive.”

“They’re still cephalopods,” David answered, intent on taking over the interview. “While it’s true we’ve never seen a living specimen, we know from carcasses that have washed ashore and by remains found in the bellies of sperm whales that the animals’ anatomies are similar to those of their smaller cousins.”

“Fantastic. David, why don’t you give us a quick rundown of this first dive.”

I held my tongue, my wounded ego seething.

“Our cephalopod lure’s been attached to the retractable arm of the submersible. Our goal is to descend to thirty-three hundred feet, entice a giant squid up from the abyss, then capture it on film. Because *Architeuthis* prefers the very deep waters, deeper than our submersible can go, we’re waiting until dark to begin our expedition, hoping the creatures will ascend with nightfall, following the food chain’s nocturnal migration into the shallows.”

“Explain that last bit. What do you mean by nocturnal migration?”

“Why don’t I let Dr. Wallace take over,” David offered, bailing out before he had to tax his left brain.

I inhaled a few temper-reducing breaths. “Giant squids inhabit an area known as the mid-water realm, by definition, the largest continuous living space on Earth. While photosynthesis initiates food chains among the surface layers of the ocean, in the mid-water realm, the primary source of nutrients

come from phytoplankton, microscopic plants. Mid-water creatures live in absolute darkness, but once the sun sets, they rise en masse to graze on the phytoplankton, a nightly event that's been described as the largest single migration of living organisms on the planet."

"Great stuff, great stuff. Hank, how's the light?" "Fifteen minutes, give or take."

"Let's keep moving, getting more into the personal. Zack, tell us about yourself. Dr. Caldwell tells me you're an American citizen, originally from Scotland."

"Yes. I grew up in the Scottish Highlands, in a small village called Drumnadrochit."

"That's at the head of Urquhart Bay, on Loch Ness," David chimed in.

"Really?"

"My mother's American," I said, the red flags waving in my brain. "My parents met while she was on holiday. We moved to New York when I was nine."

With a brazen leer, David leaned forward, mimicking a Scots accent, "Dr. Wallace is neglecting the time he spent as a wee laddie, hangin' oot wi' visitin' teams o' Nessie hunters, aren't ye, Dr. Wallace?"

I shot David a look that would boil flesh.

The director naturally jumped on his lead. "So it was actually the legend of the Loch Ness Monster that stoked your love of science. Fascinating."

And there it was, the dreaded "M"word. Loch Ness was synonymous with Monster, and Monster meant Nessie, a cryptozoologist's dream, a marine biologist's nightmare. Nessie was "fringe" science, an industry of folklore, created by tourism and fast-talkers like my father.

Being associated with Nessie had destroyed many a scientist's career, most notably Dr. Denys Tucker, of the British Museum of Natural History. Dr. Tucker had held his post for eleven years, and, at one time, had been considered the foremost authority on eels . . . until he hinted to the press that he was interested in launching an investigation into the Loch Ness Monster.

A short time later he was dismissed, his career as a scientist all but over.

Being linked to Loch Ness on a *National Geographic* special could destroy my reputation as a serious scientist, but it was already too late. David had led me to the dogshit, and, as my mother would say, I had "stepped in it." Now the goal was to keep from dragging it all over the carpet.

"Let me be clear here," I proclaimed, my booming voice threatening Hank's wife's microphone, "I was never actually one of those 'Nessie' hunters."

. . . “Ah, but you’ve always had an interest in Loch Ness, haven’t you?” David crowed, still pushing the angle.

He was like a horny high school boy, refusing to give up after his date said she wasn’t in the mood. I turned to face him, catching the full rays of the setting sun square in my eyes—a fatal mistake for a migraine sufferer.

“Loch Ness is a unique place, Dr. Caldwell,” I retorted, “but not everyone who visits comes looking for monsters. As a boy, I met many serious environmentalists who were there strictly to investigate the Loch’s algae content, or its peat, or its incredible depths. They were naturalists, like my great ancestor, Alfred Russel Wallace. You see, despite all this nonsense about legendary water beasts, the Loch remains a magnificent body of water, unique in its—”

“But most of these teams came searching for Nessie, am I right?” I glanced in the direction of David’s boyish face, with its bleached blond mustache and matching Moe Howard bangs, but all I could see were spots, purple demons that blinded my vision.

Migraine . . .

My skin tingled at the thought. I knew I needed to pop a Zomig before the brain storm moved into its more painful stages, yet on I babbled, trying desperately to salvage the interview and possibly, my career.

“Well, David, it’s not like you can escape it. They’ve turned Nessie into an industry over there, haven’t they?”

“And have you ever spotted the monster?”

I wanted to choke him right on-camera. I wanted to rip the shell necklace from his paisley Hawaiian shirt and crush his puny neck in my bare hands, but my left brain, stubborn as always, refused to relinquish control. “Excuse me, Dr. Caldwell, I thought we were here to discuss giant squids?”

David pushed on. “Stay with me, kid, I’m going somewhere with this. Have you ever spotted the monster?”

I forced a laugh, my right eye beginning to throb. “Look, I don’t know about you, *Dr. Caldwell*, but I’m a marine biologist. We’re supposed to leave the myth chasing to the crypto guys.”

“Ah, but you see, that’s exactly my point. It wasn’t long ago that these giant squids were considered more myth than science. The legend of the Scylla in the *Odyssey*, the monster in

Tennyson’s poem, ‘The Kraken.’ As a young boy growing up so close to Loch Ness, surely you must have been influenced by the greatest legend of them all?”

Cody Saults was loving it, while tropical storm David, located in the latitude of my right eye, was increasing into a hurricane.

“... maybe hunting for Nessie as a child became the foundation for your research into locating the elusive giant squid. I’m not trying to put words in your mouth, but—”

“Butts are for crapping, Dr. Caldwell, and so’s everything that follows! Nessie’s crap, too. It’s nothing but a nonsensical legend embellished to increase Highland tourism. I’m not a travel agent, I’m a scientist in search of a real sea creature, not some Scottish fabrication. Now if you two will excuse me, I need to use the head.”

Without waiting, I pushed past David and the director and entered the ship’s infrastructure, in desperate search of the nearest bathroom. The purple spots were gone, the eye pain already intensifying. The next phase would be vomiting—brain-rattling, vein-popping vomiting. This would be followed by weakness and pain and more vomiting, and eventually, if I didn’t put a bullet through my skull, I’d mercifully pass out.

It was misery, which is why, like all migraine sufferers, I tried to avoid things that set me off: direct lighting, excessive caffeine, and the stress that, to me, revolved around the taboo subject of my childhood.

My stomach was already gurgling, the pain in my eye crippling as I hurried past lab doors and staterooms. Ducking inside the nearest bathroom, I locked the door, knelt by the toilet, shoved a sacrificial digit down my throat, and puked.

The intestinal tremor released my lunch, threatening to implode the blood vessels leading to my brain. It continued on, until my stomach was empty, my will to live sapped.

For several moments I remained there, my head balanced on the cool, bacteria-laced rim of the toilet.

Maybe Lisa was right. Maybe I did need to loosen up.

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It was dark by the time I emerged on deck, my long brown hair matted to my forehead, my blue eyes glassy and bloodshot. The migraine had left me weak and shaky, and I’d have preferred to remain in bed, but it was nearly time to descend, and I knew David would grab my spot aboard the sub in a New York minute if I waited any longer.

A blood-red patch of light revealed all that was left of the western horizon, the sweltering heat of day yielding to the coolness of night. Inhaling several deep lungfuls of fresh air, I made my way aft to the stern, now a hub of activity. The ship's lights were on, creating a theater by which four technicians and a half dozen scientists completed their final check on the *Massett-6*, the twenty-seven-foot-long submersible now suspended four feet off the deck like a giant alien insect.

Able to explore depths down to thirty-five hundred feet, the *Massett-6* was a three-man deep-sea sub that consisted of an acrylic glasslike observation bubble, mounted to a rectangular-shaped aluminum chamber, its walls five inches thick. Running beneath the submersible was an exterior platform and skid that supported flotation tanks, hoses, recording devices, gas cylinders containing oxygen and air, primary and secondary batteries, a series of collection baskets, arc lights, a hydraulic manipulator arm, and nine 100-pound thrusters.

I caught David leaning against the sub, hastily pulling on a blue and gold jumpsuit—*my* jumpsuit—when he saw me approach. “Zack? Where’ve you been? We, uh, we didn’t think you were going to make it.”

“Nice try. Now take off my jumpsuit, I’m fine.”

“You look pale.”

“I said I’m fine, no thanks to you. What was all that horseshit about Loch Ness? You trying to discredit me on national TV?”

“Of course not. We’re a team, remember? I just thought it made for a great angle. *Discovery Channel* loves that mysterious stuff, we can pitch them next.”

“Forget it. I’ve worked way too hard to destroy my reputation with this nonsense. Now, for the last time, get your scrawny butt outta my jumpsuit.”

“We’re ready here,” announced Ace Futrell, our mission coordinator. “Mr. Wallace, if you’d care to grace us with your presence.”

The cameras rolled. David, back to playing the dutiful mentor, animated a few last-minute instructions to me as I slid my feet into the jumpsuit. “Remember, kid, this is our big chance, it’s our show. Work the audience. Relate to them. Get ‘em on your side.” “Chill out, David. This isn’t an infomercial.”

The hatch of the *Massett-6* was located beneath the submersible’s aft observation compartment behind the main battery assembly. Kneeling below the sub, I poked my head and shoulders into the opening and climbed up.

... The vehicle's interior was a cross between a helicopter cockpit and an FBI surveillance van. The claustrophobic aluminum chamber was crammed with video monitors, life-support equipment, carbon dioxide scrubbers, and gas analyzers, along with myriad pipes and pressurized hoses. Conversely, the forward compartment was a two-seat acrylic bubble that offered panoramic views of the sub's surroundings.

Taking my assigned place up front in the copilot's seat, I tightened the shoulder harness, then inspected the controls of my sonic lure, which had been jury-rigged to the console on my right. Everything seemed stat. Looking above my head out of the bubble, I watched as a technician double-checked the lure's underwater speaker, now attached to the vessel's exterior tow hook.

Donald Lacombe, the sub's pilot, joined me in the cockpit, wasting little time in establishing who was boss. "All right, boy genius, here's the drill. Keep your keister in your seat and don't touch anything without being told. *Capische?*"

"Aye, aye, sir."

"And nobody likes a smart-ass. You're in my vessel now, blah blah blah blah blah." Tuning him out, I turned to watch Hank Griffeth as he climbed awkwardly into the aft compartment. A crewman handed him up his camera, then sealed the rear hatch.

The radio squawked. "Control to *Six*, prepare to launch."

Lacombe spoke into his headset, clearly in his element. "Roger that, Ace, prepare to launch."

Moments later, the A-frame's crane activated, and the submersible rose away from the deck, extending twenty feet beyond the stern. The *Manhattanville's* keel lights illuminated, creating an azure patch in the otherwise dark, glassy surface, and we were lowered into the sea.

For the next ten minutes, divers circled our sub, detaching its harness and rechecking hoses and equipment. Lacombe kept busy, completing his checklist with Ace Futrell aboard the research ship, while Donald showed me photos of his children.

"So when will you and this fiancée of yours start having kids? Nothing like a few rugrats running around to make a house a home."

No problem havin' children, runt. The Wallace curse skips every other generation.

"Zack?"

"Huh?" I shook my head, the lingering ache of the migraine scattering my estranged father's words. "Sorry. No kids, at least not for a while. Too much work to do."

I returned my attention to the control panel, forcing my thoughts back to our voyage. Descending thousands of feet into the ocean depths was similar to flying. One is always aware of the danger, yet comforted in the knowledge that the majority of planes land safely, just as most subs return to the surface. I had been in a submersible twice before, but this voyage was different, meant to attract one of the most dangerous, if least understood, predators in the sea.

My heart pounded with excitement, the adrenaline escorting Angus's words from my thoughts.

Ace Futrell's commands filtered over the radio. "Control to *Six*, you are clear to submerge. Bon voyage, and good hunting."

"Roger that, Control. See you in the morning."

Lacombe activated the ballast controls, allowing seawater to enter the pressurized tanks beneath the sub. Weighed down, the neutrally buoyant *Massett-6* began to sink, trailing a stream of silvery air bubbles.

The pilot checked his instruments, activated his sonar, engaged his thrusters, then turned to me. "Hey, rookie, ever been in one of these submersibles?"

"Twice, but the missions were only two hours long. Nothing like this."

"Then we'll keep it simple. Batteries and air scrubbers'll allow us to stay below up to eighteen hours, but maneuverability's the pits. Top speed's one knot, best depth's thirty-five hundred feet. We drop too far below that, and the hull will crush like a soda can. Pressure will pop your head like a grape."

I acknowledged the pilot's attempt to put me in my place, countering with my own. "Know much about giant squids? This vessel's twenty-seven feet. The creature we're after is more than twice its size—forty to fifty feet—weighing in excess of a ton. Once we make contact with one of these monsters, be sure to follow my exact instructions."

It's okay to use the "M" word when attempting to intimidate.

Lacombe shrugged it off, but I could tell he was weighing my words. "Three hundred feet," he called out to Hank, who was already filming. "Activating exterior lights."

The twin beams lanced through the black sea, turning it a Mediterranean blue.

And what a spectacle it was, like being in a giant fishbowl in the middle of the greatest aquarium on Earth. I gawked for a full ten minutes before turning to face the camera, doing my best Carl Sagan impression.

“We’re leaving the surface waters now, approaching what many biologists call the ‘twilight zone.’ As we move deeper, we’ll be able to see how the creatures that inhabit these mid-water zones have adapted to life in the constant darkness.”

Lacombe pointed, refusing to be upstaged. “Looks like we’ve got our first visitor.”

A bizarre jellylike giant with a pulsating bell-shaped head drifted past the cockpit, the creature’s transparent forty-five-foot-long body set aglow in our artificial lights.

“That’s a siphonophore,” I stated, fully immersed in lecture mode. “Its body’s made up of millions of stinger cells that trail through the sea like a net as it searches for food.”

Next to arrive were a half dozen piranha-sized fish, with bulbous eyes and terrifying fangs. As they turned, their flat bodies reflected silvery-blue in the sub’s beams.

“These are hatchet fish,” I went on. “Their bodies contain light-producing photo-phores which countershade their silhouettes, allowing them to blend with the twilight sea. In these dark waters, it’s essential to see but not be seen. As we move deeper, we’ll find more creatures who rely on bioluminescence not only to camouflage themselves, but to attract prey.”

Jellyfish of all sizes and shapes drifted silently past the cockpit, their transparent bodies glowing a deep red in the sub’s lights. “Pilot, would you shut down the lights a moment?”

He shot me a perturbed look, then reluctantly powered off the beams.

We were surrounded by the silence of utter blackness.

“Watch,” I whispered.

A sudden flash appeared in the distance, followed by a dozen more, and suddenly the sea was alive with a pyrotechnic display of bioluminescence as a thousand neon blue lightbulbs flashed randomly in the darkness.

“Amazing,” Hank muttered, continuing to film. “It’s like these fish are communicating.”

“Communicating and hunting,” I agreed. “Nature always finds a way to adapt, even in the harshest environments.”

“Two thousand feet,” the pilot announced.

An adult gulper eel slithered by, its mouth nearly unhinging as it engulfed an unsuspecting fish. All in all, I couldn’t have asked for a better performance.

But the best was yet to come.

It was getting noticeably colder in the cabin, so I zipped up my jumpsuit, too full of pride to ask the pilot to raise the heat.

. . . Hank repositioned his camera, then reviewed the list of prompts Cody Saults had given him. “Okay, Zack, tell us about the giant squid. I read where you think it might actually be a mutation?”

“It’s just a theory.”

“Sounds interesting, give us a rundown. Wait . . . give me a second to re-focus. Okay, go ahead.”

“Mutations happen all the time in nature. They can be caused by radiation, or spontaneously, or sometimes by the organism itself as a form of adaptation to changes within its environment. Most mutations are neutral, meaning they have no effect upon the organism. Some, however, can be very beneficial or very harmful, depending upon the environment and circumstance.

“Mutations that affect the future of a particular species are heritable changes in particular sequences of nucleotides. Without these mutations, evolution as we know it wouldn’t be possible. For instance, the accidents, errors, and lucky circumstances that caused humans to evolve from lower primates were all mutations. Some mutations lead to dead ends, or extinction of the species. Neanderthal, for instance, was a dead-end mutation. Other mutations can alter the size of a particular genus, creating a new species altogether.

“In the case of *Architeuthis dux*, here we have a cephalopod, a member of the family *teuthid*, yet this particular offshoot has evolved into the largest invertebrate on the planet. Is it a mutation? Most certainly. The question is, why did it mutate in the first place? Perhaps as a defense mechanism against huge predators like the sperm whale. Was it a successful mutation or a dead end? Since we know so little about the creatures, it’s impossible to say. Then again, who’s to say *Homo sapiens* will be a success?”

The pilot rolled his eyes at my philosophical whims. “We just passed twenty-three hundred feet. Isn’t it time you activated that device of yours?”

“Oh, yeah.” Reaching to my right, I powered up the lure, sending a series of pulsating clicks chirping through the timeless sea.

I sat back, heart pounding with excitement, waiting for my “dragon” to appear.

* * * * *

“Yo, Jacques Cousteau Junior, it’s been six hours. What happened to your giant octopus?”

I looked up at the pilot from behind my copy of *Popular Science*. “I don’t know. There’s no telling what kind of range the lure has, or whether a squid’s even in the area.”

The pilot returned to his game of solitaire. “Not exactly the answer *National Geographic*’ll want to hear.”

“Hey, this is science,” I snapped. “Nature works on her own schedule.” I looked around at the black sea. “How deep are we anyway?”

“Twenty-seven hundred feet.”

“Christ, we’re not deep enough! I specifically asked for thirty-three hundred feet. Giant squids prefer the cold. We need to be deeper, below the thermocline, or we’re just wasting our time.”

Lacombe’s expression soured, knowing I had him by the short and curlies. “*Six* to Control. Ace, the kid wants me to descend to thirty-three hundred feet.”

“Stand by, *Six*.” A long silence, followed by the expected answer. “Permission granted.”

* * * * *

A half mile to the south and eleven hundred fathoms below, the monster remained dead still in the silence and darkness. Fifty-nine feet of mantle and tentacles were condensed within a crevice of rock, its 1,900-pound body ready to uncoil like the spring on a mousetrap.

The carnivore scanned the depths with its two amber eyes, each as large as dinner plates. As intelligent as it was large, it could sense everything within its environment.

* * * * *

The female angler fish swam slowly past the outcropping of rock, dangling her own lure, a long spine tipped with a bioluminous bait. Attached to the underside of the female, wagging like a second tail were the remains of her smaller mate. In an unusual adaptation of sexual dimorphism, the male angler had ended its existence by biting into the body of the female, his mouth eventually fusing with her skin until the two bloodstreams had connected as one. Over time, the male would degenerate, losing his eyes and internal organs, becoming a permanent parasite, totally dependent upon the female for food.

Feeding for two, the female maneuvered her glowing lure closer to the outcropping of rock.

Whap!

Lashing through the darkness like a bungee cord, one of the squid’s eighteen-foot feeder tentacles grasped the female angler within its leaf-shaped pad, piercing the stunned fish with an assortment of hooks protruding from its deadly rows of suckers. Drawing its prey toward its mouth, the hunter’s parrotlike beak quickly crushed the meat into digestible chunks, its tongue guiding the morsels down its throat, the meat actually passing through its brain on its way to its stomach.

. . . *Architeuthis dux* pushed its twelve-foot torpedo-shaped head out of its craggy habitat, then swallowed the remains of the angler fish in one gulp.

The giant squid was still hungry, its appetite having been teased over the last eight hours by the sonic lure. Though tempted to rise and feed on what it perceived as the remains of a sperm whale kill, the immense cephalopod had remained below, refusing to venture into the warmer surface waters.

Now, as it finished off the remains of its snack, it detected the enticing presence moving closer, entering the cooler depths.

Hunger overruled caution. Drawing its eight arms free of the fissure, it pushed away from the rocky bottom and rose, its anvil-shaped tail fin propelling it through the darkness, its movements alerting another species in the Sargasso food chain to its presence.

* * * * *

Blip.

Blip . . . blip . . . blip . . .

Donald Lacombe stared at the sonar, playing up the drama for the camera. “It’s a biologic, and it’s big, headed right for us. Fifteen hundred feet and closing.”

“Are we in any danger?” I asked, suddenly feeling vulnerable.

“I don’t know, you’re the marine biologist. Nine hundred feet. Stand by, it’s slowing. Maybe it’s checking us out?”

“It doesn’t like the bright lights,” I countered. “Switch to red lights only.”

The pilot adjusted the outer beams, rotating the lenses to their less-brilliant red filters. “That did it, it’s coming like a demon now. Three hundred feet. Two hundred. Better hold on!” Seconds passed, and then the *Masset-6* shuddered, rolling hard to starboard as the unseen beast latched onto our main battery and sled.

My heart pounded, then I nearly jumped out of my shoes when the padded sucker, as wide as a catcher’s mitt, snaked its way across the outside of our protective bubble.

Eight more tentacles joined in the dance, each appendage as thick as a fire hose, all moving independently from its still unseen owner.

Even the pilot was impressed. “Jeez-us, you actually did it! And will you look at the size of those tentacles? He must be a monster.”

“She,” I corrected. “Females grow much larger than males, and this monster’s definitely a female.”

Ah, the “M” word again. If only I had known . . .

The pilot flicked the toggle switch on his radio. “Six to Control, break out the bubbly, Ace, we’ve made contact.”

We could hear clapping coming from the control room.

“We’re getting the feed. Congratulations, partner,” David broke in over the radio, “we did it.”

“Yeah, we,” I mumbled. The sound of wrenching aluminum caused me to jump. “What was—”

“Stand by.” Lacombe seemed genuinely concerned, and that worried me. At three thousand feet, water pressure is a hundred times greater than at the surface, meaning even the slightest breach in our hull would kill us in a matter of seconds.

What if she tears loose a plate? What if she breaks open a seal?

The thought of drowning sent waves of panic crawling through my belly.

“Hey!” Hank aimed his camera at one of the video monitors. The grainy gray picture revealed an impossibly large tubular body and the edge of one gruesome eye, as massive as an adult human’s head. Several of the squid’s tentacles were tugging at the sealed lid on one of the collection baskets.

“She’s only after the fish,” I declared, praying I was right. The creature tore the lid off the steel basket as if it were a child’s toy, releasing 200 pounds of salmon to the sea.

As we watched, one of the two longer feeding tentacles deftly corralled a fish, while the others resealed the collection basket, preventing more fish from drifting away.

The pilot shook his head, amazed. “Now that’s impressive.”

“Yes,” I agreed, trying to mask my concern. “Her brain’s large and complex, with a highly developed nervous system.”

“Control to Six.” This time it was the surface ship’s radioman who sounded urgent.

Lacombe and I looked at one another. “Six here, go ahead, Control.”

“We’ve detected something new on sonar. Multiple contacts, definitely biologics, not a squid, and like nothing we’ve ever heard. Depth’s seven thousand feet, range two miles. Whatever they are, they’ve just adjusted their course and are ascending, heading in your direction. Feeding the acoustics to you now. Dr. Caldwell seems to think it’s just a school of fish, but we’re officially recommending you surface immediately, do you concur?”

Lacombe turned the volume up on his sonar so Hank and I could listen.

Blee-bloop . . . Blee-bloop . . . Blee-bloop . . . Blee-bloop . . .

The pilot looked at me, waiting for a verdict.

“Way too loud to be a school of fish,” I whispered, my mind racing to identify the vaguely familiar pattern. “Sounds almost like an amphibious air cavity.”

“Must be a whale,” offered Hank.

“At seven thousand feet? Not even a sperm whale can dive that deep.” I plugged my own headset into the console to listen privately.

Blee-bloop . . . Blee-bloop . . . Blee-bloop . . .

It was a freakish sound, almost like a water jug expelling its contents.

And suddenly my brain kicked into gear. “I don’t believe it,” I whispered. “It’s the *Bloop* .”

“What the hell’s a Bloop?” “We don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” the pilot shot back. “You just called it a Bloop.”

“That’s the name the Navy assigned it. All we know is what they’re not. They’re not whales, because of the extreme depths, and they’re not sharks or giant squids, because neither species possesses gas-filled sacs to make noises this loud.”

“Are they dangerous?” Hank asked. “Will they attack?”

“I don’t know, but I sure as hell don’t want to find out this deep.”

Lacombe got the message. “Six to Control, we’re out of here.” Grabbing his control stick, he activated the thrusters, adjusting the submersible’s fairwater planes.

We began rising, crawling at a snail’s pace.

“Look!” yelled Hank. The giant squid had abandoned the catch basket and was now scampering up the bubble, its tentacles wrapping around the cockpit glass, blocking much of our view. “She knows it’s out there, too.”

“What scares a giant squid?” I wondered aloud, then grabbed my arm rests as the submersible was jolted beneath us and the sound of twisting metal echoed throughout the compartment.

Lacombe swore as he scanned his control panel. “It’s your damn octopus. It’s wedging itself beneath the manipulator arm.”

“She’s frightened.”

. . . “Yeah, well so am I. That sound you’re hearing is our oxygen and air storage tanks being pried away from the sub’s sled. We lose that and the *Masset-6* becomes an anchor.” The pilot

repositioned his headset as he dialed up more pressure into the ballast tanks. “*Six* to Control, we’ve got an emergency—”

Another jolt cut him off, followed by an explosion that rattled our bones and released an avalanche of bubbles. Thunder roared in our ears as the sea quaked around us. Red warning lights flashed across Lacombe’s control panel like a Christmas display, and the once cocky pilot suddenly looked very pale. “*Six*, we just lost primary and secondary ballast tanks. Internal hydraulic system is off-line. Propulsion system’s failing—”

And then, my lovelies, the *Masset-6* began falling.

It fell slowly, tail first, but it was worse than any thrill ride I’d ever been on. Metal groaned and plates shook, and my hair seemed to stand on end, rustling against the back of my chair.

The rest of me just felt numb.

The pilot glanced in my direction, his expression confirming our death sentence.

Ace Futrell’s voice over the radio sent a glimmer of hope. “Control to *Six*, hang in there, guys, we’re readying an ROV with a tow line. What’s your depth?”

Lacombe’s perspiring face glistened in the control panel’s translucent light. “Three-three-six-four feet, dropping fifty feet a minute. Better get that ROV down here quick!”

I felt helpless, like a passenger aboard an airliner that had just lost its engines, accompanied by an inner voice that refused to shut up. *What are you doing here? God, don’t let me die . . . not yet, please. Lisa was right, I should’ve lived a little. Lord, get me out of this mess, and I swear, I’ll—*

The sub rolled and rattled, shattering my repentance, and I fell back in my seat, my sweaty palms gripping the armrests, my eyes watching the depth gauge as I tensed for our one final, skull-crushing implosion.

“Jesus, there’s something else out there!” Hank cried, pointing between the squid’s thrashing tentacles.

I leaned forward. Several long, dark figures were circling us, stalking the squid. I could see shadows of movement, but before I could focus, our bubble became enshrouded in clouds of ink.

The Bloops were launching their attack.

Through my headphones, I could hear them as they tore into the giant squid, their sickening high-pitched growls, like hungry fox terriers, gnawing upon their prey’s succulent flesh.

My mind abandoned me then. Too terrified to reason, I squeezed my eyes shut—and was suddenly hit with a subliminal image from my childhood.

Underwater.

Deathly cold.

The darkness—pierced by a funnel of heavenly light!

Get to the light . . . get to the light—

“The light!” Opening my eyes, I tossed aside my shoulder harness and twisted the knob on the control station panel, changing the arc lights from red back to normal.

The sea appeared again, and we could see the torn hydraulic hoses and the sub’s mangled manipulator arm dangling from its ravaged perch, along with the severed remains of lifeless tentacles, all swirling in a pool of black soup.

“Control to *Six*. The ROV’s in the water. Hang in there, Don, we’re coming to get you.”

“Huh?” Lacombe pulled himself away from the spectacle outside to check our depth. “Control, we just passed thirty-eight hundred feet. Put the pedal to the metal, Ace, we’re living on borrowed time.”

I was on my feet now, looking straight up through the bubble cockpit at a lone tentacle still wrapped around the sub’s tow arm. The arm’s death grip was preventing the rest of the dead squid’s gushing mantle and head from releasing to the sea.

Lost in the moment, I stood and watched that lifeless appendage as it slowly unfurled. The remains of the giant squid’s torpedo-shaped body released, drifting up and away, away from our light.

They were upon it in seconds, long brown forms darting in and out of the shadows, each maybe twenty to thirty feet in length, ravaging the carcass like a pack of starving wolves.

They were dark and fast and were too far away for me to identify, but their size and sheer voracity intensified my fear. I was witnessing a gruesome display of Mother Nature—it was pure animal instinct—and for a brief moment I felt relieved I’d be dead long before their voracious jaws ever tore into my flesh.

Craaaaack . . .

Death danced before me once more as the hairline fracture worked its way slowly, inch by crooked inch, across the acrylic bubble. The fear in my gut seemed to suck me in like a black hole.

Lacombe grabbed desperately for his radio. “Ace, where’s that goddamn ROV?!”

“She just passed twenty-two hundred feet.”

“Not good enough, Control, we’re in serious trouble down here!”

I fell back in my chair again, then I was up on my feet, unable to sit, unable to keep still, the pressure building inside the cabin, building inside my skull, as the crack in the acrylic bubble continued spider-webbing outward, and the depth gauge crept below 4,230 feet.

I closed my eyes, my breathing shallow, insane last thoughts creeping into my mind. I imagined David Caldwell reading my eulogy at a grave site. “. . . sure, we’ll miss him, but as the Beatles said, oh blah dee, oh blah da, life goes on . . . bra—”

Just when I thought things couldn’t get worse, the Grim Reaper proved me wrong. With a sizzling hiss, the sub’s batteries short-circuited, casting the three of us in a sudden, suffocating, claustrophobic darkness.

Panic seized me, sitting on my chest like an elephant. I gasped for air, I couldn’t breathe!

Neon blue emergency lights flashed on as the blessed backup generator took over.

I wheezed an acidic-tasting breath, then another, as I watched the blue lights begin to dim.

“Just hang on, just hang on, we’ll be all right.” Lacombe was hyperventilating, clearly not believing his own lie.

The aft compartment’s five-inch aluminum walls buckled in retort.

All of us were losing it, waiting our turn to die, but poor Hank couldn’t take any more. Limbs shaking, his eyes insane with fear, he announced, “I gotta get out of here—” then lunged for the escape hatch.

Paralyzed, I could only watch the drama unfold as Donald Lacombe leaped into the rear compartment and tackled the cameraman, pinning him to the deck. “Kid, get back here and help me Kid?”

But I was gone, my muscles frozen, my mind mesmerized, for staring at me from beyond the cockpit’s cracking acrylic windshield was a pair of round, sinister, opaque eyes . . . cold and soulless, unthinking eyes of death . . . mythic and nightmarish, eyes that burn into a man’s mind to haunt him the rest of his days . . . as final as a casket being lowered into the earth and as unfeeling as the maggots that reap upon the flesh.

It was death that stared at me, brain-splattering, final as final can be death—and I screamed like I’ve never screamed before, a bloodcurdling howl that halted Hank Griffeth in his delirium and sent Donald Lacombe scrambling back over his seat.

The dragon can sense yer fear, Zachary, he can smell it in yer blood.

“What? What did you see?”

I gasped, fighting for air to form the words, but the creature was gone, replaced by a blinking red light, now closing in the distance.

Lacombe pointed excitedly, “It’s the ROV!”

The mini torpedo-shaped remotely operated vehicle homed in on the sonic distress beacon emanating from our tow hook. Within seconds, the end of the tow-cable was attached, the line instantly going taut.

Our submersible groaned and spun, then stopped sinking.

I closed my eyes and continued hyperventilating, still frightened beyond all reason.

“Control, we’re attached, but the pressure’s cracked the bubble. Take us up, Ace, fast and steady!”

“Roger that, Don. Stand by.”

Tears of relief poured from my two companions’ eyes as the crippled *Masset-6* rose. As for me, I could only stare at the depth gauge as I trembled, counting off seconds and feet as we climbed.

4,200 feet . . . 4,150 . . . 4,100 . . .

To my horror, the cracks in the acrylic bubble continued radiating outward, racing to complete the fracture.

3,800 feet . . . 3,700 . . . 3,600 . . .

My mind switched into left-brain mode, instantly calculating our constant rate of ascent against the pattern of cracks and declining water pressure squeezing against the glass.

No good, the glass won’t hold . . . we need to climb faster!

A pipe burst overhead, spewing icy water all over my back. Leaping from my seat, I attacked the shut-off valve like a madman.

“Faster, Control, she’s breaking up!”

3,150 . . . 3,100 . . . 3,050 . . .

The pipe leak sealed, I curled in a ball, allowing Hank to replace me up front.

2,800 feet . . . 2,700 . . . 2,600 . . .

The first droplets of seawater appeared along the cracks in the bubble. “Come on, baby,” Lacombe chanted, “hold on . . . just a little bit longer.”

1,800 feet . . . 1,700 . . . 1,600 . . .

We seemed to be rising faster now, the ebony sea melding around us into shades of gray, dawn’s curtains filtering into the depths.

The pilot and cameraman giggled and slapped one another on the back.

Hyperventilating, I exhaled and inhaled, preparing my lungs for the rush of sea I prayed would never come.

“Thank you, Jesus, thank you,” Hank whispered, crossing himself with one hand, wiping sweat and tears from his beet-red face with the other. “Praise God, we’re saved.”

“Told you we’d make it,” Donald said, his cockiness returning with the light.

“My kids . . . I can’t wait to hug them again.”

What were they talking about? Didn’t they realize we were still too deep, still in danger?

“Hey, Zack, hand me my camera, we need to document our triumphant return.”

Like a zombie, I reached to the deck and picked up the heavy piece of equipment, passing it forward, confused about why we were still alive.

See, you’re not such a genius, you can be wrong. Now lighten up. As Lisa would say, enjoy the ride.

1,200 feet.

1,000 feet.

800 feet . . .

David’s voice blared over the radio. Dr. Wallace, you still with us?”

Hank swung his camera around, but I pushed the lens away.

“Dr. Wallace? Hello? Say something so we know you’re alive.”

“Fuck you.”

600 feet . . . 520 feet . . . 440 feet . . .

The ocean melded from a deep purple into a royal blue as we passed the deepest depths a human had ever ventured on a single breath.

The second deepest point, only a few feet higher, had resulted in death.

365 feet . . .

Good . . . keep going, the water’s weight subsiding every foot, the cracks slowing now.

310 feet.

I wiped away tears, my face breaking into a broad smile. Hank slapped me on the back and I giggled. Maybe we were going to make it.

“Control to Six, divers are in the water, standing by. Welcome back, team.”

Lacombe winked at Hank. “Hey, Control, wait until you see what we’ve got on film.”

Life is so fragile. One moment you're alive, the next, a semi-tractor trailer plows into you and it's all over, no warning, no final words or thoughts, everything gone.

. . . At 233 feet, the bubble exploded inward, the Sargasso roaring through our sanctuary like a freight train, blinding us in its suffocating fury.

I saw the pilot's face explode like a ripe tomato as shards of acrylic glass riddled his harnessed body like machine gun fire. Hank appeared out of the corner of my eye, and then the Atlantic Ocean lifted me from my perch and bashed me sideways against the rear wall. Only the sudden change in pressure kept me conscious, squeezing my skull in its vise. Buried beneath this howling avalanche, I lashed out blindly in the darkness, my muscles lead, my hands groping . . . my mind recognizing the rear hatch even as it ordered my spent arms to turn its wheel.

I felt the surface ship's support cable snap beneath the weight of the sea. My hands held on desperately to the hatch as the freed submersible tumbled backward, falling once more toward the abyss.

The sudden loss of pressure tore at my eardrums. And then, miraculously, the hatch yawned open.

My kids . . . I can't wait to hug them again . . .

Hank!

The left side of my brain screamed at me to get out, my chances of making it to the surface already less than 10 percent, but it was my right brain that took command, suddenly endowing me with the courage of Sir William Wallace himself.

I groped for Hank. Grabbed him from behind his shirt collar, then pushed his inert 195-pound body out the hatch, into the Sargasso's warm embrace.

A laborious twenty-five seconds had passed, and I was struggling to haul an unconscious man topside through 245 feet of water.

Get to the light . . .

I kicked and paddled, forcing myself into a cadence so as not to excessively burn away those precious molecules of air.

You'll never make it, not with Hank. Let him go, or you'll both drown.

But I didn't let go, not because I wanted to be a hero, not because I actually believed we would make it, but because, at that moment, I knew in my heart that his life was more important than mine.

My lungs seemed on fire, my beating heart the only sound I could hear.

Was I even making progress? My legs were lead . . . were they even kicking?

Scenes from my adolescence flashed before my eyes. My inner voice took over the play-by-play: *This should be the last play, Princeton down by four. Here's the snap, the quarterback pitching to Wallace. He escapes one tackle, then another, and he's heading for daylight.*

The light . . . so precious. Get to the light.

He's across mid-field . . . he's at the forty . . .

Get . . . to . . . the . . . light . . .

Wallace's at the thirty . . . the twenty . . .

The liiiiii . . .

He's at the ten, with just one defender to beat . . .

Shadows closed in on my peripheral vision. I saw death's dark hand reach for me . . . reach for Hank.

Oh, no! Wallace's tackled at the goal line as time expires.

Out of air, out of strength, out of heartbeats, my willpower gone, I slipped out of my body, and drowned.

Again.