

Year 2052. August 29th. 10 AM. 90 minutes until departure and I didn't have a clue where my scuba diving equipment was. I ran through CS-162, or simply put, Challenger, the name of the submarine. I was walking towards the changing room in hopes that I might find my gear. I trudged through the sludgy water on the floor all the way to the back. It was a nuisance to have to make twice as long of a journey as everyone else through the changing rooms. I was one of the best and most skilled divers on the submarine and I deserved better. A twice of a long journey becomes more of a burden when you realize that your scuba diving equipment is not in your locker. I sighed and charged past all my comrades who at least had the opportunity to organize their equipment.

My next journey was to Sir Evans, the man in charge of the operation. He was located at the front of the submarine, his room adjacent to the pilot's. Submarines nowadays were much bigger than those in the past. There were actual rooms on the submarine rather than just seats. It was much more comfy. I walked through several chambers and barged through the slider door that had "Sir Evans" written on the name plate.

"Sir," I barked. "I can't find my scuba gear anywhere."

It took me a second to realize that five of my comrades were sitting in the room, spread out across the chairs by the conference table. I was talking to Sir Evans' silhouette, which was created by the projecting PowerPoint behind him. He turned his wheelie chair around to face me while I shoved my fingers up on the light switch.

"Sorry guys, but I have something far more important to worry about." I ignored the huffs and puffs of my comrades. It was usually how they reacted to anything I did.

"It's nice of you to drop by," he said.

"Well, with all respect Sir, I can't find my equipment and I figured that looking for it would be more of a priority than listening to a lecture on the operation, which I wouldn't be able to execute."

Sir Evans leaned down from his chair, under the table, in order to reveal in a couple of seconds, scuba diving equipment.

"I'd thought I'd never find it." I smiled as I hurried across the room.

"Caroline found it by the ejection port so you can thank her, not me."

I turned around. "Thanks Carol. You're my savior."

She responded with a tight smile and a squint of the eyes, which from it, I detected a bit of sassiness. I didn't care. With my suit, my life was complete.

"Jan, do you have any idea how significant this operation is? You've interrupted a very important presentation on the ecosystems and landscape of the Challenger Deep." His voice had elevated.

I looked back at Sir Evans, speechless. For once, I didn't have anything to say. After all, it was the Challenger Deep we were dealing with, the deepest area of the deepest area in the ocean and in the world. It was a subduction zone in the Mariana Trench deeper than the size of Mount Everest capsized, and now I was shocked at myself for forgetting about an operation that could turn out to be one of man's biggest achievements in history.

"You see, I picked the six of you because you all are the most skillful and most intelligent marine biologists and scuba divers I know out there." He then looked directly into my eyes. "Jan, I don't want to have to demote you, so whatever you have to do, get your act together."

"Yes sir." I walked to the back of the room to a chair and propped myself down along with my belongings. I was feeling ashamed, but grateful that he thought so highly of me.

"Now if I may, I will continue." And sure enough, he did. Sir Evans talked about the high pressure that we would venture into in 75 minutes. It was home to few, but existing microbial life forms just like any other deep ocean environment. The six of us would be the first to step on the deepest part of the world, and to explore unexplored waters. "Greg." He called one of my companions to the top. "Would you be so kind to explain how you all will be able to find your way around in the dark water?"

Greg, not being able to differentiate between necessary and unnecessary information, dove into a long fifteen minute talk about our tactics. What I took from it was that we would use echo sounding. The sound waves, which would appear on the sonar machine, would bounce off whatever solid it touched. The magnitude of the reflection would show how big the object was. I cocked my head up with satisfaction. At least one of us understood.

Willy then took over in order to talk about the change of temperature and pressure from the submarine to the water. He had a stuttering problem so it was hard to wait for him while he got a hold of his words, but it was bearable. It was important to listen to this one because I did not want to go pop when I left through the ejection port. I usually finished his sentences for him,

but this time, I let him finish. He always got mad at me whenever I did that, but to be honest, he obviously needed help.

It was year 2052. Marine biologists made such huge strides since the beginning of the twenty-first century to make our technology more resistant to pressure and deep water. Now, I was practically dancing in my chair from anxiety. *I* would be the first person to step on the seafloor. Jan would be the top title of newspapers for weeks. But of course, before that could happen, Trevor and Morgan had to present about the historical descents to Challenger Deep. Trevor and Morgan — it's a long story, but whenever one of them was spotted, so was the other. They were always together. I only noticed their relationship about a month ago when I was assigned to perform a lab with them. Morgan was always laughing at Trevor, and Trevor seemed so dependent on her. How romantic, but marine biology and ichthyology is so much cooler. Am I the only normal one in this room?

Anyway, the presentations weren't all that bad. I learned about the HMS Challenger expedition and the two men: Lieutenant Don Walsh and Jacques Piccard who actually traveled down to the end of the Mariana Trench in the bathyscaphe *Trieste*, a pressure vessel. It was my turn now to present, but Sir Evans let me off the hook, since he required my time in the past for other projects. That showed how much he liked me.

Sir Evans suddenly stood up. "The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has paid hundreds of millions of dollars for what they call, 'Challenger Operation'. All of you should be honored to have been selected for the job. You have 30 minutes until departure, so in the meantime, get dressed. Meet in the ejection port ten minutes of. You are dismissed."

I walked out of there struggling with my scuba diving equipment, but wherever I went, I was not going to leave my gear. *I was going to depart from Challenger Submarine in thirty minutes no matter what.* I walked to the middle of the submarine where the study rooms were located. I approached one of the open doors, and shut it behind me. The room had note pads and pens. So after settling down, I started to write.

Dear Mum and Dad,

How is life? I'm on CS-162, Challenger Submarine right now and I'm about to do one of the coolest things any scuba diving marine biologist could do. I'm going into Challenger Deep to experience life on the deepest area of the Earth. It's going to be so cool. I depart in half an hour.

Send my best regards to grandma and grandpa. People don't really seem to like me here, but I don't care. That doesn't stop people from noticing my skills. Sir Evans and NOAA think I'm the one to enter the high pressured zone, so wish me all the best. By the way, living life in the Federated States of Micronesia is awesome. You guys should visit some time. It's beautiful. Anyway, I'm talking too much. I love you both, and I'll see you soon.

Your one and only son,

Jan

Suddenly, the alarm started to ring, signaling twenty minutes until our departure. I quickly sealed the letter in an envelope, labeled it, and dropped it through the slit. I was not going to be late for the ejection. Sir Evans was going to be proud of me. I ran through the submarine to the changing rooms, all the way to the lockers at the end where I buckled up. I put on my wet suit, my fins, my snorkel, and my diving gloves. Then in an attempt to make it on time, I slid through the submarine to get to the port.

I was barely on time. The ten minute alarm rang as soon as I opened the door. Sure enough, everybody was there: Will, Greg, Carol, and then Trev and Morg. They got annoyed when I shortened their names, but I couldn't be bothered to say the whole thing. We walked to the wall where we picked up our oxygen tanks, pressure gauges, and inflator and purge valves.

Sir Evans came a few minutes later to hand us flashlights to put on our heads. He then gave us the sonar machines and cameras to film what was soon to be discovered eye-to-eye.

"You guys are the key to the future. The submarine will emit sound waves for you, but you guys also have individual machines for that purpose. The lights are for you to see because the water is dark indigo, and it will be a frightening, but hopefully enjoyable, experience. Those cameras are waterproof and can work under high pressure, so everything should work out. If you have any problems, press this bright red button, and your teammates will be able to see it. And teams: Jan with Trevor, Caroline with Greg, and Willy with Morgan. I think it's best that Trevor and Morgan split up this time. You guys won't be able to communicate once you're out there, but it shouldn't be a problem. Anyway, Good luck to you all," and then he hugged each of us.

I'd never seen Sir Evans' soft side, but right now, he couldn't handle it. He didn't know what type of emotions to feel and to be honest, neither did I. He then walked out the ejection port

as the clock counted down from two minutes. I tried to cheer everybody up.

“Why did Sir Evans leave the room? ... Because he couldn’t handle the pressure.” I snickered, but either nobody seemed to get it or their minds were occupied.

“Funny,” Carol said in a sarcastic tone. I didn’t respond.

None of us said a word as we descended from the ladder to where the door would soon spill in a piece of the majestic blue against our bodies. We assembled into our teams. Trev and Morg were holding hands. I was scared to know what was going to happen once that door opened. *We were going to be the first experiment. Would it all work out?* I couldn’t think anymore. Time was up. The door raised itself and as the cold water filled in slowly, we left the submarine, kicking into darkness.

The lights on our heads didn’t really help much. It was only beneficial for looking at objects close-up. The submarine emitted high pitches of sound every three seconds, but nothing showed on the sonar machine. There was nothing down here. We looked at the sea-floor and the beams of light followed. There were amphipods, none bigger than an inch. They looked like shrimp sucking up food from the sea floor. They were spread out on the ground, but that was the only life-form I sensed. Their source of food was probably debris that fell to the bottom of the ocean from higher levels. It was still amazing though. Their presence proved *James Cameron’s* observation about the species he saw during his descent.

Carol and Greg pointed to the ground. I looked closely. What were they looking at? Some of the amphipods were missing half of their bodies, and every now and then, there was an unequal distance between the amphipods, signaling that they might have a predator or a disturbance in their ecosystem. Maybe they were cannibals that ate their own species. After all, anything could happen 11,000 meters underwater.

Morg and Will decided to swim ahead. They forgot about the team and their excitement took over. We couldn’t call them back. There was no communicating. We just decided to follow. The sonar machine picked up objects ahead, but it was probably just Morg and Will. Carol and Greg were right besides Trev and me. All of a sudden, the sonar machine started to flash. They were reflecting much bigger objects. It couldn’t be right. The machine was broken. An object that big would have to be approximately 10 feet long. Nothing could survive in this pressure besides the amphipods.

I looked straight ahead into the dark blue and waited. Two red lights came on, and that's when I knew something was wrong. We all stopped in our tracks. We froze. One of the red beams suddenly disappeared, and our headlights revealed something swimming towards us. It was Will. I was relieved. But where was Morg?

It didn't matter. I felt a hard jab across my stomach as I was pushed a few feet away from my teammates. It wasn't human. There was a bright light swimming throughout the water, but too fast to be one of us. We weren't alone. I was scared and hurt and breathing heavily. I looked at my oxygen level and realized that it was decreasing rapidly. I swam towards Trev and directed him to the submarine. The submarine was now a dim light a few yards away. By now, we all had our red lights on. Carol and Greg followed behind us. As for Will, his light had disappeared. There was no saving him.

The bright lights pursued us, using my trail of blood as a guide. There must have been about four lights in the water, but I wasn't able to make out the appearance of the fish. Suddenly, I saw a light coming towards us from the opposite direction. We were trapped, and I was scared. My flashlight was able to catch a glimpse of its face. It had several jagged rows of teeth, and its eyes were huge, probably to see in the dark. Its mouth was wide open as it came in for its prey. Down its mouth, I could see a big, empty space for where I predicted their prey usually met their end.

Its appearance was close to that of an Anglerfish. But in order for such a huge fish to live this deep in the water, it had to have lived here millions of years ago. That was the only way for it to adjust to the temperature and pressure of the environment. Anyway, there was no time to make sense of things when it had its mouth directed at Trev. I lifted my hand. When the creature collided into Trev, I punched it in the face. It was a lame punch, but it did the job. The creature swam away, but it would return soon. I looked behind us and could see Greg being ripped apart by two of the fish.

Carol was right next to me, and we all swam as fast as we could towards the ejection port. The tanks were heavy. If we took them off, we would pop from the high pressure. There was no option. The red ladder was right there. Carol grabbed onto the pole, but before we could successfully make it alive, one of the fishes knocked Trev and I back. It turned around in a circle to make its final move. Carol grabbed my arm and I grabbed Trev's as we pulled each other

inside. The door of the ejection port was closing down ever so slowly. The fish charged at us so rapidly as if this was its last chance for a meal. I heard a high pitch shriek, which made my bones shiver, and then Trev screamed. It bit into Trev's ribs releasing blood into the water, but before the door could decapitate the fish's head, it swam out, bringing a piece of Trev's flesh with it.

Carol stepped up the ladder, and I lifted Trev up as she pulled from the top. I placed one hand over the cut on my stomach in an attempt to stop the bleeding, but I too, was hit. Not nearly as bad as Trev though. I made it up to the main door of the ejection port to meet the two medics who crowded around Trev. I threw off my air tank and just stood there, frozen in time, staring at Carol.

Carol was kneeling over by Trev, stroking her hand through his wet, black hair. "Trevor, you listen to me, just keep your eyes open."

"Where's Morgan?" Trev tried his best to speak, but only blood trickled from his lips.

"Don't you worry about that. They're going to take good care of you. ... Just stay awake."

Carol tried so hard to stay strong, but she was crying too.

"Trevor... Trevor." She was screaming at him now as he struggled to keep his eyes open.

I pulled Carol away as she fought back. She was not the only one in tears. We embraced, and as we embraced I looked straight at Sir Evans, who was standing by the door returning the stare. I looked back at Trev. The medics ripped open the wet suit, and I squeezed Carol closer to me. One side of his ribs was completely crushed, and there were deep marks in his chest from the fish. The two medics looked at each other while one of them shook their heads. And at that moment, I realized what happened. Trev was dead. We estimated it would take four hours to reach the surface, and we lacked the equipment to take care of seriously injured patients. He didn't have a chance to begin with. The medics placed a white sheet over Trev and exited the room. Carol eventually broke the hug, and looked into my eyes.

"Jan... are these waters still as majestic as we thought?"

She then exited, leaving me to attend to my cut. I guess the medics forgot about me because I was left to take care of the bandaging. But Carol had a point.

Would I ever look at the ocean the same way? Was I blindfolded this whole time and unable to see what nature really is? Are humans so far from discovering the secrets of this

world?

All these questions entered my head. There was something about being a marine biologist that made it difficult for me to accept what I had just undergone. Who knew that such an opportunity could turn out to be a fatal experience? The ripples caused by the wind's touch against the water, and the magical world of life that was beneath our land resulted in greater curiosity and excitement for further exploration. Was I wrong to go past that imaginary boundary? Will my new fear ever come back to stop me in my tracks? Who knows.

Willy, Morgan, Trevor, Greg, even Caroline. Should I have been nicer to them? It's funny how moments like these — when you are so close to death can reveal to you your regrets and wishes. Was I wrong this whole time?

I decided to put my questions to a test. I took one of the gallons of water that was sitting on the floor in the hall. I grabbed a blue bucket from the supplies room, and then I took off to one of the study rooms. I had to check something out. I filled the bucket all the way to the top, and then dipped my fingertips in. I was hesitant at first and a little nervous, but my mission was important.

I ducked my head underneath the water for the evaluation. I was shivering, but I kept at it. It was beautiful alright. Nothing could stop me. I could see a variety of colors and rays of sunshine shining upon the moving dots in the dark blue. Not that jagged monster man-eater charging at anything it saw. And then I smiled. Fear wasn't going to hold me back this time. I knew this wasn't the end of my precious time spent in the water. This definitely wasn't the end. There was so much more out there, waiting for me — waiting for Jan.