

Into the deep- Taff's story

I awoke with a start, sweat flying forward off my nose as I slammed myself to a seated position in the bunk. Something had rocked the sub, but I heard no alarms wailing, and no shouts to get the hell up and man my station, so I, ever opportunistic, decided to take a rare moment to collect myself first. No way was I falling back asleep after that jolt, and anyways, it was nearabout time to get started, no matter how much my brain ached for the warm fog of sleep to return. I need not tell you how precious sleep was in my line of work, when it's best taken in opportunistic snatches between your duties. After your first couple trips you get into a groove between long, stretched hours spent staring through a periscope, waiting for the horrors of the deep to grace us with their presence, and falling exhausted into your bunk after a quick meal. You now see why I so valued this stolen moment to collect my thoughts and breathe a breath without it being on someone else's time. 'Course, all time is company time on a transport sub, but when there's no rep breathing down your neck at all hours and your quartermaster isn't an ass, you can find yourself with moments like those. With no window to stare out of (Glass that doesn't explode from the pressure two thousand meters down is expensive) I contented myself by looking at my job booklet. Stamped at the top was my name, Desmos Taff. Currently employed by one Captain J. Bradford. First job listed was four years ago, working as a storage clerk. I despised every second I spent checking, counting and sorting inventory. But with every Coalition paycheck I was a few marks closer to my freedom. That job was my way out of Pravet Linea, my home city, and my ticket to (so I thought) cruising the ocean depths on a grand adventure. But being on a sub takes a kind of survivalist mentality, especially if shit hits the fan and the mist of chaos descends.

I was still thinking about my sorry lot as my quartermaster, Dean, poked his head in and, seeing that I was awake, held up five fingers. "Ready in 5, Taff. We're 10 kilometers out from the City of Uloch." He ducked away and I was left to pull myself free of the bunk. I zipped up my jumpsuit, slid my shiny unused .44 revolver into its holster, and buckled my gunner's helmet over my headset, mentally steeling myself for the last leg of our journey. We were currently underway on a shipping mission, transporting chemicals from Glasmere Linea to City of Uloch. The pay was good, and it was authorized Coalition work that directly benefitted the scientists at the station, so the unspoken reward was the Coalition's good graces. They pretty much ran things below Europa's surface, ever since communication was lost with Terra. Kept things moving, kept people in line. Of course, there were separatists and fringe groups who had a different idea of society. Their actions ranged from petitions to full-blown terrorism, even bombing Coalition stations. This was mostly kept under wraps, but when you're travelling station to station word gets around. I snapped back to reality, exiting the room. I entered the common area, where we had some basic luxuries such as a coffee pot (!), stove, and some chairs. Sitting in one of the chairs was Lastimosa, a powerfully built older man with a cigar always in his mouth. He was the gunnery chief and thus my direct superior. He oversaw all of the coilgunners and made sure we were all up to snuff. I nodded to him and he waved me onwards through amidships. I passed our medical specialist, Breen, as he was climbing down the ladder to the med bay, doubtlessly to check over all of the myriad equipment and supplies stashed down there, making double-sure nobody had nicked any morphine. He was a tall, thin man who had always been amicable towards me. He glanced up at me as I passed, gave me a quick smile, then continued his descent. I pushed the button to open the door to the control room: the brain of the sub. From here, the captain navigates and issues commands, and the gunners peer into

the murky depths, aiming a periscope-mounted coilgun. You have to be clutching the triggers at all hours, ready to unleash a hail of magnetically propelled bullets at any threat to the sub. I stepped through the door and to the right, and pulled myself up the ladder to the gunner's nest. This was where I spent most of my time on the sub. A cramped, plain room with three periscopes protruding from the ceiling, only illuminated by one harsh fluorescent light. Not much to look at except for the three coilgun loaders in the wall. That's where the boxes of ammunition were connected to the guns. I was told we had around seventy shots per box, but had never fired more than ten before the lone crawler or mudraptor was either fleeing or floating weightless, riddled with holes.

I passed my coworkers, Private Marly and Corporal Snock, who were already peering through their periscopes, and if they had noticed my entry, they didn't show any signs of it. I stepped over to my assigned station for the shift, Periscope One, the one connected to the coilgun on top of the sub, and flicked on my display. The screen crackled and blinked, and then I was looking out into the water. I sighed. Life down in the cold caverns of Europa didn't give you much to look at, unless you were a big fan of rocky outcrops and water. The occasional fish darted across my vision. The only sounds were the ever-present deep echo of water, the occasional ping of sonar, and the engine's low roar. The quiet was broken by the executive officer, Sid, on the intercom: "5 kilometers to Uloch." Our captain was a grizzled war veteran and the kind of person you'd expect to see sitting at a bar instead of manning a transport sub, but our XO Sid was an intelligent and careful guy. He was hard on the crew, but the captain trusted him to oversee everything. That being said, his skillset stopped short around the time he actually had to fix something or use any equipment. We tended to look down on him for never getting his hands dirty, but always stopped short of a confrontation. Regardless, I much preferred him to the XO on my first sub, a jerk named Curnow who got himself and two others killed by not properly sealing the airlock after returning from a salvage. Every time I think about people going out into the water, I remember the station janitor having to literally mop what was left of them off the floor. Still keeps me up some nights. But it also was a constant reminder of the risk I ran every time I stepped onboard a sub. Kept me on my toes, and there's nothing better to be than ready when you're down three thousand meters under the ice.

The crew I was currently with, I had been with for six months. They were mostly reliable people with whom I had the shared interest of not dying, and hell if there's a more powerful incentive out there for cooperation. The worst we had run into this trip was a few mudraptors, which were pretty much harmless as long as you didn't let them get inside the ship. When you picture a mudraptor, imagine a bipedal crustacean as tall as a man, and about twice as long, with a nasty set of jaws and you've pretty much got it. They were by far one of the least terrifying creatures native to Europa, and even then, a dozen of them or so were capable of killing everything on a sub. I had yet to see some of the truly alien creatures that lurked in the murky depths, massive beasts waiting for an errant sonar pulse to beckon them towards our little bubble of submerged hope and tear it to shreds. The chances of this happening are bone chilling on their own, but enough to nearly send you mentally spinning out of control into a panic when you're staring into the infinite blue-black of the European Ridge.

Movement flicked across my display, and the sonar emitter attached to my gun pinged. I snapped back to alertness and frantically swiveled my turret. Then, all at once, a great red eye opened silently out of the darkness, staring directly at me, and the ship quivered from a titanic whining noise. Eyes wide, I silently clenched the trigger on my periscope and watched as the bolt from the gun went sizzling towards the creature. I saw it find its mark. A terrible, ear-splitting wail emerged from the creature, and

reduced my vision to a white blur. I felt myself fall to the ground, and the ship heave under me. I heard (over the ringing in my ears) the tearing shriek of metal, the bass of distant gunfire, and some alarm blaring staccato in the distance. I don't know how long I laid there, but when I stood up, there was dried blood around my ears. Both of the other gunners were gone, and the hatch to enter the command deck stood ajar. I could see water through it. The alarm siren hadn't stopped. I figured it was get out of there and take my chances or slowly suffocate in this room. The main air ducts that affected this level were all in the command deck. I checked the utility cabinet on the ceiling and saw all that remained. One oxygen mask, and a flashlight. Handy things, those masks, but if the hull is seriously breached or just too far flooded from a single breach, it won't help about the terminal pressure that builds up. Since the pressure hadn't driven the water into my room, I decided I was OK. I jumped down into the water after strapping the mask to my face and cracking the glowstick. My flashlight alighted on something moving gently upwards. There floated our good Captain and XO, with bleeding scratches on their chests trailing blood. The only two people who could pilot our sub, even if we got all the water drained and fixed the hull breaches. This place was already screwed. I had to get to the shuttle. We mostly had it for when the sub couldn't fit somewhere or, as you've probably guessed, in case of a situation like this. It was all the way at the bottom of the ship, next to the medical bay. I swam frantically to the hatch control that led to the main access shaft and smashed the override button. It hadn't yet flooded, so I was instantly swept down into the shaft with the water that fell from the command deck, hitting my head on the ladder. I gritted my teeth and tried to ignore it. Everywhere except my face was now thoroughly soaked, and I was starting to get cold. I continued on down through the next hatch, this time holding onto the ladder so as not to injure myself further by falling. It wouldn't have mattered, because this next shaft level was already flooded. The crew quarters door was wide open, and I didn't even have the heart to shine my light in there. I went down to the med bay. The emergency lights were on here, pulsing red. I saw various supplies and cabinets floating around the room. My oxygen mask beeped a warning at me. I had about a minute left to find a new tank or escape, assuming no one had taken the shuttle yet. I launched off of the wall and swam to the door on the far side of the room that led to the docking bay connected to the shuttle. My mask beeped again. Since I had been exerting myself swimming fast, carrying the weight of my clothes, what should have lasted a minute was expended in about fifteen seconds. I dragged myself through the water to a floating cabinet while holding my breath, flipped it upside down with some effort and opened a drawer. An air pocket clung to the inside, losing some mass as I rushed to get my mask off and stick my mouth in. I took three deep breaths and plunged myself back down, dropping the mask. I kicked towards the door and opened it. Squinting into the sudden light, my eyes suddenly were locked with Breen's. He was pressed up against the shuttle door's porthole, and when he saw me he opened the door and dragged me in. I was on the verge of consciousness. He pressed a mask connected to a tube of liquid oxygenite to my face and I was back. That stuff is magic, I swear it. As soon as the small shuttle pump had worked its magic, I coughed it out and he looked at me. "Is there anyone else in there?" I shook my head. "Flooded. How long have you been in here?" I said weakly. "Since the sirens started," he said. "Maybe thirty minutes. Where the hell were you that you survived? I heard something out there, people shooting, then nothing. I figured they would get everything secured and then I could help if someone got hurt or something, but by the looks of it things went bad." We sat in silence in the shuttle for some time. The silence was broken by a gunshot. The flash of it lit up the med bay for a split second and visible through the porthole was a human figure outlined against a crawler, a creature that looks about as much as a mermaid as a shark resembles a guppy. A barnacle encrusted torso with two finlike arms that tapers into a tail. Two beady red eyes and a mouth full of needle-sharp

teeth. Killers. I jumped to my feet and Breen shined his flashlight into the room. It was Private Marly, recognizable from his uniform and red hair floating above his mask. He was shooting his revolver back at the beast while swimming desperately towards us. I got ready to open the door but the crawler shrugged off the small puncture wounds and slammed into Marly, pressing him up against the porthole and nearly ripping his arm off with its teeth. "Shit!" I yelled. The crawler dragged poor Marly back out of the med bay, still thrashing and trailing his arm by a string. "Breen, we gotta go get him!" But Breen shook his head. He's done for. He's probably dead already. He's lost too much blood. I bet everyone else is gone already too. We've gotta go." I shook my head over and over, unbelieving. I watched the sub trail down into the trench, leaking air, as we ascended. I can't say today whether he wouldn't have made it either way or if Breen just wanted to get himself out of there. I can't say whether any other crew members survived. We undocked and set the autopilot for City of Uloch. We were less than ten minutes away. Ten minutes more, and we would've all been kicking back at the bar. I can't help but wonder, even today. Did I make a mistake shooting that giant red-eye-thing? I'll never know. They have something like it at the Institute now. They call it a Watcher. Whatever it truly is, I hope I never find out. When we got to Uloch, we got hazard pay from the Coalition and nothing more. The chemical shipment is still down there somewhere. I never checked, even though I stayed on as a submariner. I've got my own ship now, do jobs there and again. I've never seen anything like what happened on that day since. I hope I never do again.