

## Mariana Trench

Jennifer knew a prize worth fighting for when she saw it. Professor Dimitri Kostakis was a burly, brusque Greek – not the statuesque version. His goatee beard and large mahogany eyes danced in accompaniment whenever he laughed, which was often. His hands seemed far too big to manipulate the cramped submersible controls, let alone work the students he seduced.

Jennifer was the current young researcher willingly under his spell. She'd ignored the warnings, even the sad evidence of his damaged cast-offs. He was a true genius, and when they were together, they skated along the rim of scientific discovery, peering over the edge. She was along for the ride, and had no illusions about how long it would last. Besides, many of the women left in his wake were themselves now highly sought-after researchers, so great was the influence of working with this man, his mind, and his legendary resources.

Jennifer didn't consider herself pretty, being short, and a little stockier than she would have preferred. But she possessed shoulder-length auburn hair and dark bottle-green eyes, a combination she knew how to use to effect. She'd snared him when he was going through an awkward break-up with another student. She had arrived to console him when he was working late in his University office. At one point, while they were both studying a large oceanographic map of the Solomon Trench, she'd leaned across it to reach a far-flung pencil, and stayed there. She turned her head and gazed at him. He'd been surprised, but hadn't disappointed her.

A year later, given that she was now alone with him ten thousand meters underneath Pacific rollers, in the most advanced research submersible in the world, she guessed he wasn't disappointed with her either. It wasn't exactly a honeymoon, though, in the middle of nowhere in the Pacific, mid-way between Japan and New Zealand, with no decent toilet facilities since departing Guam.

She stared into the darkness outside the bathysphere's single porthole. She imagined a giant milky eye being lowered into the depths on a fishing line. But they hadn't seen anything interesting for two hours, except the ubiquitous suspended sediment, shining like lazy white worms in the bright halogen lights. Sometimes it was there, a hypnotic snowstorm, but at other times it was as if someone had painted the portholes black.

The pressure outside gave her a chill. She imagined a continent of solid, ice-cold water sinking them ever deeper, burying them so they would never return. There was no plan B, no rescue plan if anything went wrong: no standby sub, and they couldn't exactly swim ten kilometers upwards holding their breath. She switched tracks; this line of thought was on its own downward vector.

They hadn't spoken for at least thirty minutes, and she longed to hear his musical voice, to dispel the silence that hung like damp fog in the air.

"How are you?" she asked, though she hadn't been oblivious to his constant tampering with the controls for the last half hour. He'd exhausted all his funding reserves on this trip. Six months earlier a deep-probe robot sub had been lost in this God-forsaken place, but not before it had transmitted a single picture. Analyzed a thousand ways, all it revealed was a blurred angular silver shape in the vertiginous depths of the trench, with a massive metallic structure in the background. After initial media hype, it was dismissed as a camera refraction error, or at best a new species of deep-water shark, and promptly forgotten. Deep sonic probes from the surface picked up nothing, but Dimitri had argued that the very symmetry of those sonic results was suspicious. She'd been one of the few non-sycophants who also found it sinister. He

had tried to link this incident with ancient stories from aboriginal tribes in the Caroline Islands, tall tales of a giant comet crashing into the seas a thousand years earlier. But whenever he'd gotten close to current sources of those oral myths, people had disappeared, unable to be traced.

She asked a second time. "I said, 'How are you?' "

He stopped fussing with the controls, and returned her gaze, his face lighting up. "I'm fine so long as you are here with me."

She loved his clichés, because she knew he really meant them, even if they all had a makeover date, when some new girl would catch his eye and become his mistress. Most Greek men, she'd heard, were like this – boys who never really grew up. She didn't care. These days, it was refreshing to know someone with so few emotional scars or hang-ups.

"You're worried," she said, hoping to spur him into conversation. If it hadn't been such a small space, she'd have expected him to stomp up and down as he did in his office, or when he was giving a lecture, exasperated at his students' inability to see beyond the equations to the larger principles, to the meaning, to the very passion of life he saw in everything. But instead she saw his ox-like shoulders sag, as he leant back in the pilot's seat that struggled to embrace his girth. He savoured all good things in life. *Gourmand*, she knew the French would call him, which English-speaking people would incorrectly translate as "greedy".

"I had hoped to find something by now. We're at least as deep as the probe was."

She'd observed him many times in action, crossing verbal swords with other academics in treacherous public scientific debates resembling gladiatorial matches. He'd left ego stains and ruined careers scraped across auditorium walls. She countered his uncharacteristic glum mood in the only way she knew would work with him. She shifted gear into scientist-mode.

"Remote probes have significant variance in calibration integrity at extreme depths. We don't know what actual depth the incident took place, or exactly where it was, to more than a precision of five hundred meters. And its black box was crushed when it imploded." She smiled, as if she'd just answered an oral exam question – with honours.

He nodded, but the frame of his smile faltered.

She knew why: it had been a major part of the mystery. The remote probe, needing no human crew, had been very tough, rated to twelve thousand meters, far deeper than where implosion occurred. As for the black box, they were all but indestructible these days, and the probe's umbilicals, once wound back up to the surface, had looked as if they'd been bitten through by very sharp teeth.

She remembered her father saying this region was one most submarine captains – *Perishers* as they were called inside the navy – avoided if at all possible. They called it *Lucifer's triangle*, a reference to its surface cousin off Bermuda. There had been strange sightings at depths, he'd told her, and the unexplained loss of at least four nuclear submarines in the last seventy years, though only two of those were ever made public. She touched the silver locket around her neck, her father's picture in full dress uniform on one side, her brother at age sixteen on the other. She rarely looked at the pictures. She didn't need to.

Dimitri's hand reached across to take hers.

"You miss them, don't you?" he said. "Is there really no one left for you back home?"

Images fast-framed across her mind: the aerial nuclear detonations, the return to her incinerated village, the news of her father's submarine lost with all hands, her brother killed in action somewhere in Tibet, and two years of Irish urban guerrilla warfare – when she'd done as many unspeakable things as had been done to her. She'd even had to change her identity for five years afterwards until the general amnesty came into force. She bolted a smile in place.

"No one," she said, and added, before her smile caved in like quicksand. "What about you? Your family in Greece?"

"Ah," he said, eyes downcast, "My beloved Santorini is still there, sheltering my mother underneath that hideous sunroof across the whole island – but from the cliffs she gazes down over the hazy sea, not up to the scorched sky. She is still sturdy, and manages to bear the forty-five degrees. Of course, she stays in during the summer. My brother Kostas lives in the Achilles dome just outside Athens; it is more for climate control and water reclamation than staving off radiation." He gazed through the hull into a remembered distance. "Greece was lucky in the War – unlike your unfortunate emerald isle – but it is now being rent in two by the Fundie movement – those for, those against. I even had mother, an Orthodox Christian all her eighty years, suddenly quoting the Alician Structure to me last time I was home. Still, maybe it's preferable to the previous seven years of bitterness after she lost two sons in the War. The happy Greece of my childhood and adolescence, of laughter, sea, sun and – "

He skipped over a word, and she appreciated the afterthought.

"– friends, is now relegated to antique postcards. Whenever I return to my University, both sides plead with me to speak for them, so I ..." His voice cracked. He stopped.

"What?" she asked quietly, leaning forward. She rarely heard him talk about home. In fact, she realised she'd never heard him speak like this about anything – he usually concentrated on his work, where he was so upbeat, so positive.

When he looked at her, she realised it was as if he was naked before her, nothing to hide behind. With something between shock and elation, she realised he *trusted* her. His cast-offs would kill her if they knew.

"I *hide* underwater." He uttered a solitary, mirthless laugh. "That's what my brother said, last time we spoke – shouted – at each other."

She reached out her hand. "Dimitri –"

A single harsh beep intruded, shattering the intimacy. His eyes widened more than usual. He twirled his chair back around to the multron panel. Her hand hung in mid-air for a moment, before she too returned to her displays.

His voice regained its exuberance. "Something is there! And it's big!"

His excitement caught her. "Two hundred meters to port," she read from her display. As the image updated with the next sonar sweep, she saw it more clearly. "It's huge," she whispered, as the sonar revealed the outer edge of a colossal structure.

"We have to go in closer," he said, almost shouting. "Prepare to release the umbilicals!" He stood up, rocking the submersible as he did so, moving to the release panel overhead.

"Wait!" she said. "Give me thirty seconds, I want to send a data-stream up before we release."

"We can send data pods up when we get closer." He began punching in the release code.

Her fingers worked fast; she had her own suspicions about what had happened to the probe. "Please, darling, just twenty more seconds." She hit a key and the upload began.

He waited only ten. "There, my love, you've had your twenty seconds!" He tapped in the final digit.

She glanced at the screen. She'd done it, the data-squirt had left one second earlier, racing up the umbilical comms line.

The sphere wobbled back and forth like a skittle not quite knocked over, as the submersible unshackled from the ship ten kilometers above, a puppet severed from its strings. The auto-thrusters switched on to compensate. Dimitri threw himself back into his pilot's seat.

"Now, let's have a closer look!" He planed the sphere forward and down as fast as it would go, 25 kph. The pulses from the sonar increased in frequency as they approached the source. It was so large Jennifer had to reset the range parameters on the sonar screen. When they were fifty meters away, he brought the sphere to a halt, and switched the forward beams to maximum. They both crouched at the porthole, peering outward to see it with their own eyes. Neither of them could speak.

Jennifer was reminded of the time her father had taken her at age seven to a Navy dry-dock, to walk beneath the new Tsunami class nuclear submarine. She'd felt her senses almost sucked in; the vessel had so much *gravity*. Words had failed her then. Yet what she saw now was more majestic. She switched on the microphone and started recording, one of her tasks on this mission.

"This is DSV Cousteau 12, Mariana Trench, July 19, time index 17:34:02, piloted by Professor Dimitri Kostakis, assisted by Dr. Jennifer O'Donnell. We are seeing a massive structure – estimated nine hundred meters in diameter, approximately round – no, more like, er, a cooling fan, each section blade-like, stretching out from a central core structure resembling a tower. '*Take us over to the tower, please,*'" she whispered, her hand over the mike, then continued. "The structure –" what was it, she wondered: a machine? A city? A ship? "– is... about seven stories high, then on top is the tower, another four storeys. The whole object is slate grey in colour, evidently metallic – no rust, abrasions or markings." She clicked off the microphone for a moment, and glanced down at the laser spectrograph display. It read << Unknown >>. The only time she'd seen something similar was when her father had shown her secret radar images from a prototype stealth submarine just before the War. She gazed at it through the wide porthole. Who could have built this, on such a scale? Her mental search of all the dockyards, even the covert ones from the days of the Chinese Hegemony, came up negative.

"Composition unknown. Perhaps stealth technology."

Dimitri tore his eyes from the porthole a moment to cast a question mark in her direction, but she continued. "Age indeterminate, spectral dating process unable to interrogate. Sensors unable to penetrate its exterior."

She felt knots tying themselves in her stomach. The ship looked like it had been dropped into the ocean yesterday – as if nature wouldn't touch it. Some of the more paranoid-sounding hypotheses about the lost probe gathered force in her mind.

She clicked on again. "Approaching the central tower – one or two windows of some description." She felt her pulse racing, her scientific curiosity competing with her preservation instincts. "Cannot see inside, but I can now confirm six outward radial sections. And –" *what was that?*

"Did you see that?" Dimitri shouted.

She'd seen a glint of silver at the edge of the porthole, something moving very fast out in the open water. She put the microphone down and began typing rapidly. She downloaded compressed files to a pod and let it go, hearing the thud on the hull as a burst of air sent it wobbling up to the surface.

Dimitri turned to her, surprised. "So soon? We only have three."

Her instincts had kicked in with a vengeance, but her scientific mind wasn't sure yet. "Sorry, guess I'm a little trigger-happy."

A higher-pitch sonar beep – faster, rising steadily with each pulse – made her start. It signalled something getting closer. She felt an icy shiver abseil down her spine. They both focused on her sonar scan, because they could see nothing in front of them – whatever it was, it was coming from part of the ship that was now behind them. With each sonar sweep, it was changing heading, erratically.

"You know what this means?" he said, as he worked the controls to turn them around.

She prayed it was his path to the Nobel Prize, but her intuition was screaming that they were in big trouble, and should leave now, though she wasn't sure it would matter anyway. They both glimpsed something pass the porthole, a hundred meters to port. A flash of grey-silver. At first it reminded her of a hammerhead shark she'd seen off the Shannon coast on a diving expedition – it had that same demonic feel to it. It was at least four meters in length, she reckoned. They stared out the porthole, waiting, counting. After five seconds it passed again, heading in the opposite direction. It was zigzagging, but getting closer with each pass.

She did the mental calculation, and kept it to herself.

"It's going amazingly fast for an underwater creature – maybe seventy kph!"

She nodded. It appeared to have legs, and moved in short spurts. *Was it riding something, or did it have some kind of sleek harness and propellant system?* She was thinking quickly, the way she used to back on the cinder-streets of Dublin when she and her gang were hunted by kill-drones. It was on an attack vector, closing with each pass. They had no weapons, and their manoeuvrability was pitiful. She kissed a fore-finger and touched her silver locket, closing her eyes briefly, and then spun into action.

She checked to see that the optic scanners had properly recorded it. They had. *The next crew will be better prepared.* She started downloading the file. As she turned back, she saw her lover still staring, enthralled, now projecting a ghostly green head-up display onto the porthole plazglass showing its speed, size, and proximity, so he could watch its progress, homing in on them, moving inexorably closer. It made its fourth pass. It was bigger than she had first thought, yet able to move with terrifying speed through the water. She predicted that the fifth pass would collide with them. She terminated the download and jettisoned the data pod toward the surface, sending it off on an oblique sideways angle behind them before it would head straight up to the surface.

He turned to her, his face a question mark. "Jen, why –?"

She bit her lip. "I love you." She hoped the non-sequitur might get through to him. She watched the recognition dawn on his face – he grasped what she'd already intuited was happening.

He looked from her, to the silver creature, then back to her. His face became stern, as he gripped the controls tightly. "No, Jen, I won't allow it. We will not perish here! Look," he pointed through the porthole.

She followed his gaze and made out an oblong black hole within the structure, at the base of what seemed to be the conning tower on top of the leviathan ship – some kind of hatch, and it was open. Dimitri slewed the submersible forward, engines whining as he gunned the thrusters to steer them toward the entrance.

*We won't make it!* Still the creature didn't hit them, and they got closer. She dared to hope, her eyes falling on her lover's determined face. But as sanctuary lay

within just a few meters' grasp, the soot-black gaping mouth of the hatch about to swallow them whole, the submersible was struck and knocked sideways as if it had been hit by an underwater train. She flew like a toy to the opposite wall of the sub, her head banging with a nasty thud. The lights failed, except for electric blue flashes punctuating the black, their own personal lightning storm. Power relays shorted all around her, releasing the acrid smell of burning cables. A precious few dashboard lights held their ground, preventing her from being plunged into abyssal darkness.

The submersible clanked onto the external metal surface, and settled. She held her breath a moment, waiting. At first there was no sound, but then a laboured creaking ushered a series of stabbing hisses as stress fractures surrendered to the pressure, and pungent seawater punctured the hull with ice-cold needle sprays. Bruised, broken and bleeding, the shock deadening the pain, she crawled blindly forward and found Dimitri's unresponsive hand. With relief, she heard his unconscious breathing. However, the water, stinging only for a few seconds before it numbed flesh completely, lapped around her feet, like Death's embalming fluid.

She coughed, tasted blood, and then spat it out. *No, not like this!* Her mind tried to outrace her two immediate enemies: the rising water and the onset of the temporarily shock-deadened pain. They were only a metre from the opening. She tried to think. What still had power? She plunged her fractured elbow into the freezing water to give her a few more vital seconds to concentrate. But the pain burst through, like red hot scalpels stabbing into her, and she allowed herself one stark cry of anguish through clenched teeth, her good hand reaching out again for Dimitri's bulk, squeezing his arm hard. She caught her breath after the first smarting flood of hurt eased off, then grimaced again, as she realised there was only one system that had any power remaining – the emergency escape hatch. She was sure she'd been in worse situations during the War, but nothing came to mind. The water rose. She shook violently. She clamped her teeth together to avoid breaking them.

Her father had taught her that in real emergencies underwater you had five seconds to decide what to do and act on it. The freezing water clawed at her waist, Dimitri's bulk floating off the floor. She pulled him towards her, cradling her elbow around his neck. She took three deep breaths, sealed his mouth and nose closed with her left hand, and kicked at the hatch release.