

2. THE ABYSS

POV: BLAYDE

LIKE MOST TALL MEN, BLAYDE EMPATHIZED WITH PROVERBIAL sardines when traveling in *Sea Journeys*. While he barely boasted six feet in height and while his athletic physique wasn't particularly thick, *Sea Journey* was less than cavernous. Underwater vessels remained the luxury of the uber wealthy and more prodigiously sized vessels were subject to more frequent visits from border inspectors in need of spare cash to pad their weekend activities. Corruption was universal and bribes were obnoxiously expensive with larger crafts so *Sea Journey* was both a coveted resource and a claustrophobe's nightmare.

Blayde tightened his buckle, adjusted the floodlights, and increased the speed of his underwater vessel. Although his suit could take him to these lower depths, it didn't afford the same protections and it couldn't match vessel speeds. A week ago, he wouldn't have used the vessel unless he was looking for high quality images or the convenience of eating while exploring. Today, these were only minor considerations. Today, he was tracking a sea dragon. Today, he was hunting.

He pushed the control stick forward and sat a little straighter as he searched for clues begitting a dragon's lair - whatever that might mean. Maybe it stayed in a large cavern, maybe it didn't. Maybe it slept on the seafloor and covered itself with sand like astrocopus or stingray. Or maybe it didn't hide at all. Maybe it hunted for large schools of fish like the one Blayde had seen with Sam last week. Still, he found himself searching the sea bottom, caverns, and every crevice he could find at lower depths near the last sighting. Part of him was exhilarated to identify a new species. Part of him puzzled over the possibility. Chances of discovering exotic, new coastal marine life was almost nothing. Every time Blayde thought he discovered a new coastal fish, he'd find it in the database somewhere, usually classified as endangered or extinct and a couple hundred miles away from its native habitat. Only the deep sea floor harbored the world's last few mysteries. Still, this one ventured into shallow waters during a storm. Why hadn't anything that large been identified in coastal waters before? Besides the bounteous hunt of a storm, what would draw a deep sea dweller into such shallow waters? Perhaps it was growing too large for its native environment? Perhaps it was searching for better hunting grounds. As a threshold issue, that made sense: the abyss never

sported much life, but creatures of the deep were commonly large from adapting to sparse hunting grounds. The mystery intrigued him and the more he thought about it, the more questions he had.

Blayde knew his way around the deep better than anyone in the area - not that that meant much. Few companies funded deep sea exploration. Fewer allowed frequent visits. Blayde had the best of both worlds. His employer allowed occasional vessel explorations and provided high-end best suits that allowed personal exploration as well. Not known for avoiding risks, he'd had more than his fair share of deep dives with nothing more than his suit. Today was an obvious exception. Despite four decades of experience, Blayde didn't dare stalk a predator this size without a better understanding of its disposition and behavior.

A large crevice caught his attention. Although relatively narrow at the point Blayde approached, he suspected it got larger not too far from here. He increased light penetration and focused the lights through the crevice opening closest to the vessel. As the vessel moved the vessel along the crevice, he noticed textures that were clearly neither rock nor coral. He moved closer and continued peering through the crevice until he came upon what appeared to be a closed reptilian eye. Blayde's icon flashed orange, indicating a significant change in heart rate, but he didn't need the icon to tell him that.

Blayde froze. Uncertain if he really wanted to wake a sleeping giant, he considered turning the lights down, focusing them away from the eye, or continuing to blaze them right at the orb. He shifted his vision quickly to the portion of the crevice he hadn't yet explored to see whether or not this giant might have an easy escape and if so, whether or not it might easily attack the vessel. He guessed not. Even large predators tended to be a bit skittish. Still, with only legends to go from, sea dragons promised to be more aggressive than other species. Regardless of the risk, Blayde held the lights still and began recording images and videos.

He quickly regretted his decision.

The dragon opened its relatively small eye, quickly closed a protective eyelid, and swam away from his vessel so quickly that the video barely recorded the passing of its tail before sandy clouds became too dense to allow any visibility. Usable portions of the recording would be minimal. Critics would claim the images were fabricated. Skeptics would abound. The only benefit of this trip would be recording the location of this crevice and perhaps, finding the entrance to the cavern. Blayde swore, moved the control stick to the left, and continued exploring the pathway suggested by the crevice. He headed east. Soon however, it morphed into solid rock and left no

visible clues as to where the entry might have been. Hours later, he still hadn't found anything. Disappointed, he began navigating his way back to the surface, careful to take the route that most closely mimicked the pathway he would have guessed the dragon would have taken to chase the school of fish last week. He moved along slowly, toward the bottom of the seabed where he guessed this new friend would be spending its time. Unaccustomed to shallow waters, it would probably swim around the bottom where the water pressure would be greatest.

Shortly thereafter, he noticed a veritable sandstorm pressing around a bend. Stormy weather wasn't on the forecast and the movement appeared isolated. Excited, Blayde increased speed to approach the area. Almost immediately, the waters grew so murky and cloudy that visibility devolved to nothing. Even with the newest clarity filters, the billows of sand were impenetrable. He shifted back and forth between lenses, standard and heat sensing. None offered details he needed so Blayde used his next best tool, patience, and hoped to get some footage that would land him a bonus and perhaps a few extra vacation days. Occasionally, a small glimpse of a tail fin or some other appendage seemed to appear but he wouldn't be sure of that until he looked at the video in slow motion. Ten minutes passed before Blayde discerned what would become his most prized footage: a great white twitching as its last ebbs of life passed and a frenetically feasting sea dragon. As sands settled, Blayde increased light penetration and moved the vessel closer to the scene. Expecting the dragon to remain disinterested by his presence or to offer an aggressive display similar to great whites, Blayde felt relatively safe.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

The dragon swam straight toward the vessel, grabbed it with its front claws and all but threw it toward nearby boulders of no small size. Despite being tightly buckled, Blayde felt like he might fly forward and through the dense, reinforced-vortel glass casing. Then, the dragon fiercely smacked the vessel with its tail, resulting in a secondary impact against nearby rocks that was so intense, water began spraying into the small control area. Blayde nearly panicked before training and instinct kicked in. He snatched his helmet, placed it over his suit, sealed up, pushed the emergency backup button, and donned his gloves.

As water spilled over the main console, Blayde hoped the airtight casing covering the imaging unit closed quickly enough to preserve the footage he'd just taken and hoped the information he'd gathered was similarly preserved. As water continued to beat upon him, Blayde set his helmet to auto-maintain suit pressure at reasonable levels and tied the imaging unit and backup drives

to loops on his suit. Water continued to flood into the control area. Vortel glass continued to tear, threatening to crush Blayde to pieces if it didn't stop. A flood of emotions rushed through his body as he pushed the red button he'd never expected to push.

The main entry to the vessel popped open and unleashed a flurry of incoming water unlike anything he'd ever experienced. He bounced around the interior of the deep sea vessel like a piece of exploding popcorn. Despite the protective nature of his suit, Blayde felt confident he'd be bruised for weeks whether or not he suffered any broken bones. Soon enough however, the waters calmed and the vessel settled on the bottom of the ocean floor.

Tentatively, Blayde peered out the main entry to ascertain the dragon's location. Half-disappointed and half-relieved, he quickly spotted the place where it had been dining on the great white. Opportunist fish were feasting on pieces of shark meat left behind but the dragon was nowhere to be seen. Blayde pulled himself out of the now totalled company vessel, engaged his thrusters, and made his way back to the dock. He hoped beyond hope he'd hit the five o'clock news.