

The Lobster Pot (03.02.24)

I sat in the crew mess hall feeling as if I was but few paces away from my abuser; the North Sea pacing briskly back and forth along the bow of the ship we'd tediously sequestered for the job at hand. It had been a long, grisly decade since the Third-Reich fell – one where the Nazi terror had been all-too-soon replaced with the domineering figure of the Red menace – and so the promise in this mission lay not in its scientific merit but in the clawing back of all but a few seconds from the Doomsday Clock.

While U-Boats had held the Home Nations at bay with their undersea slaughter, NATO and Soviet minds had sought to reverse-engineer submersible technological improvements towards the aid and understanding of the oceans themselves. While they all snapped and whimpered at each other like children, from the enthusiastic endorsement of the cross-curtain endeavour he held no doubts that the English and Soviet bureaucrats salivated at the possible mineral and hydrothermal deposits which may lie like Solomon's treasures within the deep recesses of the ocean.

We had received notice of my Soviet counterpart's arrival mere days before we were due for their leave from the Lerwick docks, and within minutes of his arrival we had forged an almost secretive companionship. Władysław was a spritely young Polish lad, and – thank god – his English was all-but fluent. I thank God, for – as the Soviets and Scots are both world-renowned drinkers – if our only method of communication was through the dram, then our minds would've been mince by the dawn of the second day.

It had not evaded our notice that we were both subordinates in this imperial escapade – for what care did we take in the minutiae between the English and Russian Empires, when we were both to be sent down into the suffocating blackness one and the same?

Their goal was to enter the submersible and retreat down the circles of the Earth until the somewhat comfortable depth of some couple-hundred fathoms before returning promptly to the surface for analysis of their initial readings. The journey was not only a testing ground for the instruments we had brought with us, but the tenacity of our spirit.

The Sea had been subdued by domineering Arctic winds by first light that morning, and so the green-light request had been broadcast to command at great pace before the jilted waves were to regain some of their respect. With affirmation received, both Władysław and myself were subsequently kitted in our diving gear before we tentatively meandered down the grated walkway to the semicircular submarine.

It's no Nautilus, but it'll fair manage ye. You'll no need it, not by a long shot by how deep we're going the day, but tae put yer minds at rest it'll keep ye sortit down tae brimstone if ye need it tae boomed the foreman's Doric tone over the speaker system – although from the muffled mutterings we could hear from inside our helmets, he may as well have been speaking to some faraway seals.

Attempting to lighten the mood, I strenuously extended my arm to flick my helmet's internal microphone on, to converse briefly with Władysław before the dive.

If you think it's Baltic out here, then just imagine how bad it'd be if we were in there pointing my heavily padded finger at the rocking Sea waves. Failing to correctly interpret my attempt at humour, Władysław curiously inquired to if I had ever had the opportunity to sail on the Polish coast before.

Graciously saving me from the embarrassment of further questioning, the foreman's raised mumbles indicated that it was time to board the vessel. An experimental craft, it had been nicknamed the 'Creel' by the engineers who had designed its iron exoskeleton and reinforced plastic sheeting into a transport which crudely resembled a transparent loaf of bread.

The Creel shuddered as we boarded, as if the anticipation of its virgin descent was that of a schoolboy's inaugural school days. Pulling the weighted door shut with a force which I fretted would shatter the entire craft, I twisted the door lock until the airtight seal and cabin pressure were assured. Reassuringly no longer hearing the lashing weight of the Sea waves on the ship's hull, or the incessant screeching and screaming of the foolhardy gulls who had endured the pilgrimage in following the boat in hope for the surefire promise of human scraps, we looked toward the bridge in preparation for the manual countdown to the initial drop.

The foreman spoke briefly and mutedly through the ship console before counting us down using both hands.

Ten – With seals in place, control is placed in the ship's hands

Nine – Arms and motors are awoken in uncanny silence

Eight – Even the divers' own breathing is muted in the suits

Seven – Chains and weights snake in hushed choreography

Six – Turning slightly, the two men share a practiced look

Five – Crew retrieve the orange safety buoys from the water

Four – Looking around the room, both men settle in their places

Three – The final straight: the sub is held like a bathing child

Two – Trepidation has gripped the Scot, as he clenches his fists

One – The foreman looks up one last time at the two dead men.

If it hadn't been for the reinforced articulation of the two suits, the two men would have been forced to have lain with splintered shins for the remainder of their journey, yet the foresight required in such a mission as this ensured that the force of the submersible passed the men by in relative comfort. Remaining buoyant for a breath, seeming almost weightless in the great expanse of the sea, the cabin was gradually lowered by great steel chains being supported by the iron triceps of the ship's ballast. Descending in a field of drained watercolour, the translucent walls of the submarine allowed the two men to view with unparalleled clarity the nauseating vastness and emptiness of the ocean.

While the remnant air bubbles from their initial drop had all but dissipated into a froth semi-obscuring the sun above, their fall came to a sudden stop with a similar ferocity to that of their initial plunge.

It was at this depth – no more than a single hundred fathoms when referenced against the meter – that their calculations were to begin, with great aid from the data splayed in front of them on the multitude of gauges and meters. The two men, in choreographed silence but for the inaudible thumping of their steps which gently rocked the sub, halved the console and proceeded with their notetaking with tentative strokes of pencil.

With the necessitated restriction of the suit, every dotted *i* and crossed *t* brought about an inhalation not dissimilar to that of any other exercise. As such, the Pole had briefly set aside his notetaking duty to balance against the side of the

machine; attempting to manually adjust the ciliaries of his eyes – as one might tune the prisms of a telescope – endeavouring to find some limit to the blue vastness.

With the morning light still labouring to reach them, the sea's undisturbed appearance had left the spirited waves of its surface behind and settled into a gradient of teal into the cloying blackness of the floor below them – the darkness consuming all that wandered into its kingdom.

After a time had passed – for no specifics could be given, as for all the dials and instruments at their disposal no single measure was that of a clock – both men had concluded their findings and had illuminated the other of such. The Scot reached over to the console beside the door and endured the burden of stretching out his thumb to press firmly against the intercom button to initiate connection between themselves and the surface.

The illumination of the little red light above the speaker confirmed that contact had been made, yet silence prevailed. Even with the limited senses made available to them in the suits, communication was available as the microphone was located inside both transport.

The expectant static buzzed around the cabin like the murmuring of an aimless midge, as time was throttled still while they hung above the expanse.

A hundred heartbeats. A thousand heartbeats. Pressing the button repeatedly, at the agonising dissention of his arm, in the insanity anxious for a spontaneous outcome.

After a flurry of unresponsive presses, the red light – their patient translator – had left them, and the midge with it.

Silence.

Stillness.

THEIR STOMACHS LEAPED INTO THEIR CHESTS AS
THE BUBBLES WHICH HAD SUDDENLY APPEARED
RACED TO CATCH THEM.

THEIR HEARTS WERE CHOKED AND THEIR INNER
EARS EXPLODED IN PAIN AS THE HEAVINESS OF
THEIR SUITS VANISHED INSTANTANEOUSLY
ALONGSIDE THE WATERCOLOUR HUES OF THE
WATER.

FaLIInG

fAIINg

fAnLiGl

FIAILiGn

fLiNaLg

FILnGaI

aFIgNII

AINiLgF

lAlGnIf

NgFaLIi

gFIILiAn

IgFnAIL

iLfNaGl

AgNiLiF

Darkness is said to be nothing but the complete absence of light – and in the cavernous jaws of the settled sea floor light had no need to be chased away, for it had been too petrified to venture near for millennia.

That darkness had enclosed the Creel as it lay, gaunt and alone at the bottom of a crack in the world, yet life flickered and sputtered in its translucent carcass.

The Scot opened his eyes; or at least he believed he did, for when the world existed in a midnight realm the existence of open eyes was deemed sufferingly pointless. He had no understanding of what time had passed since the incident, that being if time had passed at all – for there were no instruments to recall the passage, and his nerves were frayed enough that his body's own recollection existed like a slate wiped clean.

Taking a moment to mentally survey his anatomy, inspecting every twinge and ache with minute movements of the associated limbs and appendages, he was suspicious of his apparent well-health. Taking arduous measures to delicately balance his shifting of the darkness and to propel himself upright, he was able to retain a placid foothold on what he dared to call the 'floor' underneath him.

He was of no doubt that he was still inside the protective shell of the Creel, for the pressure of the deep would have already ruptured his lungs and snapped his bones if there was even the slightest tear in its protective shielding. The air of self-congratulation which had buoyed the Scot for the briefest of instances soon deflated him once again, when he became sorely self-aware of the fact that the selfishness of his intuition had led him to forget the existence of his Polish companion.

Gingerly counting his tentative paces as he shuffled from one end of the pod to the other, he dragged his palms along the floor in eager expectation of the cushioned padding of the Pole's identical protective suit. Such relief did not come – nor when he groaned and turned himself upon his path to make a parallel returning journey upon himself.

He came to the decisive conclusion that he was alone, in the smothered murkiness of the newly disturbed seabed, but how could that be? He made another pass, stretching his arms out and eagerly waving them from side to side as he ploughed his way from corner to corner of the sub - shouting as loud as he could inside his suit. Yet he did this knowing full well that its protection came with the exchange that Władysław would not have heard him even if he was pressed firmly against him.

What was that, beyond what his eyes had fancied as being the far-right of the console? Not a shadow, for the world he existed in was shadow, but a shimmering presence outside the window like a viscous tremor in the black.

It was gone - if it had been there at all to begin with.

He had seen oiled patterns in the darkness before, when struggling to sleep and staring at the ceiling, it was just his eyes struggling beyond their natural human bounds to find something - anything - out there.

Stumbling around the Creel had exhausted him of any spurred energy he had been gifted by the shock of the drop, and the Scot soon had to shakily lower himself onto the floor of the craft in an attempt at rest. Closing his eyes and regulating his breathing to try and wrestle some control over his steadily climbing dejection in his situation, he coerced his heartrate down to a more steady beat.

Thumpthumpthumpthumpthumpthumpthumpthump

thumpthumpthump-thumpthump-thumpthump-thump

thump-thump thump-thump thump-thump thump-thump

thump-thump thump - thump thump -

Suddenly the craft shook in its entirety, as the undulating guttural sound of what must - must - have been rocks collapsing caused the darkness surrounding him to shift erratically. His skeleton, which he taken such dutiful care to inspect in the mere minutes before, trembled as his stomach convulsed in silent nausea at the unseen.

The shifting of the Creel on the juddering seabed, and the resulting grasping at the sides by its inhabitant, must have activated a previously unseen power source. For the ruby emergency bulbs – which should have automatically switched on if not for the resulting carnage of the drop – spasmed into a low whimper of light, illuminating the cabin and the immediate surroundings of the Creel in an infernal hue.

The Scot preoccupied himself with casting his eyes, which even in the low light of the emergency bulbs had been lashed by their scarlet glare, over the internals of the Creel. Congratulating himself in his perseverance in his own mental gymnastics, he stood on what he had correctly presupposed to be the former ceiling of the submersible. From his own limited understanding of the Creel's anatomy, while its organs were failing its skeleton of metal and plastic were Clyde-built and showed no signs of structural damage despite its careening descent.

Steeling his mind against the impossibilities which may lie in the pit of the Earth which he found himself, he took the chance steps required to be able to place his weighted hand against the reinforced transparency which held his mortality at bay. The bulbs cast aside the harr of darkness in the area surrounding the pit - the divot itself having been formed by the force of the sub's impact on the sand which closely resembled the off-white complexion of powdered remains.

The scattered splinters of petrified coral, black even against the dense blackness of the expanse before him, lay around the Creel while the oily grazes of the fingers of seaweed fawned over the craft.

Abruptly as the previous collapse, another seismic shift shuddered the submersible in such a ferocious manner that he would have readily believed if he had seen those weeds grab the craft and shake it by muscular force. Instead, with the assistance of the reddish hue spewed by the Creel, he once more saw the viscous glare at the end of his eyes' stretched vision swim in the nothingness.

THUMP – The Scots' heart was hammering against his ribs for merciful release from its incarceration.

THUMP – He could hear it in his ears now, even with the dampening of his hearing by the suit and the Creel itself.

THUMP – His fingers panicked on his extremities, and he held his hands together to create safety in numbers.

THUMP – His visor, which was translucent from his chin to his forehead, began to obscure with the hyperventilation of his lungs in a thickening film of fog.

Yet through that rapidly thickening fog on the inside of his helmet, he pushed his vision to the limit to make sure he didn't trip as he pressed his body against the transparency of the Creel in order to keep himself upright.

Though his vision was now muddled in the storm of moisture in his helmet, he reached it out into the nothingness for no other reason than that inert human desire to know.

And the blackness of the dark hauled itself upwards; disclosing on the being in the glass box the whites of a titanic eye – that of the Skiasynthetic existence which had been witnessing the Scot and his happenings in the Creel since their abrupt descent.

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News that the cross-curtain mission off the coast of Shetland had gone awry was reported to both respective bodies the instant the load-bearing arm of the ship had buckled. Before a response had even been heard, the crew had rallied into lifeboats and battled the Sea to attempt some – any – kind of rescue.

No contact had been made in the hours since the initial break in contact, and all feared for the worst – that was, until they had managed to create an inbound signal from the Creel's on board microphone. While they had no time to forge an outbound message, the sound of possible shuffling – gradually leaving and entering the vicinity of the microphone's limited range – could be heard.

That was until the most horrific, guttural cry was heard: deep and aged like a a titanic whale – yet from seven-thousand fathoms below.

Then contact was received from both NATO and the USSR, in joint commitment – both men were to be left at this crevice of nothingness. A fishing accident they were to say.

Yet - through the synodic layers of vast ocean life, to the abyss and then further to the graveyard of all things - there exists the paltriest outpost of humanity.

A little red light mumbled to itself, still broadcasting its whispers while now politely listening to any conversation which may be cast its way. One such voice, spoke to the empty Creel in a calm yet authoritative voice:

*"On behalf of the President, I am now announc – ead with the launching of small unmanned earth-circling satt – 58. This program will for the first time in history enable scientists throughout the world to – regions beyond the earth's atmosph
- "*

* * *

And the blackness of the dark listened with primordial understanding and hauled itself upwards.