## CHPTER2 MARIANA TRENCH

Seven thousand metres below the surface of the Western Pacific Ocean, Cassie White watched as several ghost-white snailfishes rapidly undulated down the sheer cliff-face on her right, over the boots of her armoured 'behemoth' diving suit, and straight over the ledge on which she stood.

They were there and gone in a flash, darting in and out of the twin beams of her helmet lamps.

The servos of her behemoth suit whined faintly as she turned to look back the way they had come, thinking she knew what might have spooked the creatures. Past the ledge lay a watery void that ended four thousand metres further down at the bottom of the Mariana Trench, where the water pressure was more than a thousand times the atmospheric pressure back up on the surface: more than enough to crush an unprotected human into toothpaste in the blink of an eye.

Not that this prevented Cassie from sometimes venturing into such depths when required. Her suit, constructed from ultra-strong composite materials, was built to maintain an internal air pressure equivalent to sea level back on Earth, allowing her to ascend or descend at will without having to worry about the bends.

Shuffling closer to the edge, Cassie peered down into the

abyss. Her quarter-ton suit might be the most advanced diving technology the late 21st Century could provide, but it still felt cumbersome and restrictive.

Far down in the crushing depths, she fancied she could glimpse the distant red glow of a hydrothermal vent. But it was most likely her imagination. Other than the snailfish, few things could live at depths of eleven thousand metres, and until just a few decades before, barely a dozen people in all had travelled to the deepest parts of the Trench.

That was a long way from being the case these days.

"Cassie?" Molyneux's voice sounded loud and flat in her right ear. "You're a little close to that ledge. Careful you don't lose your footing. Any sign of the target? Over."

Not that she felt in any real danger: her suit's jets were powerful enough to propel her back onto solid ground should she lose her footing, but it was far safer, at such depths, to conserve power whenever possible.

Molyneux had sounded as clear as if he'd been standing right next to her instead of aboard a support ship on the surface. Ordinary radio communications being impossible in salt water, until recently, they had relied on sonar-based radio. Unfortunately, not only had this proved unreliable, it was easy for pirate fleets, combing the seabed for rare earths and minerals, to intercept their comms.

More recently, the Joint EU-Australasia Oceanic Task Force had switched to communicating with Cassie and their other investigative divers via a surface buoy trailing a six-mile long cable dotted with laser transceivers lowered into the ocean depths. This allowed Cassie to maintain crystal-clear two-way communications via laser relay with the Deep Range, currently anchored several kilometres from her current position and a hundred kilometres east of Guam, so long as she remained in the line of sight of the lasers.

"Nothing yet," Cassie responded, stepping back from the ledge. "Just doing a little sightseeing. Over."

"Stay on course," Molyneux reminded her. "And stay in comms range. Sonar shows the factory heading straight towards you, but thirty metres higher than your current location. You'll need to move fast to intercept it. Over."

Cassie pushed a relief map of the Mariana Trench onto her HUD, revealing a deep knife wound slashed through the floor of the western Pacific Ocean, three hundred kilometres southwest of Guam. The Deep Range appeared as a glowing yellow dot. A dozen kilometres north-east of its position, a cluster of orange dots represented the New Chinese Republic pirate fleet they had been tracking for three days now.

Give or take a few metres in any direction, the fleet was right above Cassie's current position. Not that she would see anything by looking upwards, except a darkness so thick and tangible it felt alive.

Her dive lights showed the ledge merging with the cliff face just a few metres ahead of her: the only way left to go was up.

The environment beyond her visible range appeared on her HUD as a series of pale green contours laid over black, the lines clumping together at greater depths as the trench narrowed. If at that moment the ocean had suddenly become transparent, Cassie would find herself standing on a narrow ledge halfway up a valley slope with a three kilometre drop to her left. From bottom to top, that same valley was wide and deep enough to fit all of Mount Everest inside it.

Not that heights had ever bothered her, thanks to her optimized genetics. Even if they had, four years working in LEO and a couple of stints working lunar resupply would have cured her of any such fear.

Thinking of the Moon made her think of Sergio.

Bad thought, she chided herself, pushing the memory away. She had a job to do and needed a clear mind.

Ascending the cliff, even with the suit's jets to help her, proved sufficiently arduous that she soon felt as if she might

actually drown in her own sweat. But the higher she ascended, the more she could feel the steady thrum of nearby machinery work its way up through her titanium and reinforced-carbon boots.

Excitement gripped Cassie, like a hunter peering through a rifle's sights as a deer wandered into view.

Gasping from the effort, Cassie hauled herself up and onto a broad rock shelf many times wider than the ledge from which she had ascended. Her lights revealed a mottled, almost lunar landscape of grey sand.

The thrum of machinery became deeper and more rhythmic, the lights of her suit revealing clouds of billowing sediment.

From out of these clouds emerged a robot factory the size of the drive-in diner she'd eaten lunch in for the best part of six years while growing up in California. It took up half of the rock shelf on which she now stood. The factory kept close to the cliff face, leaving plenty of room between it and Cassie, who remained close to the edge.

Switching over to sonar imaging revealed finer details. The factory resembled a warehouse mounted on top of threshing blades: these blades ground sand and rock into rubble, sucking it all into the factory's interior with the aid of high-powered pumps.

There, the factory would sift through the rock and sand for precious manganese nodules containing nickel, cobalt, and copper, and any number of rare earths essential to modern industry. In the meantime, its titanium and diamond rotors continued ripping up the seabed—causing irreversible damage to flora and fauna entirely unique to these depths.

No wonder the snailfish had fled.

Lifting her chin, Cassie focused her sonar on a point just above the factory. This revealed a snaking tube rising from its roof and out of sight.

To her surprise, the factory slowed, then changed direc-

tion, veering towards her and the precipice. She moved further along the rock shelf, watching as it paused, then reoriented itself until it was again pointed straight at her.

Well, thought Cassie, her throat suddenly dry, there's a new development.

The factory didn't move fast, but she realized with a shock it had already blocked her from returning the way she had come. Of course, it might simply be acting in response to the algorithms programmed into its primitive AI; or, just maybe, someone aboard the NCR pirate fleet had spotted a sonar ping of her suit and deliberately steered the machine towards her.

After all, what was one dead investigative diver next to the endless mineral bounty of the deep ocean?

As she retreated from the advancing factory, Cassie glanced down past the edge of the rock shelf and into the murky depths below. If she was forced to descend again, she'd use up much of her suit's remaining power—and risk running out of air before she could get back to her mini-sub.

Cassie called the Deep Range and explained her situation. For the moment, at least, she was still in the direct line of sight of the comms cable. Whether that would remain the case was another matter.

"It's deliberate provocation," said Molyneux. It was easy to picture him hunched over a monitor on board the ship. "I'll radio the NCR fleet and tell them to desist immediately. Let's see Hu worm his way out of this one. Over."

Even walking backwards, Cassie could outpace the factory easily. It didn't move at much more than a slow walking pace. So far, she didn't feel threatened. Much.

"Can you patch me in so I can listen?" she asked. "Over."

She now tried moving the other way, back towards the cliff face. And, again, the factory corrected its course until it was once more pointed straight at her.

"Sure," Molyneux replied. "Give me a minute. Over."

Had the factory picked up speed, Cassie wondered, or was it her imagination?

A few seconds after stepping around a boulder that had been in her way, Cassie watched with fascination as the factory flowed over this obstruction like a robotic carpet monster. It was constructed, she saw now, from discrete parts that were linked in some fashion, a neat design modification that allowed it to navigate even the most volatile terrain.

Goddamnit, she thought: it was picking up speed.

Picking up her pace, Cassie tried to ignore the sudden rapid thrum of her heart. She listened as Molyneux radioed the Fu Yuan He, the lead vessel in the pirate fleet.

"Please respond," said Molyneux. "This is agent Alfred Molyneux of the Joint EU-Australasia Oceanic Task Force. Your ships are in violation of the 2035 international environmental preservation treaties and the terms of the 2090 Beijing conference. You are ordered to cease mining immediately and prepare for boarding by our agents, followed by a full inspection of your fleet. Failure to comply may result in the confiscation of your ships and the arrest of your senior crew under international law. Please respond. Over."

By now, the factory was moving fast enough that Cassie had to turn around and jog ahead of it to maintain her distance. Clouds of sand and black sediment billowed up around her suit, further obscuring her vision.

"Alfred?" The sound of her laboured breath filled her helmet. "Please tell them to call that thing off. It's getting too close for comfort. Over."

"They won't respond to my hail," Molyneux replied, his voice sounding hoarse. "The sons of bitches are ignoring me. Suggest you abort immediately. Over."

"Bonuses are up this year, right? And it's been months since we bagged one of these machines. Over."

"Cassie," said Molyneux, a warning in his voice. "That's no reason to take unnecessary—"

Bad idea or not, she muted the comms link so she could think.

Just the year before, an illegal factory a few dozen kilometres off the coast of Taiwan had sideswiped another diver. Although he'd survived, and the recovered factory used as evidence in a successful prosecution, severe concussion and oxygen depletion had put him in a wheelchair for months. There were rumours he still had problems feeding himself.

Not that any such thing would happen to her. Nosirree. She had plans for the bonus she'd receive if they could haul this factory back up to the surface as evidence.

As she retreated, the shelf shrank to barely two or three metres in width. The factory couldn't possibly navigate such a ridiculously narrow ledge, and whoever was in charge of the machine would surely give up their pursuit...?

Instead, the factory kept coming towards her without pause. It flowed onto the ledge in a seemingly relentless pursuit, tipping almost entirely onto one side so that its treads could grip the sheer cliff face on one side.

Under different circumstances, Cassie might have applauded.

Lacking any remaining options, Cassie hit the switch for her suit's jets. At least, once she'd climbed out of the thing's range—

Nothing happened.

Shit.

A half-choked scream of rage wormed its way up from deep inside her throat.

She started to ascend the cliff face, hand over hand—far from easy to do with both hands stuck inside enormous powered gloves, but she'd trained for moments like this. And the servos did most of the work.

A foothold gave way, and she dropped, arms flailing, onto the sharply tilted roof of the factory. Instantly, the factory came to a halt. Cassie slid, screaming, down the angled roof towards the waiting abyss.

By some dint of enormous luck, she snagged a rung on the factory's roof, something that the divers who had assembled it in shallower waters had probably used.

Gripping the rung tightly, the factory's outer plates shifting and moving beneath her, she glimpsed the whirling machinery deep inside.

Looking around in desperation, Cassie's lights revealed the flexible tube that connected the factory to the pirate fleet on the ocean surface—and an idea came to her.

Edging closer to the locking mechanism that connected the tube to the factory, Cassie watched as the tube flexed and twisted, siphoning up tons of rubble. Then, at last, she saw what she was looking for: a lever.

Cassie reached for the lever with her one free hand and missed the first three times. The fourth attempt proved to be the winning try. When she yanked on the lever, the cable came loose, and rubble and dirt spewed out from the factory's interior. The tube's lower end meanwhile whipped out of sight.

Cassie leapt upwards. Despite the failure of her pressurized jets, her suit still had enough juice in its servos that she could jump several metres up from the roof of the factory. Reaching out, she grabbed hold of a rocky protrusion jutting out from the face of the cliff and held on for her life, feeling like the effort had knocked all the wind out of her.

The sudden release of the debris tube had caused the factory to tip over too far. Its lower treads lost their grip on the ledge, and Cassie watched in numb amazement as the machine slid into the abyss, tumbling end over end and out of sight.

Well, thought Cassie, breathing hard, there goes my bonus.

She almost laughed, but found herself choking back tears instead. The sons of bitches tried to kill me.

That had never happened before.

She clung on for another few minutes until her heart rate slowed, and then she climbed slowly back down.

Any day that doesn't end with you crushed into toothpaste is a good day, Cassie reminded herself, trudging back towards her mini-sub most of a klick away.

Halfway there, she halted, her sonar picking up something long and sinuous, whipping through the deep water. At first, her senses interpreted it as a creature—some impossibly long eel, chasing after the tumbling factory—then realized it must be the kilometres-long debris tube.

Hu was getting rid of any remaining evidence. After another few seconds, the entire tube had followed the factory into oblivion.

"BORDEL DE MERDE," said a deckhand, staring in shock at the external scarring on Cassie's behemoth suit. He turned his gaze toward her. "I'm amazed you came back alive."

"Sorry to disappoint you," said Cassie. She sprawled in a nearby deckchair, sucking down ice-cold water from a bottle marked with the Task Force's logo. Well-developed muscles stood out from under a sweat-stained t-shirt.

It was still hot, even with dusk approaching. The fading sun turned the clouds a deep orange-red towards the west. Between her and the bridge of the Deep Range lay a quartermile of deck.

Her behemoth suit stood upright before her on the foremast of the former container ship, held in place by a twist lock. A complex system of pulleys and cranes surrounded its vast and imposing bulk. Nearby, mounted on a cradle, her mini-sub—mostly a platform for carrying extra air and battery packs—underwent further checks by some of Molyneux's technicians.

The deckhand, who had his back to the sun, regarded her with a curious stare. "Your eyes," he said.

"What about them?"

Sometimes, thought Cassie, if she could ever get hold of the anonymous geneticist who'd given some Opts a silver tint to their eyes, she'd give them a good, hard slap across the face.

His expression became suddenly much less friendly. "You're one of them."

One of them.

She should ignore it. She knew she should: but her encounter with the robot factory had her wound up tighter than a nun's sphincter.

"One of what?" she enquired, her tone mild.

The deckhand's fists flexed at his sides. He'd realized he had stepped out of line.

"It's nothing," he mumbled, returning his attention to his maintenance work.

"I just want to know what they are," she asked regardless.

The deckhand continued tinkering with the suit's hydraulics, like he hadn't heard her. The set of his shoulders made it clear he had. Then, at last, he turned back to her, his eyes hooded, and his lip curled in disgust.

"In Nantes," he said, "one in ten caught the Whispers. I was in the hospital for two weeks. They said I nearly died. They had the entire city in lockdown. All the doctors wore hazmat suits." His nostrils flared. "Everyone except the ones in charge. They were...immune."

She nodded. "They were Opts, huh?"

"You're one, aren't you?" he demanded, his voice quivering. "Everyone says you people invented the Whispers to kill off us ordinary humans."

Where the hell, Cassie wondered, did these people come from?

"The Whispers is a war disease." She said it like she was

delivering a lecture: dry and flat. "It's got nothing to do with being optimized. That's some batshit conspiracy theory for idiots."

"So how come none of you people ever died from it?" he snapped. "How come none of you-?"

"Arnaud!"

Cassie swivelled her head around to see a squat, darkskinned man approaching.

"Leave that," he said, pointing at the behemoth suit and glaring fixedly at the French kid. "Go find Al. Tell him to finish the diagnostics."

Arnaud blinked. "It'll only take me five-"

"Now," Riviera barked, stepping up close to the kid. "And once we get back to port in Guam, I want you off this ship."

Arnaud blanched and nodded, clearly chastened. He shot Cassie a last, dirty look as he stalked off across the deck.

Undoubtedly, she'd soon become the reason they had fired him from his job: one more reason to hate Opts.

Riviera, who oversaw dive operations from a control room just aft of the bridge, stared after the kid's retreating back. Then he turned to Cassie. "I caught the tail end of what he said," he said. "I'm sorry you had to put up with that."

Cassie felt some of her muscles unlock. She hadn't even realized she'd grown tense. "Don't worry about it," she mumbled.

Riviera rolled his shoulders. "It's my job to worry about it. Stupid little creep."

She sighed. "It's not the first time."

"I know." He nodded. "Sorry."

"What for?"

He nodded after the kid. "The recruitment agency is supposed to screen for stuff like this. I'll let Captain Molyneux know."

"He said I was to blame for the Whispers," she said wryly.

"Apparently, we're conspiring to wipe out ordinary humanity."

Riviera's face twisted up in confusion and horror. "What?"

She shrugged. "It's the kind of rubbish idiots talk about online when they run out of things to say to their VR sexbots."

Cassie stood, Riviera following her as she stepped towards a nearby cooler box and got more water, wishing it was beer. Part of her wanted to go find Arnaud and explain how the Whispers hadn't exactly been a joyride for her, either.

She looked at Riviera. "Did Molyneux have any more luck getting through to Hu?"

His mouth curled into a grimace. "None." His expression became more hopeful. "It's a shame we lost the factory," he said, "but did you get video we can use in court?"

"I don't know how good it'll be," she admitted. "The factory kicked up so much sediment, I'll be surprised if the cameras picked up anything admissible as evidence."

Riviera's face twisted in irritation. "Is the factory still down there, or did they cut and run?"

By this, Riviera meant, had the fleet owners cut the cable and abandoned the factory in order to deny responsibility?

"Depends on what you mean by cut and run," Cassie said.

Riviera's right eyebrow rose in a question.

"They tried to use the factory to kill me." She put up a hand when she saw Riviera open his mouth. "No, I can't prove it. But believe me, they did."

"You'll write all this in a report, of course."

"Of course." Not, she thought, that it would ever lead to charges. Not without overwhelming proof.

"We sent a couple of speedboats over to the ship we think was controlling the factory, along with a search warrant," said

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Riviera. He shrugged. "Unfortunately, they found no hard evidence linking them to the factory."

She chuckled wryly. "Not even a hold full of manganese nodules?"

"Without a demonstrable and proven link to the factory itself, they can tie us up with legalities and counter-law suits until the sun turns cold. Could be, they ditched it all as soon as they saw us coming."

"Same as usual, then." Cassie found her attention drawn towards a helicopter with unfamiliar decals parked next to the Sikorsky used to ferry crew and supplies to and from the land. The two choppers stood near the bridge, far away across the vast expanse of deck.

Cassie nodded at the unfamiliar chopper. "Visitors?"

"That's why I came to find you," said Riviera, grinning his apology. "Someone's here to see you."