

## The Dive

My boots rang on the corrugated steel floor of the hallway as I walked, echoing off of the immaculate white walls of the living quarters. I was dressed for work: standard-issue thermal shirt and navy blue slacks, pressed and ironed. My identification tag was clipped to the shirt just above my left breast, showing anyone who cared my name and station. My hair was pinned back in a tight knot so that it wouldn't interfere with the dive suit I'd be in later.

At the end of the corridor there was an elevator alcove. When I reached it I pressed the button on the panel to call the elevator. Mounted above the panel on a thin rectangle of white plastic was the company's logo—which was actually just the CEO's last name—stylized with black and green paint. Akehurst Industries started on Earth a few generations ago and has since expanded into the galaxy with the rest of humanity. Back on the old home planet, it had specialized in sea bed mining, so it made sense that they would head the operation on the planet we were currently on: Beta 219, a planet about the size of Mercury with close to 90% of its surface covered in saltwater. It was too small to consider for standard colonization, but it had something even better: large deposits of raw Elsinium. So far, scientists have only been able to discover the stuff here, on this tiny waterlogged middle-of-nowhere planet, but according to them it's more valuable than anything we've found in the galaxy. Something about building ship hulls that can withstand low-orbit collisions or whatever. I didn't really care why they wanted it, all that mattered was that I had a job and I was getting paid well for it.

The elevator announced its arrival with a *ding* and the doors slid back to allow my entry. I punched the button for 'sub-basement' and leaned against the wall as I started my slow descent from the eighty-fourth floor. The sub-basement was where all the shuttle docks were. I watched

the numbers on the side panel light up briefly as the elevator passed each floor, my fingers drumming restlessly on the steel wall behind me. I'd been sitting in my room for five days now, waiting for the next piece of machinery in the underwater mine to break down so I could go out and fix it. Akehurst was one of the few companies that still used human repair teams for equipment failure; most of the time they use bots nowadays. Lucky for me, deep water mining involved a lot of complicated machinery and bots typically just don't have the faculties to repair the stuff. Even remote controlled ones tend to miss things and end up only band-aiding the situation or else fucking it up worse than it had been before. So ultimately, employing a dive team to do the repairs ended up being the cheaper option for the company.

Today's assignment was a little unusual in that some of the mining pipeline had gone completely offline last night—no error reports, no failed equipment signals—nothing. Just a dead zone in the network. Normally, if any of the mining machinery experienced an issue it would send back a signal telling the tech team what exactly had blown up, and then my team and I would go out and fix it with the required tools. Since the equipment wasn't responding at all, we wouldn't know what to expect until we got there. It was irritating, but after five days of absolute boredom I was open to anything that would get me out of my room.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. I stepped out and into the docking bay, an open space with a bare concrete floor about the size of a football field. The place was dotted with a dozen submarine shuttle crafts floating in their own personal berths. It was like a marina, but for really expensive science boats. I turned and headed to the staff boot rooms, where divers changed into their suits.

My team was already there, putting on their diving suits and generally dicking around like they usually do. They're all younger than me by at least ten years, and not one of them Earth-born. Horace, a big, dark-skinned kid from one of the satellite colonies was trying to whip Lana, a whip-thin girl from Mars, with a wet towel. Horace was a good kid, and basically the only one I could halfway tolerate. He, like Lana, didn't have much deep-sea experience under his belt, but he was hard-working and humble, where the Mars girl was airy and a little spoiled. Life in the satellite colonies could be rough, since they basically had to fend for themselves most of the year, and that pioneering spirit had been passed on to Horace.

A middle-aged man with shaggy brown hair and several days' worth of stubble sat on the bench that ran the length of the room, taking a not-so-subtle swallow from a stainless steel hip flask. His name was Dan, and although he was still younger than me, he was a good deal older and more experienced than the other two. Normally I would be glad to have a veteran diver on my team, but Dan was a notorious alcoholic and all-around asshole. He'd been trying to get me to sleep with him ever since he'd gotten assigned to my team. Still, he was better than the fourth member of my team, who was busying himself with his specially-designed dive suit on the other end of the room.

Rakh-Seh was a member of the local sentient race of this planet. His people were semi-aquatic, with mottled grey skin similar to a dolphin's. They were humanoid, except for the fins that protruded in a ridge along their spine and forearms, and the webbing they had in between their fingers and toes. The most disturbing feature about them was their face. They had flat noses that barely stuck out from their face, with slits for nostrils that could close underwater. Their mouths were wide, thin slashes with hardly anything that could be called lips. And their

eyes...their eyes were huge—easily double the size of human eyes—and they had no iris, just a single large pupil like a yawning pit into nothingness. Their faces never betrayed any emotion—just permanent, perfect blankness. Because of their features, most humans on the mining platform referred to them as fish-heads.

They were officially called Sintobians, because according to them, the name of their planet was Sintob. They were tribal hunter-gatherers, and Akehurst Industries employed one of them on nearly all of the teams as guides and unskilled laborers. I hated having one on my team. Rakh-Seh could barely speak English, he didn't know what half the equipment we used in repairs did, and he always, unfailingly, smelled of heavy spices and gone-off fish. Plus, he gave me and everyone else on the team the creeps. There was never any way to know if Sintobians actually *felt* any emotions at all. It's hard to work with someone who might just as easily shake your hand as stab you in the back for a better spot in the lunch line.

I got my own suit out of my locker and stepped in, zipping it up to my collar. Later when we got onto the shuttle I would put on the rest of the diving gear. "Everybody ready?" I asked, closing my locker and giving the dial-lock a spin.

"Ready, Joan-Captain," Rakh-Seh said in a voice as devoid of emotion as his face. When he spoke it was deadpan; no intonation, nothing. His large eyes stared unblinkingly at me. I tried to ignore him and looked pointedly at the human members of my team.

"Ready." Lana grinned, giving Horace a punch on the arm.

"You two just need to fuck already," Dan said, rising from the bench.

The remark drew a blush from Lana. I rolled my eyes. “Alright, let’s head out. Shuttle O-17. It’s a deep one today, folks, so put your big-kid pants on.”

We boarded the shuttle and settled in on moulded-plastic benches as it lowered down into the ocean below. E.T.A was half an hour to the section of equipment that had gone offline, so I stretched out on one of the benches for a nap. The shuttle would take us to a drop-off point within a hundred metres of the site, and from there on out the rest would be up to us.

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The sound of the pilot’s voice announcing our arrival to the drop-point woke me twenty minutes later. I yawned, stretched, and then made my way to the adjacent dive room where the rest of my team was already putting on their helmets, oxygen tanks, and fins. I geared up accordingly, helping Lana secure her oxygen tank and allowing her to help me with mine. Once everyone had on all their equipment I input the code for short-channel communications and said, “Hands-free comm check, testing. Can you chumps all hear me?”

There was a general rumble of agreement from my team members, so I continued. “All right, standard dive protocol. Thirty seconds to let whoever is in front of you clear the vessel, then move on to the rally point ten metres starboard-side. Rakh-Seh, you’re first. Then Horace, Lana, Dan, and myself last.”

The Sintobian stepped up to the open dive hole and dropped in feet first. After thirty seconds each, Horace and Lana followed. Dan sidled up to the hole and gave me a wink. “When this is over, how about you and I grab a drink? You know I’ve always had a thing for the older ladies.”

“Shut up and dive.”

Dan flashed me a shit-eating grin and stepped backward, plunging into the dive hole straight as an arrow. I rolled my eyes as I watched his body drop away into the roiling water below and wondered why I kept getting saddled with idiots like Dan and sociopathic alien fishermen. I certainly didn't remember ever doing anything to deserve it. I flicked my eyes up to the heads-up-display—or HUD, for short—in my helmet visor and watched the seconds tick away.

When I'd counted to thirty, I hopped into the portal, keeping my arms pressed tightly to my body. Water rushed in at me from all sides, enveloping me in a clinging embrace. The lights of the shuttle's hull were distorted by the churning seawater, making the already painful brightness of it confusing and nauseating. Then, as I plummeted deeper, the light rapidly diminished until there was nothing but the oppressive darkness of deep ocean. I couldn't even see my own hand in front of my face without my headlamp. The dive is the reason why not many people can do this job. Even with years of experience, the feeling of being trapped under miles of ocean, with nothing but a suit separating you from the water around you, was enough to make the mind scream. It's not like space walks. In space you're weightless. Free as a feather. The lack of breathable atmosphere is easier to ignore, because in space, the only presence there is you. Underwater you can see, feel, and hear the ocean around you. The water is always there, always pressing in on you, trying to find a flaw in your suit so it can get in and kill you. Not many people can handle that.

Once I cleared the shuttle, I could see the headlamps of my crew. I oriented myself away from the shuttle and swam over to join them. “Head count,” I prompted.

They each went one at a time, confirming their own presence. “Good.” I checked the mini-map on my HUD. “Problem site is up ahead, about a hundred metres. Let’s head out in V-formation. I’m point.” I started off, heading toward the section of the map that had a pulsing red circle hovering over it. The non-responsive section of equipment was just past a field of loose boulders the size of small houses and then a little further down the chasm, pretty much at the rock face that they’d started drilling into. I’d bet a dozen good donuts that some rogue chunk of debris had gotten lodged somewhere and played havoc with the conveyor belt inside the protective pipeline shell. If we were lucky, this would be an easy in-and-out job.

“A little cautious for a regular fix-up don’t you think, Joan?”

It was Dan again, because of course it was. The man had a mouth that just never stopped opening, despite how unpleasant the results always were. I was going to have to request to have him removed from my team eventually. Him and the fish-head. “Standard procedure, Dan. You don’t like it, tell HR. Besides, this job is pretty deep, and we don’t know what’s waiting for us down there. Considering some of the nastier shit on this planet lives in ravines like this, a little caution is a pretty good idea.”

We swam about six or seven metres over the boulder field, our headlamps casting short, flitting shadows amongst the massive rocks below. The oppressive gloom of deep water utterly swallowed the lamp light a few metres ahead of us. The effect was like being near a black hole; in a few feet the light didn’t fade or dim—it just vanished, as if it had hit some kind of wall and simply stopped existing. Navigating anywhere down here without a mini-map would be virtually impossible.

After a few minutes, the boulders gave way to a steep, rocky drop-off that led into a section of the chasm that was even deeper than the part we were in now. We followed the rock face downward, my HUD alerting me to the change in depth and pressure as we went. The problem equipment was at the bottom of the ravine, well over 14,000 metres underwater.

“It’s like a fucking graveyard down here,” Horace said as we descended his voice empty of its usual good-natured bluster.

“A graveyard of plankton maybe,” Dan’s grin was skeletal under the washed-out glow of his helmet lamp. “We’re so far down not even jellyfish live in this neighborhood.”

Lana looked hopefully over her shoulder at Rahk-Seh. “Is that true?”

The Sintobian shook his head, causing his back fins that stuck out of his suit to wave gently in the black water. “Many things live in ocean. Up there and down here.” He pointed up with one finger and then to the bottom of the ravine. “Small things up there, big things down here.”

Lana exchanged an anxious look with Horace, who tried to smile at her reassuringly. They were getting nervous. Neither of them had ever made a dive this deep before, and it was going to make them useless to me if all they did was look over their shoulders the entire job. If we messed something up Akehurst wouldn’t pay us, and I wasn’t about to get screwed out of a paycheck because of some first-time jitters. And of course the fucking fish-head was only making things worse. “Anything down here is going to be more afraid of you than you are of it,” I said, turning to face them. “And if it isn’t, that’s why we have these,” I held aloft my harpoon gun that was holstered at my belt. “There’s nothing down here but a busted machine, so you can

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all calm down. And Rakh-Seh, you know what you can do for me? You can shut the fuck up about the local wildlife. We're not here for a tour."

We swam the rest of the way in silence, Horace and Lana looking appropriately ashamed and Dan sporting his usual expression of contemptuous boredom. Rakh-Seh's mood was impossible to tell as always, his big lamp-like eyes and narrow face completely devoid of emotion. He could kill someone and his face would never change. I shivered. And the guys in HR wonder why Sintobians don't get along very well with us humans.

A big metal pipeline the width of a mobile home came into view a few dozen feet ahead, lying on the sea bed like a giant worm. The underwater currents had caused sand to bank along the sides of the tube, partially burying it. I checked my HUD and saw that the malfunctioning section of the conveyor system was just to the north of where we were (I always thought it was stupid how management continued to use cardinal directions on dive missions where you can hardly tell which way is up, but whatever), towards the end of the pipeline where they'd begun drilling into the chasm's rock wall, no doubt after a vein of Elsinium. I swam over the metal cylinder and the second I got a good view of the unresponsive area, I could see why it had gone offline.

"Holy shit," Dan said as he came over the pipeline behind me. "What the fuck happened here?"

The pipeline, as well as all of the more delicate mining equipment housed inside of it, had been utterly destroyed. The drilling bot had been ripped clean out of the bore hole it had been excavating and lay on its side five metres away. The drill bit looked salvageable, but both of its triple-thick metal arms were warped and bent back at the wrong angles. A ten-metre-long section

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of the pipeline closest to the drill site had been crushed, ripped apart, and thrown around. The whole thing looked like the results of a toddler's temper tantrum—if the toddler was gigantic and had the strength to absolutely crush half-a-foot-thick titanium reinforced with blast-proof cement.

“Woah,” Lana said, swimming up behind Dan. Horace and Rakh-Seh trailed behind her. “What in the world could have done that?”

Rakh-Seh surveyed the destruction impassively. “Probably accident,” he said. “Big things sometimes break Sintobian fish farms. Big things not always see where they go.”

“You mean some kind of *whale* came through and tore up our shit? Must be a big fucking whale.” Dan looked at the Sintobian suspiciously. Rakh-Seh just shrugged. I doubted he knew what a whale was.

Horace looked nervous. “This is crazy. You couldn't do this much damage with a couple of demolition bots—and those things are *built* to destroy stuff.”

I sighed, looking over the damage. I had a feeling we weren't going to get paid for this dive. “All right,” I said, turning to face my team. “Obviously we can't do much here. I'm going to have to call dispatch and let them know about the situation. Once they check the feed from our suit cams, we'll be able to go back to the shuttle. I'm telling you right now though; don't get too plastered tonight, because we'll probably be down here again tomorrow morning with a tech team and heavy equipment.”

I was punching in the comm number that would patch me into dispatch when I saw all four of my team member's faces change simultaneously. Lana screamed and started

backpedaling, flailing her arms in front of her as if she were trying to ward something off. Dan shouted, “Fuck!” and bumped into the pipeline behind him. Horace was rooted to the spot, his face frozen in an expression of horror. Rakh-Seh pointed at something behind me and said, “*Khav’ei!* Joan-Captain, look out!”

I spun around just in time to see the rest of the *khav’ei* thrust its way out of the bore hole. It was, as far as I could tell, some kind of giant octopus-like creature. Tentacle arms—so many I couldn’t count them all—grasped around the edges of the bore hole and along the rock face, pushing the bulk of its frame out into the water. It was inky black in color, which made it difficult to see just how big it really was in the feeble light of my headlamp. The body of the creature was spongy and elongated, like an octopus, except that the surface of its skin was covered in what looked like thousands of tiny knife-like ridges. The worst part was the eyes, though. Big, pale, empty-looking eyes like Rakh-Seh’s, only these eyes were the size of dinner plates. And they were looking directly at me and my team.

The *khav’ei* pushed off of the rock face toward me, stirring up a cloud of sand as it did. The thing moved incredibly fast for something so large. I cried out and kicked backwards, fumbling with the spear-gun on my belt. I heard the rest of my team screaming on the comm channel, their terrified voices feeding directly into my ears. Jet-black tentacles closed around me within seconds. I brought up the gun as quickly as I could and let off a panicked shot. A foot-long spear jettisoned from the barrel and struck some part of the creature—I could tell because it jerked back just a little before one of its tentacles wrapped around my leg.

The tentacle was thick—roughly the width of my entire thigh—and once it had hold of me it began to squeeze. Immediately my HUD began blinking at me—the pressure gage on the

right leg section of my suit climbed steadily, the numbers rapidly changing color from green to yellow to red. I began to panic. The suits were nigh indestructible, but this thing had ripped apart a deep-sea mining pipeline and scattered it about like it was a piñata. I didn't want to think about what it could do to me. I tried to steady the gun to get a better shot, but another tentacle wrapped around my torso, pinning my arm to my side and knocking the spear-gun from my grasp in the process. I watched it spin harmlessly down to the ocean floor. Fear seized me in its cold grip and I began to beat at the tentacles with my free hand. I thrashed like mad as the pressure gage on my HUD flashed the words 'warning' and 'danger' in bright red letters. The *khav'ei* pulled itself closer to me, and as it did I could see its horrible beaked mouth protruding from the base of its body. I was going to get eaten by a fucking Cthulu monster on this shitty backwater planet. And, I realized suddenly, no one else was shooting at the thing.

"Help!" I screamed. I craned my neck in search of my team, hoping to see them firing on the creature while it was occupied with me. Instead, I saw Lara and Dan swimming back toward the direction of the shuttle, already far enough away that their helmet lights were little more than pinpricks in the vast blackness of the ocean. Horace was treading water twenty feet away.

"Horace!" I shouted, still struggling like a fish on a line, "Help me! Shoot it!"

I could see him hesitate, and then the big young man shook his head, his eyes wide with pure animal fear. I heard him sob, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry!" I watched as he turned and swam in the same direction as the others. In a moment of sheer desperation I looked around for Rakh-Seh, but he was nowhere to be found.

The *khav'ei* was practically on top of me now, its beak clicking in anticipation. I heard a loud *pop* and I knew that my oxygen tank had burst under the pressure of the tentacles. The suit

sealed off the intake valve so no water could enter, but my oxygen supply meter joined the pressure sensors in announcing my imminent demise. The result of the loss of my tank was almost immediate. I began to choke, my throat opening and closing in a vain attempt to draw in oxygen like a gasping fish. Hot, red pain spread from my lungs across my chest and up into my skull where it throbbed mercilessly. It was the worst pain I had ever felt in my life, and I knew it would be the last. I was drowning in my dive suit. A red mist began to spread from the edges of my vision just as the *khav'ei*'s tentacles fully enveloped my suit, cutting off my view of its terrible beaked mouth. At least I wouldn't have to watch myself get eaten, I thought, beginning to feel as if I was suddenly very far away from everything that was happening. My thoughts became sluggish and indistinct, struggling like an animal mired in quicksand. The red dimmed to black and finally I fell away into darkness, where I could no longer feel the screaming pain or see the flashing sensors or hear Horace's choked voice say, '*I'm sorry*'.

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I was moving. I couldn't see anything, but I knew that I was moving because I could feel something tug on my back every few seconds. It felt like I was being dragged somewhere, only the rest of my body wasn't touching anything. Like I was being dragged through air.

The next thing I noticed was the sound of water. Not the sound of water, exactly, but the sound of something moving in water. The sound of something *swimming*.

I opened my eyes and saw a dull blackness all around me. At first I thought that I must have been in a dark room, or somewhere where it was night, but then I realized that the gloom was familiar. It was the yawning dark of the deep ocean, which meant I was still underwater. I tried to move my arms and legs, but felt something pulling against me. Painfully, I craned my

neck to look over my shoulder and saw a grey, ridged fin poking through and running down the back of an otherwise standard diving suit. “Rakh-Seh?” I said, the name issuing forth from the void of memory.

The Sintobian looked back at me, his pale eyes reflecting the light from my headlamp. He didn’t say anything, but he gestured with a hand to something up ahead. I followed to where he was pointing to, and saw the shuttle sitting there in the water nearby. I blinked and looked back at him, realizing suddenly that he wasn’t wearing a helmet at all. Or an oxygen tank.

Rakh-Seh swam us up to the dive-hole on the belly of the ship and went up first, dragging me in after him. He pulled me onto the rubber floor of the dive room and the shuttle’s medic came running in from another chamber. She unlocked my helmet and pulled it off.

I looked at Rakh-Seh, who was unzipping his own suit. “You saved me,” I said in a hollow voice. My throat was raw, and forcing words through it hurt.

He looked at me, his eyes empty and fathomless at the same time. “It was close thing. The *khav’ei* hunts you, so it moves fast. *Khav’ei* weak spot is eyes. I had shoot eye before it let go.”

I gestured at the oxygen tank beside me. “My tank burst. This one is from you. How did you swim me back here without any air?”

Rakh-Seh shrugged. “Sintobian hold breath long time. Is not problem. Rakh-Seh not need tank, but humans want, so Rakh-Seh do what humans want.”

I hadn’t known that. Maybe if I’d bothered to learn anything about Rakh-Seh’s people, I would have. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and turned to see Horace watching

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from a nearby doorway. When he noticed me looking at him he refused to meet my gaze, and quickly turned and ducked back into the corridor behind him. I twisted around to thank Rakh-Seh, but he was already walking away toward the shuttle's transport cabin. I stared at his retreating form as he disappeared through the entrance without a single backward glance.