

## The Trench – Maisie, Year 8, NSW

*The sub was a marvel of modern engineering. Its gleaming white body was as large as two trucks and oblong shaped, with a large glass bubble at the hull to serve as a viewing window. Strapped to its roof in large waterproof barrels were the Unmanned Underwater Vehicles, programmed to map the undiscovered underwater regions. The metal, sleek but durable, was branded with its name - Moros - in proud black lettering.*

*The design looked like something from a science fiction show. It currently sat perched on sturdy struts at the edge of the ship, waiting patiently for the ramp to lower and the sole crewmember to manoeuvre it into the depths of the ocean. For now, it was on display for media teams to gawk at, and for the project members to admire the result of years of their hard work. Champagne was poured, several interviews were given and myriad photos were taken of the ship, mission directors, and the helmswoman.*

*11 hours later, the launch of the Moros was broadcast and the world watched as the hull was submerged entirely in ink black sea.*

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It was Hali's first night aboard, and she felt calmer than she ever had. Her daily duties were completed, though there hadn't been much to do at this stage. Earlier she had collected a couple of samples and sent some status reports to the surface, now she was free to appreciate what would be her new home for the next month. She stood at the helm, staring with quiet reverence at the sea outside.

She had always been fascinated by the ocean - not just the inviting green waves that lapped at the shorelines around her hometown, but the dark tumultuous waters of the Atlantic. The air of mystery that surrounds the great deep drew her in, and she developed a hunger for exploration. She was desperate to uncover its secrets, and had decided to study marine biology in her teens.

However, not in a million years would she have guessed that the paper she published would have garnered national attention, that her photo on the website would catch the eye of a director hunting for young talent, that any chain of events could lead her *here*. To the deepest point in the ocean, the Mariana Trench, doing what she had always wanted to do. Studying the deep sea and its creatures, uncovering the mysteries the waters were yet to reveal.

The headlights were shut off and nothing was visible outside. Despite the absence of anything discernible, Hali was enthralled all the same. The void looked like it could swallow you whole. It beckoned her. It was the absence of anything that was inviting. Outside was so black it was almost eldritch, and the sub was silent apart from the low hum of machinery.

She felt completely at peace.

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A week had passed aboard the *Moros*, and Hali was determined to be as productive as possible. Seated in the bridge, she watched with fascination at the creatures that would swim

by the machine's headlights and the delicious darkness encompassing them. Cameras captured every movement and relayed the footage back to the surface.

Punching in some access codes, Hali finally had the *Moros* ready for movement. The tracks at the bottom of the sub activated and the machine began to crawl forward at a steady pace. Pre-coded movements allowed her to sit back and drink in the beauty of the trench. She was filled with a sense of awe: *She* was the first to experience these seafloors, hers the first light ever to permeate the darkness of this region of ocean.

She took note of everything that crossed her view, even though she knew the cameras were capturing it. Every creature she saw was pale pink and ghostly, paper-thin skin evolved over centuries to exist in this isolated void. One vaguely reminded her of her pet axolotl. She manoeuvred the suction pipe on the outside of the sub to retrieve water and sediment samples. With those safely stored, her tasks for the day were over and she could spend the rest of the afternoon at the bridge.

With a book in hand, she leaned back against the chair and stared into the abyss outside. She silently yearned to join the creatures out there.

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After three weeks aboard the *Moros*, Hali was feeling... off.

She didn't know if it was the lack of contact with the surface, or being stuck inside for so long, but she felt a profound itch under her skin. There weren't any tasks scheduled for today, so she took the opportunity to have a day of relaxation, hoping to be more energised and efficient tomorrow. Lying in her bunk, she attempted to concentrate on her book. To focus on anything other than the ocean enveloping the sub.

But her mind kept returning to the outside.

Giving in, she lay back and allowed her thoughts to spiral. She hadn't slept at all last night, irrational fears plaguing her mind. Aside from paranoia, she felt a nagging fear of returning to the surface. She was comfortable here, away from everything and immersed in doing what she loved. Sometimes she caught herself struggling to remember what life had been like before she had come down here.

Sometimes she didn't want to remember.

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A month in, Hali deployed the UVVs with a simple push of a button. After a month of acclimatising to their new world, the delicate machines were released and descended onto the seafloor. They would - hopefully - spend the next couple of years mapping the seafloor and going where a human in a cumbersome machine couldn't.

Hali was jealous of them. *That's absurd*, said a small voice in the back of her mind, but she had started ignoring that voice long ago. She wanted more, craved the feel of the magnetic icy water embracing her body, yearned to breathe it deep into her lungs. She longed to drift unburdened across the silt and live among the other deep-sea creatures.

She wanted to exist in this world forever. She hated the people on the surface, with their scripted responses and empty, detached encouragement. The people down here were much nicer, they understood her. They wanted her to join them.

Faces pressed up against the glass, and Hali rose and pressed a hand to the pane, staring into the deep eyes of the figure outside. It wordlessly beckoned her. It reassured her that she would be much happier down here. She knew.

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The UVVs turned on their headlights. Hali knew they had begun recording and mapping. Jealousy turned to anger: now that the UVVs were up and running, there was no use for her down here. She would be forced to leave tomorrow, back to the *surface*. The thought of it made her nauseous.

The figure was still at the window, its gaunt eyes following her. Something seemed to click at that moment and her resolution solidified.

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Hali stood at the *Moros'* escape trunk. The voices had grown too loud to ignore and she knew the figures outside the sub would welcome her with open arms.

She couldn't go back to her past life, forever longing to be down here. She had to stay, far beneath the trivial concerns of the surface world. She would live and observe and learn and breathe the ocean, she would be swallowed by it and surrender herself to it - become a part of the water itself. Become part of its pure and unbridled beauty. A grin split her face as ecstasy bubbled up in her throat and forced its way out in uproarious laughter.

*This was it, she would be free.*

Tears welled in her eyes, and she knew she was ready. Warning alerts blared as she opened the first reinforced door but she paid them no mind. Water quickly filled the chamber, cold and exhilarating. She welcomed it, revelled in the sensation. Soon there was only a small air pocket available for her to breathe. The wheel dogs released her quickly, the idea being that her suit would rapidly inflate and she would be shot to the surface with as little exposure to the intense pressure as possible.

But Hali did not intend to reach the surface.

She had little time to comprehend her death. She felt herself collapse as insane weight crushed her in a painful embrace. Her vision swam, shifted, congealed and dispersed as dizzying colours filled her eyes. The most prominent was a deep, all-consuming blue. And suddenly she felt very light. She died with the ghost of a smile on her face and the vague sensation of flying. The cameras saw only a lone body, frail and unnaturally twisted, drifting in her ragged custom jumpsuit and a plume of cherry red.

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*The following month, an interesting study was published by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association about the effects of deep sea pressure and isolation on the speed of degradation of the human psyche.*