

THE DEPTHS CHRONICLES: A CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

The grizzled tiger glanced up at the door as it opened and two more tigers in naval uniforms strode inside and saluted smartly before coming to attention. He nodded and stood up, offering a salute as well. "You have further news?"

The tigers looked at one another hesitantly before one answered. "Admiral Jensen, sir, we have no idea how much longer they can last. It could be a few hours or less. We can only assume the structural damage is quite severe at this point. From their last transmission, before communications ceased, major flooding was reported in the aft bulkhead after heavy contact."

The tiger behind the desk sat back down slowly. "How long do they have? Your best guess?"

"Sir, it's really difficult to measure. Even if they've managed to keep the main chamber dry, and only aft is flooded, the problem is their air supply. They've got to get out of there, and they certainly can't swim from that deep and that pressure. Even if they managed to reach the surface with the breathing apparatuses, their lungs could explode."

The Admiral slammed the desk. "How long?"

His subordinates jumped. "S-Sir, if they regulate their breathing intake somehow we feel the men could last...maybe another five or six hours." He added hastily, "And that's conservative. Their only option then would be to flood the entire sub and escape. And...we fear none would ever make it up."

"Has the girl arrived yet?"

"We sent a message line to Papeete an hour ago. I can check status."

"Do so. The moment she arrives, I want her brought here. Dismissed."

As the two officers saluted and left, Admiral Kendall Jensen stood up again and folded his paws uneasily. On the wall behind him was a large map of the waters off of and around the Polynesian Islands. A red "X" denoted the current location of the *Poseidon*, an experimental submarine now trapped and disabled more than 400 feet below on the ocean floor. He thought about the brave tigers that had in the past volunteered for dangerous missions to test the submarine's performances at certain depths. With every dive, he was nervous. Like today, when he watched his men salute before entering the submarine, and the vessel sank below the waves and vanished, aided on its journey only by sonar and random communication checks.

The *Poseidon* was a masterful work of maritime machinery at its best, the most advanced prototype of what would become the modern submersible, over a hundred feet in length and approximately 25 feet tall. She had made several trips in the past six months to various depths to test for pressure sensitivity and speed. Today they had planned for a short trip around the waters off Tahiti, nothing more than sightseeing for the crew of 17 in observation of the holiday. He knew the dangers however. They

surrounded them in plain sight – massive reefs with sharp rocks and corals, and deep indentions that could trap fishing vessels or smash a normal schooner into splinters. The sonar had shown plenty of these natural structures on the ocean floor, approximately 400 feet below, but the *Poseidon* hadn't planned on venturing that deep. It was only when the distress call came that he realized the submarine was in serious trouble.

The *Poseidon* wasn't coming up. Try as the crew might, instead of circling the exquisite reefs they were now heading down and straight for them. There were several distinct sounds over the radio of tigers shouting, a lot of clanks and pounds as they tried to start ballasts, and then the sickening crunch as the submarine slammed tail-first into one of the reefs. There was one more distress call received, that indicated the *Poseidon* was taking in water, and then silence as communications ceased.

Admiral Jensen turned his chair around to stare intently at the red "X" on the map. There was no way the crew could survive much longer. Sooner or later the air would give out, and they would have no choice but to use what small supply of tanks there were on board to try to swim to the surface. But from that depth, and sharing air between them on the way, the chances of anyone making it without severe injuries or death were slim. Their only hope now was a bold rescue.

There was a commotion and then shouting as tigers came running down the hall and past his office, and Admiral Jensen quickly got up and hurried up to the deck of the *U.S.S. Ohio*.

It seemed their guest had arrived.

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As he stepped onto the deck, he saw several tigers pushing at one another as others reached down from the ladder to help pull. They all seemed very excited, tails twitching, faces filled with awe. "At ease!" The Admiral shouted above the loud voices and immediately the group disbanded reluctantly, as two tigers at the deck edge quickly pulled someone aboard from a smaller vessel below.

At first sight, Admiral Jensen himself was hard-pressed to stay at ease. He had spent many months away from his beloved tigress and two cubs, and he knew from sailors' experiences and history it was difficult not to be enamored with, or perhaps even led astray by, one of the girls from the islands. This particular girl was a dark brown sea otter, over a foot shorter than any of the other tigers, yet somehow maintained a stature that demanded respect at first glance. Raven hair reached the small of her back, and was done up with a pair of hibiscus blooms at either small, shell-like ear. The red and white floral pareo she wore did nothing more than hide the bottom of generous breasts and the top of her thighs. Apart from this shred of clothing and shell anklets around each webbed foot, the girl wore nothing else.

Admiral Jensen slowly approached the native otter and, as the two tigers around her pulled back, he noticed with disgust their erections inside snug pants. Mentally he reminded himself to discipline them later. There were far more important matters at hand now. "Miss Perierre. I bid you welcome to the *U.S.S. Ohio*." He offered her a paw and was pleased she took it gently but firmly in both of hers.

“You may call me Leilani, Admiral,” she replied in a sweet, lilting voice that caused his heart to flutter slightly. Yes, he thought, the girls of the South Seas were just about impossible not to lust for.

She looked around her as the last of the tigers went back to their duties on deck while others helped the boat below cast back off to the island. “I was a bit surprised to receive your call. I have never worked with the military before. But when I was told it was an emergency and that you needed my help, I was intrigued.”

“We do. I would prefer we discuss this in my office downstairs. May I offer something, a drink perhaps?” He signaled to one of the tigers but Leilani reached out with surprising quickness and stayed his arm.

“Please, no. I am fine, Admiral.”

The large tiger saw the otter’s morose expression, the deep green eyes that seemed sad, dark whiskers that drooped. “Leilani? Are you alright?”

“I said I am fine.” She nodded past him. “Shall we go, please?”

The Admiral nodded back and led her past the gawking tigers and below decks.

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Inside the Admiral’s office, Leilani sat, legs crossed demurely, and listened while the tiger spoke. She didn’t interrupt at all until after he had finished and sat back down. “These men,” she replied quietly, looking at the map behind him. “Are they able to swim well?”

“They are. All very fit and able. The problem would be the depth. Their lungs would surely rupture trying to swim up, even if they managed to breathe regularly from the tanks. Since the *Poseidon* is now equalized with the deep water around it, we want to attempt a rescue.” He gestured to the schematics of a much smaller vessel. “We want to send the *Kraken* down to the submarine, but as you can imagine, it’s only built for three. If we tried to fit others, we risk breaking the bathysphere’s cables and sending her right back to the bottom. However, the bathysphere has a flooding chamber. If we can somehow lead the men from the sub, and carefully help them into the chamber, they should be safe and fully depressurized for the journey up.”

Leilani stood up slowly and again the Admiral was drawn to her beauty as she padded close to him to inspect the documents. He caught the scent of her, that of wild flowers and coconut oil, and again reminded himself how happily married he was. “And that is why you sent for me. Since we have to take them out gradually, you want me to swim down to the submersible myself and guide each of your crew members to the safety of the *Kraken*.”

The Admiral nodded. “That was our plan, Leilani. I know you’re quite the diver in Tahiti, which is why we sought your services but...it’s at least 400 feet. Even with your skills, you’ll find those depths challenging. I would recommend you take every precaution.”

The otter countered. "The dive down would be the real task." She paused and looked at the *Kraken* schematics again. "How long would it take the *Kraken* to go that deep?"

"Approximately six fathoms per minute, as slow as possible to account for depth pressure changes and destabilization. It's capable of reaching the area of the submersible in less than eight minutes, with luck. And you can ride in the bathysphere to save strength instead of swimming down on your own."

"You mentioned the area? You do not know the *Poseidon's* exact location?"

The Admiral looked down at his shoes. "We don't. The spot is only approximate. It could be as far as 100 to 200 yards in any direction."

Leilani frowned. "I am not a fish. I cannot stay underwater and search for them. I can only breath-hold so long. I could end up being short on air, and if I lost my way back to the *Kraken*-"

"We haven't the resources to salvage at that depth. Scuba technology is still quite new, and our experts suggest we would need a special mixture of oxygen and nitrogen, at precise levels, to allow even one of my men here that deep and for an extended amount of time. We simply don't have that kind of equipment. Which is why we contacted you. We know all about your work, Leilani, and the many shipwrecks you've helped salvage in a few short years, some I believe you encountered in far deeper waters?"

"Well, it has been a while since I have ventured this deep," she sighed. "There are air supplies however, yes?"

"There's ten emergency scuba tanks on the *Poseidon*, but the men have been trained to buddy-breathe if necessary."

Leilani tossed her hair to one side and the Admiral was reminded of an ebony waterfall. "Alright, Admiral. I suppose we can try a few dives to see if I can locate the *Poseidon*. We should lower the *Kraken* at various points around where the marking is on this map. These were the last coordinates you received?"

"Yes, ma'am. The distress signal was sent just fifteen minutes later from that last reading, but obviously they didn't give a location."

"You cannot find it on sonar?"

"Not with the bottom covered in reefs, we can't. We suspect the sub may have hit one of them, which caused the rupture and sinking. They may be trapped within them now."

"What is the speed of the *Poseidon*?"

"About ten knots at its casual speed, but opens up to a powerful 25 when on patrol. But as far as we know, they were in stealth mode, just sightseeing and circling the reefs, so they can't have gone too far in one direction from these coordinates. I think you can find them."

“Well, we are wasting time. We should get ready for the attempt.” She looked at the Admiral and took his paw again, still seeming sad. “I will do all I can to save your men.” With that, she turned and headed for the door.

“I can understand you being glum. I’m really sorry to drag you out here and ruin such a joyful day like this, otter.” The Admiral sighed as he sat back down and flipped a call switch.

Leilani stopped and looked back, puzzled. “You did? What day is this?”

The Admiral tried a smile. “It’s Christmas Day, Leilani. A time when we should all be at peace.”

Leilani looked at him steadily and replied, without smiling. “I really do not celebrate it.” Then she was gone.

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Back on deck, several tigers gathered around to watch the beautiful otter while she spoke to one of the oceanographic assistants, a fetching white sheep in a blue and white skirt and jacket.

“How soon will the *Kraken* be ready?” Leilani asked, oblivious to the lustful stares around her.

“Not long a’tall, Miss Perierre,” she replied with a thick Irish accent. “About ten minutes. I already got the crew doin’ a quick double-check on ‘er.” The sheep blushed prettily and added, “if’n ya don’ mind me sayin’ so, it’s an honor to be workin’ with ya, petal. I just pray we reach ‘em in time.”

For the first time that day, Leilani smiled softly. “We will do our best, yes?” She turned to one of the tigers standing close behind her. “Please see that Miss O’Dolly stays safe as well. We will be making several trips from the bottom to the surface. I want a crew standing by for each hoist immediately upon receiving our signal.”

The tiger nodded. “We’ll be ready, ma’am.”

She turned back to the sheep. “Peep? When we reach the bottom, I can swim out of the *Kraken* then and do a search around that area. At that depth, I cannot stay underwater as long unfortunately. We should have a signal set up. There are lights on board? Perhaps if you can-“

Peep smiled and clasped the otter’s shoulder. “Good thinkin’, Leilani. I can flash the front light five times when, say, five minutes are gone?”

“Agreed. I can stay down a bit longer than that, but that is a good measure.” Leilani looked distantly at the azure world that surrounded them. Any other time, she would have welcomed a swim, a chance to relax and enjoy the water as she usually did. Now the ocean looked angry and fierce and, with the sun tucked behind an overcast sky, dark and foreboding. “We should get started.” She took a filled canteen handed to her and followed Peep to the platform, where the *Kraken*, a small oblong bathysphere approximately 10 feet in diameter and 15 feet tall, had already been lowered over the side.

Admiral Jensen approached them and handed the sheep a notebook. "These are the last known coordinates we have. Also I included some drawings of the vessel, inside and out." Then he saluted them both as they opened the top hatch and stepped into the bathysphere.

Despite the sea otter's sleek form, she found the control quarters quite cramped as Peep helped her to a seat next to her. When they were settled, the sheep flipped a few switches in front of her, and they heard the welcome hiss of air as the bathysphere pressurized.

"How long can we stay underwater?" Leilani asked and nervously looked around them. She had swam deep into undersea caves before, with some openings so tight she hardly had room to move, and feared enclosed places such as these greatly.

Peep checked the readings. "Mebbe an hour, two if we don' talk too much." She grinned over at her but then frowned as the otter looked away again. "M-Miss Perierre, I know yer just about upset as me over these boys but we'll get 'em up. That's why you're here, y'know." She reached over and stroked her arm gently. "Don't be so sad."

Leilani shook her head. "It is not that. I...I just...when the Admiral mentioned about today being a holiday. Christmas Day." She glumly lowered her head and Peep could see a tear form. "It just is not a day I-I look forward to, I suppose." She stopped talking and glanced up worriedly as the bathysphere shook several times.

"Relax, petal. They're just checkin' the cables and hoists. Should be lowerin' us any time now." The sheep flicked a switch near the main console and light streamed within the tiny compartment. Suddenly a voice crackled through the front speaker, indicating they were ready to be lowered. "We're ready as ever, John," Peep replied, "just make it a smooth trip, aye? Over."

As she spoke, the bathysphere shook again and Leilani watched through the tiny circular window as the ocean closed over their heads and they started their descent. After a moment or two, the otter rubbed her nose and shook her head a few times.

"Should be getting' used to the pressure soon, Leilani. Hold on." She glanced at a meter. "Steady at 100 feet. Oh, almost forgot. I wanna show you something." She climbed out of her seat and stepped to the back of the compartment, beckoning the otter. There was a metal portal cover in the floor. She knelt and gave the cover a few hard tugs before it finally loosened and she could twist the knob easily. "Once we get to the bottom," she said and pointed below. "I'll flood the chamber and you can easily glide right out, aye? Don't worry, we'll be fully pressurized, so not a drop will come in here."

Leilani nodded and sat back down at the controls. She closed her eyes and tried to relax, taking long, deep breaths out of her mouth and through her nose, as she had always been taught by her family. A diver of much repute, Leilani had always been more than comfortable staying underwater for several minutes at a time. To her, it was almost as if she didn't need to breathe at all when surrounded by the beauty of the sea. And though she'd been this deep before, and even deeper, she knew the dangers. At a certain depth, her lungs constricted and whatever air she still tried to hold in them would soon

become too stale. Too deep, and she might never reach the surface again. She had seen too many horrible drownings in her life, and didn't relish the idea of experiencing her own.

"Close to 300 feet now. We're makin' good progress." Peep was careful not to speak too much, having seen the otter doing meditating breathing exercises.

"Do you celebrate Christmas?" Leilani abruptly asked, opening her eyes again and turning to look at her.

Peep stammered. "W-well, aye, yeah, I do, petal. Every year the family puts out a lovely supper for us and we eat to burstin'. We used to give presents too. Nuh so much these days."

"What gifts would you get?"

The sheep smiled. "It dinna matter. As long as it came from the heart it was the best gift of all. And of course anything we got from Santa Claus was just icin' on the cake, as it were."

Leilani looked curious. "Santa Claus. I remember my husband would speak of him. He said he was a spirit of some sort, who invaded the hearts of the young and old, and caused them to feel happy and generous."

Peep smiled brightly. "Sounds like your husband's quite the catch."

The otter suddenly frowned and looked away. "He-he was..."

"Oh, 'm sorry, otter..."

Leilani said nothing more and gazed out from the *Kraken*. The water was much darker. And likely colder, she thought as she shivered unconsciously. She much more enjoyed the pleasant warmth of the Pacific from shallower depths, instead of the 50-degree water she was apt to experience here. She climbed out of her seat and untied her pareo, ignoring Peep's surprised gasp as it dropped to the floor.

"L-Leilani...? You're goin' in nude?"

The sea otter looked back at her, as if she'd asked the strangest question imaginable. "Of course. I can swim much faster without clothes. Also at these depths, less constricting. I want nothing to hinder my breath-holding."

The sheep hastily went back to looking at the console, blushing. "Well, it's just that you'll be meeting up with a lot of tigers that 'aven't seen a girl in months and..." She shrugged. "We just passed 400 feet. We should-"

The interior shuddered as the *Kraken's* lower armatures landed quite gently on the bottom and Peep checked the depressurization process. "We're there, petal. One moment while I open the flood chamber." The sheep pulled a lever near her and the bathysphere shook again as the flood chamber portal opened and water rushed in. She followed the otter to the rear of the small capsule and opened up the top portal, revealing crystal-clear water below. "Just swim down through the hole at the bottom, and you're out into the sea."

Leilani nodded and took a few deep, lung-clearing breaths before swinging her legs over and into the cold water. She immediately grimaced. "Colder than I thought," she muttered, and with a simple wave and one more breath lowered herself down through the flood chamber and out of the bathysphere.

The pressure hit her immediately but, aided by the *Kraken's* depressurization, after a few head-shakes and massaging her nose, she felt comfortable. Her fur tingled as the weight of more than 400 feet of water pushed down and squeezed her body like a silky, loving vice. She churred softly in pleasure as she caressed herself all over, feeling her nipples instantly harden.

But now was not the time to get side-tracked. She pushed off the bathysphere and began a slow, steady kick, looking in all directions for the stricken *Poseidon*. Behind her, Peep flashed the *Kraken's* large front light once as a signal, and Leilani turned and waved again. Peep would flash the signal light five times once she had been underwater five minutes. Leilani knew her limits. She'd been underwater much deeper and longer than that, and though she had never really timed herself in all her life, ten minutes was about as long as the sea otter's lungs could endure at this great a depth.

Leilani swam out as far as she could to still keep the *Kraken's* distant light in view, then turned from one direction to another, scanning the dark blue. There seemed to be no sign of a submersible whichever direction she chose. In one area she happened across a particularly large reef that dwarfed others scattered about the bottom and quickly inspected the rocky, algae-laced spires for signs of impact. Finding none, the otter next swam expertly through the reef and checked around it carefully, in case the submersible was hidden. As she moved farther away from the *Kraken's* lights, she grew concerned and dove down to the bottom to form an arrow in the sand with some of the reef's loose rocks. This way she could return to the bathysphere should she get out of range. Satisfied, she pushed off the sandy floor and continued on her way, maintaining the same direction.

After a few more moments of searching, Leilani felt the first tug at her chest, a signal that she needed to get back to the *Kraken*. She did a somersault and swam back until she found the rock arrow, and within another moment was close enough to see the frantic flashing front light of the bathysphere. She swam hard, her breath nearly gone, and slid up under the bathysphere, through the flood chamber, and gasped in air as her head broke the surface at the top.

Peep was by her side quickly and helped the otter up to sit on the edge again. "Leilani, ya gave me quite a fright! I told ya five minutes, not a minute more!" Leilani shivered from the cold and the sheep laid a towel around her. "And since I'm actin' captain of this vessel, dammit, ya do what I tell ya, is that clear?!"

Leilani's emerald eyes flashed anger and the sheep backed down. "I saw no sign of the *Poseidon*," she remarked, ignoring Peep's scolding, "I did see a giant reef but it had not been touched."

"Mebbe they aren't in this area then. I'm gonna suggest we signal to be pulled back up and we make a dive at another location."

Leilani shook her head. "That could take many minutes. We are down here now. Let me try one more search but from the other side of the *Kraken*. What direction are we currently facing?"

"West."

Leilani replied, "Then I will swim east." Before Peep could say another word, the otter drew one more gulp of air and disappeared down again.

Back in the cold depths, Leilani again got used to the water before turning around and swimming into the distance, again mindful of the *Kraken's* shining beacon. After going approximately 100 yards without nothing more than sand and reefs as far as the eye could see, she happened upon a large divot in the bottom, forming a trench nearly five feet wide. About fifty yards from there, she happened to glance to the south and saw the outline of a submersible in the murk, surrounded by jagged reefs. Quickly, she picked up a rock and swam along the wrecked *Poseidon*, tapping repeatedly on the hull.

For a few moments there was no answer at all, and Leilani became worried. As she reached the last port section of the *Poseidon* and banged the rock harder however, she was relieved to hear a faint tapping from within. She then circled around the massive vessel to the other side and quickly spotted a gaping, jagged hole in the lower section of the aft hull, at least three feet wide. She thought about inspecting the hole, perhaps seeing if she could enter the submarine from this point, but from what the Admiral had told her, it was already flooded and sealed off.

She glanced instead up the side of the *Poseidon* and spotted a small conning tower at the top. Pushing off the bottom, the sea otter swam up to the attached periscope and floated in front of it, waving her arms.

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"C-captain?" A young tiger inside the *Poseidon* stared through the periscope in astonishment, seeing a beautiful naked sea otter with flowing dark hair and sea green eyes looking back at him, brown breasts slowly heaving with the motion of her arms. "Y-you might wanna...see this...?"

"Carter..." An older tiger walked up to him, looking exhausted. "I told you no talking." He grabbed the rotating tube from him and looked for many seconds without speaking. "Who...is that?"

"I dunno, sir. Is she maybe here to help us?"

Outside the *Poseidon*, the otter tried signals, first making a fist and then lowering it slowly down, then making a swimming motion with her arms and pointing towards them.

"The hell's she trying to tell us?" He paused as he saw the otter hold up five digits before swimming away again. "Carter, I think she's coming back. Keep an eye out for her."

"Uh, with pleasure, sir."

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Despite her lungs protesting, Leilani swam hurriedly back through the depths and to the *Kraken*, and tapped on the glass to get Peep's attention. As the sheep came up to check, the otter held up an "okay" signal before swimming away again.

"What the devil, Leilani?" Peep cried out, hitting the glass. "Where ya goin?!" She worriedly checked her readings and saw that the sea otter had been without air nearly ten minutes – far too long for her at this depth. And why would she not come back first? "She musta found 'em!" The sheep sat down and flipped on a switch to open the communication line. "Everyone, Leilani's found em! I'll alert ya when we're ready to bring a man up! Over!"

Leilani swam a steady, slow breaststroke back to the *Poseidon*, trying to conserve every bit of precious air still held in her lungs. At the top of the conning tower she once more came into view of the periscope and waved for attention. This time she held up five digits again and then spread her arms apart, pointed to them, mimicked a scuba regulator with a fist to her mouth, then pointed up.

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"Captain, she's back! She keeps making weird signals, but I can't tell what it all means."

The older tiger grabbed the tube from him and glanced out. "Carter. Grab one of those metal rods and pound on the hull up here. Let her know we understand. Pound five times. Then fit as many of the men as you can with the scuba tanks. I think I know what she's telling us."

"Yes, sir."

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Leilani heard the faint pounding from the conning tower and smiled, nodding. She made one more five-minute motion and was gone again, her lungs now aching for air. When she reached the bathysphere, she was nearly unconscious and Peep had to grab her by the elbows to pull her out of the water, coughing and gasping.

"I f-found them..." Leilani sputtered, holding her chest. "Told them...five minutes. I found...the hole where I can enter too...and lead them out. Towards the rear of the *Poseidon*." After a moment she finally caught her breath. "I must first enter the submarine through the hole and see how to reach them."

"Wait, hang on, I have a picture." Peep grabbed the small notebook and flipped pages until she came to a cross-section of the sub. "Show me where you saw the opening." Leilani scrutinized the picture for a moment then tapped on the spot labeled the engine room. "Alright, listen carefully. Across from there, there should be a large door that leads out from here to the reaction compartment and main operations. Get over to there and bang on the door with all yer might. Once they open it for ya, the sub's flooded and yer committed. You gotta get in, get the tigers out. They should be equipped with the tanks, right?"

“Admiral Jensen told me there are only ten tanks there. The men will have to share.”

Peep thought a moment. “We should keep ‘em inside the *Poseidon* as long as possible. It’ll be easier for ‘em to swim out and directly to the *Kraken*, instead of waitin’ in those depths unprotected for us to get back down for each trip.”

“I will stay with the men in the *Poseidon*. If I run short of air I can breathe from one of the tanks.” She looked around the vessel again. “Is there any chance you can carry more than two? If I stay behind?”

Peep frowned. “I dunno, petal. Let’s be safe. Bring two men with ya at a time and we’ll haul them up and get back to ya as soon as we can.”

“Inform the *Ohio* it would be easier if the *Kraken* were closer to the *Poseidon*. Tell them at the surface to drop the *Kraken* down approximately 300 feet east of our current location.”

“Good thinking, petal.” She watched the otter prepare for another dive. “Still not sure how yer gonna get them to act.”

Leilani looked determined. “I can send a signal to them. If I pound on the door leading to the next compartment, they should hear it. Then they can open the door when they are ready.”

Peep frowned. “That’d be risky, otter. You swimmin’ all the way to the conning tower to alert them, then down to the hole, and then through the engine room, then hope they open the door, flood the compartment in time, and you can grab a regulator to get a breath...” She shook her head. “I don’t envy yer lungs...”

Leilani smiled softly. “I can do it. If they have a proper signal-”

Peep added, “And someone spots you in the periscope when you return.”

“They saw me before.”

Peep smirked. “I can only imagine their surprise when they did.”

Leilani ignored her look. “They answered me by pounding. They pounded five times when I indicated five minutes. So perhaps they understood the time frame.”

“Then we don’t have a lot of time. They’re expectin’ you.” She sighed deeply and smiled. “Not really the way I wanted to spend Christmas,” Peep chuckled and touched the otter’s arm. “Hey, be careful, would ya? I’d like ya to join us for dinner we had planned in Papeete.”

Leilani looked bashful. “I do not know if I could but I appreciate the invitation.” She braced herself on the edge of the chamber portal and took several deep breaths before looking at Peep again kindly. “I will bring them back. Be ready for us.” With that, she slipped back down into the water.

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As quickly as she could, the diver made her way back up to the submarine's conning tower and this time pounded on the top to get their attention. She once more swam in front of the periscope and pantomimed the regulator and scuba gear, and indicated she wanted to swim inside. She waited for distinct pounding that followed, five times like before, then dove quickly down to the bottom and located the hole in the engine compartment. She carefully braced her paws against the metal shards and fought with the incredible suction to keep from tumbling inside disoriented. Once she poked her head inside and scanned the area to get her bearings, she then pushed forward and into the churning water that completely flooded the engine room.

Exhaling what little breath she still held eased her lungs only so much, and she hastily swam to the other side of the large room and pounded several times on the compartment door. Several agonizing minutes followed as the girl held her breath. She became frantic. She could feel her body becoming limp and the effort to hold air in her lungs near impossible. With a bubbly sigh, the last of her air left her. She could no longer hold it. Too soon, she would have no choice but to pass out from lack of air, or open her mouth and feel the cold water rush into her lungs and drown her.

Miraculously, she felt the compartment door give way against her and she was sucked through the door and into the waiting arms of one of the tigers, stripped down to skivvies and wearing a scuba tank. Quickly he took the regulator from his mouth, pushed it into the sea otter's, and held her as she took long, steady pulls of air. The warmth of the tiger's fur against her stirred a bit of want within her, but she eased herself and nodded to him. She returned the regulator to him before wiggling out of his grip and signaling to the other gathered tigers to follow her, two at a time. She started to swim back to the engine room when one of them grabbed her foot and then signaled behind them, pointing frantically.

Leilani didn't understand at first and quickly counted the tigers assembled in the reaction compartment.

Sixteen.

There was one missing.

Her heart sank but there was nothing she could do right now. She nodded that she understood then pointed emphatically back to the engine room and grabbed two of the tigers by the paw to pull them towards the door, before signaling the others to stay put. One of her charges offered another breath from his tank and the sea otter shook her head and pet his cheek, earning a sheepish grin.

Quickly she pushed the tigers forward and swam behind them, helping them negotiate around the engine room wreckage and towards the hull opening. She had no idea how long the felines could withstand the depths. If either of them struggled against her or panicked, their size and strength would overpower her. She couldn't possibly fend them off and worse, if the scuba gear became loose, they would tumble together helplessly in the depths and drown. The sea otter shuddered. Now was not the time to think about the worst.

Soon all three left the *Poseidon*, kicking strongly, maneuvering around reefs and coral. Leilani stayed between them, swimming hard and keeping a close eye out for trouble. In the distance she saw the

gleaming lights of the *Kraken* and stopped swimming, pointing excitedly. She waited for the tigers to swim past her, and then followed them as they all made their way to the underside of the bathysphere. Leilani swam in front of them and gestured to the open portal, then moved aside to allow the tigers to swim inside. Once in the flood compartment, inspiration struck her and she relieved the tigers of their tanks before swimming back out of the compartment and into the sea, taking a few breaths from one of the regulators.

Peep heard Leilani tap on the window and saw her motion to start up. "Alright, 'ang on you two!" Peep exclaimed as she hopped into the seat and contacted the *Ohio*. Once the signal was given, the bathysphere shuddered before moving achingly, slowly upwards. Leilani swam up above the vessel and floated, making sure the *Kraken* ascended gradually, and once it was several fathoms up, she made a quick dive back down into the depths and the waiting *Poseidon*.

After seven more trips, Leilani was exhausted and sore, though the swims were shorter now that the bathysphere was closer to the submersible. She took only limited gulps of air from the spare tanks at wide intervals, saving them for the men instead, and the constant breath-holding burned her lungs after a while. She also felt shooting pains in her legs and arms. One of the tigers, as she had feared, panicked and tried to surface on his own, and the otter had had to grab his body and wrestle with him until she could calm him down. He had punched her several times in the chest and sides in the meantime and she now ached.

When at last sixteen of the tigers had been rescued, she dove back into the *Poseidon* with one of the scuba tanks and began an extended search for the last one. Fearing the tiger may not have been given a tank, she was almost certain he had already drowned, and that this was now a recovery mission. But she resolved to find him nonetheless. Several minutes went by while she checked every compartment, room and station. She was just about ready to give up and head back to the *Kraken*, hoping that perhaps there was a miscount, when up ahead in the far aft section, she noticed the water had not quite reached the very top of the control center nearest the port side. Feeling some hope, she swam inside.

There, fighting to keep his head above at least ten feet of water, was the missing tiger, balancing precariously on a shelf below his feet. Leilani surfaced up close to him and saw there was little less than two feet between them and the ceiling.

"Y-you!" the tiger coughed out water in surprise. "I...I remember you, you were swimming outside the sub. I...I told...I told-"

"Shush," Leilani soothed and touched his cheek. "Please, come with me now. And I will take you back to your crew."

"I...I can't, I'm so scared. The water came in and...and I couldn't reach the others...they tried to get to me but..."

"Well, I am here now," the otter calmly replied and touched noses as their bodies pressed together. "I will not let anything happen to you." Leilani smiled. He was quite handsome, with short blonde hair and

dark blue eyes, and the kind of body she had always enjoyed playing with. “Besides, would you not like to get presents from...um...Santa Claus?”

He snorted a chuckle, a bit surprised by her words. “I would but...he doesn’t exist. Not for me.” He found a new foothold on one of the shelves below. “Christmas is just another day to me. It’s nothing but a day that reminds me my family’s dead. I...I know it’s all about food, and gifts, and being good to others but...” He trailed off and looked away, panting.

Leilani frowned and edged closer to him, until their feet shared the same shelf and she could hook one of her legs around his own. “I am Leilani. What is your name?”

“C-Carter. Stephen Carter.” Despite his situation, he purred loudly at the contact between them. Warmth spread through his body and he tensed as an erection swelled in his skivvies.

“Mr. Carter,” she said softly and touched his bare chest in an intimate fashion. “It is time for us to leave.”

But the tiger backed away, nearly losing his balance. “No...I...I can’t...all that water, so deep, I...I just can’t.”

Leilani pressed against him, suddenly realizing her breasts were now nestled to his chest. His wet fur against her nipples aroused her even more. “You must. I am not leaving without you, Stephen.”

But Carter fumed. “Why not? Don’t you want to see Santa? Look, I’m-I’m sure you’d like to celebrate Christmas with your own family, so why don’t you go? It must mean something to you. Christmas means...n-nothing.” He started to cry unashamedly. “I lost my whole family on Christmas Day. A car accident. And...and since then, I-I’ve just felt like...like...life is nothing.”

Leilani bit her lip and then stroked his arm tenderly. “I...I feel as you do sometimes. I have no family really. I lost...” she sighed. “I lost my husband and only child in a horrible shooting in the States. It...it was close to Christmas time. And I-I would have had my pup close to the day. I was so looking forward to having a beautiful daughter born on Christmas Day.”

Carter stopped sniffing and looked at her. “How did you...ever get over that?”

The sea otter smiled faintly and brushed his hip. “I guess I never did. I still do not see Christmas as anything more than...a...another day. Like you.”

Carter felt warm and hard in his skivvies and softly caressed her, pleased to hear her churr softly, and her striking green eyes lid. “M-maybe...us being together...it’s...fate somehow? I guess we’re both not too good with Christmas, are we?”

Leilani brushed her mouth across his lips softly and together their whiskers twitched as they shared a kiss. “We seem to be good to one another,” she whispered. “Maybe...Christmas is not just about family? Or being with those we love and cherish? It...it could also mean being with others...just to be with

others. And not being alone. Being with those we truly are happy to be with. Like your friends waiting for you above. Waiting for us..."

Carter swallowed hard and nuzzled her again, feeling ready to burst from his skivvies. "I'm so cold..."

The otter pressed her mouth against him and kissed harder, and all the lust that had built up amidst all the swimming and diving gushed forth from her like a wellspring. She eagerly pushed down on the tiger's skivvies until his sex, stiff and throbbing, emerged. She rubbed his hardness gently with her legs first and then when she felt him respond against her stomach in steady pulses, she took his flesh into her paw to tug.

Whether it was her lust or his disorientation and lightheadedness from being immersed so long, Carter readily grabbed the otter's buttocks and thrust her down and over his member, impaling her deeply and at once enjoying her inner warmth. Leilani let out a cry and then wrapped her arms around his shoulders to support, looking into his eyes as they bounced together in the water, creating a perfect rhythm. Every so often the tiger dipped his head down to lick and kiss her breasts.

All too soon, he lost control and came into her in several hard squirts, but managed to hold onto her tightly as she continued to rock atop his member, milking him of every drop, and bringing herself to her own orgasm.

Gasping, out of breath, Leilani gently pulled herself free of his flesh and kissed him passionately again before looking above them. The water was now nearly to their chins. Soon the entire room would be flooded. "We...we need...to go, Stephen..."

It was now getting harder to take air in. Hurriedly, Leilani unstrapped the scuba tank from her body and equipped Carter before taking a deep breath and leading him through the *Poseidon* and towards the engine room. Carter passed the regulator to the girl while they swam, but Leilani declined, knowing the tank was nearly empty by now.

The swim out of the *Poseidon* took a very long time and Leilani, overcome by the swimming, breath-holding, and impromptu sex, collapsed against Carter as they both emerged from the wrecked vessel, bubbles streaming from her open mouth. The tiger turned and sucked in a long breath from the regulator, before pulling it away and putting it into the otter's mouth to breathe. Then, holding his breath, he pulled the spent otter up until she could rest comfortably on his back, and kicked hard for the flashing bathysphere's light in the near distance.

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The dinner aboard the *U.S.S. Ohio* that evening was filled with raucous laughter, cheers, and Christmas carols. Peep and Leilani entertained the crew with exotic dances, and the otter showed the sheep how to perform some of the more sensuous, enticing steps. All through the evening, they feasted, exchanged gifts, and sang, and Leilani felt surrounded by family once more.

Late that night, in the cozy peacefulness of the barracks, Stephen Carter felt movement on his cot, warmth nestle in under the sheets, and the touch of silky fur across his body. "L-Leilani?!" he whispered in disbelief.

"Shhh," the otter giggled softly and wrapped a leg around him. She ran a paw down his stomach to his groin, working his member free from the skivvies until she could get her paw around his length and stroke him to full arousal. "Merry Christmas, Stephen," she said before kissing him passionately, and then slowly rolled on top of him to make love.

Carter smiled and held her hips as she sank down onto his length, whispering back in the darkness. "Ohh...M-merry Christmas...Leilani."

END