

MARCUS AND ROY MARTIN



*Inside many structures, the vast gears of epically proportioned machinery growled and hummed, as if in preparation for a monumental task that was yet to be revealed.*

The wind was tilting the surface of the water a thousand different ways at once. Bay of Biscay, ish. The *Sprackland* swayed alarmingly at anchor. Marcus felt sick—or sicker. He'd felt low-level seasickness ever since boarding, and *that* was five days ago now. Darling it's better out where it's wetter, take it from me—thank you but *no*, thank you crabby much. The sky was dark blue overhead, its few clouds a scratched and striped white, but away to the Atlantic west, stormfronts reached their elephantine feet right down to the ocean. 'If that's coming this way,' Marcus said to Roy, 'then should we do whatever the nautical term is. Batten down? Bring the ROV back up?'

Roy didn't even glance at the stormfront. 'We're fine.' Huddled under an awning, headphones on, his eyes were fixed on the screens, Roy was absorbed in the ROV's feed. Marcus watched for a while over his shoulder, but it was the dulllest TV show ever made: murky grey-green and black splodges chasing one another along and around without even the distraction of a fish or octopus.

He went aft—was it aft? Or starboard?—and down inside the ship to get some coffee. Jean was seated at one of those tables with a lip all around the edge to stop shit falling off, sipping soda out of a can and playing a game on her cell-phone. Her fingers moved like an embroiderer, or a one-handed concert pianist. Shuttling colored blobs up and down, left and right. 'Hi Jean,' said Marcus. 'Could you just answer for me one question? Is there a storm coming?'

'Yeah.'

'Oh dear,' said Marcus. 'Isn't that something that ought to concern us?'

'Nah.'

'I mean, should we make for harbor, or something?'

‘Forecast says it’ll be hours before it comes rolling east,’ she replied, without looking at him. Anger sparked in Marcus’s heart, or the English equivalent of anger, which was a thoroughly muted thing. But since when had it become acceptable behavior to ignore the person with whom you were having a conversation and stay glued to your screen like this? Don’t mind me, he thought. I’m only the person *paying* for all this.

‘Is there any coffee?’

‘Jug’s empty,’ said Jean.

Marcus could easily have put in a new filter and filled the machine with fresh water, but the thought that he was indeed paying for all this piqued him. He was eminently pique-able, given all the current goings-on. It was running his good manners ragged, it really was. So instead he wandered off looking for Javier. Let Javier do it. And maybe get Javier to make him a cheese sandwich. Toasted. But instead of Javier he bumped into Szirtes, bundling down a corridor without looking where he was going.

‘He’s found it,’ said Szirtes, excitedly. ‘It’s the *Swift*—he’s pretty sure.’

This was certainly exciting enough to drive the thought of cheese sandwiches from Marcus’s mind, so he took his old body back up onto the deck and went port—fore? Or aft, was it?—to the monitoring station Roy had set up. It was empty. He saw Jean again. ‘Jean! Jean! What’s going on?’

‘Roy’s taking the DSV down.’

‘Taking the DSV down?’ Marcus repeated stupidly. ‘But if he’s found the *Swift* why doesn’t he just grab what he needs with the ROV? It’s got claws, don’t it? Big robot claws?’

Nobody was paying any mind to him. And why would they? He was only bloody paying for the whole operation, wasn’t he? The noise of the crane being deployed was

audible from the other—portboard? starward?—side of the craft and Marcus hurried round in time to see the Exploration Vehicle being lowered towards the choppy surface of the sea. Which sea? Where even *were* they? Too far north for it to be the Bay of Biscay, too far west for it still to be the English Channel. The place must have a name. Roy was inside the goldfish bubblebowl at the front of the DSV, and waved at Marcus. The bright grey sky, the burly breeze, the stench of brine. The creaking of the Sprackland's hull as the swell rolled and stretched it; the whine of the crane's motors, the hush and fresh wash of the sea breeze in his ears. 'Why are you going down?' he called, but of course Roy couldn't hear him.

The underside of the DSV bellyflopped onto the waters, smacked the wavetops hard enough that the waters flinched down and away with a swell and then rose up to punch the underside of the DSV back up. Then the fluid medium was swallowing the whole craft like a snake widening its jaws to absorb a giant egg. The two tanks, coffin-shaped and painted bright yellow, flanked the central Perspex bowl. Motors angled and span, and then the submersible was gone beneath a wide rug of tasseled and fizzing white. By the time the froth cleared there was nothing to see.

Marcus went inside, gripping the handholds and trying to bend his wobbly legs to account for the way the boat was bouncing up and down. He was by no means a natural at this seadog malarkey.

The control room for DSV operations was in the main bit of the—the conning tower, or boat-house, or whatever it was called; and by the time he got in there the whole crew had gathered around the screens. 'Let me speak to him,' Marcus ordered, and for once they listened to him.

He got hold of the mike. 'Roy? Roy!'

‘Marcus,’ came Roy’s buzz-edged voice through the intercom.

‘Why are you going down? There’s a storm coming. Pick it up with the ROV and we can beat a decent retreat back to land.’

‘What’s that?’

‘I’m telling you to rise, Roy, to return *de profundis*.’

‘I just needed,’ Roy said, and a loud fizzes noise interrupted him. The images of the screen were what Roy could see: nondescript blues and greys moving behind the overlapping brightnesses of the DSV’s forward-facing lights.

‘I’m sorry, Marcus,’ came Roy’s voice. ‘You’ve been so understanding. I do appreciate it. But I just *had* to get down there myself—in person. Bringing it up remotely just wouldn’t have been ...’ Another burst of interference.

‘I guess that’s something to do with being Compelled?’ Marcus asked.

‘It feels like I have to go in person,’ confirmed Roy.

‘Just,’ said Marcus, abruptly aware of everybody else in the tiny space with him. ‘Just take care, OK?’ A less inhibited person might have said *I love you*, but Marcus didn’t feel comfortable uttering those words, in this place, in front of these near-strangers. Two megaphone-shaped patches of illumination passed over the blackness of the deep sea. He found a little fold-down seat at the back of the room and watched events from a distance. He was paying for it all and it was costing him a lot of money, but he’d have paid ten times over for a guarantee that Roy would be restored safely to him.

The HMS Swift had been sunk by U-Boat June 1944 whilst transporting something from West Africa to Southampton. Roy had claimed not to know what it was that was being transported, although he knew, somehow,

that the whatever-it-was *was* down there, and that he was compelled to pick it up and take it somewhere new. New tech, something strange, something so secret that records concerning it had been buried with such efficient secrecy that the best people Marcus could hire hadn't even been able to track down the specifics. But Roy knew, somehow, with that incomprehensible knowledge of the Compelled, not only that it was down there, but that he needed to take it and put it somewhere else.

'I've got it,' came Roy's voice, out of the static. 'I'm bringing it up.' Javier gave a little cheer, and then the whole boat lurched and shifted. It swung so hard so suddenly Marcus literally fell out of his chair.

'Storm's here,' said Szirtes in a clear voice.

'I thought we had hours!' complained Marcus, trying to get to his feet. 'I thought the storm was hours away.'

'This bit of sea is unpredictable,' noted Jean. 'The Bay of Biscay has its own micro-climate. And then, when you add in the fact that the Channel, and the Atlantic, feed into it—everything converging makes for—chaos, in the strict sense of the term.'

'That's really not a very reassuring thing to hear, Jean.'

Now the whole boat was rocking like it was demonically possessed. Marcus clambered back into his little chair and braced himself with one arm against the wall and another clutching the lip of the chair. There was a whooshing, thrashing, banging sound coming from outside.

'It's going to be tricky loading the 4400/4 back onto the deck in this weather,' noted Szirtes. 'Roy, are you hearing this? We need you back up here pronto-pronto, try and winch you aboard.'

For a while Roy didn't reply. But then his voice came through the speakers. 'I can't risk it.'

Marcus felt the sinking sensation like a punch to his gut. He was going to lose—he was going to lose Roy. The certainty smote him.

‘Not sure we heard that correctly, Roy,’ said Marcus. ‘Say again?’

‘Can’t risk it.’

‘Don’t be daft,’ said Jean. ‘You can’t stay down there.’

‘Can’t risk being unable to winch the submersible back on board,’ repeated Roy. ‘It might not be possible.’

‘We’ll do our damn best,’ barked Szirtes, ‘and if the worst comes to the worst then you can evacuate the DSV and we’ll at least get *you* home. You’ll get wet, but we can pull you up on the line.’

‘No,’ came Roy’s voice, with the blank implacability of the Compelled. ‘I’ve got twenty hours of charge in these motors, and I can do two knots—I can reach Penzance. From there I’ll need a big truck. Jean—call ahead and have one organized for me. I’ll be doing the driving. If they need my driving license to rent it, tell them I’ve got it on my phone. I’ll give them the details when we get there.’

For a while nobody said anything. Marcus looked to the faces of his crew for reassurance, but did not find it in the expressions they were pulling.

‘Roy,’ said Szirtes. ‘You’re sounding like a crazy person. The submersible you’re in is not designed—absolutely not designed—to go touring like that. It’s strictly an up-down operator, and it operates from this ship. Roy?’

‘I need that truck, Jean,’ said Roy. ‘Call ahead and get it organized straight away, before—’ he stopped. And then: ‘I’m not giving this up.’ And then: ‘I’m sorry Marc. I’m really sorry. I can’t be there with you when it—’ and a marshy burst of static, and after it cleared, nothing.

‘Roy? Roy! Straight back to the surface—that’s an order,’ called Szirtes.

But Roy was not replying.

‘He’s going to get himself killed,’ said Jean, and as soon as she had said it she looked guiltily at Marcus.

‘What can we do?’ Marcus demanded.

‘He’s away,’ reported Des, from the sonar screen. ‘He’s pootling north east east—at two knots, just like he said.’

‘We’d better shadow him. I mean, Jesus. I mean, you hear stories about how crazy the Compelled can be,’ complained Jean. ‘But this is ...’

‘He knows,’ said Marcus, too swamped with grief even to weep. The boat rocked him wildly. Grief’s ragdoll. ‘This is the end. This is the end of all things. He knows I’m never going to see him again.’

‘He’ll be OK,’ called Jean, bracing herself in the wildly rocking cabin. ‘In some ways he’s better off down there—the storm is pushing in from the west and the current will, if anything, help him along. He won’t be buffeted like we are.’

‘That’s exactly it,’ cried Marcus, his resolve breaking. ‘You know the theory, people sometimes speculate, the theory that the whole Compulsion comes from the future?’

‘Nobody knows what the Compulsion is about,’ said Des.

‘Nobody knows what it’s about,’ agreed Marcus, tears on his face now. ‘It’s aliens, or God, or Gaia or whatever it is. But *whatever* it is, it’s about building something new, something unconstrained by the present set-up.’ He turned his teary face to each of them in turn. ‘I’m not worried about him. I’m worried about us. He saw that—’

A tempestuous windblast struck the *Sprackland* side on and forcefully rotated the boat through what felt to Marcus like ninety-degrees. He was chucked, unceremoniously, out

of his seat and smacked so hard into the wall he went dizzy and numb. The whole boat rocked back and Marcus rolled painfully down the wall onto the floor and then slid across until he came to a halt under the side-table, bruised and dazed. He heard Szirtes calling out '*bloody hell*' and Jean shouting that they needed to un snag the anchor or the whole bloody show was going arse-over-tit, and bodies scrabbling to get out and abovedeck and get some kind of grip on the bloody *tub*, and then the boat tilted crazily and Marcus was thrust, like a professional wrestler being body-slammed, against the wall. The back of his head met the unyielding substance of the wheelhouse and he blipped out.

When he regained some portion of consciousness it was because somebody was splashing his face with water. But it wasn't somebody, it was just the ocean—invading his space, sloshing back and forth in the little room as the whole boat tilted and re-tilted, and he was rolled like a log in the flow. There was an absolute cacophony all around him, a combination of deep-throated roaring and hammering and a high-pitched banshee piping overlaid on top, and as he struggled to try and get up, and fell over, and tried to get up again, and fell over again. Marcus heard something else, the groaning of the sheets out of which the Sprackland was built complaining in the terrifying tongue of metal being deformed beyond its tolerances. Marcus's head hurt, and he couldn't seem to focus, because his eyes were dizzied or because there was salt water in them, or maybe it was blood, and the hands he used to brace himself into the swaying door-frame were both dripping watery blood, but for one moment he had a vision—of Roy, the love of his life, tootling east north east, safe under the waves, the claws of his submersible clutching the kit he had been compelled to retrieve from the seabed and move to wherever he was

moving it to: safe, and alive, and Marcus felt a swoosh of relief at that thought. Then the *Sprackland* went over on its side and more than over and tons and tons of water flooded through the door like the fist of God himself punching Marcus out of consciousness, and that was the last thing he ever thought.