

Chapter 1

Easing back on the throttle, I slowed the submarine's speed. The light-streaked ocean around us seemed vast and empty, but I knew better. We were heading into the biggest trash vortex in the Atlantic. A piece of history could broadside us at any time.

Sure enough, a shape swirled out of the darkness, glimmering in the sub's head beams.

Gemma leaned into the viewport. "A bicycle," she said with amazement. "Just like in old photos."

"That means we're almost there," I told her.

"We're hiding a wagon full of crops in the open ocean?"

"In the middle of the trash gyre," I explained. "Genius, right?" I checked the rear monitor to make sure the sealed wagon was still hitched to the back of our sub. "No one ever comes in here."

She shot me a knowing look. "For good reason, I'll bet."

"Divers worry about getting crushed —"

"Do they?" she asked, a smile hovering on her lips.

"— but I've explored the vortex plenty and I'm still alive."

"Ty, please don't take this the wrong way. . . ." Flipping back her long hair, she tugged a life preserver out from under her seat.

While she fastened the vest, I tilted the cruiser into a steep descent. With its barrel-shaped body mounted on twin thermal engines, the sub had enough heft to plow through floating debris. I, however, was not so hardy; the sight of so much trash always hollowed out my gut.

At fifty feet down, it was just small objects gliding by — a headless doll, plastic bags, soda cans, and fishermen’s nets. Though abandoned, the nets were as effective as ever at trapping creatures, and my heart clenched when we passed a tangled dolphin, long drowned. We pushed deeper, and larger items tumbled by — a TV trailing wires, a mannequin, a sparkling chandelier — as if caught in a slow underwater hurricane. It seemed as though all the junk from past centuries had found its way here, to drift in an enormous circle forever.

“Where did this stuff come from?” Gemma shifted onto her knees to look up through the sub’s flexiglass canopy.

“Winds and currents picked it up from all over the Atlantic.” I swerved to avoid hitting a stroller.

Flipping on the exterior spotlight, I moved the beam across the drifting objects, not knowing what many were. A powerful upwelling kept them afloat while wreckfish, longer than me, lurked in the nooks, with their lower jaws thrust out as if anticipating a fight.

When the gyre’s rotation slowed to a standstill, I knew that we’d reached the center. Here, the debris simply turned in place.

“This is probably a stupid question,” Gemma said, shifting her gaze to me, “but if we leave the wagon here, what’s to stop it from floating away?”

“I’m going to hitch it on to something big.”

“Okay. What’s to stop both things from floating away?”

“We’re in the eye of the vortex. None of this scrap is going anywhere. Besides, I’ll be back at dawn to get it. Pa didn’t want the wagon to sit in the field overnight, all loaded up, looking like easy pickings. Just ’cause we’re the only settlers willing to sell to the surfs, doesn’t mean we trust them.”

“Still, I can’t hear your father saying, ‘Go hide the wagon in the *giant trash vortex*.’”

“He doesn’t care where I stash it as long as it’s safe.”

She smiled. “Uh-huh.”

“Now, that’s an anchor.” Dead ahead, a fragment of an airplane pivoted on end with all the speed of a starfish. Flipping the sub into idle, I grabbed my helmet from the seat behind me.

Gemma’s blue eyes widened. “You’re not going out there?”

“How else am I going to hitch the wagon on to that chunk of aluminum?”

“With those pincher-arm things.”

“That’ll take forever.” I headed down the aisle between the seats.

“You said that sea creatures have been migrating everywhere. If the ocean currents carried the trash here, then something could have hitched a ride.”

She was right, of course. Fishermen were constantly pulling marine life out of the Atlantic that used to live only in the Pacific or off the coast of Australia. So much land had flooded during the Rising that new channels had formed between the oceans.

“I’ll be fine,” I said, hoping it was true. Biting down on a tube in the base of my helmet, I inhaled a lungful of oxygen-infused liquid and then dropped out of the hatch in the cruiser’s floor.

“You better be,” she said through the receiver in my helmet. “Because if I have to come out there to rescue you, it’s going to ruin my day.”

That was putting it mildly. She hadn’t dipped so much as a toe into the ocean in over a month. A fact that pained me. But she’d agreed to come out in the cruiser today — for the first time in weeks — so maybe someday she would try diving again.

I shot her a thumbs-up since I couldn’t talk with Liquigen in my lungs. With three kicks, I was at the cruiser’s stern, though the upwelling was so strong that it took effort to stay level. After attaching the wagon’s line to my dive belt, I stroked toward the piece of algae-covered airplane, only to stop short as dozens of large shadows streaked past me. Using my Dark Gift, I shot sonar at them and saw in my mind that they were piked dogfish — sharks, yes, but not a threat to humans.

Still, I didn't like the frenzied way they were swimming — as if fleeing.

I sent a series of clicks into the black depths. Tense seconds went by, and when the echo finally bounced back, the mental image was too cluttered to be of use. Far below lay a graveyard of derelict vessels that had been swept there by the currents. Within the pileup were cavities and crannies galore, which meant that *anything* could be lurking down there, hidden from my view — Dark Gift or not. A chilling thought.

Still, I was glad for my biosonar. So what if Topside doctors attributed subsea kids' Dark Gifts to intense water pressure messing with our brains? I felt fine. Healthy. And was relieved that my parents had stopped worrying so much about me. Of course, it had only been four months since they'd learned that Dark Gifts weren't a myth. And that both of their children had one.

Since I couldn't get a read on the mountain of wreckage below, I turned my attention back to finding a place to hitch the wagon. I'd spotted a pair of portholes that would work when Gemma's shout filled my helmet. I spun toward the cruiser. Then my brain caught up with my retinas, and I realized that I had glimpsed a huge shape hanging motionless beside me.

With a half turn, I found myself facing an enormous squid. Floating upright, it stood at least six feet tall, its purplish red body so thick I couldn't have put my arms around it if I'd wanted to. The squid hovered, watching me. When its skin flashed to neon white and then blood red, a name came to me — *diablo rojo*. Red devil. A creature with a reputation even more terrifying than its looks.

Edging back, I tried to suppress all the stories of these particular squid dragging swimmers into the depths and eating them alive. Not tall tales, but real accounts with witnesses. Of all the predators of the deep, squid got my heart pounding like nothing else. Sharks were fearsome, but just beasts. Whereas in this creature's eyes I saw an intelligence that scared me to the core.

Again its skin rippled from luminous white to dark red, and I knew that couldn't be good. No doubt the squid was trying to confuse its prey. Me.