

**MAIDEN
VOYAGE**

Deborah M. Walsh

"C.W., we just don't have time for any more Navy projects right now," Elizabeth Merrill protested, dabbing her ears dry with a towel. Behind her, Mark Harris sat, watching her intently. "Mark and I are running some sequential tests, and we simply can't drop them now. Not for *anything*."

C.W. Crawford rubbed the back of his neck wearily. As administrator for the Foundation for Oceanic Research, the full weight of decisions fell on his shoulders, no matter who made those decisions. When Elizabeth refused an assignment, she didn't receive the top level flack, he did, and in spades.

"It's not exactly a Navy project, Elizabeth," he said evenly, trying to mask the tension in his muscles. She eyed him curiously, slowly wiping the back of her neck with the towel. "It's a personal favor. Admiral Nelson."

Her hand dropped to her side, towel dangling, all but forgotten. Mark looked up from her to C.W. and back again.

"Elizabeth, is there something wrong?" When she didn't answer, he pursued suspiciously, "Who is this Admiral Nelson?"

She held up her hand to quell his questions. "A friend, Mark. An old and dear friend." To C.W., she said, "I haven't heard from Harriman -- Admiral Nelson, for some time. Not since we came here to the Foundation."

C.W. nodded. "Not since you turned down his offer of funding from the Nelson Institute. Do I call him back, Elizabeth?"

She smiled, nodding. As C.W. turned toward his office, she asked, "Did he say what it's about, C.W.?"

The balding administrator looked back, a relieved smile crossing his face. "The *Seaview*, what else?" With that, he closed the door behind him, and dialed Nelson's private line.

Elizabeth found herself surrounded on all sides by smooth, steel walls. Near the ceiling, they arched inward, guided by the supporting girders. SeaLab 4 was a tiny habitat, holding out the sea.

"So ... what do you think, Elizabeth?" Miller Simon grinned, handing her her robe and taking her by the arm, guiding her into the living area. Mark Harris followed silently behind, staring curiously at the spartan lines of the undersea laboratory.

"Certainly not the Ritz, but I guess it'll do," she answered, shrugging the robe over her swimsuit. "It's good to see you, Miller. You're looking well."

As well as could be expected after more than a year under the ocean. But there was a tangible excitement in the air, and Miller was quick to express it.

"We haven't had any visitors since supplies were dropped off five months ago. And suddenly, we'll have a full house!" He smiled affectionately at his old co-worker, introducing her to his fellow lab workers.

"I brought you some wine ... to toast the mission. And old friendships."

Miller accepted the bottle graciously, turning it over in his hands, staring at it thoughtfully. "Perhaps we'd better wait until the Admiral gets here. From what I've heard, he could use some 'spiritual uplifting'."

Elizabeth frowned, her own concerns articulated.

The *Seaview II* was only a few hundred miles behind the *Cetacean*, and in its control room, Chip Morton and Lee Crane followed the submarine's progress with zealous interest.

"It's good to be back aboard *Seaview*," Captain Crane said, tracing their course along the transparent map near the hatch. "It's been a long year."

Morton nodded, glancing easily around the room. "The men seem to be settling in pretty well. Doc said he had a run on seasick pills a while ago, but everybody's fine now. The Chief's in the missile room, and 'Ski and Reilly are complaining about being overworked already. Just about normal, I'd say."

Crane smiled. It *had* been a long year. A year since the first *Seaview* had developed electrical difficulties off the Marianas Trench. Since they'd evacuated most of the men, leaving behind a skeleton crew to effect repairs. Since the reactor had blown, and the ship had sunk to the bottom of the Trench, carrying with it 20 men, all good men, good friends.

"Where's the Admiral? I tried his cabin --" Chip started.

"Probably in his lab. He still hasn't given up on developing a crush-proof alloy. It's killing him to know that we had to call in the *Cetacean* -- that he couldn't do it alone."

In that long year, Nelson had fought to build a sub which could withstand the pressures at the bottom of the Trench. Every attempt had failed. He had investigated every possibility, tested every variable, exhausted every avenue at his and the Institute's disposal. And still he came up with no workable solution to the problem.

"If only he could figure the make-up of the *Cetacean's* hull ..."

"I understand the Foundation's been trying to do that for a couple of years. No go. Seems the secret died with Mr. Schubert."

"Y'know, it took some string pulling to get them in on this operation. Something about a security clearance problem," Crane added.

"Y'mean 'Project Atlantis'?" Chip asked under his breath. Crane nodded absently. "I read the report on it -- weird, don't you think?"

Lee put down his marker, and led his first officer toward the nose. "Don't think we'd better mention it around the men," he whispered, nodding toward the technicians manning their scopes and miscellaneous equipment. "It's not part of the Navy anymore, but it's still got a high security rating."

Chip nodded, his face coloring pink. Too long out of the routine, he had already made the cardinal error, breaching the security of the mission. At the computer console, one of the new crew members strained his neck to catch more of the conversation.

"A water-breathing man isn't anything new to us," Lee continued, lifting himself up onto the navigation desk. "We've seen the results of some experiments in the field, mostly the ones that failed. It's about time one succeeded."

Chip drew close to Crane and said, "But, Lee -- this guy's no experiment. He's for real."

Crane stared at him incredulously. "What d'you mean? 'He's for real'? Of course he's real."

"Lee, I mean he was *born* that way. Didn't you read the report?"

It was Crane's turn for embarrassment. He hadn't had time to read the complete report on "Project Atlantis." The job of preparing the ship and briefing the crew, as well as tidying up some details of his private life had left little time for extraneous reading.

"Born that way?" he choked. "Y'mean, he's not human?"

"Doesn't seem like it," Morton answered, his voice a little awed.

"Contact with the Simon lab, sir," Sparks called out.

"Better get the Admiral, Chip," Crane ordered, shelving Project Atlantis for the time being. Straightening, he turned to answer the call.

"They're almost here," Miller reported from the communications console. "We should start preparing for docking."

The other scientists turned to follow through, as Miller added, "The Admiral would like to speak to you, Elizabeth."

She smiled, taking the headpiece from Simon, as he trotted after his companions. Nelson had been her professor in college, and had become a good friend over the years. He had been hurt when she'd refused his offer of funding for her work with Mark, and she knew it pained him to ask for her help now. But the *Cetacean* -- and Mark -- was still the only way they could get to the bottom of the Trench.

"Admiral? I understand you'll be arriving soon --"

"Has C.W. explained the situation fully, Elizabeth? Does your man understand that the sub might be radioactive?"

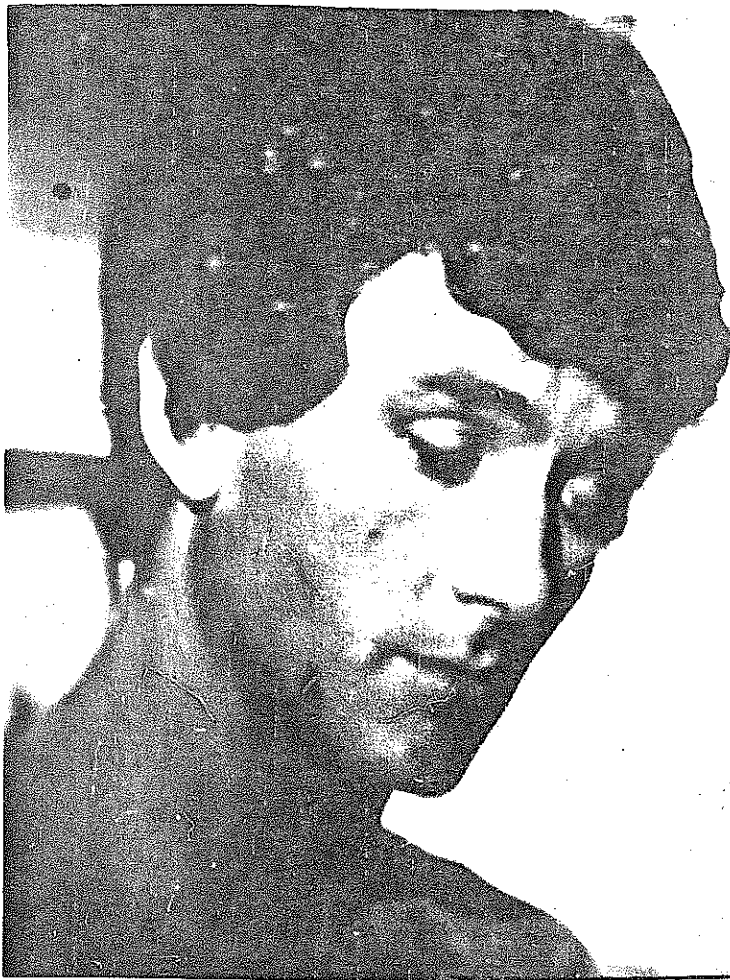
Elizabeth paused. No, C.W. hadn't mentioned that. And she and Mark hadn't gotten into radiation testing yet. "How bad do you think it might be, Admiral?"

"I think he should wear some kind of protective clothing, some radiation shielding." Dr. Merrill looked over her shoulder to see Mark standing behind her. He nodded understanding and turned to go.

"I shall ask Dr. Simon if he has the necessary materials," he explained, and disappeared through the hatch.

"Mark is looking into that now, Admiral. Do you have any radiation gear on board?" Nelson assured her that he did, if Simon didn't, and tried to lay her fears to rest. Precautions must be taken, he said, but they mustn't let fear block the way.

"We should be there in an hour or so. Is everything ready?"



All the necessary equipment was stowed aboard the *Cetacean*, winches, grappling hooks, magnetic lifting gear. Mark would search the Trench, locate the remains of the ship, and the *Cetacean* would follow, prepared to salvage what it could from the wreck. Anything they brought up would then be transferred to the *Seaview II*, and be taken back to Santa Barbara.

"Then I suppose I'll see you soon, Elizabeth. Til then ..."

When Elizabeth looked up again, Mark had returned, the bulky radiation suit slung over one shoulder. "I do not like this, Elizabeth," he said earnestly.

"Neither do I," she answered worriedly.

"I have never liked swimming with such ... ponderous clothing."

She smiled, and reminded herself of the tests they'd run, assessing his endurance, measuring his intelligence levels. Mark wouldn't take unnecessary risks, and he could swim away fast enough to avoid damage if there was indeed a dangerous radiation leak.

"What will we find when we get there, Elizabeth," he asked suddenly, his voice hollow as he stared at the ocean image on the screen.

She drew the microphone from her head, slowly replacing it on the console. "I don't know, Mark. This is one assignment I'm not looking forward to. I would imagine the ship is fairly well preserved, but the men ..." She shuddered involuntarily, the doctor in her giving way to the sensitive young woman. "I'm sure their families will be relieved to have their bodies recovered."

"And what will happen then? The equipment -- will it be usable?"

"That's what the Admiral's hoping. He's put his whole life into the *Seaview* projects. He's not young anymore. When the sub went down last year, some people wondered if he'd recover."

"And did he?"

"I hope so. I certainly hope so."

The flying sub docked easily, and soon after Lee Crane and Admiral Nelson found themselves standing in the Sealab 4 airlock. Miller Simon waited inside to greet them, along with Mark and Elizabeth, and the various other scientists and technicians who inhabited the undersea complex.

"It's good to see you again, Admiral," Elizabeth said, accepting a perfunctory kiss on the cheek from Nelson. She paused to smile at Crane, who seemed at a loss for words.

"You're looking better than ever," he said at last, taking hold of her hand. "Civilian life seems to agree with you."

She cast a look over her shoulder, nodding for Mark to come forward. "I'd like you to meet Mark Harris. Mark, this is Captain Lee Crane, commander of the *Seaview II*."

Crane reached for Mark's hand, catching sight of the webbing between his fingers. His mouth froze, and his hand stood suspended in mid-air. Mark grasped it firmly, and shaking it slowly, said, "I am pleased to meet you, Captain."

Lee stared at Mark, sputtering, "Project Atlantis?"

"Mark Harris," Elizabeth emphasized, a little annoyed. All Navy men were alike, it seemed. "We were declassified over two years ago."

Nelson nodded. "That's right, Lee. Don't you remember?"

"Right," he said, still a little shakey. As he followed the others into the living area, he realized how little his discussion with Chip had prepared him for this.

"Okay, Mark," Miller Simon instructed, placing the helmet of the radiation suit on the Atlantean's shoulders, "You understand the procedure?"

Mark nodded from beneath the hood. "I monitor the electron count on this unit here," he repeated, tapping the wrist counter with a gloved finger, "and if it rises above this level," indicating the red-coded danger zone, "I return to the *Cetacean*."

"*Quickly*," Miller amended, snapping the faceplate into place. "How does it feel?" he asked, stepping back, to survey his work.

Mark took a tentative step forward. "It's heavy," he complained, his voice echoing inside the helmet. "Are you sure it is necessary?"

Miller grinned, the space between his teeth starkly evident. "D'you think Elizabeth would let you out of her sight without it?"

Considering it a moment, Mark shook his head. "No, I do not think so. She worries too much."

Slapping him on the back and propelling him toward the hatch, Miller chuckled, "She cares, Mark. It's something to be proud of."

Mark stopped, and looked directly at Simon. "Are you?"

"What?"

"Proud that Elizabeth cares for *you*?"

Miller's smile broadened. "Yes," he answered, "very proud."

The hatch slid open and he followed Mark into the group. Elizabeth was on her feet at once, checking the seals on the radiation suit.

"Can you move your fingers?" she asked worriedly, adjusting the helmet, tugging at the fabric.

"You worry too much, Elizabeth -- I am fine. May we begin now?"

She stared at him, concern lighting her eyes. Suddenly, her face broke into an affectionate grin. "Admiral?"

"Well, let's go!"

"He's down to 15,000 feet," Elizabeth reported, eyes set on the blip on her view screen. Mark had accepted a transponder in his suit, in addition to a two-way radio. "Do you see anything, Mark?"

"I see no sign of the sub, Elizabeth. I will have to go deeper."

"How's the suit holding up?" Miller asked over her shoulder.

"It is still clumsy, but I am having no real difficulty."

Miller laid his hand gently, reassuringly, on Elizabeth's shoulder. She touched it softly with her own, eyes still intent on the screen.

The next hour passed without incident.

"He's six miles down," Dr. Merrill read evenly. "Will that suit hold at this pressure?" she asked suddenly, turned a concerned gaze on Nelson.

The short, graying man took a step forward, eyes raised to watch the overhead monitors. Hands clasped behind his back, he said softly, "If your man can hold at that depth, so can the suit." Miller nodded agreement.

Crane had been silent since Mark had left the airlock. Abruptly, he choked, "He's not *really* that deep, is he? I mean -- six miles --"

"Mark has been to the bottom of the Trench, at its deepest point, with no difficulties whatsoever," Miller announced proudly. "What's his limit, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth smiled, taking her cue. She turned in the swivel chair, and looked directly at Crane. "To our knowledge, Mark has no pressure limits. We haven't been able to create pressures in a laboratory environment that Mark cannot withstand. He had his weaknesses, but pressure isn't one of them, it seems."

"And what are his weaknesses?" Nelson pursued.

"Well," she began, rising from her seat, taking on the role of lecturer on her favorite topic, "ultra violet rays, as in sunlight, can cause extensive damage --"

"I see it, Elizabeth," crackled Mark's voice across the speakers.

Nelson had the mike in his hand, gripping it tenaciously. "What's her condition? Where's she located? Can the *Cetacean* get to her?"

"Admiral, it appeared to be intact," he answered, his tone even, unflustered by the flurry of questions. "I do not see evidence of any explosion. Where did you say the reactor was?"

The reactor. "Mark, what's the radiation count?" Elizabeth demanded, dropping quickly back into her seat, as Nelson sidestepped out of her path.

There was a pause, a thousand years long to her ears.

"Well within safety limits, Elizabeth. I'm going in closer."

Nelson caught Crane's eye, and the two Navy men stared at each other, then at the speaker, stunned.

"No damage from the explosion?" Crane whispered, his throat dry.

"No radiation leak," Elizabeth sighed, relief welling up in her voice.

"What else do you see?" the Admiral demanded, into the mike over Dr. Merrill's shoulder.

"I'm moving to the stern ... the ship is imbedded in the sea bottom ... there appears to be some buckling in the upper structures ... still no evidence of an explosion ... I'm going in through the missile room, Elizabeth," he concluded.

"Mark -- wait -- the atmosphere -- what's the radiation count? Mark?" she questioned agonizingly.

"I am at the hatch ... it seems to be jammed ..." There was a grunt of exertion, and then he said through clenched teeth, "It's moving ... I've got it, Elizabeth."

There was silence as Mark slipped into the airlock, waiting for the pressure to equalize. The green light inside the lock signalled it was safe to enter the missile room, and

he turned the wheel that released the hatch. Inside, there was an even greater silence, and a blackness deeper than that at the bottom of the sea.

He paused a moment to allow his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Even his catlike eyes were unaccustomed to such a complete pitch. The air was thin, musty, and already he could feel himself working harder to keep oxygen pumping through his bloodstream.

When his eyes had adjusted properly, he moved toward the missile racks. Empty, there was no sign of the offensive weapons they had carried a year ago. As he moved along the walls, he noticed bare wiring, and gaping holes where delicate machinery should have been. And there was the pervading silence, in a sea teeming with life and unheard voices ... unheard because no one listened, though it continued for ages on end.

"Mark -- what do you see?"

Mark lifted the helmet from his shoulders, and removed the microphone. "The atmosphere is very thin, here Admiral. The missiles are gone -- I do not know what has happened. It appears that some of the machinery has been stripped -- perhaps to affect repairs? I see no sign of bodies, though, Admiral. Where should I go next?"

Soon, Mark was heading toward the circuitry room. Nothing but stripped wiring. Next stop was the reactor room.

"My radiation readings are normal, Elizabeth. I am moving ahead."

Elizabeth looked up tensely at Nelson, who ran a nervous hand through thinning gray hair. Crane stood by, quiet, his face drawn with concentration and his arms folded stoically across his chest. Miller clenched his chin in his thumb and forefinger, lost in thought.

"Remember, Mark -- the air is thin -- you haven't much time."

"Yes, Elizabeth," he answered, turning down yet another long, sterile companionway.

Aboard *Seaview II*, a small but powerful transmitter beamed a short message to a communications room built deep within an undersea mountain.

"He's inside," reported the communications officer. The young woman glanced up to see her supervisor nod slowly. "I'll inform him -- keep monitoring the frequency," he said, turning briskly on his heel, the door hissing shut behind him.

The reactor room was empty, belying any life that might once have breathed there. The reactor was cold, shut down long ago, and as Mark examined the room, he found that there were no signs of an explosion, or malfunction. As Mark moved closer to the reactor itself, he checked the count of his radiation unit. "Can the reactor be reactivated, Admiral?" he asked, tentatively toying with a dial.

Nelson glanced quickly at Elizabeth, who rapidly vacated her seat as the Admiral slipped into it.

Quickly, Nelson explained the procedure as Mark followed his instructions carefully. As Nelson described what should be happening, Mark shook his head, saying, "There is nothing happening, Admiral."

"You should hear the engines kicking in," insisted Nelson. "The power should be coming on!"

"I am going to open the reactor housing."

Elizabeth stood up, almost visibly shaking. "No, Mark -- you mustn't --"

There was a heavy silence from the other end. Elizabeth searched Nelson's face for reassurance, her own eyes wide, lower lip trembling slightly. Nelson wiped an uneasy hand over his damp forehead, and Miller Simon gripped the edge of the communications console, straining forward.

"He can't possibly --" Crane muttered, unable to move his eyes from the obstinately quiet speaker.

"Mark ..." Elizabeth whispered softly, body stiff. "Mark," she gulped, "can you hear me?"

"Of course, Elizabeth," he answered easily. "I am not deaf. Please inform the Admiral that his reactor is empty."

Nelson's jaw dropped visibly. Crane swallowed hard.

"It's ... *what?*"

"It is empty. There are no radioactive materials here. They have been removed."

"My lab --" Nelson started, gripped in an ever-increasing realization.

A realization that seemed all too much like a nightmare come true. The lab, like the reactor, was empty. Every check found the experimental gear the *Seaview* had carried gone -- vanished into the sea beyond.

"The atmosphere -- Mark, how well are you breathing now?" Elizabeth reminded as Mark completed his report.

"I am finding it increasingly difficult, Elizabeth. I'm leaving the ship now. How soon can you and the *Cetacean* rendezvous with me?"

"Give us about an hour, Mark -- we'll see you soon."

Elizabeth was already on her way to climb back into her wet suit when Miller trotted up behind her, "Would you mind, Elizabeth?"

She smiled quickly, and they disappeared into the anteroom to the airlock.

"We'd better get back to *Seaview*, Lee," Nelson suggested wearily, his captain nodding absently. They made their way silently to the flying sub, leaving behind them the anxious scientists of SeaLab 4.

By the time Mark reached the airlock in the missile room, he was beginning to feel an ache in his chest cavity. The air in the *Seaview* was growing thinner, the oxygen burning up with each step. Quickly, he spun the wheel, opening the lock, and stepped inside. Soon, the compartment filled with water, and his labored breathing subsided.

Once more in the ocean, he swam the length of the ship, pausing at the nose. Thick glass separated him from the inside of the ship, and he marvelled at the brilliance that had gone into its creation. Now that the major part of the investigation was over, he had a chance to examine the massive submarine at his leisure.

Somewhere in the undersea mountain, a small submarine was being lowered into the sea. Its engines warmed up, and its two-man crew slipped into their seats, leaving the third seat empty. Someone activated the controls to the sea gate, and it irised open as the mini-sub followed its illuminated tracks out into the black ocean.

Following the signal on their sonar unit, they made their way toward the *Seaview*. Ahead, they could see the tiny figure of the man from Atlantis silhouetted against the great, grey ship. The co-pilot primed his weapon, aiming it carefully at the man's back.

"Okay, got 'im in my sights," he reported to his companion through their suit radios. "Can y'keep it steady?"

"Doin' my best. Maybe we should move in closer?"

His companion agreed, and the ship inched closer, outside Mark's cognizance. Suddenly a small projectile cut through the water, lodging itself in Mark's shoulder. He spun around, irritation in his eyes, and he saw the ship, and its strange markings.

"Elizabeth, I've been shot," he whispered weakly, inaudible to the *Cetacean*, as the drug began to take effect. "Another ship ..." he trailed off, his muscles going limp as he began to float aimlessly in the water. The sub moved closer, shooting out a plastic grapppler, catching hold of him and drawing him into the hold. As silently as it had come, it returned to the mountain, its cargo intact.

Navigator Jomo began plotting their course immediately, nursing the last bit of power out of the engines. The *Cetacean* was reaching speeds C.W. would have had coronary arrest over, and yet Jomo continued to coax more out of the submersible.

"Jomo?" Elizabeth begged, watching the monitors for some sign of Mark.

"It's the best I can do, Dr. Merrill," he said at last, settling back into his seat, a little more relaxed. "Anything more, and we'd blow the reactors."

"Thanks," she smiled wearily, stepping up toward Jane's communications console. "What about communications?" she asked.

The Oriental girl looked up, shaking her head doubtfully.

"I can't locate him on the scope," Jane reported grimly. "He's disappeared altogether."

Elizabeth nodded silently. Beside her, Miller watched the screen expectantly.

"Jomo, take us down further -- let's see what there is to see around the *Seaview*."

The navigator relayed the order into the navigation computer, and the *Cetacean* dove toward the bottom of the Marianas Trench.

Elizabeth left for her lab, leaving instructions for immediate notification if something should happen. Miller followed, and when they reached the lab, Dr. Merrill asked, "Have you read the reports on Schubert?"

"Somewhat. I know he was killed earlier this year in a plane crash off the Hawaiian Islands."

She toyed thoughtfully with a microscope. "That's what the police report said. But the body was burned beyond recognition."

He wasn't quite sure what she was getting at, and waited patiently for her to continue.

"When we first began to work with Mark, back when we were still with the Navy, Schubert had built an underwater habitat, near the bottom of the Trench. Several ships were lost -- pulled down, stripped of their gear, their personnel pressed into service by Schubert." She paused. "Sound familiar?"

He nodded, still waiting for the payoff. "It's as if he's come back from the dead -- to haunt us, perhaps. Or maybe he isn't dead at all."

"You think it was someone else in that plane, that Schubert is back, and he's at the bottom of all this," Miller suggested.

"He's fooled us before. His financial empire has continued in his absence -- grown, and he has always been involved in high-technology research. Couldn't some of that money and information be funnelled down to some secret base?"

Folding his arms, Miller slid onto the table-top. "Could be. Could be someone, something else. Could be some kind of warp phenomena. Could be almost anything.



She frowned. "It could be Schubert. He's always wanted Mark -- he's always wanted to control the world. And if it is him ... then we could be in trouble."

"Regular megalomaniac, huh? Well, we'll find out soon enough."

She cast a worried glance toward the hatch, and the control room beyond. "Not soon enough for me."

"Dr. Merrill," came Jomo's voice. "We're experiencing some turbulence -- can you come forward?"

She didn't wait to answer, but darted toward the heart of the *Cetacean*.

"Cause?"

"Doesn't seem natural -- we're getting an energy flux -- our instruments are going hay-wire."

Jane nodded. "I'm getting terrific interference. Like someone's jamming communications."

"Can you get through to the Admiral at all?"

Suddenly, the deck rocked menacingly below their feet. Elizabeth skidded into a control panel.

"Jomo! What's happening to us?" she screamed over the whine of the engines as the *Cetacean* fought to right itself.

"I've lost the lateral controls!" he called, struggling with his steering wheel. "We're losing power!" The lights started to dim threateningly.

Aboard *Seaview*, Nelson's hand trembled, as he picked up the microphone. "Elizabeth! Come in! What's going on?"

She lurched toward the communications desk as Jane was thrown from her seat. Grasping the mike, she choked back, "We've lost our electrical systems, Admiral -- we're sinking!"

Doc came up behind the Admiral, and placed a calming hand on his shoulder. Nelson seemed to be aging by the second. The speaker went suddenly silent, an occasional crackle of static punctuating the quiet in the *Seaview's* control room.

Angrily, Nelson balled a fist and slammed it onto the navigation desk. "No!" he bellowed. "NO!" Doc pressed the syringe he held into Nelson's arm, saying, "Calm down, Admiral. I'll take you to your quarters."

Nelson shrugged the doctor's arm off, "No, no, Doc, I'm fine -- I -- what did you give me?" he asked, drowsily raising his hand to his face.

"A tranquilizer, fast safe -- I'll take you to your quarters now," the Doc insisted.

Nelson nodded, the fight seeping away from him. "I want to be notified --"

Crane nodded. "As soon as we hear anything, Admiral."

Everything was black. Communications had gone out, and the lights had blanked out, but there was still a circulating atmosphere inside the *Cetacean*. Elizabeth picked herself up gingerly, feeling along the floor for her fellow crewmen. "Jane?" she asked tentatively.

"Here, Dr. Merrill. Are you alright?" the girl's voice came from the darkness.

"Fine -- Jomo?"

"Here. What happened?"

Abruptly, there was a sensation of forward motion, as the *Cetacean* was caught up in some unseen current. The lights came on, dim but illuminating the control room enough to facilitate movement. The engines kicked in, but communications were still out.

"A tractor beam?" Jomo asked incredulously.

As Elizabeth stood, dusting off her uniform, she said suspiciously, "Miller, you know there's only one person we know of who'd be capable of this ..."

"My, Doctor, it's nice to be remembered when one's gone," came the sweet, southern drawl of Mr. Schubert.

Jomo's eyes shot toward the screen, as Schubert's demonically cherubic face appeared. "Welcome, Dr. Merrill, to my underwater world!"

Elizabeth straightened, moving toward Mark's console. "Another bid for world domination, Schubert?" she asked sarcastically, trying to hide her concern for Mark. Miller watched, fascinated.

"How well you know me, my pretty doctor. Why don't you come into my parlor and we'll discuss it over some very fine sherry?"

Glancing around her, she answered, "Seems we have no choice."

"Precisely. I'm sure your uncooperative aquatic friend will be glad to see you."

Her eyebrow shot up. "Mark? Is he alright? What have you done with him --"

"He's fine. Resting comfortably. Seems he had a knock on the head, poor boy. But I'm sure he could use some attractive company." With that, the screen went blank, and Elizabeth turned to Jomo.

"Power?"

"Everything's being controlled for us. We can't break free."

Smiling sourly, she fell back into Mark's chair, saying, "Well, I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

"Mark?" Juliet asked quietly. "Are you alright? Mark?"

On the other side of the barred cage, the man from Atlantis stirred. "Mark?" she asked again, pressing closer to the bars. "Can you hear me?"

Dazedly, he opened one eye, surveying the confines of his prison. "Juliet?" he said weakly, moving to get up. Already, he'd been out of the water long enough to tax his strength.

"Don't get up, Mark," she said, her voice squeaking with concern. "Daddy gave you a pretty bad headache, didn't he?"

Gingerly, Mark felt at the back of his head, probing the lump left there by his struggle with Schubert's divers. "Mr. Schubert is not dead, then, Juliet?"

She shook her head gravely. "It was Mr. Brent who was killed in the plane crash a few months ago, Mark. Daddy's been hiding ever since."

Looking about his cage once more, he asked, "Where am I?"

"Daddy's 'habitat' -- we're in an undersea mountain, Mark. At the bottom of the Marianas Trench."

Mark felt his strength slowly returning, along with his coordination, and lifted himself up painfully. "The men of the *Seaview* --"

"Daddy invited them to stay -- they've been working in the labs and things," explained Juliet, lodging her tilted head between the bars. She hung there awkwardly, staring vaguely at Mark.

"Can you help me get out of here, Juliet?" he asked, on his feet now, and alert, probing the three walls that completed his cell.

"Hmm? Oh, yes, I, uh, lifted Daddy's keys," she smiled, dangling the keys invitingly.

He almost grinned as she plied the lock with the keys, and was soon free. "Where is your father?"

"In the control room. He's expecting some guests."

He nodded, as she handed him the water-bucket she'd brought for him. He smiled, thankful that she'd remembered their last encounter so clearly, and gratefully dumped the water over his head. Then Mark followed her stealthily out of the cell block, nodding absently as she babbled on.

"Guests?" he asked suddenly, as they rounded a corner, glancing around for guards.

"Mmm-hmm. I heard him talking to somebody named Dr. Merrill. Is she a friend of yours?"

Mark came to a halt, and stared blankly at her. "Yes, she is," he answered, grabbing her arm. "Where is the ammunition room?"

A little frightened, she answered, "This way," pointing down toward the right. Without a word, he turned down the hall, dragging a somewhat reluctant and confused Juliet behind him.

"How's the Admiral, Lee?" Chip Norton asked from his clipboard in the *Seaview II*'s control room. "Feeling any better?"



Lee looked up from the navigation desk, and shook his head. "A little, maybe. Hit him really hard this time. Doc says he might have to be hospitalized once we hit the mainland. He's resting now."

Morton shook his head sadly. In the few years he'd been the exec on the *Seaview*, he'd come to deeply respect the brilliant scientist who'd created the sub. Already, he could sense a dip in morale, as each man felt the Admiral's loss.

"Captain?" called Sparks from the communications alcove.

"What's up, Sparks?" Crane asked, running the length of the control room. The communications officer looked up at him, and reported, "I'm picking up an unauthorized signal from somewhere on the ship."

Crane looked toward Chip, who shrugged in ignorance. Angrily, Crane grabbed the microphone, and barked into it, "Chief, report to the control room, on the double!"

Soon, Chief Sharkey stood silently before his captain, as Crane explained Sparks' findings. "Assemble a search squad -- scour every deck, every companionway. We've got an enemy transmitter on board, and I want it found!"

Kowalski and Reilly took off toward the missile room, pausing to push open doors, peer in, and move on. Sharkey and Patterson led off toward the circuitry room, and Admiral Nelson's labs.

"What exactly are we lookin' for, Chief?" Patterson asked conversationally.

"You heard the Skipper -- an enemy transmitter. We're lookin' for somebody with a radio they shouldn't have!"

"Uh, right, Chief."

Reilly cocked the trigger on his regulation revolver. "Hey, 'Ski, y'really think we got a fink on board?"

Kowalski waved a hushing hand toward his companion, and pressed against the bulkhead. He looked surreptitiously around the corner, and motioned for Reilly to follow. Quietly, they crouched down slightly, and keeping close to the wall, made their way down the corridor.

"If the Captain says there's somebody on board, then there's somebody on board. Hey, you think the Admiral's gonna be allright?"

"Doc says he might be okay, with a little rest. Maybe not. Guess we'll have to ride the wave, y'know?"

"Right."

The missile room was ahead. Grant and Peterman were on duty. As Kowalski slowly released the hatch, Reilly said, "You don't think it's one of us, do you?"

Irritated, 'Ski answered, "I don't know who it is, and if you don't be quiet, we'll never know!"

The hatch slid open easily, and the two men stepped cautiously inside. They lurched

to a halt when they saw the limp figure of Peterman sprawled across the floor.

Reilly dove toward his fellow crewmate, as Kowalski moved toward the airlock, pressing against its tubular wall, inching around its surface.

"The Admiral has been confined to his quarters," Grant whispered into a tiny transmitter sure that he was alone in the missile room. "I'll be able to ... appropriate the flying sub soon, and make my way down to checkpoint one."

"Right. Mr. Schubert will be expecting your report," came the weak reply. Kowalski wondered just how far that signal was coming from.

"Right. Over and out."

Grant pocketed the transmitter quickly, and moved toward the wet suit rack. As he pulled one of the suits free, he felt the cold pressure of Kowalski's gun probing his lower back.

"Don't move, Grant," Kowalski hissed. "I'll blow you away if you do."

Grant's arms rose slowly, as Reilly moved from Peterman's side to retrieve the gun Grant surely must carry. Reilly spun the gun cockily, sidestepping out of Kowalski's way as the two men moved toward the hatch.

"Notify the Chief, Reilly, and don't forget to tell Doc about Peterman, there," Kowalski suggested, propelling Grant through the hatch into the corridor beyond.

Crane held back the urge to slap Grant full across the face. It was useless; this ... man wasn't about to reveal his plans.

"Shove it, Captain," he snarled. "I know you aren't going to hurt me. It isn't the 'Navy way'."

Lee slammed his hand against the bulkhead in exasperation. Morton stared sourly at the interloper, glancing nervously at the Doctor. "Doc?" he asked experimentally, "Anything you could do?"

"Well, Mr. Horton," the medic explained, "there really isn't anything that would effectively overcome his ... arrogance. Except, maybe ..."

A few minutes later, Grant was dozing peacefully, head bobbing slightly as the doctor spoke softly. He was just on the verge of consciousness, the sound of the doctor's voice a pleasant drone.

"Is he ready now, Doc?"

The craggy-faced man rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Well, Captain, the only way to find out is to try. If he's responding to the hypnotic suggestion, he should believe that refusing to answer all our questions will seriously 'endanger' his life. I would suggest, however, that you underline it with a little physical demonstration."

Crane smiled demonically. "With pleasure, Doc."

Lee grabbed a fistful of Grant's shirt, and pulled him half out of his chair. "Wake up, you son-of-a-bitch!" he bellowed, startling Grant into a frightened awareness.

"What th--"

"If you don't answer my questions, you motherless bastard, I'll wring your ugly neck!" hissed Crane, his face only inches from Grant's.

"Oh, sure, anything you say," Grant answered, fear glittering in his eyes. "What do you want to know?"

"Where are the men of the *Seaview*? Where's the *Cetacean*? Answer me, you half-witted cretin!" Crane's hold tightened, and Grant's eyes bulged in their sockets.

"They're ... they're in Mr. Schubert's underwater base. He's got them under his control -- they've been helping him."

Morton shot the doctor a relieved look, a deep sigh passing through his lips. Crane's eyes glistened, but not from anger. His men -- alive!

"What about the *Cetacean*? Where's Dr. Merrill? Answer me!"

"Same place," he choked. "They were pulled down in the tractor beam. They should be safe ... them and their fish-man."

Crane dropped Grant, who fell heavily back into his chair. "How do we get to them?" the Captain demanded, looking him viciously in the eye.

Grant squirmed uncomfortably. "I was supposed to take the flying sub down to a small base set in the Trench wall. There's a high-pressure sub there, and I was to follow the beam down to the base. I was supposed to use the code-phrase 'By the dawn's early light', to get into the habitat."

Crane cast a triumphant glance toward Morton, who said, "I'll go tell the Admiral. How many men does the sub hold?"

Grant looked nervously toward Morton, and supplied, "Three men. It carries three men."

"Notify the Chief, too, Chip. Looks like we'll be taking a little trip." To Kowalski, who'd been standing silently by, he added, "Take him to the brig. Extra security. And Kowalski --"

"Yes, sir?"

"Not a word of this ... interrogation to anyone."

Kowalski smiled. "Yes, sir."

When they'd gone, Crane asked, "Is the Admiral fit to travel?"

The doctor grinned easily. "With the news Mr. Morton's carrying, Captain, I'd say he'd be fine for lift-off to the moon!"

Crane clapped him on the back, saying, "I'll see you later, Doc. Have a feeling you'd better prepare for some old friends!"

With that, Crane exited the sick bay, heading for the control room and the flying sub.

Elizabeth found herself being guided none too gently from the control room of the *Cetacean* into a high-ceilinged, brightly lit technological marvel. Her crew disappeared as they rounded a corner, and she was sure that Schubert's plans for her did not include the sub's technicians. She was relieved to notice that Miller Simon still accompanied her as they were ushered into the heart of Schubert's base.

"Ah, Dr. Merrill. And Dr. Simon, too, I see. How nice of you to pay me a visit. And return my submersible. Won't you sit down?" he motioned to one of his flunkies, and three chairs appeared out of what seemed to be nowhere. As Miller and Schubert took their seats, Elizabeth remained standing, eyes glaring angrily.

"Where's Mark, Schubert? What have you done with him?"

Schubert looked up at the young doctor, shaking his head sadly. "Now, now, Doctor -- do you think I'd harm a hair on our amphibian friend's head? Come now, you know me better than that!"

"I know you well enough not to trust you as far as I can throw you!" she spat back, nervousness propelling her into movement. She noticed two armed guards step up to block her path, cutting off any escape attempt.

"Afraid of a little woman?" she asked venomously, tossing her head in the direction of the guards. "Where would I go?"

"Give me some credit, Dr. Merrill. You didn't get where you are today by being stupid and unresourceful. Have a seat," he emphasized, and the guards took her by the arms and placed her in the chair. "We'll wait for Mr. Harris to regain consciousness ... together."

"Uh, sir?"

"Yes, Chief?" Nelson returned, the old gleam back in his eye. "What is it?"

"Excuse me for asking, sir," he started, hauling a crated experimental laser cannon toward the flying sub's hatch, "but what do we do when we get there?"

Nelson chuckled softly. "We, Francis, are going to blow Mr. Schubert from here to hell and back. Okay?"

Sharkey flashed a grin. "Anything you say, Admiral," and he disappeared down the hatch, a definite lift in his spirits carrying him.

Just then, Crane came up from behind, and slapping the Admiral affectionately on the back, said, "Good to see you up and around, Admiral. Feeling better?"

Nelson nodded, saying, "Lee, with the news I've just had -- what do you think?"

"I think we're just about ready, Admiral," Chip put in, smiling and handing him the checklist on his clipboard. "Everything's aboard now, and we're ready for launch."

"Has Grant contacted Schubert's base? Do they know to expect us?"

Horton smiled. "And we've got the entrance sequence fed into the onboard computer. You're all set."

Reaching for Morton's hand, Crane said, "Well, you've got the con, Chip. Wish us luck."

"Just bring us back some old friends, okay, Lee?"

"Right!"

With that, Crane and the Admiral joined Sharkey in the flying sub.

"Around this corner, Mark," Juliet explained, tugging him along. Suddenly, she stopped, looking up at him curiously.

"What is it, Juliet?" he asked, touching her arm with his hand.

"Well, what will we do when we get there, Mark?"

He raised an eyebrow, considering her question. "I'm sure we'll think of something," he said at last, continuing down the corridor. She trotted after him obediently.

As Mark motioned to Juliet to remain where she was, it became apparent just how confident Schubert had become. In front of the weapons' store, there was only one guard, armed with a minor rifle.

"Wait here," Mark whispered gently, and Juliet pressed against the wall as he tread quietly up to the guard.

He tapped him on the shoulder, saying, "Excuse me?"

"What? Huh?" the guard said confusedly, as the Atlantean's fist connected squarely with his jaw, followed by a chop to the neck, and silently, he fell limp to the floor. Mark turned back to Juliet, waving her on, and the two slipped unnoticed into the weapons' room.

Nelson found that docking the flying sub was impossible. The underwater base's docking hatch was designed for Schubert's ships, not the Nelson Institute's. Shrugging, he, Crane and Sharkey struggled into their wet suits, each taking a portion of the weaponry and explosives they'd brought.

"Okay, Chief, you back us up while the Admiral and I go for the



hatch, right?"

"Right, sir," he said eagerly, pushing a tranquilizer gun into the belt of his diving suit.

"Ready?" Nelson asked impatiently.

The other two nodded, and as one, they dropped through the lock, into the sea.

Schubert's base was unguarded, and Nelson shook his head at the infernal egomania of the man. "Too sure of himself," he thought grimly to himself, trying the hatch carefully.

With little effort, the three were inside, and they saw that Schubert had not felt it necessary to elaborate on the tiny base. Inside, there were dry stores, some weapons, a few wet suits and the high-pressure mini-sub they'd take to the bottom of the Trench. Sharkey opened the hatch, surveying the space inside.

"It's tight, but we can fit the cannon, a couple of guns, and most of the explosives," he announced, and with a little prodding from Nelson, they proceeded to load the sub.

Once inside, Nelson found its controls to be standard, and had no trouble adjusting to the navigation panel. He guided the ship through the lock, and into the waiting sea below.

Juliet fingered the gun curiously. "Now what?"

Slinging a tranquilizer rifle over his shoulder, Mark explained, "We move on to the power room -- do you know where it is?"

She shook her head, "If I'd known we were going to be moving around this much, I'd've brought my jogging shoes." Mark eyed her oddly, then shrugged. A bit disappointed, she said, "Down this way -- it's not very far."

She led him quietly down a corridor, then made a turn down another. One more and they were there.

"Now what, Mark?"

"You wait here," he instructed.

"Boy, you're no fun at all. I might as well've left you in that cell."

He turned to her, concern creasing his face. "Why, Juliet? What have I done?"

"Stay here, wait here, don't do anything here. Why can't I help?"

He considered this a moment, then said, "All right, but be careful. We don't want to give ourselves away too soon."

She grinned, and followed after him like a puppy. Mark tried the door and finding it unlocked, slipped in, Juliet close behind.

Two technicians stood by the reactor housing, one taking notes, the other reciting information. Toward the control panel were another three technicians, monitoring power levels to the various parts of the underwater base. Overhead, were television screens, depicting action in the key sections of the base. Mark saw Elizabeth and Miller in Schubert's control room. In the center of the room, stood an armed security guard.

"Give me your gun," he said to her, and frowning, she handed it over. "The guards know you, right?" She nodded. "Talk to him -- distract him," he advised, and perking up, she walked over to the man.

"Hey, Chuck," she started, giving him her most seductive smile. It failed miserably, ending up like a look of extreme nausea.

"Oh, hi, Miss Schubert. Something wrong?"

So much for that gambit, she thought sourly. "Uh, no, not really, I, uh, just wanted to see how things are down here. My daddy, he --"

She didn't have to finish, as Mark delivered a quick blow to the back of the man's neck, and he crumpled to the floor. As the other technicians turned, Mark pulled the trigger on the gun in his hand, releasing a series of tranquilizer darts into each of them. Without raising an alarm, they each fell silently to the floor.

Swiftly, Mark moved to the console, scanning the panel carefully. He paused, reading the dials, and selecting his targets, began to systematically turn the knobs to their lowest readings.

"What are you doing?" she squeaked.

As he finished his first run-through, he said, "I am turning off the power to the control room, the emergency generator, and the alarm system. I have left the power to the seagate, and to the air system. I do not believe we shall have much trouble once we reach the control room -- if we move quickly."

As the lights dimmed and vanished entirely, she demanded nervously, "In the *dark*?"

Mark stared at her a moment, then remembered that she could not see in the dark, as he could. "Give me the directions, and I will lead you. I can see in the darkness."

Shrugging, she took his hand, still a little uneasy about the webbing that folded between his fingers. As she gave her directions, he found the turns and winds of the passage easily. Ahead lay the control room.

"No one will see us when we go in. Direct me to the seagate control."

Nodding, but not really sure he could see her, she led him through the doors into the darkness of the control room, and the sounds of Schubert's curses.

"You can't find good help these days -- not for all the money in the world! What the hell is happening?" he demanded petulently, slamming a fist hard against an unseen console. As he nursed his hand painfully, he ordered, "That damned water-breather must've gotten loose -- *find him!*"

The seagate opened, a voice came from the darkness. "That will not be necessary, Mr. Schubert."

"Mark?" Elizabeth breathed. Are you allright?"

"I am fine, Elizabeth. I trust you are not harmed?"

"Just pleasantly surprised."

As Mark stepped quietly down the single stair to Schubert's level, he said, "Why? Did you not know that Mr. Schubert can never hold me for long?" There was a note of satisfaction in his voice as he watched Schubert's face crumple in anger.

"You tell him, Mark, old boy!" Miller said enthusiastically, squeezing Elizabeth's hand.

"How -- how did you get out?" Schubert choked, his face red.

From somewhere else in the dark, came the weak reply, "Uh, Daddy?"

Exasperated, Schubert fell into a chair that wasn't there, crashing undignifiedly to the floor. Instantly, Mark was at his side, helping him to his feet.

"I suggest you instruct your men to give up peacefully, Mr. Schubert," Mark said evenly.

"What? Mark, m'boy, be reasonable -- one man against an army?"

"Don't forget the Navy," came the whimsical reply from the doorway.

"Admiral?" Elizabeth gasped.

A beam of light played across the tableau in the control room, and Nelson said, "Your men are trained well, Schubert -- opened the seagate immediately once we gave them the pass-phrase. 'By the dawn's early light' my foot!"

"Quite a party, eh, Mark?" Schubert said, steadfast. "Why don't *you* give up -- it's still a hundred to one."

"Not quite, Schubert," the Admiral corrected, moving down toward the group. "My men are routing up your hoodlums, and they should be moving down the *Cetacean* now. We've already released my crew, and we've set explosives ... timed to go off in 45 minutes. I'd say the odds are definitely in our favor. And I think we'd better hurry."

Schubert backed away, feeling at his belt for the gun he kept there. As his hand came up empty, Mark asked, "Looking for this?" and he dangled the compact revolver. "I do not believe in violence, Mr. Schubert. Only a kind of ... friendly persuasion."

Elizabeth stifled a chuckle behind her hand, and followed dutifully after Mark and the Admiral as Schubert and his men were escorted toward the seagate. From behind, she heard, "Uh, Mark? What about me?"

Mark turned to face a frightened Juliet Schubert. "Come along, Juliet. You don't want to be left behind, do you?"

Shaking her head quickly, she fell into step with the others, wondering vaguely what exactly would happen next. Well, it had been an eventful day.

As the last footfall sounded in the dark control room, Miller said sadly, "Well, I guess it's back to the salt mines for me!"

"So you see, Lee," Nelson explained, guiding his captain through a hatch, "it was all a cleverly designed illusion. Once the *Seaview* came within range of Schubert's disruptor field, we lost the electrical system, as the *Cetacean* did. He must've been monitoring us, and when the ship was all but deserted, activated a small bomb near the sub -- we thought it was the reactor when we lost all contact, and when the ship sank, we couldn't follow it. Until now," he concluded, smiling toward Elizabeth and Mark, who followed quietly behind.

"From what I've learned, Brent's death was a fortunate accident for Schubert, allowing him to lie low until he was ready to complete his plans. The fact that neither man had any caps or fillings only helped to continue the illusion that Schubert had died in that crash," Elizabeth supplied, as they paused outside the *Seaview* II's control room.

Lee nodded slowly, as Mark spoke for the first time. "But let us not be too ... complacent. Mr. Schubert may be in jail now, but he has escaped before."

Nelson smiled. "Well, Elizabeth, you and I will just have to design a Schubert-proof cell, I guess!"

As they chuckled softly, they heard the sounds of laughter coming from the control room.

"... And I mean, we were running against the clock, and bam! The lights go out! So the Admiral sends me and the Skipper off to evacuate the base and he takes Schubert single-handed!"

Nelson came up silently behind Sharkey, and tapping him on the shoulder said, "Now, now, Francis, give credit where credit is due -- Mark did most of the work."

Sharkey blushed, nodding, "Yes, Admiral." Turning contrite eyes on the man from Atlantis, he added, "Sorry, Mark -- kinda got carried away."

Mark held his hand up, smiling faintly. "It's ... all in a day's work?"

Elizabeth grinned broadly, saying, "I think we've had enough of a vacation here in Santa Barbara, Mark. If we don't get back to Hastings Point soon, C.W.'ll have our hides!"

As Mark hauled himself up toward the bridge, he paused, asking, "Elizabeth, what would C.W. do with our hides?"

Laughing, Elizabeth joined in with the men of the *Seaview*, and said, "Just a figure of speech, Mark -- oh, I'll explain it later!"

Epilogue

"Elizabeth!" C.W. bellowed, slamming out of his office in a flurry of anger, heading toward the *Cetacean* boarding tube.

As Elizabeth and Mark stepped down to the office-floor, she asked, "C.W., what is it?"

He glared menacingly at her, waving a pile of typed reports. "That new girl -- Juliet? Where did you dig her up? If the Navy ever saw these reports, they'd have my hide!"

Mark cast a glance at Elizabeth, who fell into a fit of giggles. Mark smiled too, and finally gave into laughter at C.W.'s face, a mass of consternation and confusion.

"I think I'd rather have Schubert!" he cried in exasperation, storming back into his office.

"But, C.W.!" Mark called after him, breaking once more into laughter. Well, maybe he'd learn the truth someday ... yes, it certainly had been an eventful day.

