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Dark Life

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CHAPTER

ONE

I peered into the deep-sea canyon, hoping to spot a toppled skyscraper. Maybe even the Statue of Liberty. But there was no sign of the old East Coast, just a sheer drop into darkness.

A ball of light shot past me – a vampire squid, trailing neon blue. The glowing cloud swirled around my helmet. Careful not to break it up, I drifted onto my knees, mesmerized. But my trance was cut short by a series of green sparks bursting out of the gorge. I fell back, every muscle in my body tense. Only one fish glittered like an emerald and traveled in a pack: the green lantern shark. Twelve inches long and deadly as piranhas, they could rip apart something twenty times their size. Forget what they could do to a human.

I should have seen them coming, even this deep. I should have known the squid had squirted its radiant goo to divert a predator. And now my helmet's crown lights served as an even brighter beacon. With a jab to my wrist screen, I snapped them off, but it was too late — I couldn't unring that dinner bell.

I pried a flare gun from my belt and fired into the midst of the electric green frenzy. Two heartbeats later, light exploded over the canyon, shocking the sharks into stillness, eyes and teeth glittering. Quickly, I scooped the anchor of my mantaboard out of the muck and hauled

myself onto it. Lying on my stomach with my legs dangling, I twisted the handgrips and took off, making serious wake. If my lungs hadn't been filled with Liquigen, I would've whooped aloud.

Not that I was in the clear. As soon as the flare died, the sharks would be on me like suckerfish on a whale. I thought about burying myself in the thick ooze of the seafloor. Bedding down with the boulder-sized clams had worked before. I chanced a look over my shoulder. Sure enough, the darkness twinkled with stars — vicious little stars, shooting my way.

Tilting the manta into a nosedive, I flicked on the head beams, only to have the light reflect off metal. A sub! I crashed into it and toppled, boots over helmet. The manta's handgrips tore from my fingers as I slammed onto my back. Sliding down the sloped hull, I grappled for a hold without luck until my feet hit the bumper and I stopped short. My guts took longer to settle.

Without a rider, the manta would shut off automatically; I'd have to find it later. Right now, I needed to take cover. But why was this little rig sitting on the seafloor without a light on to announce its presence? Was it a wreck? If so, it hadn't sunk that long ago. The polished metal hull was barnacle free.

I scuttled along the bumper until I found the circular door to the air lock. The panel cover dangled from one hinge with pry marks scoring its edge. I hesitated, wondering about those marks, when suddenly the hull

gleamed with emerald light.

I slammed the entry button. Like a dilating eye, the hatch opened and seawater filled the small chamber. Plunging into the air lock, I whirled to see sharks streaking -toward me from all sides. I hit the interior button whole-handed. As the hatch clinched shut, the sharks plowed into it like mini torpedoes. From inside, they sounded like Death pounding at the door. I slumped against the chamber wall and grinned. Nothing put a buzz in my blood like escaping predators.

How many rules had I just broken? Visiting Coldsleep Canyon alone: forbidden. On nothing but a mantaboard: absolutely forbidden. Exploring a derelict sub: off the sonar screen. But now I had to take cover until the sharks left. It was the smart thing to do. The safe thing. Not that my parents would ever hear about the sub or the sharks. With a gang of outlaws roaming the territory, they had enough to worry about.

When the last drop of seawater disappeared through the grated floor, I tipped back my helmet and inhaled. The air was rank but did its job: The oxygen-infused liquid in my lungs evaporated. Switching on my flashlight, I opened the next hatch and stepped right into someone else's nightmare.

Blood dripped from -every surface in the gear room — walls, benches, lockers. . . . Wet and glistening, it puddled around the prospecting tools that littered the floor. I slowed my breath as if that would lessen the

metallic tang that now filled my nose — a stink that conjured up the blood-slicked deck of a whaling ship. *Some fisherman butchered something big in here, that's all,* I told myself. A sunfish or a marlin. Nothing to panic about. Except . . . I edged farther into the room. No matter how hard it thrashed, a dying fish -couldn't have emptied the weapons rack, let alone ripped it off the wall.

Circling the overturned rack, I panned my light across the open lockers — all ransacked — and tugged at my suit's neck ring. Usually my helmet didn't bother me when it hung off the back of my diveskin, but now its weight choked me. The sharks outside weren't doing my nerves any favors, either, knocking along the sub's hull, looking for a way in.

As soon as the sharks stopped tapping, I'd head up to the sunlight zone and hunt for dinner like I should have been doing all along. But the tapping didn't stop. If anything, it grew louder. Worse, I realized it wasn't the sharks tapping at all, but . . .

Footsteps.

I snapped off my flashlight and let the darkness envelop me. The sub might be eerie and blood splattered, but that was no ghost tromping down the hall. Silently, I peeled off my gloves and drew my speargun from the holster on my back.

Ghosts weren't real. But outlaws were.

For months, the Seablite Gang had terrorized the settlement, robbing -every supply ship that floated our way.

I had often wondered what would happen if I came across them.

Now it looked like I was getting my chance.

I hoisted the speargun over my shoulder, only to have the cold metal slip through my fingers. Grabbing at air, I snagged the strap just before the gun clattered to the floor. In the corridor, the footsteps broke into a trot.

I crouched behind a crate and took aim at the door. As the footsteps neared, I curled my finger around the trigger. I tried to steady my breathing but -couldn't steady my arm. It was one thing to shoot a hungry tiger shark, but skewering a person — even a low-down outlaw — I didn't know if I had the stomach for it. Suddenly, a flashlight beam shot into the room and whipped across my face, blinding me. I lifted my speargun and a scream rang out — not mine — and the light went out. I scrambled to my feet and sprinted into the corridor, following the echoing footsteps into the sub's bridge.

That scream — it hadn't been an outlaw.

It had been a girl.

"I won't hurt you!" I called out.

No reply.

"Look." I aimed the flashlight at my speargun while holstering it. "Don't be afraid."

Like the gear room, the bridge was a mess. No pools of blood, thankfully. But the equipment consoles had been stripped and wires sprouted from the ceiling. One bunch swayed like seaweed, telling me someone had just

passed. As I parted the wires, a light snapped on and a high-pitched voice demanded, “Who are you?”

Surprised, I turned my flashlight -toward the voice. But my reply evaporated as a girl strode -toward me, her long, dark braid swishing.

“You scared me!” she said. In one fist she gripped a flashlight, and in the other, a green knife. Her hold on both was shaky, yet defiance blazed in her pale blue eyes.

“Sorry,” I managed to say, despite my shock. She looked about my age, fifteen. But more astounding, she was from Above. No doubt about it. Between her pink cheeks and peeling nose, her face was a study in UV exposure.

She stumbled to a halt. “Are you a ghost?”

Inside, I went very still. Just once, I would’ve liked to meet a Topsider who didn’t make me feel like a freak. I never said anything about their sunburns.

She squared her shoulders as if bracing for the worst. “You are, aren’t you?”

I almost nodded to see what she’d do. But instead I said, “I’m alive and human. Just like you.”

“You’re glowing,” she accused.

For light’s sake, so my skin shimmered. That didn’t make me a ghost. I wasn’t skeletal or hollow eyed. I’d built up lean muscle from working on the homestead, and my eyes were a perfectly normal shade of kelp green. “I’m not *glowing*,” I told her. “It’s called a shine.” I tried not to sound defensive. “It comes from eating biolumines-

-cent fish."

The girl inched closer. "People don't eat fish that glow in the dark."

"Down here we do."

"Really? That's so —" Bounding forward, she jabbed me in the ribs with her flashlight. I gasped in pain while she gasped even louder. "Hot tar! You are real."

A reply, even a sarcastic one, was beyond me. Not only had she knocked the breath from my lungs, I -couldn't believe she'd thought her flashlight would go right through me. Heck, I was lucky she hadn't tested my humanness with her knife.

"I thought," she stammered, "I mean, in the dark you —"

"I don't glow."

"No," she agreed too quickly, holstering her green knife. "Of course you don't. I'm very sorry. Are you all right?" She moved in close again, pushing her long bangs out of her eyes.

"I'll live." Though by tomorrow I'd have a bruise the size of a mud-eating sea cucumber.

"Did you see all the blood when you came in?" she asked.

"Fish blood, probably." At least I hoped so. Like most Topsiders, she stood too close. I -could feel her sucking up the oxygen around me and it was making me light-headed. I edged back. "What are you doing here?"

"I came aboard hoping this was my brother's sub.

Now I'm hoping it's not. . . ." She waved her flashlight across the ransacked consoles. "He's down here somewhere, panning for manganese nodules."

"Black pearls. That's what we call them — well, prospectors do. Like your brother. Wait, are you saying you're alone?"

"You're alone." She said it like she'd proven something.

"I live down here. I was the first person ever born subsea. You're a —" Did Topsiders mind being called Topsiders? I didn't know, but I sure hated it when they called the pioneers Dark Life.

"A what? I'm a what?"

"From Above," I amended.

"Above." She smiled as if the word amused her. "As in 'above the water'?"

"Yeah."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know . . . ?"

"That I'm from *Above*?"

Was she serious? Even if she hadn't commented on my shine, every-thing about her hollered "Topsider." Worse, she had all the telltale signs of an amateur diver. But aloud, I just said, "Freckles." At her puzzled look, I added, "Kids down here don't have them." Her whole face looked as if it had been sprinkled with wet sand. I aimed my flashlight higher. "Then there's your hair."

"My hair?" She didn't sound so amused anymore.

“It’s streaky.”

Her hair, which was brown like mine, had stripes of copper running through it. Why did the sun lighten people’s hair but darken their skin? I didn’t get that.

“Streaky . . .” She flipped her long braid over her shoulder, out of my sight.

I thrust out my hand. “I’m Ty.”

She hesitated before taking it and, of course, didn’t tug off her dive glove. Among settlers, it would’ve been an insult. But then, Topsiders rarely showed skin except from the neck up. Sometimes not even that.

“I’m Gemma.”

“Gemma.” I couldn’t help smiling. “Like *gem o’ the ocean*.”

She looked startled. “What’s that from?”

“It’s what we say down here when we come across something pretty.” I realized it sounded like I was saying that she was pretty, which I wasn’t — even though she was. My mouth went dry. “You know, like a shell.” I cleared my throat. “Or a sea slug.”

“Sea slugs are pretty?” she asked skeptically.

“They can be.”

“That’s how my brother began his last letter.” She ran her fingers over the pocket where she’d stowed her knife. “ ‘To Gem o’ the ocean.’ ”

“Well, if he lives down here, he’d know the expression.”

“Look — I lost my minisub,” she said abruptly and

tipped up her chin, daring me to laugh at her.

I wasn't even tempted. "Where'd you get a minisub?"

"At the Trade Station. I rented it from an old card player." She plucked at her baggy diveskin. "Now I'll have to pay him for it."

The guy had to be a professional gambler. The Trade Station was crawling with them. "Did you rent that diveskin from him, too? Because it doesn't fit right." Just looking at the way the metallic fabric hung limply around her slim waist was enough to make me break a sweat. The sensors were woven between the layers of material. If the diveskin wasn't hugging her body, its computer wasn't getting an accurate read on her vitals.

With an impatient flick of her hand, she dismissed my worry. "I left my sub by the air lock. But now, it's — what?"

"You -really came down here alone?" I just -couldn't wrap my brain around that. Even scientists who were experts on the deep sea brought crews and lots of equipment.

"Let me guess, you think girls should wear long dresses and 'practice obedience' in order to stop the Rising."

"No," I replied carefully, though I guessed from her tone that she didn't hold with the New Puritan belief that global warming was God's way of punishing us for our sins. "It's just that it's -really dangerous subsea."

"I -could get eaten by a giant squid — I know."

She rolled her eyes. “I was in the water for two seconds.”

“If a squid wants to eat you, it doesn’t have to wait for you to get wet.” That got her attention. “A giant squid can come eighty feet long and weigh a ton. It’ll drag your vehicle so deep, the water pressure will crack it into pieces. Then that squid will pluck you out like it’s shucking a clam.”

Under her freckles, she paled. “You’re trying to scare me.”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “But that doesn’t mean I’m lying.” She shouldn’t be deep diving without knowing the risks. Though I had to give her credit for sheer guts.

“Why would anyone want to live down here?” she asked with a shudder.

“Does your family own any land?”

“Of course not. There isn’t enough to go around.”

“My family owns two hundred acres.”

She wrinkled her nose. “At the bottom of the sea.”

“Yeah. But it’s ours.” If she saw my family’s homestead — saw how green and beautiful it was — maybe then she’d understand. “When I’m eigh-teen, I’m going to stake my own claim. A hundred acres between two buttes.”

“You sound like an ad for the Subsea Homestead Act.” Smiling, she quoted the commercial: “ *‘Stake your claim, work the land for five years, and it’s yours!’* Wait — what’s that sound?”

A shrill clicking vibrated through the hull. Our eyes

darted to the ceiling and then to the inky water outside the viewing dome. Growing louder and faster, the clicking turned into a piercing trill, then something crashed into the curved window. With a shriek, Gemma threw her arms over her head but the flexiglass didn't shatter. Instead a dark object bumped down the window, trailing a thick chain.

"Tow hook." I shut off my flashlight and pushed past her to peer up through the dome. "Kill your light." High above us, a sub hovered with its exterior lights glowing softly, outlining its shape — a shape I'd heard described many times, always in fearful tones. The heavy hook hit the rig's bumper with a thud that reverberated through the soles of my boots and up my spine. I backed away. "Let's get out of here."

A path of light shot down through the darkness. "Come on," I urged, but Gemma's gaze stayed on the chain outside, now taut and writhing in the spotlight's beam. "That's the *Spectre* up there," I tried to explain. "It belongs to —" A pair of boots thunked onto the viewing dome and kicked off again. Then the rest of the man shimmied into view. When he let go of the chain and dropped onto the bumper, a second man slid down after him.

Now Gemma skittered back into the shadows. "Who are they?"

I crouched as thin beams of light crisscrossed the bridge, coming from the men's helmets. "Outlaws," I

whispered, tugging her down.

“Really?”

She looked outside with new interest as the outlaws attached the tow hook to the rig. With -every move they made, their crown lights bounced wildly inside the bridge. I touched my thigh where I had seven inches of serrated steel holstered. Still, as skilled as I was with a knife and speargun, I knew I -couldn’t fend off a sub full of grown men. We had to get out of this rig unnoticed. I nudged Gemma and pointed at the corridor. After a last look at the outlaws, she followed me into the dark hall. At the gear room, I flicked on my flashlight and stepped through the hatchway.

She didn’t budge from the threshold. “Does this mean it’s not fish blood?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. Until now, there had been no proof that the Seablite Gang had ever killed anyone, only a heap of ugly stories and a bullet in a skipper’s leg — enough to convince me that I didn’t want to tangle with an outlaw. Around us, the hull moaned and creaked. “Hurry.” I circled the room to avoid the blood. “Once they haul this wreck out of the mud, it’ll fly.”

“I’m not going outside.” She hovered in the corridor. “I’ll hide somewhere in here.”

Maybe I shouldn’t have told her about the giant squids. “Listen,” I said, “if the Seablite Gang killed someone in here” — with a shudder, the sub lurched forward, and I grabbed on to the air lock’s hatch frame to keep from fal-

ling over — “you can bet they’re dumping this rig right into Coldsleep Canyon. You want to go down with it?”

Blanching, she dashed into the air lock. “Tell me again why -people live down here,” she said.

I hit the button that closed the hatch behind her. “When you suck it in, do it all the way.”

She flushed anemone pink. “Excuse me?”

“The Liquigen.” Flipping her helmet over her head, I snapped its seal shut. “Some beginners leave pockets of air in their lungs. Then, when they get into the black, their chests are smashed flat by the water pressure.” I clapped my hands together for effect.

The icy glare she shot me -could have restored the glaciers. But my words must have sunk in, because she bit down on the Liquigen tube in the base of her helmet and made an effort to fill her lungs. As she gagged and snorted, she fell against the chamber wall, setting off a blinking red light above the exterior hatch. I secured my own helmet, only to realize with a jolt that Gemma -couldn’t have set off the light. That light only pulsed when someone *outside* pushed the entry button.

I snapped off my flashlight — and not a second too soon. The hatch dialed open and a stream of water shot into the air lock, glistening like a blood spurt in the pulsing red light. The stream widened into a waterfall and churning water climbed over our bodies. I unspooled a short length of rip cord from my belt, clipped the end to Gemma’s belt, and steered her to the wall near the open

hatch.

As soon as the ocean filled the chamber, a beam of light cut through the bubbles. A helmet light. I waited, nerves firing, as a dark figure stepped through the hatch. The instant he crossed the chamber, I darted outside, dragging Gemma with me. Given our speed, he must have felt the water ripple behind him. He wheeled around, looking younger than I'd expected. Or maybe he just seemed it with his mouth hanging open and black eyes wide at seeing the two of us. In a burst of movement, he slashed forward, baring teeth that had been filed into points and bleached till they were as transparent as a dragonfish's fangs.

Thrusting Gemma behind me, I slammed the entry button. As the hatch cinched shut, the outlaw threw out a hand, grabbing for my neck. The metal plates closed around his forearm. His fingers raked my chest, not trying to snag me anymore but convulsing under the pressure. Stumbling back, I banged into Gemma and knocked her off the bumper into the gloom. The rip cord between us snapped taut and then yanked me into the darkness after her.

For an instant, I sprawled in the ooze, my legs entwined with hers, then I barrel rolled away from the rig, taking Gemma with me. A second later the sub lifted off the seafloor, kicking up silt as it went, sailing into the darkness.

I got to my feet, only to tumble back into the mud

when Gemma grabbed on to my dive belt. Did she think I was going to leave her? The rip cord still linked us. As we got up together, she gripped my hand like a moray eel chomping prey. I supposed the freezing darkness and intense pressure -could be nerve-wracking if you weren't used to it, which was why the other settlers almost never left the continental shelf. They didn't share my fascination with Coldsleep Canyon, even though it was longer and deeper than the Grand Canyon and a hundred times creepier. Coldsleep had been named the Hudson Canyon until a chunk of the East Coast slid into its gaping maw. Now -everyone associated the chasm with death and destruction. I just associated it with predators.

I checked around us for the green lantern sharks. Seeing none, I turned my crown lights on dim and located my mantaboard. Gemma matched me step for step with her lights blazing and knife out. The glare would attract -every beast in the area and her knife wouldn't stop half of them, but if waving it around made her feel better, great.

Luckily, her needle-nosed vehicle was whirling in a brine pool only two hundred yards away. A wealthy Topsider's toy. A real beauty. I held the anchor chain taut so she -could shimmy up to the gel-filled ring that was the entry port. I followed, pausing to hitch my manta to the jet's tail, where it hovered, resembling a real manta ray, minus the tail. I wiggled inside and spilled onto the pilot bench alongside her. It was like settling into a small, perfect rocket.

After unsealing my helmet, I drew in a breath to make the Liquigen in my lungs evaporate. Because we'd filled our lungs with liquid and not some volatile mix of gasses, our chances of getting the bends were slim. Still, I was glad to see that Gemma had turned on the vehi--cle's de-pressurization system. Beside me, she coughed up Liquigen. "Don't hack it out," I instructed, stowing our helmets behind the seat. "That's harder on your lungs."

She swallowed, eyes watering.

"You know this isn't -really a minisub, right?" My fingers whispered over the control panel. "It's a jet-fin. Not made for deep diving." As I touched the icon that turned the toggle switches on the panel into holograms, I realized she was staring at me. "Sorry. You want to drive? It's your rental."

"No." Her voice was shaky. "I'm sure you've been pi-loting subs since you were five."

"Four," I said with a smile she didn't return. "Want me to take you back to the Trade Station?" She nodded, her eyes shining with a mix of alarm and fascination — the way my little sister gazed at mammals with fur. "I have to go anyway to report that rig." To avoid her stare, I searched for the switch that would draw up the anchor. Nothing good ever followed that kind of look.

"How did you find my sub in the dark?" she asked.

"Your jet-fin. Minisubs aren't tricked out for speed."

"You didn't answer the question."

I shrugged, though my insides whirled like a comb

jelly. I'd spooked her. And here I thought I was acting normal.

"I just followed the current," I said. Which was true. Sort of. "Any pioneer -could do it." I jimmied the throttle and the jet-fin blasted forward, throwing us back against the seat. I knew Gemma was still watching me; I -could feel it. I tried to focus on the thrill of the ride, but even that didn't unclench my gut.

"It's true, isn't it?" Soft and insistent, her words poked at me. "What they say about the pioneer kids down here."

"They say a lot of things, but it's all chum." I kept my eyes on the viewport and increased the jet's speed. "We're just like you."

"No, you're not."

She may as well have jabbed me with her flashlight again. In fact, I would have preferred it. Bruises went away. I turned to defend myself, but Gemma's gaze was as bright and intense as the flare I'd fired at the green lantern sharks. And like those deep-sea creatures, I froze.

"Admit it," she said. "You have a Dark Gift."