

Sunker's Deep, by Lian Tanner (The Hidden series #2)

Chapter 1: Three hundred years later

Sharkey squinted one-eyed through the thick glass porthole. He was searching for scraps of metal – metal that'd be covered in weed by now, and colonised by barnacles, so that it looked no different from the rocks around it. But it was here somewhere, seventy-five feet below the surface of the sea, and he was determined to find it.

'Two degrees down bubble,' he murmured.

'Two degrees down, aye sir!' cried eleven-year-old Gilly, and she turned the brass wheels that tilted the little submersible's diving planes.

In the bow, eight-year-old Poddy's hands flew across the control panel, trimming the boat and keeping the direction steady as it sank. Further aft, Gilly's younger brother Cuttle braced his bare feet on the metal deck, waiting for orders to change speed. Pipes gurgled. Dials twitched. Above the children's heads, the ancestor shrine maintained a silent watch.

'Ease your bubble,' said Sharkey.

'Ease bubble, aye sir!' Gilly turned the wheels the other way.

Outside the porthole, the green light that filtered down from above touched thick strands of kelp and a shoal of codlings. The throb of *Claw*'s propeller was like the beating of Sharkey's heart.

He straightened his eyepatch and sang the last part of an old Sunker charm, under his breath.

'Below to find,

Below to bind—'

It must have worked, because almost straight away he saw something out of the corner of his undamaged eye. 'Starboard twenty,' he said.

'Starboard twenty, aye sir!' cried Poddy, and *Claw* began to turn.

When they were on the desired heading, Sharkey said, 'Midships.'

'Midships, aye sir!'

'All stop.'

'All stop, aye sir!' And Cuttle threw himself at the motor switches.

Gilly came for'ard, ducking past the periscope housing and wriggling around the chart table. 'Have you found something, sir?'

Sharkey wasn't sure, not really. But he always sounded confident, even when he had no idea what he was doing. 'Aye. There, where the kelp's thickest,' he said.

Young Poddy hooked her toe under the control panel and leaned back on her stool. 'Adm'ral Deeps *thought* you'd be able to find it, sir. And she was right!'

'Course she was,' said Sharkey, hoping that the strange-looking bit of rock really was scrap metal from the giant submersible *Resolute*, which had broken up somewhere near here ninety-three years ago.

'Has he found the boxes?' called Cuttle.

'Not yet,' said Gilly. 'But he will.' She bobbed her head in the direction of the ancestor shrine. 'Thank you, Great Granmer Lin Lin. Thank you, Great Granfer Cray.'

For the rest of the morning, *Claw* cruised back and forth through the ropy kelp, while Sharkey stared out the porthole, half-dizzy with concentration.

At the end of the forenoon watch, Gilly struck the bell eight times. *Ting-ting ting-ting ting-ting ting-ting*. 'It's midday, sir. We're due back on *Rampart* soon.'

'Mm,' said Sharkey. 'I want to find at least one of the boxes before we go.'

From the helm, Poddy said, 'You could ask Lin Lin and Adm'ral Cray where they are, sir.'

Sharkey said nothing. His fellow Sunkers venerated their dead ancestors, but at the same time they seemed to think that the spirits were like some sort of boat crew, and all he had to do was whistle and they'd come running.

Poddy glanced out the helm porthole. 'Look, sir, there's a dolphin! Maybe it's the spirit of Lin Lin! Maybe she's going to show you the boxes!'

Sharkey sighed in a long-suffering sort of way. 'Lin Lin talks to me when it suits her, Poddy. So does First Adm'ral Cray—'

The younger children bobbed their heads respectfully.

'—and *that* is just an ordinary dolphin.'

'Oh,' said Poddy, disappointed.

The dolphin swam idly away from them, and Sharkey watched it go. His eye flickered downwards. There was something—

'There!' he said. 'Port full rudder.'

‘Port full rudder, aye sir!’ Poddy’s small hands brought *Claw* around, as smooth as sea silk.

‘All stop.’

‘All stop, aye sir!’ shouted Cuttle.

‘Hold us right there,’ said Sharkey, and he gripped the lever that worked the retrieval device.

Like the underwater vessel that housed it, the device was called the claw. Sharkey pulled the lever back and it ratcheted out from the side of the little submersible and spread its talons. It wasn’t easy to use with only one eye; Sharkey had to compensate for the fact that he couldn’t judge distances as well as he’d been able to before the accident. And he didn’t want to wreck the box. Now that he’d found it, he was sure it’d be a good one, crammed full of surgeons’ secrets with not a drop of water seeped in to spoil it.

Gilly eyed the chronometer. ‘We’re due back on *Rampart* now, sir,’ she said.

Without looking up, Sharkey said, ‘Send a message turtle. Tell ’em we’ll be late.’

‘... Aye, sir.’

There was no argument, of course. Discipline on the submersibles didn’t allow for arguments. But as Gilly scratched out a note, and took one of the mechanical turtles from its rack, Sharkey knew what the middies were thinking.

He won’t get into trouble. But we will, even though we’re just following his orders!

It was true. Because of who he was, Sharkey could get away with being late, whereas the middies couldn’t.

Still, that was their problem, not his.

It took him another ten minutes to juggle the box into the side airlock. As soon as it was secure, he murmured, ‘Mark the position.’

Gilly squeezed past the ladder to the chart table. ‘Position marked, sir!’

‘Half-ahead. Take her up to periscope depth.’

As *Claw* moved forward again – the planes tilting, the bow rising – Sharkey sat back on his stool, pleased with himself. He knew what the other Sunkers would say, when they heard about the box.

Sharkey can do anything. Sharkey can find anything. Sharkey’s a hero, a future adm’ral, born on a lucky tide and blessed by the ancestors. Thank you, Lin Lin!

The submersible leveled out, and he grinned. ‘Up periscope.’

There was probably no danger from their enemies, not so far from terra. But caution was drilled into the Sunker children from the day they could crawl. Gilly crouched, her face pressed against the eyepieces, her feet swivelling in a circle.

Halfway round, she stopped and rubbed her eyes. ‘Sir, there’s something strange in the Up Above. Like huge bubbles—’

Sharkey was already moving, snatching the periscope handles away from her.

‘Sou’-west,’ said Gilly.

The breath caught in Sharkey’s throat. Gilly was right. There were three enormous white bubbles floating through the sky with woven baskets hanging beneath them! And figures leaning over the edge of the baskets, pointing to something below the surface. And lines tethering the bubbles to—

To skimmers! To a dozen or more skimmers with billowing sails and their hulls low in the water, following those pointing fingers with a look of grim purpose.

‘It’s the Ghosts!’ cried Sharkey, and his blood ran cold. For the last three hundred years, the Sunkers had dreaded this moment. ‘It’s the Hungry Ghosts! And they’ve found *Rampart!*’