

BELOW THE ICE

by

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V21
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SCRIPT NOTE:

It might have been a while since you were on a working ship.

For your convenience:

Bow - the front of the ship.

Stern - the rear of the ship.

Starboard - the right side when looking towards the bow.

Port - the left side of the ship when looking towards the bow.

FADE IN

EXT. ANTARCTICA - HELICOPTER POV - DUSK

The largest desert in the world whips under the POV. Majestic mountains of ice. Endless plains of frozen desolation.

On the horizon, a setting blood-red sun stains the sky with purples, oranges, and golds.

In the distance, buildings come into focus.

A scientific outpost sprawls across the landscape. A mish-mash of rag-tag buildings.

SUPER: McMURDO STATION ("MAC-TOWN")
POPULATION 1248 PERMANENT RESIDENTS
SOUTHERN TIP OF ROSS ISLAND... ANTARCTICA

At the ice dock, a ship bustles with activity as she's unloaded.

EXT. MCMURDO STATION - DUSK

Snow swirls. Clears. A sign becomes clear --

WELCOME TO MAC-TOWN
THE ASS END OF NOWHERE!

The wind HOWLS. An empty coffee can tumbles past. Catches the wind. Flies into the air.

INT. MCMURDO STATION - SANDY'S OASIS - DUSK

In contrast to the constant-winter outside, Sandy's Oasis proves to be a dimly lit oasis decorated in leis, coconut-tree fronds, and red and green Christmas lights.

PATRON'S drink. The mood's merry. A little drunk. TV's mounted show a variety of state-side content. On one --

CNN NEWS

Anchor ROBIN MEADE (40) moves to her next story.

ROBIN
OK. Get this. Strange happenings at
bottom of the earth. Another ship lost in
the Southern Ocean...

A graphic of the Southern Ocean opens by Robin's head.

ROBIN (CONT'D)
... This one the Esatonia, a Norwegian
flagged research vessel with 30 on board.
This is the seventh ship lost in the last
two months.

Meteorologist BOB VAN DILLEN (38) chimes in.

BOB
What are they doing down there?

ROBIN
Freezing?

They laugh.

BACK IN SANDY'S OASIS

The door opens. Wind and snow whips in.

Captain ELIAS EDWARDS, (early 40's), square jaw, athletic build, quiet confidence, enters and surveys the scene.

EDWARDS
Ava Rita! Quick now! Work to do!

Edwards turns. Walks out. Several SHADOWY FIGURES rise and follow.

EXT. ICE - HELICOPTER POV - DAY

Dotted with mini-burgs and grey-white slurry, the black water of the Southern Ocean whips by under the POV.

Less 'burgs and slurry as the ocean freezes into a thick layer of ice. The endless ice.

In the distance, out of place in the middle of nowhere, a ship.

YERMAK

Two hundred feet long. Thirty feet wide. She bobs in a hole she's punched in the ice.

A crane lifts a two-man submersible toward a 20 x 20 hole cut through the ice next to the Yermak. On her side, a name: "MIR."

Next to the hole, DMITRI ARSOV (32), dressed in cold weather gear, mans a camera on a tripod to record the MIR as she's deployed.

A tether runs from atop Mir to a giant ten-foot tall spool on the stern of the Yermak.

Next to the hole, a bobcat fitted with a chainsaw-like attachment sits unattended next to a snowmobile.

SUPER: RUSSIAN RESEARCH VESSEL YERMAK
MISSION: MAP SOUTHERN OCEAN FLOOR
FOR PROMGAZ, RUSSIA'S LARGEST OIL COMPANY

A bright orange Bell 206 LongRanger helicopter ROARS past the POV, circles the Yermak, and sets down on a platform on her stern.

EXT. YERMAK - DUSK

SAILORS stand along the rail to watch Mir drops into the abyss.

EXT. SOUTHERN OCEAN - UNDERWATER

The Mir drops through crystal clear water. Headlights flicker on. Swaths of light penetrate the darkness.

In her cockpit, TWO MEN look out.

INT. MIR

Cramped quarters. SERGEI (50's) sits by ANDREY (40's). They're bathed in the blue glow of an instrument panel NASA would envy.

Andrey twists the top off a thermos.

They, like all crew of the Yermak, SPEAK RUSSIAN.

ANDREY

Tea?

Sergei shakes his head 'no.' Andrey sips his tea.

EXT. SOUTHERN OCEAN - UNDERWATER

Deep water. The ghostly orbs of Mir's lights drift downward.

SUPER: NEAR THE SINDLINGER TRENCH.
DEEPEST POINT OF THE SOUTHERN OCEAN

EXT. YERMAK - STERN - DAY

Dmitri stands next to the tether-spool and watches it unwind. A LED shows the submersibles depth: 22,250... 22,300... 22,350 ...

The wind HOWLS. Flurries dance and shift.

INT. YERMAK - BRIDGE

CAPTAIN TITOV (50) watches the radar. The Mir is a small dot that moves further from the center point with each sweep of the radar.

On another monitor, a camera positioned above the bridge looks down at the dive hole. In the bottom corner, 'REC' blinks.

Second mate PETROV (35) looks at yet another monitor. Above it, a sticker has 'MIR' written on it. The POV shows the view from the front of Mir. Technical information is superimposed.

Petrov's brow wrinkles as he looks at the screen.

PETROV

Captain...?

Titov walks over. Petrov points to the temperature in the corner of the monitor. It blinks: "29.50 F / -1.38 C."

TITOV

Glitch.

Titov picks up the radio transmitter --

TITOV (CONT'D)

Come in, Mir. We're reading a temperature anomaly. Can you confirm?

EXT. SOUTHERN OCEAN - UNDERWATER

The Mir hovers five feet above the ocean floor. Her lights pierce the darkness. Sergei and Andrey stare out through portholes.

INT. MIR - SAME

Andrey glances at a gauge: "29.50 F / -1.38 C."

He taps at it. The temperature doesn't change.

ANDREY

We see it too, Yermak. Can't be right.
Note it in the maintenance log, please?

The submersible GROANS under the pressure of the dense water.

Both men go still as they look up toward the sound, wondering if the hull will hold. The GROAN subsides. Sergei lets out a held breath and flips switches.

SERGEI

Beginning sonar map.

PING!

EXT. SOUTHERN OCEAN - UNDERWATER

The PING reverberates through the depths. Mir drops a few feet closer to the ocean floor. Her rotors kick up a cloud of silt.

PING!

EXT. YERMAK - STERN

The LED on the spool shows the Mir's depth at 23,800 feet. Dmitri looks down at the ice-hole. It's beginning to freeze-over.

DMITRI

(into the walkie-talkie)
I'm going to break up the ice.

INT. MIR

Through the window, the Mir's powerful spots illuminate the alien landscape of the ocean floor: vast, flat, grey, virginal.

PING!

Near Andre, a display shows the high-res image of the ocean floor generated in time to the PING.

Andrey raises his thermos in a toast.

ANDREY

I claim another barren fucking desert in
the name of Mother Russia.

Sergei smiles and shakes his head.

PING!

Sergei glances down at the computer generated map. There's a hole in the ocean floor. Impossible to tell scale. He quickly looks up and out the window, brow creased with concern.

Before he can say anything, their view becomes obstructed by a billowing cloud of silt.

SERGEI

All stop!

EXT. SOUTHERN OCEAN - UNDERWATER

The Mir hangs in a swirling cloud of brown silt. Behind the submersible, something slithers by. Just a glimpse. Sleek. Fast. Massive. Hidden within the cloud.

INT. MIR

Sergei flips switches as the Mir stops.

SERGEI

Something... Something in front of us...

The silt clears.

Sergei and Andrey stare out, eyes wide with wonder.

EXT. SOUTHERN OCEAN - UNDERWATER

The Mir's spots are trained on a huge circular hole in the ocean floor. Seventy feet in diameter. Bottomless.

ANDREY (O.S.)

What is it?

INT. MIR - SAME

Sergei and Andrey stare out at the hole.

SERGEI
Hydrothermal vent, maybe?

Sergei pushes the 'SONAR' button: PING!

EXT. SOUTHERN OCEAN - UNDERWATER

Suddenly, the Mir tilts 90 degrees and SLAMS into the ocean bed!

INT. MIR - SAME

Chaos! Lights FLICKER! Instruments SPARK! Metal GROANS! Andrey and Sergei SCREAM as they're thrown around the cockpit. The front windshield CRACKS. Water HISSES in at them.

EXT. SOUTHERN OCEAN - UNDERWATER

Still hidden in the clouds of silt, shadows of a slithering marine mass slip in and out of view as The Beast shakes the Mir like a rag doll.

The Mir's spots dance wildly.

INT. YERMAK - BRIDGE - SAME

On the radio. SCREAMS of horror.

TITOV
Bring them up! Bring them up!

EXT. SOUTHERN OCEAN - UNDERWATER - SAME

Silt shrouds the attacker as the headlights rise, twist and ferociously SLAM into the ocean floor. One headlight breaks, the other flickers madly.

INT. MIR - SAME

Andre and Sergei throw their arms over their heads as the cockpit CRUNCHES inward.

SERGEI
Argghhh!

EXT. SOUTHERN OCEAN - UNDERWATER - SAME

With a flash of light and a gush of bubbles, the Mir IMPLODES.

EXT. MCMURDO STATION - ICE DOCK - DAY

A bustle of activity as a ship unloads. She's small for an icebreaker.

Built in the early eighties, seventy-five meters long, near thirty-five wide. Blooms of rust dot her superstructure. Stenciled on her stern, "AVA RITA."

SUPER: ICE BREAKER M.V. AVA RITA
 LENGTH 75M, WEIGHT: 3,540 TONS
 MAX CAPACITY: 150, MAX CREW: 26, CURRENT CREW: 12
 CONTRACTED BY US GOVERNMENT TO FERRY SCIENTIFIC
 PERSONNEL AND EQUIPMENT TO REMOTE OUTPOSTS.

SERIES OF SHOTS - UNLOADING A CROWDED BOAT

-- SCIENTISTS squeeze past each other in the cramped halls.

-- Scientists stand and chat as they eat in the crowded dining room. Trash mounds on tables. Nowhere to sit.

-- A crane lifts pallets from the Ava Rita to the dock.

END SERIES OF SHOTS

EXT. MCMURDO STATION - ICE DOCK - DAY

CONTESSA "CONNIE" ALMERO (late 30's), black hair pulled back in a ponytail, face free of makeup, has the markings of a stark, plain beauty raised far away from the bright lights of the big city.

She inspects a pallet full of scientific equipment.

SEAN MCCOMB (45) approaches. A gaunt man with sharp features and intelligent eyes behind John Lennon glasses. He doesn't have time for buffoons or for anyone with a sub-140 IQ.

He nods at another pallet loaded with gear. Tucked amongst the boxes, several labeled 'HIGH EXPLOSIVES - DANGEROUS.'

MCCOMB

See that you're careful with that one.
 It's very expensive. Very delicate.

She smiles at him, then sticks out her hand.

CONNIE

Dr. Almero. You must be Dr. McComb.

He shakes his head at his mistake, shakes her hand.

MCCOMB

So sorry. I thought --

She waves him off.

CONNIE

No worries. I'm heading for the Yermak as well. Interesting situation.

He purses his lips, reluctant to comment.

MCCOMB

Quite.

CONNIE

(re: his gear)

Go on, I'll keep an eye on it.

He nods, walks towards the brow (a ramp that leads from dock to ship) and passes the masses as they disembark.

Among them, Captain Edwards, who smiles when he sees Connie. He makes his way over.

EDWARDS

Of all the gin joints in the world ...

She turns to him. Her face lights up.

EDWARDS (CONT'D)

... she walks into mine.

CONNIE

Look at you!

She wraps her arms around him and they hug: longtime friends.

EDWARDS

I've had the boys clean out the lab.
She's all ready for you.

CONNIE

Thanks, Elias -- watch out!

A chain from the winch swings towards them. Edwards snatches it from mid-air and attaches it to McComb's palette.

CONNIE (CONT'D)

Careful. Mr. Fancy Pants told me it was
very expensive. Very delicate.

Edwards laughs.

EDWARDS

Right. I'll be gentle.

Edwards looks up, swirls his finger in the air: *lift 'er up boys!*

Edwards puts out his arm, Connie hooks hers in. They walk towards the brow.

CONNIE

Sunny still around?

Edwards smiles.

EDWARDS

Yeah. Somewhere. Still the only female never to leave me, tell me I'm wrong, or nag me to death.

Connie laughs.

CONNIE

Not yet, at least.

EDWARDS

Ain't that the truth. Surprised to run into you.

CONNIE

Life's crazy. I go where they tell me.

EDWARDS

And this time they tell you the Yermak?

CONNIE

Yep. Russian job. Mapping the ocean floor...

She looks away. Doesn't want to say too much.

EDWARDS

Got her coordinates last night.

CONNIE

And for you?

EDWARDS

Back and forth, back and forth. Drop you and McComb at the Yermak and then on to Tierra del Fuego. Wash, rinse, repeat.

CONNIE

Exotic. ETA?

Edwards shakes his head, smiles, shrugs.

EDWARDS

Hard to say. Eighty three hundred miles through the thickest ice known to man. Might take ten days. Might take twenty. Depends --

CONNIE

On the ice?

He smiles at her. Old friends.

EDWARDS

Always does.

Edwards' walkie-talkie crackles to life.

VOICE (ON THE RADIO)
All our little birdies have flown the
coop, Cap'.

INT. AVA RITA - BRIDGE - SAME

Gauges, switches, levers. All heavy-duty circa 1980. A few monitors have been retrofitted into the console.

Second Mate LARRY KEALY (40's), grizzled by a life at sea, looks out at the bow of the boat. Kealy's an efficient man. A follower, not a leader. He speaks into a radio.

KEALY
Like a damn ghost ship, now.

EDWARDS (ON THE RADIO)
Those divers make it?

INT. AVA RITA - CANDY AND CHAZ'S ROOM - SAME

CANDY (25), a shapely short-haired blonde, and CHAZ (27), a muscled model-type plucked from last months cover of "GQ" stow dive gear in their cramped quarters.

KEALY (V.O.) (ON THE RADIO)
Stowing their gear.

SERIES OF SHOTS - AN EMPTY BOAT

- Long dark halls. Empty. Poorly lit. Shadowy.
- An empty dining room. Trash on the tables. Trash on the floors.
- The deck doors on the bow cargo-hold fold closed.
- The Ava Rita makes way, fading into light swirling snow.

END SERIES OF SHOTS

INT. AVA RITA - SCIENCE LAB

Connie moves through her crowded machine-filled lab.

Scientific gear is stacked along the walls. A few boxes remain unopened here and there.

Three fish tanks line one wall.

On the left, in a small tank, a silvery Arctic cod swims alone. A digital thermometer shows the temperature: "28.50 F / -2.22 C."