



Undersea Guardians, Ray Bradbury

## Undersea Guardians

### Amazing Stories (1944)

All of us have a purpose in life; among us are those whose duty is to act as guardians for those who have a mission to perform.

THE ocean slept quietly. There was little movement in its deep green silence. Along the floor of a watery valley some bright flecks of orange color swam: tiny arrow-shaped fish. A shark prowled by, gaping its mouth. An octopus reached up lazily with a tentacle, wiggled it at nothing, and settled back dark and quiet.

Fish swam in and around the rusting, torn hulk of a submerged cargo ship, in and out of gaping holes and ripped ports. The legend on the prow said: USS Atlantic.

It was quite soundless. The water formed around the ship like green gelatin.

And then Conda came, with his recruits.

They were swimming like dream-motes through the wide dark-watered valleys of the ocean; Conda at the head of the school with his red shock of hair flurried upright in a current, and his red bush beard trailed down over the massive rib of his chest. He put out his great arms, clutched water, pulled back, and his long body shot ahead.

The others imitated Conda, and it was very quietly done. The ripple of white arms, cupped hands, the glimmer of quick moving feet, was like the movement of motion pictures from which the sound-track has been cut. Just deep water silence and the mute moves of Conda and his swarm.

Alita came close at his kicking heels. She swam with her sea-green eyes wide-fixed and her dark hair spilling back over her naked body. Her mouth twisted with some sort of agony to which she could give no words.

Alita felt someone moving at her side. Another, smaller, woman, very thin in her nakedness, with gray hair and a shriveled husk of face that held nothing but weariness. She swam too, and would keep on swimming.

And then there was Helene, flashing by over their heads like an instantaneous charge of lightning. Helene with her hot angry eyes and her long platinum hair and her strange laughter.

"How much longer, Conda?" The old woman's thought reached through the waters, touching the brains of them all as they swam.

"An hour. Perhaps only forty minutes!" came Conda's blunt retort. It had the depth of fathoms in it; dark like the tides in the sunken water lands.

"Watch out!" somebody cried.

Down through the green waters overhead something tumbled. A shadow crossed the ocean surface, quick, like a gigantic sea-gull.

"Depth-charge!" shouted Conda. "Get away from it!"

Like so many frightened fish the twenty of them scattered instantly, with a flurry of legs, a spreading of arms, a diving of heads.

THE depth-charge ripped water into gouts and shreds, spread terrific vibrations down to kick the sandy bottom, up to ram the surface like a geyser!

Alita screamed to herself as she sank, stunned, to the sea-floor, a queer strange pain going through her limbs. If only this were over, if only the real death came. If only it were over.

A shivering went through her. Quite suddenly the water was icy cold, and she was alone in the green emptiness. So very alone. Alone, staring at a dark ring on her left hand.

"Richard, I want to see you again so very much. Oh, Richard, if we could only be together."

"Daughter." The gentle thought husked at her as the old woman glided up, white hair misting around her wrinkled face. "Don't. Don't think. Come along. There's work. Work to be done. Much of it. Work for you and me and the ships on the surface, and for—for Richard."

Alita didn't move. "I don't want to swim. I'd rather just sit here on the sand and... wait."

"You know you can't do that." The old woman touched her. "You'd be all the unhappier. You have a reason to swim or you wouldn't be swimming. Come along. We're almost there!"

The effects of the depth-charge, dropped from a low-flying airplane, had dispersed. Mud-streaks boiled up fogging the water, and there were a million air bubbles dancing toward the outer world like laughing diamonds. Alita let the old woman take her hand and tug her up from the sand floor. Together they progressed toward Conda, who was the nucleus of a growing congregation.

"Submarine!" somebody thought, in a tense whisper. "Over that crop of coral ahead. That's why the airplane dropped the depth-charge!"

"What kind of submarine?" someone else asked.

"German," said Conda grimly. His red beard wavered in the water and his red-rimmed eyes stared out with iron fury. Helene flicked by them

all, swiftly, laughing. "A German submarine lying on the bottom, sleeping quietly— waiting for the convoy!"

Their minds swirled at the words of Conda, like so many warm-cold currents intermixing with fear and apprehension.

"And the convoy will pass this spot in how long?"

"Half an hour at most, now."

"Then there isn't much time, is there?"

"Not much."

"Isn't it dangerous for us to be near it? What if the airplane returns with more depth-charges?"

Conda growled. "This is the limit to the plane range. That plane won't be back. He's out of bombs and out of gas. It's our job now. And what of it? You afraid?"

Silence.

THE ring of faces looked to Conda for the plan, Alita among them; fourteen men, six women. Men with beards grown out four, five months; hair long and unshorn about their ears. Pallid watery faces with determined bone under the skin, set jaws and tightened fists.

All gathered like fragments of some oceanic nightmare. The pallid undead, breathing water, and thinking mute thoughts about the stormy night when the USS Atlantic had been torpedoed and sent to the bottom, with all of them trapped, screaming, inside her.

"We never had our chance," said Conda, grimly, "to get where we were going to do what we had to do. But we'll go on doing it until the war's

over because that's all that's worth while doing. I don't know how we live or what makes us live except the will to fight, the will to vengeance, wanting to win—not wanting to lie on the coral shelves like so much meat for the sharks—"

Alita listened and shuddered. Why was she still alive and swimming forty fathoms under?

And then she knew. It was like sudden flame in her. She lived because she loved Richard Jameson. She lived simply because his ship might pass this way some day soon again, like it had three weeks ago, returning from England. And she might see him leaning on the rail, smoking his pipe and trying to smile, still alive.

She lived for that. She lived to keep him safe on every trip. Like the others, she had a purpose, a hot, constricting, unquenchable purpose to prevent more victims from coming down to join her in the same nightmare fashion as the USS Atlantic. She guessed that explained everything. There was good reason for her still to be moving, and somehow God had motivated them all in the green sea-weed plateaus and gullies.

"Now," came Conda's heavy thought, "we've this German submarine to consider. We have to knock it out of action completely. We can't have it lying here when the convoy comes. Alita—"

Alita jerked. She came out of her thoughts, and her pale lips moved. "Yes?"

"You know what to do, Alita? And... Helene?"

Helene drifted down dreamily, laughing in answer, and opening white fingers to clench them tight.

"It's up to you, Alita and Helene. The rest of us will deploy around the submarine. Jones, you and Merrith try to jam the torpedo openings somehow. Acton, you work on the induction valves. Simpson, see what

you can do to the guns on deck; and Haines, you and the other men try your damndest with the periscope and conning tower."

"Yes, sir."

"Good enough, sir."

"If we do it, this'll be the sixth sub for us—"

"If we do it," said Conda.

"Alita'll do it for us, won't you, Alita?"

"What? Oh, yes. Yes! I'll do it." She tried to smile.

"All right then." Conda swung about. "Spread out and go in toward the submarine under a smoke-screen. Deploy!"

SILENTLY the congregation split into twos and threes and swam toward the coral shelf, around it, then sank to the bottom, scooped up great handfuls of mud and darkened the water with it. Alita followed, cold, tired, unhappy.

The submarine squatted on the bottom like a metal shark, dark and wary and not making a sound. Sea-weed waved drowsy fronds around it, and several curious blue-fish eyed it and fluttered past. Sunshine slanted down through water, touching the gray bulk, making it look prehistoric, primeval.

A veil of mud sprang up as the cordon of Conda's people closed in around the U-boat. Through this veil their pasty white bodies twisted, naked and quick.

Alita's heart spasmed its cold grave-flesh inside her. It beat salt water through her arteries, it beat agony through her veins. There, just a few

feet from her through the mud-veil, lay an iron-womb, and inside it grown-up children stirred, living. And out here in the cold deeps nothing lived but the fish.

Conda and Alita and the others didn't count.

The submarine, a metal womb, nurturing those men, keeping the choking, hungry waters from them. What a difference a few inches of metal made between pink flesh and her own white flesh, between living and not living, between laughing and crying. All of that air inside the submarine. What would it be like to gasp it in again, like the old days just a few scant weeks ago. What would it be like to suck it in and mouth it out with talked words on it? To talk again!

Alita grimaced. She kicked her legs. Plunging to the U-boat, she beat her fists against it, screaming, "Let me in! Let me in! I'm out here and I want to live! I want to live! Let me in!"

"Alita!" The old woman's voice cried in her mind. A shadow drew across her lined face, softening it. "No, no, my child, do not think of it! Think only of what must be done!"

Alita's handsome face was ugly with torture.

"Just one breath! Just one song!"

"Time shortens, Alita. And the convoy comes! The submarine must be smashed—now!"

"Yes," said Alita wearily. "Yes. I must think of Richard—if he should happen to be in this next convoy—"

Her dark hair surged in her face. She brushed it back with white fingers and stopped thinking about living again. It was needless torture.

She heard Helene's laughter from somewhere. It made her shiver. She saw Helene's nude body flash by above her like a silver fish, magnificent



and graceful as a wind-borne thistle. Her laughter swam with her.  
"Open the U-boat up! Open it up and let them out and I'll make love to a German boy!"

THERE were lights in the submarine. Dim lights. Alita pressed her pale face against the port and stared into a crew's quarters. Two German men lay on small bunks, looking at the iron ceiling, doing nothing.

After a while one puckered his lips, whistled, and rolled out of the bunk to disappear through a small iron door. Alita nodded. This was the way she wanted it. The other man was very young and very nervous, his eyes were erratic in a tired face, and his hair was corn-yellow and clipped tight to his head. He twisted his hands together, again and again, and a muscle in his cheek kept jerking.

Light and life, a matter of inches away. Alita felt the cold press of the ocean all around her, the beckoning urge of the cold swells. Oh, just to be inside, living and talking like them. . .

She raised her tiny fist, the one with Richard's thick ring on it, from Annapolis, and struck at the port. She struck four times.

No effect.

She tried again, and knew that Helene would be doing the same on the opposite side of the sub.

The Annapolis ring clicked against thick port glass.

Jerking, the German lad pulled his head up half an inch and stared at the port, and looked away again, went back to twisting his fingers and wetting his lips with his tongue.

"I'm out here!" Alita struck again and again. "Listen to me! Listen! I'm out here!"

The German sat up so violently he cracked his head against metal. Holding his forehead with one hand he slipped out of the bunk and stepped to the port.

He squinted out, cupping hands over eyes to see better.

Alita smiled. She didn't feel like smiling, but she smiled. Sunlight sprang down upon her dark smoke-spirals of hair dancing on the water. Sunlight stroked her naked white body. She beckoned with her hands, laughing.

For one unbelieving, stricken instant, it was as if hands strangled the German lad. His eyes grew out from his face like unhealthy gray things. His mouth stopped retching and froze. Something crumbled inside him. It seemed to be the one last thing to strike his mind once and for all insane.

One moment there, the next he was gone. Alita watched him fling himself back from the port, screaming words she couldn't hear. Her heart pounded. He fought to the door, staggering out. She swam to the next port in time to see him shout into the midst of a sweating trio of mechanics. He stopped, swayed, swallowed, pointed back to the bunk room, and while the others turned to stare in the designated direction, the young German ran on, his mouth wide, to the entrance rungs of the conning tower.

Alita knew what he was yelling. She spoke little German; she heard nothing; but faintly the waves of his mind impinged on hers, a screaming insanity: "God! Oh God! She's outside. And she is swimming! And alive!"

THE sub captain saw him coming.

He dragged out a revolver and fired, point-blank. The shot missed and the two grappled.

"God! Oh God! I can't stand it longer! Months of sleeping under the sea! Let me out of this god-damned nightmare! Let me out!"

"Stop! Stop it, Schmidt! Stop!" The captain fell under a blow. The younger man wrested the gun from him, shot him three times. Then he jumped up the rungs to the conning tower, and twisted at mechanisms.

Alita warned the others. "Be ready! One is coming out! He's coming out! He's opening the inner door!" Instantly, breathlessly, passionately, Helene's voice rang: "To hell with the inner door! It's the outer door we want open!"

"God in heaven, let me out! I can't stay below!"

"Stop him!"

The crew scrambled. Ringing down, the inner door peeled open. Three Germanic faces betrayed the biting fear in their bellies. They grabbed instruments and threw them at Schmidt's vanishing legs jumping up the rungs!

Conda's voice clashed like a thrust gong in the deep sunlit waters. "Ready, everyone? If he gets the outer door open, we must force in to stop the others from ever closing it!"

Helene laughed her knifing laughter. "I'm ready!"

The submarine stirred and rolled to a strange gurgling sound. Young Schmidt was babbling and crying. To Alita, he was now out of sight. The other men were pouring pistol shots up into the conning tower where he'd vanished, to no effect. They climbed after him, shouting.

A gout of water hammered down, crushed them!

"It's open!" Helene exulted. "It's open! The outer seal is free!"

"Don't let them slam it again!" roared Conda. White bodies shot by, flashing green in the sunlight. Thoughts darkened, veiling like unsettled mud.

Inside the machine-room, the crew staggered in a sloshing, belching nightmare of thrusting water. There was churning and thrashing and shaking like the interior of a gigantic washing machine. Two or three crew-men struggled up the rungs to the inner lock and beat at the closing mechanism.

"I'm inside!" Helene's voice was high, excited. "I've got him—the German boy! Oh, this is a new kind of love, this is!"

There was a terrific mental scream from the German, and then silence. A moment later his dangling legs appeared half in, half out the lock as the door started to seal! Now it couldn't seal. Yanking desperately, the crew beneath tried to free him of the lock, but Helene laughed dimly and said, "Oh, no, I've got him and I'm keeping him here where he'll do the most good! He's mine. Very much mine. You can't have him back!"

Water thundered, spewed. The Germans floundered. Schmidt's limbs kicked wildly, with no life, in the steadily descending torrent. Something happened to release him. The lock rapped open and he fell face down into the rising waters.

Something came with him. Something white and quick and naked. Helene.

ALITA watched in a numbed sort of feeling that was too weary to be horror.

She watched until there were three Germans left, swimming about, keeping their heads over water, yelling to God to save them. And Helene was in among them, invisible and stroking and moving quickly.

Her white hands flickered up, grasped one officer by the shoulders and pulled him steadily under.

"This is a different kind of love! Make love to me! Make love! Don't you like my cold lips?"

Alita swam off, shuddering, away from the fury and yelling and corruption. The submarine was dying, shaking its prehistoric bulk with metal agony. In another moment it would be drowned and the job done. Silence would come down again and sunlight would strike on the dead, quiet U-boat and another attack would be successful.

Sobbing, Alita swam up toward the sun in the green silence. It was late afternoon, and the water became warmer as she neared the surface. Late afternoon. Back in Forest Hills they'd be playing tennis now on the hot courts, drinking cool cocktails, talking about dancing tonight at the Indigo Club. Back in Forest Hills they'd be deciding what formal to wear tonight to that dance, what show to see. Oh, that was so long ago in the sanity of living, in the time before torpedoes crushed the hull of the USS Atlantic and took her down.

Richard, where are you now? Will you be here in a few minutes, Richard, with the convoy? Will you be thinking of us and the day we kissed goodbye in New York at the harbor, when I was on my way to nursing service in London? Will you remember how we kissed and held tight, and how you never saw me again?

I saw you, Richard. Three weeks ago. When you passed by on Destroyer 242, oblivious to me floating a few feet under the water!

If only we could be together. But I wouldn't want you to be like this, white and sodden and not alive. I want to keep you from all this, darling. And I shall. That's why I stay moving, I guess. Because I know I can help keep you living. We just killed a submarine, Richard. It won't have a chance to harm you. You'll have a chance to go to Britain, to do the things we wanted to do together.

There was a gentle movement in the water, and the old woman was at her side.

Alita's white shoulders jerked. "It —it was awful."

The old woman looked at the sun caught in the liquid. "It always is— this kind of death. It always has been —always will be as long as men are at war. We had to do it. We didn't take lives, we saved lives — hundreds of them."

Alita closed her eyes and opened them again. "I've been wondering about us. Why is it that just you and I and Conda and Helene and a few others survived the sinking. Why didn't some of the hundreds of others join us? What are we?"

The old woman moved her feet slowly, rippling currents.

"We're Guardians, that's what you'd call us. A thousand people drowned when the USS Atlantic went down, but twenty of us came out, half-dead, because we have somebody to guard. You have a lover on the convoy routes. I have four sons in the Navy. The others have similar obligations. Conda has sons too. And Helene—well, her lover was drowned inside the USS Atlantic and never came half-alive like us, so she's vindictive, motivated by a great vengeance. She can't ever really be killed.

"We all have a stake in the convoys that cross and recross the ocean. We're not the only ones. Maybe there are thousands of others who cannot and will not rest between here and England, breaking seams in German cargo boats, darkening Nazi periscopes and frightening German crewmen, sinking their gun-boats when the chance comes.

"But we're all the same. Our love for our husbands and sons and daughters and fathers makes us go on when we should be meat for fish, makes us go on being Guardians of the Convoy, gives us the ability to swim faster than any human ever swam while living, as fast as any fish ever swam. Invisible guardians nobody'll ever know about or

appreciate. Our urge to do our bit was so great we wouldn't let dying put us out of action. . .

"I'm so tired, though," said Alita. "So very tired."

"When the war is over—we'll rest. In the meanwhile—"

"The convoy is coming!"

IT WAS Conda's deep, voice of authority. Used to giving captain's orders for years aboard the USS Atlantic, he appeared below them now, about a hundred yards away, striving up in the watered sunlight, his red hair aflame around his big-nosed, thick-lipped face. His beard was like so many living tentacles, writhing.

The convoy!

The Guardians stopped whatever they were doing and hung suspended like insects in some green primordial amber, listening to the deeps.

From far, far off it came: the voice of the convoy. First a dim note, a lazy drifting of sound, like trumpets blown into eternity and lost in the wind. A dim vibration of propellers beating water, a bulking of much weight on the sun-sparkled Atlantic tides.

The convoy!

Destroyers, cruisers, corvettes, and cargo ships. The great bulking convoy!

Richard! Richard! Are you with them?

Alita breathed water in her nostrils, down her throat, in her lungs. She hung like a pearl against a green velvet gown that rose and fell under the breathing of the sea.

Richard!

The echo of ships became more than a suggestion. The water began to hum and dance and tremble with the advancing armada. Bearing munitions and food and planes, bearing hopes and prayers and people, the convoy churned for England.

Richard Jameson!

The ships would come by like so many heavy blue shadows over their heads and pass on and be lost soon in the night-time, and tomorrow there would be another and another stream of them.

Alita would swim with them for a way. Until she was tired of swimming, perhaps, and then she'd drop down, come floating back here to this spot on a deep water tide she knew and utilized for the purpose.

Now, excitedly, she shot upward.

She went as near to the surface as she could, hearing Conda's thunder-voice giving commands:

"Spread out! One of you to each major ship! Report any hostile activity to me instantly! We'll trail with them until after sunset! Spread!"

The others obeyed, rising to position, ready. Not near enough to the surface so the sun could get at their flesh.

They waited. The hammer-hammer churn-churn of ships folded and grew upon itself. The sea brimmed with its bellow going down to kick the sand and striking up in reflected quivers of sound. Hammer-hammer-churn!

Richard Jameson!



Alita dared raise her head above water. The sun hit her like a dull hammer. Her eyes flicked, searching, and as she sank down again she cried, "Richard. It's his ship. The first destroyer. I recognize the number. He's here again!"

"Alita, please," cautioned the old woman. "Control yourself. My boy, too. He's on one of the cargo ships. I know its propeller voice well. I recognize the sound. One of my boys is here, near me. And it feels so very good."

The whole score of them swam to meet the convoy. Only Helene stayed behind. Swimming around and around the German U-boat, swimming swiftly and laughing her strange high laughter that wasn't sane.

Alita felt something like elation rising in her. It was good, just to be this close to Richard, even if she couldn't speak or show herself or kiss him ever again. She'd watch him every time he came by this way. Perhaps she'd swim all night, now, and part of the next day, until she couldn't keep up with him any longer, and then she'd whisper goodbye and let him sail on alone.

THE destroyer cut close to her. She saw its number on the prow in the sun. And the sea sprang aside as the destroyer cut it like a glittering knife.

There was a moment of exhilaration, and then Conda shouted it deep and loud and excited:

"SUBMARINE!"

"Submarine coming from north, cutting across convoy! German!"

Richard!

Alita's body twisted fearfully as she heard the under-water vibration that meant a submarine was coming in toward them, fast. A dark long shadow pulsed underwater.

There was nothing you could do to stop a moving submarine, unless you were lucky. You could try stopping it by jamming its propellers, but there wasn't time for that.

Conda yelled, "Close in on the sub! Try to stop it somehow! Block the periscope. Do anything!"

But the German U-boat gnashed in like a mercurial monster. In three breaths it was lined up with the convoy, unseen, and squaring off to release its torpedoes.

Down below, like some dim-moving fantasy, Helene swam in eccentric circles, but as the sub shadow trailed over her she snapped her face up, her hot eyes pulled wide and she launched herself with terrific energy up at it, her face blazing with fury!

The ships of the convoy moved on, all unaware of the poisoned waters they churned. Their great valvular hearts pounding, their screws thrashing a wild water song.

"Conda, do something! Conda!" Alita shivered as her mind thrust the thoughts out at the red-bearded giant. Conda moved like a magnificent shark up toward the propellers of the U-boat, swift and angry.

Squirting, bubbling, jolting, the sub expelled a child of force, a streamlined torpedo that kicked out of its metal womb, trailed by a second, launched with terrific impetus—at the destroyer.

Alita kicked with her feet. She grasped at the veils of water with helpless fingers, blew all the water from her lungs in a stifled scream.

Things happened swiftly. She had to swim at incredible speed just to keep pace with submarine and convoy. And —spinning a bubbled trail of web—the torpedoes coursed at the destroyer as Alita swam her frantic way.

"It missed! Both torps missed!" someone cried; it sounded like the old woman.

Oh, Richard, Richard, don't you know the sub is near you. Don't let it bring you down to... this, Richard! Drop the depth charges! Drop them now!

Nothing.

Conda clung to the conning tower of the U-boat, cursing with elemental rage, striving uselessly.

Two more torpedoes issued from the mouths of the sub and went surging on their trajectories. Maybe—

"Missed again!"

Alita was gaining. Gaining. Getting closer to the destroyer. If only she could leap from the waters, shouting. If only she were something else but this dead white flesh. ...

Another torpedo. The last one, probably, in the sub.

It was going to hit!

Alita knew that before she'd taken three strokes more. She swam exactly alongside the destroyer now, the submarine was many, many yards ahead when it let loose its last explosive. She saw it come, shining like some new kind of fish, and she knew the range was correct this time.

In an instant she knew what there was to be done. In an instant she knew the whole purpose and destiny of her swimming and being only half-dead. It meant the end of swimming forever, now, the end of thinking about Richard and never having him for herself ever again. It meant—

She kicked her heels in the face of water, stroked ahead clean, quick. The torpedo came directly at her with its blunt, ugly nose.

Alita coasted, spread her arms wide, waited to embrace it, take it to her breast like a long-lost lover.

She shouted it in her mind:

"Helene! Helene! From now on— from now on—take care of Richard for me! Watch over him for me!

Take care of Richard—!"

"Submarine off starboard!"

"Ready depth-charges!"

"Torpedo traces! Four of them! Missed us!"

"Here comes another one! They've got our range this time, Jameson! Watch it!"

To the men on the bridge it was the last moment before hell. Richard Jameson stood there with his teeth clenched, yelling, "Hard over!" but it was no use; that torp was coming on, not caring, not looking where it was going. It would hit them amidship! Jameson's face went white all over and he breathed something under his breath and clutched the rail.

The torpedo never reached the destroyer.

It exploded about one hundred feet from the destroyer's hull. Jameson fell to the deck, swearing. He waited. He staggered up moments later, helped by his junior officer.

"That was a close one, sir!"

"What happened?"

"That torp had our range, sir. But they must have put a faulty mechanism in her. She exploded short of her goal. Struck a submerged log or something." Jameson stood there with salt spraying his face. "I thought I saw something just before the explosion. It looked like a... log. Yeah. That was it. A log."

"Lucky for us, eh, sir?"

"Yeah. Damn lucky."

"Depth-charge! Toss 'em!"

Depth-charges were dropped. Moments later a subwater explosion tore up the water. Oil bubbled up to color the waves, with bits of wreckage mixed in it.

"We got the sub," someone said.

"Yeah. And the sub almost got us!"

The destroyer ran in the wave channels, in the free wind, under a darkening sky.

"Full speed ahead!"

The ocean slept quiet as the convoy moved on in the twilight. There was little movement in its deep green silence. Except for some things that may have been a swarm of silver fish gathered below, just under the waters where the convoy had passed; pale things, stirring, flashing a flash of white, and swimming off silently, strangely, into the deep green soundlessness of the undersea valleys....

The ocean slept again.

The end