

**Mini-Episode 09:
Underbelly**

By: Rebecca Mahoney

SOMEONE WALKS WITH PURPOSE TO A PODIUM. PAPERS SHUFFLE BRIEFLY,
SOMEONE TAPS THE MIC, AND THE FAINTEST BIT OF MUSIC PLAYS IN THE
DISTANCE.

CHALLENGER DEEP

I'm going to tell you a story.

I know. The poster said 'lecture.' But I'm going to let you in on a little secret: I hate lectures. I hate the word 'lecture.' You can't inspire a person and tell them what to do at the same time.

As an academic, lectures should be my bread and butter. But there are a great many things I should do that I do not. And vice versa, even more.

Bollard, if you could get the door, please.

THOUGH WE DO NOT HEAR BOLLARD, AFTER A BRIEF BEAT, WE HEAR A DOOR
CLICK SHUT.

Now. Close your eyes, if you like. And let's begin.

Fifteen years ago, the guests, visitors - and yes, the staff - of the Transcontinental Hotel vanished into thin air.

... but you already know that, don't you? And if you don't, I mean, goodness. Where have you been.

In all seriousness - I'm not here to talk about that night. I'm not in the business of telling you things you already know. But imagine that time, if you will. Because this story takes place those same fifteen years ago. On a night much like that one. In the last days of the Transcontinental Hotel.

A BEAT, AND A LAUGH.

That got your attention, didn't it?

Now. I was young then. [coyly] I'm not going to tell you how young. And my budding sense of injustice had only just begun to take root into something - deeper. So when I tell you that the Transcontinental Hotel - the same Transcontinental Hotel that built its roots deep into the local reef, that spilled its pollution and waste into the waters, that served the fruits of its kills in their fancy kitchens - when I tell you that same hotel was hosting a charity gala for the environment? I don't think you have to imagine very hard to understand the rage I felt.

So I made a choice I'm not entirely proud of. I forged an invitation. And I went to the Transcontinental Hotel with the intention of trashing the place.

I did mention that I was young, right?

Turned out, I didn't even need to forge the invitation. Maybe I looked like I belonged, or maybe they didn't care, but either way, they let me right in. It was a simpler time. Everyone was so beautiful and so rich, and maybe it never crossed their minds that anyone could hurt them.

So I walked into the Transcontinental Hotel for the first and last time.

My coat was heavy, drenched by a sudden storm. But the concierge took it with a smile, showed me where I could find it at the end of the night. Her daughter was at the back of the coat check, a book propped on her crossed legs. It was a softer scene than I imagined behind that smooth, cold lobby. I was... disarmed.

And that was before I stepped into the ballroom.

Well... you've heard what was waiting for me, of course. When you talk about the Transcontinental Hotel, you talk about those floor-to-ceiling windows. The vast expanse of the stars. The

illusion of a dance across the waves. That glittering centerpiece that would, in just a few days, become Step One of a tragedy.

Just windows back then. Just the glass and the waves and the night beyond. But I was transfixed, nonetheless.

And a funny thing happened. I forgot why I came, for a time. I walked among those people in their high gloves and higher laughs, and I laughed with them. They were funny, and warm, and they spoke passionately for the cause. And in the lilt of their voices, I stepped into a dream, a dream where these people felt the injustice around us as deeply as I did.

It got warm, after a time, and I stepped outside to the deck. And the dream ended. They always do.

It was hard to see what was happening, at first. A cluster of bodies in suits and dresses, laughing, drinking. Without that echo of the ballroom, the laughter was sharper, discordant. Maybe that's why I looked, truly looked this time.

Plates, silverware, wine glasses - they were snatching them from the platters lined up to be carried inside, throwing them at the waves. At least I thought it was at the waves, at first. Until I saw the water ripple, a flash of scales in the moonlight. A thrash of pain as one of those glasses connected with that beautiful creature. Its target.

A LONG. DELIBERATE. SILENCE.

They say we get what we deserve.

ANOTHER BEAT.

As to whether the Transcontinental Hotel got what it deserved? That's not for me to say. But that night, that younger me got a reminder. No matter

how glittery the facade, how appealing the words, how warm the laughter... you treat everything the same way. You flip over the rock. And you look at what's underneath.

I remembered why I came that night. And for my troubles, I received a lifetime ban from the premises. But. Well. Joke's on them.

I heard something surprising a few years ago. I look, sometimes - as we all do - at those items that turn up in the road each year around Checkpoint 8. One year I looked at those mementos of the lost. And there was my coat from that very night. After all those years, still unclaimed.

And there it's going to stay. The girl who handed her wet, heavy coat to the concierge, that sincere, naive, easily distracted girl, that girl who never looked underneath - she's not here to pick it up, not anymore.

I look back on her with fondness, of course. But with something stronger than that, too. The knowledge that if that girl were still here, she'd still be in that dream somewhere. Like I imagine so many of you are, even now.

So promise me this. Don't get lost in that dream. And always look underneath.

BEAT.

Now. Open your eyes. And wake up.

CREDITS:

Welcome back, Travelers, and thank you so much for listening to The Bridge! This mini-episode was written by Rebecca Mahoney. It was edited and produced by Alex Brown. It features Rebecca Mahoney as the voice of CHALLENGER DEEP, and the musical stylings of the inimitable Sara Fairchild.

Want to flip over the rock and look underneath? Head to thebridgepod.com, where you can find transcripts, character bios, and links to our store, social media, and Patreon. Or send us an email at watchtower10reports@gmail.com. That's watchtower-10-reports. And, as always, please rate and review us on iTunes, or the podcasting app of your choosing.

Thank you, once again, for listening to The Bridge. For today's outtake, please enjoy my complete inability to pronounce the second most important word on our show.